



« The inside of a traditional yurt with locals craft making (inset).

Once over the mountains we descended to Kyrgyzstan, dropping down to the agricultural bowl with very long fields growing mostly fodder for animals for the long, cold winters. The capital of Bishkek is a relatively small city, but based on the number of cranes at construction sites, the city is growing fast with the development of apartment buildings and other infrastructure, assisted by China and Russia who also provide workers. The country is transforming from the old Soviet-era repressive accommodation to a modern city. The city centre has wide leafy boulevards and marble-faced public buildings with parks and monuments in dedication to the former Soviet Union and respect for the tragedy of World War II.

Kyrgyzstan became an independent state in 1991 but it kept some Marx and Lenin statues, though not in the prominent locations they used to be. Bishkek is known for its public buildings built in brutalist architecture, such as the Wedding Palace, State History Museum and historical presidential building that now serves as the national parliament. The State History Museum has a display of Indigenous crafts, yurts and women in ceremonial dress.

Traveling the World in a Vision Jet: Central Asia – Part 3

by Amir and Tamra Hyster



AMIR AND TAMRA HYSTER are active aviation travelers, flying themselves throughout the world and writing about their experiences. The Vision Jet is their fifth Cirrus aircraft (they recently upgraded to their second Vision Jet), a progressive move from their previous SR22N, SR22TN and SR22T that they previously flew on their world adventures. Visit their website for more stories and information: www.VisionJetTravel.com

Dushanbe, Tajikistan (UTDD) to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (UCFM)

Parked alongside us was the president of Tajikistan’s Boeing 787, getting ready to depart. We needed to get out of the airport before it closed for his departure.

Our SID from UTDD was via one of the most difficult departures we have encountered in the world – the RWY 09 JD5 departure, which is famous among pilots of this region as it needs to clear the largest mountain range in the world. Immediately after rotation the TAWS warned “Terrain pull up.” We had huge mountains right in front of us.

We turned left until we reached 3,285 feet AGL, then turned a sharp 180-degrees right with a required minimum bank of 20 degrees whilst climbing at a minimum of 4.8% up to FL160. On arrival at FL160 we turned right again 180 degrees and continued the climb at 3.9% to FL210. We continued climbing to pass the lowest safe altitude (LSA) of FL243 to level at FL310, only about 7,000 feet AGL of the snow-topped mountains.

We can never get enough of seeing majestic mountains from the cockpit but these were on a completely different scale. The biggest and most impressive mountain ranges we have seen, skirting the edge of the Himalayan orogenic belt that consists of the Himalayas Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, the connecting Tian Shan Mountains, Pamir Mountains and Altai Mountains bridging between China,

Nepal, Pakistan and India. The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau stretches about 1,900 miles and is over 1.5 million square miles, as far as we could see – range after range of huge mountains.

The plateau and its surrounding mountains make up the world’s largest no-fly zone. It is forbidden for commercial flights to enter this area as there is no place for an emergency landing, no ability of rescue, and if you lose pressurization you cannot descend to below FL140 or have enough oxygen until you can descend. It is wild with no human activity in sight. We were lucky to see it as we were flying in excellent, clear conditions. Just imagine an area from Florida to California that has an LSA between FL203 and FL311. This area is the mother of all mountains, making any other mountain range in the world look like little hills.

We took a day tour to Ala-Archa National Park in the rugged Tian Shan mountains. The clear streams led to the Ala-Archa River, which flows through this valley. There are several mountains with peaks over 15,000 feet; the place is excellent for mountain climbers and hiking.

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (UCFM) to Almaty, Kazakhstan (UAAA)

We arrived at Bishkek's airport and were greeted by two young ladies who took us through customs and immigration in less than five minutes. Departing UCFM on the UML0D 1 departure, we were handed over to Almaty ATC, which instructed us to level at FL190 to clear the Tian Shan-Ile Alatau mountains. This very short flight of 120NM crosses the lowest side of the mountain range. Once cleared, the descent was a quick drop down to the approach point and then to follow the TIPSA1D arrival for an RNP app RWY 05R.

Astana Aviation Services assisted us through the airport, including calling us a taxi.

Whilst in Central Asia we never rented a car. Every taxi that we encountered we negotiated with them to take us for a day to see the sights. Usually the day rate was around \$20 to \$40; we always tipped a lot more on completion of our tours.

