

The Silk Road

Travels in
Central Asia



By

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Dedicated to Karkani

Through thick and thin, and illness, you
never said you just wanted to go home. A
great travelling companion and more.

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Note: I have excluded travelling between cities unless something significant happened because it can be repetitive. Towards the end of the trip, Karkani was feeling ill and so the detail of the last sections are a bit sketchy.

Setting Off

Karkani sighed just audibly, for me to realise that she had heard the 'we should travel light' speech that I had made many times before. I suppose it is a bit of an issue for some people who would ideally want to pack everything, just in case. But I had a silver edge of an ace up my sleeve.

'There is a benefit though,' I began.

She seemed a bit more interested now.

'You know the company that organised our visas and permissions and stuff, well they also have a transport arm to their company. If we find anything we want, we can just get the company to deliver the items directly to the UK. They have offices in all the towns and cities on our route. In fact they specialise in this kind of thing right from Tbilisi to Beijing.'

I should tell you about a few changes that had happened to us since our last adventure. We had returned from one of our trips to the Scottish cottage and found a letter addressed to me. On opening it, I was faced with an inheritance of many thousands of pounds left to me by a friend who had died of a massive stroke. Although, it is, of course, a very sad matter, I was inwardly more relieved than sorry for him because he had a few chronic illnesses and suffered quite a lot.

Karkani and I had suffered a bit from a lack of funds in our recent adventures, which is inevitable if you don't have regular work. On the other hand, if you do work regular hours, you can't go on adventures in any case because you would always be at work! This unexpected windfall was not enough to retire for life, or anything like that, you understand, but when you have got used to a very limited funding lifestyle, it is nice to be able to relax and not worry too much about where the next rouble is coming from. We could now follow our fantasy of moving into a larger flat and furnishing it in any way we wanted. We had talked about interior design and such matters and I had said I wasn't interested; Karkani could decide on it because she was interested and much more knowledgeable about it than I was. My contribution to the discussion now, though, was that we might be able to get furniture or rugs, and other paraphernalia from our journey on the Silk Road, send it back via the travel company, and have a central Asian theme to our living space. Brilliant or what?

Karkani immediately took on the air of an interior designer, and I could see that she was mentally picturing each room of our, as yet, imaginary flat with a view to extensive refurbishment. All this was far too speculative and far reaching for me and so I left her to it.

'So', I concluded, 'we can travel light, get anything we like en route, within reason, and get our furnishings as well.'

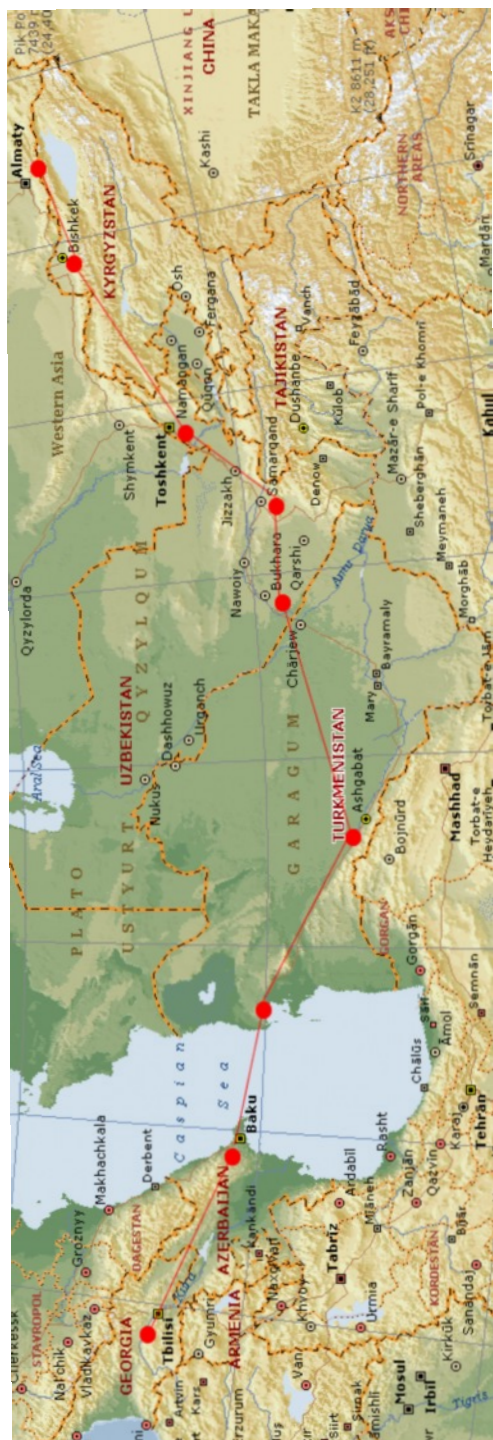
Karkani said nothing but I felt she must be having warm feelings inside, and I secretly declared myself a genius for thinking and linking everything up so well. We were packed and ready to go in just a few weeks. All the visa stuff had taken almost three months, and that was through an agency! Had I done all the work myself, I don't think would be going at all. So, when the final paperwork was declared as completed, we wanted get off as soon as possible. In many ways, the

