

Along the Silk Road: A Journey Through Central Asia – Volume 1

Sunday, September 20, 2026 — Almaty, Kazakhstan

Hello from Almaty, Kazakhstan, where we're beginning a journey through one of the least-visited and least-understood regions of the world. Over the next three weeks, we'll travel through the five Central Asian countries collectively known as the "Five Stans": Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

I'm traveling with my brother Jerry and his girlfriend Jinda, my daughter Julia, and her two friends Molly and Hogan. You'll recognize Julia, Jerry, and Hogan from our trip to Nepal in 2024. Lori opted to stay home after the birth of our new granddaughter, Ellie Rose, who was born last Tuesday, September 15. That's the perfect excuse for a trip she wasn't interested in taking in the first place. This trip was planned before Jade was pregnant, so I'm not as bad a grandfather as it seems.

Although these five countries are often lumped together on maps and travel itineraries, they're very different from one another geographically, culturally, and ethnically. What they do share is a political history. During the late nineteenth century, the Russian Empire gradually conquered much of Central Asia. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet Union divided the region into five republics during the 1920s and 1930s. The borders weren't based on centuries of independent nationhood. They were administrative boundaries drawn by Soviet authorities, often cutting across ethnic and cultural lines. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, those internal borders suddenly became international ones, and five independent countries emerged. Russian remains widely spoken throughout the region alongside the local languages. A large majority of the population is Muslim, with Russian Orthodox Christianity the most prominent minority religion.



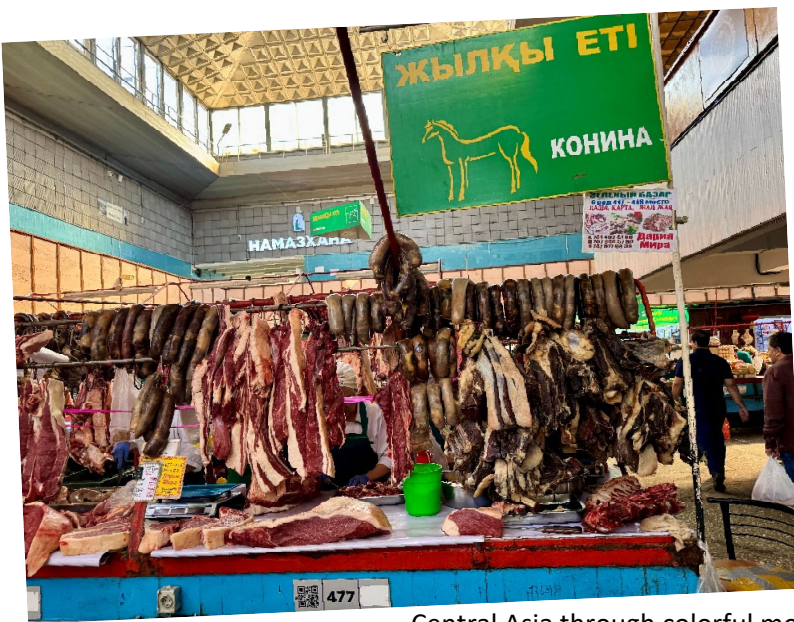
The suffix "stan" comes from Persian and simply means "land of." Kazakhstan is the land of the Kazakhs, Uzbekistan the land of the Uzbeks, and so on. In reality, though, every one of these countries is home to a mix of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures.

Our journey will follow much of the ancient Silk Road. Despite its name, the Silk Road wasn't a single road but an enormous network of trade routes linking China with the Middle East and Europe for nearly two thousand years. Silk was one of its most valuable commodities, but merchants also carried horses, spices, porcelain, paper, precious metals, religions, scientific ideas, and diseases. Some cities became fabulously wealthy because so much of the trade between East and West passed through them.

Our first stop is Kazakhstan, Borat's supposed homeland and the ninth-largest country in the world. It's larger than all the other Central Asian countries combined. Despite its size, much of Kazakhstan consists of empty steppe, desert, and semi-arid plains, giving it one of the lowest population densities in the world. That vast emptiness made it useful to the Soviet Union for reasons that weren't exactly tourist-friendly. Between 1949 and 1989, the Soviets conducted 456 nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk test site in northeastern Kazakhstan.

Fortunately, Kazakhstan's story isn't defined solely by nuclear weapons. It also sits atop enormous reserves of oil, natural gas, uranium, coal, and other minerals, helping make it the wealthiest country in Central Asia.

Some archaeological evidence suggests that horses were first domesticated on the Kazakh steppe roughly 5,500 years ago, forever changing transportation, agriculture, and warfare across much of the world. Horses continue to serve Kazakhstan today, although many eventually end up on someone's dinner plate. Horse meat and horse sausage are traditional Kazakh delicacies.



Almaty, our first stop, served as Kazakhstan's capital until 1997, when the government began moving it to Astana. Today, Almaty is still the country's financial and cultural center and probably its most cosmopolitan city. Its name is associated with apples, and the wild ancestor of today's domesticated apple is native to the mountains and forests around the city. Maybe Johnny Appleseed was really a Kazakh and an ancestor of Borat's.

Central Asia through colorful mountains of spices, dried fruits, nuts, fresh produce, meat from cows, pigs, and horses, and enough unfamiliar foods to keep us guessing. We headed to a fancy coffee shop before having traditional Kazakh food for lunch, including beshbarmak, Kazakhstan's national dish made with horse meat, wide flat noodles, onions, and broth. Now that we've tried horse and gotten that out of the way, I'm not sure we need to have it again.