Almaty is Kazakhstan's largest metropolis, set in the foothills of the Trans-Ili Alatau mountains. It served as the country's capital until 1997. Again, there are a lot of ex-Soviet era memorials. The Russian Orthodox bright yellow and gold Ascension Cathedral is made of wood and without nails. It stands 150 feet tall and the inner structure was made in art workshops in Moscow and Kyiv. We wandered through the maze of vendors in the Zelyony Green Bazaar, with the most exotic food, including horse meat, on display.

We drove to the Big Almaty Lake, which sits at 8,300 feet on the slopes of the mountains. Unfortunately, as it was Saturday, the drive up the mountain to the lake entrance was closed to vehicles. Whilst you can walk a return trip of 12 miles to the lake we were not ready for it, so we turned back to visit the rare birds

of prey at the Sunkar Falconry Refuge. Paul Pfander, the master falconer and ornithologist, showed us how to hold and feed the falcons on our arms, send them flying, recover them back and then feed them whole baby chickens. We finished the day in a private room at the Sandyq restaurant, enjoying ancient traditions with authentic Central Asian cuisine sounded by incredible local arts. We didn't have the heart to try the horse meat stew.

Our driver took us to Ile-Alatau State National Park to see Lake Issyk on a spring day. The previous day, the temperature was 85°F. By the next day it dropped to 45°F and by the time we got to the lake, it was 33°F, which turned into a full snow showdown. It was the most beautiful walk as the landscape around us turned from bright green to white in just a few minutes. We had never experienced such a strong snow before and were slipping on the road that was quickly turning to ice, dressed only for light showers, not snowing conditions. The lake was very nice and the snow made the trip really amazing.

⌵ *A view of Almaty with a background of mountains.*

Almaty, Kazakhstan (UAAA) to Tashkent, Uzbekistan (UTTT)

Our SID from UAAA followed the Tian Shan-Ile Alatau mountain range. We climbed to the minimum safe altitude (MSA) of 18,600 feet and turned left on the climb to cross over the mountain range for a last-time view of the majestic wild mountains. We flew 250NM, and below us, there were no signs of life, just high mountains. The STAR allowed us a 3.7% descent from the high altitude followed by ILS RWY08R into UTTT.

We parked next to three identical Ilyushin Il-96s belonging to the Russian president. He was there for a conference and the city had been beautified for his visit and delegation. We were lucky to be there at the same time as the president, as all the water fountains were working, the streets were spotless and the monuments were open. An hour after he left all the water fountains were turned off.

The most interesting souk or market was there. The Chorsu Bazaar in the old town sits under a mosaic blue dome

and it is fascinating to wander through with the brightly colored spices, dried fruit, nuts, meat butchers, dairy produce and pickles of every variety. They are still using ancient butchery methods and the produce sits on tables under no refrigeration; it's not hard to imagine how things were in olden times.

We visited a new Uzbekistan City called Yangi, which China is building with a huge event stadium, high-rise apartments, a university, parks and a memorial square presenting the history of Uzbekistan. It was interesting to see the grand scale of the development.

Mosques, monuments and centres for Islamic civilization were basically the things to see there and learn the history of the great leader Amir Temur, who reconquered the lands back from Genghis Khan's descendants in the 13th/14th centuries.

Samarkand, Uzbekistan (UTSS)

After a short 180NM flight within the agricultural flat basin that surrounds



⌵ *The Zelyony Green Bazaar filled with vendors selling their goods.*

Lake Aydar, we arrived at our hotel in a new complex labeled "The Silk Road." Everywhere we were traveling from Georgia to Azerbaijan to Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan the rebuilding of the mythological road was underway, but for us, we were following another path, one that was of barely surviving and desperation. This Central Asian region was a place of mass movement of people trying to escape and survive World War II and escape from the invasions of the German Nazis. In particular, we were re-stepping the pathway taken by Amir's father, Dov Hister, who in 1939 was a 12-year-old boy. His father, mother and two brothers escaped Poland in 1939. They traveled for three years in cattle train carriages, oxen carts or any means of transport they could, including a lot of walking, mostly walking.

