

A JOURNEY ON THE SILK ROAD

Serge Potier





“As I was traveling on the Silk Road, I saw landscapes, monuments and faces which I knew would be hard to describe on my return. The pictures I took during this journey are like a testimony: they show the exotic beauty of the countries. Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tibet and China.... Each one of these regions is unique, and yet there is something that links them together: the ancestral Silk Road that is like a trail of breadcrumbs giving a common history to this group of Asian countries.”





UZBEKISTAN

On the other bank of the Amu Darya, Turkmenistan fades into the distance as the metallic creaking of the floating bridge, linking it with Uzbekistan, rips through our eardrums, which had become dormant during our week in the desert.

We quickly arrive in Bukhara on a wide, straight road, crowded with donkey carts. At first, the city seems rather sad, laden with memories of the Soviet past. But the next day, as soon as we leave our hotel, we're transported back several centuries: just the kind of shock I love! Right in front of us is the citadel—a fortress dominated by curves—that, with the numerous structures built around it, seems to be the very heart of the city. And yet, it's beyond its ramparts that the real city of Bukhara lies.

My second emotional jolt was the Kalan Mosque! It's a grandiose mix of excess and sobriety, dominated by two colors: the beige of the bricks and the blue of the mosaics,

SAMARKAND _Uzbekistan

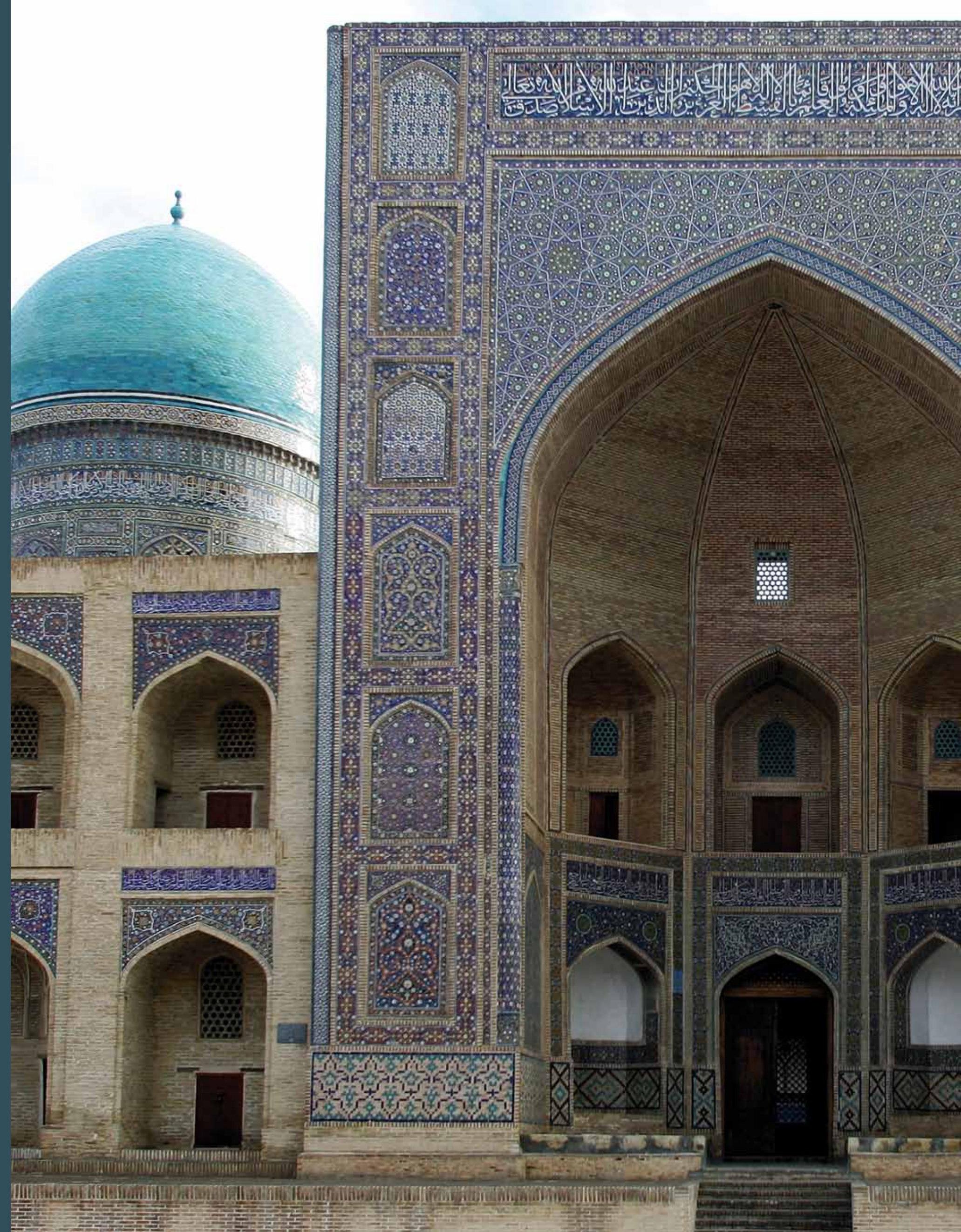
The city possesses nooks and crannies that hide unimagined riches. It a pleasure to wander through these narrow streets echoing with stories of the past. Even the faces of some of the inhabitants seem to have come straight out of history.

