

WOMEN OF THE SILK ROAD

Stories from modern Uzbekistan

BY HELEN PROUD

Introduction

Having skimmed through fifty countries over my lifetime, I decided at the age of 57 that I wanted to live in one of the countries I'd visited as a tourist. I wanted to stay for six months, try to learn the language, understand the politics, shop in the bazaars, visit the homes, schools, hospitals, share the ups and downs of the people and work beside them, not just look at them. It may sound like I wanted to go to somewhere like Somalia or Laos and live in a hut with tribal people – well lots of Westerners do that and I admire them – while others go to work with aid agencies in a volunteer or professional capacity in scores of developing and third world countries. I admire them too. I went as a self-funded semi-retiree with not too many skills – just a desire to find out what lies underneath the skin of a country. And that country was Uzbekistan, part of the famed Silk Road, in Central Asia in 2003.

I'm a sucker for the mysterious and elusive places of the world and finding myself at the age of 57 leading small tour groups through China, Mongolia, Russia and Central Asia, my appetite for Central Asia was not satiated by one brief visit. The SARS (Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic, the virus originating in China in the middle of 2003 which killed several hundred people, put an end to my touring as it did for tens of thousands of people in the travel business, not only in China and Asia, but worldwide while the fear of an epidemic

pervaded the media. I was halfway through an 18-month contract – it seemed a shame not to fulfil the original plan of being overseas for that length of time – especially since I’d leased my country house in the hills of northern New South Wales in Australia and couldn’t return for another nine months.

Cradled in the middle of Central Asia, landlocked on all sides, Uzbekistan is a desert country flanked by two snow-fed rivers and dotted with oases. It lies transversely above Turkmenistan and Afghanistan and below Kazakstan with its former benefactor, Moscow, 3,000 km away from the capital, Tashkent. Its oases formed one of the main routes for the ancient traders bringing and buying goods, providing respite and water for endless invading armies, and they were the lifeblood for the nomads who’d been skilfully herding their goats, sheep and camels since man first arrived in this “middle world.” The constant movement of humans and beasts ultimately brought wealth, civilisation and learning from China to the Mediterranean. It soon became known as the Silk Road and it was one of these oases that called me – Bukhara – in the heart of Uzbekistan. But it was the women of the Silk Road who captured my admiration enough to pursue their personal stories.

Those evocative phrases “the Great Silk Road”, “the crossroads of civilisations”, “the royal road to Bukhara”, and the giant names of history like Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Marco Polo and Tamarlane conjured up for me a mysterious and secretive part of the world where the countries blurred into each other and all ended in “stan”. I’d seen huge empty mountainous landscapes in photographs of Kyrgyzstan. I’d read thrilling tales by early adventurers into Turkmenistan. I’d had a smattering of history about the British and Russians striving for supremacy in this part of the world as they shored up their interests around China and India. I’d seen TV documentaries and been to Mongolia where I learnt about the bloodthirsty Kublai and Genghis Khan rampaging across Central Asia killing and conquering all in their way. And of

course I'd drooled over the glamorous travel brochures inviting one and all on the Golden Road to Samarkand, to the ancient and still lived-in old city of Bukhara and to the relatively newly restored desert oasis at Khiva. Central Asia is and has been an alluring destination for the last two-and-a-half millenniums.

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With my tourism career on hold, I asked Rashida who handled the travel arrangements for our group in Uzbekistan if I could come back and help her with her travel business. I said I could cover my costs if she could provide accommodation for me. She agreed with alacrity so I returned to Australia to see my small farm and the tenants, visit my sons and siblings and do the mid-year tax return! She in the meantime arranged for a six-month business visa for me. With Australia having no diplomatic ties with Uzbekistan, I was obliged to send my passport to London to obtain a visa - a costly little venture. But I was then ready to set off to do that thing I had longed to do – to live in another country that was not my culture, not my language or religion, where I didn't have access to TV, radio or newspapers for world news, where I didn't have a telephone or weekly commitments, where I would have to catch public transport, make new friends, find how I could best fit in and help, and learn everything I could about this new country. And without the normal bills flowing in, without car expenses and the daily temptations of consumerism and with a little rent coming in, I could change my lifestyle completely for six months without too much damage to my financial security. What a bonus for a 57-year-old divorced mother of two highly independent equable sons who are getting used to their mother doing eccentric things.

