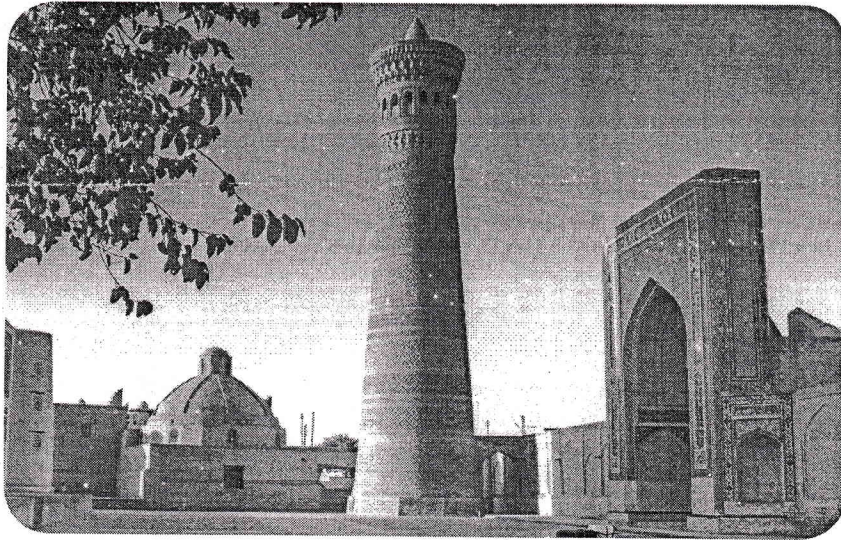


Spellbinding Silk Road

By Bob Rupani

From Astrakhan to Tashkent, traveling the historic trade route



The Minaret of Kalyan and the Mosque of Kalyan in Bukhara

Our world and way of life has been shaped by events, inventions, explorations and ancient trade routes like the historic Silk Road. I recently drove on this fabled journey with the Silk Road 2013 Expedition. This overland expedition was organized by Land Rover Experience Germany and included 11 very well prepared vehicles. I joined the expedition in Astrakhan Russia and drove till Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, traversing through Kazakhstan.

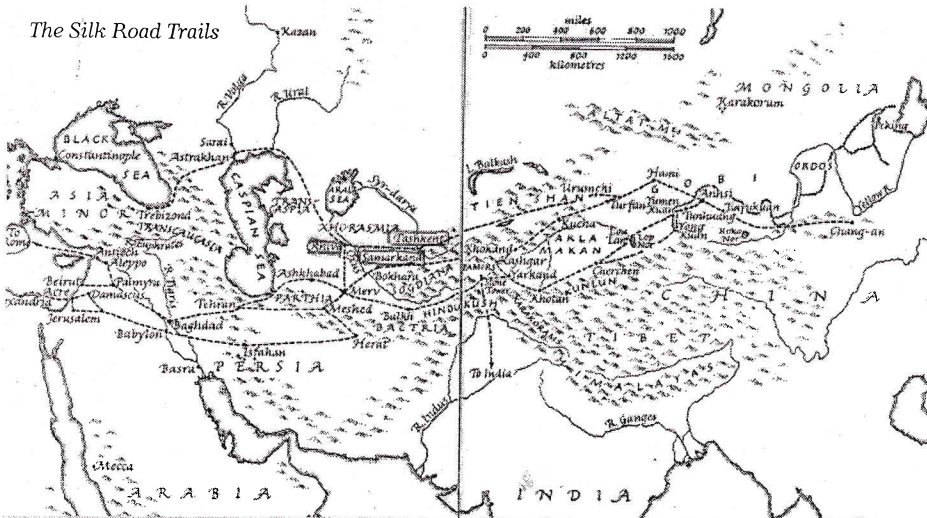
The Silk Significance

The Silk Road connected Hindustan (as India was known then), Tibet and China to places as far away as Rome and Greece. This route was traversed by traders, pilgrims, soldiers, nomads, etc. for a period of about 2,000 years. Though trade on this road is said to have begun in (202 BCE—220 CE), the name “The Great Silk Road” was only given in the 12th century CE by the German geographer and geologist Ferdinand Von Richthofen.

Stretching some 6,213 miles, the Silk Road gets its name from the profitable trade in Chinese and Indian silk. Indian spices were in great demand at the time, but silk played the most important role in the development of this trade route. Once Alexander the Great came over the Khyber Pass, direct trade links were developed by merchants from Greece, Egypt and Rome with the princely kingdoms of Hindustan. The fine Indian silk reached China mainly through Tibet via what is now known as the “Hindustan-Tibet” road. The Indian silk and famous “gold zari” work or embroidery became most popular with foreign aristocrats. Here’s a fascinating bit of trivia: Indian silk was used as protection for warriors. It was worn under the armor, as it had the unique ability to help pull out arrowheads from a soldier’s body.

