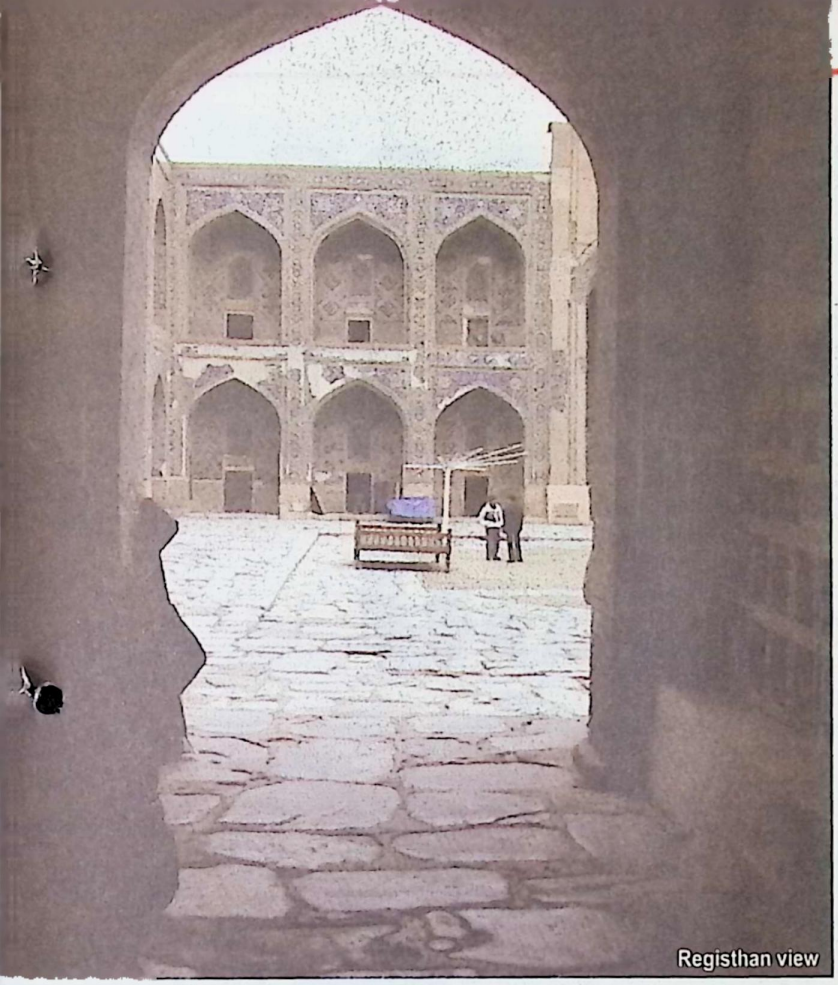


Registhan view

dust their wares with peacock feathers. Jolly old men offer paintings, Rehels, jewellery-boxes, statuettes all made by hand. Bargaining is still a way of life here - requiring much patience, mutual respect and equitable compromises for mutual profits.

Registon Square comprises of three 12th-14th century complexes with mosaic gateways, minarets and domes that have now become the hallmark of Muslim architecture. Nearby is the Al-Biruni Memorial housing instruments of astronomy, scientific sketches, paintings, Q'uranic çalligraphy and the fabled hand-illustrated books popularised by the Ottomans. We paid tribute to saints, dervishes and royalty at the Shohi-Zinda a vast, hilltop necropolis with sarcophagi and shrines that glimmer on the hillside. We stood on the footprints of Omar Khaiyam and gazed down upon the city that had once shared his despair.

★★★

The drive to Bukhara was our first close encounter with the Silk Road - amidst its sights, sounds and scents. Today's Silk Road is an 8-lane freeway, punctuated by arched stone gates where trade caravans would stop for water and shade. We passed donkey-carts and 16-wheelers plying the trail together. And at last, Bukhara. Peaceful. Distant.

There is a sense of disconnect between Bukhara and the bustling, impersonal and intolerant world out there. Like an ancient sage, she crouches amidst the dunes with monastic solitude. A faithful, mourning chaperone to her builders the city seems frozen in some other time. From the fading, cobalt stripes on Chor-Minar, the eroding towers of the Ark Citadel - you will sense the profound age that weighs down upon Bukhara: the weight of standing witness to centuries of prosperity and famines, dynasties and rebels, faith and false prophets.

Largely a Tajik city, commuters here look different: paler skin, squarer jaws, slightly lighter hair, thinner lips and quieter manners. The children look like Matroyashka dolls. Women and young girls are glowing beauties draped in long, velvet dresses, brocade head-coverings and elaborately-embroidered, red canvass pumps. And most are hard at work at bazaars and cotton-fields, souvenir shops and diners. Here, it's the women who often lead social interactions, guide family decisions and manage finances. To conserve this arrangement there are no edicts or social movements, but grasp and harmony of the natural order of things.

In this deeply religious city that has lent its name to the venerable Imam Bukhari, beautiful Tajik children, doubling on bikes to school, dismount in front of holy shrines, mazaars and plying cars too, come to a grinding halt. Hundreds of saints, sages and heretics, world-renowned and nameless, lie beneath its hallowed grounds and watch over Bukhara and its people.

As we traversed cobblestone walkways of old Bukhara, people stopped us to announce themselves, learn our names and guide us to the best places to visit. They treat you like honored guests. With child-like simplicity, they inquire about your race, religion, spouse and salaries. At an open-air restaurant, where the air was heavy with the sweet smoke of Chilim. The mouth-watering Mastava soup, smoked lamb, homemade Katlama loaves, garden salad and assortment of dried fruits were all served on exquisite earthenware. Also served in rudimentary earthen glasses were the fruity 'Vini Italia' sweet wines, 'Bukhara' Vodka and sour cherry sherbet.

As darkness falls, the warm desert breeze, like long-stifled sighs, dashes around through deserted thoroughfares and desolate alleys. This is an incredibly alive and sentient city that will speak to you in hushed whispers if you listen. I feel my journey through the Silk Road has taught me much. Too long, I had indiscriminately suspected unwarranted benevolence as being, ultimately, schemes of deception. I had presupposed agenda in altruism. I now try to assume the best in people instead of the worst. I have no regrets only room for improvement.