

The land that is now Uzbekistan was once at the heart of the ancient Silk Road trade route connecting China with the Middle East and Rome. The country came under Russian control in the 19th century, and emerged as an independent state when Soviet rule ended in 1991. Uzbekistan, landlocked country in Central Asia, lies mainly between two major rivers, the Syr Darya (historically known as the Jaxartes) to the northeast and the Amu Darya (historically the Oxus) to the southwest, though they only partly form its boundaries. Uzbekistan is bordered by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. The autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan (*Qoraqalpog'iston*) is located in the western third of the country. Uzbeks make up more than four fifths of the population, followed by Tajiks, Kazakhs, Tatars, Russians and Karakalpaks. The Uzbeks are Sunni Muslims. Slightly less than one tenth of the population is Eastern Orthodox Christian. Most of the population lives in the eastern half of the country. Heavily populated oases and foothill basins are covered with an extensive network of canals intersecting fields, orchards and vineyards. Nearly four fifths of Uzbekistan's territory, the sun-dried western area, has the appearance of a wasteland. In the northwest the Turan Plain rises 60 to 90 metres above sea level around the Aral Sea in Karakalpakstan. This terrain merges on the south with the Kyzylkum (*Qizilqum*) Desert and farther west becomes the Ustyurt Plateau, a region of low ridges, salt marshes, sinkholes and caverns.

Tashkent. The capital city of Uzbekistan is one of the most populous cities in Central Asia. Situated in the northeastern part of the country, near the border with Kazakhstan, Tashkent has been profoundly shaped and influenced by diverse cultures throughout its history. The most significant transformation of its urban landscape occurred during the Soviet era when the city

was rebuilt as a model Soviet city, following the 1966 earthquake that caused substantial damage. During this reconstruction, architects from various regions of the Soviet Union collaborated with local experts, resulting in a unique form of architectural modernism that harmoniously integrated elements of Islamic architecture, indigenous creativity and cutting-edge engineering achievements of that era. *The Tashkent Modernism XX/XXI research and preservation project* was initiated and commissioned by the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF) in an effort to preserve the modernist architecture and heritage in the Uzbek capital, while raising awareness of its importance. *139 Documentary Center* is a public space in Tashkent, founded by photographer Timur Karpov, for documentary, activism and human rights ends. linktr.ee/dc139

Samarkand. The historic town is a crossroads and melting pot of the world's cultures. Founded in the 7th century BC as ancient Afrasiab, Samarkand had its most significant development in the Timurid period from the 14th to the 15th centuries. The major monuments include the Registan Mosque and *madrasas*, Bibi-Khanum Mosque, the Shakhi-Zinda compound and the Gur-Emir mausoleum. Today this second-largest city of Uzbekistan exemplifies a harmonious mix of modern economic achievement. The *Ulugh Beg Observatory* in Samarkand was founded in the 15th century by the astronomer and mathematician Ulugh Beg, grandson of emperor Timur the Lame (Tamerlane). A product of one Muslim prince's devotion to science, the observatory was the site of the world's most advanced astronomical studies for three decades before being levelled by religious extremists. In 1908 the Russian archaeologist Vassily Vyatkin (buried on site according to his own wishes) uncovered the remains. Perhaps Ulugh Beg's greatest achievement was a star catalogue containing at least 1,018 stars and their

locations in the night sky, compiled almost 200 years before the advent of telescopes. atlasobscura.com/places/ulugh-beg-observatory

Bukhara. More than 2,000 years old, it is the most complete example of a medieval city in Central Asia, with an urban fabric that has remained largely intact. Monuments of particular interest include the famous tomb of Ismail Samani, a masterpiece of 10th-century Muslim architecture, and a large number of 17th-century *madrasas*. In Bukhara, it's possible to visit *Master Ceramist Abdulvahid Bukhoriy*, one of the few craftsmen still practising the Blue Bukhara glazing technique, made from the ash of the *ishkor* desert plant. He started working with clay in his childhood, learning to make toys in a village in the Bukhara region. He later moved to Tashkent and studied at the Art College and the National Institute of Fine Arts and Design. Today he is particularly interested in working with national heritage, using local clays, reviving traditional patterns and techniques. The artist took part in the installation of the Pavilion of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the 18th International Venice Biennale Architecture Exhibition, 2023. acdf.uz/en

The Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor. Located in rugged mountains, fertile river valleys and uninhabitable desert, the 866 km corridor runs from east to west along the Zarafshan River and further southwest following the ancient caravan roads crossing the Karakum Desert to the Merv Oasis. People travelled, settled, conquered or were defeated here, making it a melting pot of ethnicities, cultures, religions, sciences and technologies.

Itchan Kala. The inner town, protected by brick walls some 10 m high, of the old Khiva oasis was the last resting place for caravans before crossing the desert to Iran. Although few very old monuments still remain, it is a coherent

and well-preserved example of the Muslim architecture of Central Asia. There are several outstanding structures such as the Djuma Mosque, the mausoleums and the *madrasas* and the two magnificent palaces built at the beginning of the 19th century by Alla-Kulli-Khan.

Fergana Valley. Central Asia's longest and second deepest river, the Syr Darya (nearly 3,000 km) runs through this valley making it an agricultural paradise. Pomegranates, grapes, figs, walnuts, rice, wheat and clover were grown here, which the Chinese only got wind of in the 2nd century BC and only due to their contacts with Fergana. Margilan—one of the ancient cities of Central Asia, which the Great Silk Road passed through, located in the Fergana Valley—is considered a centre of silk production and silk goods. For a long time, the secrets of making traditional fabrics in Uzbekistan were passed down from generation to generation. But during the times of the Soviet Union, many masters were exiled, and the craft of making *adras* and *ikat* was nearly lost. Now their descendants are reviving the work of their ancestors. In October, the *Atlas Bayrami* international festival of traditional fabrics is held there. *Master Nurmuhammad Valiev* is a fourth-generation crafter based in Margilan.

Nukus, Karakalpakstan. *The Savitsky State Museum of Arts*, founded in 1966 by Igor Savitsky, scientist, ethnographer, artist and collector, hosts one of the most remarkable collections of 20th-century Russian art. The Fine Art Department consists of three sections: Uzbek avant-garde of the 1920s–v1930s, Russian avant-garde of the 20th century and contemporary art of Karakalpakstan. The library has a vast collection (oriental studies, art, gender development, modern fashion) and a wide selection of publications pertaining to Karakalpak folk art. museum.kr.uz/museum