Rashida owns a ten-roomed guesthouse in Bukhara in central Uzbekistan and her small travel agency handled all the arrangements for the week I was originally to lead a tour group

in Uzbekistan. The guesthouse and office were in the old part of the city in adjacent lanes that were lined with mud brick houses now over 200 years old. The area is in the Jewish quarter and a tiny synagogue with a somewhat reclusive Rabbi receives the small congregation on the Sabbath as well as a steady stream of Jewish tourists, often from Israel, during the week. There is a Jewish school around the corner catering to about 60 students who attend a school that has been converted from a home to six classrooms. All the houses in this old part of Bukhara have narrow double wooden doors to enter by, and have a huge iron ring that serves both as a knocker and opener. Once stepping over the threshold, usually sideways and stooped because the little half doors were made when people were considerably thinner and shorter, you find yourself in a courtyard open to the sky, with rooms on two or three sides and generally they are two-storied. Trees are often grown in the courtyard to provide some shade and coolness during the intense summer heat.

At Rashida's travel agency, after stooping and stepping inside another set of half doors leading from the courtyard, I found myself in a cheerful room with a number of posters and artefacts around freshly painted walls. There was not much more in the room other than tables and chairs and three computers for her staff, but the walls were painted with traditional motifs including peacocks and leafy floral designs as frescos. I asked if they'd had it done especially but no, the last tenants had had it painted. They were a British couple who had come to Bukhara bringing their Christianity to a now Muslim country that still looks suspiciously on Western ideas. Religion had been banned for 70 years under communism and the 13-year-old independent government is regarding all religion cautiously. When it was discovered that the British couple were proselytising they were told to quit the country within 24 hours, necessarily leaving behind the little black kitten they had brought with them a year earlier. It suddenly became a vegetarian cat living amongst Muslims, presumably without any change of heart. However it did benefit by my patronage

over the next few months with leftovers from my home-cooked dinners.

Rashida's office computers deliver the all-important daily emails, decidedly more reliable than the Uzbek postal service and they are the saviour of the tourist industry for Uzbekistan. With some spasmodic advertising abroad and a slowly growing number of tour companies finding her, Rashida is beginning to see her tourist agency grow. The morning emails with enquiries from overseas occupy their days. Her four young staff members all of whom speak English can arrange tailor-made itineraries throughout the whole Central Asian region, albeit with great difficulty given the vagaries of the phones, internet and post-communist bureaucracy.

In the next lane is Rashida's ten-roomed guesthouse where I had a small, comfortable room with an ensuite for five months. Half of the guesthouse had been demolished, rebuilt and renovated with new bricks and unskilled labour to meet the expectations of Western tourists. The style resembles all the houses in this old part of town. Once you step over the threshold you are in a bright courtyard, this time with a large pomegranate tree in the centre and grapevines growing over the first floor verandahs. The tree and vines attracted several families of sparrows and robins that became somewhat demanding friends as the winter drew on, deliberately waking me up on dark cold mornings singing for the breadcrumbs that I daily sprinkled for them. Artefacts, pottery jars and bright blue-painted plates adorn the courtyard walls and tables. It was inviting and cool after the June heat when I arrived in Bukhara and low tables with cushioned bench-seats were laid with colourful tablecloths. Guests are welcomed with a cool drink while they check into this authentic little guesthouse that would have been a family home for the past 200 years. In winter the tourist season closes down completely and so did the guesthouse, except for me in my upstairs room that overlooked three medressahs and two mosques.

The staff at the guesthouse are young, formal and almost courteous, unaccustomed to either a friendly lifestyle or a service industry. However they mostly speak English and they are learning how to meet the expectations of foreigners on holiday who normally have never been in an ex-Soviet country. Growing up steeped in communism when they would have all been Young Pioneers at school, they are finding it a big leap forward to be welcoming and charming to the capitalists they had been taught to despise.

I certainly didn't imagine writing a book about my experiences when I left Australia on a circuitous flight to Tashkent via Seoul and then on to Bukhara by overnight train. In fact I was rather taken aback on arrival. I was met at the station by Rashida's son, but I had not been told that his mother was away for two weeks on a trip to Afghanistan to meet artisans there who she could later invite to Bukhara to participate in a craft festival. At the tourist agency I was formally welcomed by her staff, two middle aged women who did the accounts, and four young people in their late twenties and thirties who answered emails and during the tourist season – June to October – acted as tour guides for her guests. Her brother and son drove a minivan to collect tourists from the train and another niece came in each day to cook a midday meal for everyone at the travel agency office. Not unnaturally family members were a large component of the staff, the travel agency providing some part-time work in a country that had around 70% unemployment. A computer and desk were designated to me and Rashida had instructed them to suggest I work on some promotional and advertising material for the business so that's how I put in the first two weeks till she returned.

We met only briefly on her return because she had to be off again within the week to meet a high profile American museum group in neighbouring Tajikistan and take them on tour through four of the Central Asian countries for three weeks.