Along with silk many other goods were traded and various technologies, religions and philosophies, cultural practices, languages, recipes and cuisine also spread via the Silk Road. The Bactrian camel was the main pack animal for the caravans, because of its ability to withstand cold, drought, and high alti-

The Silk Road Trails



The double hump-backed camel

tudes. It carried loads of up to 550 pounds and traveled 31 miles a day! And thanks to the Silk Road, some Bactrian camels are still found in the Nubra Valley in Ladakh.

Over the Khyber Pass

A large portion of the Silk Road passed through Central Asia and many historians believe that the climate and geography of this region played a crucial part in the world's history, especially that of India.

The arid weather was not conducive to agriculture, and this resulted in a nomadic lifestyle for the people of the steppe regions. These nomads became very accomplished horseback riders and their way of life was well suited to warfare. They started moving out and conquering other territories, which made them even stronger.

Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India, also came from this region. He was born in 1483 in contemporary Uzbekistan. He was a direct descendant of Timur, through his father, and a descendant of Genghis Khan from his mother's side. In 1504, he crossed the Hindu Kush Mountains and captured Kabul. He then went over the Khyber Pass and reached Hindustan. In February 1526, Babur's 17-year-old son, Humayun (Father of Emperor Akbar), led the Timurid army into battle against Ibrahim Lodi, the Afghan who ruled the Delhi Sultanate then, and achieved a decisive victory. In the Battle of Panipat, fought in April 1526, Ibrahim Lodi was killed and his army defeated. Babur became ruler of both Delhi and Agra and thus began the Mughal Dynasty in India.

The Silk Road eventually faded from prominence because Portuguese explorers like Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to India and landed in Calicut (now Kozhikode) in 1498. In 1513, the first European trading ship reached the coasts of China, and this event marked the end of the historic Silk Road.

The Road Less Traveled

Traversing through Kazakhstan, I was fascinated to see how sparsely populated the region is. It's the ninth largest country in the world, but with just 17 million people, its population is only the 62nd largest. What's even more significant is that its population density is less than 16 people per square mile! Compare this with India, which is the seventh-largest country and the second-most populous one with over 1.27 billion people (by a recent estimate). But more importantly, the population density is almost 1,100 people per square mile. (United States is 84 per square mile.) This means that when you

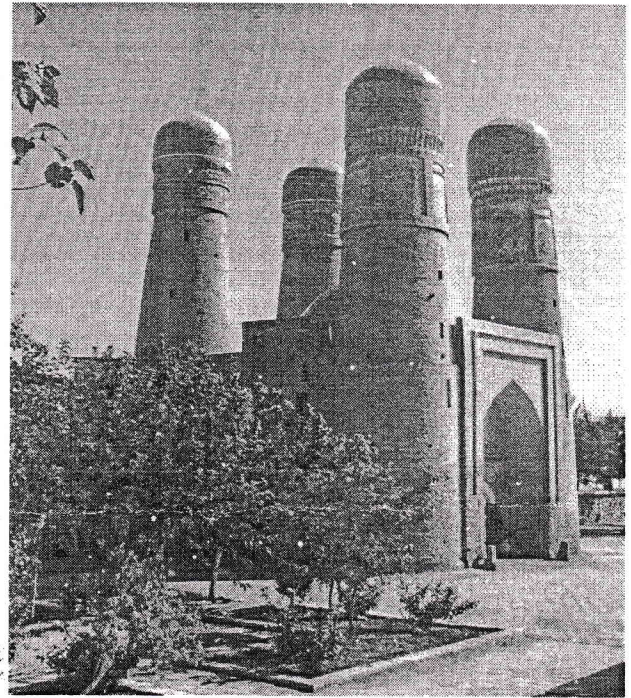
travel across a country like Kazakhstan, you wonder where the people are. In between cities you have vast stretches of desert flatlands and steppe grasslands that are completely uninhabited. You can drive for 300 miles and not see even five people! In fact we saw more camels than people.

Surprisingly, we did not see a single tree in Kazakhstan and no land being cultivated either. But we did see some horses and horsemen herding sheep. This desert land is barren and bare, but beautiful.

The Caravan Cities of Uzbekistan

After we crossed into Uzbekistan the "land of the Uzbeks" we began to see a few more people, but even here the population density is about 158 people per square mile.