In the afternoon, we met the other ten people on our tour and our guide for the trip, Naim, who, along with the rest of us, has never been here before. Huh? Not to worry; we have local guides everywhere we go. After an orientation meeting, we went back to the Green Bazaar, which by then was a lot busier than it had been that morning. Afterward, we all went to a Russian restaurant for dinner, where I could barely keep my eyes open after getting about seven hours of sleep over the past two days. No problem falling asleep tonight.

Not a bad first day in Kazakhstan. Tomorrow we'll formally explore Almaty and get a real look at the country behind the Borat jokes, which we can't seem to stop making.





Monday, September 21, 2026 — Almaty, Kazakhstan

We began this morning with a walk through Panfilov Park, one of Almaty's most popular gathering places. The park's Memorial of Glory honors the Panfilov Guardsmen, Soviet soldiers celebrated for their defense of Moscow during World War II. An eternal flame burns as part of the memorial complex.

At the center of the park stands the Russian Orthodox Zenkov Cathedral. Completed in 1907, it's one of the tallest wooden churches in the world and was built almost entirely without nails. Even more remarkable, it survived the devastating 1911 earthquake that destroyed much of the city around it. That's a strong case against nails.

After that, we took the metro to the city center and walked to Abai Square, which is used for public gatherings, ceremonies, and concerts.

We then headed into the mountains overlooking the city, where we rode three cable cars up to Shymbulak Ski Resort, climbing to more than 10,000 feet above sea level. The views across the Tien Shan Mountains were spectacular and made it easy to forget we were in a country better known for endless steppe than alpine scenery.

Dinner was at a Kazakh restaurant, where we didn't order horse meat. Been there, eaten that.

That's enough for now. If you've read this entire journal, you know about as much about Kazakhstan as I do without having to travel twenty hours to get here.

More to come.
Love, Stephen



Correction from previous journal: We're traveling with Mollie, not Molly.



Tuesday, September 22, 2026 — Kazakhstan to Karakol, Kyrgyzstan

This morning we left Almaty, Kazakhstan, and headed toward Kyrgyzstan, our second “Stan.” On the way, we stopped at Charyn Canyon for a short hike. Often compared to the Grand Canyon, Charyn Canyon is smaller but every bit as spectacular. Over millions of years, the Charyn River carved deep into the surrounding rock, leaving behind towering sandstone formations.

Journeying on, we stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant that should have gone out of business a long time ago based on the quality of the food, proving once again that location is everything. I avoided the

horse meat this time.

Eventually, we reached the Kyrgyz border, where we officially entered our second country of the trip. Kyrgyzstan has often been described as one of the more politically open countries in Central Asia, although compared with some of its neighbors, that may be setting the bar rather low. It's also one of the most mountainous countries on Earth, with nearly ninety percent of its territory above 5,000 feet.

Along the way, we dodged cows, horses, and donkeys wandering freely in and around the road. By late afternoon, we arrived in Karakol, a mountain town near the eastern edge of Lake Issyk Kul. Originally established as a Russian military outpost in the nineteenth century, Karakol later became a crossroads where Russians, Chinese Muslims, and Central Asian nomads all left their mark.

Before going to our hotel, we visited the colorful Dungan Mosque. The Dungans are Chinese Muslims who fled western China during the nineteenth century after a series of violent



uprisings.

Rather than resembling a traditional mosque, this one looks like a Chinese pagoda, complete with curved roofs and intricate woodwork. Even more impressive, it was built entirely without nails, Super Glue, or duct tape.

We had a Kyrgyz dinner at our hotel, including lots of horse meat, followed by a traditional local folk performance. The meat was tough, but the performance was excellent.

Wednesday, September 23, 2026 — Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan

Our morning began with a short tour of Karakol, whose diverse history is reflected in its architecture. We visited the Russian Orthodox Church, another reminder that this corner of Central Asia has long been home to many different cultures and religions. The contrast between the church and yesterday's mosque illustrates how migration and empire have shaped this region over the centuries.



Leaving Karakol behind, we continued toward one of Kyrgyzstan's most visited natural landscapes, the Seven Bulls, a famous line of bright red sandstone formations in the Jeti-Ögüz Gorge. Being one of the country's most visited sites doesn't mean there's a paved road to get there, so the ride was slow and bumpy, like a lot of the roads in Kyrgyzstan. We had

lunch at the top of our hike overlooking beautiful scenery, where we learned that the "warm vegetable salad" of course comes with beef. At least it wasn't horse meat, I think.



We continued to one of Kyrgyzstan's most unusual landscapes, Skazka Canyon. Skazka means "fairy tale" in Russian, and it's easy to understand why. Wind and rain have sculpted the sandstone into bizarre formations resembling castles, dragons, and other imaginary creatures. We climbed up and around the formations for some great photos.

Next, we met one of Kyrgyzstan's most famous cultural icons: the eagle hunter. Eagle hunting has been practiced across Central Asia for well over a thousand years. Young female golden eagles, prized for their size and strength, are

trained to hunt foxes, rabbits, and other small animals. Watching one launch from its handler's arm and soar effortlessly across the landscape is an unforgettable demonstration of the remarkable partnership between humans and one of nature's greatest predators.

The eagle was impressive. The fact that someone looked at one and thought, "I bet I could train that," was even more impressive.

We continued to Lake Issyk Kul, one of the largest alpine lakes in the world. Despite sitting more than 5,000 feet above sea level and being surrounded by snow-covered mountains, the lake almost never freezes due in part to its salinity. Its name appropriately means "Warm Lake."

Tonight, we traded hotels for something far more traditional: a yurt camp along the lakeshore. Yurts have sheltered the nomadic peoples of Central Asia for thousands of years. Built with collapsible wooden frames



covered in thick felt made from sheep's wool, they can be assembled or taken down in just a few hours, allowing families to move with their livestock as the seasons change. Spending a night in one is probably the closest we'll come to experiencing the lifestyle that shaped this part of the world for centuries.



