



Our visit to Uzbekistan

Yes we really were there! We went on a small group tour in October 2019 (how long ago that seems now!) we mostly had pleasant sunny days but the nights were pretty cold.

The national currency is the Som (UZS). The exchange rate was about 3000UZS to the dollar. We used it for meals, snacks and drinks etc, - a loaf of bread being about 800 Som and a Mars bar 1,500 Som. Tourist shops preferred us to pay in Dollars or Euros.

Food

- Generally the food was very good - The national dish is ***Plov***, (cf. pilau) a rice based dish with onions carrots and lamb. It's hearty winter fare, potentially rather greasy, cooked in a large bowl: and lamb layer at the bottom then rice with chopped veg, lamb fat and water, slow cooked for several hours. Traditionally eaten at midday it was served as an upturned mound topped with the lamb and sometimes fancy toppings like quails' eggs, roasted garlic or dried fruit.



This was the type of stove plov would be cooked on, - a brick built structure with space for a wood fire underneath, though here it's gas burners, and a large hole to fit the metal bowl can sit to cook the rice etc.



The other dish you find everywhere is ***shashlik***: kebabs, originally large slabs of chewy mutton, but for tourists it's more refined and you can find chicken and beef. It's cooked over gutter-like troughs of charcoal.



Bread is all important, called **Non** (cf. naan). Normally we had round flat loaves stamped with the baker's mark and cooked in a large clay oven called a **tandyr** (cf. tandoori).

Unfortunately it goes dry very quickly and, and as it's greatly valued, almost revered, even stale bread is sometimes served rather than wasted.



