

# By Hotter Winds

The road to Samarkand

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## Abstract

We decided to go to Samarkand. Why Samarkand? No-one was certain, but it sounded exotic, and that was good enough for the four of us. We packed up our lives in London, bought a hardy vehicle, learnt some Russian, obtained letters of invitation from ministries of the interior, and set off.

Along the way we ran into some trouble: treason in Croatia; psychosis in Serbia; sedition in Azerbaijan; starvation on the Caspian. And we weren't even in Central Asia yet. We still had to negotiate desert roads and traverse the Pamir Highway, second-highest in the world. Before reaching Samarkand we'd have lost ten kilogrammes each, seen a hundred busts of Lenin and been harried by a thousand officious border guards and ex-KGB policemen.

We discovered a region that is as beautiful as it is mystifying. Stranded ideologically between the Kremlin and the Koran, Central Asia is a baffling league of rival states. Held together loosely by the accident of geography and a common hatred for Russia, the alliance goes no further than that. Turkmen oil and gas merchants, Uzbek nationalists, Kyrgyz mountain folk and Tajik peasants all live in close and unfriendly proximity. Stalin pencilled in their borders on a whim, and with the fall of communism in 1989, many were left stranded, minorities under foreign rule.

This is the world of Robert Byron, Colin Thubron, Fitzroy MacLean and Marco Polo; the Samarkand of Omar Khayyam, Timur the Lame, Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan; the fantasy of Christopher Marlowe, Edgar Allan Poe, Wole Soyinka and James Elroy Flecker. We wanted to see the land and its people through their eyes, but also through our own.

Our journey took us through a land of extremes: over the snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush and through the parched Karakum Desert; across the ancient Amu- and Syr-Darya Rivers, known in the West as the Oxus and Jaxartes; and ultimately to our destination – the great Silk Road capitals of Bukhara and Samarkand. The last, sad caravanserai had made their final journeys from the turquoise gates many years ago. What would the cities be like now?

When the journey was over, and I'd experienced the road to Samarkand for myself, I put my version of it in writing. *By Hotter Winds* captures the exhilaration and tedium of travel and the shared experience of a journey by car. At the same time it offers narrow glimpses into the history of the faded Silk Road, its cities and its people.

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## By Hotter Winds

*We travel not for trafficking alone;  
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:  
For lust of knowing what should not be known,  
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

(Flecker, 1922)

IT was almost three o'clock and we still hadn't found a crossing point. Each had something to disqualify it: the river was too wide; there was a settlement nearby; we couldn't see around the river bend. My nerves were wearing thin and I needed to piss. We stopped the car and I got out of the passenger seat, walking the ten or so metres to the river's edge.

'Matt!' I called up to the car. 'Nothing wrong with this spot.'

Matt and Beth came down to take a look. Nina stayed in the car. It was about twenty metres across – not too wide. Sure, the current looked strong, but the river didn't take a turn for at least half a kilometre, so we'd just wash up a little further down. We stood for a few minutes weighing it up. Eventually Matt said, 'Fuck it, let's swim.'

We dashed back to the vehicle and stripped to our underwear. My heart was beating fast and the adrenaline tingled in the tips of my fingers. Beth's adventurous side had won out, and she joined us for a quick photo to mark the occasion. Barefoot, we rushed to the river's edge.

The water numbed my feet. We waded in as quickly as we could, each step causing us to yelp in pain as we disappeared deeper into the dark water.

'Well there's no point hanging around,' Beth said. 'Let's go!'

I was so caught up in my desire to swim to Afghanistan that caution was just a distant irritation. It was everyone for himself. I was worried about Beth, but she didn't want to miss out. I stepped

further in so that most of my torso was covered, gasping as the air was forced out my lungs by the cold.

Matt's eyes were a little wild. Beth was further behind us. Now that we were deeper we could feel the current. It was strong, much stronger than we'd anticipated.

'Three ... Two ... One ... Go!' Matt shouted.

I started swimming as fast as I could. The only thing I heard, coming up for breath, was Beth shouting that she was turning around. I was being dragged quickly downstream. It seemed to be taking longer than it should've, and after a while I lifted my head to take a look. I couldn't believe it – I was still only halfway. Matt was slightly behind. I took another few strokes and quickly realised what was happening. The current was funnelling us back into the middle of the river, where it flowed fastest. There was an invisible barrier blocking us from reaching the other side. I looked back at Matt.

'It's too fast!' he shouted. 'I'm turning back!'

I thought that was a bad idea – we were closer to the Afghan side now than the Tajik, and I was already exhausted. Fear lending me extra energy, I fought the current and the cold. I looked up again to see how close I was, but still it dragged me. How far had I been swept downriver? I was so exhausted I didn't care. Fatigue was overcoming me. Consciousness seemed to slow. I looked up again to see the rocky river bank of Afghanistan, just metres away, but out of my reach. Another minute of this and I'd surely drown.

## Chapter 1 – Departure

*Away, for we are ready to a man!  
Our camels sniff the evening and are glad.  
Lead on, O Master of the Caravan,  
Lead on the Merchant-Princes of Baghdad.*

(Flecker, 1922)

It felt as though we were preparing for battle. We'd just added the finishing touches to our burdened roof rack. Up there were three empty jerry cans – two for fuel and one for water – and nine full 'ammo boxes'. Two of them held vehicle spares – various filters and fan belts. Others held our personal belongings. One box for each traveller and another to share. I was sharing with Beth, and Matt with Nina. The ninth box, controversially, held nearly thirty books. Beth couldn't imagine the prospect of seven months without them. The stand-off resulting from the book-box dilemma lasted nearly a month, with Beth overcoming a three to one vote by sheer force of will.

Atop the boxes were two tents, four chairs, a fold-up table, a gas canister, a set of gas-cooking fixtures and a cumbersome gazebo.

'I don't think we'll ever get it this neat again,' Matt said. We were going to have to improve on the time – three hours was too long to spend packing the roof.

Two bicycles were fastened onto a dubious contraption attached to the spare wheel. Their involvement on our expedition hung in the balance – two votes for and two against. Beth and I wanted them, Matt and Nina didn't.

Matt's mother Ingrid was watching us pack from indoors. Her anxiety had been growing since lunch. The latest we could leave Raynes Park was five thirty. It was a three-hour drive to the port of Harwich. From there we would set sail for Hook of Holland. Although missing our ferry wouldn't present an insurmountable problem, we all knew it would be a bad omen to miss the very first deadline of a seven-month trip. And Ingrid was our omnipresent prophet of doom.

Four thirty saw me still on the roof trying to loop the security cable around our baggage – a sufficient number of loops to ward off thieves, but few enough to make it a practical daily task. Five o'clock and we were rearranging the boot for the fifth time. Would our home-made shelf handle the weight of the fridge and the battery? It was already an alarmingly concave shape. At five fifteen we heard Ingrid on the phone inside.

'It's not how we would've done it, Peter. Not at all.' Ingrid was buzzing around inside like a hornet, talking excitedly on her phone. 'Christ, I don't think they're even going to make the ferry... Yes... Ja... No... Exactly!'

But just as she walked outside with a smile that didn't come close to concealing her scepticism for 'the whole darned endeavour', the last box clicked neatly into place. Beth flung the boot shut. Soon Ingrid was clutching Matt in an embrace that must have squeezed the wind out of him.

A few friends had come to say goodbye. Kimmi was crying because Beth was abandoning her. Kimmi's boyfriend Bird bombarded me with impossible questions about our vehicle.

'Is it a turbo?'

'I think so'

'What's the torque?'

'What's the what?'

'Torque!'

'Sorry Bird, listen we really need to get going. Ferry leaves in three hours.'

I jumped into the vehicle. Beth and Nina clambered into the back after a flurry of hugs and kisses. Matt finally got into the passenger seat after managing to extricate himself from his mother's grip. Ingrid's terse smile had given way to a storm of tears. Her darling Matt, off to a city called 'Samarkand' in the company of three idiots. Matt did a remarkable job of fooling his parents into believing he was a moral and virtuous citizen of the world. Just as we were about to set off, Ingrid came rushing out of the house with Matt's guitar in a soft case.

'You have to take this with you, Matt. You *have* to.'

We looked at each other. It would take a lot of space, but you can't separate a musician from his guitar. I guess Matt had been pretending that he didn't want it. We could see from his face that he did.

'Okay fine, Ingrid, we'll stick it in the boot. Luckily we've packed so efficiently that we have plenty space for it.' She didn't seem to notice the sarcasm in Nina's voice. She gave Matt one final hug and kiss, and then glared at the three of us.

'Don't put my son in any danger,' she warned.

'Promise,' said Beth. It was way more likely Matt would put *us* in danger.

Finally we were able to leave. We were on the open road. The tension that had been rising all afternoon melted away as we realised that we were finally doing it. We were leaving England for good. Would I miss it? Probably in time, but for now I couldn't wait to get away. Away from the grey and tedious humdrum of our lives in London. Out of the dead-end weekend routine we'd fallen into.

Nina was running through a final checklist while Matt fiddled with his iPod to find just the right song for the moment. He chose *Love in this Club* by Usher, a ridiculous tune that somehow became our expedition anthem. It was the anti-song, with lyrics so preposterous you just couldn't help but hum along to it. 'Gonna make loove in this cluub', it went, 'on the couch, on the table, on the bar,

on the floor.’

We had only just tied up all the loose ends. That morning a DHL van had dropped off an emergency delivery of two passports that contained our twelfth visa. The thirteenth we’d have to pick up in Zagreb. Actually, there was a fourteenth one – for Iran – but we wouldn’t be getting that until Yerevan, so it wasn’t urgent.

And only yesterday a map, *the* map, a fantastic 1:500 000 of the Pamirs, had arrived from Zurich – the only place it could be purchased in Europe. Not even Stanfords, the three-storey travel bookstore in Covent Garden, stocked it. Since Markus Hauser, a Swiss cartographer, appeared to be the only Westerner who’d ever completed a detailed geological survey of the mountains of Tajikistan, you could only buy his map from the Swiss.

The day before that, I’d completed my eighth and final Russian lesson. By the end of the course all I could do was read the Cyrillic alphabet and say about fifteen Russian words. ‘Spa-see-ba’. ‘Khuh-ruh-sho’. ‘Puh-jhul-stuh’. At least I’d be able to read the road signs.

And it was only the previous weekend that we’d learnt how to drive Elroy, our 1997, three-litre, blue Toyota Land Cruiser. On Matt’s urging, we’d ended up at the Land Cruiser Enthusiast Weekend, hoping to pick up a few tips. What we discovered was that in most cases, driving skill is not required when negotiating difficult terrain. All a driver needs is the nerve to step on the gas and a very basic understanding of which gear to engage (almost exclusively low-range second). The Land Cruiser does rest. They are built for adversity. You, the humble driver, are just along for the ride.

We only learned the basics that weekend (such as rejecting the urge to slam on the brakes when lurching down a steep and muddy decline – you should in fact *accelerate*) but it was enough to give us the confidence to take Elroy out into the unknown. We were less afraid of it now.

We named our Land Cruiser after James Elroy Flecker, an English playwright, novelist and poet. He died in 1915 of tuberculosis with his best years still ahead of him. His death was described by one (maybe overzealous) journalist at the time as ‘unquestionably the greatest premature loss that English literature has suffered since the death of Keats.’ Probably his most famous work, *Hassan*, is a play about merchants and pilgrims planning to travel the Silk Road. The epilogue and prologue, in verse, capture the spirit of a journey, not just to Samarkand, but of all journeys. We adopted Flecker’s views, and felt that the name of our vehicle should somehow reflect this. James was too common a name, Flecker an unseemly one, so we were left with the goofy ‘Elroy’, which was perfect. It stuck.

Beth and Nina were chatting cheerfully in the back seat while Matt fiddled with the iPod again. I reflected on our gallant crew. Things were going well with Beth. Friends had warned us that it was crazy to travel for such a long time with your partner. That didn’t really make any sense to me.

‘A sure way to hasten a break-up,’ Ed warned.

‘You won’t make it to Split without splitting,’ Dean predicted.

We’d been together for nearly two years by that point, and I figured that if I discovered things about her that I didn’t know, well then that could only be a good thing. She has a sunny smile and is always up for anything exciting. She seemed not to mind where we were going on the expedition as long as it was photographable. Her only other conditions were ‘beaches and sun’. Those hadn’t been difficult conditions to meet.

I’d been friends with Matt since high school. He’s an unpredictable character, but there are two things you can always bet on: if beer or travel is on the cards, he’s the first to sign up. Tall and lanky with a loud voice and quick wit, he fills every room he enters.

Matt pursues women with tireless dedication. It is the opinions of his lovers that interest him most, and his trysts tend to range freely through the variables of age and beauty. He’s in love with all of womankind, and each has something that appeals to him. This makes him impossible to tie down in a relationship, and fidelity abandons him with depressing regularity.

He’d kept up a romance with Sarah for nearly five months, a record for him, and originally she was to be the fourth companion on our journey. But one night, six months before our departure, Sarah arrived at his favourite bar in Liverpool Street to discover him locked in wanton embrace with an Australian he’d met on the Tube.

The incident had resulted in a gap on our expedition team. We knew it needed to be filled. Three is not a good travelling number.

Nina joined our trip at the eleventh hour. She’d grown weary of England and had decided to return to South Africa. She wanted to do some travelling on her way home and we fitted conveniently into her plans. Initially we’d been sceptical. The comforts of home were important to Nina, and she normally preferred low-risk destinations like Paris or Barcelona. But we were surprised by her resolve – once she’d decided to come, she was a tenacious planner, unfazed by any potential danger or privation. She embraced the unfamiliarity of our Silk Road aspirations, burying herself in guidebooks and putting together a meticulous list of everything we might need. Plus it was through her connection, Arafah, that we were able to obtain Iranian visas.

As we travelled north through East Anglia, Matt and I turned to discussing the hot topic of the moment – which route to take through Turkey. I was keen to see the South. Matt had already been there, and preferred a more direct northerly passage.

We’d been having such discussions for nearly two years. A guiding principle of debate had been established from the outset: if someone had a ‘non-negotiable’, then we would fit it in. One of mine was Transylvania. One of Matt’s was Svaneti, in Georgia. Beth was less specific – what she most cared about was beaches. Nina was keen to see Croatia.

In this way, not an inch of the route from England to Uzbekistan went unexamined and unchallenged. The process was painstaking but captivating. I would find myself buried in a Serbian Internet article about the parking options at EXIT music festival one minute and the next be lost in a Wikipedia entry about the current administration in Armenia.

But while the route may have been up for debate, there was never any doubt about the destination: Samarkand, a city with a name that invokes poetry, history, trade, war, travel and myth. A city as old as Rome, Athens and Babylon. Samarkand, ‘The Gem of the East’.

Two years before, I hadn’t even heard of the place. I remember the day that I did, on a train approaching Waterloo. Paging through *Snowboarder Magazine*, I turned to an article about snowboarders who’d flown to Uzbekistan. Where was that? Central Asia, apparently. Central Asia? The map further down the article obliged. It was somewhere in that gap in most people’s mental geography. Flanked on one side by the Caspian Sea, on the other by China, to the north by Russia, and the south by India and Pakistan, Central Asia is about as foreign a place as most Westerners can imagine. So foreign, in fact, that I tried to envision what it was like, what cities were there, what the people looked like, what language they spoke. I drew a blank every time.

The article itself didn’t discuss Samarkand in much detail, focusing instead on a snowboarding expedition in the nearby mountains. But something in the few sentences about the city piqued my interest. Samarkand – it had such a grand ring to it, like Xanadu or Timbuktu. A Silk Road capital, cloaked in blue marble, with thick walls enclosing ancient madrasahs and mausoleums and minarets.

Here was an opportunity. I too would take my snowboard to Uzbekistan. Everyone knows that there are many countries other than France, Switzerland and Italy that are good for snowboarding. But just how far did that list go? I investigated and discovered that you can drive from England to Uzbekistan and snowboard in every single country along the way.

But then I considered what else we might do in the countries we’d be driving through. Winter was not a great time to travel. It wouldn’t have been a problem in Western Europe, but as a general rule, roads tend to deteriorate as you head east, and I couldn’t get thoughts of Napoleon’s and Hitler’s winter campaigns out of my mind.

‘Anyway, it’ll be ice cold every day.’ Beth was more pragmatic when I put the idea to her. Although she could also snowboard, she was not obsessed with the sport like I was.

‘Just think about it – trying to sightsee in five layers of clothing, huddled in our tents as the snow falls, changing our tyre in a blizzard. It doesn’t sound like fun.’

She was right, of course. While winter might be a good time for snow, it’s a really bad time for everything else. Common sense prevailed, and we started planning a summer expedition to Samarkand. We would drive the Silk Road, following in the footsteps of countless merchants and

explorers, of Babur and Benedict the Pole, of Marco Polo and Jean Baptiste Tavernier. It was once the most trodden of all paths, but in recent centuries its commuters had dried up. This happened long before the closing of USSR borders. Merchants had journeyed from Istanbul to Xian for two thousand years, but the charting of shipping routes around Africa changed the Silk Road forever. The maritime route was faster, plus merchants didn't have to negotiate a safe passage through deserts, over mountains and past bloodthirsty bandits. For us, equipped with the luxuries of modern technology, the Silk Road would be a journey through history at today's speed.

The next day I called Matt. He signed up immediately, and since that day we'd been dreaming, plotting, scheming and planning for our journey to Samarkand.

\*

For as long as I can remember I've been captivated by maps. When my parents took me for a school readiness test, aged four, my interviewer asked which toy in the room I wanted to play with. I was shy and so passed my message to her through my parents, blushing furiously as I did, ashamed that it was in fact none of her toys I was interested in, but the world globe she had on her desk. I sat spinning it round and round for nearly an hour. She must have thought I was mildly autistic, because I didn't receive the go-ahead to start school at age five and had to begin at six with everyone else.

Throughout primary school my bedroom walls were plastered with maps. I'd found a discarded pile of dusty maps at a school fête – the American states at the time of the civil war, one of Africa before independence (mostly red), a world map, one of Southern Africa, another of India and one above the window of Spain and Portugal. I switched them round from time to time so that I could stare at a different one as I lay on my bunk-bed before the lights went out. It would make sense to assume that this was when my fascination for all things foreign began.

But the truth was that it had taken hold of me even earlier, long before the slightly peculiar map obsession that had my mother concerned for years. It was my father's parents who first became caught up in travel. Gramps worked in the post office and Granny kept the home. On a humble income they saved and planned and were somehow able to travel abroad every four or five years. China, Brazil, Canada, Thailand, India – all relatively accessible to well-heeled South Africans now – but then it was rare for middle-class whites to venture beyond the borders. First of all, South Africans were not welcome in many places because of the regime in place at the time, and second, travel was extortionate.

Home, though, was not enough for Granny and Gramps, just as it doesn't seem to be for me. Their house was crammed with trinkets and photographs, their conversations with wondrous reminiscences of Rio or Delhi or Bangkok.

It wasn't until I was eighteen, when I spent time working in England, that I had the opportunity

to see other countries for myself. Since then I have always been either travelling, or planning to travel. Ideas for peculiar destinations or road-trips come to me faster than I can add them to my calendar. Then there's the cost. It's an addiction, like gambling. Every addict knows that price is not a deterrent. Some find it hard to understand why others spend every penny so frivolously on travel. But frivolity it is not: we can't help ourselves.

\*

We sped towards Harwich. The grey sky reminded me why we were leaving – it was nearly the summer solstice and still the long dark of England hadn't abated. It had been raining on and off for weeks. That would change when we hit the mainland, I told myself. The rain would dissipate and give way to warm summer days.

I stopped next to the customs office but it was dark inside. There was no one to help us anywhere.

We whizzed down the car lane and past another office. An official jumped out as we passed, waving his arms frantically. I slammed on brakes and reversed back to him.

'Where in God's name do you think you're going?'

'I'm so sorry – we were just in such a rush, and...' I said.

'Alright, alright, just give me the car papers and your passports. If you want to make it onto that ferry you're going to have to be quick'.

We handed over our passports. He glanced at Nina's British and Matt's German without a thought before coming to Beth's and mine. South African passports. He sighed. It meant more work for him, and less time for us. He took them into his office. After ten minutes he emerged.

'Can I see Elizabeth and Brian please?'

From the perspective of a customs official, South Africans are not welcome most places they go. The formalities took another fifteen minutes. The official eventually re-emerged, pointing us in the right direction, and we raced to our ferry. We were waved through onto the metal gangway by a woman who shook her head at us, tapping her watch. We dumped everything into our cheap four-berth cabin – Harwich to Hook takes eight hours overnight. When planning the route we'd thought that it would be great to start our journey in Holland at the mouth of the Rhine, the sun beaming into our cabin. We went straight to the cafeteria.

'Shots!' It was Matt's suggestion. Nina grimaced. Beth was game. So was I.

'Okay, beer first maybe, and then shots,' said Nina, yielding.

We found a table at the window, slightly less gloomy than the rest of the sparsely occupied canteen. I glanced around at our company for the crossing. Harwich to Holland is not a route used for leisure. People preferred the speedy Eurostar, or the Dover-Calais connection, which is much shorter. Most of our fellow commuters were truckers. The ferry was old and musty, and had

probably been in operation for at least thirty years.

After dinner and a few celebratory toasts, conversation petered out. A few lone truckers sipped pints at the bar. I'd been anticipating this night for so long and expected to be excited and energised. Instead I was exhausted. Nina was the first to call it a night and Beth followed soon after. Matt and I made a few final toasts to our journey, invoking all the gods of luck before joining them in the cabin.

\*

I looked out the small window but could see only blackness. Ten minutes before I'd been ready for bed, but now my mind was humming. Although this expedition was just a holiday, in reality much more was riding on it for me. Intuitive Beth knew it. This trip was not just about travel. Life's great excitement had begun to fade for me in London. I was a lowly coal-shoveller on a giant steamship drifting nowhere. As a contractor, I wasn't even a real employee. The money was good, but somehow it felt shameful. I was selling myself by the hour. I would cycle home from Canary Wharf every day, feeling empty. Five years before, in sunny Johannesburg, the future had been bright. Now it seemed grey as the London sky.

The journey was a way out for me. It was as much about going away as it was about not staying where I was. It served no purpose in itself – we weren't trying to feed hungry Uzbek children, or plant trees in Iran – but I speculated that maybe, by putting myself at the mercy of chance, something would change. It was a foolish hope, maybe, but I had to try. Who knew what could happen on the Silk Road?

## Chapter 2 – Hook of Holland to Skradin

In the early stages of the trip, I often wondered what Samarkand was really like. We'd been building the city up in our imaginations for nearly two years but all we'd seen were photographs. A photograph can't tell you how a place smells, or how hot the wind is on your face.

In an effort to familiarise myself with Samarkand before leaving London, I'd browsed bookshops and libraries for clues. Milton, Keats, Wilde, Poe, Marlowe, Arnold and Flecker have all written about the turquoise city. The Persian Hafiz evoked its charms in his renowned poetry. Omar Khayyam, astronomer, mathematician and poet of *Rubaiyat* fame, lived there for many years. And closer to home, Wole Soyinka published a collection entitled *Samarkand and other markets I have known*.

I made printouts or photocopies of everything I came across and stuffed them into a plastic sleeve, secreted away in our trip file among visa confirmations, letters of invitation and bookings.

One evening at campsite just outside Koblenz, I dug into my Samarkand stash for the first time since leaving home. We'd been making our way slowly down the Rhine from Rotterdam, mostly in the rain, which was starting to annoy me. I escaped from the weather in my tent, skimming through one of the photocopies. It was a few pages of Edgar Allan Poe's epic poem, *Tamerlane*, about Timur, the iron warlord of Central Asia and Persia in the late 1300s, who made the city his capital. I found a stanza that I liked and read it over a few times, trying to picture the city:

*Look 'round thee now on Samarcand!  
Is she not queen of Earth? Her pride  
Above all cities? In her hand  
Their destinies? In all beside  
Of glory which the world hath known  
Stands she not nobly and alone?*

(Poe, 1827)

It was kind of hard to visualise: a proud and noble city; the queen of earth. No closer to defining the vague peripheries of my half-imagined city, I stuffed the pages back into the sleeve and lay on my sleeping bag for a while as I waited for Matt to get on with dinner preparations.

\*

We ditched the Rhine sometime before Strasbourg and turned left, making for Heidelberg, and then Munich. Western Europe wasn't a focus for us so we contented ourselves gazing at rain-soaked river views and gothic cathedrals, all the while drinking kölsch. Munich was soon behind us, and

Austria flew past in a couple of hours. Slovakia was across the Iron Curtain, the barrier between Stettin and Trieste that had endured for half a century. This was where our journey really began. As I was resting in our stark communist-era hostel in Bratislava, I heard Nina shout from the parking area.

‘Elroy won’t start!’

I groaned quietly to myself before going outside to investigate, hoping I’d misheard. I turned the key in the ignition. No sound, not even the faintest hint of the engine turning over. Beth and Matt joined us. Nina opened the bonnet. We all stood around in the rain, looking despondently at the engine.

‘Looks fine,’ Beth ventured.

‘What does *not fine* look like?’ said Matt. ‘Does anyone know what to look for?’

Silence.

‘Should we check whether that receptionist knows anything about cars?’ Beth asked. She went inside to call Zoran, who’d signed us in the previous evening. He’d seemed friendly enough, and could speak some English. He joined us around the offending engine after donning a rain jacket.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Well it won’t start...’ said Beth

He hummed, staring into the engine.

‘It looks okay,’ he said.

He didn’t have a clue. We were going to need someone who knew more than nothing about engines.

‘Do you know the number of a mechanic?’ I asked.

He stroked his Lenin-beard thoughtfully. ‘Yes, I know someone. I make phone call.’

We followed him inside, glad to be out the rain.

‘Guys, also don’t forget kick-off is at three.’ I tried to slip it in.

‘Don’t you think a broken-down Elroy is more important than another stupid rugby game?’ said Beth.

‘Beth, I don’t think you understand.’ I tried to explain, ‘This is the *Lions Tour*. This is the *first test* of the Lions Tour. The only thing bigger than this is the *World Cup*.’

She sighed.

Matt and I had spent most of the previous day looking for a bar in Bratislava that would be screening the match. Not too many people in Slovakia even know what rugby is, so it had proved quite a challenge. At least we’d had the opportunity to walk the old town flat – we took a topsy-turvy route through alleyways, following each proprietor’s directions to another establishment that might show foreign sport. At our seventh, we struck it lucky. O’Leary’s Irish Bar would be showing

the rugby live on a big screen.

It was two o'clock before our mechanic arrived. He looked like Detective Columbo from the eighties TV series, wearing a green raincoat and carrying a little toolbox under his right arm. He addressed us in Slovakian. I shook my head apologetically and referred him to Zoran. The two spoke. It didn't look at all like they were discussing the problem at hand.

We all walked over to Elroy and the six of us stood around the bonnet in the rain. He fiddled and tinkered, pulled at various pipes with a practised hand. He signalled to Matt to turn the ignition. Still nothing.

He said something to Zoran, and we turned to him for the translation.

'I don't know the English word, but it makes battery charge.'

'The alternator?' Beth asked. She knew much more than the rest of us about this sort of thing.

'I think that is right, yes.'

'Well, can he fix it?'

Zoran spoke again at length to Columbo. Eventually he turned to us.

'Yes, he can fix, but not here. He must take car to his shop. It's not far. He bring big car and put it on back.'

'How much?'

Beth bargained him down to two hundred Euros (in addition to being our best mechanic, she was also our principal negotiator). That was our combined daily budget, which included accommodation, food, drinks, sightseeing and fuel. We didn't have a choice though.

Columbo drove off in his Lada to fetch the 'big car' and we moved out of the rain. Forty-five minutes till kick-off. We were never going to make it. He returned with a large pick-up truck.

Matt and I kept checking the time. Two thirty. Two forty-two. Two fifty-three.

'Oh for goodness sake, just go watch the stupid match,' said Beth, exasperated. 'We don't all need to be here. It's fine, Nina and I will sort this out.'

Matt smiled at her sheepishly. 'Are you sure that's okay?'

'Yes, damn it Matt, just go before we change our minds.'

Matt and I sprinted through the town in the drizzle, trying to remember which alleyway O'Leary's was on. The roads all looked the same. We found it after a few wrong turns, and burst through the door. It was hot and stuffy inside. A huge screen was showing the game with the sound at full blast. The bar was jam-packed. At least two stag parties were underway. A few spectators sported Springbok jerseys, but most wore the red of the British and Irish Lions. One supporter identified himself immediately as a South African: 'Come on you *moffie!*' he shouted at one of the players.

'Awesome, only five minutes in. Come on *Bokke!*' he shouted, before placing an order for vodka

shots and two pints of Guinness.

The game went well, and the red-jerseyed supporters were silenced as the Boks won easily. The only South Africans in Bratislava had become fast friends in the space of eighty minutes. We were buying rounds with a German-born South African on business, a Capetonian, Jay, who'd moved here after marrying a Slovakian, and a few others on a weekend trip from London. Our celebrations took us well past the final whistle.

'Matt, finish up,' I said. 'We really should go.'

He led the way out of O'Leary's and into the rain. We arrived back at the hostel, wet and woozy, to find Beth and Nina at the hostel bar. They were surrounded by empty glasses, deep in conversation.

'Nice of you guys to drop in to see how we are,' said Nina.

We stumbled through our apologies.

'Don't worry, we've sorted everything out,' she said. 'Elroy is fixed, but I don't think anyone's driving to Budapest tonight. We've just been discussing the ways you could repay us.'

Matt gave Nina a kiss on the cheek. She rolled her eyes.

\*

We arrived late in the afternoon. As expected, rain was our companion, but I'd begun to make peace with it. The engine was running well after Columbo's adjustments and we reached our guest house without incident. Janos greeted us enthusiastically at the gate, bringing us leftover Hungarian cake his wife had just baked. He saw Matt's guitar as we carried our things inside.

'Ah, you play, yes? I also have guitar. We must, how you say, jam?' He strummed an air guitar. Before Matt could answer, he continued. 'You can see my restaurant, next door?'

We nodded.

'Before, many years, it was my bar. It was best bar in Budapest.' He looked up into the sky, running his hands through his long black hair. 'Every night in my bar many people. We have a big party every night. It was very good. I have many drinks, every day. Then my wife tells me I drink too much beer. She tells me I am *alcoholic*. *Alcoholic!*' He slapped his hand hard on his thigh to stress the word.

'So no more bar. No beer, no vodka.' A wistful look. 'I closed bar. Now I have vegetarian restaurant.' He sighed. 'Anyway, it is good food here. Maybe it is not bar, but good food.'

We asked him where we should have dinner.

'I think you go down to the river. Good view of Budapest. Go to Vaci Utka street. It is good. Expensive maybe, but good. So anyway, I go now. Time to bath baby.'

Even rain can't diminish the splendour of Budapest. The bridges spanning the Danube are very grand. The parliament buildings look similar to their English counterparts. They were inspired by

Westminster, though no Big Ben here. At night the white walls and red roofs are lit up, their reflections glistening on the Danube. Looking back across the river from the parliament, you can see the Royal Castle, perched high on a hilltop. The Buda heights give the city a striking topography, and lit up at night the view from the river is spectacular. Then there are the trams. A complex network connects all the central districts. The yellow carriages have a communist-era look to them – square and mass-produced, but oddly appealing.

Vaci Utka was a heaving throng, even in the rain. We allowed ourselves to be hustled into a restaurant. The warning signs were all there. It doesn't matter which European city you visit, there are certain areas you should always avoid spending money. La Ramblas in Barcelona. Leicester Square in London. Anywhere with a good view of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. But the rain had by now soaked us through, dampening our desire to walk and intensifying our appetites. We chose a restaurant that appeared to cater to our budget, though when the bill came much later we were horrified.

Over dinner we discussed the plans for the next few days.

'We need to get out of this weather system. I reckon we head for Croatia as quickly as possible,' said Beth.

'Well there's no point in ignoring everything in between, just because of the rain,' said Matt.