We had a full day today. By dinnertime, we could eat a horse. Literally. But we didn't. We think.

Thursday, September 24, 2026 — Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

One night in a yurt was enough. I shared mine with three other guys on the tour and our tour guide. Fortunately, our yurt was relatively close to the bathroom building, so the three times I had to pee in the middle of the night weren't too much of an ordeal, although each trip required getting dressed, navigating to the yurt door in the pitch dark, and walking to the bathroom. Everyone was on his best behavior: minimal snoring and no farting out loud, which is quite a feat for five men.

We departed our yurt camp and drove through Ak Sai Canyon, where the "road" consisted of a dried riverbed. In other words, a typical road in Kyrgyzstan. We stopped along the way for a short hike and some photos before arriving at a yurt-making workshop. I now know how to build a yurt. Another useless skill picked up along the way! If anyone wants a yurt in their backyard, call me. Just don't invite me to sleep over.

After lunch, we visited Burana Tower, one of the oldest surviving structures in Kyrgyzstan. Standing alone today in an open field, the tower is all that remains of Balasagun, once a thriving Silk Road city that flourished nearly a



thousand years ago before gradually disappearing from history.

It's difficult to imagine bustling caravans of merchants once passing through what is now quiet and empty countryside. Some of the world's most important cities simply vanished after the Silk Road declined.

Just in time for rush hour traffic, we reached Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital. Nestled against the snow-covered Ala-Too Mountains, Bishkek was greener and cleaner than I expected. Wide boulevards lined with trees, parks, and irrigation canals carrying fresh mountain water give the city a relaxed atmosphere. After a few days in the mountains, it also felt surprisingly modern.

We went out for dinner, where we got into a verbal fight with the table next to ours that was having a loud FaceTime call on their speakerphone. *Public Service Announcement: nobody else wants to hear your phone call, YouTube video, podcast, or music. When in public, use your headphones!*



Friday, September 25, 2026 — Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to Tashkent, Uzbekistan



Our final morning in Kyrgyzstan was spent exploring Bishkek. We visited the Bishkek Central Mosque and Ala-Too Square, the symbolic heart of the country, along with Victory Square and Osh Bazaar, where locals buy everything from fresh produce to clothing and household goods. Like markets throughout the world, it offered a reminder that everyday life usually tells you more about a country than its monuments do.

In the afternoon, we took a short flight to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. With nearly three million people, it's the largest city in Central Asia and feels noticeably more modern and cosmopolitan than much of where we've been so far.

We had the rest of the afternoon free, so we wandered around the bazaar and rode the metro, checking out some of its beautiful, themed Soviet-era stations. At fifteen cents a ride with unlimited



transfers, even I wasn't looking for a senior discount. We then rode the elevator up the Tashkent TV Tower for views of the city. After several days of hiking, taking an elevator to the top of something felt like progress.



We had Uzbek plov for dinner,

the country's national dish. It's

made with rice, meat, julienned carrots, onions, garlic, and cumin, all cooked together in oil or fat.

Getting back to our hotel, we had an entertaining rideshare with a Russian-speaking driver. Despite the language barrier, he managed to make it very clear that he hates Joe Biden but loves American female singers and '80s action stars. Apparently, some things don't require a common language.

That's enough for now.

Love, Stephen



Saturday, September 26, 2026 — Tashkent, Uzbekistan to Khujand, Tajikistan

This morning we left Uzbekistan almost as quickly as we arrived, driving east toward the Oybek border crossing and into our fourth “Stan,” Tajikistan. We’ll be back in Uzbekistan in a few days.

Crossing from Uzbekistan into Tajikistan was a bit more involved than simply driving across the border. Our bus dropped us off on the Uzbek side, where we unloaded our luggage, cleared immigration, took a buggy part of the way, and then walked the rest of the way across a no-man’s-land to Tajikistan, weaving in and around trucks waiting in line to cross. There, we went through immigration all over again before meeting a new bus on the other side. For about thirty minutes, we were essentially stateless pedestrians dragging suitcases through Central Asia.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan trace much of their heritage to Turkic nomads. Tajikistan is different. The Tajiks are descendants of ancient Persian peoples, and their language is a form of Persian closely related to modern Farsi spoken in Iran. In fact, students hoping to learn Persian often study in Tajikistan rather than Iran, for obvious reasons.

Tajikistan is also the poorest of the five Central Asian countries. Unlike resource-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, it has little oil or natural gas. More than ninety percent of the country is covered by mountains, leaving only a small fraction of its land suitable for farming. Following



independence, Tajikistan endured a devastating civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1997, delaying economic development. Even today, many Tajik families rely on relatives working abroad, particularly in Russia, to send money home.

The government also regulates the size and length of weddings and other celebrations to keep families from spending beyond their means. Had I known that sooner, I would have had Michael and Jade’s wedding in Tajikistan.

Our destination today was Khujand, one of Central Asia’s oldest cities. Founded more than 2,500 years ago, it was already an important trading center when Alexander the Great arrived there in 329 BCE. After capturing the city, he renamed it Alexandria Eschate, meaning “Alexandria the Farthest,”

because this marked the easternmost limit of his expanding empire.

On our city tour in the afternoon, our first stop was the Historical Museum of Sughd, a regional history museum built within the Khujand Fortress overlooking the Syr Darya River.

Next was Arbob Palace, modeled after a palace in St. Petersburg, Russia. It was here, in 1992, that the Parliament of Tajikistan met after fleeing the violence in the capital during the civil war.



Our final stop was the lively Panjshanbe Bazaar, one of the largest markets in Tajikistan. Like every market we've visited so far, it provided a colorful snapshot of everyday life. Mountains of fresh produce, fragrant spices, breads, nuts, dried fruit, sweets, and meat filled the aisles. Prices were extremely low. We bought a big bag of delicious assorted baked goods for under one dollar.



