

UZBEKISTAN – BIRDING THE GREAT SILK ROAD

16 – 26 MAY 2023

TOUR OVERVIEW: Uzbekistan is situated deep within Central Asia on the same latitude as the Mediterranean and is one of only two ‘double landlocked’ countries in the world (being itself wholly surrounded by landlocked countries). With an area similar in size to France and twice that of Great Britain, it is predominately a land of desert and steppe, including the famous Kyzyl-Kum Desert, which merges with the neighbouring Kara-Kum Desert in Turkmenistan to form the fourth largest desert in the world. Major rivers in the east of the country emanate from the western flanks of the mighty Tien Shan mountains, and flow westwards providing valuable irrigation and fertile soils for agriculture, although water over usage has sadly contributed to the ever-shrinking condition of the Aral Sea.



Whilst the present country is relatively young, having gained its independence following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1999, the roots of Uzbekistan are ancient. It was the Great Silk Road, a network of overland trading routes between China in the east and Turkey to the west that brought prosperity to this region. Beginning two centuries BC, silk was originally the major trade item, but this expanded over time to include many other goods and services, which opened long distance political, religious and economic relations between all of the countries along the route. This newfound wealth and power did not go un-noticed and Alexander the Great, Ghengis Khan and Timur (Tamerlane) are among the world’s most famous conquerors to have blazed a trail through this land. Bukhara and Samarkand are two of the most famous ancient cities on the Great Silk Road and we will stay in both these UNESCO World Heritage Sites, enabling us to experience their stunningly preserved architectural beauty which is not to be missed.

Uzbekistan is the most populous country in Central Asia and is inhabited by representatives of several ethnic groups, but primarily by Uzbeks and Russians. The main religions are Islam and Christianity, and religious tolerance is reassuringly the norm. The capital Tashkent lost much of its heritage in a massive 1966 earthquake, though it was rebuilt afterwards as a model Soviet city and is now home to some 2.5 million residents. Relaxed and with a youthful and growing cafe culture, it is an engaging place to visit, where ancient alongside modern is the theme and good standards of accommodation, restaurants and transport the norm. The Uzbek people themselves afford visitors legendary hospitality and we can be further reassured by being in the safe hands of an experienced ground agent, who has been operating birding tours in this area for over 20 years.



TOUR DESCRIPTION: From the natural history point of view, Uzbekistan, like Kazakhstan to the north, forms a bridge between Asia and Europe and enjoys an astonishingly rich biodiversity, including an amazing bird list. Our tour aims to experience a significant cross section of the country's habitats and avian diversity. We begin in Tashkent, the country's modern capital from where we visit the attractive foothills of the western Tien Shan, home to Hume's Whitethroat, Yellow-breasted Tit, Rufous-naped Tit, White-crowned Penduline-tit and White-capped Bunting. A modern high-speed train then takes us west to Bukhara where we stay for four nights, enabling us to explore the steppe of the Kyzyl-Kum Desert and nearby wetlands for spring migrants plus a host of superb birds such as Asian Houbara, White-tailed Plover, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and Menetries's Warbler. The star attraction for many is likely to be Pander's (or Turkestan) Ground-jay, a member of an elite genus comprising just

four species, all specialists of the higher altitude Central Asian deserts. Returning eastwards to Samarkand, the surrounding sunny hillsides host a fine selection of keenly sought-after species such as Hume's Lark, White-throated Robin, Finsch's Wheatear and Upcher's Warbler, providing a fine conclusion to the tour. The timing of our visit also means that many other species including waders and passerines will be migrating northwards.



In both Bukhara and Samarkand, we have scheduled time to take guided sightseeing tours. We can gaze in wonder at the glittering minarets and voluptuous turquoise domes of the madrasahs (educational institutions for religious studies, particularly Islam), with mosques and mausoleums adorned with intricate and hypnotic mosaics. There will be a chance to either haggle over the price of a hand-crafted souvenir in the bazaars or to simply sit in the shade with a cool drink and admire the surroundings.

We stay in comfortable hotels throughout, each well equipped for western travellers, and we benefit from being escorted at all times by a knowledgeable and experienced ground agent, who will provide an excellent English-speaking local bird guide and a thoroughly comfortable coach and driver throughout.



