

A Pottery Journey through Uzbekistan and Tajikistan 2022 - With Jane Gibson

Mosques, Madrassas and Mausoleums all covered in exquisitely beautiful tiles, archaeological sites, museums, deserts, mountains, potters, paper makers, silk makers and welcoming people.

I am back on the Silk Road.

We were visiting different areas from the ones I went to in 2016, especially the Fergana Valley. Although I could write reams about this wonderful trip I

must drill down to the important matter for this article which is pottery. Our first potter was in Tashkent. After three excellent museums we were flagging and it was a relief to enter the

calm courtyard of Master Ceramist, Alisher Rakhimov and his family (all images on this page). Alisher has exhibited all over the world including the Aberystwyth International Ceramics Festival.

They have been potters for six generations and his grandfather had to hide the pottery during Soviet times as homeworking was not allowed and they had to fire the



Painting in progress



Decoration over white slip (left) and...



...on red earthen-ware

kiln at night. We were welcomed into the studio by Alisher and his son who described their making processes and the natural minerals used in the glazes. They run classes to inspire a new generation of ceramists and we



watched their grandson paint an intricate design onto a bowl. A visit to the gallery to see their beautiful wares was followed by tea and local sweetmeats.

Next day we had a dramatic drive over the high, snowy Angran pass into the Fergana valley. As we drove down the other side we saw roadside stalls

selling vegetables and fruit. There also seemed to be what looked like huge kilns. Being potters, it was a “stop the bus” moment and we all piled out. They were actually lines of huge bread ovens (see image above) where flat breads were stuck to the sides of the open ovens and produced the most delicious hot bread. I digress, back to pottery. We were surprised at how urban the valley seemed because photos painted a more bucolic picture. Actually the valley supports the greatest population density in Uzbekistan. It is famous for its many crafts and we first visited a silk making factory still using traditional methods.

Pottery has existed here for centuries. Rishtan, being an important transit point on the Great Silk Road developed fast, both economically and culturally. The ceramists created colourful ceramics of azure hues distinguishing them from other regions. Their unique glaze, ishkor, is manually produced from natural mineral dyes and ashes of mountain plants so does not contain lead which the glazes of other potters in the area still use. By the end of the 20th century the culture of Rishtan ceramics was lost but later was revived by new masters. Leading artisans still inherit the tradition of white and blue ishkor but we are told others do not in order to sell as much as possible.

We first visited the brand-new International Centre for Ceramic Art. Built in 2020 by the government in the style of a madrassa it has 20 separate units which are rented by potters. No workshop repeats the design of another. Each has two floors with gas and electric connections. It seemed rather empty but we were assured it is busy in the tourist season. We were welcomed by Master Ceramists Alisher Nazirov and his son who had just

returned from an exhibition in Japan. The beautiful work, in common with the other potters we met, is made from a low firing earthenware clay. It is thrown or press-moulded into plates, bowls and tea services. When dry it is dipped into a white slip or decorated by slip trailing designs and bisque fired. This caused consternation amongst us potters who said they would never put slip on dry ware because it would crack. The white ware is then decorated in traditional patterns with natural oxides and fired with a transparent or copper glaze to 980C.



Ishkor azure glaze

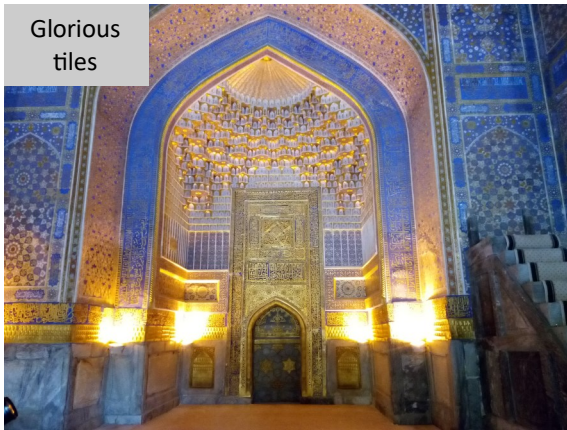
We moved on to the studio and workshop of Rustam Usmanov. Behind carved doors (images on this page) was a beautiful garden in which were workshops, studios and pots everywhere. 25 potters worked there with 3 throwers and the rest decorating. The old

underground kilns have been replaced with gas. After watching the skilled painters doing their intricate designs we sat down to lunch. Naturally all the crockery on the table had been made there and the tablecloth was local silk. We ate a delicious



lunch then browsed amongst the pots for sale and their pottery museum. I collect water pots and was thrilled to find that the little bird shaped pots were based on much larger ones which traditionally were used for pouring water. I later saw the larger pots in a museum. We spent the next few days in Tajikistan being led by the lovely guide we had in 2017. Ancient cities, fortresses, high mountain passes, stunning

lakes and gorgeous autumn tree colourings all made this part of the trip very special. We passed back into Uzbekistan (both border crossings very tedious) and headed for Samarkand. As well as the famous Registan Square and other sights I had seen before we also visited old Samarkand which is an archaeology site with a very good museum containing many pots. Our last master potter had built a very attractive craft centre at Konigil village just outside the city (below, right). He wanted to preserve old crafts and although it was obviously touristy it was very well set out.



Glorious tiles

We saw how the bark of the mulberry tree is turned into paper. In the pottery one of our group had a go on the kick wheel and did very well. Throughout the trip we visited museums with very interesting pottery and histories of the regions. We gaped awestruck at the glorious tiles on the madrasas and

mosques (see above). Most of the buildings had been restored using local craftsmen. We left Samarkand and drove north west visiting some wonderful petroglyphs in a steep valley. As another potter and I had already been to Bukhara and Khiva we went off into the desert and stayed in a yurt with music around a campfire. Next day we paddled in Aydakul lake before driving into the mountains for two nights in a guest house amongst wonderful scenery. A great finish to another fascinating trip.



Kick wheel in action

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www.christineannrichards.co.uk www.caravantraveluz.come-mail



My Travel Companions