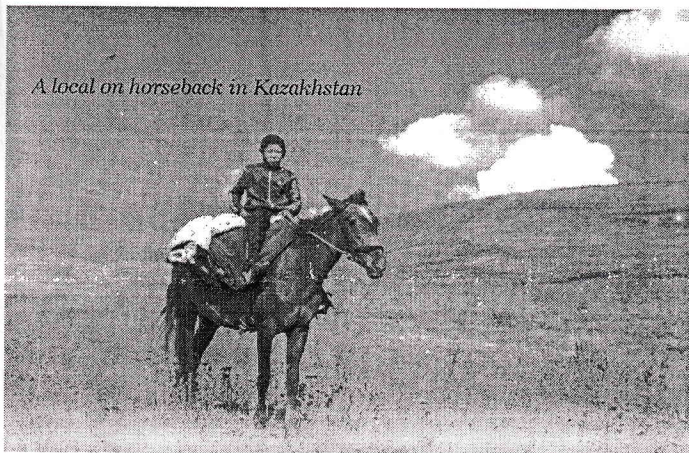
Along the way we came across many Bactrian double humped camels—heroes of the historic Silk Road.



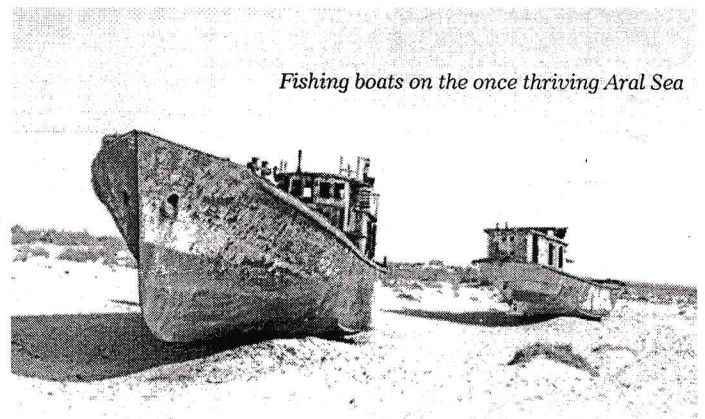
Magak-i-Attari, Bukhara

While traveling along the Silk Road we visited the Aral Sea, which was once one of the four largest lakes in the world with an area of 26,254 sq miles. Since the 1960s, it's been shrinking rapidly because the rivers that fed it were diverted by the Soviet government for irrigation projects. By 2007, the Aral Sea had become 10% of its original size. This is "one of the planet's worst environmental disasters" that's resulted in the creation of a desert on the former lake bed. Fishing boats now lie scattered on the dry land and it's actually a very depressing sight.

Fortunately, everything else we saw in Uzbekistan was beautiful. The historic cities of Khiva, Samarkand and Bukhara are simply spectacular. Along with Bukhara, Samarkand is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. Interestingly, Khiva and Samarkand are both on UNESCO's World Heritage list, and Bukhara is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



A local on horseback in Kazakhstan



Fishing boats on the once thriving Aral Sea

Made famous by Tamerlane, the Turko-Mongol ruler, Samarkand contains the world's greatest collection of Islamic architecture. The intricate tilework and soaring domes are visible everywhere and especially at Tamerlane's resting place, the Gur Amir. The minarets, mosques, markets, mausoleums, madrassas, etc, all have a distinctive architectural style with decorations highlighted in shades of turquoise.

Bukhara has the oldest surviving mosque in Central Asia—the Magak-i-Attari, dating back to the twelfth century. Built in 1807, the Char-Minar (as it is also known) or Four Minarets, (we have one in the Indian city of Hyderabad too), is a little building full of character. It consists of four turrets with small turquoise cupolas and a square domed house between them.

Khiva used to be a slave trading hub and its walled boundaries suggest a once bustling well-protected marketplace. It's a day trip to Khiva and its various buildings, mosques and minarets display the intricacies of majolica tiles, some engraved with proverbs by yesteryear philosophers.

A Food Mecca

This entire region is a tourist's delight and we were greeted with warm smiles everywhere, but what was strange is that when asked where I was from; if I said India—it evoked hardly any response. But when I said *Hindustan*, there was instant recognition and I was often greeted with a namaste. In fact a local FM station in Uzbekistan also plays Hindi film songs on a show called "Namaste Hindustan." Many words used in Uzbekistani are familiar, too. They call their sandy places or deserts, *registan*, exactly the word Indians use to refer to deserts. Shops are known as *dukan*, gardens as *bagh*, mother as *maa*, etc. Uzbek women too wear a dress known as *salwar* which is identical to the Indian salwar kameez.

