

Islam Khodja Minaret is the tallest such structure in Khiva; A statue of Persian Scholar, Al Khwarizmi (facing page), sits next to the walls of the Old City.



# *Khiva:* The Land of Babur's Daughters

Heaps of history, heavy hats and heavenly vistas—life in the Uzbek city is an exciting example of the wonder that is Central Asia

*By Swagata Ghosh*



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FACING PAGE: ANDREA PISTOLESI/PHOTOLIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES

It was a little after nine in the morning, but you wouldn't know that looking around you. The square was buzzing with hawkers, travellers, pilgrims, traders, all bartering for bargain tickets, haggling over carpets, prayer mats and skullcaps. A bunch of guards sat under the canopy of a gate operating a ticketed entrance, the likes of which you see at London tube stations. Outside the sun beat down on the cobbled square with temperatures soaring to late afternoon highs. I found myself a small clearing, pulled my friend a little closer and posed for our husbands standing a few feet away. But posing for cameras outside Ata Darwarza, the very imposing west gate of Itchan Kala—Khiva's ancient citadel—is no easy task. Between the camera and us marched a steady stream of matronly women in bright, ikat jackets and matching headscarves.

After a few minutes, when we had almost given up, we realised we were surrounded. A group of women bright-faced and mostly middle-aged had cleared the trampling crowds and poured into our frame. A little startled, we smiled for the cameras. One of them slipped her arm into my friend's and with an emphatic gesture said, "Hindustan, Hindustan!" When my friend nodded yes, she kissed her and kept repeating a sentence where we could only pick out a few words. Timur, our guide, intervened. "She is calling you Babur's daughter. They are from Ferghana and she says you have the most beautiful eyes."

We'd been roaming across Uzbekistan for the past eight days and so far we had many a pleasant encounter. In Samarkand we met a wizened, old gentleman on crutches at a mulberry silk factory who came tripping to our seats singing, "Mud mud ke na dekh, mud mud ke." In Bukhara we were coaxed by a young teenager into buying her ceramics with impromptu moves from "I'm a disco dancer," to the collective glee of clapping tourists. But nowhere had we been called 'Babur's daughters,' a reference to the middle-aged warrior king who, having lost his own kingdom of Ferghana and that of his ancestor's, Samarkand, three times, turned south towards Delhi in 1526 and never looked back.

We left our Ferghana 'cousins' outside Ata Darwarza and stepped into what seemed like a film set from *The Arabian Nights*. Despite the streets almost choking with tourists, Khiva has a very authentic Central Asian feel. Unlike Samarkand that towers around you at Himalayan proportions and drowns you in a tsunami of turquoise tiles, Itchan Kala is almost uniformly monochrome—a brick and mud oasis with high ramparts skirting around a mishmash of madrasahs, mausoleums, mosques and minarets. Inside there is only a hint of glazed majolica-tiled facades that glint like gemstones singling out some of its finest architectural marvels.

## Caravan City

On the Uzbek-Turkmenistan border, not far from the banks of Amu Darya river that Alexander the Great knew as Oxus, sits Khiva. Sandwiched in between two mammoth Central Asian deserts, the Kyzlkum (red sands) and Karakum

(black sands), Khiva was a bazaar city that traded in everything from camels, coffee, concubines and carpets. For over 2,000 years Khiva was a capitalist's dream, which everyone from the Persians, Greeks, Zoroastrians, Turks, Arabs, Mongols and the Russians wanted a piece of. It was central to the old Silk Route trade. As a result it was razed and rebuilt several times and much of the city that we see today is no more than 300 years old. And yet the spirit of the city is timeless.

Our first stop was the Amin Khan Madrasah, Khiva's premiere religious school that once housed 260 boarders and the chancery of the Supreme Court. Its creator, Amin Khan, had a penchant for all things bright and beautiful, and in the mid-19th century he conceived this madrasah as one of the foremost imposing buildings in the city with a facade wrapped in azure, indigo and cobalt blue tiles. But the Khan didn't stop there. He commissioned the adjoining Kuk Minar, almost entirely shrouded in a sea of sapphire tiles, to be the highest built brick minaret in the world, which when finished would have dwarfed the Qutub Minar in Delhi. Yet the Kuk Minar was never finished. The Khan was killed and all building work ground to a halt. Yet at a truncated 29 metres, Kuk or Katla (short) Minar is the highlight of any Khiva trip. If you are staying the night, you could take up rooms at the Khan's madrasah. The boarders have long left and it is now a very fine hotel.