Also at the bazaar, we bought kebabs from a food stand while a guy hovered around us, talking away in a language none of us understood. When we walked off with our food, he followed. Suddenly, the chef and his son came charging over, physically shoved him away, and sent him running. The chef then turned to us and offered the only explanation we needed: "Bad guy." Sometimes it pays not to negotiate prices in a bazaar.



Sunday, September 27, 2026 — Khujand to Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Today we traveled deeper into Tajikistan, stopping first in the ancient city of Istaravshan. Like so many places along the Silk Road, Istaravshan has changed hands countless times over the centuries. Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Timur's armies, Russians, and Soviets all left their mark here, creating a fascinating blend of cultures that still defines the city today.

We visited the Khazrati Shokh religious complex, where mosques, mausoleums, and madrassahs stand quietly side by side. Even though Tajikistan is a majority-Muslim country, religious education is

tightly controlled by the government, and traditional madrassahs have largely disappeared.

That was followed by a stop at a blacksmith market, where craftsmen made everything from knives to stove hoods.

Outside of town, we stopped to climb 360 steps to the Lenin statue, built during the Soviet era, for a view over Istaravshan. Like the Soviet Union near its end, the steps and walkways were crumbling.

Continuing on, we drove through mountain passes and tunnels, often on roads hugging the edges of cliffs without the benefit of guardrails. What could possibly go wrong? The valley below was littered with cars that had unsuccessfully attempted the journey. The views were spectacular.

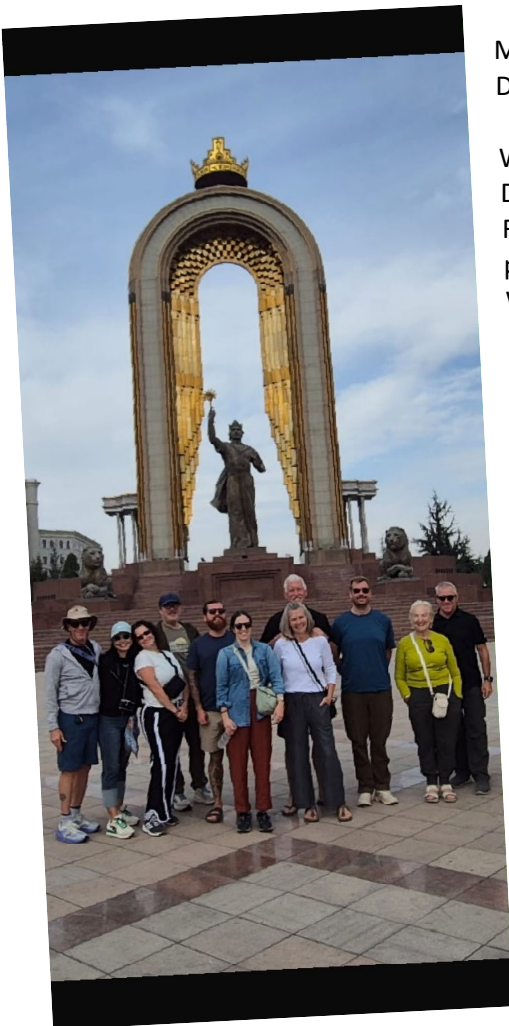




We stopped at a “buffet” restaurant for lunch, which was like a Morrison's Cafeteria from the 1960s, only with Tajik food. Lunch for Julia and me came to 75 somoni, the local currency. My change from 100 somoni was 20 somoni and a pack of candy. Apparently, there is a forced purchase at checkout. Unfortunately, I can't use the candy to pay for two trips to the bathroom, which is what the missing 5 somoni would have gotten me.

By late afternoon, we reached Dushanbe, the nation's capital. Dushanbe is a relatively young city. Its name literally means “Monday,” because this was once the site of a weekly Monday market that gradually grew into a permanent settlement. It may be the only capital city in the world named after a day of the week.

Dushanbe seems quite modern and attractive. After spending decades as a Soviet administrative center, the city has invested heavily in reinventing itself since independence.



Monday, September 28, 2026 —
Dushanbe, Tajikistan

We spent today exploring Dushanbe, walking along Rudaki Avenue and through the parks around Rudaki Square. We saw the Independence Monument and National Flagpole Park, which has one of the tallest flagpoles in the world. Hey, you compete where you can.

We then headed a little out of town to Hissar Fortress, whose history stretches back more than two thousand years. Although much of what stands today has been reconstructed, the site occupies an important strategic position that has been defended by one empire after another. Nearby stand a restored madrassah and mosque, reminders that education, religion, and trade often developed together along the Silk Road.





Returning to Dushanbe, we walked through the Botanical Garden, where towering trees and quiet walking paths offered a break from the city. Like Bishkek, Dushanbe contains far more green space than I expected.

We ended up at the local bazaar. By now, we've become unofficial market critics. Every city has one.

Every guide proudly tells us theirs is the best. And somehow every one of them manages to sell the same dried apricots, pistachios, spices, and enormous round loaves of bread. Fortunately, I'm still not tired of any of them. This one was particularly clean and well organized.

That's all for now.
Love, Stephen



Along the Silk Road: A Journey Through Central Asia – Volume 4

Tuesday, September 29, 2026 — Dushanbe to Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Today's drive turned out to be one of the most scenic of the trip, passing through mountain ranges with spectacular views of the valleys below. Our route took us through the infamous Anzob Tunnel. Officially, it's simply a highway tunnel connecting northern and southern Tajikistan. Unofficially, it's known as the "Tunnel of Death" due to its crumbling pavement, poor ventilation, flooding, stalled traffic, inadequate lighting, and haze of coal dust in the air. Supposedly, conditions have improved significantly following reconstruction. Based on current conditions, I don't see how it could have been much worse. I think they should face reality and make the name official. It's scary as hell.



