Why Uzbekistan?

An Unexpected Journey Through the Silk Roads

A few people have asked me:

"Why Uzbekistan?"

When I chose to go, I don't think I fully knew the answer.

Perhaps I understand a little more now.

Uzbekistan lies in Central Asia, along the ancient Silk Roads that once connected China, India, Persia, the Middle East and Europe.

For centuries, merchants crossed these landscapes carrying silk, spices, precious stones and other goods.

But they carried something else too.

Knowledge.

Ideas travelled alongside merchandise. Languages, beliefs, discoveries and ways of living encountered one another. What belonged to one civilisation gradually became part of another.

I went expecting beautiful buildings, unfamiliar streets, colourful markets, new foods and a glimpse of the old Silk Road.

I found all of those things.

But I also found something I hadn't anticipated.

I was walking through landscapes that had once been remarkable centres of learning.

Where Knowledge Once Flourished

In Samarkand, I stood in the Registan, an extraordinary square surrounded by magnificent madrasas — historic institutions where students once gathered to study.

At first, I admired the architecture.

The intricate tiles. The enormous arches. The extraordinary craftsmanship.

Then my attention began to shift.

I was no longer looking only at buildings.

I began wondering about the minds that had passed through this part of the world.

This was the intellectual landscape of Ulugh Beg, the ruler and astronomer who studied the heavens.

It belonged to a wider world of scholarship that included al-Khwarizmi, whose mathematical legacy gave us the words *algebra* and *algorithm*, and Ibn Sina, one of history's great physicians and philosophers, born near Bukhara.

There were connections with India too.

Babur, born in Central Asia, eventually travelled into India and founded the Mughal Empire.

As someone with roots in India, who had studied mathematics and astronomy, become a teacher, and later developed an interest in Ayurveda and the different ways human beings have sought understanding, I began finding connections everywhere.

Some were profound.

Others were wonderfully ordinary.

The *tandir*, Uzbekistan's traditional clay oven, reminded me of the Indian *tandoor*.

Plov, its celebrated rice dish, reminded me of *biryani*.

Spices, nuts, dried fruits, breads and fabrics could feel foreign and familiar at the same time.

What appeared different on the surface often carried traces of something I already knew.

The Silk Roads were no longer lines crossing a historical map.

They had become places I had walked.

The Staircase in Bukhara

Then I travelled to Bukhara, another ancient Silk Road city.

And there came perhaps my greatest surprise.

I entered an old madrasa, a place where students had once studied and lived.

At first, I admired its architecture.

Then I noticed a staircase.

It was steep.

I climbed it for no particular reason other than curiosity.

I simply wanted to know what was upstairs.

There were small rooms.

Nothing particularly grand.

Yet those rooms captured my attention more than I had expected.

I began wondering:

Where did the students sleep?

How did they keep warm during the cold winters?

- What did they eat?
- Where did they wash?
- What did they study?

And what did they learn, not only from their teachers and manuscripts, but from sharing their lives with one another?

I had entered the building as a visitor admiring its architecture.

Somewhere along that staircase, I had become a curious student again.

- One room led to another.
- One question opened another.

And I realised that I was no longer simply exploring a historic building.

I was imagining the lives that had unfolded within it.

The ordinary routines.

- The friendships.
- The difficulties.
- The ambitions.
- The questions those young students might have carried.

Centuries separated their lives from mine.

Yet curiosity had somehow brought us a little closer.

The Journey I Hadn't Planned

As I continued travelling, something gradually became clearer.

Knowledge does not remain confined to the place where it begins.

It travels.

It encounters other knowledge.

It changes, develops and sometimes returns in forms we no longer recognise.

- A mathematical idea may cross continents.
- A method of cooking may become part of another culture.
- A medical tradition may inspire new questions.

And a traveller may discover that something unfamiliar has been connected to their own life all along.

What began as an ordinary holiday had quietly become an exploration of knowledge itself.

- How it travels.
- How we receive it.
- How we make sense of it.

And what we eventually do with what we have learned.

Perhaps that is what I loved most about Uzbekistan.

It surprised me.

I went to admire buildings and found myself thinking about people.

I went following the Silk Roads and discovered the journeys of knowledge.

I went expecting to encounter another country and found unexpected connections with India, with my education, and with different chapters of my own life.

New Rooms Within

Sometimes we travel because we know exactly what we want to see.

We prepare an itinerary, visit the landmarks and return with photographs and memories.

And sometimes we travel simply because somewhere has caught our attention.

We may not even know why.

Only afterwards, when the experiences have had time to settle, do we begin to recognise what the journey has given us.

I did not go to Uzbekistan looking for answers about myself.

I went because I was curious.

- And perhaps that was enough.
- A staircase invited me upwards.
- A small room awakened a question.
- A question opened a memory.

And one experience began connecting with another.

I returned with photographs, memories and a deeper appreciation of a country I had barely known.

But I also returned with something less visible.

Uzbekistan gave me something I wasn't looking for: new rooms within myself.

And perhaps those rooms will continue to open, long after the journey has ended.

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The Living Wisdom of Arriving