Squeezed into the week she was at home, her 24-year-old son was to be married – a three-day affair in Muslim Tartar tradition. Now that communism has been abandoned by the State the country has re-embraced its old Muslim traditions. Mullahs lead Friday prayers, albeit watched over by the powers that be, and while most mosques and medressahs have been turned into tourist shops, one senses a cursory adherence to the faith that lay dormant or underground for 70 years while communism ruled. For this wedding, a bevy of friends, relatives from Russia and local business associates were to be entertained at a number of ceremonies and dinners and lunches. The formal marriage would be signed later at the State Registry Office. In this rather exceptional family with an entrepreneurial mother at the helm this was also an exceptional son. He had already had one year at a high school in the United States before gaining a bachelor degree at the local Bukhara University and he was keen to study business management in the United States, hopeful of going with his new wife who also wanted to study there, though a little less enthusiastically.

The religious wedding ceremony performed by the Mullah I was not privy to, but the outdoor wedding reception at night at a restaurant under a canopy to accommodate a generous dinner for 200 people with abundant wine and Vodka was a cheerful and musical affair with a loud rock band. The young bride, also a Tartar, wore an expensive Western-style long gown of satin and brocade with a waist-length veil. They arrived an hour late so I was grateful that I'd been introduced to one of the few wedding guests who spoke English, a close friend of Rashida's who flew in from Tashkent for the weekend and stayed at her guest house where I also lived. Liana works as a freelance translator and interpreter for foreign aid agencies, foreign companies and at international conferences. With lots of time to get to know each other over the two days we became firm friends and I was to stay with her later on during my interview-collecting visit to Tashkent and Ferghana. At one point during the wedding celebrations Rashida rushed up to me to ask me to propose a toast to the young couple. Liana, she said, would

translate for me. So I gathered my thoughts to say something reasonably appropriate with an introduction in my halting, two-week-old Russian. I was something of a novelty because few Australians visit this part of the world and fewer still would be proposing a toast to newlyweds. The meal was interspersed with dancing and many speeches. Children danced with their grandparents but it was mostly the women who were up dancing. The men sat talking and drinking with each other. During the long night I was to gain snippets about Liana's life and hopes for a life abroad but it was not until the winter snows arrived and I was in Tashkent that I heard the full drama of her family's sad background linked to Stalin's relentless purges in Russia, forcing many Tartars to find refuge in Uzbekistan.

Rashida left next day to meet her group so I soon slipped into an easy routine, enjoying chatting to other guests at Rashida's guesthouse. It gave me a chance to get to know her staff and I spent the working day at the office in the next lane starting on a brochure and expanding some of their local tour itineraries. The guests who arrived daily at the guesthouse were an intriguing mixture of foreign tourists with a penchant for exotic places and a wide assortment of United Nations and aid agency personnel staying over for R & R or en route to a new posting. I met a young French woman who'd been in Afghanistan for nine months as a UN refugee worker in a remote northern village of that country. Millions of Afghans are displaced within their own country. She and her interpreter were sent to find out where the refugees came from and how and if they could return to their old village if, indeed, it was still there. After 20 years of war and displacement in Afghanistan, her job seemed insurmountable. Law and human rights trained, she worked for eight weeks at a time in a village without electricity, with water that had to be carried up from the stream half an hour away, and sleeping on a rough bed in a hut. It was clearly a long and thankless inhospitable job about which she never passed one word of complaint. She was warm and intelligent but kept a low profile, preferring to sleep and enjoy the luxury of a bedroom with en suite and running hot water on

her week's leave, storing up some energy for another eight-week stint in the rugged mountains over the border.

Two other young women I met were working in the high schools and prisons of Tashkent as Red Crescent social workers. One was from Poland and one from Holland. They were part of a program designed to raise awareness about international human rights. I assume this is to bring some sense of international justice into the consciousness of the young Uzbeks, previously aware only of Soviet justice, and to monitor conditions and welfare in the prison system. Another effusive and attractively blonde young French woman described herself as a UN intern, on a six-month probationary posting in the capital of Turkmenistan, Ashkabad. She too was on a week's leave after eight weeks at her job in what she openly described as a despotic state run by a madman. If interns survive their first posting, which is meant to be a challenge to help them decide if they want a career in the United Nations Organisation, they move on to an easier posting hopefully. I joined her on a four-hour taxi ride from Bukhara to Samarkand, she on the tourist route, I on the investigative route to meet women in Samarkand. She was able to hold the conversation for four hours in unflinching English describing the megalomaniac rule of Turkmenistan's president who has written his own Koran. Every child must learn this tome by heart and every employee must repeat it verbatim in order to get a government job. Shades of Mao Zedung's Little Red Book. I greatly admired her pluck and general knowledge, though she did have degrees from both the Sorbonne and Washington State Universities. To get to Bukhara she had travelled to the border in a UN car, then was left to fend for herself in a broken down private bus laden as it turned out with contraband, some of which was confiscated by military looking men at numerous checkpoints.

