

I'm sitting on the edge of the world.

I'm at Quoddy Head State Park in Lubec, Maine, the easternmost point in the contiguous US and a stone's throw from Canada, on the ledge of a 40-foot high sea cliff that's shrouded in fog. It's unclear where the fog ends and the Bay of Fundy begins. Staring into the grey abyss, I wonder: *What else is out there I can't see?*

Meanwhile, my friend Amisha, guru-like with her waist-long raven hair, presses play on Day 15 of Deepak Chopra's 21-Day Abundance Meditation Challenge. This is day 23 of our magical road trip up the Maine Coast – a first for both of us despite being northeast natives. We ended up here instead of traveling across Central Asia as planned because of covid; Maine was the only safe place we could explore that truly excited us.

* night train *

ON THE SILK ROAD

Text by
Erin LEVI

Today's lesson is on *synchrodestiny* — the merging of coincidences and destiny. Chopra, in his healing and hypnotic voice, says there's a rhythm to life and that when we live in harmony with it, everything we desire comes to us effortlessly, as if we're floating on a gentle river where everything we've ever wanted awaits us. In this way, we can make miracles happen with no limit or end!

"Now let's begin," he continues. *"In this moment, go within to that place of inner quiet where we experience our connection to the higher self. With each inhalation and exhalation, allow yourself to become more relaxed and at peace. Gently introduce today's Sanskrit mantra, repeating it mentally: Aham Brahmasmi. The core of my being is the ultimate reality."*

"I'll mind the time. At the end, I'll ring a soft bell to indicate that it's time to release the mantra. Aham Brahmasmi. Aham Brahmasmi."

Ding! And we begin...

I settle into lotus position, feeling a slight chill as the gabbroic stone meets my flesh. My blue and white pinstriped dress, more suitable for setting sail than transcendence, is an inch too short. Resting my hands lightly atop my bronzed knees, I take a deep breath, inhaling a potpourri of pine, wildflowers and salt, and exhaling in sync with the cadence of the waves as they crash against the rocks below—a powerful and humbling experience. As I disconnect from one world, I reconnect with another: Mother Nature and all of her magic. And just like that, my mind is calmed. Well, *almost*.

Aham Brahmasmi.
Aham Brahmasmi. Aham—
Fwheeeoo!

A whistle, instead of Deepak's usual chimes! Already?!

I half-open my eyes, squinting from the light. The fog has lifted to reveal an ikat-patterned sky and a turquoise-domed mosaic mosque soaring above a walled city.

WHERE AM I?

The mosque rushes by or is it me that rushes by? I look over at Amisha who is asleep beside me. The rising sun casts an orange glow over the old fortified city of Khiva, on Uzbekistan's border near Turkmenistan, which comes into focus through a dusty cabin window on the Orient Silk Road Express, a private train traversing the legendary trade route westward through Central Asia, just like Marco Polo and Alexander the Great. A knock on the door startles Amisha awake. A train attendant named Akmal slides the door open but doesn't enter.

"Kechirasiz. Would you like coffee or spice tea, Miss?" he asks.

Speaking with a faint Russian accent, he perches his hand on the Uzbek teapot – a pretty little thing painted with swirls of blue and white symbolizing cotton flowers called *paxta* – as if he knew my choice before I could say it.

"Choy, iltimos," I answer, impressed with myself for recalling the Uzbek word for *please* after all this time. Although I've been to Uzbekistan twice before — first as a grad student, spending a summer in Samarkand learning Uzbek (a language that has proved more useful than expected), and second to film a travel show — I never visited the neighboring four 'stans nor have I been to Khiva, which is why I'm so excited to finally arrive here, even if it is in the strangest of ways.

As he pours me a cup, the heady smells of cardamom, clove, nutmeg, cinnamon, and anise billow into a little steam cloud that's intoxicating. And with a single sip, memories of Maine begin to slip away...