BIRD LIST: Highlights are many and may include a large number of the following: Ruddy Shelduck, Marbled Duck, Ferruginous Duck, White-headed Duck, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Black Stork, Dalmatian Pelican, Lesser Kestrel, Red-footed Falcon, White-tailed Eagle, Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon Vulture, Cinereous (Black) Vulture, Black-eared Kite, Montagu's Harrier, Shikra, Long-legged Buzzard, Golden Eagle, Steppe Eagle, Asian Houbara, Greater Sand Plover, Marsh Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Collared Pratincole, Gull-billed Tern, Caspian Tern, White-winged Tern, Oriental Turtle-dove, European Roller, Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Pander's (Turkestan) Ground-jay, White-winged Woodpecker, shrikes including Turkestan, Lesser Grey, Long-tailed and *pallidirostris* Asian Grey, Indian Golden Oriole, Turkestan and Yellow-bellied (Azure) Tit, Eurasian and White-crowned Penduline-tit, Pale Martin, Calandra, Bimaculated and Hume's Lark, many types of warbler including Savi's, Paddyfield, Blyth's Reed, Sykes's, Hume's, Greenish and Barred plus Siberian Chiffchaff, Lesser Whitethroat *curruca* and *halimondendri*, Streaked Scrub-warbler, Hume's Whitethroat, Asian Desert Warbler, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Moustached Warbler and Menetries's Warbler, Rose-coloured Starling, Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, White-throated Robin, Bluethroat, Siberian Stonechat, Pied Bushchat, Isabelline Wheatear, Finsch's Wheatear, Pied Wheatear, Indian House Sparrow *bactrianus*, Rock Sparrow, Masked Wagtail *personata*, Citrine Wagtail, Yellow Wagtail (*beema* and *feldegg*), Tawny Pipit, Eastern Goldfinch (*caniceps*), Desert Finch, Common Rosefinch, White-capped, Rock and Red-headed Buntings.

PHOTOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES: You will most definitely want your camera to hand to capture memories of the spectacular scenery and the awe-inspiring

architecture of the fine ancient cities. Birds often appear close to hand and are often approachable, so good results can be expected, even for those using more modest bridge cameras or their mobile phones coupled to a telescope.

MAMMALS & OTHER WILDLIFE: We can expect to see Yellow Souslik, Great Gerbil, Tolai Hare, Goitered Gazelle, Asian Wild Ass, Corsac Fox and Grey Marmot. Golden Jackal is more often heard than seen. For those with an interest in reptiles and amphibians there is a good variety of species on offer, and Uzbekistan, like its Central Asian neighbours, is also a botanist's dream with deserts and mountains covered in stunning wildflowers at the time of our visit.



ACCOMMODATION & FOOD: We will use comfortable 3 to 4-star hotels when staying near Chimgan (two nights at the beginning of the tour), Bukhara (four nights), Samarkand (two nights) and Tashkent (single night at the start and end of the tour). Comfortable rooms have en-suite facilities. Though our hotels have excellent dining rooms, we will often eat in nearby restaurants which offer a pleasing mix of traditional and western style food in a very convivial atmosphere. Beer and wine will be available everywhere at client's expense, though bottled mineral water is provided daily to each group member. Within reason, special dietary requirements can be accommodated by notifying Birding Abroad via the booking form. Lunchtime food will sometimes be a packed lunch, but more often we return to town for a cafe meal.

WEATHER & CLOTHING: Uzbekistan is more southerly than Kazakhstan and has a mix of Mediterranean and continental climates. At the time of our spring visit, we can expect pleasant sunny days with daytime temperatures not excessively hot in the range of 25 to 30 degrees centigrade in the steppes and deserts, and between 15 and

20°C in the hills. Night-time temperatures fall by 10 degrees or so. In spring the tendency is for clear and sunny weather, though cool and windy snaps are possible. The only place where we are likely to encounter many flies (and much fewer mosquitoes) is around the few steppe lakes that we visit. Being prepared with insect repellent (DEET recommended) could be useful on occasions.