waiting made me feel as if I had already been and come back from the journey; it had taken so long and been extremely frustrating.

We agreed that suitcases would be too constricting and so decided on taking rucksacks. This was less of a problem for me, but Karkani wasn't too happy because she complained that it was very difficult to keep clothes neat and crease free. We didn't need sleeping bags, tents or gas burners for cooking as we would be staying in hotels, and so the rucksacks presented enough space for clothing and toiletries and the like. Rucksacks are also easier to carry than dragging along rectangular cases.

There were some documents to collect and we had to organise the paperwork for transporting items if required, to send them back to the UK, and so we went first to the agency in London, planning to stay for only one day, and then had a flight booked to Moscow. We would then get a connecting flight to Tbilisi in Georgia. We had decided against a stay over in Moscow and that we would do that on the return journey. My friend in Moscow, Ekaterina, was disappointed, but I thought I would get her a present and see her on the way back to catch up and have a good 'knees up' as a final hurrah on this adventure.

And so, I found myself with Karkani in Terminal 3 at Heathrow for yet another time. I had the obligatory three pints of Guinness airside, that had now become a tradition, to fortify me for the journey, and then we were boarding our Aeroflot plane. I was looking forward to the meal on board, hoping that another tradition would be fulfilled; there is sometimes a side serving of raw fish.



Tbilisi



The new city in the distance and the old town in the foreground. The Georgian mind-set is all about pride and strength. Georgians make up about 70% of the population with minorities including Azerbaijanis and Russians making up the rest. Stalin was from

Georgia and these people like to think of themselves as the strongman of the region, although clearly it is just a small country in the modern post-soviet era.

There is a strong presence of mosques and other Islamic structures in the old town, although there are also many churches, and Georgia is officially a Christian country. I was only interested in the old town area because the new town was just like any other modern city. The old town has narrow twisting streets, lots of shops and tea houses, but a lack of touristy stuff; something I welcomed. Karkani was very engrossed in the fine cloth and embroidery in the clothing shops we passed.

We stopped for tea and snacks at a teashop deep in the old town and really enjoyed the sights and smells that took me back to an imaginary time of years ago. Karkani said that she could also feel the history and could easily imagine a time in the past when there were no cars, planes, or modern industry. The day was warm, and people passed by us lost in their own thoughts. Karkani said it was romantic, and I could only agree with her. For me, I could have spent hours lost in this place, but with time ticking past, we decided to do some more exploring and find a hotel for the night.

The hotel, when we finally decided on it, was quite small; all the large international chains were in the new town area which we avoided. It was set in a very old building and had perhaps twenty rooms, a dining room and reception. The room with twin beds was cheaper, but magnanimously I insisted on a room with a king sized bed and had to pay a king sized price. The view out of the window was fantastic and I could easily imagine us in any time in the last 300 years, being here surreptitiously, lovers hiding from the conformities of tradition. Karkani liked my overzealous imagination and I could see her living the story as I told her of our tales of love, passion and adventure. The stairs down to the dining room creaked as we stepped, and the quite dimly lit dining room itself seemed to be teeming with memories of a more glorious past.

We ate a supper of lamb seekh kebabs, with a large serving of fresh salad. I had the obligatory several glasses of vodka, mainly because there wasn't any wine, and Karkani decided she could do without any alcohol and had a large glass of a mixed fruit drink that looked delicious.

Before retiring for the night we couldn't resist a walk and the atmosphere of history was even more endearing as we wandered through the night life of old Tbilisi.

