

## UZBEKISTAN by John Ward

I was asked to go to Samarkand, in Uzbekistan, to meet some prospective customers who wanted to set up a copying centre in their city as a franchise.

I travelled overnight, with two locals, in a jeep from Tashkent, across the mountains with a most wonderful view of the night sky.

When we arrived at our destination it was almost midday and our customers said we were to have lunch with the mayor.

We left our jeep and headed to a restaurant in their car to which they attached a flashing blue light on the roof and proceeded to speed through red traffic lights with flashing headlights and continual sounding of the horn. It was like being in a car chase movie.

When we did stop at a major junction we were joined by a police car. They wound their window down and spoke to our driver, with much hand waving.

"We're in trouble now," I thought.

Not a bit of it. The police car joined us with their own blue flashing lights and warning sirens and led us at high speed through the city streets until we reached the restaurant.

I was introduced to the mayor as a visiting VIP from the UK who was going to help our hosts set up a big business.

We had a superb lunch, though I never saw any sign of a bill. I assume that, as the mayor was with us, lunch was on the house.

After lunch, we went to look at the location that they had allocated for their copying centre, and to ask my opinion.

It was on a corner of the high street with good visibility in all directions and I told them it was an excellent location

The ground floor was occupied by a clothing and fabrics shop so I asked if the ladies running it would be moving out.

"Oh no," said my hosts. "We have the second floor."

We went upstairs to have a look. Not bad but I told them, "It's good but a shame you haven't got the ground floor. That would be better to attract the customers from the street. They went into a conversation with the mayor in Russian, which I didn't understand.

A few minutes later they came back to me, all smiles.

"Thank you, thank you." they said.

"What for?"

"On your recommendation, The Mayor has allocated the ground floor to us."

"What about the women who run the clothing business there?"

"They are moving to the second floor."

"Do they know?"

"Not yet."

So with one throw-away comment I've unintentionally ruined a good business. How embarrassing.

Before leaving the city to return to Tashkent I was taken to one of their houses for a barbeque where I was given a traditional outfit and a large scimitar knife and I was now declared, with all due ceremony, an honorary Uzbek.