EASE & PACE: Uzbekistan is a relatively large country so expect some travelling to visit all the key spots. Using the modern and comfortable high-speed train network will take the strain out of the longer cross-country journeys, the longest of which takes just over three hours. From our bases, daily drives are typically of around one hour. The tour is not over strenuous and basic fitness is all that is necessary. Short walks on flat but slightly gravelly ground will be taken frequently, occasionally up to one mile or so in each direction. More often, we venture just a few hundred yards from the vehicle. There is little uphill walking except in the gently undulating hills, where this is done at a sensible pace. We are of course in Central Asia and well away from the normal tourist route, so we should be prepared for occasional discomfort or an organisational hitch. Typically, the day will start with breakfast no later than 07.00 to make the most of the early morning. We finish around 18.00, rarely a little later if the itinerary dictates. We will use a comfortable coach for road transport with plenty of room for additional bags and telescopes. These can be left safely on the vehicle when not in use because the driver will remain with the coach at all times. All participants will be expected to rotate seats daily and fairly. Leaders will sit at the front throughout.



PRICE: The tour price will be £2750. Included will be all transport in Uzbekistan using modern air-conditioned buses and high-speed modern trains as indicated, an English-speaking local bird guide throughout who will assist Lance and Nick, accommodation in good standard twin-bedded rooms, all food (breakfast, lunch and evening meals), all entrance fees to national parks and monuments and tips for our local ground agent guides. Mineral water will be supplied on the coach throughout. A single supplement is available at £275.

Not included are international flights (expect to pay about £750), alcoholic and soft drinks when not provided with meals and any items of a personal nature such as laundry. Travel insurance is compulsory.

To ensure a place on this exciting tour, please return a completed booking form with a £300 deposit.

GROUP SIZE 12 with 2 leaders.



Turkestan Shrikes are common and widespread, here a stunning male.

DAY TO DAY ITINERARY

Day 1: Tuesday 16 May - UK to Uzbekistan. The leaders intend to fly to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, from London using the services of Turkish Airlines via Istanbul. For those who prefer, it may be possible to take flights from Manchester or other regional airports. Another option that might become available is the only direct flight from the UK, a 7-hour overnight flight with Uzbekistan Airlines which departs London Heathrow in the evening.

Day 2: Wednesday 17 May - Chimgan. Our flight arrives at Tashkent in the early hours of the morning. Waiting to greet us at the airport will be our ground agent, from where we will be taken to the Hotel Uzbekistan where we have rooms to enable us to catch up on some sleep. Following a refreshing brunch late morning at the hotel we will be ready for our onward journey through this large cosmopolitan city and into the mountains. Our destination is about two hours' drive north-east into the outdoor haven of the Ugam-Chatkal National Park. This is actually an outlier of the western Tien Shan Mountains and is on the border with Kyrgyzstan! After checking-in to the hotel, and a light lunch, we will walk into the countryside close to the hotel. Here Red-rumped Swallows, European Honey-buzzards and Oriental Turtle-doves will whet our appetite for the days ahead. Night Chimgan.

European Honey-buzzard can be seen near our hotel



Day 3: Thursday 18 May - Chimgan area. After breakfast at 07.00, we will explore leafy pathways along the lower slopes of the surrounding hills, some within easy walking distance of the hotel. Mixed woodland is dominated by juniper and

incorporates open meadows and streams. Target species include the little-known Hume's Whitethroat and Rufous-naped Tit (also known as Black-breasted Tit), here at the north-west limit of its' range.



Later we take our vehicle higher to explore montane forests and alpine pastures where the attractive Red-fronted Serin can be found. Rather common in the neighbourhood are White-capped and Rock Buntings, Turkestan Tit and the fine looking, Yellow-breasted Tit, a distinct form of the sought-after Azure Tit and sometimes treated as a separate species. We will check the skies for soaring raptors which could include both Eurasian and Himalayan Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagle, European and Oriental Honey-buzzards and Eurasian Hobby. A chorus of bird song will include the fluty phrases of Indian Golden Orioles and Common Nightingales in “full-throated ease”, as well as more familiar Mistle Thrushes and Eurasian Blackbirds. We will hopefully find some of the local race of Hawfinch *humii*, geographically isolated from the main range and perhaps a species in its own right. Night in Chimgan.