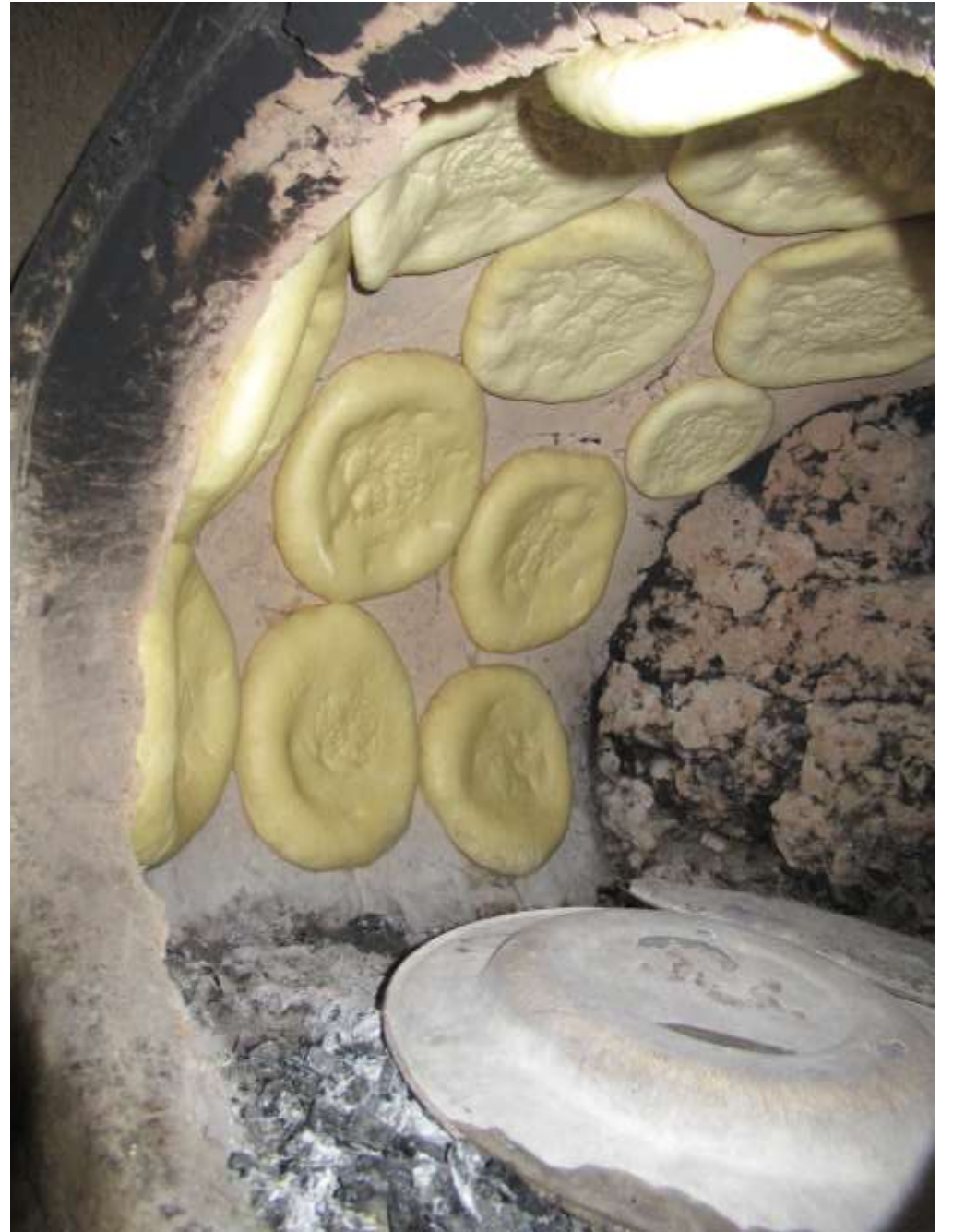


- Large tandyr were built in the main square on Khiva (it's a world heritage site so they try to make it authentic) for festivals etc and you can just see the brick stands for cooking large quantities of plov.

The next slide is a video where you see us in a 'homestay', having a go at shaping the *non*. It was then baked in a sideways *tandyr*, each *non* wetted on one side so that it would stick to the oven wall. Once it is baked it falls off easily.







We also had ***manty***, soft dumplings filled with a root vegetable mix, sometimes with mutton added.

Every meal was accompanied by black tea which was constantly topped up, but Russian beer and a very drinkable local red wine was also available.





Samsa (cf. samosas) are large pasties, onion and mutton or lamb baked in a clay tandyr oven and served drenched in fatty lamb juices.



This all sounds rather greasy and heavy but each meal started with either a veg soup or little sharing dishes of delicious salads or veg fritters. The salads were often mixtures of shredded cooked veg with dried fruit or nuts.







Although we mostly had chairs and tables at a height we are used to in the west, the locals usually sat on colourful long cushions at low tables like the one below.



There is a lot of fruit in season – we were there in October, the tail end of the melon harvest.





We visited the main food market in Tashkent (left) and it was full of fruit and dried fruit, nuts and spices, - amazingly colourful.



Crafts

Carpets are everywhere in Asia. There's lots of debate about which country makes the best quality carpets but ultimately the all-important factor is the size of the stitching. They can be made of cotton, wool, camel hair or silk and the designs are very intricate, often traditional, with symbolic meaning.



In the 19 century a Brit took it upon himself to revive the dyeing and weaving crafts in Khiva.

Some carpets are used for floors, depending on what they are made of, but many were intended as wall coverings, to insulate yurts or drape on seating.

The next couple of slides are videos taken at the workshop in Khiva. The work is very intricate and sometimes there are several girls working on one carpet. It can take three to five months to complete a carpet.







Although she has the design details pinned up to guide her, this girl is watching a soap in her phone as she works!

The dress she is wearing is made of Ikat style woven fabric, which we will see later on.





The carpet below is completely reversible, different designs woven simultaneously on each side



Above you can see just how intricate some of the designs can be.



Silk

As soon as merchants started to bring silks through the trade routes, the countries along the route tried to get hold of the Chinese secret of silk culture and eventually silk was produced in many countries including in Europe.