Another time a party of aid workers arrived at Rashida's guesthouse in their big United Nations 4-wheel drive from Tajikistan for a weekend break in Bukhara – 10 hours of driving each way over mountains and deserts from the capital

Dushanbe. The party included a couple of Australians, not young this time, but with equally intriguing jobs. The woman, trim and tough in her fifties, had been with the UN for two decades after a career in the Australian army. They too were keen to get away to see the charming old city of Bukhara, to rest around the town's central pool with its water-spouts, two restaurants and 600-year-old shady mulberry and oak trees. Bukhara in the summer, while very hot is also very appealing. If you are there in August, while you sit on the tapchans (bed-like seats placed around the pool) you find yourself propped up by cushions and you eat from a large table that can seat up to eight people. And throughout your meal, small white mulberries will fall from overhanging branches, quite likely right into your tea or coffee cup! They were exquisitely sweet just as the shade from abundant foliage was exquisitely cooling.

There were dozens of such people I had a chance to meet over breakfasts even if it did make me feel a bit redundant. It prompted me to become a little more useful so I began teaching English in the afternoons after my day at the office. One of Rashida's staff introduced me to his friend who became my first student, a 22-year-old law graduate from Dushanbe University. He was an Uzbek raised in Bukhara, but with some family connections he'd been able to more easily and cheaply get into the law school in Tajikistan. Only after graduating did he find out that the four-year-degree wasn't recognised in Uzbekistan and wouldn't get him a job back in the Public Prosecutor's Office in Bukhara without offering a huge bribe. Neither he nor his family had money to do that. And it is out of the question to think you might go to another city to find work. Uzbeks must live and work where they were born. They must carry ID when they travel and they are only allowed to visit another city or town for three days at a time. Permission to relocate requires jumping huge bureaucratic hurdles as well as giving huge bureaucratic bribes. His only alternative was to try to work abroad.

Surat was making a visa application to work in Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates where his older brother had gone to work. This brother was able to send him the money for the visa and the airfare. The Emirates have evolved a close relationship with Uzbekistan for trade in goods and young women mainly. There is, apparently, a flourishing underworld of extortion and bribery for the prostitution market. Surat's brother worked in a textile factory and had been sending money home to support his mother, now retired from school teaching and relying on her government pension which when I met her was seven months behind in payment. Surat aged 22, with no work prospects, felt it was his turn to earn the family some extra money, menial as the work may be in Dubai and forfeiting his four years of law study. He felt his high school English would need to be polished up if he were to get work in the Emirates, possibly in the hotel or restaurant industry. Over the weeks as his English improved he opened his heart about his family life and his plans for his future and ultimately his mother sent word to invite me home to lunch. It was this lunch that started me on the journey of writing down the stories of the women I was meeting. Rosia's warmth and generosity belied her resigned and forbearing outlook on life, and the fearful reality of the dark family secret they were keeping. I asked if she would let me return another time to write it all down with an interpreter and I saw the potential to tell her story in a book about Uzbek women to reveal the plight she was in. She readily agreed. In spite of the personal pain, she felt it would be valuable to have the story told. It helped me understand what life without hope must be like. However, she had prepared a delicious meal for me, the table groaning with far too much food to eat – a tradition I became accustomed to even when people can't afford to offer so much. Her neat, sparse apartment and her generosity of spirit touched me, while in her heart she was crying with grief and hopelessness. As I left on that first visit, down the dirty stairwell with its broken windows covered in plastic and the handrail shaky, I felt as I do when I've been to a movie with a tragic ending.

As the weeks unfolded I gathered it was up to me to make my own entertainment and friends. In the first place I was something of an anomaly. Not too many Westerners turn up offering to help a private business and run free English classes. I soon realised that even the people I was working with had very little money and couldn't easily invite me to their homes let alone entertain me or take me sightseeing. In fact there was really nowhere to take me. Beyond the city limits is desert until the next city is reached. The annual income is said to be around \$US1200 a year but most people are earning \$US1 a day if they are lucky enough to have a job. And rushing around inviting foreigners home just 10 years ago could have had the SNB (Uzbek equivalent of the KGB secret police) knocking on your door demanding hours of explanation and justification and perhaps worse. Uzbek and perhaps all Soviet society, is the antithesis of what I'd grown up with where my parents were involved in sport, church, craft, hosting overseas students, taking their turn in the family celebrations and playing a role at our schools and in the community. Family life and extended family life is at the heart of Uzbek society but beyond that their interests seemed to me to be rather closed and opportunity limited by infinitesimal family incomes and negligible work options. Once they enter their apartment, Uzbeks leave the outside world alone, except for the ubiquitous television which plays a big part in people's lives. In the few homes I visited, the TV was on all the time as we sat chatting in the living room. When you can't afford to go out and where entertainment is almost non-existent, the TV is an all-important part of life, albeit mostly Russian escapism TV. There is a national Uzbek channel from Tashkent, but most of the programs come from Moscow, including the heavily censored world news. There's lots of repeats – shows with comedians, pop singers, bands and dancers, overtones of American extravaganzas, always with a line-up of poker faced dark-suited politicians clapping reservedly, the cameras panning on them frequently. There is one cinema in Bukhara and it mainly shows Indian Bollywood films. For those with a video player, Russian videos and DVDs are popular and now some badly dubbed American movies can