Day 4: Friday 19 May – We have another full morning in the mountains, giving us time to consolidate on the key species, and explore the various habitats to add more tantalizing species to our growing list. Cinereous Vulture and Short-toed Snake-eagles patrol the skies, whilst at stream sides we will check for Indian Paradise-flycatcher and Blue Whistling-thrush. Woodlands host White-winged Woodpecker, whilst hillside scrub holds Long-tailed Shrike and Eastern Orphean Warbler. Even the Common

Starlings, here of the race *porphyronoyus*, look different with greenish heads and virtually unspotted purple under and upperparts. After a late lunch we leave Chimgan and descend from the wooded slopes back towards Tashkent which takes us along the wide valley of the River Chirchiq and passed a large reservoir where we can scan for migrants. Back in Tashkent we board a late afternoon high-speed train to the fabled Great Silk Road city of Bukhara, taking our evening meal on board to break the journey. Arriving late evening, our stylish hotel is just off the Lyabi-Hauz, one of the city's most famous tourist plazas, where restaurants shaded by centuries old Mulberry trees surround a tranquil pool, all beautifully floodlit at night. Night in Bukhara.

Day 5: Saturday 20 May - Bukhara lowlands. A relaxing breakfast this morning before we venture south-east to visit an area of tamarisk scrub and reed-fringed pools which lies beside a canal adorned with low scrub; ideal breeding habitat for birds such as Ménétries's Warbler, Sykes's Warbler and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers. All these sought-after warblers, normally shy and retiring birds, can be watched at leisure as they will be keen to establish territories and sometimes sing relatively in the open for such secretive species. Also present in reasonable numbers are Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin and Pied Bushchat. Any roadside wires in the area are a good place to see Oriental Turtle-doves, and they provide ideal perches for Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. Time permitting, we will search agricultural fields for more species to boost the burgeoning list, such as Oriental Skylark which breeds in the neighbourhood.

After a light lunch we will embark on a special guided sightseeing tour around the ancient city. Bukhara is one of the most well-preserved ancient Islamic cities of Central Asia and is indeed a cultural and architectural masterpiece of the 10th to 17th centuries. Our guide will explain that by the Middle Ages, Bukhara was already a famous trading city attracting merchants from as far away as Iran, India, Russia and China. The main streets served as bazaars, and often each street would sell a different type of product. In order to shelter the traders through the hot summer months and to keep them warm during the cooler winters, market halls became roofed by special domes or toki, which enabled the markets to continue year-round. The Toki-Zargaron, or dome of the jewellers and the Toki-Sarrafon, dome of the money sellers, are prime examples that we can stroll around on our visit. The famous Ark Fortress is encircled on all sides by huge earthen walls and was the palace of the Emir of Bukhara for many centuries. It was here that British colonial conspirators Connolly and Stoddart were beheaded on the orders of the Emir of Bukhara, Nasrullah Khan, in 1842 thus ending "The Great Game" which paved the way for greater Russian, rather than British, influence in the region thereafter.

As the day concludes, we will no doubt share a relaxing drink together around the floodlit Lyabi-Hauz plaza after our evening meal. Night in Bukhara.

Day 6: Sunday 21 May - Kyzyl-Kum Desert. Today we start early as we must drive for three hours north-west of Bukhara into the remote Kyzyl-Kum Desert to a site for the rare Turkestan Ground-Jay, more often known as Pander's Ground-jay. Arriving early gives us the best chance to see this desert specialty before the day becomes too hot for bird (and human!) activity. Using sandy mounds as viewpoints, we will scan the

desert scrub for these birds which often perch prominently before running along the sands from patch to patch of vegetation.

The community of breeding desert birds is fascinating and includes *pallidirostris* Steppe Grey Shrike, Isabelline Wheatear, Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, Asian Desert Warbler, Desert Lesser Whitethroat, Streaked Scrub-warbler, Asian Short-toed Lark and Desert Finch.

Lunch will be taken at a roadside café, with welcoming shade and fresh cold drinks and then en-route back to Bukhara we will check roadside pools where the edges and peripheral vegetation attracts migrants at this time of year. Anything can turn up at such spots which act as mini oases. Ortolan Bunting for example should be on the move, stopping to feed in weedy fields often alongside Blyth's Reed-warbler, Citrine Wagtail and Red-headed Buntings, whilst waders will be attracted to muddy margins and likely to include Red-necked Phalaropes, Little Stints, Marsh and Curlew Sandpipers, sometimes in decent numbers.