Uzbek silk is now largely produced in the fertile Ferghana valley but in ancient times, when water was more plentiful, Khiva was a major centre for silk.

It is used for carpets of course, but also for fine scarves and woven fabrics such as Ikat, and for embroidery threads for crafts like Suzani.

Suzani

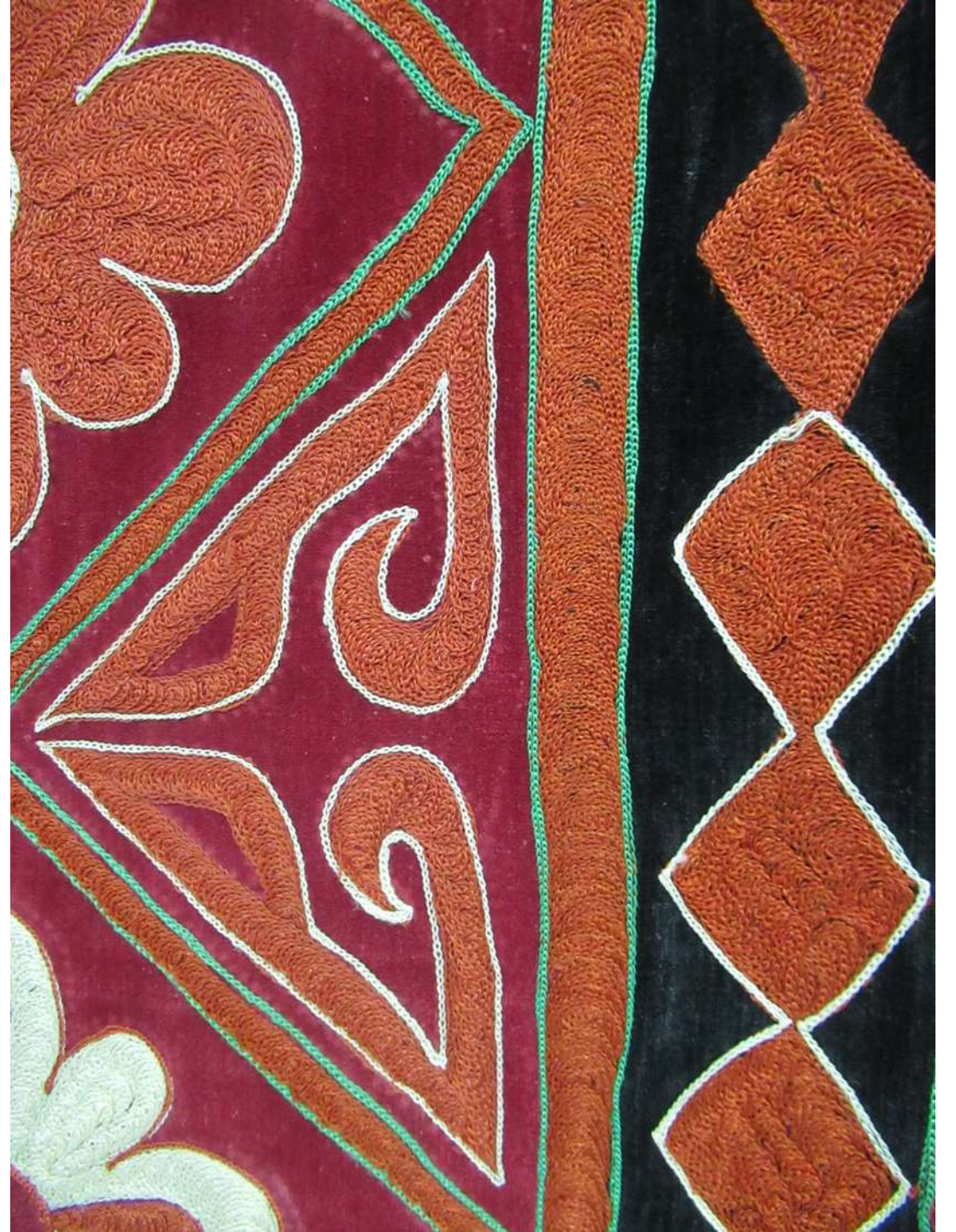
Suzani embroidery is found everywhere, fabric embroidered with silk or cotton stitching to create vibrant designs.