add to the family entertainment played on computers or DVD players. Somehow everyone has become accustomed to American movies being dubbed so badly with just two or three voices doing all the voice-overs throughout the whole movie. These voices lack any flair – they simply follow the lines they are given to read and one can easily hear the English words behind which are not dubbed out. There are a couple of discos in Bukhara, but this is a prohibitive form of entertainment except for the handful of rich kids even though the entry fee is the equivalent of 60 cents. Alcoholic drinks are prohibitively expensive but are on sale openly in such places for the privileged few.

What continually surprised me was the complete lack of pride in the common areas of the apartment buildings. Mostly erected with three storeys to avoid having to put in elevators, (except in Tashkent where some of the buildings are higher), these 1950s built uni-designed concrete boxes flanked by monstrous overhead pipes for heating, giving everyone uni-heat, certainly did what they set out to do. This was Krushchev's idea of rehousing everyone so that the communist urban ideal of equality was achieved. Most families of parents and three children got a one-bedroom apartment. Lucky if you had four kids - you got a two-bedroom apartment. But I was reminded that this type of housing was an improvement on what came before. Previously you had old dilapidated housing where you shared a common kitchen and bathroom with several families. I noted that since they were constructed no maintenance was carried out in the common areas, the stairwells and around each building. The stairwells were unlit, the stairs were uneven, they were chipped, the render was falling off the walls, the glass in the windows between floors was almost universally out, with some covered in plastic. In a city that gets lavish snowfalls in the winter, I shivered thinking about people coming home in the dark, stumbling up the broken, icy stairwell with its shaky handrail. However, I always found that once inside everyone's apartment, they were clean and brightly adorned with rugs both on the floors and pinned to the walls.

There soon developed a small group of young people wanting to expand their English vocabularies so I set up afternoon classes from 4 pm after school and university. One of my students invited me home on a freezing afternoon which saw me skidding in puddles of ice on the road. I was shocked to be let in to her mother's apartment and find her mother in shorts and T-shirt! It was so hot inside we were all stripping off to the bare essentials. The piped heating – and remember once there was no heating except for gas stoves – is pumped through everyone's apartment at the same heat. The only way to alter the heat is to open a window and let some freezing air in!

When I decided I must write down the stories of the women I was meeting, with their permission, I first interviewed the women who worked at the guesthouse where I was living – the cook, the housemaid and some of the girls who acted as receptionists and tour guides. Then Rashida introduced me to some of her friends and soon the word was getting around about my wanting to interview women. When I met one young dynamic teacher who invited me to speak to her high school English class, word spread that I was not only keen to interview female school and university teachers, but was also happy to speak to high school and university English students in their classrooms. A dedicated young couple on a two-year Peace Corps program from the United States both invited me to their high school and university classes. So towards the end of my stay I was getting quite busy with such invitations. I'd start off with some British and Australian history, linking the European world with Australasia, and ultimately Australia's place as part of Asia. I talked about our democratic history, our struggle to become a nation and now taking our place in the world as a member of the United Nations and other international organisations. I talked about our flora and fauna, the huge uninhabitable deserts and our problems with water and salinity – something they related to as salinity and water loss due to overcropping cotton is the biggest ecological issue in Uzbekistan. While the refugee question didn't arise in the

classroom (it did with many of the UN workers who cross-questioned me about it) always the Aboriginal questions were fired at me. The young Uzbeks knew about the convicts, the deserts, the kangaroos and koalas and the killing of Aborigines. In order to circumvent politics, I would tell them about the revival of Aboriginal culture, the dance companies travelling the world, the art being shown and bought around the world and the popularity of the didgeridoo! I also told them about the Sorry marches, our late but none-the-less imperative desire to redress the past at a grass roots level and I tried to speak positively in the hope they would forget some of the negatives they had heard or been taught. It was not lost on me that here in the depths of the Central Asian deserts, in impoverished post-Soviet schools, students knew about Australia's brutal past in relation to our indigenous countrymen and women.