Baku



Baku is the capital and largest city of Azerbaijan. It is a port on the western coast of the Caspian Sea. The oldest section of Baku, located in the heart of the city, is known as Icheri Sheher, meaning "inner city." In 2000 it was designated a World Heritage Site. We were travelling east on the ferry from Baku to

Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan, the first truly Asian country on our adventure. The port of Baku is massive and the ships including our ferry are of serious

proportions. In true romantic style we were on the deck looking back at the disappearing coastline of Europe and then turning our heads to the east to watch the sea reaching to the horizon, to an unknown destination only to be imagined at this early stage. There were all sorts of images rushing through my head; music, dancing, exotic foods, and the like. Karkani seemed to be enthralled in a world of her own and so was I.

I thought of what a simple example of free will and destiny this journey presented. Each time I discuss spiritual matters with people, I try to think of examples that are practical and easy to understand. In this case, I thought of the free will we passengers had, of deciding to travel on this journey, but then we were all now intertwined in a sort of collective destiny on this ship. So, although we all from different places and had different reasons for travelling, we did now find that we were all together on this ship for the duration of the journey. So, the answer to the question, do we have free will or are we controlled by destiny is that we have both free will and are subject to destiny. If something should happen, like a storm, we would all be in it together. And, at the end of the journey, when we disembarked, we would all be transformed back into individuals with the free will to decide what we would do next. But not Karkani and I, who were travelling together and therefore had a continuous intertwined destiny of our own.

Karkani was telling me something that edged into my consciousness and brought me back to the present. She was talking about how she liked ships and had only been on a few in her life. I said that I had also only been on a handful of boats and ships in my time. Then we went inside to a bar and sort of restaurant; more of a snack bar type of place really.

‘So when were you on a ship last?’ I asked her.

‘When we travelled from Oman to the UK,’ she replied. ‘We were on three ships in all. But that wasn’t any fun, because we were refugees looking for a place of safety.’ She concluded.

I told her of my experiences as we ate some kind of pasty, a bit like a samosa, called samsa. I noticed that there was vodka available in little glasses and so had a shot for me and another one for her because Karkani doesn’t drink much herself.



Turkmenbashi

Landing here from Baku, Turkmenbashi is the first flavour of central Asia and the country of Turkmenistan. It is just an entry point really with nothing much to see or do in particular. It feels more like a Russian than a central Asian city, and we stayed at the Hotel Hazar for just one night before leaving for Ashkabat.

One great feature of central Asian countries is that there are lots of tea houses, places full of locals and sometimes tourists. It's a great way to pass the time, watching the world go by. The teas available are green and black and some which were unknown to me. The problem with not being able to speak the language is that you can use a Russian phrasebook to order standard stuff like black tea or green tea, but the phrases for anything more complicated, or rare, are not included. Even then, the two types of tea available were enough for both me and Karkani, especially when there was also vodka available, which seemed to be everywhere.

Another thing you soon realise sitting at the roadside with your tea, is that there are lots of different types of people. Although I couldn't identify them individually, there are Russians, Turkmen, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and others. All central Asian countries have a wide variety of people that are distinct by their clothing, languages and mannerisms. I suppose it's because of the Silk Road and

the history of travelling and trading that has left a kaliedoscope of nationalities all mixed together.

The Silk Road was the most important pre-modern trade route linking China, Central Asia, Persia and western Asia, and Europe. A 19th-century German scholar named the network of trails the Silk Road for the precious Chinese cloth that was originally the most valuable and abundant commodity transported on it. It isn't strictly speaking a single road but begins from central Europe in the west and Middle Eastern countries in the south. It then continues across central Asia, on to China. It also has paths that go north into Russia and south into Iran, Afghanistan and India.

Besides silk and fine cloths, all sorts of other goods were also transported, and with the goods, there also were people from all over the area, mixed up, inter-married and settled far from their original homes. With these people also came their ideas and religions. There are two cradles of the major religions in the world. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all originate in the Middle East. Hinduism and Buddhism, together with minor religions like Jainism, and Sikhism originate in India. Other religions in the region include Zoroastrianism from Persia and Taoism from China.

There is lots of evidence that these religions took on original adaptations as they intermingled with each other. There were also saints and gurus who travelled along the routes in personal journeys to develop their spiritualism. That is one of the main reasons I was interested in this journey. The Soviet era from 1917 until 1990 suppressed these ideas that are now emerging again.