Traditionally the technique was used to make wall hangings as wedding gifts for the bridegroom.

The next slide shows a wall hanging I saw in a museum.

In the detail you can see how effectively the stitching creates blocks of colour.







I fell in love with this jacket though it is probably machine stitch with synthetic threads!



Ikat

Ikat is a dyeing and weaving technique that originally came from Indonesia.

It creates a slightly blurred effect, created by carefully tie dyeing the warp or weft in various colours before the cloth is woven. It can be made from cotton or silk.







Local dress

Mostly men wear informal western style clothes, but many wear embroidered pill box hats or skull caps.

Women often wear velvet or colourfully embroidered dresses, either long or with leggings. Usually they wore headscarves, but we were not expected to except when going inside a Mosque. They also carry their fortune in their mouths and often reveal the glint of gold crowns when they smile!





On the right you can see Berwyn modelling the long quilted velvet coat worn by men in the colder seasons. It belonged to our driver. Very warm, but unfortunately it would not have been suitable for wet Wales!



Our Homestay

We spent a couple of nights in a 'homestay' with a young family in a lovely green valley surrounded by brown hills. It was as spotlessly clean as you could expect in that environment (the bedroom walls were bare mud plaster) and the family were delightful.

Granny looked after the children while Dad tended the smallholding and led us on walks, and Mum washed and cooked.





They had an ancient electric washer for all the bedlinen, but they rinsed out the sheets in the stream and hung them everywhere they could to dry.

They arranged a little entertainment by a local family who came to play their instruments and dance for us. The next slide is a video showing some of the performance, - apologies that it starts off sideways, - it does right itself eventually!





Uzbeks love to dress their children up, and to dress up themselves!



Notice the shaggy sheepskin headgear, or *telpek*. These were for sale on market stalls in Khiva. Traditionally they were worn all year round over a shaven head and skull cap, as insulation against heat or cold. In Khiva they generally wore black wool and white was reserved for high officials, but we didn't see anyone actually wearing one.





One of our party tried on a very glamorous Russian number!



The telpeks are at the bottom of the rack.

Metal work

This is a video showing some bronze workers on the street.