which, when the light reflects off them at just the right angle, take on the colors of the sun and sky. Its minaret reaches a height of more than fifty meters. This lighthouse of the desert, which used to guide caravans toward the city, was, in the 11th century, reputed to be the tallest structure in the world. In any case, it was impressive enough to convince Genghis Khan to spare it when he sacked the city. And there wasn't a soul at this classic tourist destination the day I tread its sacred ground. What a delight!

The voyage back in time continues, with the incredible size of the monuments creating an eerie effect. And the past seems all the more present when we wander through the jewelry market. It seems like nothing has changed for centuries. And you wonder if the stalls aren't the exact same ones as in the time of Tamerlane. Men and women with striking faces give life to this wondrous picture. And the merchandise one finds here today isn't fake, but real jewelry with real gemstones set in 18-carat gold...

BOUKHARA _Uzbekistan

Linked by a small passageway to the minaret, the great mosque of Bukhara (built during the 15th and 16th centuries) is one of the largest surviving structures of its kind in Central Asia. Under its 288 domes, it can accommodate almost 10.000 worshippers whose prayers fill this immense space.





BOUKHARA _Uzbekistan

A war veterans with extraordinary physique allow himself to be photographed while exchanging a few words. He explains to us that he confronted and defeated Hitler's army after the siege of Warsaw. He is worthy descendant of Tamerlane, or "Timur the Lame," the Turko-Mongol warrior of the 14th century.

KYZYL KUM DESERT_Uzbekistan

Here we are back on the road that leads to Samarkand, after having left the Kyzyl Kum (or "red sand") Desert. We pause with these three local inhabitants who are headed to the next village on their motorbike. The battery on the luggage rack isn't a spare—it's part of the bike!

UZBEKISTAN



The Aral "Sea" is actually a large salt lake, located partly in Kazakhstan and partly in Uzbekistan. It's fed by two rivers, the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya. In 1960, it had a surface area of 68,000 square kilometers, and a large part of the region's population lived from fishing.

However, Soviet-era irrigation projects designed to increase cotton production, in Uzbekistan, and the planting of rice fields in the middle of the desert, in Kazakhstan, diverted up to 60% of the water from the two rivers flowing into it. In forty years, the Aral Sea lost more than half of its surface area and three-fourths of its volume. And the increased salinity destroyed the lake's aquatic life. Since 2005, efforts have been underway, primarily on the part of the Kazakh government, with the support of the World Bank, to increase the water level and revive the fishing industry. The recent discovery of the ruins of two ancient cities in the dried lake bed has helped renew optimism, recalling the days, described in travel narratives of the 11th and 14th centuries, when caravans on the Silk Road crossed the region which has been covered with water for centuries. Four times already, in the course of its long history, the forces of nature have caused the Aral Sea to disappear almost completely and then reform again.