Our air-conditioned bus will ensure we are back to Bukhara in time for some leisure time, when you are free to roam around the ancient streets, or perhaps just sit and enjoy a coffee or beer, catching up on notes and photographs.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters are rather common near Bukhara



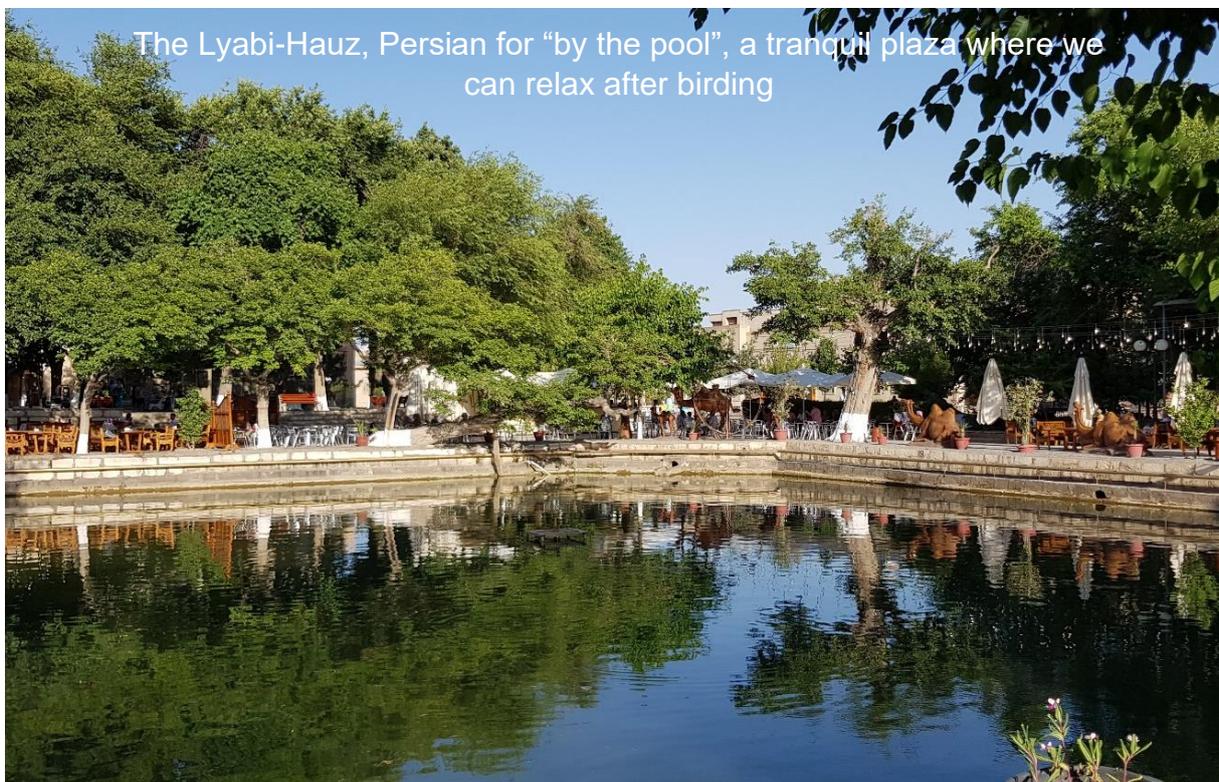
Day 7 Monday 22 May - Bukhara Steppe. After breakfast we will visit the Jeyran Ecocenter reserve set amongst a vast steppe plain just one hour from the city. The core activity of this protected area is the breeding and preservation of endangered animals. Following early success with Goitered Gazelles, whose local name 'Jeyran', gives its name to the reserve, efforts have recently become more focused on the endangered Asiatic Wild Ass and Przewalski Horse.

Scanning carefully and patiently from a good vantage point should enable us to pick out a few Asian Houbara which frequent this area, as well as a selection of mammals, including Goitered Gazelle and Asiatic Wild Ass.

Moving into the reserve itself, a pleasant walk towards a series of steppe lakes is likely to reveal White-tailed Plover, Marbled Duck, Pygmy Cormorant, Collared Pratincole, Kentish Plover, Clamorous Reed-warbler and Moustached Warblers, with dashing Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, all of which breed here.

We can expect some migrant waders at the time of our visit including elegant Marsh Sandpipers, Temminck's and Little Stints. Smaller mammals in this barren landscape include Tolai Hare, Long-clawed Ground Squirrel, Great Gerbil and Yellow Souslik.