I was inclined to agree with him. I couldn't believe that the weather was actually forcing us out of Europe. We'd only planned to stay in Budapest for one more day anyway. From there we'd cross the Croatian border, make for Zagreb and, soon after, reach the coast.

'Let's just stick to our plan,' I said. 'What do you think, Nina?'

But she wasn't listening. There was a group of guys standing at the bar. One was watching her – a smooth-looking fellow with a crisp white shirt. A drink arrived at our table for her. Some sort of fancy cocktail.

I looked at Matt. He was telling Beth about a new song he was writing: 'In Hoxton Hackney, Shoreditch and Aldgate/Live trendy hipsters who I really hate,' and was paying no attention to Nina. Before long we were four beers down, and Nina invited the guys at the bar to join us. They were locals. It was quite obvious to everyone that this was where they came to hook up with foreign girls. But at least they weren't pretending that they were here for anything else. Nina seemed quite taken with her amorous Hungarian, Piotr, who was regaling her with tales of Budapest under the Kremlin.

'My father was in Budapest during the uprising in '56. Many people were killed. Some were sent to Siberia. Some were executed. My father's uncle disappeared. No one knows what happened to him.'

'That must have been so hard for you,' Nina said, touching his hand.

‘Alright, keep your shirt on, Nina,’ said Matt, finally paying attention, ‘I don’t think he had such a hard time – he was still in nappies when the Berlin Wall fell.’

‘Well whatever kind of time he had, I’m sure it was tougher than your youth in Westcliff, with three maids and two gardeners,’ she said.

Matt glanced around looking for a diversion, sauntering across to the bar where a graceful, blonde woman in a short skirt was ordering for her friends with theatrical gestures. Beth and I continued our conversation with the Hungarians, who’d all pulled up chairs. One of them made a suggestion: ‘Unicum! It’s Hungary’s best drink.’

I called Matt over from where he was deep in conversation with the woman at the bar. He came back, bringing her and her friends with him. We placed an order for thirteen Unicums. We toasted Hungary, South Africa and France, where Elodie was from. You will never forget your first Unicum. It tastes like medicine and burns horribly. And, somehow, it also tastes Hungarian.

It was soon time to move on, and Piotr led the way, hand-in-hand with Nina. Three taxis ferried us to the bar he’d been punting – a multi-storey affair, with trendy features designed to get you lost. A few old Ladas had been painted in geometrical oranges and reds. A sawn-in-half bath, now a functionless cross-section of itself, rested near the bar. Old barrels with new coats of paint served as tables and smaller ones as chairs. It was packed, and we could hear a dance floor heaving somewhere in the labyrinth.

As midnight became two thirty, I’d spoken to Piotr and his friends about as much as language permitted. Beth’s hard sell of Cape Town as a travel destination was also drawing to a close. But Piotr had just about convinced Nina to hit the dance floor, and Matt now had Elodie and the other Frenchwomen captivated by a story about his business and how it taxes the rich to raise funds for charities. As we got up to leave, I saw him glance across the table at Nina, just in time to see Piotr lean in for a kiss. He spun back to his audience and returned to his story with renewed vigour.

They were all mesmerised by his ability to go on talking interminably in a manner that made it sound as though he was saving the world one orphan at a time. I knew how this story ended so I said goodbye and walked out of the club into the rain with Beth. We wanted to ride a tram back across the river, but they’d stopped running for the night, so we caught a taxi instead. We were soon back across the chain bridge and at Janos’ guest house.

‘I hope Nina will be okay,’ murmured Beth before drifting off to sleep.

\*

Janos’ guest house was a collection of small flats separated by an open courtyard. Ours had a kitchen and three bedrooms. When we woke in the morning, Matt and Nina weren’t there.

‘Let’s get some breakfast anyway,’ I said, grabbing my coat, ‘You give Nina a call; I’ll try to get hold of Matt.’

Matt picked up after one ring. He was at a guest house nearby having breakfast with Elodie, but said he was keen to leave as he was getting sick of French people. Beth couldn't get hold of Nina.

We met Matt at a restaurant near the river.

'You shouldn't have let her leave the club without you, Matt,' said Beth.

'She's not my responsibility,' he replied, annoyed at her tone. 'And anyway, she left before me.'

'Come on guys, Nina's a big girl, she can look after herself,' I said, trying to reassure myself. We ate breakfast in silence, unable to make any plans for the day while we fretted over her whereabouts. After an agonising hour, Beth received a call. It was an excited Nina, and I could hear her saying something about 'in the country'.

'Well come on, what is it?' said Matt after Beth had hung up.

'Piotr's family lives in Pecs, a small town near here. Tomorrow is Saturday, so he's invited us to join him there for a night. There's space for all of us to stay in their house!'

'Perfect!' I said. 'I think we're going that direction anyway.'

Matt was less impressed. 'Are we going to have to listen to more of Piotr's stories about how he nearly fought in the 1956 uprising?'

\*

Driving through the Hungarian countryside, we stopped just outside Budapest at Memento Park, an open-air museum of statues and icons from the Soviet period. It commemorates Hungary's communist years – 1949 to 1989 – and includes likenesses of Lenin, Marx, Engels and others. Many of the statues once stood in Budapest, but after the fall of the Berlin Wall were removed and brought here. One piece is a giant set of shoes perched on a wall. It commemorates the revolution, when Hungarians had heaved Stalin's statue to the ground, leaving only his boots on their pedestal. The museum was the first communist one we'd been to, and it introduced a theme for them all: Lenin is untouchable. Marx is sacred. Khrushchev, Breshnev, Andropov and Kalinin are all fine. But not Stalin. He remains an evil figure for almost everyone across the ex-Soviet world, with one rather odd exception, though we would only discover that much further into our trip. Trotsky is nowhere to be found, as though he'd never existed. The merest mention of his name often sends a museum guard into fits of rage. The Soviets had airbrushed him from history, and any reference to him was as the most evil man the world had ever seen.

We spent a pleasant evening with Piotr's family in the small town, where we tried our best to communicate with his parents through his translation. He quickly bored of the responsibility though, being far more interested in Nina. He went to great lengths to lure her out of the general melee. But it was obvious to everyone except Piotr that she'd lost interest. He was much too young, she told us, plus his English was pitiable.

'Bad lover,' Matt whispered to me on the sly.

‘Why should you care?’ I asked. He ignored the question. ‘And anyway, what’s up with Elodie? She was nice.’

‘Yeah nice and boring, man,’ said Matt, ‘I couldn’t coax a single opinion out of her. Plus her friends were bloody rude. I was glad you gave me an excuse to leave before breakfast dragged on too long.’

\*

The moment we crossed the border into rural Croatia, we began encountering buildings riddled with bullet-holes. At first I couldn’t believe it – the war had ended fourteen years earlier, and I’d thought that most of the fighting had been further east. But the war and destruction that swallowed Yugoslavia in the nineties appeared to have been inescapable. Everyone was affected, including, it appears, farmers minding their own business near the Hungarian border.

We made for a campsite just outside Croatia’s capital, Zagreb. It took hours to find and turned out to be dirty and dangerous. A few other campers came over to warn us – they’d had three thousand Euros and their passports stolen. We couldn’t leave anything unattended. Standing guard over our tents in the rain while the others went off to buy some food for the evening, I noticed a car of likely suspects. They didn’t appear to be looking for a place to camp, nor did they have any gear. They circled the area a few times and glared at me as I stood there, trying to look as big as I could. I thought for a moment that they might just steal our stuff anyway after knocking me down, or knifing me.

It seemed like a very long time before the others returned, and in the meantime I’d become a feast for a cruel and persistent plague of mosquitoes. Itchy, wet and cold, I’d had enough. We decided to build a fire anyway, despite the drizzle, because at least we’d be warm. Matt optimistically took out the four chairs, and his guitar. He started plucking away and singing, Louis Armstrong-like:

Zagreb blues, I got the Zagreb blues.

Please bring me good news, not Zagreb blues.

Rain all day and rain all night;

A scourge of mozzies; a terrible plight

Zagreb blues I got the Zagreb blues.

Please bring me good news, not Zagreb blues.

It had been raining for three solid weeks.

\*

We spent the day in Zagreb before heading for the coast. We’d stumbled into the capital on

Independence Day. The Croatians take the celebration very seriously. The Republic of Croatia only split from Yugoslavia in 1991. Croatian flags flew out of every window and were draped over every wall in Zagreb. All manner of uniformed cohorts marched to the central square for speech time.

The next day, on our way down a tortuous pass that cut through the mountains, we took in our first view of the Dalmatian coastline. Zadar lay nestled in the bay. From above, we saw red roofs and green trees. Surrounded by water on three sides, it's a lazy maritime town of fishing boats and an aging population. The masts of a hundred yachts told of the relative prosperity of the town's inhabitants, or at least of its visitors.

We'd booked a yacht trip on the Adriatic from Zadar as a bit of a break from driving. After finding safe long-term parking for Elroy, we met up with Andro, our skipper, who was a student. His bristling moustache already had grey patches, and I wondered how long he'd been enrolled at university, if at all. We never found out, as he kept to himself. We spent the night on our small yacht and set sail early the next morning. The cabins were musty and the whole vessel smelled like those rarely-cleaned ablution blocks at caravan-parks. We carried our mattresses upstairs and only went below deck when absolutely necessary.

The Dalmatian coast is made up of 1185 islands, islets and reefs and is so vast that you can sail in certain areas and not see another vessel for days. Especially near Zadar, it is a labyrinth of small and unpopulated islands, which made it difficult to keep track of direction and time. Where possible, we dined at small restaurants on populated islands, and where not, Andro cooked simple Croatian food for us. We plotted a course south, and Andro's plan was to sail in a loop back up to Zadar.

Three days into the voyage we passed Sjibenik, an inland town on the Krka River. We'd made good time so Andro suggested we continue upriver and head for the sleepy village of Skradin. After half a day's sailing, we spent the night docked at the quay. Andro wanted some quiet time, so sent us into the village for the evening.

Dinner was a low key affair near the docks, but Matt started to ramp it up dangerously even before mains had come. He kept topping us all up with the *rakija* he'd bought in Zadar. It was fiery and burned more with each sip. Matt seemed to be enjoying it though. Soon he ordered another bottle from the woman who'd been serving us 'small fish fried' the whole night. She wasn't interested in our juvenile revelry, and as the restaurant emptied, she began putting chairs on the tables to make sure we knew they were closing. By that point we were working hard on our second bottle of the Croatian brew. Matt and I decided that we wouldn't leave the restaurant until we'd finished every last drop of it. Beth and Nina showed their disdain for this idea.

'We'll see you two boys back at the boat,' said Beth. 'Enjoy your *rakija*.'

Matt poured me another glass of the fiery liquor. 'To Croatia!' we toasted, in the manner we'd

seen locals doing it. ‘To Andro!’ Another. ‘To our families!’ Soon we’d emptied the bottle. The restaurant was deserted, and the proprietor began to sweep the floor right underneath our feet.

Matt stood up rather unsteadily. We staggered out the restaurant towards the quay. Yachts lined the piers along the waterfront. Matt knocked optimistically at the locked door of another tavern. Then we saw the flags.

Four flagpoles stood in front of the harbour house. There was not a breath of wind. How great would one of those flags look flying proudly on top of our mast as we sailed back to Zadar?

All we had to do was untie the knot at the base of the pole, let the flag down, and steal away to our boat. Finally managing to undo the knot, I tugged on the rope and it fell silently to the ground. The flag landed in my hand, the Croatian flag, we noticed for the first time as we laid it out on the ground. But before we could start congratulating ourselves, a rough hand grabbed my shoulder.

*‘Dodite se mnom. Come with me.’*

It was the harbour master – we recognised him from earlier when we’d had to sign in the boat. He grabbed our arms and pulled us into the harbour house. Before long the office was swarming with policemen. The constable couldn’t speak much English. He was making phone calls from the harbour master’s desk, which he had appropriated to preside over our crime; that of attempting to steal a flag.

‘There is big problem for you. Big problem.’

The constable stood up importantly and signalled to one of his men to bring us over. The man grabbed our arms roughly and frogmarched us the two metres to the desk.

‘We take your passports.’

‘Please explain to us why you’re taking our passports?’ I asked him desperately.

‘You steal flag, yes?’

‘Well we tried to, but didn’t manage!’

‘That is Croatian flag, yes?’

‘Yes?’

‘Then you make the treason.’

Treason was a word reserved for Americans who’d gone over to the KGB. For revolutionaries in a police state. But on the sunny Dalmatian coast? I didn’t understand. Then I twigged. Croatia is a brand new country. Many men died so that the Croatian flag could fly proudly in small towns like Skradin. Couldn’t you get into trouble for disrespecting flags in places like the US? And wouldn’t a country like Croatia be touchier than most about theirs?

‘Our passports are in the yacht, sir, you can come with us to collect them,’ I said. ‘How will we get them back?’

‘Tomorrow you go to Sjibenik, to courthouse. They will have it there. You have trial, maybe next

week.’

They escorted us roughly to the yacht where Beth and Nina were sound asleep. We’d deal with explanations tomorrow. I retrieved my passport from the safe, as did Matt. But they shook their heads. They only wanted mine. Because I’d been the one pulling down the flag. Matt stood firm with me, though, and handed over his passport as well.

\*

I woke with a start, and a pounding headache. We filled a two-litre bottle with cold water, washed our faces, brushed our teeth and tried our best to look respectable. I scribbled a quick note for Beth:

‘We’ve run into a spot of bother with the law. Nothing serious, we just have to pop into the police station in Sjibenik – stay in town and we’ll come find you later.’

Sjibenik is a thirty-minute drive from Skradin. It’s not on a bus route. We would have to hitch, since Elroy was still parked up the coast in Zadar. We didn’t say a word to each other. Matt must have been wishing he hadn’t handed over his passport. I was wishing he hadn’t ordered that second bottle of *rakija*. How would we find our way to the courthouse? Almost no one in Croatia spoke English. Would our passports even be waiting there? Eventually a truck pulled over and we jumped in gratefully.

‘*Dobri dan*. Good day,’ I said. We had brought a phrasebook with us. It might make the difference between success and failure. ‘*Hvala*. Thank you.’

Using the phrasebook, which miraculously had the word for courthouse in it, we made our way towards the centre of town. We walked up to the large stone building where we’d been directed. Just inside, we bumped into a smartly dressed man. His dark hair was pressed tightly in place and he regarded us inquisitively. Clearly we didn’t fit in. ‘Can I be of assistance?’ His English was impeccable.

Matt and I explained our plight, glad to be able to tell someone who understood. ‘This is extremely serious,’ he said. ‘You are in big trouble. Without any help, you are going to have great difficulty. You will not know what to do or who to speak to. You are not even in the correct courthouse.’

‘My name is Franjo,’ he continued, after a long pause. ‘I have just heard that my murder case was postponed. I will try to help you today, because without me, you will struggle to get your passports back, and you might even go to jail.’

Jail? My stomach lurched at the thought.

‘We don’t have much money’, we told him.

‘That is okay, you do not need to pay me’.

‘*Hvala*,’ we thanked him.

This courthouse was less impressive than the first – a small collection of offices that looked more

like a motel than a centre of law. Franjo made some enquiries and came back with a grim face.

‘It is as you have said. You are to be put on trial for treason. Stealing a flag is a very serious crime here in Croatia. You are set for trial next week.’

‘But we are leaving Croatia in a few days’ time,’ I pleaded. ‘Our visas expire soon.’

After a long pause he said, ‘I know the judge. It is not usual for me to do this, but I can ask him to move the trial forward, because I know that you meant no harm. I don’t want you to have a bad experience in my beautiful country.’

He disappeared again. Matt and I hadn’t spoken much. Franjo was gone for nearly an hour. He returned with a smile on his face.

‘Come, let’s go,’ he said, beaming.

‘But what about the trial, what about our passports?’ I said.

‘I will explain to you over lunch’.

He took us to a small corner café with a view of the ocean. I wasn’t very hungry though.

‘I have spoken to the judge, who is a friend of mine. I have convinced him that your crime was one of foolishness, rather than malice.’ His English was flawless.

‘He understands that you are just travellers and were looking for a bit of fun. He has agreed to hold your trial this afternoon. The outcome might be favourable.’

We thanked him in as many different ways as we knew how, offering to pay for the lunch, but he would have nothing of it. Why was he doing this, I asked myself? What was in it for him? Nothing, as far as I could see. He should be preparing for his murder case, but instead was taking two foolish kids to lunch and calling in favours from a judge.

He prepared us for the case over calamari. We needed no further cautioning as to how serious the matter was, and that, under no circumstances, should we appear unrepentant or hot-headed.

Two o’clock drew near. My shirt was almost completely wet from sweat. Matt didn’t smell too good. At least it wasn’t raining, I thought to myself.

We walked into the courtroom. On a dais in the centre of the wood-panelled room sat the judge, wearing a red cloak. A guard showed us to our seats, on a bench on the left of the room. Behind us a stenographer was already typing away furiously.

Franjo came in and sat on another bench on the right side of the room.

‘Please state your names for the court,’ said the judge, his voice reverberating around the tiny room. His English, too, was excellent.

‘Matt Schneider.’

‘Brian Tait.’

‘Thank you. Now I will explain to you what your options are. Either you can plead guilty to public misconduct, or not guilty to treason. If you plead not guilty, then we will have a full trial, and

you must know that if you lose, you may go to prison. On the other hand, if you plead guilty to public misconduct, you will be fined, and we will give you back your passports, and you may continue to see our lovely country.'

He and Franjo conferred in Croatian and laughed at us a few times. I was sure I would do the same in their position. Then he changed the subject.

'Did you know that I fought in the war?' the judge asked us.

I shook my head.

'I will tell you a story about it. It is how I know that my life is special. One day, I was on patrol near Vukovar. We were under fire from shells and it was very dangerous. Suddenly a shell landed right between us. There were six of us on the patrol.'

He gazed out of the window, apparently forgetting about us entirely.

'Every other man on that patrol was killed instantly,' he said softly. 'But not me. I was not touched. The shell exploded right near me, and it killed everyone except for me. All that was wrong with me was that my ears were ringing. From then, I knew that my life was special.'

He sat there silently for a while before proceeding. He explained that he understood our situation, and that it was unfortunate that it had got to this point, because in his opinion, the police should just have cautioned us and sent us to bed. But in Croatia, once process is started, it must be followed, he said, and these policemen had decided that they'd caught us in the act of treason.

'Brian Tait, on the charge of public misconduct, how do you plead?' the judge boomed in his official voice.

'Guilty.' It's not a word I ever thought I would say in a courtroom.

The same process was followed for Matt.

'You are each fined two hundred Euros,' he passed the sentence.

We sighed in relief. Two hundred Euros was four days' budget each, but a small price to pay with the prospect of Croatian jail looming. The stenographer finally stopped typing.

We thanked the judge earnestly, and the stenographer, and the guard, and Franjo and made our way to the office where we had to pay our fines.

In a final act of kindness, Franjo offered to drive us all the way to our small village. It had been a strange and lucky day, given the circumstances. Back in Skradin, we felt that a drink or two with our liberator was in order.

But not *rakija*, of course.

### Chapter 3 – Dubrovnik to Belgrade

Our northbound course back to Zadar slipped away in stony silence. Andro wanted as little to do with us as possible after the incident. I didn't blame him. He maintained the minimum level of interaction, employing grunts and gestures when he had no choice but to ask for our help with the sails.

We docked in Zadar, tipping Andro for putting up with us. Matt picked up Elroy from its parking garage and brought it across to the port where we packed up and strapped in all our belongings. It was good to be on the road again, and we made for Split without wasting time.

Split was only a little further south, even on the snaking coastal road, we arrived as the sun began to set over the Dalmatian islands just beyond. Split was the centre of the Roman Empire during the reign of Diocletian. The emperor had a palace built right on the waterfront, spending more time there than in Rome. But it was neither the history nor the splendour of the palace that made it so fascinating, though these still seemed like good reasons to visit: it is a living museum. Over time, the palace's rooms, corridors and balconies have been co-opted as homes or shops or restaurants. The stone edifices have been altered or augmented, but in a way that seemed to add to their authenticity. Walking through the streets, we stumbled on restaurants in the palace's tiny recesses, or shops under stairways. It felt as though we were walking through a real-life Roman city. It was impossible to maintain a sense of direction in the maze-like corridors and alleyways, and we wandered through the streets for hours before eventually stopping at a likely-looking seafood bistro for dinner.

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We disembarked from the Brac ferry, driving Elroy onto the island. No one knows quite what it was that precipitated the argument. Superficially, it concerned the route. Matt was driving and had taken a coastal road that wound past bay after pristine bay. I'd thought there was an inland road that would've taken fifteen minutes. Of course it really didn't matter which road we took, but for some reason the casual disagreement became a quarrel. Nina took Matt's side and although Beth tried to stay out of it, she was also eventually drawn into the melee. The escalation was rapid: 'Of course there's an inland road, you idiot!', 'You always think you're right!' and finally, 'I hate travelling with you.'

That last comment silenced us. It was hard even to know who'd said it, but I think we all meant it at the time. Somehow in the short space of twenty minutes, we'd gone from cheerful fellow travellers to brooding enemies. I was embarrassed that I'd started such a ridiculous argument: what did it matter which route we took? I think everyone was surprised at how quickly it had escalated. I was annoyed because Nina always sided with Matt, regardless of the situation. Then I became

annoyed with myself for such a juvenile reflection. Beth buried herself in her Kerouac book. Matt turned up the music and hummed along. I looked at Nina. She was just staring out the window. It was still a very long way to Samarkand. I decided to withdraw as well, pulling out my Silk Road flip file from its home in the side of the door.

In my pursuit of all things Samarkand, I'd come across Christopher Marlowe's play *Tamburlaine*, his largely fictional perspective on Timur. It's a seminal work, marking a turning point in English dramatic history – away from slapstick farce towards more elegant and imaginative plot lines. Marlowe was in some ways responsible for arousing the English-speaking world's appetite for stories from the Orient. He was an 'armchair Orientalist' in that he didn't actually visit any of the places he described so evocatively in *Tamburlaine*. Given the practical difficulties of his times, he can be forgiven for that.

I tried to read the whole play, but in the end it was probably a bit *too* elegant for my unrefined tastes, and my attention shifted. Before putting it aside, I copied one of the Samarkand sections and stuck it into my folder:

*Then shall my native city Samarcanda,  
And crystal waves of fresh Jaertis' stream,  
The pride and beauty of her princely seat,  
Be famous through the furthest continents;  
For there my palace royal shall be plac'd,  
Whose shining turrets shall dismay the heavens,  
And cast the fame of Ilion's tower to hell:  
Through the streets, with troops of conquer'd kings,  
I'll ride in golden armour like the sun;  
And in my helm a triple plume shall spring,  
Spangled with diamonds, dancing in the air,  
To note me emperor of the three-fold world;*

(Marlowe, 1590)

From my cocoon in the driver's seat (everyone having taken great pains to ignore each other), I brooded over these images. Shining turrets, golden armour, crystal waves. They didn't correspond very well with the photos I'd seen on the Internet. I'd have to be patient. We were months from Samarkand still.

\*

In Povlja, a small town on Brac, we took some time out to cool off. We'd rented a small villa from

Milenka, whose father lived nearby. He looked after the place and sold visitors his home-made goods. He couldn't speak English, but that didn't stop him from conversing with Matt. Every evening after dinner, Milenka's dad would join us on the balcony, bringing bottles of olives and home-brewed *rakija* to settle in for the night. It baffled me what the two of them spoke about, Matt in English and Milenka's dad in Croatian. But they seemed to understand each other perfectly, conducting drawn out conversations about life in Povelja, the war and his daughter Milenka who lived in London and who'd bought the house. Nina and Beth also tried to participate, but, like me, couldn't get close to grasping what they were talking about. Matt had a knack for communication. I think he could understand what people were saying just by looking at their faces.

I spent those warm evenings mostly in silence, surveying the becalmed inlet on which Povelja slumbered. Beth kept to herself as well, taking photos, writing in her diary or reading.

The locals must live long and stress-free lives in Povelja. There were a few shops along the seafront, but other than that, commerce was slow. The islanders concerned themselves mostly with fishing or making olive oil. The cost of living wasn't very high, and the islanders traded with each other to ensure they had provisions. Milenka's dad was content with his lot, making olive oil and walnut *rakija* for the guests. He also had access to a speedboat, which he used to ferry us to his entrepreneurial contacts on other parts of the island. There were hundreds of inlets and coves, each with their own tiny village and beach. Villas, churches and monasteries lined the shore, all built in quintessential Croatian colours: white walls and red roofs.

When it was time to leave, Matt and I purchased a few two-litre Coke bottles of *rakija* from Milenka's dad and Beth bought some olive oil. We packed Elroy and drove towards the south end of Brac, where another ferry awaited us. No one mentioned anything about which route to take.

\*

Croatia's matchless gem is a city surrounded by high white stone walls on a small peninsula jutting out into the Adriatic. Entering through colossal gates, the main road runs straight into the heart of town. The avenues are paved with brilliant marble, smooth to the touch from hundreds of years of pedestrian polishing. Bustling restaurants line the roads, with patrons spilling out onto the pavements.

This is Dubrovnik, a great medieval city-state that once rivalled Venice and Genoa. Conformity of architecture and colour can often be tiresome, but in Dubrovnik it is exquisite. The walls of every building have a light-stone colour, and all the roofs are tiled in the same burnt red. Although it's hard to find an uninspiring view anywhere in the city, the perspective from the walls above are the most compelling. The whole city is surrounded by ramparts, up to six metres thick in places. You can walk the full perimeter of Dubrovnik, passing battlements and guard houses. From the sea-facing portions, a vertiginous drop – first wall, then cliff – ends in the deep blue of the Adriatic. I

could hear the sounds of people walking the streets from within a sea of red roofs that stretched from wall to wall.

We descended back to street level further along after seeing a cafe outside the walls, perched on the cliff top. It was a shrewd location for a restaurant, reflected in their prices, but it was impossible to forego the opportunity to sip a few cocktails while looking towards the forested island of Lokrum and its Benedictine abbey. We spent most of the afternoon there after finding a spot on the rocks just outside the restaurant periphery where we could laze with beers and jump off the cliff into the sea below. It was about a ten-metre drop, and the climb back up wasn't too arduous, though I imagine it was a different proposition if you were a medieval soldier attacking the city and defenders were hurling rocks and spears at you from the walls above.

\*

'Dubrovnik is full of sadness,' said the owner of the apartment we'd rented as he drove us down to the beach the following day. 'You can see many places where the shells hit the road. There. And there.'

He pointed out some darker areas where new tar covered the shell damage. 'Everyone is different before and after war with Serbia. Before, we have peaceful time. Then war brought sad things to our life. Three of my friends died in the bombing. Two other friends lost a leg and arm. Before war we went to the beach often for fun. Now we go one time every week to respect our friends who died or who cannot walk.'

'What about the old town; did it get bombed?' Nina asked.

'Ah, old town, old town,' he said, shaking his head. 'Serbians, they know where to hit us here.' He tapped his hand on his chest. 'They aim direct for old town because they know we love our city Dubrovnik. There is not strategic reason to bomb Dubrovnik. Few people, no factory, but they bomb anyway. When Tito was president he made declaration that we must remove anything from Dubrovnik that will make an enemy bomb it. That is how special it is. But the Serbians bomb anyway.'

'Shells hit many buildings there. You will not see now, because it was the first thing Croatian government fix. Fix roofs, fix roads, fix old buildings. We try to fix everything so that we can forget the war. But you cannot fix dead people, or fix arms and legs that were blown off.'

He was silent for a while, then cleared his throat loudly as he turned his head away.

'Anyway, here is beach,' he said brusquely. 'You give me text message and I come fetch you. Enjoy.'

\*

None of us knew anyone who'd been to Bosnia. Sure, we'd read about it, but it was off the beaten track. Off the *Busabout* routes of Europe. Away from the glittering Mediterranean ports. And right

in the heart of a land which had weathered a recent and savage violence and appalled the world.

Mostar, which means ‘bridge town’, straddles the Neretva River about a hundred kilometres inland from Dubrovnik. Matt was driving as we wended our way through the alleys trying to find the hostel we’d reserved. There aren’t any main roads in Mostar. It was silent inside Elroy as we stared around the town in disbelief. Everywhere we looked were ruined buildings, bullet-ridden walls or shell holes. It was difficult to believe that some of the buildings were still standing – they were more bullet hole than wall.

‘What the fuck happened here,’ said Matt, more to himself than anyone. ‘It’s fifteen years later! Imagine what this place looked like straight afterwards. It must have been Armageddon.’

As we neared the *stari grad* (old town), we saw a small sign in Bosnian with an English translation below. ‘Never forget’ warned the inscription. But you couldn’t look any direction in Mostar without being reminded of war.

The conflict that engulfed Yugoslavia in the nineties is hard to understand. We’d all read a lot about it recently. But the more time we spent in Bosnia the more we realised that we’d never fully comprehend. The resentment goes back to well before the nineties, even to before the twentieth century. Certainly feelings were hardened during World War Two, when Balkan nations fought on different sides after Yugoslavia was occupied by the Axis powers. The Croats had been quick to adopt Nazism, and their ultra-right wing movement, the notorious Ustase, organised the mass killing of Serbs. The Serbs chose to fight Hitler, and various factions arose – the most prominent of which were the Chetniks, under Mihailovic, and the Communist partisans, under Tito. Although the Balkan nations are no stranger to internecine violence, World War Two proved a fertile environment for brutality. During the war thousands of Serbs were massacred, and on the collapse of Nazism a few years later, revenge was swift and terrible. The Croatian army, along with thousands of civilians, tried to surrender to the Americans and British in Austria, rather than the Chetniks and Communists whom they’d been persecuting. But they were sent back from the border, with predictable results. The Serbians put them on ‘death marches’ – columns of civilians and soldiers alike were force marched to nowhere, without food or water, until they perished.

For the ensuing years, Yugoslavia was held together relatively successfully as a communist state by Tito, but the memories of World War Two festered in Croat, Serb, Slovene and Bosniak, in Muslim and Christian alike.

Everything changed with the collapse of Communism in 1989. The whole region was quickly plunged into a violent and complex war after Yugoslavia’s constituent nations respectively declared independence from Belgrade.

In Mostar, the war had taken a bizarre form. The south side of the River Neretva was mainly Muslim, or Bosniak, and the north side mainly Christian and Croat. Sometime soon after

independence, the two sides of the town declared war on each other. The bridge over Neretva Gorge was destroyed and chaos descended upon Mostar. But enemies became reluctant allies as the city was attacked by the Bosnian Serbs.

Over a period of three years the town was almost completely destroyed. Today, the bridge has been rebuilt and some of the mosques restored, but the scars of war will run through Mostar for many years to come. While its neighbours Croatia and Serbia have been able to rebuild their economies relatively quickly, Bosnia was so badly ruined, in spirit and materially, that no one appeared to have the heart or the pockets to rebuild towns like Mostar.

There were very few tourists in the area. Normally this is a good thing, but for the sake of the Bosnians we wished there were more. It doesn't have the romantic appeal that Croatia does, with its majestic medieval cities and scenic Dalmatian coastline. It seems as though Bosnia is looking to adventure sports to put it on the tourist map – there are a few ski resorts and some swift rivers for rafting, but throngs of visitors are a long way off.

Later in the afternoon we walked across the Stari Most for the first time. It was obvious why the town took its name from the bridge, which was rebuilt soon after the war ended. A high arch of white stone spans the river from cliff to cliff. The water is bright blue and a backdrop of mosques and minarets make it a picture-postcard image for Bosnia if you narrow your viewing perspective to exclude the buildings shattered by war.

We'd already heard that the locals jumped off the bridge into the freezing water as entertainment for tourists after collecting enough cash to make it worth their while. We discovered that for the princely sum of thirty Euros, foreigners can also take the plunge.

I walked nervously into the office on the north side of the bridge where the local jumpers appeared to be congregating and I waved to an earnest-looking man sitting at a desk in his wetsuit.

'You have jump high cliff before?' he asked, after regarding me thoughtfully.