"If you stare any harder, those tiles will cast a spell. Come along quick, we mustn't keep the Khan waiting," Timur smiled, and we walked down the steps of the madrasah, into the clamour of the surging bazaar. Despite the prevailing belief, Khiva is no museum city. Here even a make-believe 'Khan' will pose for a picture with you in exchange for 5,000 Uzbek Som. Every street corner, every square, was heaving with suzans, carpets and carved, wooden Quran stands. Shopping here is not just a mere holiday pastime—it is Khiva's very soul. The city was founded



Lagman is a classic example of Central Asian cooking. Facing page: An Uzbek family (top) enjoy a local market; The ramparts of the citadel (bottom) are a central part of Khiva's landscape.



RATOV, MAXIM / SHUTTERSTOCK

GRANT ROONEY / AGEFOTOSTOCK / DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (PEOPLE); LUCAS VALLECILLOS / AGEFOTOSTOCK / DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (FORT)

The interiors of the Kunya Ark Fortress represent stunning craftsmanship.

**KHIVA IS A RAMBLER'S PARADISE. YOU CAN EASILY LOSE A COUPLE OF DAYS IN THIS WARREN, SIPPING TEA AND BAZAAR-HOPPING**

on trade and thrived for two millennia because of it. We brushed past a row of stalls selling tall, bushy woolly hats and Timur pointed out: “Those are *chugirma*, handmade sheep-skinned hats for Khiva men to show off status. It also keeps their heads warm in winters and in shade in summers. It’s a symbol of pride that you keep in the family and you wouldn’t lend it, even to a friend.” I tried one and my head disappeared inside it.

## Ramblers’ Paradise

You can easily lose a couple of days in this warren, sipping tea through languid afternoons, squatting at stalls selling ikat pottery and Uzbek dolls on visits to the bazaar. Sweets, nuts, fruits both dried and fresh—apricots, pomegranates, watermelons, oranges—are cheap and plentiful: nobody buys without sampling first. And lunchtimes are unhurried.

We stopped at a caravanserai and were taken to a *chowpai*, a raised platform strewn with cushions where you sit around a table in the middle and stretch your legs underneath. The water is salty in Khiva, so locals stick to tea and vodka, both of which you drink from the same blue-glazed ceramic cups. “In Uzbekistan, vodka is not alcohol, it’s white tea. It flows like the Amu Darya,” said Timur, while he passed around a large platter of assorted salads (dill, purple basil, cilantro, baby radish, tomatoes), yoghurt with cumin and chilli, and warm bread straight out of a tandoor, that you tear and share. It was communal supper at its finest. The main course was even more diverse. My friend ordered a lamb *lagman* and I stuck to my old favourite, *samsa* (a samosa-like savoury snack). Lagman is an Uighur speciality—thick *lo mein*-like noodles in a Central Asian soup. It’s all the best bits of the Silk Route in a bowl—trade, travel, migration and food without borders.

Reluctantly, after an hour-and-a-half we rolled out of our *chowpays* and headed to Juma Masjid. Plain and unassuming from the outside, its flat roof is supported by a forest of 213 carved wooden pillars, some dating back to the 10th century. Underneath each pillar rests a marble base stuffed with camel wool. “That’s ancient earthquake protection. Khiva hasn’t just fallen to men. You can’t be too careful here.”

By late afternoon the crowds had thinned and we walked towards a bulbous turquoise dome, past bathhouses and lounging camels. Unlike Bukhara and Samarkand, Itchan Kala has just one majolica-tiled domed mausoleum that towers over the mushrooming city dedicated to Pahlavan Makhmud. Pahlavan, born in 1247, was a poet philosopher who not only wrote ghazals, but was also a champion wrestler whose fame travelled from Iran to India. Legend goes that Pahlavan went to Delhi and defeated the ‘king’ who granted him one wish as a reward. Pahlavan, with his wit, turned this one wish into the freedom and return of hundreds of his countrymen previously captured in India. In Khiva, Pahlavan is not just a national hero, but also a patron saint: successive generations of Khiva Khans have all erected mausoleums over his grave, each far outshining its

predecessor. As a result, the interior is a veritable feast of painted blue plaster ceilings and water-stained, filigreed marble chandeliers.