They moved through Ukraine, then were pushed into a work camp cutting wood in the cold, desolate Russian Siberia. They were released in 1942 after Germany declared war and invaded Russia. The family moved thousands of miles southeast to escape from the freeze of winter. On the way, Dov then just 15 years old, lost his father and later his mother (Amir's grandparents), who he buried using his bare hands. He lost his brother when he joined the army, never to be seen again, then finally settled in Uzbekistan. The secular Muslim cultured country was a safe haven for him and his younger brother. Amir wanted to see this place that gave refuge and dignity to his hero father, so we followed his footsteps and walked through those same old streets and bazaar markets where Dov traded whatever he had on his back for a mere loaf of bread to eat. He wrote in his book that he remembered the magnificent old buildings of beautiful colors, mostly in ruins but he was too focused on surviving to pay attention to anything else.

Fortunately for us, those beautiful, brightly colored buildings have now all been restored to their former glory. We started with the most impressive place in Samarkand, the Registan. It is a public square framed by three madrasahs (schools) enmeshed with blue tiles and domes of unique and distinctive Persian architecture.

The bright colors of the tiles and the grandeur of the square are both architectural and art masterpieces. The three madrasahs, Ulugh Beg Madrasah (1417–1420), Sher-Dor Madrasah (1619–1636) and Tilya-Kori Madrasah (1646–1660), are impressive sites. We could not stop taking photos of this grandeur and returned at night to a restaurant overlooking the square whilst having a delicious Uzbeki meal, taking many more pictures and talking to local Uzbek people who also came to enjoy the light show spectacular.

We wanted to try a traditional meal. In Uzbekistan every dish involves meat. The national dish is called plov, made in a massive wok, starting with 80 pounds

of large fatty cuts of beef, fried in animal fat, then 80 pounds of cut carrots are added, matched with 40 pounds of rice, spices and whatever else you want to throw in. It is one of the most delicious dishes you will eat, full of fatty goodness.

Everyone eats from the same platter placed in the middle of the table and traditionally the plate must all be finished. Unfortunately we were unable to finish ours. The dish is accompanied by a salad of fresh vegetables and the local sour milk called katyk garnished with salt and dill herb.

There are several sites of ancient tombs, mausoleums, mosques and centres of worship in the same impressive style, but the most extraordinary are the Amir Temur mausoleum and the Shah-i-Zinda, a huge collection of massive mausoleums displaying incredible craftsmanship and beauty. We found another local restaurant that served a 24-foot skewered, grilled shish kebab. It took eight waiters to deliver it to the table!

Bukhara, Uzbekistan (UTSB)

Our next stop was Bukhara, a 30-minute flight for us but most tourists take the three-hour train ride over small villages and agricultural fields with many lakes and rivers. The dry, hot summer and harsh winters leave the land only good for grazing animals; there are no forests or woods to see from the air.

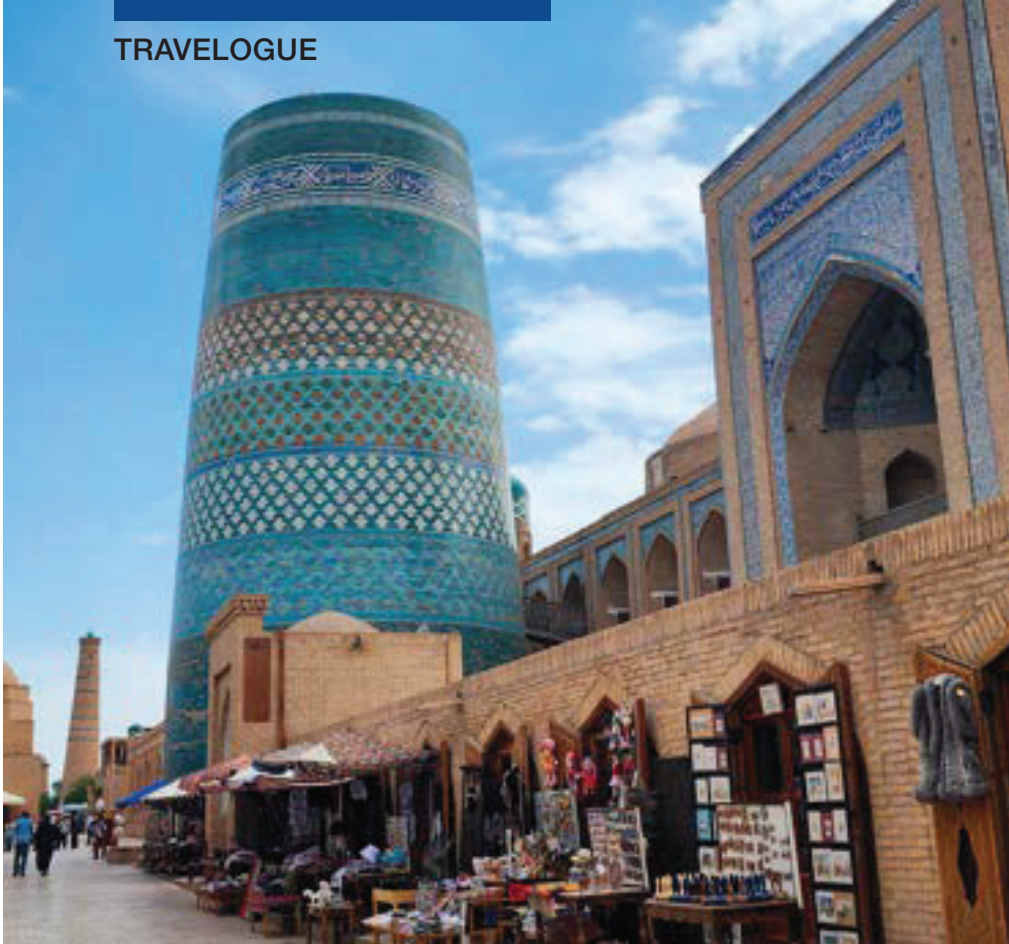
Located on the Silk Route, Bukhara existed for more than 2,000 years. It was an important trading centre with a dark history as the slave trade capital of the world. It still maintains its small