For me, as an active Tantric, I will use my skills to experience and extract strains of original thought and practices that I can write notes about during the journey and then develop them back in the UK. It is very exciting that people like Gurdjieff had many 'lost years' travelling in these parts, experiences that led him to his great spiritual heights. I would be happy with just a taste of what he experienced.

The train to Ashkabat would leave at about 3.30 in the morning and so we asked for an early wake up call at the hotel desk. We would have to be up at 2.00 am in order to get ready and get the train; hardly worth a hotel bill or a sleep. But we were on holiday and we had to have our comforts. The plus point was that the

train gets to Ashgabat at about 6.30 am and would give us a full day and night there. Then we could decide if we wanted to stay longer or move on.

Ashkabat



This city was all but destroyed by an earthquake in the 1940s and the Earthquake Museum is worth a visit. There are lots of other museums as well. The city has been destroyed and rebuilt a few times and is like a building site, in parts, as much as anything else. The old Soviet type of construction has been replaced in places by new, supposedly more beautiful, constructions.

One of the delicacies in both Arab nations and in central Asian countries is sheep's head. I have been offered this dish before but have never tried it yet. Given the

opportunity, I would certainly give it a go, but am not sure how it is prepared and cooked, or how it is eaten. I was also thinking about vegetarianism because often when people go abroad and think about meat dishes that seem to be different from food at home, they often say things like: 'it's enough to make you a vegetarian'. In addition to this, people have often asked me on my views about vegetarianism and spiritualism.

The confusion comes when people start to give preferences to different life forms. We say that animals are more important than vegetables, and edible vegetables are more important than grass or weeds, (although wheat and other staples are grasses themselves). It is a human problem of interpretation. If we assume that there is a God, who made everything, surely he would give equal weight to all species. It's like asking a mother which of her children she prefers; she might emphasise particular qualities in one or other child but would not say that one is better or more important than the other. If you look at the eco-

system, we can see that there is a great interdependency between all species, plants and animals alike. And so, the answer from a spiritual point of view is that all species are equally important, and assumed preferences for one or other is simply a human construct.

At a deeper level, life is dependent on death. Virtually everything we do involves death in some way. Even drinking a glass of water entails the killing of thousands of micro-organisms that live in the water. Walking along the street involves squashing insects underfoot, and driving along in a car, bus or train involves the squashing of insects on the front of the vehicle. Hinduism has a good explanation of the relationship between life and death. God is portrayed as a trinity, called Trimurti, and is made up of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the maintainer, and Shiva the destroyer. Without death there cannot be life; can you imagine if nothing ever died? And without birth there can be no continuation, and that requires the forces of maintenance. It is a cycle.

Coming back to the question of vegetarianism, I say that it doesn't exist. It exists if you consider it to just involve not eating meat, although even that conclusion is tenuous. Fertiliser has one of its main ingredients as crushed bones of animals and therefore, vegetarians are eating as much meat as anyone else. If you look at vegetarians not killing or being responsible for killing living things, then vegetarians kill more than anyone else. Each leaf of salad, each grain of rice is the killing of something.

Someone once said that if horses ruled the world, God would look like a horse, and horses being at the top, would never sanction the eating of horse meat. In that case, eating humans would be OK because they would be further down the pecking order. It is all a matter of interpretation. Cannibalism is frowned upon only because it is the eating of humans by humans; otherwise it is meat like any other.

We could stay in Ashkabat either for one day and then travel to Bukhara on the 19.15pm overnight train, or stay longer and travel on the second night.

Bukhara

The cities we were going to visit were going to be fairly similar, with highlight features of muslim architecture, modern concrete constructions, lots of large and smallish bazaars and hotels that promised much more than they could deliver. Bukhara was no different.

One of the things that always surprises me is the desire to be remembered. There are so many people who want to be remembered for something or other so that when they die it will somehow make a difference. Most of these people are just ordinary people and I think it is enough to have lived a full life without imposing their stupidities on future generations. Once you are dead, this life then ends and another may begin. It may be that they are so afraid of what comes after death that is too frightening to contemplate, and in desperation they want to leave a mark of themselves behind.