"Good morning and welcome to Khiva—the 'secret' crown jewel of Uzbekistan! In a few moments, you

may disembark and meet your guide at the station for a day excursion to one of the most magical cities along the Silk Road,” announces the conductor.

“Amisha, we’re here! Finally! Can you believe it?”

Her doe eyes widen as she reads the 21-day itinerary pasted on our cabin wall: *Ashgabat! Khiva! Bukhara! Samarkand! Khujand! Kokand! Tashkent! Bishkek! Almaty! Astana!* All bypassing the Karakum and Kyzylkum deserts, Tian Shan Mountains and Lake Issyk-Kul.

Amisha and I had been planning to cross the Silk Road since we met six years ago at an event on Suriname in New York, where I happened to overhear her talking about Uzbek textiles. Synchron destiny, as Deepak would say! But somehow, for reasons beyond covid, this journey of a lifetime had eluded us.

Until now.

We quickly gather our things — afraid that if we don’t move fast enough everything will disappear — and make our way down the narrow hallway to exit the train, passing other people: mostly older Germans and Brits and some vodka-toasting Russians. On the platform we see a sign that reads “Double Trouble”.

“That must be for us,” I chuckle.

Sure enough, it was. Our guide, however, was Bhante—a nomadic Buddhist monk we’d met and meditated with in Portland at the start of our Maine road trip. Huh? How weird. I blink a couple of times. Nope, he’s still there. His saffron robe impossible to miss, lucent like a butter lamp against the sand-hued city. His round face, however, could pass for Uzbek despite being Bangladeshi. Like everyone

in Central Asia, the look is an exotic mix—a result of centuries of conquests and occupations by everyone from Ghenghis Khan to the Soviets.

“What are you doing here, Bhante?”

“Didn’t you know that Buddhism traveled the Silk Road, too?” he answers with a twinkle in his eyes. “I’m interested in uncovering any traces of Buddhism left here. But also—you didn’t seriously think I’d let you two have another adventure without me, did you?” he jokes, his laughter echoing against the 30-foot high brick walls, which wrap around the old town.

It’s true: Silk wasn’t the only thing traded between the East and West. Ideas and religions were exchanged, too, as with other goods like spices and rhubarb via a network of routes bridging the East and West, better described as the Silk Roads. That said, the only sign of Buddhism I’d ever witnessed in modern Uzbekistan was a cyber café in Samarkand called *Nirvana*. (It’s also true that he missed out on our spontaneous trip up Maine’s coast to the Canadian border.)

Bhante leads us through the gates of the fortified city to Itchan Kala, the inner town which served as an oasis to traveling caravans and is now full of merchants selling everything from intricately hand-painted ceramics to outlandish fur hats. From one narrow cobbled street to the next, we allow ourselves to get lost in a dizzying maze of madrassas, mosques, mausolea and bazaars. Everything feels so ancient and mysterious as if we’re in an Indiana Jones flick! Although it’s unclear what we’re searching for...

Until I feel pangs.

Hungry, we follow our noses and enter a single-domed mosque turned tea house through an old

wooden door. Inside, the beige brick walls are decorated with colorful hand-embroidered *suzani* — one of the textiles Amisha and I originally bonded over. We take the stairs to a rooftop terrace and are left breathless — not by the climb so much as by the view. There she is, Khiva’s landmark minaret, the blue and green-tiled Kalta Minor, beautiful and looming like a full moon on the horizon!

A server wearing a silky khan-atlas tunic wafts over, inviting us to sit at a long table next to some lower tables with cushions where white-bearded men wearing skullcaps sit munching on apricot kernels and dried fruits in between sips of tea.

“*Assalomu alaykum*. We’ve been expecting you,” she says, handing us a menu. Her gold teeth reflect the sunlight as she recites the dishes: *Plov! Manti! Shashlyk! Lagmon! Salat! Samsa! Shivit Oshi!* The pumpkin manti (dumplings) and green shivit oshi (noodles infused with dill) are local delicacies, she informs us. And while the plov (rice pilaf cooked in a cauldron), is the national dish, Khiva has its own version *we must try*, especially since “he who has not eaten plov has not lived”, attests an Uzbek proverb.