For lunch, we stopped in Panjikent, just before the Uzbek border. Everyone was pleasantly surprised by the food at the buffet cafeteria. By now, we have very low expectations.

By afternoon, we had crossed back into Uzbekistan, repeating much of the same border-crossing routine we experienced a few days earlier, only in reverse.

Our destination was Samarkand. More than 2,700 years old, it was already an ancient city when Alexander the Great conquered it in 329 BCE. Centuries later, it was destroyed by Genghis Khan before rising again under Timur, better known in the West as Tamerlane, who transformed it into the glittering capital of his vast empire.

In the evening, we watched the light and music show at Registan Square, the historic heart of Samarkand, framed by three majestic, tile-adorned madrassahs that once served as centers of learning.

Jacob, we still haven't been able to watch a Buzkashi match, a traditional Central Asian equestrian sport where horse-mounted players compete to grab a dead goat carcass and carry it to a scoring circle. Kind of like polo with a dead animal and no mallets.

Wednesday, September 30, 2026 — Samarkand, Uzbekistan

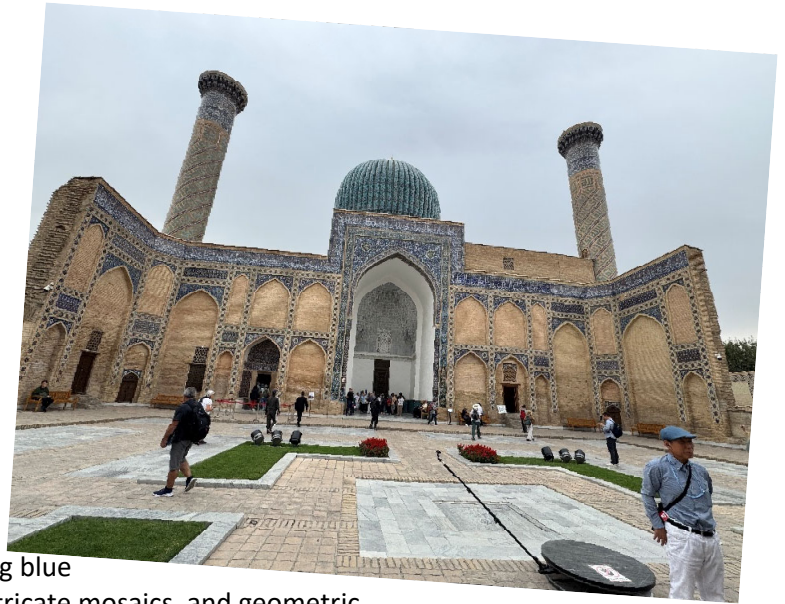


For more than two thousand years, Samarkand occupied one of the most strategic locations on the Silk Road. Caravans traveling between China, Persia, India, and Europe passed through here, bringing enormous wealth to the city. Then, in the late fourteenth century, Timur made Samarkand the capital of his vast empire and set out to create the finest city the world had ever seen.

He brought architects, craftsmen, artists, and scholars from across his empire to transform Samarkand into a center of art, science, and architecture. The result is what we saw today.

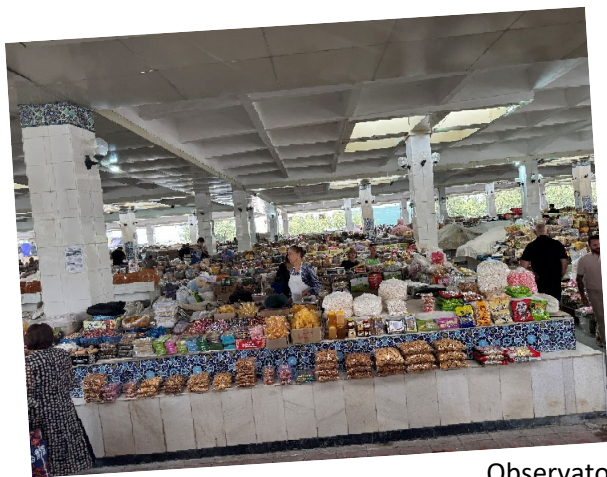
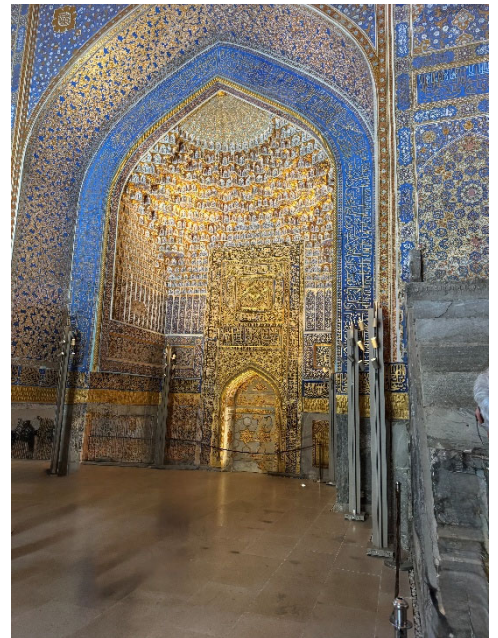
Our morning began at the Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum, Timur's final resting place. Beneath its soaring blue dome lies one of history's most formidable conquerors, whose empire stretched from modern-day Turkey to India. Timur was both a patron of the arts and a ruthless conqueror. He transformed Samarkand into a center of learning while simultaneously building pyramids from the skulls of his enemies.