I think about the palaces and mosques, the fortifications and defences built by great leaders who may themselves have had dreamt of greatness. And we can see their constructions all over central Asia, standing proud and distinct in the otherwise desert like terrain. But who really remembers them and how much do they remember? Even if someone's name is remembered, what does that really signify? Consider the example below:



Tamerlane (1336-1405), Turkic ruler and conqueror, one of the greatest military campaigners in history, whose far-flung expeditions carried him from southern Russia to India, and from Central Asia to Turkey. He was born near the city of Samarqand, in what is now Uzbekistan.

So, whatever Tamerlane did, and it was very impressive, all we know about him really is what is written above, and for most people this information is enough. Really, who cares? Think about other people who are 'famous'. We know very little about them as people; were they nice people, did they like life, what were their likes and dislikes, what did their children think of them, etc? Even if we can understand them as people, I ask again, who cares?

So, if we don't care about great people in history, who is going to care about lesser achievers like an actor, the owner of a string of supermarkets, a hockey player, or a politician? In fact, people are hardly remembered when they are alive never mind years after their death. People who try to be remembered are just wasting their time. Instead of trying for material greatness, isn't it better to just try to become a better person themselves? It must be worth more to just look inside and find out how they can be better whilst they are alive, to live better, help others, and be happy with their life as it is.

So, we are left, in country after country with buildings, beautiful in themselves, that are a minimal reminder that others have been here before. Where are they now; skeletons of empires, scattered in the desert!

We would travel from Bukhara to Samarkand by train.

Samarkand



You can just look at the buildings in the two photographs below to see how beautiful the architecture is. Personally, i could sit here and admire the view all day long. No further words of description are necessary. We would fly form here to Tashkent on the very regular Uzbekistan Airways.

There is a real difference between religion and spirituality. In fact, it is very important to define terms otherwise there is always a big chance of misunderstanding. People tend to be quite happy to use terms with their own

understanding of them and never think that other people might not see their definition in the same way. One of the biggest misunderstandings I have come across is between spirituality and religion.



Religion is based on the outer, objective reality. It is the outward expression of faith. If you belong to a religion, you have a place of worship, a congregation to participate with, hymns and songs to sing, a book to guide you in life, somewhere to

introduce new life into the world, and somewhere to take your dead. It gives you an identity; a place in the community.



My religion is Manchester United. It fulfils almost all the requirements mentioned above. There is a place of worship; Old Trafford stadium. There are songs to sing including, 'glory glory Man. United'. There are messiahs including the now retired Sir Alex Ferguson. There is a congregation of worldwide supporters. There is a reason to look forward to life; winning games and trophies. There is somewhere to have your ashes scattered; in and around the stadium. I

could go on. Finally, there are even other people of other religions to try to convert; Arsenal, Liverpool, and Chelsea are a few of these.

Spirituality is entirely internal and subjective. Subjectivity defined in this sense is, a study of the subject, in other words, yourself. You can live your religion in your head centre but to live your spirituality you have to live in your heart centre.

Spirituality is all about your personal relationship with God, nature or the universe. I have spoken to many people who say they know to a greater or lesser extent, and have a personal relationship with, God. They know this for themselves but cannot explain it to anyone else. In fact, it is impossible to explain it to someone else because it is subjective and internal. I can show you gravity by throwing an apple into the air and explaining to you that every time I do this, the apple will fall back to the ground. You might not understand the theory of gravity but you know that an object thrown into the air will fall back to the ground. This is why objective science is so good; experiments can be repeated to prove the action.

In spirituality, you cannot conduct experiments to prove your understanding. We have all experienced that fantastic feeling of seeing a beautiful sunset, or the emotions of falling in love, but you cannot even begin to explain the exact feeling to someone else because it is something inside and personal to you. It is the same with trying to explain your spiritual experiences; it cannot be done. Only you can know what you feel.

This doesn't mean that you cannot prove the experience to yourself. You should always be sceptical and try to discover if the feeling is just your imagination or really a meaningful experience that has actually happened to you. Test yourself and try to re-create the feelings. Test and test again until you are sure that for you the feeling is genuine. If you cannot prove it to yourself, you might still want to keep it because it makes you feel good. Spirituality is all about you.

Tashkent

This is a large sprawling city, but I was interested only in the Old Town area. It starts at the Chorsu Bazaar and is made up of narrow dirt streets, with a liberal sprinkling of ancient mosques, madrasses and building of other indistinguishable purposes. In the same way as other ex-Soviet era cities Tashkent has its fair share of statues and memorials, most of which are difficult to identify the purposes of.