“Can we have it all?” I plead, guilty of gluttony and overcome by nostalgia. I can already taste the richness of the lamb plov, infused with carrots and cumin, and the sweetness of the dumplings. And I can’t wait to try Khiva’s green glory.

“*Albatta*,” she answers. *Of course*.

First to arrive is the non, golden brown, round and decorated with seeds and holes in the shape of a flower. Uzbek bread is a veritable work of art, almost too exquisite to eat. Nevertheless, we rip it apart. It’s warm and chewy. *Yum*.

While we await the rest of the feast, Bhante reaches into his robe and pulls out a Silk Roads guidebook by Paul Wilson. He flips to the section on Khiva.

“Hungarian traveler Arminius Vámbéry visited Khiva in 1863,” he reads. “One of his first encounters was with eight old men lying supine having their eyes gouged out by the khan’s executioner, who wiped his knife clean on each victim’s beard before moving on to the next.”

I nearly choke. “Bhante, that’s awful! Why did you have to share that at lunch?” I asked, lowering my hand from my throat back to the table.

“I’m sorry. I’m a bad monk!” he laughs, referring to the title of his forthcoming memoir: *Bad Monk, Bad Stories*. “But I thought you as a travel writer might be interested...”

He’s isn’t wrong, and continues. “Do you know when Khiva was founded?”

We shake our heads, embarrassed. Although we shouldn’t be. How many Americans even heard of the ‘stans before Borat?

“Don’t worry! No one really does,” Bhante says. “But one popular legend dates it to biblical times. After the flood, Noah’s son Shem began wandering around the Kyzylkum desert with his tribes and one night dreamt of 300 torches blazing in the red sands here. He took it as an omen to build a city in the form of a ship, following the outline of the torch-wall in his dream.”

“Wow—so Khiva really is a dream come true!” I quip. Amisha laughs.

It’s also a place where great dreamers were born and scientific thinking was fostered. Half a century before Columbus “discovered” America, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, one of the finest scientists of the medieval Islamic era, who hailed from Khiva, believed there was a continent on the other side of the earth and that people lived there. Imagine that?

The feast comes and goes and before we know we have to head back. By the time I reach my cabin, I collapse onto my bed with a full belly, swiftly lulled to sleep by the aural rhythms of the train.

