

## Impressions of Uzbekistan February 2022

### Our trip:

**Wednesday:** We arrived at around 4:30am at Tashkent Airport. Visa hassle... This may all be political, we don't know. After the Uzbek counsel in Rostov told us that our applications were our visas, the border entry said they were only applications for "visa upon entry"... \$160 USD each, please. Of course, we've been living in Russia and had only rubles. "The bank is over there", he pointed to one small booth next to customs. By the way, when we tried to apply for visas online it was \$20, but as soon as we put in Nationality: American, the web page stopped working.



Around 5am or so we checked in at our hotel and took a nap for a few hours. Then we took a long walk around several blocks. Later we met our friend, Samandar, for a late lunch at a Plov Restaurant. After dinner we took a tour of the TV Tower, the Monument to the Defenders (those who died from Stalin's gulags), and the new Tashkent City Park, where we had tea and dessert.

**Thursday:** Samandar's uncle is a taxi driver and he drove us to all the places on our journey, starting with Samarkand, the beginning of the Silk Road. Many universities (madrasa) are there. These were free to anyone who could continue passing exams. We spent the night at a hotel.

**Friday:** Friday morning we continued our journey to Bukhara, established 1420. There we toured the fortress of the last king, who gave up the throne around 1940 and moved to Afghanistan. Included was a tour of the jail and a monument to Job. The story is that Job in Old Testament times came there and saw there was no water. He stabbed his staff into the ground causing a spring to start. People still drink from that spring inside the monument. Being a holy place, we were not allowed in.



We also spent that night at a hotel. The hotel room had a picture on the wall of stacks of USA \$100 bills. We later found out that this is a superstition to call money to you.

**Saturday:** In the morning we began the long drive to return to Tashkent, arriving later that evening.

**Sunday:** Most of the day was forecast for rain. In the afternoon we went for a walk between showers. And in the evening, another restaurant specializing in national foods.

**Monday:** We tried to visit a couple of museums, but they were closed...no reason why.

**Tuesday:** After getting our half-hearted PCR tests at the airport for the return flight (one small dab just inside the nose), we went to a museum that featured a lot of relics, paintings and models of the early days of Uzbekistan.

Had a weird time at baggage and passport control leaving Uz. After x-raying our bag, they wanted us to open it and examine several items, none of which were out of the ordinary...like an electric toothbrush??. After examining the entire bag, they seemed satisfied, except for the one question...Why do Americans want to go to Russia? Oh, you live there, WHY?

Most of the plane was Uz migrant workers traveling to jobs...most of the construction workers in R are migrants. We were the only non UZ nationals. On leaving, passport control

studied our passports with a magnifying glass for quite a long time, first one guy, then he called a second one in. Then they took them and left the cubicle saying a "just a minute..." about 10 minutes later they returned, stamped us out just in time to get on the plane (it was already boarding). We have no idea what that was all about, they didn't say anything.

Arriving at passport control in Krasnodar...similar...all Uz migrants, and we are on delavaya ("having business in the country") visas...again, "wait over there". A second man showed up and asked why Americans are entering on an Uzbek migrant worker flight, why do we want to be in R????? What were we doing in Uzbekistan?? And, of course all of the migrants are intently watching this polite "interrogation". Finally, he said something to the first guy who stamped us through and out of the airport...very strange.

**Climate:** Tashkent is more humid than the surrounding countryside. Outside of the city the farmlands are green as they are irrigated. But, the desert is arid scrub brush on adobe soil, not unlike parts of the American Southwest. And the air there is very dry.

**Food:** The quality of food is very good (it is halal), as is its flavor. Alcohol is sold in shops and some restaurants. Pork is not sold anywhere. Most of the foods were very mildly seasoned with aromatic herbs, We did not taste any hot spices in main dishes, but shakers of black and red peppers were in place with salt and vinegar on the tables and some salads had a single hot pepper to the side. A lot of restaurants specialize in one type of food. These are some of the foods we had:

**Wedding Plov:** very mildly seasoned rice, with garbanzo beans, steamed carrots, raisins, and tender pieces of beef, garnished with a piece of horsemeat sausage and a dolmatha (meat and rice stuffed grapeleaf), accompanied by tomato cucumber salad, flatbread, and green tea.

Plov is the national dish.



**Lulya Kebob** (Люля Кебаб, is also popular in Russia): spiced finely ground lamb, hand shaped on a flat skewer and grilled, accompanied by finely sliced white onion with tomato cucumber salad, flatbread, and green tea.