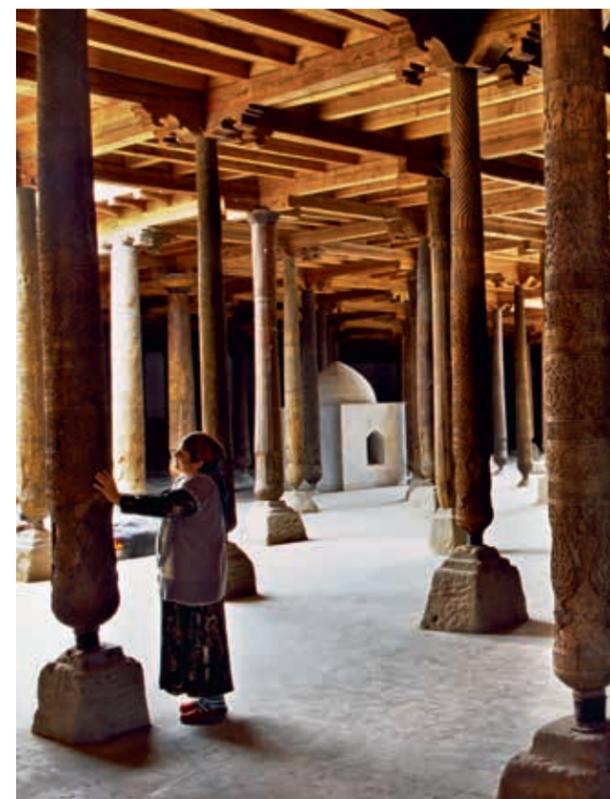
Outside, it was almost evening and the sun had disappeared behind a curtain of grey clouds. “It’s going to rain tonight. If we make it quick, we might just beat the crowds to the ramparts,” said Timur, as he slipped on his shoes and took to the streets. We followed. Unless you have a map and a very good sense of direction, a local guide is priceless in Khiva. The stories they weave rival *A Thousand and One Nights*. The stairs up the ramparts are narrow, dark and of irregular height. At places they often disappear to a toehold. But if you persevere, you will be richly rewarded. As we surfaced into the open terrace, I realised what everyone from Alexander to Marco Polo and Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta saw in Khiva. The skyline of madrasahs, mausoleums, mosques and minarets may not have been the same, but its soul had remained unchanged.

Up until the very modern 1920s—when the Russians finally took over from the ruling puppet Khiva Khanate—the city of Khiva was divided in two parts, Itchan and Ditchan Kala. Itchan Kala was the heart and everyone who lived within its walls was related to the king. Its four gates strictly regulated traffic and trade to its centre. Today these gates are never locked, even at night.

The rains had arrived earlier than predicted and we walked back to our hotel past the bulwark-clinging tombs that dot the outer wall of Itchan Kala. The story goes that every resident who left the city could only return to it alive. If they failed, they were denied entry to the city. Forever. In the shimmering rain, I stopped and stared at the graves clinging on to the ramparts for their ‘dear lives.’ It was eerily quiet. Perhaps they were hatching a plan. After night fell and the city slept they would quietly climb the walls and make their way to the necropolis. Perhaps next morning, if we had counted, there would be a couple less. ●



Uzbek ceramics, dolls (facing page, top left) and *chugirma* (facing page, top right) are popular souvenirs; The columns at Juma Mosque (facing page, bottom) are a testament to Uzbek woodwork.



PAN\_DA/SHUTTERSTOCK

RAGA JOSE FUSTE/PRISMA/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (DOLLS); LEISA TYLER/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES (PEOPLE); GONZALO AZUMENDI/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (MOSQUE)



## Essentials

### GETTING THERE

Direct flights to Uzbekistan fly nonstop from Delhi to Tashkent on Uzbekistan Airways. From Tashkent visitors can travel by train directly to Khiva or fly to Urgench and take a private car to Khiva, which is approximately a 45-min drive.

### VISA

Indian citizens can enter Uzbekistan with an eVisa for a total of 30 days. The eVisa for Uzbekistan is valid for 90 days after issue. It typically takes three to seven days to process the eVisa, and costs \$20/₹1,450 onwards. Visa on arrival is also applicable for Indians, but only if the visitor first checks in with Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in India. Also, it is only valid for entry at Tashkent International Airport, thus eVisa is considered the simplest option.