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MASTURA'S KID BROTHER Letter 29

The mulberries were in season. The fruits and vegetables we had heard so much about are grown without pesticides in the semi-desert conditions of this ancient country. The blood-red tomatoes, they look and taste like aphrodisiacs. Ever taste such succulent strawberries before? See why these raisins are sold throughout the world? The abundance of spices make each visit to the vast, covered market--in Tashkent, Bukhara and Samarkand--an adventure out of 1001 Nights. Yellow carrots are used in pilaf, while the deep-orange kind are served as a separate dish. As for the mulberries, they are crushed underfoot everywhere we go, even at the entrance to the Samrakand Jewish Cemetery, but we won't get to taste them until we tour the early-morning market of Samarkand and the women, in exotic garb, with Uzbek-Mongol faces, urge us with their broad smiles to sample their wares. I pop three into my mouth. Shana, with a more delicate constitution than me, savors two. And it was worth the wait, almost worth the whole trip. In each city, we hire an English-speaking guide, who is grateful for the business. After 9/11 Americans stopped flying, so the only foreign language that you hear is German, and German tourists are notoriously tight-fisted. Olga, although young, is your standard-issue Intourist guide from the bad old days. She talks at you, and rarely deviates from the party line. Of Russian parentage, Olga has never been exposed to native English, and it is hard to decode her pronunciation. The one moment of truth is when Shana asks if she speaks Uzbek. "Of course not!" she laughs, then admits that since independence, not speaking Uzbek has become a real liability. Taskent was almost completely destroyed in the great earthquake of 1966, and as we visit the massive Socialist-Realist monument in memory of the quake--a muscular male shielding a virginal maiden--Olga wants us to believe that only 15 people were killed in the rubble, so effective was the relief effort. She does allow that there are many older people who "regret" the Soviet period, by which she means, look back in longing to a time when

anyone could afford a trip to Moscow, and Tashkent was the cosmopolitan hub of a vast empire. We see the Opera House designed by Russian architects and executed in precious stone after the war, so solid that it weathered the quake, and Olga never mentions that it was built by Japanese slave labor, something we know from our friend Aaron, a native of Tashkent, who, on our last night in Uzbekistan, will take us touring the most impressive site--the Metro, built by paid laborers, each station designed by another Uzbek architect.

Buxom, ebullient Mastura picks us up in the lobby of Hotel Bukhara. Before we get started, she explains that Mastura means "Obedience," that it was traditionally the name given to the fourth wife permitted an Uzbek man, and that she was anything but. We are instantly won over, especially when we learn that she held off getting married until her early thirties--bringing her mother's wrath down upon her--and ended up choosing a divorced man, who, as we all know, make the best husbands.

Mastura presents a complex picture of the Soviet occupation. The aerial bombing of Bukhara lasted three days even though the Emir had already fled to Afganistan and pleaded with the Reds to spare his city. Priceless buildings were destroyed, including two-thirds of the sixteenth-century walls. "They emulated Genghis Khan. To prove that they were conquerors." Then they subjugated the local population and turned Uzbekistan into an Indian Reservation. (She doesn't know the politically correct term for "Indian.") In late September, the universities closed down for five weeks and everyone was forced to pick cotton. Not to speak of what the cotton fields did to the soil, to the water supply. The whole country is slowly turning into a pillar of salt. On the other hand, on order of the Soviets, the Burning of the Veils occurred back in 1927, and despite the few hundred Uzbek husbands and brothers who murdered their wayward women, the ban on veils has stood the test of time. In those days, remember, every Uzbek door had two metal rings, the bigger one on the right was used by men and the small one by women, so that the occupant could identify the caller without even opening. Of her brothers, Mastura has this to say. "My younger prays five times a day. The older one would be happy to drink five times a day." Not coincidentally, all but her youngest sibling intermarried, which is to say, found a spouse from a different racial group. Mastura herself is one-quarter Afgani.

Mastura comes from a long line of willful women. She reminds us of our friend Suzi. And on our first shopping expedition, we see the next generation in action, for we are accosted by two girls just outside the Kalon Mosque and Minaret. Girls, unlike boys, do not go bathing in the public fountains. We see flocks of them in their school uniforms, many, children everywhere, because over half the population, according to our Lonely Planet guidebook, is under the age of fifteen, but these girls, for some reason, are not in school, and they are tenacious. They make us promise, with a handshake, to inspect their wares when our tour is done, and they track us down an hour later, after we have bought up the reclaimed silk market located in the Khodja Zainuddin Complex, and we buy an embroidered Bukharan cap from each of them, their first sale of the day, which calls for another handshake. Mastura has given us a few tips on how to bargain. When the going gets rough, she takes over. But since the silk ladies are extremely friendly, and tea is served in between transactions, and they will throw in a gift if you buy wholesale, come away feeling that sixty years of Communist rule may eventually be overcome.

Valerie is almost too shy to be a tour guide. She lets us know in a roundabout way that some of her best friends are Jews. There is so much to see in legendary

Samarkand and so little time to see it! Valerie's hero is Ulugbek, grandson of Timur the Great, AKA Tamerlaine, and we will spend almost as much time at Ulugbek's Observatory--discovered by an amateur archaeologist at the beginning of the last century--as at the far more magnificent mosques and mausoleums, because for Valerie, the usable past is poetry and science, and anyway, Ulugbek finished many of the massive structures begun by his grandfather. If we hadn't O.D.ed on architecture, we would find Valerie's detailed analysis of tile glazing techniques most interesting. The blue domes and minarets are like an ocean in the sky, glistening, beckoning, dazzling, undulating, in the late afternoon sun. And there, Valerie shows us, in the plaza, is the largest Koran stand in the world, made of stone, apparently untouched by the Communists. In fact, when the political winds changed, it was they who launched the massive restoration effort that is still underway.

And since the current ruler, Karimov, is the old Communist Party boss in nationalist garb, he simply tore down all the statues to Marx and Lenin, and replaced them with Timur the Great, whose equestrian profile also graces the worthless currency, called sum. What Karimov is up against, in addition to runaway inflation, a despoiled land, and a stagnant economy, is the enemy within, exemplified by Mastura's kid brother, who someday will join forces with the Islamic Brotherhood, if he hasn't done so already. He is the reason there are roadblocks everywhere. He is the reason all the Jews are leaving.

Jerusalem, May 30, 2002

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