The more people I met the more intrigued I became by the life stories they told me during casual conversations followed up with some pertinent questioning. I met students, teachers, mothers, government officials, market women, doctors, artists, fashion designers and lawyers. It was like having a history lesson every time a woman spoke to me. At first I was amazed that they were prepared to tell me their disturbing private histories. For some it was cathartic. For others it was the first time they'd opened up to a stranger and then they begged me to tell their story when I returned home. I began to understand what ran their lives, seeing their frustration and cynicism and I knew I must tell the world what they want the world to know. As one woman said, "Please be our voice. We have no way to tell anyone what is going on here." Of course there were some good stories, glimmers of hope midst the clouds of sadness and cynicism I encountered and these I also included.

So I started to write down their stories. My schoolgirl shorthand, 45-years-old, didn't let me down. I travelled the whole length of the country to meet women who were willing to talk to me. I caught overnight trains, stifling buses in the summer and freezing buses in the winter and unregistered taxis

when there was no other means. I had a driver/interpreter with his car for my longest journey of 1000 km to eastern Uzbekistan, and once I caught an Uzbekistan Airlines plane. With the head steward sitting opposite me without a seatbelt on for either take-off or landing, and in a Russian aircraft that seemed so heavy it didn't want to leave the tarmac, and which shuddered and swayed on unimproved landing and takeoff runways, I felt one of those trips was enough. Any form of transport in Uzbekistan can provide a near-death experience if that's what you need in your life.

Some women asked me not to use their real name and others asked me not to photograph them in case of reprisals either against their business or family or for other personal reasons. The legacy of communism is a latent fear – they've never had freedom of speech or press. They were told what to think and learn and do and not to question. Those repressions are unimaginable for most of us in the West. But they permeated every conversation I had with every person I met in Uzbekistan. I knew I was under suspicion and to begin with every conversation was guarded. Once trust had been established, the past gushed out. I knew that most of these stories were not told to each other – why would you share family horrors when everyone has similar stories? I soon realised that fear is the outward manifestation of something more sinister, like a malignant, undiagnosed cancer. What caused the fear is what I wanted to find out. My findings continually shocked me.

Originally nomadic tribes wandered this vast desert area midway between the Siberian steppes and the mountains of Afghanistan and Iran, before myriad invaders came, the first notable one being Alexander the Great with his army around 300BC. Then the traders from China in the East and the Mediterranean in the West brought their silks, jewels, carpets and spices to trade, with Uzbekistan being the perfect half-way point with oases and rivers to spare. Then came the Zoroastrians, Buddhists and Arabs with their religions and crafts. The infamous Genghis Khan with immense and

murderous armies came during the 13th century leaving many descendants who still inhabit the Central Asian countries. Then there were the sprinkling of adventurers and would-be colonisers adding to the melting pot of human cross-fertilisation. But the modern Uzbek women, while claiming this mixed heritage, are now intrinsically products of the Sovietisation of their country in the 20th century.

Their personal histories have been part of the bloodbath of the last 100 years. Some say up to a 100 million Soviet people lost their lives during this time beginning with the uprisings and revolutions at the turn of the 20th century, then the First World War casualties followed by the Bolshevik and Communist Revolutions. The pogroms and death camps of Stalin's reign of terror accounted for some 20 million Soviet lives. The Second World War to which all of the Soviet states had to send their youth and men to defend the USSR went hand in hand with starvation and misery at home that left many, not directly involved in the fighting, dead from hunger, cold and desperation and together accounted for another 20 million deaths.

As carers of the young and aged, balancing a miniscule family budget, often with low paid work as teacher or farm worker or market trader, in many cases the only breadwinner even when the husband is still at home, seems to have fallen on the shoulders of the Uzbek women to rebuild the spirit of their families and country. I felt a palpable lack of spirit in many of the men, demoralised by lack of work, incentive being wrung out of them by corruption at every official level and their communist comfort zone whisked out from under them in 1991 with the collapse of the USSR. With a flimsy social security safety net, Uzbeks find themselves forced to accept a huge social upheaval – the demise of communism which the country didn't ask for, didn't want and more importantly can't handle. Everyone has had to come to terms with their belief system being shattered. They are faced with the betrayal of a lifetime of indoctrination and blind faith. Uzbeks, perhaps like most of

the ex-Soviet peoples, are in a state of shock since communism died. They were taught from the cradle that they were building the perfect world – everyone would be equal – and they would all, one day, share the bounty. It never came about and they now have to live with the lie.