From there, we walked into Registan Square. Three magnificent madrassahs surround the square, their towering facades covered with dazzling blue tilework, intricate mosaics, and geometric patterns that seem almost impossible to create by hand.



We continued past the enormous Bibi-Khanym Mosque, built by Timur after one of his military campaigns. According to legend, it was constructed as a surprise gift for his favorite wife while he was away conquering yet another country. Whether that's true or not, it's a far better souvenir than anything I've ever brought Lori home.

Nearby, we wandered through Siab Bazaar, where locals have been buying and selling everything imaginable for centuries. Now they're all selling the same spices, nuts, dried fruit, and Chinese pottery.



No group tour would be complete without a visit to a local craft factory to see how good the locals are at selling us things we don't need. In this case, it was a carpet factory, where we watched how traditional Uzbek carpets are made. I escaped without buying anything. I have enough baggage already.

Our final stop was the Ulugh Beg

Observatory. If Timur conquered the world with armies, his grandson Ulugh Beg tried to understand it through science. Long before telescopes existed, Ulugh Beg built one of the world's great astronomical observatories and produced remarkably accurate star charts.





At a time when much of Europe was struggling through the late Middle Ages, scholars here were making astonishing advances in mathematics and astronomy. It's a good reminder that scientific progress has never belonged to just one civilization.

I'm writing these whenever I find the time. More to follow.
Love, Stephen

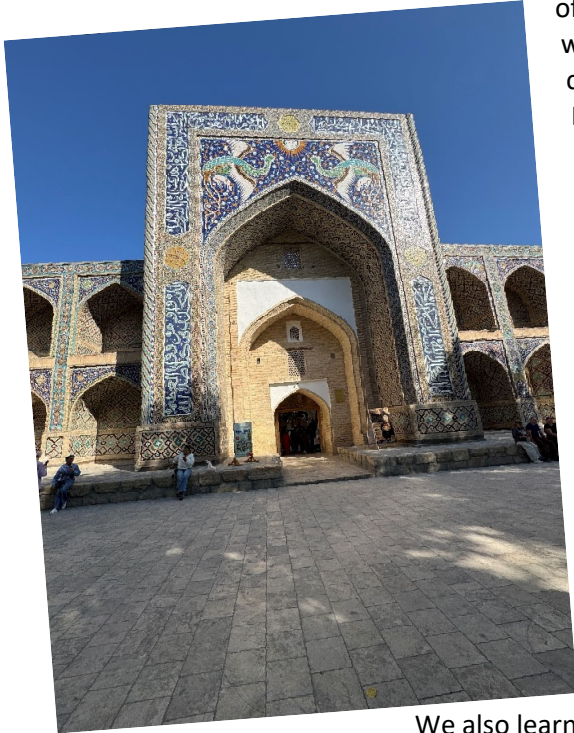
Thursday, October 1, 2026 — Samarkand to Bukhara, Uzbekistan

This morning we boarded Uzbekistan's high-speed train to Bukhara. Riding a modern bullet train between cities that flourished a thousand years ago somehow felt surreal. If the Silk Road had today's technology back then, the merchants could have spent less time crossing deserts and more time complaining about the Wi-Fi.

If Samarkand was the political showpiece of Timur's empire, Bukhara was its intellectual heart. For centuries, the city was one

of the Islamic world's great centers of scholarship.

Hundreds of madrassahs educated students from across Asia, and its libraries attracted scholars from thousands of miles away. Long before universities became common in Europe, Bukhara had established itself as a center of learning.



We spent the afternoon exploring Bukhara's wonderfully restored old town. Parts of the city were heavily damaged in 1920, when the Red Army bombarded Bukhara as the Bolsheviks fought to overthrow the emir and bring the independent Emirate of Bukhara under Soviet control.

We wandered through the old trading domes, where merchants have conducted business for hundreds of years. Although the silk caravans are gone, jewelers, carpet dealers, spice merchants, and craftsmen continue traditions that stretch back generations, including, of course, importing goods from China. Some things never change.

We also learned about Bukhara's ancient Jewish community, which was established here centuries before the Muslim conquest of Central Asia. There is still a synagogue in the old Jewish quarter, but we weren't able to visit because the rabbi is currently in Israel.

We saw Chor Minor, meaning "four minarets," a historic gatehouse for a now-destroyed madrassah, then walked to Lyab-i-Hauz, one of Bukhara's most pleasant gathering places. Centered around a large reflecting pool and shaded by ancient mulberry trees, it's easy to imagine merchants relaxing here after months spent crossing deserts with their camel caravans. Surrounding the pool are historic madrassahs and a khanqah, a Sufi lodge.

The Kalyan Minaret dominates the skyline. Completed in 1127, it was so impressive that Genghis Khan reportedly ordered his troops not to destroy it while much of the surrounding city was devastated. Considering his usual approach to urban planning, that was high praise indeed. Or maybe it just made a good lookout tower.



In the same square are the enormous Kalyan Mosque and the Mir-i-Arab Madrasah, which is still an active Islamic school today.

We arrived at the Bolo Haouz Mosque during the call to prayer, then continued to the Ark of Bukhara, the massive fortress where the emirs ruled for centuries. The Ark was essentially a city within a city, housing government offices, barracks, workshops, mosques, treasuries, prisons, and the royal family.



taken a picture.

We ended the tour at the Mausoleum of Ismail Samani, one of the oldest surviving buildings in Central Asia. Completed more than a thousand years ago, it's considered a masterpiece of early Islamic architecture. Its intricate brickwork creates patterns so elegant that the building hardly needs any additional decoration.