Nestled in the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan spreads out over 1,400 kilometers from east to west and 900 kilometers from north to south. If, like Italy, it has the shape of a boot, in contrast to that Mediterranean country, it is far from any ocean. And the 5 countries that surround it — Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan — have no direct access to the sea either. In fact, the only other State in the world to share this sort of double-landlocked status is tiny Lichtenstein.

Of the 447,400 square kilometers that make up the Uzbek territory—an area about the size of California—more than two-thirds are arid lands: the low-lying plains of the Touranian Depression (12 meters below sea level at the lowest point), to the west, around the Aral Sea, and the Kyzyl Kum (literally "red sand") Desert, which in the southwest joins up with its Turkmenistan counterpart, the Karakum (or "black sand") Desert.

The southern and eastern parts of the country are covered with mountains (the Pamir Foothills and the Tian Shan Mountains), piedmonts and fertile valleys, where most of the population is concentrated. In the northeast, Mount Adelung rises to 4,301 meters, while Khazret Sultan, on the border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, reaches a height of 4,643 meters. The rich Fergana Valley is home to more than 11 million people spread out over 22,000 square kilometers in Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan. During the Bronze Age, it was one of the most important agricultural centers on the planet, where irrigation was practiced and wheat and barley were cultivated. At the end of the 2nd century B.C., early Chinese pioneers of the Silk Road brought back from the region the first seeds of domesticated grapes and the legendary "celestial horses," whose huge legs made them formidable mounts for warfare.

The two main rivers of Uzbekistan originate in the mountainous regions on the edge of Central Asia and empty into the Aral Sea. The Syr Darya, whose source is in the Tian Shan ("celestial mountains") in Kirghizstan, flows from east to west across the Fergana Valley and the region of Tashkent, continuing its way through southern Kazakhstan. The Amu Darya rises in the Pamir Mountains, in Afghanistan. It forms a natural border, first between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and then between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, before ending in the marshy delta south of the Aral Sea.

The cities and towns are located on or near the rivers. The ancient cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, on the Zeravshan River, and Khiva, with its oasis, built their fortunes on commerce and their key positions as unavoidable stopovers for caravans. The capital, Tashkent, in the easternmost part of the country, was also an important trading post on the Silk Road for many years. With over 2.2 million inhabitants, today it's the most populated city in Central Asia.



BUKHARA _Uzbekistan

The Citadel of Bukhara was the residence of the emir of the city until 1920. Located on Registan Square, it was the site where corporal punishments were carried out, and its walls held important prisoners, who were kept under close supervision. But grand receptions for foreign ambassadors also took place there. Today, this impressive fortified monument, dating from the 16th century, has been entirely restored.

following spread

LHASA _Tibet

On each major stop along the Silk Road, one finds the traces left by the Buddhist religion, long before the dominance of Islam. In fact, the Muslim religion developed pretty much everywhere, except in the most Asian parts of China. The Potala Palace used to be the seat of the Tibetan government as well as the winter residence of the Dalai Lama.





HOTAN _CHINA

In Hotan, one can still find traditional silk makers using looms similar to those invented by the Chinese over 3,000 years ago. However, there are also much more modern industrial facilities, specializing in large carpets, some of which are on display in prestigious sites like historic châteaux in France's Loire Valley.



HOTAN _CHINA

The art of raising silkworms—or sericulture—appeared over 2,000 before the Christian Era. After being scalded in hot water, the silkworm cocoons are washed and sorted. Then, after extensive preparation, the filaments are extracted and wound into threads before being sent to the weavers.



SPECIFICATIONS

270X350 MM OR 230X300 MM

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A JOURNEY ON THE SILK ROAD invites you, throughout 200 stunning photographs, to follow the footsteps of Marco Polo in his legendary and sublime journey at the gates of the East and beyond. In this book, the photographer Serge Potier has gathered his best pictures from China to Turkey, via Iran or Uzbekistan. Magnificent landscapes, fortified cities, mythical oasis, amazing encounters and wild deserts have been immortalized by Serge Potier's camera. Besides, texts including the photographer's memories, anecdotes, literary extracts and a lot of information will make you discover history, geography and societies of the visited countries. Open the doors of the East and let yourself fall under its magical spell!