

## Hampshire Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers December Meeting 2019

Before sitting down to a sumptuous American lunch, members who attended the Guild meeting on Saturday 7th December were taken on a fascinating and adventure-packed journey along the Central Asian Silk Road by Peter Hewlett-Smith who undertook the trip in 1997 after a 37-year career in the army.

The idea had been simmering at the back of his mind since, at the age of sixteen, he had seen a picture of Tashravat in a book. Tashravat is an example of a caravanserai: a roadside inn which supported the flow of commerce along the Silk Road and provided rest and shelter for traders and travellers and their camels. The small domed building, within a square surrounded by stone walls, sits in wide, barren looking country beneath towering mountains in Kyrgystan and Peter vowed that, one day, he would go and find that place.



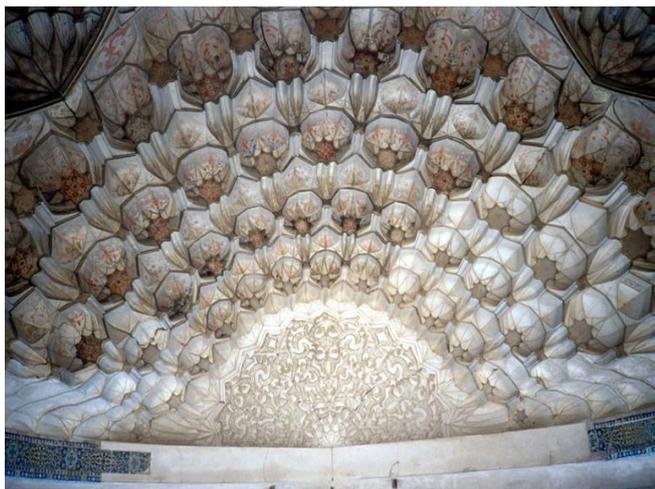
Photo © Peter Hewlett-Smith

A chance meeting at a church concert in London resulted in a travelling companion, Lucy, and the pair made their way by rail to Moscow where they boarded The Samarkand Express. Before departure they were warned to be aware of thieves and asked if they had a gun! As it turned out, the greatest problem on board came from cockroaches.

Days later, somewhere south of the Aral Sea, they alighted in the heat of the ancient city of Bukhara where huge city walls made of mud still survive. There too were the remains of buildings tiled in vibrant colours, examples of which were passed round amongst us so that we could feel the thickness of the tiles and see the colour of the clay as well as the richness of the blue surface. Minarets soared elegantly amongst tiled mosque domes. The audience chamber of the one-time Sultan, with its low doorway which could only be got through by bending very low in deference, was stunningly decorated in beautifully coloured and patterned tiles. Interestingly, the call-to-prayer towers were also used as lighthouses to guide the traders' caravans in from the desert.

But, amongst all this beauty, danger lurked, and Peter's sense of its approach did not prevent him from being attacked. Luckily, Lucy carried the American dollars they carried secreted securely about her person! By great good fortune they were befriended by a local man who took them to his home where they were fed with wonderful bread, yogurt, old wine, sweet tea and given a place to sleep. By way of some return for such kindness,

the travellers had brought along a supply of pencils, notebooks and coloured postcards of London landmarks which they handed out to the children of the family. Lack of a common language was no barrier.



Photos © Peter Hewlett-Smith

The hospitality of locals was a big feature of the four week trip. All along the way Peter and Lucy benefited from the cultural practice that "today's host is tomorrow's guest" and they were often invited to share food in people's houses and yurts as well as during bus trips. Food was also obtained from station platforms, street markets and roadside traders. The bread was a great favourite with Peter. He liked watching it being baked and enjoyed its fresh crustiness.



The importance of food was closely followed by the need for toilets which varied widely. A train might provide a hole in the floor while being on a bus necessitated a request to the driver for a comfort break when a wall was greatly appreciated.

Along the way Peter graded these facilities from nought to ten, nought being the best. One place apparently was given a grading of twelve. He didn't elaborate.