Registan Square in Samarkand is framed by three madrasahs (schools) enmeshed with blue tiles (shown above) and domes of unique and distinctive Persian architecture.



One shish kebab to feed the entire table.



village atmosphere with a central water fountain to help cool the air at the main square alongside the old mosque and madrasah (school). But that is not the best part. As you wander through the small streets you find each dome and arch is filled with markets, live music, restaurants and small vendors selling their goods. It is the most complete example of a medieval city in Central Asia with monuments and tombs from the 10th century in Muslim architecture and a large number of 17th-century madrasahs. The 12th-century, 150-foot-tall Kalyan Minaret survived almost intact for millennia.

There are many remains from the Mongol invasions of Genghis Khan in 1220 and Timur in 1370, and the main architecture now is from the Sheibani period of Uzbek rule from the early 16th century onwards. The Ark (fortress) and high mud brick walls of Bukhara date back to the fifth century. The days are very hot and at night all the local families

come to the city to gather as the old city skyline lights up the turquoise, blue and purple domes and towers to create a spectacular evening.

Urgench/Khiva, Uzbekistan (UTNU)

Leaving early to avoid the heat of the day of 99°F, as in all the airports in the Stans, we are the only airplane on the tarmac. The best handling agent in Central Asia, Marina, guided us through the airport very quickly. We faced strong headwinds which increased the short 50-minute flight through dry barren lands, following the river that also acts as the border between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The handling services everywhere in the Stans were incredibly good. We took a taxi to Khiva, a 30-minute drive, and booked into the Faravon Hotel. Although a few miles from the old city, it is new and luxurious with excellent facilities and cool air conditioning!

« **A look at Itchan Kala**, the inner UNESCO World Heritage city in Khiva, which dates back to the sixth century.

There were some old Madrasahs that had been converted into small boutique hotels. The original school classrooms are now small hotel rooms with just two small single beds, no air conditioning and a small bathroom; you get to experience that atmosphere in 99°F heat!

Itchan Kala is the inner UNESCO World Heritage city in Khiva, situated on the edge of the Karakum Desert and dates back to the sixth century. It is surrounded by a high, mud brick wall with four gate entrances and was an ancient trade city on the caravan routes. Most of the landmarks now are from the Islamic period of the 18th and 19th centuries and follow the same architecture as most of the cities we had just been through. Except here and in Bukhara, the cities have the Old World feel of the same stone and mud brick dwellings in small village streets. The tallest grand Minaret Islam Khoja and Kalta Minor Mesquita Juma mosque with carved wooden columns are amazing sites as is the rest of this old town.

It is very difficult to express and capture the essence of the Stans or the Silk Road in a short article. In our month of travel, we experienced diverse cultures and different-but-the-same architecture themes. The flying experience alone is one of the most memorable and challenging. Crossing the edge of the Himalayas will rank up there as one of our most spectacular. We flew on to Armenia for our path back to Europe, then on to another 10 countries, including Sarajevo and Tunisia, sleeping in over 30 beds in 60 days! Our travels continue. ☺



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