The modern part of the city can be seen in the photographs below. I am very bored by these Soviet era expressions although all the hotels with modern amenities can be found here rather than in the old town area.

I was pondering on matters generally, when a great revelation came to me. I thought immediately of all the great gurus and saints who had also had revelations on the Silk Road and whether it was the route that held some magical powers or whether it was something going on inside me that had just completed itself and revealed itself to me. It was to do with the story printed below, something I have mentioned many times before in my writings.

The Tao master Chuang Tzu gathered his disciples together one morning and asked them for help. He told them that he had dreamt that he was a butterfly. In the dream, he felt that he was a butterfly as much as this morning he felt he was a man, and asked the question: am I now a man dreaming that I was a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming now that I am a man?

I realised now that Chuang Tzu must have gathered together his novice monks rather than more advanced ones because the question was put in a simple way. You see, the mind works in an either/or way, a bit like a switch. The novices probably had not got to the level where they could pass beyond that point and move on to greater realisations. So, Chuang Tzu was asking them to choose whether they thought he was in fact a man, or a butterfly. No matter what the novices answered, they would be wrong because they were working from the head centre, which is the wrong equipment to use for spiritual realisations. By listening to their answers, Chuang Tzu would know whether the novices were ready to move on to the next stage of their development or not. His question was made up and irrelevant; merely a construct to assess his novices.

I had just realised that there were seven answers to this riddle, not just the two presented.

He could be a man

He could be a butterfly

He could be neither

He could be both

He could be less than both

He could be more than both

He could be eternal

When you apply the question in the right way and use the correct instrument to consider it, then it is easy. The correct centre, incidentally, is the heart centre. If he could be a butterfly in his dreams and a man in this reality, he could in fact be any number of creatures, incarnations, or beings on other occasions. For instance, tonight he might be a tiger or a wasp.

We are taught that this life of ours is real, and other experiences are imagination. I know for myself, and the reader can find out from my other works, that this reality is as much as a dream as some of the other realities I have experienced. Either they are all imagination or they are all true, or else something in between. And who is to say that imagination isn't as valuable as this 'real' life?

We have such a determination to see this life as the only real one, that we assume there was nothing before this life or will be after it, let alone parallel lives that run alongside this present one. I have proved that I can live in at least one additional life at the same time as this one and you can read it for yourself in my novel Hillside Retreat, Additional Chapters, Part Five.

There comes the question then, that if we can and do live additional lives at the same time as this one, are we affected in our skills and abilities by what is going on in the other lives? I find it strange that some people suddenly get ill for no apparent reason and thought about whether it could sometimes be due to our actions and behaviours in other lives. I have spoken to doctors often, who tell me that medicine isn't an exact science, and they have gone on to tell me about people who are perfectly fit and healthy who sometimes drop dead for no apparent reason. As long as we assume we can only live one life at a time, then it may be unexplainable. But, if we accept for the moment that we may be involved in more than one life at a time, then isn't it possible that a sudden death in another life might act like a domino that then spills over into this life?

I am not thinking of natural ageing here, because the body does deteriorate with age and everyone slows down because of physical reasons or due to mental reasons as the body ages. But what about unexplained deaths? I have heard of old people who easily maintain their full faculties well into their 90s and beyond, whilst others are struggling in their 50s. In many cases there are lifestyle choices that lead to ill health including drinking, smoking and drug taking, and these deteriorations are clearly understood. Consider this example. It's like a tree that

grows upwards. As long as there isn't a branch growing out of the trunk, all the energy of the roots goes to the trunk. As soon as the trunk sprouts branches, some of the energy of the tree goes into the branches and less goes into the growth of the trunk. When a tree is mature, there is less growth at the top of the tree but significant growth sideways in the branches, which in turn sprout twigs and leaves. If one of the branches becomes diseased, it is possible that the sickness spreads downwards into the trunk and eventually kills the whole tree.

Is it possible that some people live a very long life because most of their energy is concentrated in just one life and if there are others, they are merely peripheral? If we accept this premise for the moment, we can understand that someone involved in many lives at the same time as this one will degenerate more quickly because they are using more energy and putting more stress on themselves. And if all this is true, what happens to the person when he or she dies; does one life simply shut off and its essence is displaced into one of the other lives, or even a new one? Are we truly ever dead then, because lives like branches of a tree continue to sprout out of the trunk? If the trunk becomes diseased and dies is it possible to simply move into another trunk which has after all sprouted from the seeds shed by the original tree?