The food in Uzbekistan is fantastic and familiar. Kebabs, naan, pilaf (similar to

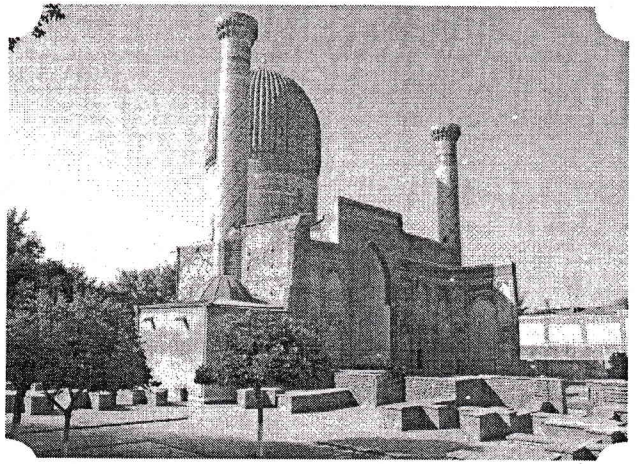
pulao), and *somsa* (baked samosa). Yes, samosas are almost always baked in Central Asia and never fried. They are baked in round clay tandoors and sold on the streets as a hot snack. All the food is truly delectable and I particularly enjoyed the kebabs which are served with raw onions and a much thicker version of the naan, than what we eat in India.

The naan in Uzbekistan is like thick pita bread and sold everywhere. It's rarely eaten hot and interestingly, the naan bread is considered to be holy for the Uzbek people. According to their tradition, when someone leaves home he bites a small piece of *obi-non* (naan) and it is kept until the traveler comes back and eats the whole bread. The origin of kebabs is equally charming. Uzbeks say it was born out of shortage of cooking fuel and the dish was invented by medieval soldiers who used their swords to grill meat over open-field fires!

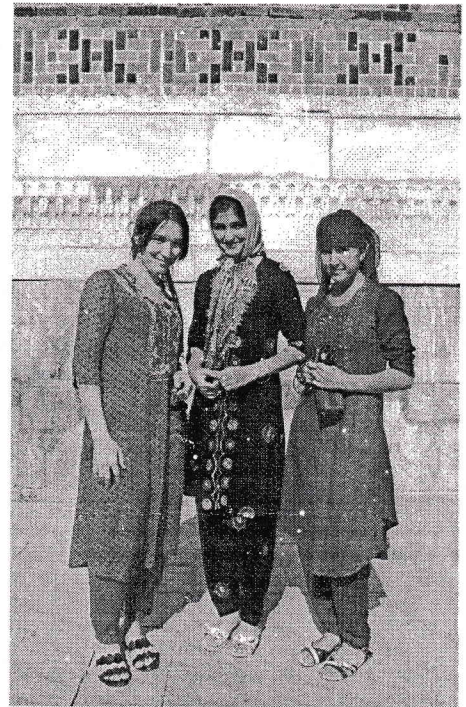
One of the most popular sweets in Uzbekistan is *halva*. It's delicious and considered a must at weddings. In fact during courtship, it's customary for an Uzbek youth to bring halva for his fiancée. When a baby girl is born into an Uzbek family, she is also referred to as "halva." They also have many *chai-khanas* (tea-houses), where you are served a *piala* (cup) of *chai* (tea)!

The Silk Road connected countries, cultures and people in a most unique manner and this made my overland journey thoroughly enjoyable and educative. ■

Bob Rupani is a pioneering Indian automobile journalist and author of books such as Driving Holidays in India and India's 100 Best Destinations. His latest book More Driving Holidays in India released recently.



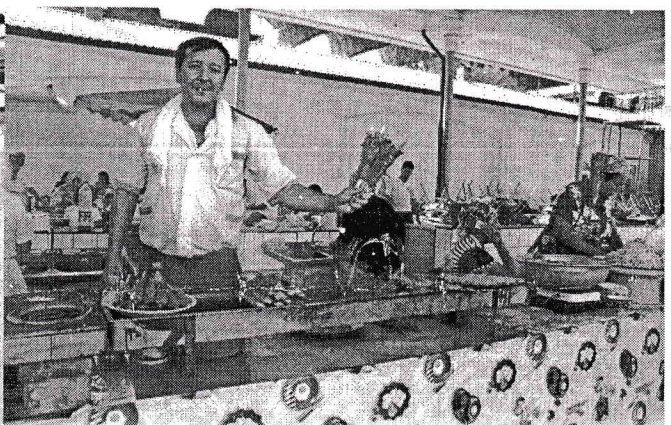
A palace in Samarkand



Three Uzbek women dressed in salwars



A woman selling Uzbek naan, which resembles pita bread



A kebab stall in Uzbekistan