'Kind of,' I said, 'but nothing this high.'

He looked me up and down before sighing.

'Okay it is fine, you can jump, but you must listen very carefully. I will show you. This is not a ten-metre jump. This is high. Twenty-three metres. If you make a mistake, you'll hurt yourself.'

He handed me a wetsuit from the cupboard.

'For cold and also to protect your skin from hitting the water,' he explained, pointing to his shins and thighs.

I was getting nervous.

He took me through a short lesson on how to jump off the Stari Most. It seemed that the most important thing was to lean unreasonably far forward as you jump, holding both hands up in a kind of twin *heil Hitler*. Then just before landing you pull in and straighten like a pin. The rationale was

that it was easier to keep your balance if you were leaning forward. Normally when I did this sort of thing I just leapt off stiffened, arms at my sides. But he explained to me why this is inadvisable on the Stari Most:

‘You see – if you jump like a pin at beginning, you will not balance yourself when you fall. Then what will happen? You go flat.’ He showed me what he meant with his hand, holding it first upright, then bringing it down leaning backwards more and more until it was almost horizontal.

‘One tourist we have here, he did not listen to me. He landed on his back in the water. We need ambulance to take him out.’

The one thing he didn’t have to tell me was that the longer I stood there gazing down at the depths below, the less likely I’d be to jump. I told myself that once I’d climbed the railing, I’d look down only once and jump immediately.

Beth would be in the gorge below to catch the whole episode on camera, and Matt would take a snap from the top, so at least I’d have some evidence of the foolish exploit. A small crowd had gathered outside. I walked slowly along the bridge to its highest point in the middle. My hands were shaking uncontrollably. I climbed over the black metal railing and stood on the edge, looking down for an instant at the hungry river. It was a long way down. The spectators started a countdown.

‘Three ... two ... one!’

There was nothing for it. Clearing my brain of its objections, I leapt off the Stari Most into thin air. My heart lurched and adrenaline pulsed through my body. I forced myself to keep my arms out ahead of me, leaning unnaturally forward. The river was approaching quickly and I soon had to straighten and pull in my limbs for fear of smashing them on the water. But I was still falling. Too soon! My body started leaning forward again, just as I hit the water with an almighty crash.

Ice cold. Deep. Panicked, I tried to work out which way was up. I’d gone very deep, but I was soon able to fight my way to the top. Wide-eyed and terrified I felt for my limbs. Everything was still there, still working. Now I had to get back to shore before being swept away. I put my head down and swam hard for the closest edge. As I neared the river bank my instructor grabbed my arm and yanked me out.

‘Good, yes, very good!’ he said. The spectators were clapping. ‘You fall forward a bit at the end, but mostly you jump good. Very calm.’

My body was in shock. If I looked calm I felt anything but. As I peeled off my wetsuit I felt a pain in my shins. They were bright red. I had burst hundreds of tiny blood vessels.

Back on the bridge, I signed the book. They’d been keeping a log of jumpers since the bridge was rebuilt in 1996. I signed my name in space 292. Fewer than three hundred people had jumped in thirteen years. When I wrote my address down the instructor looked at me excitedly.

‘You are first from South Africa.’

\*

We were booked into a guest house in Sarajevo called Rose. In Sarajevo, the word rose has non-floral connotations. Many of the scars on the roads of the ill-fated capital of Bosnia have been filled with a red resin, leaving floral-like shapes in the asphalt as a grim reminder of war. I wondered whether our proprietor had meant her guests to make this connection. It seemed a bit macabre.

The siege of Sarajevo was the longest of a capital in the history of modern warfare. From April 1992 to February 1996 it was blockaded by the Republika Srpska (Bosnian Serb) army, its inhabitants mercilessly shelled and machine-gunned. For nearly four years, the largely Muslim population was made to scurry around like rats in their city as the roar of explosions and the sound of snipers' gunfire rang through the empty streets. They had no access to clean water, fresh food or proper medical supplies.

Four years is the tenure of single-term US presidents. Four years is the time between Rugby World Cups. It is a long time.

In the aftermath of the war, when many Serb generals were on trial for crimes against humanity, this was the opening statement for the prosecution against one of the key perpetrators:

The siege of Sarajevo, as it came to be popularly known, was an episode of such notoriety in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia that one must go back to World War Two to find a parallel in European history. Not since then had a professional army conducted a campaign of unrelenting violence against the inhabitants of a European city so as to reduce them to a state of medieval deprivation in which they were in constant fear of death. In the period covered in this indictment, there was nowhere safe for a Sarajevan, not at home, at school, in a hospital, from deliberate attack.

That night we cooked our own dinner outside on the gas cooker, with a view of the city. We were high up on the outskirts of town. I couldn't help thinking what an easy place it must have been to besiege. Sarajevo is surrounded on three sides by hills. All an enemy needed to do was control the exit road on the western side – the unelevated side – and set up artillery positions at a few key points on the surrounding mountains. What was more difficult to understand was why the Bosnian Serbs had besieged it for four years without overrunning it. In most sieges, the goal is to win the city.

But I don't think that the Republika Srpska army actually wanted to take Sarajevo. They wanted to put the Bosniaks through as much misery as possible. The local population was starving and for the most part unarmed, and so could surely not have put up much resistance if the Serbs had come marching in. I sat back in my camping chair, wondering if a general had once stood nearby, barking

orders at his men to keep shooting at the rats in the city below.

The following day we spent some time walking around Sarajevo. Everywhere women wore the hejab, and Beth and Nina were advised to cover their shoulders. We walked along the river's edge. It was spanned every few hundred metres by arched stone bridges, giving it a Roman feel. We were looking for a significant location, just on the north side of the Latin Bridge. There was a plaque there to mark the spot: 'From this place on 28 June 1914 Gavrilo Princip assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sofia.' A shot had rung through the streets of Sarajevo that day, and the world was plunged into war, a war which until then was the most terrible in history.

From the river we walked up through to the bazaar and past a few mosques. The damage from the war was still obvious here, though not nearly as much as in Mostar. Despite the odd ruin, it was an attractive city that felt as though it would be more at home in the Middle East. Some of the guidebooks claimed that Sarajevo is where East meets West. We laughed because Sarajevo had some competition in this department – Istanbul, Tbilisi, Yerevan, St Petersburg – all of them staking a claim to this title, or at least according to the guidebooks.

We passed a few more sombre Sarajevo roses in the streets as we made our way back up to the guest house. The roses weren't easy to spot at first, mere stains on the pavements, but once we knew what to look for, they were hard to miss. Some estimate that at the height of the siege, an average of 329 shells hit Sarajevo each day.

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We were soon travelling east again, heading deep into Bosnian Serb territory. From there, we'd cross the border into Serbia itself. I was slightly apprehensive about what we were going to find. Serbia isn't viewed too favourably by much of the world. Certainly my impression of their army is that they're a bloodthirsty bunch of imperialists who would love nothing more than to conquer the other Balkan nations. How did they come to be viewed like this? One theory I'd read was that Serbia had been a battlefield between the Austro-Hungarians and the Ottomans for hundreds of years. East met West on the Serbian plains, staining the ground with the blood of Christians and Muslims as they pitted their wills against each other. Caught in between, the Serbians themselves were subservient, depending on who held their land at the time. They were a fiercely nationalistic people, who yearned for independence and empire just like the lords who had held sway over them for so many years. This was a simplistic view though, and things were no doubt much more complicated. Even after the war with Bosnia, for which the Serbians were widely condemned, many seem relatively unrepentant if you ask them off the record, as though the Bosniaks had deserved it.

Beth was driving. We weren't sure how long it would take us to get to the Bosnian-Serb border and what to expect from it. Borders between enemy states open and close like a cat flap blowing in

the wind. One day you can get through without delay, the next you face the prospect of taking the long road through a third country. As it happened, relations between the two countries must have been warming, because the visa had been relatively straightforward to obtain in Sarajevo.

There'd been no obvious route to take when looking at the map. The few snaking roads that intersected the area looked more like the Nile River delta than a road network.

The northern highlands of Bosnia were green and precipitous. Our road wound deeper into the mountains, becoming less serviceable as we went. The most notorious mass execution of the war had taken place not too far from where we were driving: Srebrenica. In July 1995, under the command of General Ratko Mladic, over eight thousand Bosniaks, mostly men and boys, had been rounded up and executed just north of the town of Srebrenica. It was not an impromptu execution. It had been carefully planned and orchestrated by the Bosnian-Serb military under Mladic's command, with the assistance of the Serbian armed forces and, it is alleged, the Greek Volunteer Guard, which still shames the Greek government to this day.

Our road began to deteriorate. It was untarred, and we'd started to come across some rather odd tunnels that must have been built by the world's worst engineers. They barely reached daylight on the other side, and no care for aesthetics had been taken. They were cavities blasted into the mountainside. When the third and longest tunnel got narrower and narrower, Nina began to panic.

'I need to get out of the car right now,' she said, her face pale, even in the relative dark of the tunnel. 'We're definitely lost.'

Matt pulled out the map. We made a guess at which of the snaking roads was ours, and realised that we'd made a wrong turn quite some time back. We faced the unhappy decision that we would no doubt confront again on our trip – should we head deeper into the unknown and hope that this dubious tunnel reached daylight, or should we turn around and find a place to stay for the night?

'So let's look at this logically – on this dirt road, so far, we've been through two tunnels and we're stuck in a third, right?' said Nina.

'Right,' I said.

'And according to the map we still have a long way to go before we link up again with what we *think* is a slightly better road, right?'

'Yup.'

'So imagine how bad this road is going to be further along? Who knows if this tunnel even ends? What if it stops completely and we get stuck in a Serb slaughterhouse?'

'Wait, what?' I said, turning to look at her in the tunnel's dim light.

'Sorry,' she said, 'I don't mean a slaughterhouse, I just mean that, well, I'm pretty spooked by this place, to be honest. We all read what these guys were up to recently. Butchering Bosniaks. What if they think we're Bosniaks?'

‘Damn it Nina, don’t be so panicky,’ said Matt. ‘The war ended ages ago. That’s like saying you’re too scared to go to Germany because you’re worried that you look Jewish.’

The car fell silent again.

‘Well, it’s basically impossible to turn around, so let’s make this decision on the other side of the tunnel,’ said Beth, driving onwards through the dark. The walls were now so close to each side that we wouldn’t have been able to open the doors had we needed to get out. Finally the warm light of the real world began to seep into the tunnel from the exit. We were through, but now even deeper in the mountains.

Beth stopped and turned off the ignition so we could make a decision. As the engine fell silent, we heard the sound of another vehicle reverberating through the mountain rock. The tunnel amplified the noise so that it rumbled unnaturally through the spooky valley.

‘Perhaps it’s someone who can help us,’ Beth suggested, though we could all see she didn’t even believe herself.

Beth turned on the ignition. ‘Just in case we need to leave quickly,’ she explained.

At last a vehicle exited the tunnel mouth behind us. I was amazed that such a tiny car could make such a loud noise. Perhaps it was the old engine, or maybe the amplifying effect of the tunnel, or even our overactive imaginations. I wasn’t even sure what machine I had imagined would come out of the tunnel – Elroy was certainly the biggest vehicle that could make it through, so visions of tanks or outlandish killing machines seemed even more ridiculous as we watched the jalopy trundling towards us. It looked as though it should’ve been retired many years ago. Of at least 80s vintage, it had certainly never had any work done on the numerous dents and scrapes covering its grey-green body. And yet I was still nervous as it approached. We could make out two people in the car.

‘It’s Radovan and Ratko,’ said Matt, referring to the two Bosnian Serbs wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. They’d been in hiding since 1995.

‘What should we do?’ asked Beth in a slightly panicked voice.

‘I’m sure they’re just some friendly locals,’ said Matt.

It was soon too late to flee. Indecision had been decisive. The car, which we could now see was a Skoda, pulled up next to us. A bearded man held a fish out of the passenger’s window.

‘What the hell?’ said Nina, who was closest to the fish.

They got out their Skoda. Matt and I stepped out of Elroy. Beth turned off the engine and opened her door. Nina stayed in the car.

The two waved to us in greeting. A strong whiff of liquor hit me. The driver had three teeth that I could see, and his grey beard was scraggly and unkempt. The passenger, who was still holding out the fish, teetered towards us uncertainly, taking a few unplanned digressions on his way. He wore a

fox-tail hat. They didn't appear to speak any English, so Matt took a shot in the dark.

'*Guten tag?*' he ventured.

'*Ah, ja, guten tag,*' replied the driver excitedly. We'd found that German was much better understood than English in the Balkans.

Matt turned to us after a brief exchange.

'Hunters,' he said, 'they're on a hunting weekend.'

'Ja, hunt, hunt,' said the foxtail-hat chap, recognising the English word.

'What are you hunting?' Beth asked him.

He beamed at us, holding the fish out, signalling for us to take it.

Beth scrunched up her nose. 'Yuck.'

Matt quickly grabbed the fish, not wanted to refuse their kindness. Beth went to the car to fetch one of our 'business cards' from the cubbyhole. It had a picture of the four of us superimposed on a map of our planned route to Samarkand, to be used for just such situations.

Ratko and Radovan looked at the picture. Radovan started gushing in Serbian. He pointed at himself, held his hand out at waist height, and then grabbed the map, pointing his dirty finger first at England, then moving it uncertainly across to Ireland. I shook my head. Ratko explained in German to Matt that Radovan's daughter was at university there.

'Dublin?' I asked.

Radovan tried to remember, but the exertion of the whole endeavour overcame him and he fell face first onto the ground. He stood up, laughing, and Ratko laughed at him too.

'Hunt, hunt!' Radovan shouted, taking out his hip flask and passing it around. I grimaced as I took a sip. The potency of their revolting concoction explained his unceremonious fall. It reminded me of witblits. Matt quickly grabbed some of the Croatian *rakija* we'd purchased in Povelja. Ratko and Radovan each took a long swig.

'You only hunt fish?' I asked, pointing to the fish that Nina was now wrapping unenthusiastically.

'*Nein, nein,*' said Ratko, leading us to the boot of his Skoda. Radovan was making gun sounds and shooting into the mountains. In their boot was a whole arsenal – handguns, knives, rifles. There was also some kind of animal, a fox or badger, lying bloodied on some newspaper. Matt chatted a bit more with Ratko in German, then turned to us to explain:

'They've only got a fox and some fish so far, but *that* is not what they're hunting,' Matt said the last part slowly and deliberately, turning to Nina as he spoke.

Silence. Nina's face went white.

'What are they ...' her voice trailed off slowly.

Matt laughed, 'Don't be ridiculous, Nina. It's bears. They're hunting bears.'

She laughed uneasily. ‘That’s what I thought you meant.’

Radovan remembered some more English. ‘Come hunt. Hunt bear.’

Another silence. Matt was considering it. I know I was. But Nina was adamant: ‘There’s no way on God’s green earth that we’re staying here with these two morons to hunt bears.’

With that, she marched over to Elroy and turned on the ignition. Matt realised he would lose this battle and turned to Ratko and Radovan, politely declining their offer.

‘Don’t forget to ask directions to Belgrade,’ shouted Nina from the driver’s seat.

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According to Ratko, our road was actually quite a direct route to the Bosno-Serb border, if perhaps a bit of a slow one, so we continued through the mountains. The last major town we drove through before the border was Visegrad. Although Srebrenica is the massacre many Westerners have heard of, towns such as Visegrad also have terrible stories. Here, the Chetniks, the Serbian paramilitary group with roots in the World War Two partisan unit of the same name, set up concentration camps around the town to imprison the local Bosniak population. The conditions in the camps were horrendous. Famished inmates tried their best to survive, but most of them were systematically murdered or starved by their captors.

A particularly repugnant place was the Bikavac Spa, in which hundreds of Muslim women were detained purely for the purposes of rape. Many of the victims were barely teenagers at the time. The personal stories to come out of the camps are horrifying – mothers forced to watch their daughters raped, children shot in front of their parents, people tortured and killed for sport.

There have been no apologies for the massacres here, or anywhere in Bosnia. The Dayton Accord, which ended the conflict in 1995, was a peace treaty, no more. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission may have been a painful process, but it brought the atrocities out into the open, and gave us a generally accepted account of what happened under Apartheid. In Bosnia, the murky truth of the war will forever lie buried, deep in silent forests or forgotten rivers. Almost no Muslims live in Visegrad today, and the Serbs, whose ethnic cleansing efforts appear to have been largely successful in some areas, are unremorseful.

Just past the town of Visegrad we reached the border. Crossing was less trouble than we’d expected, and soon we were driving through the no-man’s-land tunnel that separates Bosnia from Serbia. The sun was setting. We’d barely averaged 40km/h for the day, and had been driving since sunrise. Now we still had to make it all the way to Belgrade, on a busy, single-lane road. We were annoyed with ourselves for not having sought local knowledge before setting off. But if we’d taken the correct road, we wouldn’t have met our two Bosnian-Serb hunter friends, nor would we have a fish in our freezer.



## Chapter 4 – Novi Sad to Sozopol

Everyone was coming. Well at least everyone important for a festival like EXIT. To start off with, there were Dean and Ed. Not the type you wanted over for Sunday lunch with your parents, but then EXIT wasn't Sunday lunch. Dean's riotous beard declared his festive intentions before he'd even announced himself. For anyone who doubted his authenticity on first sight, to spend just five minutes with him was to learn that the outward appearance matched the character. The lanky Ed was not as charismatic, but no less energetic, especially when it came to music festivals. The two of them were veterans, always traveling as a pair.

Ant and Jenna were coming too. They'd all flown into Belgrade the night before we arrived, and taken a train up to Novi Sad. We met them at a bar on the Danube, having spent a few nights ourselves in Serbia's capital.

It was strange to see familiar faces in a place like Serbia. We didn't rush to find a campsite in the castle, as we were a day early for the festival, so we spent the afternoon sharing travel stories and hearing news from London. Things, it seemed, were just as we'd left them. Dean still had a bit of a drug problem, Ed drank too much, and the others, well, they were all spending most of their time in the same bar in Liverpool Street.

As evening approached, Nina reminded us that we still needed to set up camp in the castle. But the afternoon had already begun to spin out of control. Somewhere between the raucous conversation and the rumpus of reunion, a common understanding of our lack of sleeping arrangements finally became clear. It was much too late to do anything about it. At that point very few of us cared. I think Nina probably cared a little, but she and Matt were so engrossed in a conversation about Balkan music, initiated when Wolf, a Serbian, had joined our gathering and declared that all Balkan music was 'how do you say, gay?' that she hadn't really noticed.

She and Matt were discussing the pros and cons of the local music, which we'd been hearing a lot, and Dean and Ed were vigorously debating Wolf's use of the word gay to describe his countrymen's music, and whether he'd meant the same as someone in England would've. Probably, was the agreed position. Wolf loved heavy metal and invited us to a bar where his band called Death Dogs (loosely translated from Serbian) was playing. We decided against it.

On realising our sleeping plight, though it hardly felt like one to me, Beth decided to investigate other options. But Ed stopped her.

'Beth, settle down. We'll just sleep on the banks of the Danube.'

The bar was beside a large patch of trimmed grass, which earlier in the day had been choc-a-block with sunbathers and swimmers (you can wade into the shallows of the Danube without getting swept away as long as you don't go in too deep), but was now looking irresistibly green and

comfortable in the fading sunlight.

Our party continued well into the night. Beth put everyone's bags into Elroy and parked it right alongside the grassy patch. As the party dispersed in the early hours, people began to fall asleep under the stars beside the Danube.

The sun woke me and, when I couldn't bear to stay in my sleeping bag a second longer for the heat, I forced open my eyes. I heard the sound of distant house music. It appeared as though some had not needed a bed at all: Dean, Ed, Matt and Nina were dancing in the shallow water to tunes playing from Ed's portable hi-fi. Dean was doing what looked like lines of cocaine on a Frisbee in the water, and the others had definitely swallowed something to keep them going all night. They had a frantic look about them. EXIT had begun.

I was feeling terrible, so I went to get my boardshorts from Elroy in the hope that a morning swim would clear my head. Beth, Ant and Jenna were nowhere to be seen, no doubt having been woken earlier by the music and revelry. I'd slept through it all, as I normally did.

The swim did nothing to clear my fuzzy head. The others waved to invite me over to their little party. I knew that conversation between us now would be impossible, but made my way over anyway to see what was going on. Almost before I knew it, Dean had handed me something and I'd swallowed it. I didn't even know what it was.

'It'll blow your mind!' he shouted, and the others all agreed with exaggerated thumbs up and nods. A wave of regret for my knee-jerk decision engulfed me. Dean scared me sometimes. Most weekends he only slept in the daytime. That he managed to hold down a decent job at all was a miracle. Who knows what he'd passed me, and more disturbingly, where he'd got it.

I ran to grab my phone. I had to find Beth before it kicked in. She, Ant and Jenna had stopped for some breakfast and were bringing me a sandwich. Thank God, I thought. I needed to get some food into my stomach. When she came back I told her what had happened, and she laughed.

'That didn't take long – we're not even at the festival yet! Don't worry, Dean gave us some as well, but I think I'll wait till we've set up camp before I join you guys on the crazy train.'

The fortress of Petrovaradin sits on a hill overlooking the Danube, and for most of the year it's a picturesque, if solemn, museum. But for four days in July, it's transformed into a seething throng of DJs, bands, hippies, festival veterans, travellers, peddlers, trance fiends and rave zealots, all hyped up to the point of fanaticism.

The first day we saw a couple of dance acts, a few mainstream bands, and even managed to put together a coherent plan for the evening. Dean soon brought out another concoction that I knew to avoid, but the others hardly noticed that they'd had some. Even Jenna took a swig, which caused me some alarm: she wasn't the person for this sort of thing. My memory of the events that followed is fuzzy. What I do know is that we all made it back to our campsite sometime before dark on what I

thought was probably the second day of EXIT.

The place had started to resemble a refugee camp. Bodies strewn across the floor, clothing scattered everywhere, order just a distant memory. Ed stumbled around his tent looking for something. Eventually he had it – his portable hi-fi. He put a song on repeat for the whole afternoon. I've never forgotten it. That was actually his intention. He always did this at festivals, giving the gift of vivid memory to everyone through a song. Just a hint of that melody would transport you right back to wherever you'd been when he had it on repeat. For EXIT he'd chosen a bizarre country/rap tune by someone I subsequently discovered was called Mickey Avalon, *Do the Jane Fonda*.

Our group, along with various hangers-on, was sitting between the tents, beers in hand, humming along to, 'I know you wanna do the Jane Fonda,' when the relative peace was disrupted by some loud and increasingly hysterical shouting.

'I don't care if they see! I don't care at all.'

It was Jenna's voice. She and Ant had disappeared into their tent without anyone noticing. Ant was trying to calm her.

'Shh, Jen, quiet.'

'Don't tell me to keep quiet.' She was speaking too fast. Or was I imagining it? 'I'll do anything. I don't care if they see. Our love is pure!'

Suddenly the tent was open and they rolled halfway out, Jenna almost completely naked. Ant had a look of panic on his face. Jenna's voice was shrill.

'They can see our love, I don't care. I love you forever, like-the-wind-and-the-rain-and-red-yellow-orange-forever-and-ever-and-ever.'

Ed turned off the music. There was dead silence outside now. Ant was fighting to get her off him, and to cover her. No one else did anything. Words were now streaming unchecked from her mouth.

'Yellow-orange-red-purple-I-love-you-like-the-stars-and-the-sun-let's-ride-into-forever-together...'

Everyone remembers something different from the incident. I remember the astonishing rapidity of her speech. I'd never heard anything like it. A horse-racing commentator sounded like a dreary newsreader by comparison. My mind could barely process what she was saying. And while it was mostly nonsense, it was also not. That was the scariest part of all – it was a window to her thoughts, which were streaming into the air for all to hear. And it wasn't just our friends who were listening. Other festival-goers had begun to notice the disturbance. Capturing people's attention at a place like EXIT, with its many distractions, is not easy. Jenna now had the attention of everyone within earshot.

'You-are-beautiful-and-incredible-and-beautiful-and-I-want-to-marry-you,' she said again, then

turned and looked at the tents describing them all: the colours, the shapes. Then she looked at individuals and described them, one by one.

After what felt like half an hour, Dean snapped into action. It was he who had fed her the crazy juice, now it was his responsibility to sort the situation out. And as he got up, the realisation hit everyone else who'd recently taken a sip of Dean's nectar. Were they next? I was relieved I'd not had any. Beth grabbed my arm and pulled me away. We needed to leave. There was no point hanging around to see Jenna humiliated, she said. Matt's face was ash-coloured. He grabbed Nina and they left too.

'It's Dean's problem to sort out, and he's gone for help,' Beth said to me. 'There's nothing we can do here.'

Even though I knew I should leave, I was too fascinated to wrench myself away. Ant had been able to clothe her by this point. Next thing, I saw a truck driving straight through the campsite. It looked exactly like one of the Casspirs that had been used during apartheid. At first I thought it was the police, but then noticed a red cross on its side. It lumbered along a service road that had been kept clear of tents, probably for just such situations.

Two medics with grim faces hopped out, put Jenna on a stretcher, lifted her into the vehicle and explained briefly to Ant where he would be able to find her. The vehicle returned up the service road.

An excited chatter soon filled the silence. Everyone had different reactions, but since no one knew how Jenna was going to turn out, relief was not one of them. We all scattered in different directions. The festival's atmosphere had been tainted. Petrovaradin Fortress now seemed like a malevolent place, its shadows threatening.

Ed had the worst time of it. In his half-hallucinatory state brought on by Dean's concoction, he'd thought that the ambulance was actually a mobile morgue come to pick up Jenna's body. When he'd asked people to confirm this story and they told him it was just an ambulance, he thought they were lying to him to protect him from the truth, which infuriated him.

Dean and Ant had gone to look for Jenna at the medical tent, where they found her sleeping peacefully alongside a few others – one with a broken arm, another with a gash to his face and a third who must've had a similar condition to Jenna, as there was no sign of physical harm.

Dean chatted to the patient with the sling, asking if he saw what had happened. He was a student from Bristol. I heard the story much later.

'Yeah, crazy one, your friend. Never seen anything like it. Everyone stared at her until the injection.'

'Injection?'

'Yeah, a glucose one of some sort. She was fine again in no time.'

The colour slowly returned to Ant's face. 'How did you know she was okay?' He asked.

'She said so herself. And ... well I'm not sure if you want to hear this or not.'

Ant nodded.

'Well she remembers absolutely everything, clear as day. She's pretty sure she'll never be able to speak to any of you ever again.'

'Dean, what the hell was that stuff you gave us anyway?' asked Ant.

Dean just shook his head, 'It's a secret man. Don't ask, don't tell. All's well that ends well.'

'Has it ended well?' Ant asked.

'Well, better than it could have,' said Dean dismissively, turning to go. 'I'll leave you two to it then.'

\*

I barely saw the others again for the rest of EXIT. I lost interest in the festival and wandered the streets of Novi Sad with Beth instead. At the centre is Trg Slobode (Liberty Square), surrounded by shops, restaurants and bars, all of which are packed at that time of year. The façades are variously coloured, but in the same pastel shades: pink, yellow, orange, blue. The dark gothic steeple of the Catholic Church watches over the citizens of Novi Sad, whilst its cream walls protect one side of Trg Slobode. The city is apparently nicknamed 'the Serbian Athens', I guess because the Petrovaradin fortress on the hill vaguely resembles the Acropolis. It's a rather a tall claim though, Novi Sad having only been established some 350 years ago.

At lunchtime on the last day of the festival, we decided to find Matt and Nina and move on to Romania. There was little point hanging out in Novi Sad avoiding Dean, Ed, Ant and Jenna. I got hold of Matt and discovered that he and Nina were in town too, no doubt also avoiding the chaos.

They arrived at our restaurant at midday and we plotted our escape to Romania. I noticed Beth observing them with interest. What had they been up to the last couple of days?

The others were all still in the campsite, having barely left it for two days. Dean was dancing like a caveman around Ed's hi-fi, Ed was singing along to *Do the Jane Fonda* and Ant was chatting to a few onlookers. Jenna sat in her tent, avoiding everyone. I went to chat to her for a bit to see how she was doing, but I felt awkward and couldn't bring myself to ask her directly. Instead, I skirted the issue, and just discussed the festival and how crazy Dean was. I told her that we were leaving, and she seemed to understand. Climbing out the tent, I overheard an Australian on the phone to his friend.

'Mate, you gotta get over here,' he said, looking at Dean. 'We've met some real characters. Get over here now.'

\*

From the bucolic vistas we'd seen up till that point, the Romanian countryside is about as rustic as

Europe gets. We passed horse carts, tiny villages and pastoral scenes free of modern technology. The roads were in horrendous condition and we were never able to drive faster than about sixty. At midnight we reached the village of Sinaia. We'd taken up a recommendation to stay there by a friend whose girlfriend was from Bucharest. I think she'd misunderstood what we were looking for, because Sinaia turned out to be a purpose-built holiday resort offering hiking and skiing to the wealthy. It was picturesque, but fake, and we probably should've stayed in one of the medieval Transylvanian towns like Brasov or Sibiu instead. We were soon on our way to the capital.

We weren't expecting much from Bucharest. My vague impression of Romania's first city from history lessons was that it had embraced authoritarianism with a rare gusto and in the fifty or so years under Communism had barely managed a small riot in protest. It differed from other Eastern Bloc counties like Czechoslovakia or Hungary, which had never really stopped fighting. Ceaușescu, the country's long-time dictator, was so brutal and efficient that there was no chance an uprising would unseat him. For a long time the West saw him as a reforming communist, who acted independently of Moscow, but he proved to be one of the most Stalinist of all the Eastern European regimes. Everyone ate, breathed and slept Ceaușescu. He ruled with an iron fist from 1967 until the fall of Communism in 1989, when he and his wife were executed. During his reign, he had to be shown in only the best possible light on television, and there were no posters or likenesses of him over the age of forty.

His crowning glory was the construction of 'the House of the People,' which still dominates Bucharest today. It's the world's second largest building after the Pentagon, and one of the most expensive ever constructed. Most of historical Bucharest had to be bulldozed to make space for it, including twenty-five churches, six synagogues and thirty thousand houses. A thousand rooms are spread over twelve gaudy storeys. The floor space is an astonishing 340 000 square metres. Most of it was built with Transylvanian marble, over one million cubic metres of it, adorned with 3500 tonnes of crystal.

\*

Bulgaria was our last European stop en route to the East. It's not well-known for its sights. We were passing through the country more out of necessity than for any other reason. An increasing number of English people were buying property there because, with the Bulgarian economy on its knees, it had become dirt cheap, both in the Black Sea coastal resorts and in the ski towns of the south-west. Of course this, if anything, made the country even less appealing, but at least it had beaches. I hadn't been expecting much from the Black Sea, but when I think about it, that was probably because of its name, which makes it sound unpleasant. The truth is that the Black Sea coast has far better beaches than most of the pebbly Mediterranean, because crucially, the sand is fine and the shore is pounded by medium-sized waves. They say you can even surf there, though this may be a

myth.

We took some time out in the resort towns of Varna and Sozopol, which were pleasant enough, though we found the Bulgarians to be the least friendly people we'd met. Perhaps this was because they thought we were English (there was widespread irritation about the English land grab in their country) or they were just genuinely grumpy. Either way, we were unable to elicit much more than a *hurumph* from any of them, even when we initiated a conversation with a Bulgarian word or two.

We spent a few days at a campsite where we used what had come to be accepted as our worst purchase – the gazebo tent – for the first and only time on our trip. Not only did it weigh a ton, it also took up about 10 per cent of precious roof rack real estate. Luckily no one could actually remember whose idea it had been, so blame for the bad decision could not be apportioned anywhere. A Black Sea campsite was the ideal place for it, but even then it only stood for the first afternoon before a strong wind ripped it down. For some reason we still persisted with it, so even after it had failed to give us service in the one place it should have, we kept it on the roof for the day we might need it. That day never came.

