



Turkmenistan

Marble, Mud, Museums and Monuments

By Margaret White

'Surreal' could describe our early morning arrival in Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan. In this remodelled hub, fuelled by oil and gas wealth, all government and residential buildings are amazingly faced in white marble. Fountains danced in multi-coloured light shows along wide boulevards. Statues of the late President for Life Saparmurat Niyazov, self-described Turkmenbashi or "Father of the Turkmen", are omnipresent, hailing the ambitious architect of much of Turkmenistan's comprehensive 'Golden Age' of cultural identity and heritage.

Turkmenistan was one of the 'stans' to emerge as a nation after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and as its name suggests, its population is dominated by the tribal Turkmen. Though their origins are clouded, Turkmen possibly migrated from Mongolia around the 10th century. It is perhaps the contemporary use of the characteristic *gul* or medallion design, depicted on their red rugs, white buildings and the green national flag that is a clear and frequent reminder of their past.

Another traditional symbol central to nomadic culture is the famed, high-spirited Ahal-Tekke horse, with its long, elegant neck, fine legs and golden coat. This small horse was revered for its endurance and speed, just as the Ferghana or blood-sweating horse of Uzbekistan was sought by the Chinese in ancient times. These endangered animals, a few of which we managed to see and ride, are celebrated annually with a Turkmen Horse Fair.

Historical and cultural influences became more evident as we toured some incredible archaeological sites. These extraordinary places have remained out of sight from much of the modern world. Beliefs such as shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam accompanied successive generations of Persian Achaemenians and Sasanians, Greek Parthians and Seljuk Turks. Turkmenistan, once at the centre of the world along the Silk Road, now boasts several UNESCO World Heritage Sites which we visited, including Old Nisa, the oasis city of Ancient Merv and Konye-Urgench at Dashoguz. Miraculously, despite ancient looting and the ravages of time



The white marble Museum of Turkmen National Values

upon these mud brick structures, 95% of the archaeological sites remain to be excavated.

An undoubted highlight was the late Bronze Age site of Gonur Depe. Gonur Depe was contemporaneous with the Mesopotamian and Indus Valley civilisations and was once a kingdom along the former Murghab Delta. After a two-hour ride on paved road from Mary (near ancient Merv) to the edge of the desolate Karakum or Black Sand Desert, we exchanged our minivan for two Russian four-wheel drives for an extra hour's bone-shattering ride across the flat, brown, *takyr* or clay desert. Eagles wheeled overhead and camels roamed among the grey-green camel thorn bushes and gnarled saxaul trees.

Our Russian guide, Viktor, who has worked alongside pioneer archaeologist Professor Viktor Sarianidi, created an excellent picture of what life may have been like in the extensive, maze-like palace with its sophisticated water supply and sewerage system, its temple and a necropolis complex showing evidence of animal sacrifice. Sarianidi, who has been excavating at Gonur since the early 1970s,



FOM Study Tour Group



The Bronze Age site of Gonur Depe (Margina) in the Karakum Desert

has postulated some controversial theories on its religion and customs, such as that Gonur was the birthplace of Zoroastrianism. While many of the larger artefacts had already been removed to museums such as the National Museum in Ashgabat, piles of ceramic sherds, including jars and storage vessels, some inscribed with patterns, still littered the site, clearly visible and extremely tempting to those of us who have an interest in archaeology.

Retracing our path across the desert, I was just thinking how we had previously dodged a particular wet, sticky patch of ground when our van stopped with a jolt. Although we offered to disembark, our driver insisted we should stay put. That is exactly what we did. We sank deeper and deeper into the mud. Eventually, we could only clamber out by the front door. Our van was mired over the wheels. No amount of pushing and pulling would dislodge us, so we abandoned our van.

Bitter cold, low clouds and light drizzle dogged us throughout the tour, although our local guide, Gozel, assured us that rain meant good luck in this arid land. We were aware that Turkmen value clean and shiny shoes; unfortunately, we failed to live up to their standards. Although we were constantly scraping off mud on sharp edges, on camel thorn bushes and sloshing through puddles, we often felt Turkmen eyes were cast disapprovingly downwards as we entered their buildings.

Sunday is rest day for Turkmen, but not at the bustling Tolkuchka Bazaar, the largest open-air market in Central



Stuck in the mud, escaping from the bus

Asia. What an eye-opener! It was a cornucopia of carpets, clothing, handicrafts and silver jewellery mounted with carnelians, Soviet memorabilia, auto parts and white goods, all jostling alongside livestock. On rows of concrete tables, the Russian Bazaar at Ashgabat offered colourful fresh fruit and vegetables, medicinal herbs, spices, meat, fish from the Caspian Sea and Russian caviar, all filling the air with pleasant aromas. Speaking of food, we did not go hungry as we tucked into many hearty meals which began with a wide variety of cold, cooked salads; delicious, warming soups; *chorek* or flat bread, followed by shashlik or *plov*, consisting of meat and rice; melon or ice cream for dessert, all washed down with beer and vodka.

It may have seemed indulgent but our group flew, rather than drove, between sites. At US \$15-18, it made sense to save many arduous hours on the road. Konye-Urgench was a day trip to the north, necessitating a 4:00 am departure flight and a midnight return. Konye-Urgench was an important Islamic city in the 11th and 12th centuries, particularly for the Kubravid school of Sufism. The complex of mausoleums, partially clad in vivid, turquoise and lapis lazuli tiles, still has major pilgrimage significance. Watching a young couple and their child circumambulate a mausoleum reverently in prayer, underlined the sacredness of the place.

Thank you so much Helen Cannon-Brookes and Sue Ellen Kelso for leading us on a marvellous journey.



Konye-Urgench Sultan Ali Mausoleum

Margaret White is a long-term member of FOM who recently returned to her home in Sydney where she joined The Asian Arts Society of Australia to continue her focus on all things Asian. She returned to Singapore with her husband Richard to participate in this FOM study tour.

All photos by Gisella Harrold