All the buildings were magnificent, but after several hours they started to blend together. By the end of the tour, we couldn't tell a mosque from a madrassah from a mausoleum. At that point, if our guide had pointed to a Starbucks and told us it was a 12th-century Sufi shrine, we probably would have

Friday, October 2, 2026 — Bukhara to Khiva, Uzbekistan

This morning we boarded a Soviet-era sleeper train, heading west for six hours across the Kyzylkum Desert toward Khiva. The sheets were clean, but we had to make our own bunks. Fortunately, they also provided instructions on proper peeing technique. Based on the condition of the bathroom, apparently no one followed them.

Much of the journey passed through an endless landscape of sand and scrub brush, making it easier to appreciate why oasis cities like Bukhara and Khiva became so valuable. When you're crossing hundreds of miles of desert, the appearance of fresh water and city walls must have seemed almost miraculous.



By early afternoon we reached Khiva. Unlike Samarkand and Bukhara, which have grown into modern cities surrounding historic centers, Khiva's old city remains remarkably intact. Walking through its massive gates feels less like entering a city than stepping back several centuries. If Hollywood ever needs a ready-made Silk Road movie set, they should film here.



Before our afternoon tour began, a few of us went for lunch at a recommended restaurant. Wow! It was probably the best meal we've had since arriving in Central Asia two weeks ago. We were enjoying ourselves so much that we texted the rest of the group and simply met up with them when we were ready.

Our tour visited the Kunya Ark, the fortified residence of Khiva's rulers. Within its walls were royal apartments, audience halls, a mint, a mosque, and even a jail. Apparently absolute rulers have always preferred living close to the office.

I ended the tour at Tash Hauli Palace, whose beautifully decorated courtyards once housed the khan, his family, government officials, and, according to our guide, a rather substantial harem. Apparently managing the khanate wasn't his only full-time job.

Afterwards, I left the group for some much-needed rest.

That's all for now. More to follow.

Love,
Stephen



Saturday, October 3, 2026 — Khiva, Uzbekistan to Darvaza, Turkmenistan

Today we crossed into our fifth and final “Stan,” Turkmenistan. With a population of only about six million people spread across a country larger than California, Turkmenistan possesses the world’s fourth-largest reserves of natural gas. By any measure, it should be one of the wealthiest countries in the region. Instead, it has spent much of its independence isolated from the outside world under one of the world’s most tightly controlled governments. Turkmenistan is often compared to North Korea because of its restrictions.

For many years, former president Saparmurat Niyazov, who renamed himself Turkmenbashi, or “Leader of the Turkmen,” built an extraordinary personality cult around himself. His portrait appeared almost everywhere. Months of the year were renamed after members of his family. He authored a spiritual guide called the *Ruhnama*, which became required reading in schools and government offices. At one point, a giant gold statue of him rotated throughout the day so it always faced the sun. In other words, this guy is the role model for today’s narcissistic politicians.



The border crossing was better than expected. It only took us about four hours. That included COVID tests, visa fee calculations, money exchange, visas, passport control, luggage inspection, and about half a dozen passport examinations. All fees had to be paid in new, crisp U.S. dollar bills. The COVID tests are administered and charged for, but we don’t think they’re actually analyzed. It seems to be just another way to add a fee to enter the country and generate hard currency.

Leaving the border behind, we drove for five hours on what used to be a four-lane road, deep into the Karakum Desert. Now it’s pieces of pavement separated by gaps, cracks, and holes that our driver zigzagged around, at times leaving the “road” for dirt trails because they were in better condition. Covering roughly seventy percent of the country, the Karakum is a vast landscape of sand dunes, sparse vegetation, endless horizons, freely roaming camels, and no toilets. I suspect real estate values are quite depressed.

By late afternoon we reached one of Central Asia’s most famous landmarks, the Darvaza Gas Crater. Nicknamed the “Gate to Hell,” the crater resulted from a Soviet-era drilling accident. Geologists drilling for natural gas collapsed the ground into an underground cavern and ignited the escaping gas, expecting the fire to burn out within a few days. More than fifty years later ... it’s still burning. Oops!



Flames danced across the floor of the enormous pit while waves of heat shimmered into the cool desert air. Standing along its rim, it was easy to understand how it earned its dramatic nickname.

It's the top tourist attraction in Turkmenistan, and it's practically impossible to get to.



We spent the night in a nearby yurt camp. Yep, you read that right. I had to sleep in another fucking yurt, with bathrooms down the way in another building. Oh, and there was no electricity or lights in the yurt camp. Power problems. Not surprising.

Sunday, October 4, 2026 — Darvaza to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

After another visit to the crater to see it in daylight, we continued across the Karakum Desert toward Ashgabat on a 'road' similar to yesterday's, stopping briefly to see the region's water crater, a lesser-known cousin to yesterday's gas crater. Similar hole, different effect.

Eventually the desert gave way to one of the most unusual capital cities in the world. Ashgabat doesn't simply embrace



white marble. It appears to be the only building material used.

Following independence, the city embarked on an enormous construction



program that filled its broad boulevards with gleaming white marble government buildings, apartment towers, monuments, fountains, and palaces. The result earned Ashgabat a Guinness

World Record for having the highest concentration of white marble buildings in the world. About 95% of the cars in Ashgabat are white as well, with most of the rest in light colors. The effect is white everywhere you look.



The scale of nearly everything in Ashgabat is extraordinary. Monumental buildings, enormous public squares, oversized fountains and monuments, and remarkably wide streets create the impression that the city was designed for a population several times its actual size. However, there were surprisingly few people around. For a capital city, the streets seemed unusually quiet. There were few pedestrians, almost no traffic, and an almost surreal sense of order. Whether that's by design or simply the city's personality, it gives Ashgabat an atmosphere unlike any city I've ever visited.

The rest of the country hasn't been updated since the Middle Ages, and here's a completely modern city without any people. Crazy.