\*

We left Bulgaria and made for European Turkey. As I lay daydreaming in the back seat my thoughts turned again to Samarkand. Oscar Wilde touches on Central Asia in *Ave Imperatrix*, his tongue-in-cheek critique of British Imperialism. Although I knew deep down that his allusions to Samarkand were probably casual – a fleeting image of the exotically remote – that was what I was after: a mythical and blurry impression of Samarkand, conjured up by abstract and lyrical verse:

*For southern wind and east wind meet  
Where, girt and crowned by sword and fire,  
England with bare and bloody feet  
Climbs the steep road of wide empire.  
O lonely Himalayan height,  
Grey pillar of the Indian sky,  
Where saw'st thou last in clanging flight  
Our winged dogs of Victory?  
The almond-groves of Samarkand,  
Bokhara, where red lilies blow,  
And Oxus, by whose yellow sand  
The grave white-turbaned merchants go:*

(Wilde, 1881)

Visions of oases and whirling dervishes, camels and caravans, blended confusingly with my memories of the cartoon film *Aladdin*. I was no closer to picturing a coherent Samarkand now than I'd been before discovering its existence. In some ways I was actually more confused: there was the added complexity of the Soviet years – each decree from Moscow further severing the region's bonds with its past, forcing half the world into its dull, homogenous vision for a Greater Russia. Solzhenitsyn's novel *Cancer Ward* was set in Uzbekistan in the years after Stalin's purges. The story actually took place nearby in Tashkent, but it could just as easily have been in Samarkand. Had the bureaucrats and peoples' commissars ruined the city with their single-minded city-planning and carelessness for history?

## Chapter 5 – Istanbul to Mestia

Istanbul is a treasure-trove. A Shangri-La for the travel-minded. It has history, both ancient and rich. Its vistas are wide and vivid. It has energy, opportunity and hope. Istanbul transcends the borders of modern geopolitics and although it's part of Turkey today, one could argue that this is just a coincidence. The Turks understand, as did those nations who inhabited it before, that Istanbul is more than just a Turkish city. It is a world city, whose shoulders have borne the fortunes of empires for thousands of years. It has been Byzantium, an ancient Greek city founded as a trading port on the Bosphorus; Constantinople, seat of the Eastern Roman Emperor and capital of the sultans; and Istanbul, a modern-day Turkish city. As Constantinople, it was the centre of two of the greatest empires in history – the Eastern Roman Empire, for a thousand years, and the Ottoman Empire, for a further five hundred.

Istanbul is also the traditional start (or end, depending on which way you're going) of the Silk Road. From Istanbul, things would be tougher for us. More demanding on the Land Cruiser, more testing for the group. And all of this in exotic terrain. We'd be off the beaten track, following an ancient road that struck through fabled deserts and snow-bound mountain passes, through the old Soviet states, which until very recently had seen few foreigners. And, most importantly, we wouldn't be tourists anymore. We'd be gallant explorers. Sort of.

If you were travelling to Samarkand from Europe a thousand years ago, Constantinople would've been your last major supply point before Bukhara and Samarkand. I wondered how many caravans had arrived here from China, brim-full of luxurious silk and all the unimaginable treasures of Asia.

Today, Istanbul is remarkable for its multiculturalism, uniquely perhaps in the Muslim Middle East. You can buy beer in bars and restaurants. You can worship in a church or synagogue. You can visit dance clubs and beach bars, not just hookah joints and kebab shops. There are Greek, Polish, Bosnian and Kurdish neighbourhoods, plus the inevitable Western expatriate hangouts. There is even a growing Armenian population, which is surprising given the anger still felt by Armenians for the genocide perpetrated by the Turks during the First World War.

It also holds what has to be the most strategic location in Europe. Istanbul straddles the Bosphorus, a narrow strait connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, and separating Europe from Asia. Today, vessels travelling down the Danube, the Dnieper and the Don, from Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade, from the oil- and gas-rich cities of Russia and Central Asia, from the Black Sea ports of Samsun, Sochi and Sevastopol, from Kerch and Kiev, from Varna and Volgograd, all have to pass right through the centre of Istanbul. It is hardly surprising then that the city has been the most jealously guarded jewel in the crown of empires for two and a half thousand years.

One of Nina's friends, Karin, had flown in to join us from London for the weekend. After meeting her at a party in Wimbledon, Matt had dubbed her 'quiet Karin'. But in Istanbul she was completely different to the shy and withdrawn person we thought we knew.

The five of us stopped at a small café just off the Galata Bridge for some Turkish coffee. I'd tried it before and never really liked it. It has bits floating at the surface and as you near the bottom you're in danger of choking on chunks of pure caffeine, but it is a custom, so we placed our order.

Apparently you can read your future in the patterns left by the drying coffee residue. We learnt this from Mehmet, a Turkish fellow who'd started chatting to Karin somewhere near Galata Bridge, and had been following us ever since. He'd been most persistent in his offer to be our personal tour guide, and he came with no apparent price tag. In any event, if there was a price to be paid, it would surely have to be paid by Karin, whose brown eyes and long eyelashes Mehmet found irresistible. I'm sure she was aware of this, but she didn't put up much of a fight, so our guide he became.

Mehmet found only wealth and happiness in Karin's future after reading her coffee. Nina had a more specific fortune – she would be meeting her future husband tonight, no doubt at a bar that Mehmet would select for us. In Beth's coffee he saw Jesus, which made her giggle, and he was not in the least bit keen to read Matt or my futures. He was good natured, and had kept his end of the bargain so far, walking up and down the streets of Istanbul showing off its bazaars, carpet shops and mosques, sprinkling his tour with anecdotes.

'Topkapi Palace – you will find staff of Moses and hand of John the Baptist. Also hair of Mohammed. Blue Mosque – six thousand years old. Istanbul – invented by Muslims many years ago.' He marched us around the old city on the European side of the Bosphorus, known as the Golden Horn.

One of the most magnificent structures from classical times, Hagia Sophia, is a prominent part of Istanbul's skyline. Built by the emperor Justinian in 532 AD, it's the third church on that site. Today the fourth largest cathedral in the world, its dome is awe-inspiring, unrivalled for hundreds of years after it was constructed. Justinian apparently used 10 000 workers to build it. The sultans converted it into a Mosque when they conquered the city, but were careful not to destroy any of the existing art and architecture – the Ottomans were known for many things, but iconoclasm wasn't one of them. These days it's neither a church nor a Mosque but is open to everyone as a museum.

Walking towards Hagia Sophia, we could already see that it's a building without peer. Four minarets reach high into the air, giving the complex a sense of symmetry. Enclosed by a large, black dome, its walls are reddish brown. A bright blue backdrop of the Bosphorus Strait, emerald gardens and tall fountains forced us to stop for a while to take it all in.

Inside, through great wooden doors, the vast halls seem much bigger than their enclosing walls should allow them to be. Four massive pendentives hold up Justinian's great dome, enabling the

square structure to have a circular roof. This particular design was the first of its kind – an innovation of its architects to solve the problem of the dome’s weight and its square base. It sits atop many small arched windows, through which shafts of light illuminate the intricate designs inside. Other partial domes connect to the main dome, and huge marble pillars and arches hold up the walls. The whole structure is a single room that flows seamlessly through arches, between pillars and past Byzantine frescoes and paintings.

That night I read up on Istanbul. Constantinople, as it was called as capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, fell to the Ottomans in 1453. The collapse of the city ushered in the age of the Ottoman Empire and coincided with the birth of the Renaissance in Italy, so is considered one of the most significant events in European history.

At the time, Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror had under his command a great army. He held land both north and south of Constantinople, and to have an enemy state in the midst of his burgeoning empire was intolerable. He laid siege in mid-April with a full strength army. For two months the Eastern Orthodox Greeks held the capital but, with their Venetian allies deserting them and outnumbered ten to one, the outcome was inevitable. Constantinople fell on the 29th of May, and as was custom, Mehmed allowed his army of Ottoman Muslims and Serbian Catholics to plunder the city for three days before kicking them out and making it his capital. The Ottomans ruled the Mediterranean for five hundred years after that. That is the conventional view of the fall of the Constantinople.

But the reality of 1453 is slightly more complicated than that, and not a little ironic. The changing of the guard in Europe’s most strategically positioned city was without doubt one of the most significant things to happen in Europe in five hundred years: it signalled the end of Christian dominance of the Mediterranean; Islam flourished; and most importantly, Byzantium’s greatest philosophers, scientists and humanists fled to Italy, where a culture of art and learning slowly hauled Europe out of the Dark Ages.

Geopolitically, though, the fall of Constantinople was a foregone conclusion. If it hadn’t happened in 1453, it would’ve in 1463 or 1500: by that time the Eastern Roman Empire was a shadow of its former glory. And the main reason for the empire’s decline was the Fourth Crusade.

The first three Crusades had been waged to seize the Holy Lands for the Christians. Not for all Christians, mind – just the Catholic ‘Latins’ who fell under the authority of the Pope – mainly the French and English. The Fourth Crusade was launched with the same goal, and even though the schism between the Western Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox Roman Empire had been growing, Pope Innocent III forbade any war with Christian states.

After a disagreement with the Venetians about payment for transport, however, the Crusader army needed more cash. They didn’t go to the Holy Land at all, but made instead for

Constantinople, to pick up some loot and at the same time settle the score with the Greeks once and for all. They hated each other, the Latins and Greeks. The Latins viewed the Byzantines as snobbish intellectuals and faithless merchants, more interested in wealth and trade than religion. For their part, the educated and wealthy Byzantines saw the Latins as lawless, impious, covetous and bloodthirsty thugs.

It took nearly a year, but eventually, in April 1204, Constantinople was breached and the Crusader army swarmed in. The estrangement of East and West, which had been growing over the centuries, culminated in a horrific massacre. The Greeks were convinced that even the Turks, had they taken the city, would not have been as cruel as the Latin Christians. Although the Greeks won the city back a few years later, the defeat accelerated political decline so that the Byzantines ultimately became easy prey to the Turks. The irony is that the Fourth Crusade and the crusading movement generally thus resulted in the victory of Islam, which was of course the exact opposite of its original intention. From that point on, the Ottoman Empire ruled the Mediterranean.

We relieved our tour guide of his duties the following day because we wanted to visit the Topkapi Palace – home of the sultans – and cruise the Bosphorus. It appeared that Mehmet hadn't been fabricating too outrageously because Topkapi does claim to have the staff of Moses and the hand of John the Baptist. I doubted whether officials would have allowed these relics to be subjected to any rigorous dating procedures though.

The harem of the sultans is a curious place. The sultans certainly made fornication a priority during their reign. The harem is an intricate network of chambers, baths and 'love rooms', filled, we were told, with the three sounds loved most by man: 'the sound of gold, the sound of water, and the sound of women laughing.' Legend has it that one Sultan never actually left the harem once during his reign, choosing instead to spend it in the arms of as many women as possible.

It was a great honour for a woman, we were told, to be selected to join the harem, and noblemen tried their utmost to have their daughters invited, hoping to curry favour with the Sultan. Their daughters would never see the light of day again, spending the rest of their years waiting for the Sultan to grace them with his affections. When too old to be attractive to the Sultan, they remained in the harem, but now they looked after the 'new recruits' and kept discipline.

We found a wide selection of Bosphorus boat trips offered along the Golden Horn inlet. The only other passenger on the one we chose was a local who appeared to be on his lunch break. As we launched from a small harbour, he lay down, put his newspaper over his head and fell asleep for the hour journey. I don't think he'd paid either, so perhaps this was just his daily lunchtime routine.

As we drifted along, we saw centuries-old monuments mixed with modern and colourful apartment blocks; minarets rise up from mosques, both ancient and modern; palaces and castles adorn the lower regions next to the strait and higher up, the slopes of the city are blocks of flats. In

the distance we could see the mighty Bosphorus Bridge spanning the one-and-a-half kilometres between Europe and Asia. Surely this is where East meets West? Many countries have tried to claim this moniker, but I couldn't imagine that any city in the world could really believe that Istanbul isn't the rightful owner.

That afternoon Nina suggested we take a Turkish bath, or *hamam*. She said that we couldn't come to Turkey without having one. Matt was hesitant, and I wasn't too sure either, but Matt gave in easily, and I didn't want to be left out. In a hot, murky steam chamber, I was thrown unceremoniously onto a slab of concrete by a giant of a man who smelled like he needed to be bathed himself. He scrubbed me roughly from head to toe. In the *hamam*, head-to-toe is a literal term, and since I'd entered with only a towel to protect me, there was no part of my body left unscrubbed. No part at all.

Feeling clean and refreshed, if slightly violated, we made our way back to the hotel: Mehmet was taking us out on the town. He arrived with his older brother, Shaheed, who seemed to be there more to look after Mehmet than anything else. Matt and I chatted to him for much of the evening about life in Istanbul. It was tough, he told us. Although the economy was doing relatively well, Istanbul was full of people looking for work, and with tourism slowing down after 2008, there wasn't as much foreign money around. He ran a stall in Istanbul's massive bazaar, selling a wide range of products – trinkets, mementos, underwear and tea. After going to a couple of bars, we visited a Turkish nightclub, which catered for locals. Mehmet and Shaheed showed everyone how to dance like real Turks. Matt, Beth and I joined in, looking like idiots, while Nina kept Karin company. Karin watched Mehmet with feigned indifference. Her constant downplaying of his advances belied her curiosity. Eventually the evening drew to a close and Mehmet offered to walk us back. He received a lingering kiss for his endeavours, probably fair payment for three days' worth of tour-guiding. She gave him her email address, but we heard a few weeks later that she'd had to block him from her account because he'd been declared his undying love every day since.

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It's a four-day journey to Georgia from Istanbul. Turkey's northern regions are quieter and more conservative than the Mediterranean coast to the south, and it boasts the best remnants of the faded Ottoman Empire.

We'd been given advice in Istanbul to seek out two villages along this route. Safranbolu was a wonderfully preserved Ottoman hamlet that had somehow managed to skip the industrialisation of Turkey over the last century. Cobbled streets wound their way through white timber-and-plaster cottages, reminiscent of England's Tudor style, except with red roofs instead of brown.

We reached Amasya at four the following afternoon. Deep in a valley with steep cliffs, it's an attractive town. Bigger than Safranbolu, and grander, its best houses, all in the same Ottoman

design, line the river, which flows through the centre. Across the valley, one set of cliffs boasts gigantic arches carved into the stone, entrances to the tombs of ancient kings. At night they are lit up, creating ghostly images on the mountain. On the opposite side of the valley, at the top of a steep pass, is a traditional Ottoman restaurant where we celebrated my thirtieth birthday. One of Beth's generous friends had called earlier in the day from London to say she was depositing a hundred pounds into my account so that we could celebrate. One hundred pounds doesn't sound like a lot of money for four people to have dinner, but in a place like Amasya it goes a very long way, and we spent every penny of it that night.

We had a fair distance to travel from Amasya to Georgia, so we agreed that we'd drive as far as possible the next day and stop wherever we could for the night. Unfortunately the town we reached was Trabzon, a dirty Black Sea port 'full of thieves and harlots', according to an article Matt had read. We were advised by the hotel receptionist to remove everything from our vehicle for fear of theft. It took the better part of an hour.

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Georgia was the only country on our trip that allows South Africans entry without a visa. Most of its neighbours had a blanket visa requirement for all African countries. Many didn't even differentiate between them. Indeed, it was questionable whether they actually knew that Africa wasn't a single country. The notion that Georgia had real diplomatic relations with us amounting to more than just colonial age patronage was rather fanciful. But no matter which section of the Georgian consulate I'd contacted in London, the message had been consistent. That fact alone was something to marvel at.

As we left Trabzon, we were uncertain whether our expedition might come to an unceremonious end as we reached our first ex-Soviet state. The journey had always been about the Silk Road and Samarkand, but if there were a sub-plot, it would surely have to be about charting the erstwhile communist lands. We'd covered much of the territory that once fell behind the Iron Curtain, but now we were about to enter a nation that had been part of the USSR.

The crossing was not without its customary peculiarities. The only episode was the guards discovering for the first time of the existence of South Africa, and then being even more surprised at its inclusion on the list of visa-waivable nations. But there it was, in clear print on their wall, which was more important than any consular note or visa. So while it made no sense to them, it was technically correct, which is the most important kind of correct to anyone who'd ever been a citizen of the USSR. They handed our passports around to everyone on duty so they could have a chuckle.

If we'd thought the roads had been bad in Eastern Europe, we were in for a shock. Georgia brought to bear a whole new standard in motorway mediocrity. We also realised an important principle as we negotiated the broken boulevards of Batumi searching for a hotel: don't look for

lodging on an empty stomach. We trawled the streets for hours trying to find something that was within our budget and at the same time not repugnant. In the end, we failed on both counts, surrendering to our stomachs and just choosing the next place we came across. It was both expensive and disgusting. By that time we were too tired and hungry to care, so we checked in and went into town.

Batumi is a tired and lazy Black Sea port. As we walked along the beachfront, we noticed that most cafés were full of pensioners playing cards and chess. The beaches were white and long, and a restful if slightly dull atmosphere permeated the town. Many of the young people had migrated north to Sochi to find work, a barman told us. Apparently there was more commerce in the Russian Black Sea port that was due to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics.

The next morning we found all the tell-tale signs of a poor-quality accommodation: slugs in the bedroom, stale smell in the bathroom, stains on the sheets, dirt on bedcovers and some suspect clientele. Nina was worst affected. She didn't want to shower because the bathroom was too rancid, nor could she stand the thought of spending another minute without cleansing herself of the hotel's filth. She was almost in tears before Beth suggested she find a bucket and wash herself outside. There weren't any, but we did have a jerry-can filled with water on Elroy's roof rack. Matt offered to give her a cold shower. She didn't hesitate, and wasted no time getting into her bikini. While Beth and I were packing the boot, Matt happily doused Nina with luke-warm water from the roof of the car.

Svaneti, in the north of Georgia, was our next destination, and by all accounts it was going to take us a very long time to get there.

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If the Georgians are viewed as clannish and sectarian by the rest of the world, then the Svans are the Georgians' Georgians. They're an ungovernable and isolated people who live high in the Caucasian mountains. Other Georgians don't seem to mind their de facto independence: the Svans live so far away that no one cares to go up there to tell them who is in charge.

The road to Mestia, the area's principal village, was long and vertiginous. Potholes scarred the surface where tar still covered it, and mostly there wasn't any tar. This was the main highway up to Svaneti, making it difficult to imagine what some of the smaller regional roads must have looked like. The last hundred kilometres took over three hours. We crossed a few rickety wooden bridges and stared nervously down the steep cliffs which formed the right shoulder of the road. We retired early that night at our home-stay arranged by Mestia's local tourist agency.

The next morning, while we were unloading, someone called out to us.

'*Ztrasdvuy!*' A balding fellow stuck his head out of an upstairs window.

'*Ztrasd...vuy...tee*', I stammered through the formal Russian for 'hello'. I never seemed to be

able to get that word to roll off my tongue.

‘Hello American! *Vina?*’ He held out a five-litre plastic container to show us what he meant.

Matt and I went to investigate. We walked around the front of the building and climbed a flight of stairs. I knocked on a wooden door. The bald chap opened briskly and invited us inside. He smelled terrible.

A few beaming Svans were seated around a table in an otherwise empty room. They each had a glass in their hands. A nearly empty twenty-litre plastic container of local brew rested on the floor beside a five-litre one.

A glass of wine was shoved into our hands before anything was said. They held up their glasses and we toasted.

‘Georgia!’

I took a small sip from my glass. The wine was unexpectedly good.

They looked at me as though I’d just insulted them. What had I done wrong? I looked across at Matt, who shrugged. Then I saw their glasses. They were all empty.

‘*Izvinite!*’ I apologised, realising that I’d have to finish what was in the glass. I hastily knocked it back.

‘Good! Welcome to Svaneti,’ said the large fellow.

Satisfied that we’d been inducted into their little gathering, they got to the business of the morning: entertaining the travellers. They offered us their opinions in halting English, which revolved around the greatness of Georgia in general and Svaneti in particular, and the wickedness of pretty much everyone else, including Russians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Gorbachev, Putin and Breshnev.

We got by with some key English phrases like, ‘no problem!’, ‘down with the Russians’, ‘more wine’ and ‘Georgia!’

They brought out their Georgian/English phrasebook entitled *Hello America*, but since none of them could actually read the non-Georgian script it was rendered useless.

Beth and Nina came up to join us. The Svans were delighted to have more guests and the two were immediately given full glasses. Over the course of the celebration we discovered more about our hosts. There was Zaza, also known as ‘Shereef’, owner of the house and the head hog of the gathering. His blue T-shirt didn’t quite cover his belly, which hung out over his shorts. He was the drunkest of the four. We weren’t quite sure whether they jokingly call him Shereef because he was actually the Sherriff or because he’d been in jail before. Either seemed plausible.

Then there was Gegi, also called *Prostitutka*. We assumed his nickname explained his after-hours habits. He only had three teeth, a fact made evident every time he threw his head back and opened his mouth to laugh, which he did frequently. He was a great host and always saw that we were

comfortable, topping our glasses the second we managed to empty them. At one point he went into the kitchen and brought out a plate for each of us with what looked like mutton. It was mostly bone and gristle, and we struggled through it so as not to appear rude.

Zoba, the third, spent most of his time laughing hysterically at Shereef.

‘Ha ha ha. Shereef! Shereef!’ He pointed at Zaza.

‘*Nu! Nu* Shereef!’ was the constant reply from Zaza. I wasn’t quite sure what was so funny, so assumed it was a private joke.

We couldn’t make out what Zoba did for a living, but judging by the dishevelled state of his clothing and the stale smell of alcohol around him, we didn’t think it was much. He had an odd-looking face that was out of proportion in so many ways it was difficult to pinpoint exactly what made him look so strange. He was good-humoured and didn’t seem to mind the teasing that came his way from the others.

Tsatso joined us a little later. He was in a better state to communicate with us. He’d just dropped in with his wife to say hi, but soon became embroiled in the festivities, much to her annoyance.

‘Zoba, Zaza, Gegi and I have been friends since we were small,’ he explained. ‘We lived in Mestia always. We love Svaneti. It is beautiful here.’ I couldn’t fault him there. The mountains and lakes were spectacular. We could see a glacier through the window of the room.

‘But across that mountain,’ he points to the glacier, ‘is Russia. Russia is very bad, yes?’ Matt and I nodded our heads in agreement. It wasn’t the first time we’d heard that. Apparently all you needed to do in Svaneti in order to get along with everyone was hate the Russians.

Fortune had favoured the four differently, and Tsatso was by a long way the most successful. He was dressed in clean clothes and the others would point at him and rub their fingers together from time to time. At one point, after their relentless heckling, he actually pulled out his empty pockets to show them that he had no cash. He was also the supplier of cigarettes.

Tsatso was an electrician, which we guessed was about as successful as you can be in Mestia. Zoba directed his laughing fits at Tsatso from time to time, pointing at the lights and shouting, ‘Energierter! Energierter!’ or something like that.

We brought in the *rakija* that we’d had since Croatia for just such occasions and offered them some. Even these hardened drinkers struggled with the Croatian brew.

Soon others started to filter in, having heard that there were foreigners about. ‘Mexico’ arrived with his two sons bringing with them more Georgian wine. Apparently his nickname stemmed from his resemblance to Antonio Banderas. He didn’t really have a film star look about him, but the Svans were unanimous.

‘Mexico! Mexico!’ they welcomed him excitedly.

Shereef’s brother also emerged from one of the bedrooms. He’d clearly not been able to handle

the pace of the previous night and soon went back to bed.

Even ‘Mummy’ made a brief appearance. We weren’t sure whether she was Zaza’s or Zoba’s, but we supposed in a town like Mestia everyone is family.

Tsatso’s wife stormed angrily into the room at one point. She appeared to have had enough of his irresponsible behaviour before lunchtime. She reprimanded Tsatso. He got up to follow her, but Shereef would not hear of it and Tsatso was back at the table with another full glass of wine before he’d had a chance to reach the door. She came back inside but this time Tsatso ignored her completely and she left in a huff. I was sure he’d be sorry later though.

Just before two o’clock Viktor arrived. He was the mayor of Mestia, apparently, and I looked forward to chatting to him. He was in no mood though, and it seemed he had only come to drag Shereef away, adding weight to our theory that he was actually the Sherriff. He was probably supposed to be on duty. That put a bit of a dampener on proceedings, so we thanked everyone and left them to resolve their awkward situation.

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I was in bed by tea time, and drifted off reading from one of my printouts of Samarkand. This was an anecdote I’d found about the all-conquering Timur. It described his arrival in Shiraz on his Persian campaign. The first thing he did after taking the city was arrest its most famous resident, the poet Hafiz, for snubbing Samarkand in one of his poems. Hafiz had written:

*Belle of Shiraz, grant me but love’s demand,  
And for your mole – that clinging grain of sand  
Upon a cheek of pearl – Hafiz would give  
All of Bukhara, all of Samarkand...*

(Hafiz, 2007)

Timur was reportedly incensed because he’d spent most of his life conquering Central Asia in order to install Samarkand as the capital of the world, and yet Hafiz, he protested, would’ve been willing to sell the city for the scandalous price of a Shirazi beauty’s mole (*was she the Persian Cindy Crawford?*, I wondered). On hearing the charge, the artful Hafiz apparently bowed deeply and replied:

‘Alas, O Prince, it is this extravagance which is the cause of the poverty in which you find me.’

Timur sent him home with gifts for his wit.



## Chapter 6 – Tbilisi to Turkmenbashi

We snaked slowly back down the pass that separated Svaneti from the real world. Swathes of pine trees enveloped the mountainsides, and the bright peacock-blue of the Inguri Dam reflected the cloudless sky. The water was an impossible colour, as though it was hiding rich deposits of some undiscovered mineral. We crossed the same rickety wooden bridges as a week before, no less fearful of a watery death.

We stopped at a roadside honey-vendor. His bee farm and store filled a small patch of grass on the edge of a particularly slow and curvy stretch of road. The honey was sold in old plastic Coke bottles, but it looked pure and tasty, plus we could see the beehives. Unless he was a master swindler, he was selling the real thing. At the low prices he was asking, it was hard to say no.

Eventually the road gave way to a wide valley, scattered with cultivated fields. We were back on the plains, the mountains of Georgia behind us. But how far to Tbilisi? How far even to Gori? Hours no doubt. Georgia isn't a big country, but distances are deceiving when the roads are so bad. We hoped to stop in Gori for lunch, but the sun was low in the sky by the time we rolled towards the gigantic statue of Stalin dominating the small town of his birthplace.

Stalin granted no special favour to his countrymen when dealing out death in the name of progress or paranoia. Thousands of Georgians were sent to Siberia during his years of terror. Georgians shouldered some of the heaviest losses at Stalingrad, shot by Germans from the front or by their Russian commanders from behind. Mention Moscow nearby and they will spit on you.

We took a few photographs, but the notion of posing in front of a colossus of Stalin made me feel uneasy. Why was that statue still there? We were soon on our way. We discovered six months later that it was pulled down in the middle of the night – the last great purge of the USSR – and replaced with a memorial to Stalin's victims.

We pushed on to Tbilisi, hoping to arrive by sunset. The road improved slightly near the capital, though this introduced a new set of problems: Georgian driving. We'd already experienced some of the perils, but on the slow empty roads of Svaneti the problem had been one of vehicle versus road. Near the capital, where you can drive faster than sixty kilometres per hour, unimaginable road-anarchy reigned. You might see three cars driving abreast in the same direction on a single lane highway, leaving nothing but gutter for a car coming the opposite way. Passing a car in oncoming traffic? No problem, just forge ahead and hope it'll move. We even saw two vehicles, driving in opposite directions, pass each other, but each on the wrong side of the road. The reckless daring of it terrified me, and I was a quivering wreck by the time sunset saw us drive into the capital.

Surrounded by hills and bisected by a brisk, blue river, from a distance the city looks tranquil and sophisticated. Closer inspection reveals the truth: Tbilisi is locked in a frenzied and impassioned campaign to be the most disorderly capital in the world. Its people live by their own rules, or, it often seems, by none at all. What unites them is a common hatred for the Russians, a partial hatred for the Armenians (though this is more a chivalrous rivalry) and an unfaltering belief that Georgia is by far the greatest country on earth.

The disarray is most notable in the traffic. We'd already experienced it first hand, and after the ordeal decided to spend the rest of our time in the city on foot. But it wasn't just the traffic. The only order a pattern-hungry mind can ascribe to the city is through its miscellany of architectures; harmony through disorder: a Moorish opera house beside an art deco government ministry; a Corinthian column bearing a golden sculpture of St. George and the Dragon (a position relinquished by a scowling, concrete Lenin); a chaotic hodgepodge of wooden houses, their joisted balconies leaning this way or that, as though sharing their occupants' predilection for Georgian wine; a futuristic bridge that looked like a discarded science-fair exhibit of the spacetime-fabric; looming Orthodox and Catholic churches, vying for their share of the devout populace; neoclassical office blocks above yawning discothèques and strip clubs; Pagan temples alongside underground thrash-metal bars.

We walked up to the dilapidated fortress that bestrides the rocky hilltop to the south. The cycle of disintegration and restoration has given the fort a muddled complexion, allowing it to fit in well with the rest of the city. From the hilltop we saw, further out, dreary Soviet apartment blocks, their bland uniformity a stark contrast to the colourful inner city. We walked the length of Rustaveli Avenue in search of a hearty local meal, eventually settling on a likely-looking joint.

Georgian cuisine isn't well known in the West, but in former Soviet parts of the world, it's a favourite. Georgian restaurants fill the fine dining directories of Moscow and St Petersburg. *Shashlyk*, meat on a stick, marinated in mint and dill, is a staple. My favourite was *khinkhali*, a large dumpling that has to be eaten in one gulp or the meaty juices explode onto your lap. Inside is a delicious beef mince, infused with dill and parsley. *Khachapuri* is a cheese-coated bread with fillings of mince, potato or egg. There's plenty more on the menu, aubergines and sweet potatoes, turnips and beetroot, all topped with yoghurt, pomegranate seeds and an array of exotic spices. I thought that this was the start of a culinary tour of the ex-Soviet states. But sadly Georgia is the last bastion of gastronomy for thousands of miles, probably until India.

One thing I've always known about Georgians is that they're very partial to rugby. That morning we saw chalkboard signs all over town with variations of 'TriNations SA vs All Blacks'. I'd given up trying to follow the rugby since we'd left Europe, so this was a happy revelation. The four of us headed to Bitburger Bar later for the match and were astonished to find a sweaty

multitude of Georgians already taking their seats. Even better, most of them appeared to be supporting the Boks. We found some space with a group of particularly large locals wearing rugby jerseys, presumably from their home clubs. I wouldn't have been keen to face any of them on the rugby field, their long hair and beards lending them extra menace. They drank quickly and became more and more boisterous as the game wore on. High fives were dispensed liberally when we clinched the win, but we snuck out soon after when the celebration turned to friendly wrestling. It was at least half an hour before the stale, sweaty odour left me.

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From Tbilisi we made for Yerevan, three hundred kilometres southwards through more Caucasian highlands. Advice from an Armenian acquaintance in London, Armen, was not to spend too much time in the capital. He was part of the diaspora, most of whom seemed to view their countrymen back home like poor cousins. Armen suggested that we should go to Republic Square to see the light fountains, where every evening at six *Hooked-on-Classics* would accompany a show.

‘But it won't be very spectacular,’ he warned.

Armed with his half-hearted recommendations, we arrived in the capital, not overly excited. Armenia must surely have the highest concentration of old churches, monasteries and chapels in the world. Inevitably, this has led the tourism industry to concentrate almost exclusively on religious structures. Churches were being built here from as early as 301 AD.

We signed up for one of the excursions of the pious Armenian countryside. Our guide, also called Armen, gave us the low-down on how Armenia was able to adopt Christianity before anyone else. St Gregory the Illuminator arrived sometime late in the third century with his new religion to start converting people. The king took exception to this, and threw Gregory in a pit, leaving him to die. About thirteen years later, the king fell violently ill. He was counselled to retrieve Gregory, who he was assured would still be down there, nourished by his religion. The king was amazed to find Gregory alive, if slightly groggy and a bit blind. They nursed him back to health, and the king declared Gregory's survival a miracle, proclaiming that from that day forth every Armenian would be Christian, making Armenia the first officially Christian state.