Bishkek

There's a lot of concrete in all places we visit, seemingly an obsession of the Soviet era. Ala-Too square is a main feature of Bishkek. It used to be called Lenin Square, something I still prefer. There are lots of museums again, as in all these large cities, but I was particularly interested in the various bazaars and the wide variety of people including Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and their particular localised wares.

I used to get very frustrated when I could never find anyone who was even moderately interested in spirituality. Everyone, it seems, is interested only in material things; money, babies, property and the like. Once you have seen even a glimpse of the spiritual experience, there is nothing to compare with it. Everything in the material world seems pretty insignificant and poor. I compare it with action in a primary school playground; lots of children having petty arguments about whose turn it is to play on the swings, or with the football. However, now I see things differently. If no one is interested then the more there is for me to get on with. It's like going to an empty supermarket; there's no one to push past, or queues to wait in. Another way of looking at it is to imagine a huge box of chocolates; they're all mine! I have tried to share the magical experience but no one is interested, and so, I have started withdrawing from the world and immersing myself completely in this magical world. Every now and then I have to emerge into the material world to pay the bills, do some shopping and cooking, and make sure my landlord is happy with my tenancy. When everything is in order, I can then return to my own world of enlightenment and experiences.



Another matter is that some people simply don't believe anything I say. That used to be very frustrating because I have been doing this for eighteen years and it doesn't help when people think

you're just a bit more than mad. I have become easy with this position as well; maybe it's got to do with age or something. In any case, I think that even if everything I say or do is entirely from my imagination, it's not a bad way to live my life. After all, I don't hurt anyone, it's all very enjoyable, and I'm having fun.

My main frustration though, is when I see people suffering or struggling through life, wasting their time by wandering up blind alleys. I can see the path they need to go on, but I see them obstinately wandering up yet another blind alley of stupidity. If I point this out to them, I simply get abuse and am accused of being pompous and dominant. There is no helping some people and so I just imagine I am watching a television programme; there is no sense of responsibility then as one programme ends and another drama begins.



Almaty

Panfilov Park is a good place to visit. The famous Zenkov cathedral is situated there and nearby are lots of pretty fancy shops. There are also four or five museums around Almaty that are worth a visit. They include museums of Musical Instruments, Arts, and Geology. For me, though, the best view is the sight of the Tian Shan mountain range in the adjoining country of China which you can see in the picture opposite.



Another view from Almaty.



Appendix – The boring stuff

This account isn't a traditional travelogue and so i don't feel guilty about not including vast details about administration and beaurocracy that generally accompanies the planning and execution of a project like this. However, I have decided to mention some aspects here, in the appendix, so as not to have to interrupt the main stories with the 'boring stuff' continuously.

Each country has a requirement for visas, and in some cases special permissions for certain areas, like places near military installations etc. It is a headache that I solved by getting an agency to sort them out. I simply gave them a map of our travel plans, the approximate duration of our journey, and handed over my passport and Karkani's one and waited. One thing to remember, though, is that it can take months to sort all this out. In the end we got visas for seven countries, as I remember it. And, it can be quite expensive in total; although individual visas aren't that costly, the total can make your eyes water.

The other main concern is currency, and the advice here is to carry at least one credit card, some euro travellers cheques, and lots of American dollars. It is easy to convert currency in a new nation once you arrive, but beware of the black market rates because it is easy to get ripped off if you relax too much. All notes should be in perfect condition; not torn or too creased.

Country	Currency
Georgia	Lari
Azerbaijan	Manat
Turkmenistan	Turkmen Manat
Uzbekistan	Sum
Kyrgystan	Som
Kazakhstan	Tenge

There is widespread corruption throughout this area of the world and so you must adapt to survive. It is better to give a small bribe than stick to your principles. You have to think, 'when in Rome', and then you should be fine.

There are lots of languages throughout the region and it is unrealistic to learn even the basics in all of them. The best language to use is Russian which is also the legal and administrative language used in these countries. It is a good idea to learn key phrases and words that will be required regularly.

Languages

Russian

Turkmen

Uzbek

Tajik

Kyrgyz

Kazakh