**Somsa:** a baked bread shell filled with tender pieces of lamb, seasoned with aromatic herbs reminiscent of Italian oregano, and served with a plain tomato sauce and melted butter. Served with a choice of salad, flatbread and green tea. This salad was cucumber & mushroom with oil & vinegar.



**Shashlik** (shish kabob): a differently seasoned ground lamb kebab and a kebab of beef cubes and a grilled tomato, also on flat skewers, with finely sliced white onion. Accompanied by tomato cucumber salad, flatbread, and green tea.



Plates of fruit at the end.



**Chicken pieces:** simmered in a mild parsley sauce, the seasoning was vaguely Chinese in taste. Served with fried potato slices, salad and flatbread.







**Horsemeat with Pasta:** shredded horsemeat sausage cooked in bouillon and mixed with handmade pasta and thinly sliced white onion, garnished with two slices of horsemeat sausage, all served cold with the hot bouillon on the side. The sausage is very mild and reminiscent of roast beef, but much drier in texture.

Salads, flatbread and tea on the side.



**Pea soup:** cups of savory rich broth accompanied by a platter of garbanzo beans, tender cubes of beef, onions and green herbs to add as you wish to the broth before eating. Accompanied by tomato cucumber salad, flatbread, and green tea. (alas, we didn't get a photo of this very delicious soup)

**Lamb Soup:** Lamb chop in broth with potato and carrot, garnished with cilantro.



**Pilaf:** with beef, carrot, raisins, and egg.

**Salad and Dessert:**





The following can be seen in the above photos.

**Tomato cucumber salad:** slices or chunks of tomato, cucumber, sliced red or white onion, garnished with a piece of green onion and possibly a hot pepper. Can be served plain, or lightly salted, or with a plain oil and vinegar dressing. This is the most common salad and accompanies most dishes. The tomatoes are exceptionally good, meaty and sweet. The juices from this salad makes an excellent dip for pieces of the flatbread

**Flatbread:** The types of flatbread vary, but most are about 8" round with a raised rim and flattened center. They may be plain or garnished with sesame or poppy seeds.

**Tea:** is served in small bowls. We chose green tea at our meals, but other types are available, as well as coffee.

**Culture:** The culture is traditional but with heavy Western influences in technology, entertainment, fashion, and food. Most people are Muslim, though few are devout; but it is not in the constitution as the national religion, so other religions are accepted equally as long as they respect Muslims.

**Currency:** Sum, or Soum, or Som (pronounced "soom", means "pure" or "pure gold") and Tiyn (1/100 sum). One USD = ~10,850 Sum. The smallest coin in use is 100 sum. In the picture 5,000 Rubles top, 5,000 Som middle, 5,000 Som bottom (old and new bills). 1 Ruble = 141 Som . Payments are only in Sum or maybe USD. Bank cards may work, but Sberbank blocked Jerry's when he started using it until he talked to them for half an hour on the phone. Bring cash. Later, both of our cards were blocked. After we got back, the bank received a lecture. They tried the "only trying to protect you" line, but they blocked Jerry's card the second time when he tried to pay for a taxi (about \$1 USD) and this is AFTER he talked to them to unblock it the first time.

**Language:** The main language is Uzbek. Russian is the second language and most people speak it. And English...well, it lurks in a few common phrases here and there, but is blatant on shop signs. There are a lot of language schools for English, but there are few fluent speakers. Uzbek is written in Latin. It's origins are Mongolian, later influenced by Turkish. It is very soft on the ear. Russian and English may be written in either Latin or Cyrillic, or both. We have seen signs where one word is written using both alphabets mixed together. Also there are many signs with all three languages.



**Driving:** Don't drive here, hire a driver and try to not look outside the car. The roads are often very narrow and uneven (some roads are centuries old). There are remarkably few accidents considering the driving style is sort of carnival bumper cars. Road markings are only taken as a suggestion, 3-4 cars across 2 lanes is common. There's also a LOT of construction going on, the previous president didn't do much



upkeep, spent money on himself. Now they're making up for lost time, building new and refurbishing old buildings, roads, and other infrastructure



On parting, our host Samandar presented us with gifts to take home: A tray of dried fruits and nuts, Uzbek bread, and a ceramic plate depicting a view of Samarkand.



**Tourism:** If the museums and monuments seemed sparse of tourists, one of the tour guides explained the situation. Although all of the Covid restrictions had been lifted last summer, the tourism industry has not yet recovered.