Gregory's pit was our first stop. It's no longer just a hole, and a monastery known as Khor Virap has been built over it. To the west, the imposing Mount Ararat climbs high into the clouds. Armen reckoned that Noah's ark was still lodged somewhere on the snowy peak.

We descended by ladder from the monastery into a small, dank pit – Gregory's home for thirteen years.

‘But, it was not only the religion that was keeping him alive,’ said Armen triumphantly, as though revealing the twist of the third act, ‘An old lady lowered food and water in a basket to him

every day.' I couldn't make out whether he'd dropped this titbit in as evidence for, or repudiation of, divine intervention.

Leaving St Gregory's holy site, we proceeded to a local vineyard, where lunch was served in the home of the owner. Armenian *shashlyk* was cooking on the fire, seasoned as expected with dill. We were plied with plenty of vodka shots. One thing we learned quickly was that a finished shot glass was refilled by the host, no questions asked. But it was also very rude to leave a glass unfinished. Only the most skilled of guests is able to leave his host's house sober in this part of the world. It wouldn't be our first experience of the subtle dance between guest and host, in which the guest bids to tread that fine line between sobriety and courtesy. A shot glass was a standard setting at most lunch and dinner tables. And not just the 25ml we were used to in South Africa. In this part of the world 50ml is customary.

During lunch, Armen and the winemaker entertained us with stories about the Georgians. The Second World War had proved fertile ground for the Georgian-Armenian rivalry. They were brothers-in-arms through some of the most horrendous battles the world had ever witnessed. At Stalingrad, Georgians would apparently make a point of wiping their bums with Armenian newspapers. The Armenians' retort was that Georgian bums were becoming smarter than their heads.

Apparently, Georgians are very proud of the famous photo of the Red Army capturing Berlin, in which the soldier raising the hammer and sickle flag over the Reichstag is one of their countrymen. But not so fast, say the Armenians: look at his arm – you can see a few watches around his wrist. That means he was looting, stealing from the old and infirm, a dishonourable pursuit for a true soldier. That's Georgians for you, according to Armenians (in fact, the Russians were also embarrassed by this, so in order to get a new photo, they re-enacted the scene a few days later with a different soldier).

As with most nations in this part of the world, the Armenians have suffered terribly. Their continuing strategy seemed to be a prudent self-admission of military inferiority to the empires that surrounded them: Armenia preferred to pick a side rather than be massacred, which was probably a good approach for a small country besieged by empires. It worked, more or less, for hundreds of years, during which they were at times Russian, Persian, Ottoman Turk, and sometimes all three. Ultimately though, being a minority in another empire ended in tragedy for the Armenians.

As the Ottoman Empire splintered during World War One, the Turks busied themselves on the home front by cleansing their country of all Greeks and Armenians. The Greeks faced expulsion across the Aegean. But the Armenians, for whom a growing hatred had been nurtured by the new Young Turk government, were not so lucky. In 1915 the genocide started in earnest. Estimates vary but probably about a third of all Armenians perished in brutal and efficient Turkish massacres. The

killing took many forms: forced labour, death marches, mass burning, poisoning, shooting and drowning. Over the course of three years, up to one-and-a-half million were killed, making it the second deadliest genocide after the Holocaust. Turkey has never taken responsibility for what happened, which shames them to this day in the international community, and still prevents Armenia and Turkey from establishing diplomatic ties.

After the killings, there were very few Armenians left in Turkey. Survivors fled across the border to the part of Armenia under Russian rule. What this meant is that the eternal symbol of Armenia – the snowy-peaked Mount Ararat – is now situated in Turkey, a country with almost no Armenians living in it. You can see it from Yerevan, Armenia's capital, but its position, across a closed border, is a constant reminder to the Armenians of the century-old and still unacknowledged crime.

Armen told us more. It appeared that it wasn't just Turkey with whom the Armenians have a bone to pick. As if having one sworn enemy to their west wasn't enough, they have an even more volatile situation to their east. The Azerbaijanis' hatred for Armenians consumes them. In the wake of the USSR's disintegration, when former Soviet republics were declaring their independence, a part of Azerbaijan known as Nagorno Karabakh tried to secede and join Armenia. This scheme by local ethnic Armenians was supported by the government of Armenia. After six years of war in the mountains, Armenia prevailed. From the way Armen put things, there isn't an Azerbaijani in the world who would spurn the opportunity to sell all of Armenia into slavery.

Then to the north, as far as the Georgians are concerned, a sort of uneasy truce exists with Armenia, similar perhaps to that between Russia and Poland. War between the two is unlikely, but certainly not impossible. The only true friend with which Armenia shares a border is Iran to its south. Relations between the Christian state and what is now a radical Islamic republic have been extremely cordial for centuries. A sizeable population of Armenians lives in Iran, mostly in the cultural hub Esfahan.

Our lunch and history lesson ended with further toasts to Armenia, after which we were introduced to some of the region's wine. The Caucasian countries are proud of their wine, but these weren't very good. All the white was as sweet as the sweetest late harvest I'd ever tasted, and the red was unpalatable. Perhaps they had different ideas of what made a good wine, but whatever the reason, we didn't end up buying anything.

A warm and lazy afternoon after wine and vodka is not exactly prime church-viewing time, but that is precisely what Armen required of us. Armenian churches all look very similar: pointed domes in imitation of Mt Ararat, and sharp, angular corners that look as though they could cut through skin. Many of them are taller than they are long, perhaps also in tribute to the famous mountain. Long, narrow windows accentuate the elevation. A circular tower extends high from the

centre of the church, roofed by a typical Armenian reddish-brown vault. A small single cross adorns the pointed peak. Many of the churches are over fifteen hundred years old.

The ardent suitor of a local liege-lord's daughter supposedly built a particularly attractive monastery we visited, called Noravank. The suitor was told that if he constructed the most beautiful church in the world, he could have her hand. The lord did not expect the man to succeed, but he did, some twenty years later. Rather than give his daughter's hand to a peasant, the lord had the lovelorn builder show him around the completed structure before shoving him to his death from the open tower.

On our eventual return to Yerevan, we whiled away the evening watching the light fountains in Republic Square to the familiar eighties tunes of *Hooked-on-Classics*. Just as our Armenian friend in London had predicted, it wasn't worth hanging around for. What did interest us about Yerevan though was how Westernised it is in comparison to Tbilisi. With large Armenian populations in countries like the US, France, Australia and Argentina, Western influence in the motherland is evident – department stores, fashion outlets (Victoria's Secret, Topshop) and restaurants seem to have shaken the city's communist history.

To counterbalance our church viewing, we decided to visit the local distillery the following day. The most well-known of Armenia's exports to the world is Ararat, a cognac distilled in the heart of Yerevan. Winston Churchill refused to drink any other brandy, and was once known to reply to a question of how he remained so physically fit with:

'I only drink Armenian brandy, I only smoke Cuban cigars, and I don't play sports.'

We were told a story about the master distiller of Ararat who in 1943 found himself in Stalin's bad books, resulting in a one-way ticket to the gulag. When Churchill got wind of this he entreated Stalin to return the man to his duties, because, he said, the Allied war effort was being impaired by the sudden drop in the standard of Churchill's cognac. Stalin was not without a sense of humour (on this occasion) and the man was apparently returned to his duties. In celebration of his survival, we purchased a bottle of the highly palatable five year old.

It was time to leave the Caucasus. We planned to drive into Northern Iran, through Tehran, and along the Caspian coast to Turkmenistan, our first Central-Asian country. We wound our way downwards from Yerevan through the Armenian mountains on our way to Iran.

Invariably it is the South African passports that are viewed with suspicion by border guards around the world. But on this occasion, and even though we all had visas, it was Nina's British passport that received unwanted attention. After an hour's wait we were informed that she wouldn't be allowed in. We spoke to a few Iranians at the border post as the official hadn't seen fit to bother with an explanation.

Iran had just held an election, which there was little doubt Ahmadinejad had rigged in order to stay in power. There'd been riots and demonstrations, all amounting to nought. International pressure had come chiefly from countries like Britain, who strongly condemned the election's outcome. Britain was so outspoken that it had caused an international incident, with all British nationals suddenly being refused entry to the Islamic Republic, and, in a most cynical riposte, all Iranians applying for entry to Britain having their visas denied. It was all very 'I'm taking my ball and going home', but it had happened, and for us that was a problem.

We faced a tough decision. There were a few options on the table, including (though only implied, not mentioned) turning around and driving back to London. Getting to Central Asia from where we were stuck is not easy. The Caspian Sea blocks the way to the east, with the only southerly route being through Iran and the northerly passage through the endless steppes of Russia. We looked at a map. Nearly four thousand kilometres separated us from Turkmenistan around the north, and in any case, Russian visas were difficult to come by. The only real option, suggested by the Iranians at the border, was the Caspian Sea Ferry. It was unreliable and slow. We turned around, making for the Azerbaijani port of Baku.

In this part of the world, a route you can trace on a map is very rarely one you can take. Because of the on-going hostilities between Caucasian nations, we would have to drive a strange route to the port capital of Azerbaijan, just a hundred kilometres away as the crow flies. North through Armenia, in almost the opposite direction of the port, back across into Georgia, do a U-turn and cross into Azerbaijan. It was roughly three times further than it should've been to Baku, had everyone in the region seen eye to eye.

We obtained transit visas in Tbilisi and turned south-east. A four-hour journey later and we were at the Azerbaijani border, only to discover that the embassy had made a hash of Matt and my visas. By that point, Elroy was already in no-man's land, between the Georgian and the Azerbaijani sides, so Matt and I took a bus back to Tbilisi, leaving Beth and Nina to look after Elroy in no-man's land. There was no point signing the vehicle back into Georgia, a very time-consuming process. We'd be quick, we promised.

We only arrived back at the border post late the following afternoon. Beth and Nina had grown tired of waiting, and at about the time they thought we would be returning from Tbilisi, decided to commence the process of signing Elroy through the border. Matt and I cleared the Georgian side and were ambling through no-man's land. Nearing the vehicle, we could see a border guard gesticulating at Beth and Nina. He was shouting hysterically, and as he did so, his Kalashnikov danced in the air at his waist, attached by a strap. We started running towards them. As we neared them, he turned to face us with a menacing glare. He grabbed his Kalashnikov and brandished it at us.

‘Just stay there!’ shouted Beth.

‘What is this all about?’ I asked.

‘The sticker,’ said Nina.

Matt and I looked at each other. What sticker? The guard then started marching animatedly around Elroy. Every time he swooped past the rear of the vehicle, he banged his stubby finger against the back window, shouting ‘Karabakh!’ After he’d circled the vehicle four times, he began to rip at something with his fingernails on the rear window. I couldn’t make out what it was.

But Matt worked it out. The guard was trying to tear off the Armenian sticker. We had one for every country we’d driven through so far. Georgia, Turkey, Bosnia, Serbia and many others – they were all there, evidence of our itinerary. The mere mention of the word Armenia sends an Azerbaijani into fits of rage, so seeing a little sticker that says ‘I love Armenia’ had pushed this border guard right over the edge.

I wanted to help him, to be rid of my Armenian transgressions, but when I approached, he just bellowed, waving his Kalashnikov at me, so we were forced to stand and watch as he struggled to scratch the sticker off. His fingernails must have been too short, because he couldn’t grasp it. I was worried he might resort to more extreme tactics. But he got it eventually, and in a final, melodramatic motion, ripped the sticker off Elroy. He tore it up, tossing it on the ground and scuffing the pieces into the dust with his heavy black boot.

None of us said a word. I thought he was done, but this was just the start of his quest for Armenian contraband. He threw open the boot and started ferreting through our goods. A medical-aid kit that might have contained opium? Not interested. A few suspicious-looking bottles? Not suspicious enough. He knew what he was looking for, and he was a hound on the scent of fox. Eventually he got to the book box. He hurried through the titles, dumping them on the back seat, until he withdrew his prize triumphantly. In his hands he held *The Lonely Planet Guide to the Caucasus: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan*.

He continued his diatribe, still in Azerbaijani, reprimanding us for owning a copy of the diabolical volume. He opened it, hurrying through the pages until he found the section on Karabakh. He pointed at the chapter title, underlining it with his fingernail over and over until he’d imprinted it on the page. He flipped to the end of the section and grabbed the lot in his hand, ripping it from the spine. It came out so easily that he overbalanced and fell back onto Elroy, which made him angrier. He dropped the rest of the book onto the ground and started tearing the pages into shreds. Each handful he threw over his shoulder, the breeze carrying them off into the grey Azeri dusk.

And then it was over. The thunderstorm had passed. He’d made sure that no piece of paper bearing the name ‘Karabakh’ would cross into his country, and he mildly pointed us in the direction of the guardhouse, saying in English ‘take passport’. I looked across at Beth. She shrugged. We

started walking slowly to the car, apprehensively at first, half expecting him to come roaring back, but he didn't. He just trudged back to the guardhouse, shoulders slumped, exhausted from his half-hour performance. The rest of the process went smoothly, and we were soon on the road to Baku, minus an 'I Love Armenia' sticker and about 25 pages of our *Lonely Planet*.

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The ferry trip from the sprawling nouveau riche gloom of Baku, unlikely Olympic Candidate City 2020, across the Caspian Sea to Turkmenbashi, is something one should do only once. The distance is a relatively short three-hundred-and-twenty kilometres, across a becalmed inland sea, and anywhere else it would be rightly viewed as a fairly routine crossing. But we weren't anywhere else: we were in the ex-Soviet boondocks. The ferry had no fixed schedule and we were unable to find a single person in Baku who was willing to commit to a date when the next ship would be leaving. Some sources on the Internet stated that there were multiple ferries doing the route every day, others that there was only one a week.

At the port itself, opinion was divided between a departure that night, and one in two days' time. The stout woman in the Baku tourism office was convinced there wouldn't be a ship leaving for at least three days, so we prepared ourselves for a long layover in Baku, a city where if you had no business dealing in oil and gas, you had no business being in at all. Later that night more information somehow became available and a consensus was slowly reached between the various officials that a boat would be leaving that night. We met up with some students from Bristol driving the Mongol Rally so we were able to pass the time over beers, *shashlyk* and *shisha* in a local *chaikhana*.

At about two in the morning a boat finally arrived in the port and a few exhausted-looking passengers disembarked unsteadily. By four our documents had been checked by all the relevant officials, and by five-thirty we were driving on board, just as dawn broke. For some strange reason, the Azerbaijani officials had a habit of saying 'good luck' every time they stamped a document. What they should really have said is, 'Bad luck. You are now aboard the *Hasan Aliiev*.'

The *Hasan Aliiev* is a ramshackle and rusty Soviet-era ferry designed primarily for the transport of rail carriages. We soon realised that the hundred-dollar price tag for the journey represented the worst value for money in the world. The state of the ship meant that for most of the journey the fear of a watery death would never be far from our thoughts. Our berths were damp and dirty, the wallpaper peeling off and water dripping from myriad leaks. The other passengers were Turkish truckers, a few Chinese merchants and some Turkmen peasants.

The only English information available was an evacuation map, which optimistically included a restaurant, cafeteria, games room and music hall on its schematic. The ship itself bore no resemblance to the diagram, the cafeteria being the only existing amenity, furnished with rusted

metal tables, a single backgammon set and a few faded posters of exotic island destinations and baskets of fruit.

Three-hundred-and-twenty kilometre's worth of Caspian Sea went by quickly, and we soon caught our first glimpse of the port of Turkmenbashi to the east.

'That wasn't too bad,' said Matt, cautiously optimistic.

Our Turkmenbashi vista contrasted with the one we'd had of Baku on departure, when the featureless grey of the city had merged with the sea in a dull pastel canvas. Turkmenbashi rose magnificently out of the sea on dramatic stone cliffs. Night was probably the best time to see the port, with the city lights glimmering on the Caspian.

When the anchor was lowered, we should've realised something was wrong. There was no sign that we'd be docking anytime soon, so we went to bed, steeling ourselves for a night in the dank cabins. The next morning, after a meagre breakfast, we walked up and down the boat asking passengers for some clarity on the situation. Worryingly, most of them hardly seemed to have registered that we were within a stone's throw of the harbour. What did they know that we didn't? Delays in Central Asia are measured in days, not hours, and the most pessimistic estimates are generally the most accurate.

It didn't take long for us to run out of food. It looked like we'd have to sample the cafeteria's menu after all. On our first day languishing off the coast of Turkmenistan we could, for a small fortune in US dollars, purchase the crew's leftovers of deep fried potato crisps, grey plastic sausages and tomato cucumber salad. On our second day, a stew of tomato, onion and green pepper was served with a side salad of tomato, onion and green pepper. On day three only *plov* remained – a sort of minced meat with rice. No one even broached the topic of what sort of meat it might be. Vodka was all we could order to drink.

The only two ferry-related Russian expressions in our phrasebook were 'what time does the ferry leave?' which didn't elicit anything other than a *hurumph* from anyone we cared to ask, and 'where are the lifejackets', which on the *Hasan Aliiev* was a rhetorical question. The only phrase worth asking was '*Turkmenbashi Sivodnya*', which more or less means 'Are we going to arrive in Turkmenbashi today?' The response was always '*Nyet, zaftra*' (no, tomorrow), and then for good measure, '*Inshallah*' (God willing).

It wasn't the waiting so much as the interminable uncertainty of our situation that was so frustrating. The other passengers were completely unfazed, and could presumably have waited for weeks before growing concerned. The captain in particular was in no rush to go anywhere, spending most of the time fishing off the back in a faded Hawaiian shirt. It was forty degrees above deck and even hotter below during the day, and at night, the creaking and dripping was enough to drive me mad.

On our third night we were considering swimming ashore when a crew member came over to inform us that we would be docking soon. Having become immune to optimism we ignored her and headed off to bed at about eleven after a few depressing vodkas. Minutes later there was a furious banging on our door and a deranged looking woman burst into the room, threw our rubbish out the porthole and gestured to us to get on deck.

The short journey into port was exhilarating not only because we were finally nearing the end, but also because of the stark industrial beauty of the city, whose massive refinery glowed red, illuminating the town in an otherworldly light. Silhouettes of ruined ships dotted the shore, rusting pipelines criss-crossed the sandy expanses and hundreds of cranes rose up from a flotilla of communist-era transport ships. Further inland, featureless Soviet apartment blocks and obscure municipal monoliths lit up the dark mountains.

Getting into port was not the end of the journey, and we still had our first Central-Asian customs to clear. The system was a perplexing procedure of queues, payments, stamps, receipts and inspections. Officials were variously meticulous, indolent, illiterate, abrasive, or a combination of these, and it was another ten hours before we were nearly certain that we'd crossed into Turkmenistan.

The ferry journey across the Caspian, we all agreed as we headed through the desert for the capital, Ashgabat, was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

## Chapter 7 – Ashgabat to Khiva

Although translated directly from Persian as ‘The city that love built’, Ashgabat is known by most as ‘The White City’. More than anything, it was the blinding whiteness that struck me first. It glimmered brightly in the distance as we negotiated the desert road from Turkmenbashi to the capital. As we got closer, we had to avert our eyes.

The Turkmen government requires all visitors to be chaperoned. Our guide was Tatyana, who’d met us (late) in Turkmenbashi before regally assuming front-seat privileges. The dusty desert highway from the port to the capital had taken two days of solid driving, and our collective humour was nearing record lows by the time we got close to the white marble buildings.

Late in the afternoon, it was still forty degrees when we reached the city. Tatyana directed us to the hotel in a mixture of Russian and English before deserting us. When were we going to see her again? Where could we find some food? Her parting comment had been that we should wash our car. We ignored her rude suggestion and retreated to the relative peace of our rooms. We’d been warned that we weren’t allowed to go anywhere without her, so until she decided to rejoin us, we were stuck in the hotel. It was a stark establishment with more guards than staff, and the restaurant looked as though it hadn’t seen custom in weeks. For the time being we’d have to survive on whatever was left in Elroy’s fridge.

In the early evening, when the temperature became more amenable, we decided to venture forth into the unknown without Tatyana. Matt reasoned that she would’ve told us not to go anywhere if she’d meant for us not to. Nina wasn’t so sure. It was hard to believe that we weren’t allowed to drive around the capital in our own vehicle, so common sense prevailed and we took a drive.

Grotesque marble buildings lined the boulevards. Their dazzling façades seemed to focus the setting sun directly on me, like a magnifying glass on an ant. The avenues were wide and ostentatious, but completely deserted, and it felt as though we’d walked through the looking glass into some dystopian fantasy. Not ten minutes into our drive, as we neared the city centre, we were flagged down by a policeman.

‘Damn it Matt, I knew we should’ve stayed at the hotel,’ said Nina.

The policeman ran his finger slowly down the side mirror and looked disgustedly at the dirt it left on his index finger. Sweat was dripping from his jaw. He pushed his stubby finger into my face and ran it across my cheek, leaving a streak of dirt. What was his problem? He signalled to me to get out. He escorted me around the vehicle, angrily noting the state of the dusty back window, the dirty tyres and a stripe of mud below the fuel cap where spilt diesel had coagulated with desert sand.

I shook my head apologetically.

‘*Izvenite*,’ I said, hoping that the Russian for ‘excuse me’ meant the same as ‘sorry’ in Turkmenistan. ‘We have just been driving from Turkmenbashi. We’ll wash it as soon as we can.’

He was visibly agitated by the dirty car, but seemed willing to let this one slide, probably because he couldn’t communicate very well with us. He pointed his finger towards a car wash, just two blocks down.

‘You clean. No dirty in Ashgabat.’

Relieved to be out of trouble, we pulled into the car wash. While five men gave the Land Cruiser a spray-down, Beth pulled out a guidebook and quickly skimmed through the section on Ashgabat to try and work out what we’d done wrong.

The ‘Glorious Turkmenbashi’ had been in charge since Soviet times, when he rose to power as secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party. In 1990, when the Soviet Union broke up, Turkmenbashi (whose real name was Saparmurat Niyazov) assumed command of Turkmenistan as president-for-life. On his death in 2006 he was replaced by his dentist, who is also rumoured to be his illegitimate son.

Beth noted that Turkmenbashi had renamed the days of the week, months of the year, a meteorite, a moon crater, a breed of horse, airports and a city after himself and members of his family. He even changed the Turkmen word for bread to his late mother’s name. He banned beards, long hair, opera, ballet and circuses, and made it illegal to play recorded music at weddings. He also forbade anyone from driving a dirty car in Ashgabat. At least it meant booming business for car washes, as there must have been no shortage of that kind of work in this desert country.

We drove out of the car wash and parked near the city centre, where most of the guidebook-listed sites are to be found. On foot, we entered an immense concrete square, decorated with shaped plants, which must’ve been watered almost constantly just to stay alive. At the centre stood Ashgabat’s most renowned attraction: The Arch of Neutrality. It was erected at a cost of twelve million dollars to celebrate the unanimous endorsement of the Turkmenbashi’s policy of neutrality. Perched atop a huge tripod that looks like a Martian spaceship from *War of the Worlds* is a golden statue of the Turkmenbashi. It rotates during the day so that it always faces the sun – a garish monument to the greed of a dictator.

Just next to the arch is a huge statue of a bull. Sitting on its back is another golden incarnation of the Turkmenbashi, this time as a baby, literally taking the bull by the horns. He had it erected to commemorate his personal struggle after his mother died.

Most of Ashgabat’s buildings come straight out of Orwell’s 1984: The Arch of Neutrality; The Ministry of Fairness; The Museum of Turkmen Values (also called the ‘toilet plunger’ by locals). To the east we could see the Turkmenbashi’s palace, an extravagant and brash ensemble of white pillars, topped with a bright golden dome. South, looking towards the mountains of Iran was a

mosque, very similar to the palace, though here the dome was turquoise.

But where was everyone? The only people we'd seen were guards, glowering suspiciously at us as we walked by. We decided to look for the part of Ashgabat where people lived, if indeed there was anyone actually living here: the whole city centre was an empty monument to a mad dictator.

A silent road led west out of the city centre and into a vastly different Ashgabat. Ramshackle houses lined the filthy streets, most unpaved. Consulting our map, we located the bazaar, advertised as 'the oldest in Central Asia'. From the safety of our air-conditioned vehicle it looked like fun. But as I opened the door the smells and sounds overwhelmed me. It was vibrant, but also chaotic. We could hardly hear for the noise of vendors and buyers haggling over stationery, herbs, camel milk or carpets – an assortment of goods characteristically Central Asian. Most people were poorly dressed, and even the merchant class bore shabby garb. A scuffle had broken out between two teenagers manning the camel-milk kiosk. It appeared to be over a customer with a bulk order.

After a short browse I knew I wouldn't survive long. I wasn't made of stern enough stuff to participate in the random chaos of this market. But I had to taste some camel milk before withdrawing to the hotel. I placed some of my Manat coins into the grubby hand of the vendor who'd lost the earlier scuffle to his colleague, and received a Coke bottle filled with a curdled white and clear liquid in return. A crowd gathered to watch the pasty foreigner taking his first sip of camel milk. I took a swig and gagged, but held it in, not wanting to be rude. Forcing the fermented liquid down my throat I smiled through streaming eyes as they laughed at me.

On our way back to the hotel, we passed a gigantic statue of a book. It was pink and green and stood about twenty metres above a large round platform. About fifty fountains danced around the base. The front cover read *Ruhnama*, and above that the name of the author, predictably 'Turkmenbashi'. This tome was penned by the versatile dictator to help guide his people towards his vision of history, culture and Turkmenistan's future.

*The Book of the Soul* is required reading for everyone doing any sort of exam in Turkmenistan, including driving tests. A copy was once rocket-propelled into space where it will orbit the earth for the next fifty years or so. I found an English translation on the Internet. The text discussed Turkmenbashi's divine purpose:

'This position and responsibility, which have been given to me without my asking, have motivated me to call up my spiritual, intellectual and physical strength that Allah granted me and use them as a societal force to achieve progress in my country.'

After our first day in Ashgabat it was already clear how he aimed to achieve that progress: Turkmenistan sits on a winning lottery ticket of natural gas, and most of the money was channelled into his personal account, and towards his goal of embellishing Ashgabat with white marble. In the new part of town the boulevards continued for kilometres, lined on either side by gleaming

apartment blocks and hotels. But they all stood empty. No one could afford to stay there. The disenfranchised masses were forced to get by selling stationery and camel's milk to each other.

We managed to track down a shopping centre called Yimpash on our way back to the hotel, which we thought would probably have something good for dinner. For the first time since leaving Europe we found a food court that sold pizza, burgers, fried chicken, milkshakes and ice cream. The centre was air-conditioned and it exuded a sense of order and calm that we hadn't felt in months. A Western oasis in the middle of an exotic police state, it housed an Internet cafe, a pool bar, clothing stores, perfume shops and bookstores.

Matt became annoyed with me when I suggested our third visit. He hadn't come all the way to Central Asia, he declared, to sit in a Pizza Hut and surf the web. Truth be told, I was annoyed with myself too. Matt dropped me off and went to see some more ridiculous government ministries with Nina. Beth and I overdosed on burgers and waffles. That evening I retired to the relative safety of my hotel room and distracted myself from Ashgabat's intimidating atmosphere with more pleasant thoughts of Samarkand. I rolled over and went to sleep trying not to think of leery Turkmen police, hilariously abbreviated as PYGGS in this part of the world.

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We met up with our new guide Max at the hotel on the morning we were to leave Ashgabat. Well-groomed and self-assured, he liked the sound of his own voice far more than he liked listening to us.

'You need the meat and the vodka', he said, leading us around another of Ashgabat's heaving markets. The vodka was easy to find, as it is everywhere in this part of the world. Finding meat wasn't quite so straightforward. We passed some butcher stalls, and I grimaced at the smell.

Max grew impatient. 'Come, hurry, we must go! We must go to Gates of Hell! Many kilometres and desert.' We found a stall where the gold-toothed proprietor seemed to appreciate the importance of aroma when selling meat. We bought a fairly fresh piece of what we were reasonably sure was either beef or lamb.

We headed off on one of only three national highways in the country: our road went North from Ashgabat, straight into the Karakum desert. The road wasn't as bad as expected but it was eerily empty, just like downtown Ashgabat. Not a single car or truck passed us for hours.

Max had told us that this would be a real test for Elroy. About five hours on, we'd take a right turn onto a road that barely existed, and head directly into the dunes. Our destination was the Darvaza Gas Crater, a spectacle that could only exist in a country like Turkmenistan.

'You know four-by-four drive?' Max kept asking me anxiously, 'Not good drive to Gates of Hell, you know, many flour on road.' This made me nervous. Sure I'd had some practice on a few sketchy Georgian passes, but desert driving – well it wasn't in my repertoire. This was a deadly

concoction of desert sand and dust, or 'flour', by Max's reckoning.

We turned off at a place that only a guide could have known and headed east on a sand track. It became less and less serviceable as we went, and I soon had to change into low range. Max became more fidgety as we got deeper into the desert. His cool demeanour melted as Elroy got bogged down from time to time in especially soft patches of sand. He kept shaking his head in disbelief as I turned to avoid an obstacle or accelerated through deep sand.

'Would you prefer to drive?' I asked.

'No! No! I no drive,' he yelled.

Late in the afternoon we arrived at the campsite, just a few hundred metres from the crater rim. A couple of other tents had already been pitched in the desert sand. We began setting up camp. Max insisted on doing the cooking. We took out the Cadac for him to use, but he just stared at us and asked, 'Where's your Big Pot?' He also expressed his annoyance that we'd neglected to marinate the meat for forty-eight hours. Beth pointed out that we'd only bought it that morning, on his advice, and that he had been with us the whole time since then, but he merely took another swig of the vodka he'd opened at lunchtime.

I turned my attention to the other two campers. They were American. Roger had been a marine years before, but now worked as a contractor for the United States embassy in Ashgabat. He'd also been posted at the embassy in Kyrgyzstan for a few years before moving to Ashgabat. His wife Sandra was mostly silent.

We found it difficult to ascertain exactly what it was that Roger did for the US embassy. He avoided direct questions, and by the end of our conversation he'd learned about as much as there was to learn about me, and I still knew nothing about him. A contractor could be many things. No matter which way I asked the question, I was unable to discover the true nature of his work. What was an ex-marine doing contracting for the US government in ex-Soviet states?

He kept the focus on us. I explained why we were taking our route and how we'd come upon the idea in the first place. I'd only just launched into my revelation that it was possible to snowboard in Uzbekistan when he cut me off.

'Well then you have to go heli-skiing in Kyrgyzstan. You can do it for a hundred and fifty bucks', he said.

One hundred and fifty dollars? It seemed unlikely.

'I did it two months ago,' he said. 'They have an old Russian military helicopter that will take you right to the top of the Tian Shans.'

'But it's summer,' I replied.

'You can heli-ski all year round in the Tian Shans. They go up to seven thousand metres. Just don't expect a guide. Or safety.'

Dinner was served. Max had metamorphosed into Mad Max during the course of his haphazard preparations, having polished off nearly a whole bottle of vodka by himself. He withdrew a second bottle, which he made us all partake in, pouring shot after shot.

‘Vodka tastes best in the desert!’ he shouted to no one in particular as he blundered around the campfire.

As the sun set, we became aware of why the Gates of Hell was so named, and why many ‘strangest places in the world’ lists featured it. During the day it looked like a fairly innocuous hole in the ground, but now colossal fiery plumes rose from the pit, making me reconsider my stance on the afterlife. On the rim of the crater were the ghostly remains of the Russian mining structures that had once stood there. I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

It was time to leave Max and take a closer look at the Gates of Hell. Matt led the way. The four of us scrambled downhill in the dark towards the fiery pit, which was much further than it had seemed a few hours before. We were also beginning to feel the effects of Max’s vodka. As we neared the rim, the turbulent heat hit us as the wind changed direction.