We started at the bazaar, built by the Russians, where we shopped for souvenirs and other ways to spend our Turkmenistan money. The prices were so low, it was tough.

Our next stop introduced us to another national symbol: the magnificent Akhal-Teke horse. Considered one of the oldest horse breeds in the world, the Akhal-Teke is famous for its speed, endurance, and distinctive metallic sheen that almost makes its coat appear to glow in sunlight. The horses are a source of enormous national pride and appear throughout Turkmen art, monuments, and the country's coat of arms. Having seen them in person, I understand why. They're stunning animals. Fortunately, we didn't see them on any menus.



We stopped at Independence Park and the Neutrality Monument. Turkmenistan proudly maintains a policy of permanent neutrality, recognized by the United Nations in 1995. Unlike its neighbors, the country generally avoids military alliances and international disputes, preferring to chart its own course.

Adding to the country's collection of Guinness World Records, which it seems to pursue as a national obsession, Ashgabat has the world's largest indoor Ferris wheel. Due to the rain, the operator determined it wasn't safe for anyone else to ride, right after our car and one other car had been loaded. Apparently Ferris wheels don't go backwards, so we continued all the way around before learning about the conditions. Is it really indoors if it's affected by the rain? What could have possibly gone wrong?



Tomorrow is the end of our Five Stans tour, and we fly out of Ashgabat. For centuries, merchants crossed Central Asia because it connected the civilizations of Europe and Asia. Today, far fewer travelers make the journey. While these countries have a way to go in developing their tourist infrastructure for Western travelers, the Five Stans remain one of the world's great travel destinations.

Some of the world's greatest civilizations flourished here, in places many of us could barely locate on a map before



arriving. For well over a thousand years, this region was at the center of the world. Merchants, armies, scholars, diplomats, missionaries, and explorers all passed through here on their journeys between East and West. Those civilizations may have faded, but their legacy remains remarkably alive. We're fortunate enough to have followed in their footsteps.

We met some great people on our tour and had a lot of good times and laughs. Thank you all for sharing this adventure with us.

Love,
Stephen



Monday, October 5, 2026 — Istanbul, Türkiye

This morning we boarded our flight from Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, to Istanbul, Türkiye. Although this marked the end of our Central Asian adventure, it also began the final chapter of our trip in one of history's greatest cities.

Straddling Europe and Asia, Istanbul has served as a crossroads of civilizations for thousands of years. Originally founded by Greek colonists around 660 BC as Byzantium, the city later became Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire. If Rome was the capital of Western Christianity and Baghdad became the intellectual center of the Islamic world, Constantinople stood between them for more than a thousand years. Protected by massive walls and commanding the entrance to the Black Sea, it became one of the richest cities on Earth. Even after the Ottoman



conquest in 1453 and its eventual transformation into modern-day Istanbul, the city remained one of the world's great commercial and cultural centers. Today, more than fifteen million people call Istanbul home, making it Europe's largest city.



After dropping our luggage at our hotel, we headed to Sultanahmet Square to join a walking tour. Our guide introduced us to the city's remarkable history while leading us through the district that contains many of Istanbul's greatest treasures. We walked past the Blue Mosque, admired Hagia Sophia, peered inside Topkapi Palace, and explored the Hippodrome, where Roman chariot races once entertained crowds of more than 100,000 spectators. Apparently, Istanbul had traffic problems long before the invention of the automobile.

It's almost impossible to absorb how much history surrounds you here. Unlike many ancient cities that survive only as ruins, Istanbul has never stopped being one of the world's great cities. It simply kept reinventing itself.

Tuesday, October 6, 2026 — Istanbul, Türkiye

One of the best ways to understand a city is through its food. After spending more than two weeks sampling the cuisines of Central Asia, which is not exactly a foodie paradise, today we explored another culinary crossroads where Europe, Asia, and the Middle East have been influencing one another for centuries.



Our morning food tour began at the Spice Bazaar on the European side of Istanbul, where we gathered the ingredients for a typical Turkish breakfast and ate them at a tea house. We then crossed by ferry to the Asian side and spent the next five hours sampling practically every food imaginable and learning about its place in Istanbul's food culture. We tried Turkish delight, pickles, kebabs, baklava, and plenty of other things I can no longer remember because, by that point, I was concentrating mostly on finding additional room in my stomach.

Best of all, after two weeks in Central Asia, I was relieved to learn that horses are not on the menu in Türkiye.

It was a fun day, but by the end, we had eaten enough for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Possibly tomorrow's breakfast too.

Wednesday, October 7, 2026 — Istanbul, Türkiye

It turned out we did have room for breakfast today after yesterday's food orgy. Apparently, the human stomach can always make more room for food when it's on vacation.



In the afternoon, we cruised one of the world's most famous waterways. The Bosphorus is only about twenty miles long, yet few stretches of water have influenced history more. It separates Europe from Asia while connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara and, ultimately, the Mediterranean, making it one of the world's most strategically important shipping lanes.



As our boat left the dock, Europe stretched along one shore while Asia unfolded along the other. How many cities can honestly make that claim? We cruised past palaces, mosques, waterfront mansions, and fortresses built over centuries by the empires that fought to control this narrow strip of water. After more than two weeks following the Silk Road across Central Asia, cruising between two continents seemed like an appropriate way to bring the trip to an end.

Tomorrow we head home. It has been a great trip: Five Stans, countless mosques and madrasas, several border crossings, two nights in a yurt, more plov than

anyone should eat in a lifetime, and, thankfully, no horse meat in Türkiye.

But after nearly three weeks on the road, I'm ready to sleep in my own bed, use my own bathroom, and wake up without wondering what country I'm in.

Until the next trip,
Love,
Stephen