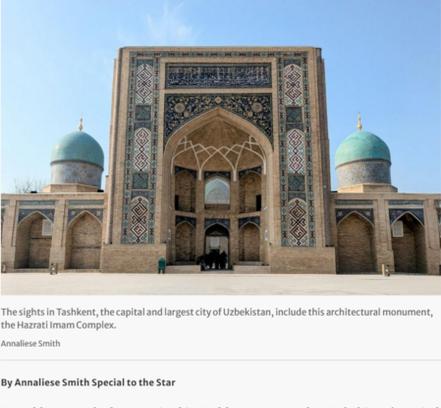


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# The Silk Road by rail: In Uzbekistan, I travelled to historic cities by futuristic, high-speed train

The train remains the most convenient and affordable way to get around Uzbekistan, which is experiencing a tourism boom.

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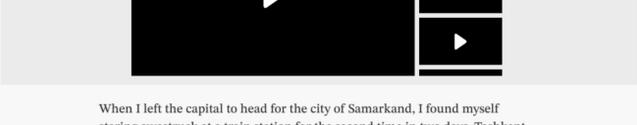
The sights in Tashkent, the capital and largest city of Uzbekistan, include this architectural monument, the Hazrat Imam Complex.

By Annaliese Smith Special to the Star

I was bleary-eyed when I arrived in Tashkent at 6 a.m., but Uzbekistan's capital isn't a place for the weary. Even in the early hours, people are on the move: snub-nosed Chevrolet taxis flit through traffic, sellers in the Chorsu Bazaar flog their spices and sweets, and the metro rumbles underfoot. As I was swept up in the sights, I wasn't even fully registering how I got from place to place, until I stumbled into the Mustaqillik Maydoni metro station.

Its scale is magnificent. Great marble columns push the chandeliered ceilings high above the tracks, and Soviet-era trains rattle along the walls. Within minutes, one had delivered me to Kosmonavtlar, an equally impressive station with giant portraits of Uzbekistan's early cosmonauts gazing down from the walls. I was awestruck.

This was just my first taste of train travel in a country that takes rail, both local and long-distance, very seriously. Uzbekistan spans 1,425 kilometres from East to West, so it takes a while to traverse no matter how you try. Although the government is making a concerted effort to expand travel infrastructure in the midst of its current tourism boom, the train remains the most convenient and affordable way to get around.



When I left the capital to head for the city of Samarkand, I found myself staring awestruck at a train station for the second time in two days. Tashkent Central Station is a Soviet Modernist marvel topped with an intricate mosaic, reminiscent of the country's ubiquitous Islamic architecture. The inside is wall-to-wall marble, which bounced the departure announcements around the hall in a tinny echo.

The disembodied voice hurried commuters onto local electric Sharq trains and broadcast the arrival of an ultraluxurious Silk Road sleeper from China. I'd opted for the daily, high-speed Afrosiyob train, which launched in 2011. Its futuristic, streamlined front end looked comically out of place pulling into the mid-century station.

With the train hitting top speeds of 250 kilometres per hour, the 309-kilometre trip to Samarkand took only two hours. I was delighted to be served a complimentary breakfast, a sweet berry pastry and tea, considering the ticket cost just \$34.



Registan Square in Samarkand is recognized as one of the country's most iconic landmarks.

Stepping off the train and into Samarkand cemented my perception of this train as a sort of time-travelling device. Although it's full of energy and momentum, Samarkand is one of the oldest cities in Central Asia and has the gravitas to prove it.

From the Registan Square's tilting minarets to the maze of mosaics in the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis to the aromas of the plov centre, Samarkand is a feast for the senses. The 14th-century ruler Timur designed it to be just that. It became a capital of the arts, education and religion, and 700 years later, that intention is still palpable.

After a few days of exploring, I was back on the train, speeding toward Bukhara, another iconic city on the ancient Silk Road. Known for metalwork and a fierce lineage of leaders, Bukhara is now home to many of Uzbekistan's artists.



Puppet theatres and street performers whirled around the market squares, which were, when I was there in the fall, decorated with yet more art for the inaugural Bukhara Biennial, Central Asia's first major contemporary art biennale. It featured works on the theme of "recipes for a broken heart," including a dissolving house made of traditional rock candy (nabat).



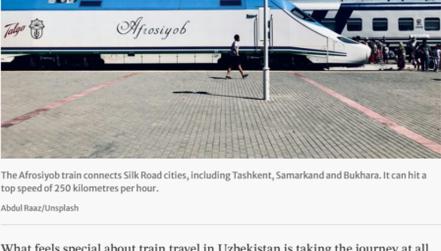
The city of Bukhara is known for the arts. This installation, "Kutadgu Billig (The Wisdom That Brings Happiness)" by Saule Suleimenova, was part of the inaugural Bukhara Biennial, in 2025.

The Afrosiyob train halves the journey time between Samarkand and Bukhara, reducing it to just one hour and 40 minutes, making it convenient not only for tourists like me but also for the locals taking the same journey north on a Sunday night. Other travellers helped me with my bags and to find my seat. I could only manage a clumsy "rahmat" (thank you) in Uzbek.

Quickly, however, I discovered a surefire way of making friends in Uzbekistan. When I mentioned that I'm from the U.K., more than once a local would eagerly ask, "Do you watch football?" And with that, we whiled away our journeys discussing recent games and mediocre managers before transitioning to local recommendations and Uzbekistan's tourism boom.

The general consensus is that the boom will only keep growing, and the Afrosiyob high-speed train will be essential to that. Already stopping at Uzbekistan's most famous cities, as well as the Jizzakh region, noted for its scenic mountains, it is the most convenient way to get around and helps relieve some pressure on local transportation networks.

Later this year, the Uzbek government will expand the Afrosiyob high-speed line into Khiva. The northern city is a peaceful destination, where the sights include the winding streets of the 2,500-year-old Itchan Kala (inner city), iconic turquoise minarets and 20th-century palaces. This new train will make the journey from Tashkent about seven hours, again halving the time it takes now.



The Afrosiyob train connects Silk Road cities, including Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara. It can hit a top speed of 250 kilometres per hour.

What feels special about train travel in Uzbekistan is taking the journey at all. As I was whisked from city to city on high-speed rail along a historic route, I was constantly reminded that I was on the Silk Road. There are caravanserais, ancient markets and a blend of cultures that prove these are the beaten paths of the world. An invisible flow weaves its way through the country, shaped by centuries of people making the same pilgrimage.

Sure, you could fly from place to place in half the time, but slow travel, paced to appreciate truly the landscapes passing by, feels the most fitting and natural here. In Uzbekistan, the journey has always been as important as the destination.

Annaliese Smith travelled as a guest of the Tourism Committee of Uzbekistan, which did not review or approve this article.

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