There were no fences. We walked to the very edge of the pit and peered into its heart. Flames the size of buildings shot up from the base and sides, a hundred metres below, and you couldn’t look for longer than a few seconds for the heat of it. We started walking around the rim, tentative and unsteady. Very soon we had no idea how far we’d gone. The crater was almost perfectly round, and looking outwards from the perimeter we could just see darkness. No campsite, no path, nothing that would give us an idea of which direction to go.

I began to feel dizzy and disorientated. Beth was a bit pale, and she stumbled dangerously from time to time as we continued around the edge. After circling the pit at least twice, we grew anxious. How would we know which way to walk back to the tents? Night was behind us, and a huge fiery pit in front of us. We couldn’t even see Matt and Nina anymore; we’d gone ahead of them. Suddenly a rough hand grabbed my shoulder from the darkness. I was about to hit back when I realised that it was Roger.

‘Easy does it,’ he said, ‘You need to be careful round here, you know. You don’t want to get lost in the desert.’

We found Matt and Nina further round. They appeared to have given up and were sitting on the sand, looking a bit bewildered. We walked in silence back to the campsite, Roger leading the way. I had no idea how he knew which way to go, but eventually I could make out the faint glimmer of a fireplace. It was invisible from where we’d been, especially after losing our night vision by staring into the hypnotising flames.

Back at camp, after a few more cursory attempts at discovering the nature of Roger’s duties at the US consulate, we gave up and went to bed. I rubbed my shoulder as I lay in bed. Roger had

strong hands.

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Max was up early for a man who'd consumed a bottle and a half of vodka the previous night. He could sense that his duties were nearing an end, and seemed keen to be done with us. He had to deliver us to the border that day, with the only stop being Khunya Urgench. We were running low on fuel, but Max was uncharacteristically resourceful when faced with the prospect of becoming stranded in the desert, and we were able to buy some from a local village at a price as high as the laws of supply and demand could have predicted. I assumed that Max also cut himself into the deal.

Back on the highway, driving north, the road began to deteriorate again. The sweltering heat had sucked everything dry, including, it seemed, the road: in places the desert sand had shifted right over it.

Max recounted the city's tragic history as we neared the ruins. Khunya Urgench was at the heart of a diplomatic incident that changed the course of history, one that led to the destruction of most of Central Asia and the genocide of its people. To fully understand the tragedy, you have to go back to the eighth century AD, to the prosperous times when the Arabs ruled Central Asia.

The city had become a major trading centre for the surrounding nomadic tribes, as well as a thriving economic and cultural centre. It grew in size and influence, and over three centuries it became one of the most affluent and cultured cities in the region.

The 10th century historian, al-Muqaddasi, described the town as having four huge gates whose workmanship had no equal in Central Asia. Ali, who ruled in 997, built a huge palace and laid out a square in front of the palace gates in imitation of the Registan of Bukhara. At this time a wooden dam diverted the course of the Amu Darya (Oxus) to the east of the city.

But the prosperity of Khunya Urgench was not to last. In the 1200s, Shah Muhammed of Khorezm, having made his capital there, established diplomatic ties with a Mongol ruler in the East known as Genghis Khan who'd learned of the city's wealth. In 1218 a Mongol caravan, on its way to Khunya Urgench, was attacked at an oasis north of the city. Whether the caravan contained Mongol spies, as some have speculated, or whether it had attacked first in order to establish a pretext for war, no one will ever know, but we do know that its merchants were massacred. The enraged Genghis demanded that Shah Muhammed extradite the local governor responsible. The Shah refused.

By 1221, a vast Mongol army was at the city gates. Chinese engineers, Mongol cavalry and an infantry assimilated from other subjugated lands laid siege to Khunya Urgench. Within a few months they had breached the walls.

Genghis began his western campaign, which would ultimately take him all the way to Europe, by butchering every man, woman and child in Khunya Urgench. Estimates for the death toll vary. The

city's numbers were swollen by surrounding tribes who'd taken shelter before the siege began. Many scholars believe that somewhere in the vicinity of a million people were put to the sword by the Mongols over the course of a few days. Only a few escaped to tell the tale. Genghis allowed this to happen as part of the psychological warfare that would characterise his campaigns. A paralysing fear took hold of Central Asia, and soon after, Persia.

We clambered out of Elroy into the shimmering heat of the ruined city. The few ancient buildings scattered around a vast empty space could not divert our attention from the city's single dominating feature: a soaring minaret, predating the city's destruction. It's known as the Gutluk Temir, and legend has it that Genghis had deemed it so beautiful and perfect (it stands over sixty metres high, at one time the tallest brick minaret in the world) that he decided not to demolish it. It leans slightly – perhaps Asia's answer to Pisa.

Genghis was a very thorough mass murderer. Other than the tower, there is not much left of Khunya Urgench. The few remaining buildings are all in various states of disrepair or restoration. A high portal guards the entrance to the principal mausoleum. It is elegantly proportioned and a broken dome sits at the centre. Another smaller mausoleum sits beneath a stout conical tower, which still carries traces of the blue marble that once decorated it. The city is considered to be very holy, dotted as it is with ancient mausoleums. Local Muslims may forgo their Haj to Mecca by making a pilgrimage to Khunya Urgench. This is quite a fortunate loophole for many of Central Asia's impoverished Muslim inhabitants who have been dealt the double blow of poor economies and a recent communist past. A flight to Saudi Arabia was out of the question for most of Turkmenistan's citizens. The overwhelming majority of the fiscal spend had already been ring-fenced for dressing up obscure ministries in white marble.

We walked past a small hill within the ruins where a group of women were gathered, clapping and shouting. A young woman wrapped herself in an old coat, lay on the ground, and rolled down the dusty hill to the bottom. She got up shaken and in some pain. Then another followed, in the same coat. Then another.

'Ai Ai Aieeee!' yelled the spectators as each woman took her turn to roll.

The spectacle was oddly engrossing – women rolling down a hill in a big dirty jacket and limping back up, dusty-faced but serene. An excited bustle as the next woman readied herself for the roll. She dusted off the jacket and put it on, tying the belt tightly around her waist. She murmured a quick prayer while her friends offered support; those who had already participated no doubt giving rolling advice, those who had not just offering general words of encouragement. She lay down at the top of the hill and let gravity take her. The rolling accelerated quickly down the steep incline. Each contestant had a different trajectory. Some veered left, others right onto the rocks. Very few went perfectly straight. Everyone cheered as the roller finished, standing up

tentatively. Max told us that it was a fertility ritual. We watched them, clapping and cheering as we willed their future children into existence.

Max tore us away from the spectacle and herded us into Elroy. He had a flight to catch. Nearing the Uzbek border, we had one more Turkmen treat. We pulled off the highway for some food and walked into a roadhouse where we were warned by the waiter of the imminent arrival of many guests. A hundred colourful people hustled into the restaurant. Large amplifiers stuttered and music began to blast – nineties techno with deep bass and lyrics in either Russian or Turkmen. Everyone began to dance and in the midst of the throng, the groom held his bride. She looked very young and a little unhappy but Max assured us that the tradition here was for brides not to smile.

No food or drinks were served; sober guests were dancing wildly to the techno with steps that didn't look at all traditional and in ways that Westerners would only dare after five glasses of champagne.

Max hurried us swiftly out, and we were soon at the border. The office was liberally decorated with photographs of Gurbanguly (the current president). One was a collage celebrating the dentist's many achievements – flying a helicopter, performing open heart surgery, driving a Formula One racer past the chequered flag. But each picture showed exactly the same photo of the dictator. Just the backgrounds were different.

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The most impressive part of Khiva is undoubtedly its colossal city walls. They've been restored almost precisely to their former glory by an Uzbek government keen to flex its nationalist muscle. You can see what the city used to look like, but the downside is that it's hard to discern which parts are four hundred years old and which are fake. Khiva is the modest sister of Bukhara and Samarkand, the two elite and fabled Silk Road cities. Many Westerners have not heard of Khiva before, perhaps because it isn't mentioned in Polo or Keats or Flecker, and no one knows anyone who's been there.

Parking the vehicle outside a likely looking bedsit, we were greeted at the door by a girl, Feruza, who looked at most eleven.

'Come inside, please,' she offered, in what must have been at least her third language. 'We have bed and food. Then you come into town of Khiva with me. I am businesswoman. I have shop.'

'Ah, *biznizmienka*,' I volunteered, keen to use what scant Russian vocabulary I had.

'*Da*, yes,' she said laughing at my pronunciation, '*Biznizmienka*. You come to see shop and buy many things.'

There was no doubt who ran her family's establishment. Feruza took the money, made out the receipts, gave us police forms to fill out, checked our passports, showed us to our rooms and offered sightseeing advice. I wondered briefly where her parents were, and whether they saw all the profits

of their business. Feruza had a wily look, the look of a *biznizmienka*. We followed her around the city, but I soon grew tired of our excursion, which was really a tour of the establishments of her business associates. A restaurant here, a *chaikhana* there, and at least five souvenir stores selling the same wares. Politely we told her that would prefer to wander the city on our own. She didn't bat an eyelid.

‘Well you must be hungry. Come, I show you place for dinner.’

We soon realised that the path of least resistance was the only easy way out, so we prepared ourselves for some ordinary *shashlyk* and *plov* at her business associate's restaurant.

On a tour of the walls that evening, we were able to take in a full panorama of Khiva. Brick minarets rose out of a sea of brown desert structures, transporting me straight into Arabian Nights. The minarets were crowned with a shiny turquoise brick that from a suitable angle cut the desert sun into a thousand brilliant refractions. One minaret was especially fat and ungainly. Covered in brick patterns for its full, if diminutive length, the Kalta Minor is actually a monument to the failure of its patron, Mukhammed-Aminkhan, who was trying to build the tallest minaret in Central Asia in the 1800s. To be so tall, its base had to be much fatter than those of its less aspirational peers, of which there are nearly 50 in Khiva. While the tower was under construction, the emir of Bukhara got wind of Mukhammed's lofty ambitions and made a deal with the architect to build an even larger one afterwards in Bukhara. Legend has it that when Mukhammed discovered his employee's treachery, he had him thrown from the incomplete minaret, which by that point was just a few storeys tall. After that, no one dared to continue work on the minaret, and so it stands incomplete today, with a wide base and a large circular top, like a tiled miniature cooling tower.

Getting out of the city a few days later in Elroy proved far more difficult than getting in. Much of the walled section of Khiva is an unfathomable maze of narrowing thoroughfares and dead ends. Finding our way in had been easy, but getting out was an altogether different proposition. After perhaps our fourth reversal and probably tenth wrong turn, Matt surrendered the navigating to Nina, who seemed to have a better sense for that sort of thing.

‘It's because it was dark, damn it,’ he mumbled from the back seat to where he'd been relegated.

Nina got us out the city walls in fifteen minutes, with only two wrong turns and a single dead-end reversal. Soon we were speeding towards Tajikistan, and the Pamir Highway.

## Chapter 8 – Penjacent to Karakul

We'd hoped to reach Dushanbe by nightfall, but the dirt road persisted, and so reaching the Tajik border before dark became the new goal. We made it to the crossing point just in time for dinner – their dinner – which meant we'd have to wait. We sat in the car, frustrated, as the sun sank lower over the Fann Mountains just beyond. The fickle electricity stopped working again, and when, after coffee and dessert, the border eventually reopened, the officers weren't able to process us by computer. They'd decided to turn us away for the night, but some well-practised diplomacy from a local farmer convinced them that they could let us through by taking down our details manually, then capturing them on their system once the lights came on again. We were so relieved not to have to spend the night in the dust alongside a border post that we failed to notice the error that had been committed when the officials were crossing the 't's and dotting the 'i's. Weeks later on our re-entry to Uzbekistan we would pay for that oversight.

We made for the border town of Penjacent and stayed at the local hotel, which was deserted. Matt found the manager after knocking on just about every door in the five-storey building. A bearded man emerged in a gown, the ash building up dangerously at the end of his cigarette. He told us that his *Intourist* (a Soviet hotel chain) had seen better days. I looked around at the moth-eaten furnishings and dirty floors. He was certainly an optimist.

Before the splintering of the Soviet Union, Russians had taken their holidays all over the empire. Now they were unwelcome in Central Asia, and the impact on tourism was predictable. The hotel looked as though it had once been a thriving summer mountain retreat, but now it was in a terrible state of disrepair. Our manager was able to rustle up some mystery meat and *plov*, which we ate only because we were very hungry.

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The road we had to follow the next day to Dushanbe was particularly bad, he told us. It crossed the Fann Mountains via a pass that seemed to wind upwards indefinitely. But it was only 235 kilometres to the capital, and we figured that even on a terrible road we should be there by lunch if we left early.

As usual, we were well off the mark. It ended up taking us the entire day to get to Dushanbe on a road in varying degrees of disrepair the whole way. Luckily the scenery was captivating. The Fanns boast eight peaks over 5000 metres with names, like 'Energy' and 'Zamok'. Driving to a height of 4300 metres, we could see lakes, valleys and peaks, and when we eventually neared the top of the highest pass, we were above the snowline. The day before we'd been in the middle of the desert, the fine sand blowing across the road and obscuring it from view. Now it was the snow that was hiding the road, high up in the mountains of Tajikistan.

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Other than Timur, Omar Khayyam is without question Samarkand's most famous son. Although he wasn't born there, Khayyam spent much of his life in the city, learning, teaching and writing.

He was born in Persia in 1048, and moved to Samarkand when he was still young in order to could study and mingle with the greatest minds of his time. While Europe was dithering through the dark ages, Khayyam was writing major treatises on algebra, geometry and physics, and influencing changes in the calendar through the study of astronomy.

In the West he's most famous for his poetry, in particular the *Rubaiyat*, a celebration of wine, love and mortality (though mostly wine). Its English translation in 1859, by Edward Fitzgerald, re-popularised Khayyam after centuries of virtual obscurity and made the *Rubaiyat* one of the most popular works of the day. At the time, most average Americans and certainly every American writer could quote from it. Stanza XII of the *Rubaiyat* neatly sums up the essence of his accessible poem.

*Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,  
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse — and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness —  
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.*

(Khayyam, *Rubaiyat* (Edward Fitzgerald Translation), 1859)

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Dushanbe claims to be the greenest city in the world. It did appear relatively verdant in comparison to its stark outskirts, but it's far more likely to be recognised internationally for having the most policemen per square kilometre. Down Lenin Road (that most ubiquitous of Central-Asian street names), there were roadblocks every two hundred metres. The Tajik patrolmen were generally quite pleasant, if maybe slightly bored, but though they never stopped us for longer than a couple of minutes, they soon became a bit of a nuisance. What was their job exactly? All they did was stand in the road all day stopping cars and sending them on their way. With our UK number plates on an obviously foreign vehicle, we were of particular interest. Many were curious about what we were doing in their country, which by all accounts is not a tourist destination.

It appeared that in Tajikistan, the police force is one of the biggest employers. This was a convention from Soviet days, when they'd had the honourable responsibility of apprehending 'enemies of the people'. These days they don't have quite so grand a mandate. In gloomy submission, the vestiges of Dushanbe's once formidable constabulary whiles away its hours on Lenin Road, a few hundred metres apart.

We discovered later that the reason they all shook our hand as we stopped was that they expected a small payoff, as was custom in these parts. We'd been oblivious to this tradition and so just shook

their hands enthusiastically, handing them one of our business cards. They never seemed to have the heart to explain to us that they were expecting cash, or perhaps it was just too much effort, so we never had to part with any of our Somons. In fact, we found that in almost every case where the notion of a bribe seemed to hang around like a bad smell, the language barrier worked in our favour.

We were exhausted and dirty after our long drive through the Fanns, and were hoping to find a hotel, but there's a dearth of budget accommodation in Dushanbe. That's probably because Dushanbe is so far off the beaten track that it just isn't geared for travellers. The only people who visit are government officials and neighbouring dignitaries, and they all stay in the expensive hotels. We certainly weren't going to fork out \$80 each, so a \$10 homestay it was, our host family on this occasion moving onto the cement veranda outside to make room for us.

There aren't too many remarkable things to see in the Tajik capital. It's a typical Soviet city – impeccably planned and somewhat dreary in appearance. As Stalinabad, many years back, it had reluctantly borne the name of the greatest despot of the twentieth century, but this was rectified shortly after the dictator's death. There are a few museums, but for the most part, Dushanbe was base camp – a place to prepare for the real adventure.

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The Pamir Highway is the second highest international road in the world. It loses marginally to the Karakoram Highway, which links Pakistani Kashmir to China. The Pamir is a mere 38m lower than the Karakorum, about sixty kilometres to the west at their closest points. However, at the moment the Pamir is the highest road that anyone can actually drive, because a landslide in China created a dam which inundated a long section of the Karakorum. For this reason, there is some doubt whether it should maintain its bragging rights over the Pamir, since it's not really traversable anymore unless your vehicle can float.

Childish competitions aside, the Pamir Highway is a breathtakingly high road to drive. Breaching 4000 metres on numerous occasions, and reaching a single highest point of 4655 metres, its average height is probably higher than most people ever stand in their lives. To put things into perspective, the highest peak in Southern Africa, Thaba Ntlenyana, is more than a kilometre lower, and a road up there would seem ludicrously high. The highway negotiates the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, once a major thoroughfare on the Silk Road to China. Three colossal mountain ranges converge nearby: the Pamirs, the Hindu Kush and the Wakhan range. In the valley below this meeting of giants is the confluence of the Pamir and Wakhan Rivers, which join to form the Panj, the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The Panj in turn is a major tributary of the Amu Darya, once known in the West as the Oxus. The twin Uzbek rivers, the Oxus and Jaxartes, are like the Tigris and Euphrates of Central Asian civilisation. They both flow into the Aral Sea, and for thousands of years fed fertile plains, sustaining desert cities. That was until Soviet engineering

diverted so much water for use on collective farms throughout Uzbekistan that the Aral Sea all but completely dried up, emptying fishing villages and destroying a way of life that had existed there for centuries.

The Pamir highway is in turn dwarfed by the soaring peaks that surround it. Lenin Peak on Tajikistan's border with Kyrgyzstan reaches a breathtaking 7140 metres.

We hoped to reach Khorog in a day. We'd met a well-heeled *biznizmien* at the car wash in Dushanbe who'd informed us that one route there was much faster than the other. Although not the highest section of the highway, the road to Khorog still reached 3800 metres, negotiating several winding passes on its way to the Panj River. We filled the jerry-cans with extra fuel for the first time and departed early the following morning.

Elroy overheated on the way up the pass. We were asking a lot of the 1997 Land Cruiser, its roof rack packed to the hilt and its boot almost bursting. We took a short break and prepared some lunch. Elroy cooled down, and we were soon summiting. From the crest of the road we saw Afghanistan for the first time. The valley below was stark and isolated. Nor was the Panj River valley fertile and green, as I'd been expecting for some reason. It was a harsh, desolate environment, brown but for some cursory scrub at the river's edge. The snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush dominated the horizon to the south. They were somehow more foreign and hostile than other snowy ranges I'd seen, but that could just have been a symptom of their remoteness, or the fact that it was Afghanistan, a country with a reputation for a hostile landscape.

We wound our way slowly down towards the valley floor. The Panj was dark and swift. The river's sandy floodplain was broad – a few hundred metres. Presumably in April or May, when much of the snow melts, it becomes a raging torrent that fills the whole valley, but for now it was dormant, lurking, though no less deadly.

Near the river's edge, we saw a roadworks sign. We passed more and more of them until we nearly knocked over a man with his arms held out in a diagonal cross. We'd seen it before, in Ashgabat: the Central-Asian signal for 'do not pass'. And we realised then why everyone other than the *biznizmien* at the car wash had advised us to take the slow route. This road was closed. For blasting, it turned out. A few other unfortunate vehicles had also taken this route, and were parked in a small sad queue at the barriers. This mistake would add two long days of driving to our Pamir journey, all the way to Dushanbe and back along the slow road.

We got out the car and tried to find out what was going on. Why were the other vehicles still hanging around? The road ahead was narrow and cut into the side of the mountain. If they were blasting, there was no way it was passable.

But this was Tajikistan, and normal rules didn't apply. The blasting would take place in the next half an hour, we discovered, and then a sort of caterpillar-vehicle parked nearby would drive into

the wreckage and grind a way through for the vehicles involved in the construction. That was the road we would have to take. Ours was the sturdiest vehicle around by quite some distance, and if the others expected to make it, then we too could afford to hope that we wouldn't have to waste two days.

We sat and waited. Everyone was a bit nervous, and the drivers had taken their vehicles well out of blast range. Evidently accidents were commonplace, and no one wanted a rock through the roof. We moved Elroy back. A massive TNT explosion blasted chunks of rock out the side of the mountain and into the river below.

Then the earthmover got going. It pushed the boulders around, and workmen assisted with the smaller rocks. In about half an hour the queue began to form. We didn't want to be at the rear in case some of the vehicles failed to make it through, but nor were we terribly keen to be the guinea pig in front. We decided to slot in behind a small van that looked relatively hardy and whose driver was keen to get going. There were a couple of large boulders to drive over on the makeshift road, and many of the rocks were still being pushed into place by the Caterpillar. The ride was nerve-racking, especially with a sheer drop to the river, but for the most part Elroy managed fine with the rear diff lock engaged.

The delay meant that we weren't going to make it to Khorog that day, and instead had to stop over in Kalaikhum, a small town nearby. It was already dark. Although we'd not had a particularly favourable homestay in Dushanbe, we were overjoyed to see one advertised as we were neared Kalaikhum.

Our host, Farhang, took us to the only restaurant for dinner, and we chatted well into the night. His English was good. He talked us through some of the issues facing young Tajiks. Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, and its young people hold little hope for prosperity. Many leave for Russia, where at least they have a chance of finding work. Most go to Sochi. Our host's brother lived there and was making good money, he said. Farhang had decided to stay, and was studying business at a university in the capital.

We left at dawn the next morning. The road continued alongside the Panj River. Just beyond lay Afghanistan. The border towns looked peaceful enough, and the rest of the land was empty of people. For the most part there were only tiny villages, much the same as those on the Tajik side. From what Farhang had told us, the majority of the inhabitants of the Afghan villages were Pamiris, just as they were on the Tajik side, so the only difference between them was that some held Afghan citizenship and others Tajik.

In Khorog, we found a homestay that looked fairly comfortable and didn't require our hosts to sleep outside for the night. The owner walked around in his jocks and vest, talking to himself in Russian. His wife, an ample woman, prepared food for us. There was running water, but it wasn't

delivered through pipes. Instead it was available via a complex system of furrows and canals which ran in between, and in some cases right through, Khorog's small houses. A furrow flowed through the living room of our accommodation and into the bathroom, then on into the next house.

Showering proved an interesting challenge. It involved mixing hot water (from a boiler) and cold water (from one of the furrows) at an amenable temperature in a bucket, and then pouring it over yourself with a ladle. It wasn't luxurious, but still better than a cold shower, or no shower at all.

Beth returned from the toilet that afternoon and triumphantly declared that Tajikistan was truly where East meets West. We'd been searching for that mythical place since leaving Western Europe. Matt's vote had been for Armenia, which yearned for the West but was constrained by its post-Soviet legacy. Nina backed Bosnia, its mosques and minarets reminiscent of the Near East but situated deep in Europe proper. My vote was Istanbul. Beth hadn't staked her claim yet, and after her explanation, we had to give her the victory: our ablutions in Khorog comprised two toilets – a 'Western' one and an 'Eastern' one, right alongside each other, so that you could choose, in the privacy of your own bathroom, which way you leaned.

An 'Eastern toilet' is a squatting toilet. Every Westerner remembers the first time they came across one of these, not quite knowing how to use it. And similarly, many people have no idea how to use a Western toilet. I'd heard that sometimes those unfamiliar with them would squat on top of the seat, the idea of actually sitting down too disgusting to contemplate.

That night we met a group of travellers who'd just arrived in Khorog. Instead of driving the high road from Murghab, they'd taken a detour through the Wakhan Valley. This route traces the Afghan border still further south and then east before turning north again to re-join the Pamir Highway proper. What was the road like? How much longer would it take? We discussed the idea at length, and eventually decided to do it. The Wakhan Valley sounded stark and dramatic, yielding views not only of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, but also spectacular vistas of Pakistan's Hindu Kush beyond.

The Wakhan Corridor is a thin sliver of Afghan land sticking out eastwards from the start of the Wakhan Valley for about 200 kilometres, forming a corridor to China between Tajikistan and Pakistan. It's an incongruous pan-handle, which makes you wonder why the map was drawn that way. The explanation, as you might expect, has to do with the childish feuding of faraway empires.

During the 'Great Game', an era of political intrigue in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Wakhan Corridor was created as a buffer between British India and the Tsar's Russian Empire. Now it's a political anomaly, making direct border travel between Pakistan and Tajikistan impossible, and effectively cutting off its Afghan inhabitants from the rest of their country: there is no modern road within the corridor in Afghanistan, and the locals might as well be adrift in the Indian Ocean.

The northern border of this Wakhan Corridor is the Panj River, which runs through the Wakhan

Valley, and along whose northern bank our road lay. Having prepared ourselves for the worst as far as road conditions were concerned, we were pleasantly surprised. It was tarred from time to time, and the gravel sections were serviceable. Continuing along the Panj River, and therefore the border with Afghanistan, the temptation to swim became stronger.

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We'd not spoken of the intended crossing since leaving home, but I knew that it was in Matt's thoughts now. Undeniably, it was the only thing on my mind.

To our right the Panj surged violently past us, a deep blue, ice-cold from the snow that fuelled it. A photograph had initiated the conversation back in London: a shallow ford only a few metres across, two triumphant travellers standing in Afghanistan. Looking at the river now, it was doubtful any such ford existed. The Panj was at least forty metres wide, fast-flowing, and deep. Matt's pronouncement on seeing that photo came back to me now: 'We will swim to Afghanistan,' he said.

Conversation had dried up as we all contemplated the idea. No one wanted to broach the topic, and so we just sat in an uncomfortable silence for most of the day's drive. Eventually Matt spoke up.

'We're not going to make it across by staring out the window all day.'

'Don't be an asshole,' said Nina. 'Only an asshole would try to swim across *that* just to try and stand in another country.'

Beth was torn – hankering after adventure on the one hand, and terrified of the notion on the other. She said nothing.

'Let's take a look at the map,' I suggested. 'We're driving upriver, and perhaps there will be points further along where crossing will be easier.'

We pulled off the dirt road and opened the Swiss map.

'A tributary joins in over there so we should definitely look further upriver.'

I nodded in agreement. 'Anyway, since it's actually illegal to swim across borders, we should probably do it somewhere completely deserted,' I said.

I didn't think such an area would be too difficult to find, judging by the previous couple of days' travel. Khorog had been a one-horse town, and it was the regional capital.

'How about that stretch over there, between Ishkashim and this other town?' I pointed to a section of river that we would reach the following day. Nina refused to take part in the conversation. She kept shaking her head, eventually withdrawing completely and putting her earphones in.

'Done,' said Matt.

That evening Matt and I walked around Ishkashim trying to gather some river-crossing advice. We met a few likely-looking fellows at a *chaikhana*. They had long beards and ruddy, weatherworn

complexions. Matt struck up a conversation over a cup of *chai*, our few Russian words allowing us to communicate on an essential level in combination with sign language.

‘Anyway,’ he whispered to me, ‘these guys don’t look like border police to you, do they?’

We told them that we planned to cross the Panj in order to have stood, if only for a few moments, in Afghanistan. A silence settled on our gathering when they eventually understood. No one said anything for a while, but then one of the more lively fellows made a pistol shape with his hand.

‘They shoot you like dog.’

The Tajiks all made excuses and left.

‘That went well,’ said Matt.

‘He does have a point,’ I said, a bit shocked by the image.

‘Yeah, but I bet it’s just because none of them have ever thought to do something like that,’ said Matt. ‘Why would you want to swim across if you lived in a village on this side? It’s not like Afghanistan’s a sought-after destination.’

‘I’m just saying that we should find a spot where no one’s around.’

Luckily Nina and Beth had missed this interaction. I was starting to have doubts about it myself. We were being consumed by our ill-conceived plot to swim to Afghanistan. We should’ve been enjoying the vastness of the Pamirs, with its snowy peaks and remote valleys. After a couple of Sim beers, Matt and I plodded back up the dirt road to our homestay in silence.

The next day another complication arose. Posted at intervals on the right were landmine warning signs – it was impossible to say how old they were, but it hardly mattered. I looked at Matt after we passed the second one. He ignored my glance, choosing instead to turn the music up. After a lunch of stale bread and the few remaining tomatoes, spent mostly in silence, he spoke up:

‘If we don’t find a suitable spot by three o’clock today, we’ll just cross there and then.’

I said nothing. Nina and Beth were also silent.

‘You’re not going to pull out now, are you?’ he said. ‘When will you be back here again? The river isn’t looking too dangerous now, and you have to agree that there is no one around. We’ve hardly seen a soul for two hours.’

‘Okay fine,’ I said. ‘Let’s do it. No one we know will ever swim to Afghanistan, and isn’t that what’s important?’

Matt laughed. Nina sulked.

We spent the next two hours scouring the opposite shore for people, weighing up the pros and cons of various crossing points. Was wider and slower better than narrow and violent? How cold was it? Were there landmines here?

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I’d been in the freezing water for nearly five minutes, trying in vain to make some headway, when

my hand eventually hit a rock. I dragged my body out of the torrent, relieved. I'd reached the other side, but this was scant comfort. I lay there, head down, for a few seconds, my body heaving and feeling slowly returning to my limbs.

*Beth! Matt!* I thought, *where are they?*

I rolled over and sat up.

Beth was on the far shore next to Nina, waving her hands. I could just make Matt out much further downriver, still in the current, approaching a bend. I was at least five hundred metres from where we'd set off. I could see where the current was taking him: rapids. They didn't look too dangerous, but he had no lifejacket, and if he was as exhausted as I was, well...

I had my own problems anyway. I still had to get back to Tajikistan. There was nothing I could do for Matt. I stood up and my legs buckled. They were trembling. I sat down again to rest. Matt had passed out of sight and was now completely on his own. I was sitting on a rock, by myself, in Afghanistan. I reflected on my situation, which only made me start to panic.

I tried to calm down. I had to get back across. No one seemed to have noticed us, but there could easily have been lookout points. For all I knew, a team of guards might be on its way to pick me up. I needed to walk upriver again, at least back to where I had started, because I couldn't risk becoming embroiled in the rapids.

While doing this I could recover, I told myself. Walk slowly up the river's edge, and by the time I'm back at the crossing point, I'll be ready to swim again. But it wasn't as straightforward as that. The riverbank was covered in a hideous spiny plant with thorns that cut me as I brushed past them. Soon my legs were dripping with blood. I was trying to move quickly: I didn't want to be shot 'like dog'. But each step I made caused me to gasp in pain.

Reaching my upriver objective, I could see the vehicle, only about fifty metres away across the Panj. I had no time to waste. We had to find Matt.

I was more prudent this time. I knew that I needed stamina, rather than short bursts of speed. A good start would also help, so I found a rock to dive from, gaining valuable metres. After hesitating for a second, I plunged into the river. This time I swam more deliberately, with slower strokes. I kept my head up to measure progress. The swirling current soon took hold of me. But this time I knew what to expect. I reached the middle in seconds, but beyond that the going was tough. I fought off the panic as the river tried to drag me back to the middle. I kept going, exhausted, instinct taking over. I nearly blacked out, but a small left bend in the river favoured me, and eventually I washed up back in Tajikistan.

Beth and Nina were gone. So was the car. It wasn't where I'd seen it just before diving in. Unless I was going crazy. Evidently the two had driven Elroy downriver to find Matt while I'd been caught in the maelstrom. I scrambled to my feet and collapsed, vomiting on the rocks. Fighting the

dizziness I rose again, this time more slowly. I clambered up to the road and began to walk downriver. I could see Elroy in the distance.