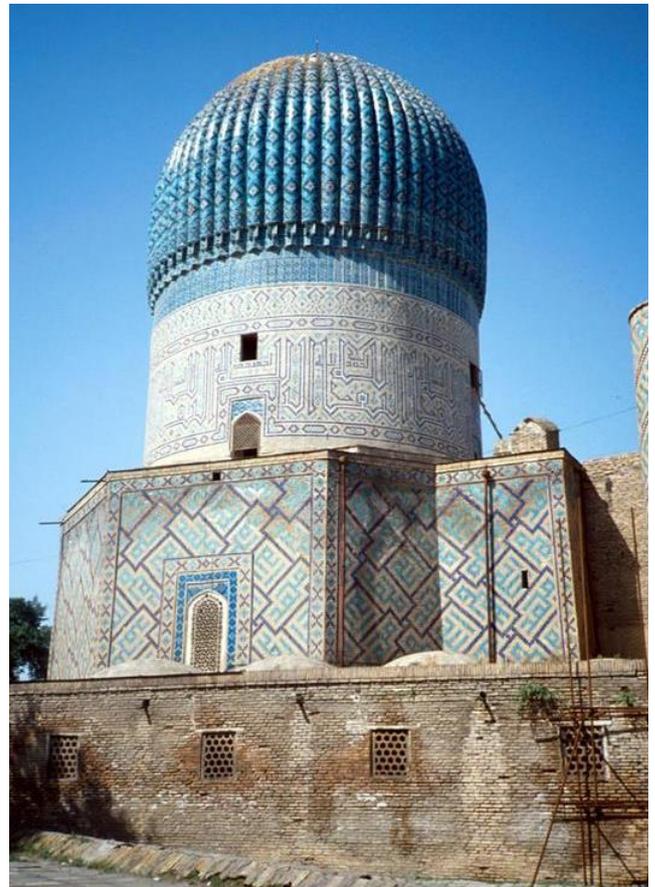
A seven hour bus trip from Bukhara took them east to Samarkand. Conquered by Ghengis Khan in 1220 and the capital of Tamarlane's empire in the 14th century, Samarkand was an Islamic centre of scholarly study.



The blue-tiled elegantly arched entrances to the ancient university, either side of the sanded square are still there. Unfortunately, saline water from below is seeping up into some of the tiled buildings of Samarkand resulting in the tiles being forced off the walls.

Another long journey on another dilapidated bus took them farther east to the communist town of Vishtak where the street markets sold everything imaginable. No bus was available for the next stage of their journey, but someone knew someone with a jeep and a fee was negotiated. Off they set through Kyrgystan into the Tien Shan mountain range to China. The mountains they were travelling through rose around them to heights of 4000m. Marmots popped up unexpectedly out of their burrows and huge shaggy yak stared at us from the screen, while tiny, brilliantly blue irises bloomed unbelievably.

Again, dollars changed hands and food and shelter was provided by a family on the road. Next day, coming over a rise in this wide barren country, surrounded by mountains, Peter's dream came true. There ahead of them was Tashrvat Caravanserai, just as he remembered it from the book, he had seen it in all those years before. They even spent the night in it, sleeping on the stone ledges under the domed interior.



Then on to Kashgar, an old communist town dominated by a huge statue of Chairman Mao and where the Islamic Wigas are presently being persecuted. But, still flowering outside the building that once housed the British Embassy, were the English roses planted by the ambassador's wife.

Street markets abounded in this important trading city and again Peter was fascinated to watch the baking of the delicious bread.

The penultimate leg of the journey took place by bus, but the adventure was far from over. When that bus broke down on a deserted stretch of road and it was clear that a long wait was in the offing, Peter and Lucy headed for a group of yurts nearby, taking the opportunity to socialise with the locals, entertain the children with drawing and postcards and, of course, a chance to take more photographs. When the replacement bus arrived and everyone and their many possessions had to be transferred from the disabled bus, Peter's organisational skills gained from a career in the army came to the fore.





Photos © Peter Hewlett-Smith

They pressed on through the snowy, precipitous terrain of the mountain pass into the valley of the Indus where boys swam in the glacial temperatures and stood bare-chested in the cold to have their group photo taken. What a contrast between that last mountain village with its prayer flag tree and its dry stone rubble houses built into the hill slopes and the bustling city of Islamabad where Peter and Lucy boarded the plane back to Britain.

We in the audience also felt we'd returned to earth with a bump when the screen went blank and the 90 minute talk was over. We had truly been transported to another time and other places.

We were surprised and not a little disappointed to learn that Lucy and Peter have not kept in contact. The romantics amongst us were hoping that their huge adventure had perhaps been the beginning of a lifetime's adventure together.

Author of article: Jean Philips

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