Uzbeks had grown up initiated into believing Karl Marx's theory of a classless society, where everything was to be equally shared. What they got in practice was Lenin's and Stalin's interpretation that power to do this must be seized, that there would be centralised ownership of all products, and that any opposition to these ideals would be suppressed. When the practice was clearly not working after 70 years of force, the Soviet Union collapsed almost overnight to the surprise of the whole world. Uzbekistan was booted out of the communist nest and told to stand on its own feet. Unfortunately it doesn't know how - just like the other states that made up the Soviet Union.

So how did this impact on the lives of ordinary families? Unaccustomed to the concept of work producing wealth, lacking a background of entrepreneurship and with communism suppressing individuality, incentive and a creative spirit - it looks as though no one knows what to do. The government seems reluctant to throw out the old ideas and is highly suspicious of embracing democracy, free trade or private enterprise. After all, the former General Secretary of the Uzbekistan Communist Party became the President of the new independent democracy overnight, without having much training in western economic reform or democratic rights!

With few factories and little foreign development being encouraged, with a lack of effort evidenced in infrastructure outside the capital, Tashkent, and precious little incentive from a corrupt, autocratic central government to start your own enterprise, there is little for men to do. The bazaars are dominated by women traders. Women often talked about the men "sitting at home" or meeting together to play chess or cards and drink tea to pass the days. Vodka is cheap and brings

with it the obvious outcomes of domestic violence and undernourished children. Resigned to the lack of drive in their men to deliver the family from starvation, many women have had to pick up the role of sole breadwinner. There are stories of some prostituting themselves or their daughters to make money, others are being used as human carriers of narcotics and heroin, risking their lives by swallowing capsules to take across borders in buses, others are getting illegal papers to go to the Middle East as prostitutes. The majority is just making ends meet by buying and trading whatever they can – food, clothes, electricals, anything to try and make a few dollars to feed their family for a few days at a time. Some are taking on any and all sorts of menial work for a pittance – sweeping the streets, selling cigarettes and sweets from a table they set up on the footpath, collecting bread from the bakery and selling it on the corner of their lane. A select few with better education and often previously dedicated to the soviet regime are brave enough to start up their own businesses in tourism, opening their homes as Bed and Breakfasts, organising and taking tours, training young people as guides, meeting foreigners at the station and airports and transporting them around the rebuilt historical sites to earn some foreign dollars. Others are making and selling the superb assortment of local crafts – ceramics, embroidery, silver, carpets, silk cloth, paintings, miniatures etc. Tourism is at least one sector that shows some growth and vitality, albeit severely watched by a government, police force and mafia intent on making money out of it too.

So what do the tourists actually see when they come to these Silk Road cities scattered across brown deserts which bloom artificially in the summer, swamped as they are by irrigation canals and channels redirecting rivers, streams and underground watercourses to grow wheat, cotton, rice and mulberry trees as well as providing vegetables and spices for the local bazaars?

The answer is wonderfully restored medieval buildings that once rose out of empty deserts beckoning weary camel trains and traders. Out of the wealth that came from bartering and

bargaining, from carrying goods from one side of the world to the other and from conquering armies bringing back artisans and slave labour, rose majestic, towering edifices topped with ceramic tiles that rivalled the colour of the skies, architecture that defied gravity, and workmanship in gold, silver, wood, ceramic, stones, jewels and paint, that would take the viewer's breath away. These great cities that grew beside the oases, have become outdoor museums. Sixteenth century medressahs (Muslim universities), mosques, mausoleums, minarets, palaces, libraries, citadels, city walls dating back to the 10th century, abandoned cities that are now archeological digs, are all leaving the new tourists open-mouthed. These medieval cities still reveal the once-important caravanserais, where the camel caravans would stop for rest and food for both men and beasts. Gold, silver and silk embroidery, camel hair, wool and silk carpet weaving, textiles, ceramics, mosaics, frescos, pottery, armour, woodwork – the quality and volume as you wander around these old cities will exhaust and amaze you. You can spend days dwarfed by them and drawn into them in awe.

By the time the Bolsheviks came to conquer Uzbekistan in the 1920s, shoring up what would become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, they too knew they had come across gems of the 14th to 18th centuries. Once they had finished bombing, destroying, looting and killing to gain control, they then ruthlessly dominated the impoverished Central Asian states which had no chance to withstand the mighty hand of Russia with its radical ideology and its spiderweb network of contacts to control its outlying new states. Submission came on the heels of the bombs, and compliance came on the heels of the KGB secret police.

Once firmly in power the central government in Moscow encouraged their puppet Uzbekistan Supreme Soviet installed in Tashkent, to reinstate some of the great buildings to their former glory. Young men who were fortunate enough to miss the war or political persecution were taught the old skilled

crafts to rebuild the blown up monuments and decorate them in the traditional style. Anyone was glad of work.