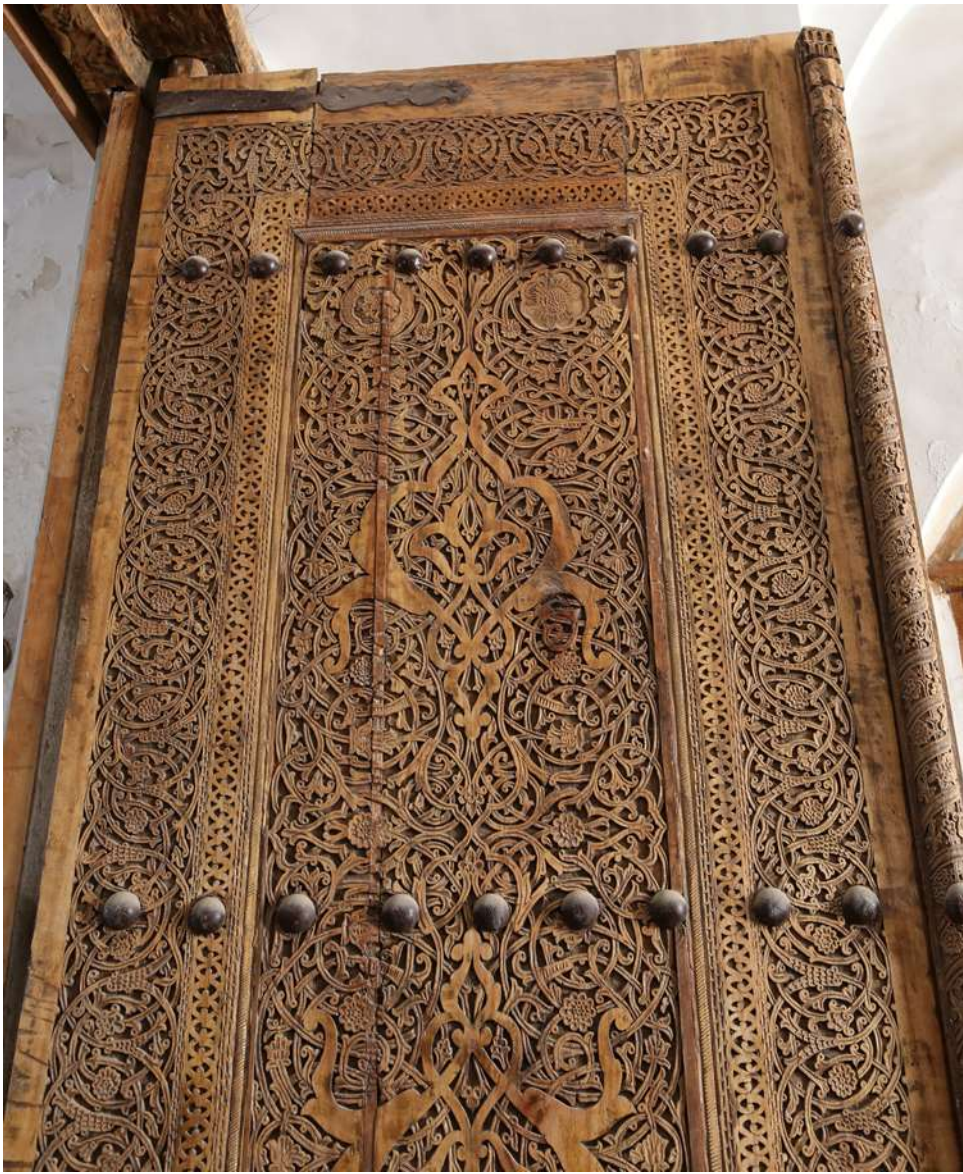
Silver jewellery was everywhere!
Traditionally a set like this would be part of a bride's costume, including an ornate chain running from ear to nose.



Wood work

Wood is a scarce resource in desert lands and is often very ornately carved. Every pillar and door was intricately carved





We watched little Khoran stands being carved from a single block of wood, quite complicated to use! The next slide is a video of a demonstration!



Ceramics

This is a craft you just can't ignore. There are colourful tea sets, plates and tiles for sale in many tourist shops.







The basin in the ladies in a Tashkent restaurant.

Ceramic tiles are an effective way of protecting the mud brick structures from the weather.

As you've seen all the restored buildings are faced with ceramic tiles of varying quality and amazing designs. Some are the original tiles but many have been replaced.



The tiles are coloured with glazes using lapis lazuli, turquoise, yellow ochre, burnt sienna and red oxide.

We were told that the Russians used craftsmen with expertise gained in the renovation of St Petersburg when they undertook the mammoth task of restoring the Silk road buildings.





We visited Museum of modern Russian art and were struck by the vibrance of this Uzbek shepherd on his Russian motorcycle. He would probably have lived in a yurt rather less ornate than the one below. They are light wooden frameworks, covered in felt or skins with a topping of canvas. Inside is often hung with colourful woven fabric or carpets.





We spent one night in a yurt, or most of us did. We even had electric blankets, but Berwyn wanted to sleep under the stars, - the coldest night he's ever spent!

He was very glad of the warming breakfast laid on for us in the communal yurt next day!

That's all folks!