I found out afterwards what had happened. Beth had realised the strength of the current right at the outset and, trying to escape, was carried well downstream before freeing herself. She and Nina had checked to see whether I'd made it across, and then gone to look for Matt. They searched for twenty minutes before finding him, washed up on a rock on the river bank. That is where I found all three of them. Matt was pale, lying on his back. But for the faint and irregular breathing, he looked dead. They were trying to get him to drink some Coke, but he couldn't swallow, and nearly choked on it, coughing and spluttering. He rolled over to be sick.

We helped him up to the car, where he lay in the back seat on Nina's lap, muttering deliriously.

Matt refused to talk about the experience, even long afterwards. I was certain he'd come about as close to drowning as you can. Whether he'd fought to his last breath and reached the bank, or resigned himself to drowning before washing up on the Tajik side by chance, I never discovered.

He didn't talk for the rest of the day, and nor did the rest of us, gloominess having descended over our team. Everyone was thinking it, though no one said it. What would we have done if someone had drowned? What if both Matt and I had drowned? What if we'd been picked up by guards on the other side? The possibilities made me nauseous.

Matt became ill, contracting acute diarrhoea and a vomiting sickness that only let up a week later in Osh.

\*

We made for the small town of Langar on the Wakhan Valley road. The valley was beautiful in its desolation. Tall snowy peaks surrounded us. We were in the midst of that great continental juncture that built the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs. From time to time we passed locals selling tomatoes or other less familiar vegetables.

We spent two nights in Langar, which gave us an opportunity to do some hiking in the mountains. The proprietor's son, Yusuf, who was eleven, offered us his services as a guide for the Pamiri foothills. A Dutch fellow, Ben, had joined us in the homestay that evening, and would also be coming on the walk. Our destination, as far as our aspirant guide was concerned, was a big rock, which had engravings believed by locals to be thousands of years old. When we reached them a little later in the day, I was not convinced of their authenticity. They looked as though they'd been engraved by some children a few years prior, but who were we to argue? Anyway, we'd not been that interested in the engravings in the first place, the hike being more about the views and the exercise. My goal was to get a good view of the mountain ranges.

Grey rivers surged between the colossal Hindu Kush and the Pamirs Mountains into the valleys below. This was a different beauty from the Alps, Rockies or Malutis. This felt more primal, more

rugged. I think the inaccessibility was a contributor. No castles or churches or ski resorts peppered the highlands. Just tiny villages of mostly impoverished Tajiks, eking out an existence in whatever way they could. In Yusuf's case it was taking his guests to supposedly ancient engravings. Others tried to farm, though the land did not lend itself to agriculture, being cold for much of the year.

We told Yusuf that we'd swum the river the previous day, and he was astounded at our stupidity. I don't think he actually believed us. He said he'd show us to the confluence of the rivers, far down in the valley, later that day, so that we could demonstrate our valour to him. Beth and Nina decided to go back for lunch, and to see how Matt was coping. Ben and I continued upwards. Around midday, I was running out of energy. Goats and goatherds had left a network of trails from years of grazing. Our path was steep and narrow, and I was struggling. At intervals a herdsman with his goats would frisk casually past us, the young goatherd barely breaking a sweat. I was feeling unfit and outclassed, so I decided to call it a day.

I'd agreed to meet the others at the confluence of the rivers, which we could see below us for the duration of our hike. But as I walked the wide plain that the valley turned out to be, I realised that 'the confluence' was too vast to be useful as a meeting place.

We passed two Bactrian camels grazing on the plain's sparse pasture. Supposedly they are rare in the wild. I guessed that these must have been owned by someone. They ignored us as we walked past them. I reached out to touch one but it avoided me. As we got closer to the river, the ground became a maze of banks and rivulets. At first we could jump across, but soon we had to wade through the rushing water, or jump from stone to stone. I would've been happy to turn around – Beth and Nina were nowhere to be seen – but Yusuf wanted to see me swim. It was getting cold, and I wasn't keen to confront that river again so soon, but the kid wouldn't rest until I had. After much leaping and wading we eventually made it to the river proper. I stripped to my boardshorts and regarded the speedily flowing water with trepidation. It was ice cold, I knew from the wading we'd done to get here. It had only recently melted, and was not much above freezing. But I had to swim. I couldn't let Yusuf down after he'd spent the whole day with me. I procrastinated so long that he began to look triumphantly at me, as if to say, 'You see! No one swims here. It's crazy!'

But I found my nerve and jumped in. This time I treaded water right at the river's edge, and stayed in no longer than a few seconds – just enough time to prove to an eleven-year-old that I had in fact swum across. I felt pretty stupid as I dried myself, trying to warm up my numb skin.

I didn't need much of an invitation to climb into bed that night. For dinner we had some suspicious-tasting shashlyk with sauceless rice. Well at least Beth, Nina and I did. Matt didn't touch a thing.

\*

With my meal repeating dangerously on me in bed, I thought back to a Samarkand reference of

Keats' that I'd found. A Montague-Capulet style feud prevents two lovers from marrying. Every year on St Agnes' Eve, so the tradition goes, a woman who lies naked in bed and follows a number of rituals will be rewarded with a dream of her future husband preparing a feast for her. This way she gets to find out who she'll marry, plus sneak in a midnight snack. Anxious to spend all the time she can with him, even if just in a dream, the woman in question observes the necessary requirements on St Agnes' Eve.

Only on this occasion, her star-crossed lover is also planning a secret rendezvous (no doubt wise to the tradition), and while she plans to dream of a feast with him, he is preparing a real one for her:

*While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon*

(Keats, 1884)

But if Samarkand's food was anything like the rest of Central Asia's, I wasn't as optimistic as Keats about the 'spiced dainties' we'd find there. Maybe fatty mutton *shashlyk*, but not the sort you'd prepare if you had only one meal to sweep your Juliet off her feet.

\*

The next day we had a lot of climbing to do. Langar was at 1500 metres, and before the end of the day would reach 4000 again. It was a long way to Lake Karakul, high on the Pamir plateau. We'd join up with the main Khorog-Murghab route again as we turned north after Langar, and hopefully be in Murghab by lunchtime.

Having made it all the way up onto the plateau again from the Wakhan Valley, on a very bad road that until that point had been completely deserted, we spotted a cyclist. He looked out of place in this wilderness.

'Only mad dogs and Englishmen, eh?' he said, grinning, as Nina wound down the driver's window.

He looked more like a mad dog. He was haggard and dirty, his water bottle empty, and we knew he had at least 60 kilometres to go before he would come across anything resembling civilisation. We topped up his provisions and gave him an accurate a description of his way ahead. The corrugations on the dirt road were terrible at that point. They were the sort that jar your whole body,

and there was no sign it was about to let up. We watched him cycle off the other way. We felt like radical pioneers just being there in a 4-by-4, and here was a guy on his bicycle.

We only reached Murghab in the late afternoon, and wasted plenty of time there trying to get our hands on some fuel. Diesel was hard to come by in these mountain towns. We'd been sent from vendor to vendor without much luck, and were starting to worry that we wouldn't make it out of Tajikistan. With only two days remaining on our visas, the concern wasn't just about wasting time.

While Khorog was the capital of the area, and had a university and some life to it, Murghab was quite drab. In fact, the prevailing memory I have of Murghab is one of brownness – the houses, the roads, the shops, the people. Brown from the mountain dust that seemed to infuse everything. We briefly visited the French outreach agency, which runs a local charity, but they were singularly unhelpful when we enquired about fuel. The woman behind the desk regarded us with such disdain – that most French of gifts – that we knew from the start our visit would prove fruitless.

Eventually an old man who'd been watching us from where he was sitting on a wooden crate, took pity on us. We knew there'd be some sort of facilitation cost, but we were grateful for his assistance. He knew a man who knew a man who knew a *biznizmien*, who, among other things, sold diesel. The price was steep, but we were in no position to haggle.

Coming out of Murghab, we were astonished to find a newly tarred road, very broad, and not even painted yet. If this was the condition of the road to the lake, I thought, we were in for a comfortable ride. But we soon realised something was amiss. We reached a dead end, and a large building that looked suspiciously like an airport terminal loomed ahead. Luckily flights out of Murghab were infrequent.

The correct road was as bad as we'd come to expect, and now we'd wasted a further half hour of light driving around an airport. From here it was nearly a 100 kilometres to the lake, and we still had to reach the highest point on the highway.

The pass was no laughing matter. We nervously watched the altitude reading rise on our GPS. Elroy began to struggle on some of the steeper hairpins. Most cars have power problems at these elevations. The exhaust fumes were black and the torque became sluggish. Just after sunset, with the light slowly fading, we reached the top of the pass and the highest point on our travels: 4655 metres above sea level. We felt it was quite an achievement, even though the achievement was mostly Elroy's.

Outside the air was icy. We needed a photo. It ended up being dull and nondescript, only a brown road in the background, the sinking sun not strong enough to illuminate the peaks nearby. We were lit up by the car's headlights, huddled together in the cold. We didn't waste too much time in self-congratulation – there was still plenty of distance to cover, and nowhere to stay. It was completely dark before we saw a sign advertising a homestay.

After breakfast, we became mixed up in a family photo shoot with our host family. Beth had brought along a small photo printer so that we could give people the photos we took of them. At lake Karakul, the photo session got out of hand, with our host family donning multiple sets of clothes for more photos. We took as many permutations of participants as their number allowed. Eventually, with even the baby having had photos in her Sunday best, we told them we would have loved to stay, but wanted to see the natural beauty their town and lake had to offer.

Visitors to the lake pay for their view in blood: Karakul is home to the most murderous mosquitoes I've ever come across. At one point on the water's edge it felt like I was fighting for my life, worried that the bloodsuckers would drain me completely. I jumped around trying to swat them off. They were the size of horseflies. I don't know how they were able to breed and survive in the freezing conditions, but they looked like they could withstand hardships more sinister than mere cold.

The lake was deep blue. Narrow and long, surrounded by snow-capped peaks, its magnificence was grounded, like everything else along the Pamir highway, in its isolation. Next to the lake, the small village we'd stayed in was impoverished and derelict, but also serene. Even in Tajik terms this was remote. Most of the village's inhabitants spent their whole lives there. I'm not sure I would've been able to survive the mosquitoes.

Sadly we couldn't stay long in Karakul. I never understood why countries like this make it so difficult for tourists to visit, and then when they did, forced them to leave so soon. Surely they needed the tourist dollars? There were a host of other problems that made travel to Tajikistan difficult: the enmity between many of the local people whose borders had been drawn on a whim by Stalin; the free flow of heroin and opium on the country's many back roads, to name just two. These factors forced governments to clamp down on entry and exit, we understood, but to this extent? Tajikistan had been the hardest visa of all to get as a South African. In fact, the country didn't even have a policy on South African citizens – perhaps because none had ever visited. We'd eventually had to go through a well-connected visa agent who'd charged us double and no doubt paid off some official.

Our road now led us out of Tajikistan. The man in charge on the Tajik side of the border was friendly enough, but officious and meticulous. He could speak English, and explained to us that he had a job to do here, and ('by God, he was going to do it properly,' we could almost hear him saying). His was the drug route.

We had three boxes in the boot and nine on the roof, all of which were ratcheted down securely. We were well practised at packing. A job that had taken over an hour at the start of the trip now took just under twenty, but that was with four people working hard. Unloading the roof rack, a box at a time, then rummaging through each one, spilling out the contents onto the road, was a process that

would take well over an hour, and one that appeared inevitable. What was this? What was that? Mostly the guards didn't even listen to our answers. The medical kit attracted some scrutiny, but what was so ridiculous is that it could actually have been filled to the brim with some sort of illegal substance and they still wouldn't have known. Lunchtime was upon us before we could get going again, finally through the Tajik crossing. And then we still had the Kyrgyz side to negotiate. The border posts were about ten kilometres apart, on either side of a steep and winding pass through no-man's-land. Eventually we were sent on our way, oblivious to a rather serious blunder we'd made.

## Chapter 9 – Osh to Samarkand

*Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells  
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,  
And softly through the silence beat the bells  
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

(Flecker, 1922)

The Tajik head border guard had already warned us that in his lofty opinion, the Kyrgyz search would be even more comprehensive than his own, so we prepared to sit back and watch more officials rummaging through our underwear. But it turned out to be the easiest of all our Central-Asian crossings, and we made record time through customs. The official didn't so much as glance at Elroy on our way through. Very pleased with ourselves, we began the journey to Osh. The road didn't improve much on the Kyrgyz side, and the corrugations were making for an unpleasant ride.

A few kilometres later, just as we were passing an old lady hobbling with a stick, our gas cooker flew off the roof rack and nearly decapitated her. The spade and a few other bits and pieces were also flung from the vehicle. Because of the warning about how thorough the Kyrgyz officials would be, we hadn't packed the roof rack properly on the Tajik side. In fact, some of the boxes had hardly been strapped on at all – a makeshift packing job to last a few kilometres. But when they'd sent us on our way with the minimum of fuss, we'd forgotten about our rush job.

We were surprised that instead of being angry, she actually smiled at us, as though fortune had cast a lucky coin in her path, rather than a Cadac gas cooker. She carried it over and we apologised profusely. For her, this had been an auspicious near-death experience: as penance for nearly killing her, we'd be giving her a lift to the next village, which of course was no trouble at all. It was more than 10 kilometres away, and when we passed her she had not been hitching, so we must have saved her more than two hours' walk.

The relentless assault on our vehicle was making us edgy. At the times when the corrugations were worst the only thing on my mind was *how will Elroy hold together?* I had a mental image of the engine falling onto the road, leaving us stranded. How could a vehicle possibly withstand this much of a beating?

We only made it to Osh after dark and stayed in the first place that would have us. I'd had a conversation with a British guy back at a bar in London before we'd left. We got to talking about the trip, and when I told him we were going to Kyrgyzstan he became quite animated. He'd been on a field trip or assistance mission of some description to the capital, Bishkek.

'But whatever you do, don't go to Osh', he cautioned. The south-east of Kyrgyzstan was

infamous for banditry and violence, according to him, and even though he'd spent three months in Kyrgyzstan, he'd barely left the capital.

I've often found that such alarmist opinion is misguided. Of course some places are foolish to travel through, like Mogadishu or Kandahar, but I suspected that in the case of Osh, my British friend was being over-cautious. For sure, we didn't visit any dangerous parts of town after nightfall, but that would be a prudent *modus operandi* anywhere – London or Paris or Johannesburg.

We met Omar, 'dog of war', in the market the next day. He must've overheard us speaking English because he appeared like a jack-in-the-box to introduce himself in a mixture of English and Russian. He knew all about South Africa because he had an old friend Roy, a 'soldier of fortune from Rhodesia'. We must've seemed interested enough, because he launched straight into his well-practised version of the events of his life as a KGB hatchet man.

He'd spent most of his days foiling capitalists and counterrevolutionaries from the Baltic to the Black Sea. His final contribution to defending the USSR had been to stab a Lithuanian policeman to death in Riga in 1991 during the final days of the Soviet Empire. As his story wore on, the scene shifted to Estonia and the time to 1992.

To add credence to his tale he produced two photocopied newspaper clippings from an Estonian newspaper depicting a grinning soldier in aviator sunglasses with a slight resemblance to Omar. These, he assured us, detailed his exploits as a mercenary after the collapse of the USSR. He insisted on writing his address and telephone number down for us and then disappeared as fast as he had appeared.

Half an hour later, from across the crowded bazaar, we heard someone shouting our names. It was Omar and he'd just come to say hi again, he said, and to make Matt and me honorary *Hero Workers of the Soviet Union*. We received an authentic membership card, which he signed as a representative of the Communist Party. He also explained that he was the local head of the Monarchy Party and was quietly working to reassert control over the breakaway republics and re-establish the Soviet Union. He gave us his number again and vanished into the crowd, this time for good.

We were first introduced to the traditional Kyrgyz hat, the *kalpak*, in the same bazaar. It's quite different from the Tajik *tyubeteika*, which is flat and rounded, very similar to the Muslim *taqiya* skullcaps. The Kyrgyz *kalpak* is tall and made of sheepskin, coming in black, brown or white. The white ones are for special occasions. They can stand up to forty centimetres high, worn proudly and flamboyantly. Only Manaschi are allowed to wear them in public. Manaschi are those who can recite, by heart, the Epic of Manas, a heroic poem of nearly five hundred thousand lines. This makes it twenty times longer than the Iliad and Odyssey combined. It's the treasured gem of Kyrgyz literature and a source of great national pride. The Kyrgyz claim that it's the longest epic

poem in the world, and many campaign to have it officially declared as such. In *Manas*, the actions of the hero were supposed to have taken place over a thousand years ago, but there are many doubts over the veracity of pretty much everything about the story. Historians say *Manas* was a character invented in the eighteenth century, and one refers to him as an ‘absurd gallimaufry of pseudo-history’. But as far as we were concerned, anyone who could recite that many lines of anything deserved some credit. And in Kyrgyzstan, that credit was the right to wear a tall *Kalpak* and recite poetry in public.

We spent some time sipping *chai* in the *chaikhanas*, meeting various locals, who would often approach us to practise English, or for something to do. We met an English teacher from the local university, a mother and her two small daughters, one of whom performed a little Kyrgyz jig for us, and many chess players, who lined the tables at meeting points along the main roads. There didn’t appear to be a lot of hard work happening in the city, and life seemed fairly relaxed for the locals of Osh.

Kyrgyzstan is sometimes referred to as the Switzerland of Asia. Of course that doesn’t have anything to do with chocolate, neutrality or clocks. Topography is the basis of this comparison, though I would have to say that it must end there: other than mountains and lakes, the two countries couldn’t be more different. We left Osh in the morning, and our road to the capital, Bishkek, took us over precipitous mountain passes scattered with yurts, past ghostly lakes encircled with small stone dwellings and eventually to the *chaikhana* of the apocalypse. It reminded me of Douglas Adams’s sequel to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* called *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. The title refers to an eatery built in a time bubble during the destruction of the universe, rocking back and forth in time across the Armageddon to allow its guests a view of the spectacle.

Our view from this *chaikhana* was not as spectacular, but no less apocalyptic. It was the only building for hundreds of miles, high up in the mountains. There was absolutely no life of any description up there. A dead straight dirt track reached all the way to the horizon in both directions. Low on food and fuel, we walked into the *chaikhana* hoping for some assistance. The proprietor couldn’t help but stare at us. We weren’t his usual custom, evidently. He was old and leathery, with distinctly Chinese features. His face carried so many lines it was hard to make out his age, or what he must have looked like when he was younger. Eventually, jolting himself into action, he shuffled over to us with what must once have been a menu. It nearly came to pieces in my hand, and was so torn, stained and faded that even World War Two’s best cryptographers would’ve struggled to place an order.

We tried to order different items – safety in variety – but we all four got the same meal. Perhaps they only served one, with the menu a mere distraction to help pass the time. The food that arrived appeared to be some type of broth that had the murky hue of dirty dishwater, concealing a few

chunks of meat and bone. We struggled to discern what meat group the mystery lumps spoke for, but if I were a betting man, I would've said either goat or mutton. Either way, it was largely irrelevant because the meat was meagre, the chunks consisting mostly of bone and fat. Matt grimaced as he pulled off a hunk of lard he'd tracked down in his broth. I took a mouthful of the watery soup and coughed it up immediately.

No one got very far with their meal. We were pretty hungry, but not hungry enough for this. As we sat on the floor sipping some sugary *chai*, a troupe of truckers trudged wearily inside. One took out a handful of dirty coins and started counting them out. They were almost certainly Chinese. They ordered a single meal between the four of them. It arrived to the same specification as ours. They passed the bowl around, lapping up its contents voraciously. One of them leered hungrily at our untouched mains. Nina wasted no time and handed our tray over to the truckers. They dug in and polished off the lot.

The *chaikhana* at the end of the universe had not delivered much in the way of nourishment, and as the stale smell of trucker began to mingle with the muttony-dung odour of the *soupe du jour*, we decided it was time to leave. Beth paid, and we walked out to Elroy. As we gazed around at the barren landscape, I realised that having any meat in our broth at all was a miracle. We found a stale loaf of bread left in the car and shared it out. I shivered as we chewed the tasteless bread in silence. The cold was pervasive – an unrelenting and unforgiving cold. And this was summer.

Before coming to Kyrgyzstan we'd promised ourselves that we'd spend at least one night in a yurt. The round tents of the locals are built with sheepskin and plastered with sheep fat inside. I could imagine all too well what they must smell like. After that lunch, no one brought up the potential yurt experience again.

I'd been losing weight steadily since Ashgabat. I glanced at the others as we packed up. Matt was looking decidedly bony. He'd hardly eaten a thing since Langar, and was by now surely malnourished. Beth seemed a bit pale and Nina was even thinner than normal. Of course, it was our own fault: there *was* food in Central Asia. It just wasn't very appetising, especially outside the cities. I thought back fondly to Georgia's delicious cuisine. I was starting to go off meat completely by that point, and wondered briefly whether I was converting unwittingly to vegetarianism.

We finally found our way to Bishkek. It was much like you would imagine any ex-Soviet capital to be: Lenin Avenue running through the middle of town, Lenin Square at the heart, and an extravagant Museum of Communism holding centre stage below a grand exhibit of the largest flags in the world. The ex-Soviet states all appear to be in a perpetual battle of heraldry, the size of their flag correlating to the profound greatness of the current regime.

The museum's contents were also not too surprising: Lenin exalted in every second statue, the anonymous worker making up most of the balance, and all traces of Stalin purged from the exhibit.

Stalin's callous dealings with this part of the world were still having an impact. The squiggly border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had left large groups of ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz on the wrong side of their respective borders. These minority groups have been marginalised and disenfranchised, and violence flares up often. This is particularly so when feelings of patriotism are running high, for instance on Independence Day, which as you might imagine is on the same day for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Since the previous year's rioting around the Ferghana Valley region, a particularly fertile basin that Stalin had allotted to Uzbekistan, the presidents of both countries decided that the simplest solution to the violence was to shut the borders altogether for a few days. This had worked relatively well, so the following year they decided to extend that period to ten days each side of the public holiday.

Where did this leave us? Stranded in Kyrgyzstan, of course, because our next stop was supposed to be Tashkent in Uzbekistan, and Independence Day was just around the corner. We discovered this only a day before our planned departure. The only way around this problem – our Kyrgyz visas were due to expire well before the border re-opened, and we didn't have exit visas to any of the other surrounding countries – was to head north through Kazakhstan. It was a long way through the vast flat steppes of Central Asia, but it was all we could do short of leaving Elroy in Kyrgyzstan and flying out. Luckily the Kazakh visas ended up being relatively easy to obtain by Central-Asian standards – only a few days of queuing.

After a week's delay, which the others spent reading, and I spent downloading the Tri-Nations games that I'd missed, we were on the road. We'd briefly toyed with the idea of going to Almaty, the only city in Kazakhstan worth visiting, but it was far and had a reputation for being expensive so we decided to push on to Tashkent. We hoped to make it there in a day. By all accounts there was nothing to see on the way – just a few poor towns and an empty wilderness – so we got on the road at first light, soon crossing into Kazakhstan.

But distances in this part of the world are deceiving. The vast tracts of emptiness had proved too great for conquerors in the past, and ended up getting the better of us as well. It was like being swallowed by nothingness. The landscape didn't alter once from a flat brownness, causing the passage of time to become an inconsistent ebb and flow. A quiet breakfast at the side of the road morphed into midday, which in turn faded into dusk. With so few landmarks, we couldn't work out where we were on the map. The only thing that became clear was that we'd never make it to Tashkent that day, or even the Uzbek border. We received varying and confusing opinions about the border crossing from the few people we'd asked along the way. None of the information was gelling into a consistent view.

At about nine in the evening, with the fuel running low, we reached the town of Shumkent. It

had some life, thankfully, and after stopping at a few dire drinking establishments, we were able to find a place renting rooms for the night. We may have been the only tourists ever to stop in Shumkent, which is perhaps why we drew curious stares at the restaurant we'd found for dinner. The night started off quietly enough, but we were soon beckoned over to join a group of Shumkentis making merry. We never discovered what the occasion was, but were sure that the two women in the group were being paid for their company. The principal vodka consumer seemed to be a local politician of sorts, and he directed proceedings for the evening, including the photo shoots. He was determined not to let us leave his town without at least a hundred portraits of him, his sycophants and his women.

He was tiresome, but ultimately of some assistance when he provided the clearest information about the border. The news was not good: the border we'd hoped to cross was closed for renovations. Now we would have to drive a further two hundred kilometres west, cross into Uzbekistan, and come back all the way in the opposite direction.

At around lunchtime the following day we reached the border. We spent an inordinate amount of time waiting in queues and filling out various forms, and finally were cleared to cross. Spirits were rising as Matt skipped to the playlist he called: 'crossing over'. The music was so loud that we didn't hear the hooting of a police vehicle behind us. Panicking, I signalled my confusion to its driver, now alongside us, but didn't pull over yet. I suppose I was hoping he'd just give up and turn around. This was the incorrect tactic, and he soon became enraged, cutting us off. I slammed on the brakes. We were silent as he strode angrily towards us. I was baffled. What could it be? We'd filled out everything they'd asked, and had only left when they'd sent us on our way. He didn't even say anything to the rest of us. It was Nina he wanted. The car was in her name.

'You come,' he said, showing Nina the back seat of his car.

'Why?' she'd asked, her voice quivering.

He just pointed at Elroy. He pulled her hand roughly and she cried out, but followed, getting into the car.

'Wait,' shouted Beth, 'what about us?'

He made a signal that seemed to suggest that we were to follow him. Matt jumped into the police car with Nina. The official wasted no time, and screeched off back towards the border. Beth and I followed, trying to keep up. We parked within sight of the border, but not too close: Beth thought it was a good idea to leave Elroy firmly in Uzbek territory. We didn't want to make it easy for them to kick us out. We found every official crowded around Matt and Nina when we reached the office. She was close to tears as a flurry of questions came her way, all in Russian. Matt couldn't follow their questioning either. Eventually, with a few Russian words, she was able to calm proceedings down, explaining that she and Matt couldn't answer because they didn't understand.

The chief interrogator told everyone to be quiet. He attempted some English, but in the end communication came down to sign language, as it normally did. He paged through Nina's passport, pointing to the date we'd come into Uzbekistan previously.

*'Da,'* Nina agreed.

Then he took the 'car passport', pointing to the corresponding entry date for Elroy.

*'Da.'*

Then he pointed to the date she'd left, crossing into Tajikistan.

*'Da.'*

Finally he showed us that he didn't have a corresponding sign-out date for Elroy. It was, officially, still in Uzbekistan from our previous visit.

'Of course,' said Nina, remembering at the same time as we all did that the electricity had been out when we'd crossed out of Uzbekistan all those weeks before. Matt's Russian was better than Nina's so he took over the negotiation. It was going to be a difficult one to explain. He pointed at plugs and lights and a map he withdrew from his pocket, making various hand gestures and throwing in a few Russian words with his English.

After repeating his explanation three times, Matt was able to make himself understood. There was silence for a while as the Uzbek decided what he would do with the information. He wasn't convinced, but nor was he incredulous, so he decided to call the other border post to corroborate our story.

He was in his office for at least half an hour. We sat on a hard bench in the otherwise stark room, surrounded by almost twenty officials. Some glared, others were rather more curious. Beth took out the 'business card' with our route map that had stood us in such good stead with other officers of bureaucracy, and as usual, it initiated a genial conversation (in sign language of course). At least we had them on our side now.

Their chief emerged from his office a while later with a satisfied look on his face. He nodded at us, with what was almost a smile. It was hard to work out what kind of a smile it was. He asked Nina to fill out a few more forms, but his hostility had diminished. Maybe he'd decided that ignorant and naïve travellers like us weren't his usual suspects, or it was his amazement upon verifying our story with his colleagues across the country. By the time Nina had completed all her forms, we found ourselves in a convivial conversation with his whole team, much to the disgust of some truckers waiting to get their passports stamped. It was completely dark by the time we got to Tashkent.

Tashkent is the biggest and most populous city in Central Asia, and the first place we'd been to in a long time that made us feel like we were back in a familiar world. Sure, the signs were in Uzbek, but it had a big-city feel to it. Elegant restaurants, five-star hotels, bars, traffic, nightlife.

Although its history goes back to the fifth century BC, it was only in the last hundred years or so that Tashkent rose to prominence as a regional capital.

It also has an Iranian embassy. This gave us what would be our second last opportunity to get Nina a new visa. Maybe Anglo-Iranian relations had warmed over the last few months. At the embassy the next day we spoke to an amiable old woman whose English was flawless. This was surely a good sign. We spent about half an hour in conversation, explaining the difficulties of getting Elroy into Iran without Nina, and whether it was possible to get another visa for Nina, and various other permutations. Although she understood everything we were saying, she somehow thought that we were asking for a blessing rather than practical assistance. She started telling us a sort of parable about journeys, and then said that she hoped Allah would protect us on our adventures. At no point did she refer at all to anything like visas, rules about getting vehicles into Iran without the driver, or anything useful.

She closed with, 'Inshallah you will reach your destination safely.' Nina complained that the woman had simply misunderstood, but I thought she was a sly old fox, saying 'no' in the most polite way imaginable.

We gave up and decided to hit the town for a good meal and hopefully some *shisha*. We'd developed a weakness for the Eastern pipe with cherry or apple tobacco, but hadn't found any place selling it since Ashgabat. Tashkent provided plenty of options, and we whiled away the evening in a joint designed specifically for *shisha* smoking.

Tashkent was base camp for Bukhara and Samarkand. Finally we would be visiting the twin cities. For many, they exist more in legend than reality, especially since they're so hard to visit.

That night I paged through some of the notes I'd made before leaving England. When Alexander conquered Samarkand in 329BC, he thought it the most beautiful city he'd ever seen and lingered there while gathering his strength for the next campaign. A thousand years later Timur the Great made it his capital. He was an emperor of great cruelty, conquering vast tracts of Central Asia and putting many luckless enemies to the sword. He robbed most of the neighbouring countries of their scholars, artists and architects in order to beautify Bukhara and Samarkand. For a time they were the greatest centres of learning and arts in the world.

But it's not so much for this that they are famous. Cultural hubs come and go, but Bukhara and Samarkand are probably most famous for the accident of their location, as major stopover cities on the Silk Road. Just about everyone travelling between Europe and China would stay, trading goods and taking some rest. Our route would take us first to Bukhara.

We arrived late in the afternoon. The Ark, an immense sandstone fortress near the centre of the old town, completely dominates the entrance to the city. The great, brown walls are broad and bulky, with towers every 30 metres or so at a steep incline, thrust out like elephant toes. The corner

towers are particularly impressive, their circular base stretching 270 degrees around the wall before extending upwards to meet the top.

Overshadowing the city is the broad Kalyan Minaret, also known as the Tower of Death: for centuries criminals and heretics were executed by being thrown out of the top room. At night the inner chamber near the top is illuminated, producing arch-shaped shafts of light that beam ephemerally into the great plaza around the Ark.

Bukhara was established in the sixth century BC, not only as a major Silk Road stopover point, but also as a centre of culture and learning. There are over 350 mosques and 100 religious colleges scattered around the city, and today no fewer than 140 buildings are dedicated monuments, making the entire old city a 'town museum'.

The intricate network of alleyways had become too complicated even for our best navigator, so we parked Elroy and decided to look for a hotel on foot. The establishment we eventually chose did have parking, so we embarked upon the hazardous mission of driving Elroy into town. The roads became narrower with each turn, and soon we were taking corners with one driver in the car and the other three directing from outside. Beth needed all her considerable alley-docking prowess to eventually deposit us in a nook between two 17th century mud-coloured houses.

We found a restaurant in the main square, kicking off what was to become a long afternoon and evening. We met a bunch of Englishmen and ended up joining them. They were in Bukhara, of all places, for a stag party. They appeared to be quite a scholarly lot based on their conversation, and are probably still the only stag party that has ever reached Bukhara from England. After a few vodkas and toasts we were singing along to some well-known tunes as part of a game that one of them had introduced – they seemed like a public-school singing set, and vodka had dispelled reticence and warmed singing voices. That was about as much as I can remember of the evening, and, aside from a brief but fiery argument that Beth had with one of the English chaps who had a few negative things to say about South Africa, the night drew slowly to a close and we were on our way back to the flat. In the confusion of tiny roads and passageways, we didn't find our beds for about 45 minutes.