Then through the sixties and seventies as Russia propped up Uzbekistan and its other unsustainable sibling states, most of whom returned a resounding deficit every year, life while not abundant became safe and predictable after half a century of upheaval and sadness. Millions were rehoused in identical apartments. There is a favourite Russian comedy film about a man who forgot (or was so drunk that he didn't realise) he was in another city. His friends put him on a plane in Moscow to St. Petersburg. On arrival at what seemed a familiar airport he caught a familiar taxi giving the driver his Moscow street address. There was an identical street name and an identical building where he was dropped off. He went to the top floor apartment, put his key in the lock, recognised the identical furniture as his own and fell asleep on the sofa identical to his in Moscow. Naturally a gorgeous girl came in later, surprised to find a stranger in her apartment and demanding he leave. He claimed he'd lived there all his life – until she told him he was in St. Petersburg and not Moscow. Naturally they fell in love and lived happily ever after. Town plans, street names, buildings, furnishing were often virtually the same across all of the Soviet countries and many remain so. Certainly I could never be relied upon to return to the home of someone I had previously interviewed. Suburb after suburb, street after street in the new part of Bukhara or the new suburbs of Tashkent and a myriad of smaller cities and towns across the Soviet countries, all replicated each other. If I was invited on a return visit to someone's apartment, I had to ask them to meet me at the bus stop for I could never differentiate the rows upon rows of identical buildings.

The immediate post-Stalinist era was when communism was really taking its hold on the minds and hearts of one and all. The mosques had long been closed, mullahs were silenced so the opiate of the people became the ideology of the classless society. The period of stern suppression overseen by Stalin was

behind them, and everyone lived and breathed the centralisation of ownership of all property, the sharing of products and labour and the commitment to the goal of universal equality and the happiness that it would bring. Devout Muslims became devout communists in one generation. Each and every family lived and died for the doctrine that controlled them from the cradle to the grave.

Since everything was state owned, cheap subsidised holidays were part of the work culture, along with quite a fostering of interchange between school children and young communists of the other Soviet states. It was very prestigious as a Young Pioneer at primary school or a member of the communist youth Komsomol to be chosen to go to say Moscow or the Black Sea for training camps with young people from all over the USSR. Cultural exchanges were also encouraged – all to bolster and foster the brotherhood of the Soviet Union. And it was within the range of most Uzbek families during post-Stalinist times to afford the subsidised holiday by plane or train at least every few years, if not every year. Trade unions and the Party often awarded such holidays for outstanding work – or bribes. People from other Soviet states came to Uzbekistan to see the beautifully restored buildings of Tamarlane in Samarkand, the Labi Hauz (the pool) at the heart of Bukhara with its 17th century old city still inhabited by the locals, and Khiva, the city claiming to be the best preserved and restored medieval city in Central Asia. It was in these three cities that accommodation in the old, grand merchants' houses and caravanserais sparked the start of the post-Independence tourist industry that is now beckoning Western travellers, including myself.

As well as teaching English and giving ad hoc history and geography lessons to high school and university students I also offered to teach aspects of hotel management and tourism to Rashida's staff. In the course of my days I was meeting a growing cross-section of women trying to make their lives work and their pay stretch. The longer I stayed the more I discovered the stories of their families. They unravelled the

secrecy and mystery of what I had come to know as the Cold War and the ordinary people who were behind the fearful Iron Curtain that we in the West had come to dread. I soon learnt that these terms belied the poverty, hunger and cruelty inflicted on the people they were supposed to uphold. So I travelled 3,000 km across the country to meet a cross-section of women. In the process I was to learn not only about them and their suffering and struggle with their pasts, but also to learn and feel the wrath of man's inhumanity in spite of a common ideology that many of these women had experienced in their family backgrounds. I observed the long-term effect of wars and revolution, the deplorable waste of resources and lives, the suppressed anger and disempowerment that resulted from a lack of freedom to choose their own path in life. These were women totally cognizant of a century of wars and persecution and brutality in their own families – and in the end to witness the collapse of the ideology they had been forced to believe in that had propped up the Soviet empire. I saw how it left people in a terrible void of disbelief and cynicism, trying to come to terms with the betrayal of hundreds of millions of people who they regarded as part of their Soviet family. It has left them sad, confused and disconnected – pasts and futures that have little meaning or purpose.

Now I want to introduce you to 53 ordinary women of Uzbekistan who agreed to be interviewed. Their stories are just the tip of the iceberg. Living with little, neither proud of nor trusting their government, knowing there is no credibility in their system of law, their police force or army, worried to death about the future of their children, these women are remarkable for their resilience. I left Uzbekistan realising that the most precious human emotion is confidence in the future. Uzbeks do not have it, and we in the West take it for granted as our inalienable right without really thinking about it.