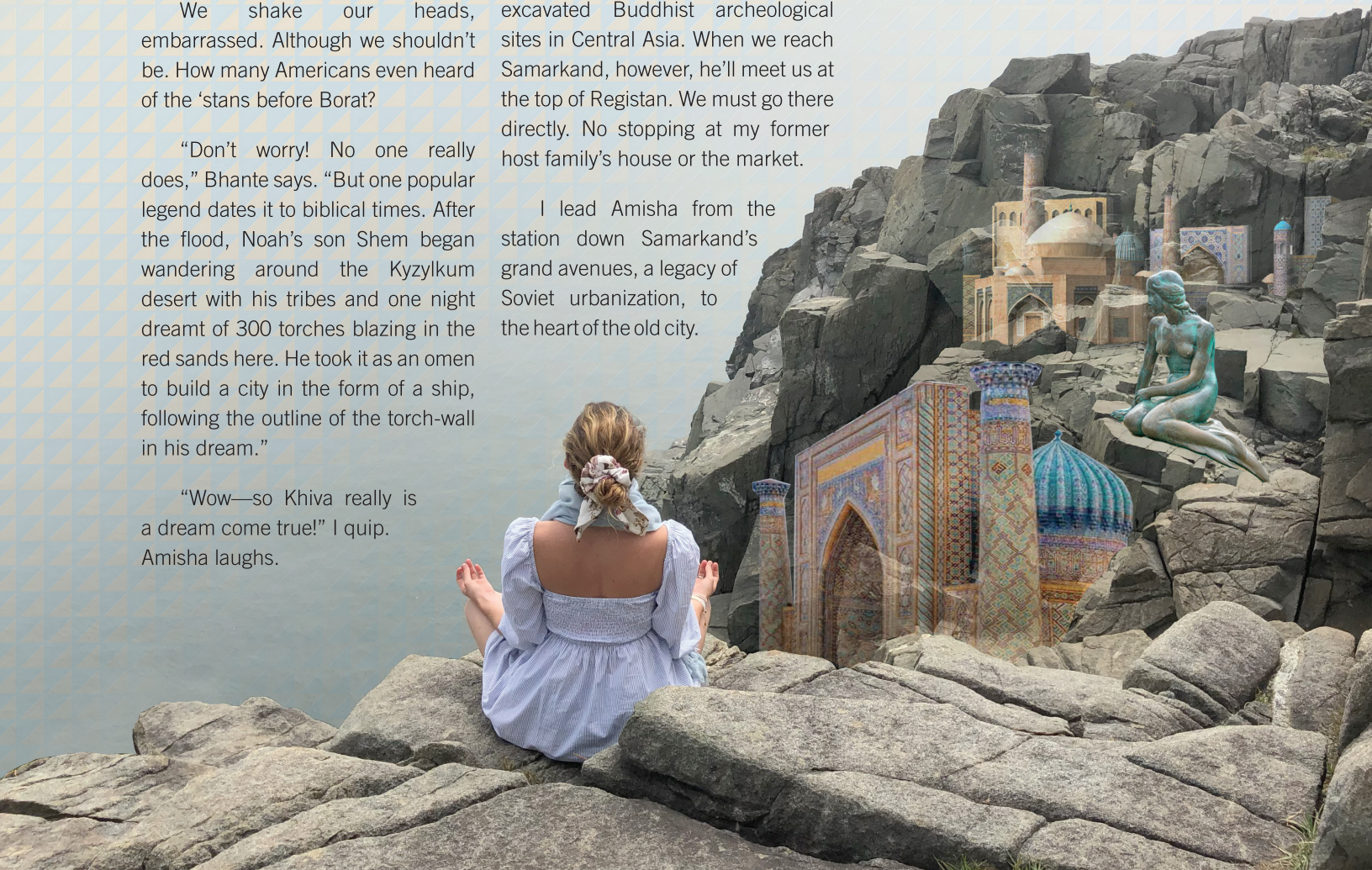
I awake to a knock. This time, Akmal, with the morning tea and coffee cart, hands us a note from Bhante stuffed with some Uzbek currency inside. He’s gone to find the domed stupa and monastery at Fayaz Tepe, near the city of Termez on the southern border with Afghanistan, which is one of the best excavated Buddhist archeological sites in Central Asia. When we reach Samarkand, however, he’ll meet us at the top of Registan. We must go there directly. No stopping at my former host family’s house or the market.

I lead Amisha from the station down Samarkand’s grand avenues, a legacy of Soviet urbanization, to the heart of the old city.

Without consulting a map, my feet know the way even if I’ve forgotten. We turn onto the treelined University Boulevard, passing my old language school and taking a tiny detour to see Gur-e-Amir, an azure-tiled mausoleum for Turkic-Mongol conqueror Timur (Tamerlane), before reaching Registan Street. My pulse quickens as we approach Registan: one of the most beautiful public squares in the world and Uzbekistan’s most famous landmark.

Once the three ornately tiled madrassas are within sight, we stand still, our mouths agape. Registan is more resplendent than I even remembered!

Upon entering the massive square, we navigate the colorful crowds and head directly to Ulugbek’s Madrassa, whose portal is decorated with blue and yellow mosaics depicting the stars—fitting since Ulugbek (Timur’s grandson) was an astronomer and



mathematician, and it was here that the sciences were taught. He also built an observatory in Samarkand we can check out after, I tell Amisha.