We rose late and set out to explore the rest of the city on foot. Bukhara was more than anything a city of learning. Even its name is said to mean 'full of knowledge'. It's possible that the wisdom gained from their studies allowed them to make the right decision when Genghis Khan was sweeping through Central Asia, demanding their unconditional surrender. They submitted unreservedly, unlike their unfortunate contemporaries in Khunya Urgench a few months prior. As a result there was only a 'mild massacre' in Bukhara. Although most buildings burned, the city wasn't completely destroyed.

There wasn't much to see that dated to before Genghis, except the imposing Kalyan Minaret.

Genghis was apparently so amazed by the tower's splendour that he made sure it was spared his 'mild' destructive orgy. A proud local told us that the minaret hadn't needed any repairs since its original construction over eight hundred years before.

The city is also a tragic footnote in the history of the British Empire. On 24 June 1842, two high-ranking British officers, filthy and emaciated, were dragged into the dusty square in front of the Ark Fortress. Thrust onto the sand before a host of bloodthirsty spectators, they were beheaded for espionage. The news only reached home three years later, when another reckless adventurer, Reverend Wolff, arrived home from his mission to discover their fate.

The first executed officer was Charles Stoddard, a British diplomat, whose mission it had been to persuade the Emir to sign a treaty with Britain. When he was arrested for spying, Arthur Conolly, a preeminent envoy of his time who'd spent much of his career in Central Asia, was dispatched to Bukhara to rescue him. He was arrested for the same crime, and also sentenced to death. Wolff's account of their tragic end attained sensational heights with a voracious British audience, and after that, most English travellers steered well clear of the city.

A hundred years later, Fitzroy Maclean, a swashbuckling, real-life James Bond, and British ambassador to Moscow during Stalin's purges, visited the city a few times while posted to the Soviet Union. The accounts of his travels were the English-speaking world's first peek into Bukhara since the tragic events there nearly a century before.

Like his long-dead counterparts, Maclean was also in danger of being arrested for spying. This time, though, it was the NKVD – the Soviet secret police – who were ready to pounce, rather than the local emir. Maclean travelled Central Asia in disguise, and made it through unscathed, as he always somehow managed to do in his charmed life of reckless bravado.

In the footsteps of these illustrious adventurers, I felt like an amateur. What was it about their stories that make me dream of brave deeds in exotic lands? I suppose the upside was that we were unlikely to be beheaded in the dust outside the Ark.

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The night before reaching the great destination of our expedition, I took one last look through my clippings. Having glimpsed Khiva and Bukhara, I figured that Samarkand would present less of a surprise to me now. I'd seen desert mosques, turquoise domes, and tall brick minarets.

Wole Soyinka embedded Samarkand into the same image as my native Johannesburg, which made his piece about markets more pertinent than most for my trivial purposes. Wherever you find yourself in Central Asia, a market is doubtless just around the corner. We'd already visited many of them, each with a claim loftier than the last: 'oldest bazaar in the world'; 'biggest bazaar in Central Asia'; 'most camels'; 'smelliest'. Beyond the spice sections of these celebrated marketplaces, I found myself unable to appreciate them. The clamour and chaos grated at my nerves, and a

thousand hands begging for coppers made me feel simultaneously guilty and annoyed. But whatever my verdict on markets, they remain one of Central Asia's most mystifying institutions. There always seemed to be more vendors than customers. The heat and smell should surely make vending a career of last resort, but there was always a surplus of assistants and colleagues, hanging around for the sheer thrill of it. Wole Soyinka seemed to understand them, and in anticipation of Samarkand's famed peach-stalls, I read his piece the night before we arrived.

*A market is where Samarkand invades  
Johannesburg, and, as the shutters close,  
Departs without regrets or trace  
Until its next reincarnation. A market is  
Where London's Portobello spells Caracas and Yoruba, Catalan or  
Khourassan,  
And though hard currency is what changes hands,  
It lets you drift in fluid channels where  
Sensations thrive on trade by barter.*

(Soyinka, 2003)

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It turns out that the road to Samarkand is not exactly paved with gold. It's barely paved at all, though this was hardly a surprise. The outskirts were like any Central-Asian city – kilometres of grey and dreary Soviet apartment blocks, all in various stages of disrepair and some almost completely ruined. As we reached the old centre, vestiges of the great outer wall were visible in chunks. The road wove between the fragmented ramparts, oscillating inadvertently between modern and ancient. The walls once extended for 12 kilometres in an unbroken line around the city to protect the people and their riches from marauding hordes.

We made for the necropolis of Shah-i-Zindah, an ensemble of over 20 blue marble and mosaic tombs. The complex was packed with pilgrims because the body of the Prophet Mohammed's cousin lies in one of the mausoleums, or so it is believed, making the tomb a Muslim shrine – the only one in Samarkand. Most of the other residents of the mausoleum are from Timur's time, including his niece, sisters and a few other aristocrats. The beauty of the complex is in the range of its design and gilding. Floral motifs blend seamlessly with terracotta and majolica tile work; while ancient calligraphy adorns their resting places. The only common theme (other than dead people of course) is the turquoise-blue, that ubiquitous blue of the Silk Road, so striking in the otherwise brown cityscapes.

Next we saw the Bibi Khanum Mosque, built by Timur himself with the help of 95 elephants snatched from India after a Delhi campaign. It was constructed in too much haste, and the 50-metre minaret started collapsing quite soon after it was completed. Recent restoration efforts have succeeded in giving it an oddly artificial, if at least intact, appearance.

Nearby was the resting place of Timur himself. The Gur-i-Amir was originally planned for his grandson, but turned out to be such a spectacular mausoleum that it was deemed fit for one of history's greatest warlords. A ribbed turquoise dome floats like a hot-air balloon above the central chamber, which is reached via a sumptuous blue and white archway. Two bejewelled minarets stand guard either side. At night the building is illuminated, crafting a ghostly fantasy of turquoise and gold.

The Russians exhumed Timur from here in order to confirm his resting place and to check whether he was in fact lame (he was). Above his tomb is inscribed 'When I rise from the dead, the world shall tremble'. On opening the casket, the Russians found another inscription that read: 'Whoever opens my tomb shall unleash an enemy more terrible than me'. Three days later, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa against Russia – the deadliest and most terrible campaign the world has ever witnessed.

We'd decided to save the best for last, and the following day we made our way to the centre of the old city, which in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was the centre of the universe: the Registan of Samarkand. Hundreds of years before, camel caravans and mule trains with drivers robed in white would've been bound for the turquoise gates, laden with all the enigmatic produce of India and Persia, of China and Cathay.

The Registan has three majestic madrasahs that surround the great central square. This marketplace would once have been filled with merchants selling spices, silks, jewels, slaves and all manner of goods imaginable. The smell of dung, sweat and perfumes would hang heavy and the clamour of market noises would fill the air. Public announcements were made from here, and lawbreakers beheaded.

Today though, the square was quiet. A few travellers wandered around, looking up in amazement at the splendour of the madrasahs while a small ensemble of lute-toting songsters played traditional Uzbek music.

Each madrasah had its own purpose. The western, Ulug Bek madrasah, was the oldest, completed in 1420. Inside, the schools of mathematics, theology, astronomy and philosophy once flourished. The eastern, Sher Dor madrasah (1636), which has two cavorting mosaic tigers on its façade, was once the school of Islamic Sciences. The central one, Tilla-Kari madrasah (1660), contains a mosque with walls and ceilings of elaborate gold leaf and a dome that seems to defy the laws of geometry. It was once a residential college for students. Astride the east and west madrasahs

stand four tall minarets, adorned with sumptuous blue and yellow mosaics.

Though undoubtedly impressive, the huge madrasahs seemed only to emphasise the emptiness of the Registan complex. We were in a giant open-air museum. Where were the merchants and their wares, the whirling dervishes and *fakirs*, the laden caravans?

We lunched late at a restaurant overlooking the Registan. The *shashlyk* was juicy. We had a few more days to wander the city, so we decided to settle in with a celebratory vodka and some Sarbast beer. The conversation turned to our expedition, and whether we'd succeeded in doing whatever it was we'd set out to do.

'Well, I guess no one died,' said Beth.

'Matt nearly died,' said Nina. It was the first time anyone had spoken about the incident on the Panj. No one said anything for a while.

'I was just treading water,' said Matt after a long silence.

'We nearly went to prison for treason, I suppose,' I said, laughing at the memory of the overzealous Croatian police. It seemed almost trivial now, being arrested for treason, time and distance having whitewashed the memory of the beady-eyed harbour master.

'Or we could be locked in an asylum in Serbia, thanks to *your* friend Dean,' Nina said to Matt, with some malice. EXIT festival seemed like a fiction now, the truth adrift between the diverse and confused accounts of that day's crazy events in Novi Sad.

'The only thing I regret is not going bear hunting in Bosnia,' said Matt. 'We would've feasted on bear flesh with war criminals. Now that's a story.'

Nina rolled her eyes. I looked at her for a while, wondering what had happened between the two of them. Certainly there'd been some chemistry. Had she grown bored? Had he tired of the pursuit? Thinking about it now, I didn't really care – the most important thing was that they'd kept whatever was going on between them off the agenda.

The evening ended in silence as we contemplated our journey. It was a fitting conclusion to our days in Samarkand, looking across into the Silk Road's great, dusty arena as the sun descended slowly over the Registan. The turquoise domes shimmered in the last light of day before flickering out like burned-down candles. The square was deserted, lonely even, in the cool light of dusk. Surrounding us were some of the most majestic buildings I'd ever seen, but their time in the sun had come and gone.

## Epilogue – Ashgabat to Shiraz

The ambassador looked at me sombrely. He stroked his long, grey beard, mumbling something in Farsi to the man seated next to him. Pausing for a second, the man turned to our guide Angela and spoke, but this time in Russian. Finally she relayed the message to me:

‘You can try, but I think that you will not be successful.’

The room at the Iranian embassy in Ashgabat had become stuffy and hot. What should’ve taken ten minutes was taking closer to forty.

‘Is there nothing you can do? Can’t you write a note to the customs official perhaps, giving permission?’ I tried to keep the exasperation from my voice.

My request followed the chain of translation. English to Russian, Russian to Farsi, and back again.

‘I’m sorry, sir, but it’s not in my power to write you such a note. I wish you the best of luck.’

I thanked him and left. He’d been civil, but unhelpful. The others were waiting for me outside. When they saw my face they knew that it was a lost cause. We wouldn’t be able to drive Elroy back through Iran. Instead, we’d have to ship it from Ashgabat to Africa at great expense and high risk. We drove back silently to Hotel Turkmen and prepared to leave.

Our planning session was short and to the point. Beth and I had visas for Iran. Nina didn’t, and therefore nor did Elroy. We were all headed for Africa and home, but Matt wouldn’t hear of letting Nina fly out alone, so it was settled. We spent an afternoon finding a shipping company that would get Elroy to Africa from the landlocked Turkmenistan. Matt and Nina purchased tickets on Turkmenistan Air to Dubai. Beth and I planned a journey through Iran on public transport.

We departed the city in a flurry: loading Elroy for freighting to Mombasa; preparing a ludicrous number of nearly identical vehicle documents; paying shipping agents and middlemen thick wads of US dollars; and packing the bare essentials into a few small bags.

We would be without Elroy for three weeks. That was the optimistic estimate. It was quite likely that something would go wrong in a shipping itinerary that involved a truck, three borders, a boat and a pirate-infested ocean, all during the month of Ramadan. We couldn’t discount the possibility of Elroy not arriving in Mombasa at all, so we left nothing of value in it.

Packing clothing proved quite a challenge because Iran demanded modesty, and Kenya none, and we planned to spend most of our time on the beach there. In Iran, Beth could only bare her hands and face. Straining under the weight of laptops, bags, books and various other paraphernalia, we rushed to the bus station and found a spot on the floor that was slightly quieter than the rest of the chaotic station. We ended up spending most of the night there. I felt dejected. Beth and I didn’t talk much that night. Elroy was now at the mercy of Iran’s private shipping industry, whose hazy

regulations and medieval intrigues would determine its fate.

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We climbed aboard the Tehran bus, which went via Sari on the Caspian coast. Inside, gaudy red curtains with yellow tassels hung from the windows. In the front dangled all manner of dolls, teddy bears, fluffy dice and a monkey whose human face was disturbing. His shrunken head looked a bit like the ones crafted by cannibal tribes in the Amazon, except that he had the body of a monkey. It wasn't a toy I'd buy for a child.

The morning sun hadn't had time to warm the bus, and I put on two jerseys. Almost all the women on board were dressed as revealingly as possible. This was their way of sticking it to the government: freezing half to death on an insignificant bus somewhere near the Turkmen border. No doubt their bags contained the necessary body-concealing garb for the border crossing into Iran.

Our final stop before the border was a lunch break. We had a symbolic last beer before the long dry of Iran, as did many of the other Iranians. Back on the bus Beth and I struck up a conversation. Two engineers and a doctor were returning from a weekend's holiday in Ashgabat during which their chief goal appeared to have been drinking. Political discourse was furthest from my mind, but they seemed keen to get stuck right in, beers in their hands and an audience of Westerners.

One of the engineers didn't hold back: 'The Islamic revolution has destroyed Persian society.' I wasn't too sure of the law, but I was certain just saying such things could land one in prison. 'The Ayatollahs have brought our country to its knees. Ahmadinejad will start a war.' We were getting uncomfortable as he began to garner stares from even the uncovered Iranians.

We concluded our conversation when the second engineer pulled out a bottle of Russian vodka, and we all toasted Iran. They downed the rest of the bottle like a bunch of naughty schoolboys before we reached the border.

Having passed customs, our fellow passengers showered us with gifts of biscuits, juice, water and many a 'welcome to Iran, we hope you enjoy yourself in our beautiful country'. One solitary traveller even addressed me as 'dude', presumably to highlight his American street cred.

From there the bus trip was mostly unremarkable, and we arrived two hours early in Sari. We handed out some of our cards to friendly passengers, and in return were given phone numbers and offers of accommodation and general assistance.

We found a small hotel where we changed a few dollars for a thick wad of Rials. The receptionist handed me an Iranian newspaper. The front page displayed a wretched looking woman in the dock. Punishment would no doubt be swift and severe.

While Sari itself was disappointing, the beach nearby was a real treat. The dress code that applies on land in Iran applies in the sea as well. You can't get away without full hejab just because you're swimming, even if the sun is beating down at forty degrees. The main beach was a unisex affair,

where everyone was fully clothed except the children. Further down the beach were some cordoned-off sections for women and men respectively, concealed by blue dividers. In my section, the men daringly sported shorts and shirtsleeve button-ups as they gambolled about in the tepid ocean. They were alternately shy or overzealous in their unaccustomed semi-nudity.

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The next day we made for the capital. We'd read that the way to experience the city properly is to spend time with locals in their houses. The only place the government respects peoples' privacy is behind closed doors. We didn't know any Tehranis, so had to be content strolling through bazaars and avoiding a brutal death by motor car.

In one of the markets, we saw a handful of giggling women buying lingerie in full view of the men, who were trying hard to feign disinterest. Although they may show very little skin, women still found a way of making themselves look alluring, with immaculate make-up and suggestively-worn headscarves.

We were soon on our way. We couldn't hang out in the heat and commotion of Tehran any longer when we had Esfahan and Shiraz to see. We spent much of the day arranging public transport for the remainder of our journey. Up to that point our Iranian experience had been very positive, but public transport stations are the same everywhere in the developing world – frustrating and tedious. We settled on a bus to Kashan, and an onward change from there to Esfahan.

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Esfahan, the capital of Shah Abbas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is the pounding heart of cultural Iran. Where Tehran has the pace and money, Esfahan has the history, beauty, refinement and sophistication of a true Persian capital.

Shah Abbas ruled the Persian Empire from here at the height of its glory. Or at least *one* of the heights along its impressive 3000-year history: ancient kings like Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes conjure up images of bygone glory. Persepolis, city of kings, languishes beneath the desert sand near Shiraz. Relics of ancient religions still dignify sand-blasted cities.

Unfortunately, we ended up getting there much later than planned. Eight hours into our bus trip we discovered, during a conversation with the woman seated in front of us, that we were headed for Quchan, not Kashan. Quchan is a town close to the Turkmen border, which we'd already passed. It began to make sense why the scenery had looked so familiar. Once our oversight had been communicated throughout the coach, everyone rallied together to make a plan. The bus driver flagged down another bus travelling in the opposite direction, and after a conversation with its driver that didn't appear to involve any discussion of money, we hopped on and headed back the other way. Thankfully all we lost was sixteen hours but by the time we finally drove into Esfahan it had been a bus trip of incomparable duration.

Many superlatives have been used to describe Esfahan, most of them by the Esfahanis themselves.

‘Welcome to Esfahan,’ they say, ‘the most beautiful city in the world.’

‘Enjoy your stay in Esfahan. Did you know that Imam Square is the second biggest in the world after Tiananmen Square, but more lovely?’

‘Please accept the generous hospitality of Esfahan, where we have the Imam Mosque, the most magnificent mosque in history.’

Although it became slightly annoying after a while, their friendliness was sincere, and after seeing the city ourselves, we found it hard to disagree with them.

Imam Square, the pride of the city, is surrounded by three mosques and decorated Persian walls, and has a long, fountained pool running down the middle. In between walkways and grass quadrangles run lines of perfectly manicured plants and shrubs, green as obsidian.

But it’s not the design that makes it so special: Imam Square is not a tourist attraction; it’s the centrepiece of a vibrant city. It’s always full of Esfahanis, sitting on the grass or having a walk, or in the case of children, running around in the fountains (fully clothed of course). During the month of Ramadan, as the sun sets, the square becomes a vast picnic spot for locals preparing to break their fast. They sit on blankets chatting cheerfully, watching the fading light shimmer from the blue domes of mosques. Every evening we returned to the square at sunset.

We didn’t intend to buy a carpet in one of the shops surrounding Imam Square. But it’s very difficult to stay out of the carpet shops when they invite you in for tea, especially when every other café and restaurant is closed during daylight hours for Ramadan. Soon we were very much in the market for carpets. The kilim, in particular, had caught our eye.

Kilims are hand-woven carpets, thinner than the traditional Persian carpet, made by nomads who still wander the deserts of Iran. They were quite expensive, but appeared to be authentic, and, as the merchants convinced us, were ‘an excellent investment.’

After hours of shopping, Beth and I found one that we both liked at a reasonable price. Although quite small, its bright coloured patterns appealed to us. The vendor’s son told us the story behind the design.

‘You see men carry water home to wives?’ he said, pointing to the motif decorating the outermost diamond of the carpet’s intricate pattern. We nodded, although I couldn’t quite make out these men and their wives.

‘Then you see wives in field cutting wheat?’ He pointed to the middle diamond. I couldn’t work that one out at all.

‘And you see children playing in house?’ I stared hard at the innermost diamond. Now I knew he was making it up. The carpet was attractive, sure, but the designs seemed purely decorative. I was

certain he'd told this same story for hundreds of different carpets.

Beth saw my suspicious expression. She knew it well.

'Okay thank you, that's great,' she cut him off. 'We'll take it.'

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The imposing Imam Mosque, built by Shah Abbas in the seventeenth century, is set at a slight angle to the southern end of the square. Its high arched entrance gives you a sense of what's to come. Two tall minarets stand on each side of the archway, which is at least 40 metres at its highest point. It's wide too, decorated on the underside with elaborate blue and yellow motifs on honeycomb-like shapes cut into the stone. It took sixteen years to complete and is a masterpiece of Islamic architecture.

We were disappointed to find the view of the courtyard inside ruined by an unsightly temporary shade rigging. Scaffolding poles held up dirty white cloth throughout the courtyard. A local teacher made a beeline for us in the quad when he saw that we were foreign. He enjoyed speaking English, and liked to practise with tourists, he said. He explained the situation to us.

'It's the Mullahs on Friday. They want many people in mosque. Not for Islam, you see, for politics. The cloth protects people from the sun, so many more come.'

'But it's so ugly,' I said. He nodded sadly.

'You ask people of Esfahan, they do not want the covering in Imam Mosque. Imam Mosque is beautiful building. Should not be used for politics by Mullahs.'

Luckily the rest of the mosque was not obscured by shade cloth and we spent most of the afternoon admiring Shah Abbas's magnum opus. Inside the mosque itself, the intricacy and splendour of its features defy belief. Thousands of blue patterns, intertwined with a hint of gold, decorated the myriad pillars and domes. We lost track of time gazing at walls and up into the main dome, which seemed to hypnotise everyone who looked at it. The shafts of light coming through high windows glinted off the blue, giving the whole building a mystical atmosphere. That must have been the Shah's intention.

Later we visited the Armenian quarter of Esfahan, where several Christian churches are tolerated. Armenians have lived in Iran ever since Shah Abbas shipped them in to work as artisans on his many constructions. They are still granted slight leniency with regard to dress sense and religion. Anyway, whatever leniencies are afforded them, the favourite pursuit of the Iranian Armenians appears to be beauty in general, and nose jobs in particular. The Armenian quarter has been taken over by the white-bandaged warriors of earthly beauty. We were surprised to learn that there is a Jewish quarter as well. Surprising because you are not even allowed into Iran if you've been to

Israel, or ever plan to go (they ask this question on the visa application form).

Catching a cab back to our hotel, an opportunity to participate in the inscrutable Persian tradition, *T'aarof*, presented itself. As we were about to pay, our multilingual driver implored, 'Please, you not pay for humble taxi. It is pleasure to have you.' I recognised our cue.

'No! We must pay you more!' I said. 'We have had the best taxi trip through Esfahan with you!'

'I cannot accept your money, please,' he countered.

'But it has been a wonderful journey through your beautiful city. I am sorry we were such bad company.'

'No, I am sorry you have bad time in my taxi. Please, you not pay!'

The charade continued back and forth until we ended up paying what was probably a fair price for the ride.

*T'aarof* is a peculiarly Persian custom involving an almost absurd level of self-effacement. I was exhausted after just one round. I couldn't imagine having to take part in that every day. Examples of *T'aarof* run from the ridiculous to the sublime: five gentlemen waiting at a door, each imploring the other to go through first; a shop owner refusing to quote a price for an item in his shop, declaring it 'worthless', while the customer has to insist on paying more than the fair value; a farewell after having people over for dinner from the hosts might be, 'We're sorry you had such a bad time.'

That evening we walked along the River Zayanderud, whose bridges must have looked exquisite for the hundreds of years that they actually had a flowing river to cross, but six months before, it had been diverted to facilitate the building of a metro below. We weren't quite sure why they needed to divert the river for that: at the height of the rainy season it's never more than a couple of metres deep. Can you imagine diverting the Thames to extend the Underground network? Anyway, that's how the Esfahanis decided to do it, and it did take away from the legendary beauty of its bustling bridges.

\*

After a few days in Esfahan we boarded the bus for the desert town of Yazd. We arrived in a place vastly different from the Iran we'd seen so far. Yazd is an ancient town, and the centre of Zoroastrianism, the oldest religion in Iran. With a dogma bound to the elements, especially fire and water, its strange customs put it on a collision course with a modernising world. One of these odd traditions involves the death of a Zoroastrian. They don't believe in burial or cremation – their bodies are left on the top of mountain temples for the vultures to eat so that they don't pollute the earth. These mountains are called 'Towers of Silence'. Even odder is the way in which the community knows the final resting place of a Zoroastrian soul: if the vulture first pecks out the right eye, paradise is close, but the left eye means a dismal afterlife. The priest has the gruesome job of sitting atop the Tower of Silence to witness the fateful eye-pecking. This ritual was being conducted

as recently as the 1970s, when the local authorities banned it, so Zoroastrians are now buried in special concrete coffins so that their bodies don't pollute the earth.

The oldest section of Yazd is an unfathomable network of alleyways and dead ends. The walls are plastered with a reddish-brown mud and rooftops are teeming with 'wind towers', designed to funnel any breath of wind into the sun-baked houses.

We followed the guidebook's map, which came with a disclaimer that no one has ever completed the walk without becoming lost. We were certainly no different from the other *Lonely Planet*-toting tourists whose paths we occasionally crossed. As in Esfahan, we were approached several times by locals looking to practise their English.

'I was at University in Dublin,' one told us. 'I would like to go back one day.' He looked at his wife, who lowered her eyes.

'I am leaving this year to study in Norway,' another said excitedly. 'I will do a degree in engineering for oilrigs in Oslo and then I can leave Iran.'

The few people we spoke to were undoubtedly a skewed cross-section of Iranian society – firstly they could speak English, and secondly, they were among the best-educated. But the message was consistent. They wanted change. And many wanted out.

I suppose I expected to find defiance, a nation shaking their fists at the meddling West, but instead the people we met were mild-mannered and friendly, delighted that we'd deigned to visit them, wanting us to know that their government did not necessarily represent their views. They abhorred the idea of being confused with Arabs (they are Persians!), something so many ignorant Westerners do, and also mentioned often that they were opposed to their government's nuclear collusions.

We strolled back to our hotel that evening. It was early still, and we passed the time in the courtyard playing cards. A family of Iranians staying in the hotel were sitting nearby. They'd come to Yazd to see their daughter off to university. She was the one with the bandage on her nose; yet another Iranian with a nose job. Her brother turned his attention to our card playing.

'I can show you cards, yes?' said one of them.

'Okay', I said, handing them over.

'I show you shuffle.'

I'm no good at shuffling myself, but was surprised that this chap wanted to show me how good he was at it when I saw his ham-fisted attempt.

He smiled triumphantly after just managing to keep all fifty-two cards together.

'You see – shuffle!'

He handed them back to me. I wondered at the meaning of this strange interaction. It was only later that evening as I was lying in bed reading the guidebook that I realised that gambling of any

sort is banned. A deck of cards is contraband.

\*

Our last Iranian stop was Shiraz, city of poets. In addition to literature, Shiraz is, or was, the home of the legendary Shirazi wine. This is not to be confused with the Shiraz grape, though many tour guides make this connection. Production of Iranian white wine was halted after the revolution in 1979, and now alcohol is banned altogether. A guide told us that the ban is merely a ruse to allow the soil to become fallow and rich again. But our experience of Iran so far was chiefly a daytime one – the ban on alcohol had terminated most of the nightlife, and future leniency is unlikely.

It seemed fitting that the Persian capital of wine is also their capital of poetry. Iran's literary tradition is every bit as strong as our English one. They have their Chaucer and Shakespeare, their Milton and Keats. However, their revered poets wrote their epics hundreds of years earlier than ours. Ferdowsi, chief of these literary giants, died in 1020. We visited the grave of his literary successor, Hafiz, in Shiraz. We sometimes pay cursory visits to the graves of our poets and writers, but the Iranians make pilgrimages to theirs. The shrine of Hafiz is a curious place. His poetry, set to chanting music, fills the air, and folk touch his gravestone and whisper his poems. Apparently it's a good omen to visit.

As today we might say 'all's well that ends well', or 'it's all Greek to me' or 'one fell swoop', bringing Shakespeare into our everyday speech, so the Persians quote Ferdowsi, Hafiz and Khayyam. The only difference is that almost every Persian can recite long passages from their poetry, whereas the number of people able to quote Shakespeare probably shrinks every year.

We left the shrine with a copy of *The Divan*, the works of Hafiz translated into English by three poets, only one of whom the Persians accept as having captured the true essence of the original. We found it very readable, although I doubted I'd make it through the whole thing.

From Shiraz, we set out for Persepolis, one of the best-preserved cities from the Achaemenid Persian period. Its huge stone edifices and pillars bear testimony to the wealth and power of ancient Persia.

Kareem was our guide. He was an affable chap with a few odd opinions, but he was an assiduous educator who, I think, was grateful to have tourists who were interested in more than just photos of the columns and façades.

En route to the ruins, we chatted in Kareem's car. We'd always been careful not to raise any politically or religiously sensitive issues during our time in the country, but Kareem was the one who broached the topic of Iran's relationship with the West.

'You from Ingerland?' he asked.

'South Africa,' Beth answered, 'you know, Nelson Mandela?'

'Yes, Mandela, I know him. What country in South Africa?'

‘From Cape Town,’ she simplified it.

‘It is good you are not from Ingerland. Or America.’ We were relieved not to be.

‘Ingerland and America do not like Ahmadinejad.’ No argument there. ‘You know why?’ I shook my head. ‘It is because Ingerland and America want Iran weak and divided. With Ahmadinejad we are powerful and they are afraid.’

I was certainly no supporter of the way in which the West had meddled in the affairs of the Middle East, but I didn’t think that this was an accurate explanation of why they were meddling. The West wanted reform in Iran, as did many Iranians. Ahmadinejad was a power-hungry holocaust denier with nuclear ambitions. He scared locals and foreigners alike not because he was powerful, but because he was a threat to stability in the region, and an obstacle to peace in the Middle East.

I shifted the conversation to a slightly less controversial topic.

‘Yes, it’s bad the way that the West meddles in the affairs of the world,’ I said.

‘Yes. Yes,’ he agreed heartily, ‘you from Africa so you know what I mean. In your country, I think that white people should leave now and go to Europe where they belong. Africa is for black people only. Iran is for Persians only.’

I saw that there wasn’t much constructive political discourse to be had with Kareem, so we swung back to the less contentious arena of ancient Persian history.

The Achaemenid Persians ruled an empire as vast as the Romans or Mongols. Cyrus the Great was their founding father, but equally powerful were Darius I, who founded Persepolis in 550BC, and Xerxes I. The latter is famous for destroying Athens, though the Persians claim it was in retaliation for a Greek atrocity. The Greeks got their own back anyway, in 330BC, when Alexander the Great burnt Persepolis to the ground.

It has been visited as a tourist site for centuries. The entrance is marked with graffiti, though not of the spray-paint variety. I could still clearly read one of the illicit engravings: ‘Henry Morton Stanley, New York Herald, 1870’.

More recently a new area was excavated where inscriptions and carvings have been immaculately preserved under the sand. These have confirmed or confounded theories of not only the Persians, but of its empire as well. Civilisations as far flung as Nubia, India and Arabia are pictured in the myriad stone carvings and inscriptions on the walls.

We visited the massive tombs of Darius and Xerxes in a cliff face nearby. Kareem was remarkably enthusiastic for a guide who’d been to Persepolis, by his own report, over a thousand times.

\*

It had been nearly five months since we’d left London in the rain, through Western and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Turkey, the Caucasus, Central Asia and now finally Iran.

We'd travelled the Silk Road all the way to the border of China and back. We'd spent time in a Croatian courthouse, seen Bosnian cities destroyed by war, lost our way in the Serbian mountains, lost our minds at a music festival, seen the last surviving statue of Stalin outside Russia, drunk wine with Svans, sailed across the Caspian, swum to Afghanistan, driven through desert sand and mountain snow, into deep valleys and over the soaring Pamirs.

We'd gazed on the wonders of ancient Persia and seen the Silk Road jewels of Khiva, Bukhara and Samarkand.

Had we achieved anything? Certainly we hadn't. Had we changed anyone's lives? Had *we* changed? Probably not. But a journey leaves an indelible mark. At first it's just superficial – an interesting story that friends might care to hear, though only once. Later the experiences and memories become detached from their temporal roots, vague images drifting around the mind, summoned when least expected. A strange smell in a marketplace. A hot wind on your face. As the tempo of life slows, the memories linger like uninvited guests as you slumber fitfully or gaze unsleeping at the city lights. Finally, when the daily routine of life becomes too bewildering to contemplate, it is these memories that keep you company, bursting irresistibly into fantasies of turquoise cities and fierce titans.

We'd be back one day, I promised, but for now, we'd leave Shiraz, City of Poets, and head for Africa, and home.

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# The Golden Road



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LONDON

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BELGRADE

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TBILISI

YEREVAN

BAKU

TURKMENBASHI

ASHGABAT

KHIVA

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SAMARKAND

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OSH

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ESFAHAN

SHIRAZ