The portal is flanked by two towering minarets. I point to the slightly tilted one on the right.

“That’s the one we can go up,” I whisper to Amisha. “Although we’re not really allowed...”

A menacing guard blocks the entrance to the minaret. His expression is flat and serious until I open my mouth — “*Assalomu alaykum, yaxshimisiz?*” — and unclench my hand, revealing a wad of Uzbek *so’m* from Bhante. He nods, letting us in.

Our legs burn as we ascend the minaret’s steep spiral staircase. “This reminds me of my old East Village walk-up,” Amisha jokes.

Finally, we reach a metal hatch that leads to the rooftop. Amisha thinks I’m mad for pulling myself through it, but I convince her to follow. We’re now teetering 100 feet above ground, without any barrier to prevent us from falling, which is both thrilling and frightening! We have exceptional views of Sher Dor Madrassa’s tiger mosaic, and the crowds below are kaleidoscopic. In fact, it appears they’re dancers in a show. How wonderful to watch it from up here!

Amisha looks pale. In a bid to keep her here until Bhante comes, I try to calm her, telling her to close her eyes and breathe slowly, thinking of a happy place. I do the same, immediately taking note of the folk music playing below. The drumming of the *doira*, the strumming of the *dutar*, and the playing of the *nay* (a flute).

Ding! A bell chimes.

“It is time to release the mantra,” Deepak says.

I open my eyes to a celestial scene. The sun is shining, the water is glistening. Am I in heaven or back at Quoddy Head?

Amisha slowly awakens and reaches to turn off the meditation. “That was amazing,” she sighs.

Gazing at the vista, I try to process what happened when suddenly I notice something in the water—a seal, I’m hoping, but likely just a buoy. The mysterious object moves closer and as it rises out of the water I realize it’s neither.

It’s a merman.

The merman climbs up the cliff using a rope. His tail is turquoise with shimmering scales that remind me of Islamic mosaics. He extends a wet hand and introduces himself as Mike.

“Uh, hi Mike. Sorry, are we dreaming?” I ask.

“You’re not. I’ll explain everything, which I can do on land if I stay hydrated,” he says.

Mike leads us through a mossy forest into town and takes us to a charming beer garden aptly located on Lubec’s Water Street. Over pints of organic spruce ale, Mike spills his aquatic life tale to us, from his career working on submarines and harvesting pharmaceutical grade seaweed to his dramatic divorce from a Danish beauty: Copenhagen’s Little Mermaid. Eventually, he gets to the point.

“You are in a place with strong magnetic forces and the most extreme tides in the world, which affects everything. And then there are ley lines...”

“Ley lines?”

“Google it. Basically, you’re in an in-between place — halfway between the North Pole and the

Equator, on the border with the US and Canada — which means you can move to other in-between places.”

That’s when I realize that Central Asia is such a place — in between Europe and Asia, the East and West — and one that is more famous for being along a route than a destination.

“How?” I ask.

“You’ve already done it,” says Mike. “Find a special spot, clear your mind, and dream.”

I turn to Amisha and say, “Let’s go back! I still want to see the rest of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. And then we can cross over to Mongolia, and make our way to Xi’an...!”

Grinning, Amisha says, “Yes! But this time, let’s spend a little less time feasting and more time hunting for textiles, okay?”

I agree. There’s only so much plov one can eat, anyway.

We leave Mike, dashing back to our place on the cliff. As I settle into lotus position, I no longer feel as if I’m on the edge of the world, but on the terrace of infinity. Because, as Deepak, Bhante and Mike taught us, the world is endless and knows no bounds. ■

Erin Levi is a ~~spy~~ travel writer and polyglot whose first visit to Uzbekistan 13 years ago wasn't just a summer fling: it was true plov. To find out if she ever ends up crossing the Silk Road by train, follow her on Instagram @gldncr1 or check www.erinlevi.com. She's also an expert on the Himalayas and now, after a 42-day road trip, Downeast Maine.