We then return to Bukhara for a late lunch and take a short rest before embarking on a shorter sightseeing tour for further highlights around the ancient city. These will include the Kalen Minaret which survived the onslaught of Genghis Khan in 1220, and the Mir-i-Arab Madrasah, built in the early 16th century and which is still active, both these places representing the educational and spiritual heart of the old city. Even the most hard-core birders will be amazed at such cultural splendor. Night in Bukhara.



Day 8: Tuesday 23 May – Bukhara to Samarkand. A relaxing breakfast this morning before we venture out for a morning's birding covering our favourite habitats around

Bukhara, ensuring we have time to 'clear up' on any species that might so far have eluded us. With such great birdlife in the area, we will be sad to leave.

After a light lunch we will board the mid-afternoon high-speed train to Samarkand which arrives at 17.25. A modern hotel awaits us, and we will have our evening meal at a traditional and ornate restaurant in the city. Night in Samarkand.

Day 9: Wednesday 24 May – Samarkand. This morning we will journey for one hour south of Samarkand to a quite stunning range of low hills and shallow sunny valleys in the foothills of the Zerayshan range, another outlier of the Tien Shan. The higher escarpments are covered with short grass meadows with craggy outcrops, home to the hard to find Hume's Lark, which often shows closely so their subtle features can be appreciated. Eastern Orphean Warblers and Eastern Rock Nuthatches could be classed as common. Red-headed Buntings sing all around and Red-tailed (Turkestan) Shrikes perch prominently. We will take a stroll along the shallow slopes of valleys where White-throated Robins are found. The local form of the Great Tit lacks yellow and is usually split as Turkestan Tit. The Pied Wheatears here can include the scarce pale-throated form *vittata*. Overhead we will keep a watchful eye out for Cinereous and Egyptian Vultures, Booted Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard, whilst other notable birds include Lesser Grey Shrike, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Rock Sparrow and Eastern Goldfinch (*caniceps*). We will pause at a site for Finsch's Wheatears, and then return to Samarkand in the mid-afternoon in time for a sightseeing session.



The historic city of Samarkand on the Great Silk Road was founded over 2500 years ago. Alexander the Great, who conquered the city in 329 BC, wrote of its stunning beauty and later it became the capital of the great Mongol conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) whose vast empire extended from Persia through to India. Samarkand

still possesses many visible reminders of its long and turbulent history. The skyline of the city is punctuated by the huge domes and minarets of its mosques, tombs and religious schools. We tour this ancient city by bus with short walks around the key sites with an English speaking and very knowledgeable local guide. Highlights include the stunningly beautiful Registan Square, surely one of the world's most beautiful plazas, flanked on three sides by ornately tiled, mosaic-clad madrasahs built between the 1400s and 1600s which glitter in shades of azure lapis, lazuli, indigo and gold. Adjacent is the enormous and restored mosque of Bibi Khanum, cathedral-like with majestic blue domes built for Timur's beloved wife and considered one of the most avant-garde buildings in the world when built in the 14th century. Close-at-hand is the Gur Emir mausoleum, Timur's own vault with its gold-hued dome, the design of which was a prototype for the Taj Mahal in Agra. Night in Samarkand.





Day 10: Thursday 25 May - Samarkand – Tashkent. We will spend the morning taking a short stroll in one of the picturesque valleys just outside the city limits. A major target is the Upcher's Warbler which can be found in song side by side its close relative the Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. We will take some time to absorb the differences between these closely related species. The pace will not be rushed, and we can watch spell bound at the vivid beauty of White-throated Robins; the males are surely one of the most attractive of chats.

White-throated Robin, surely one of the most attractive of chats



Chukars call from rocky slopes, whilst lush groves along the valley are home to Indian Paradise-flycatcher and the songs of Eastern Orphean Warblers ring out as Red-headed Buntings flutter across the valleys. Those with an interest in wildflowers and butterflies will find much to occupy themselves in this tranquil countryside. We can also just sit and take in the amazing panoramic scenery looking across to the snow-capped mountains of the Pamir range in Tajikistan. After returning to the city for lunch, we will enjoy another short sightseeing walk around more of Samarkand's treasures. By late afternoon it will be time to take the high-speed train back to Tashkent, where we will have our final evening meal together, no doubt raising a glass or two and reflecting on what a superb birding and cultural experience Uzbekistan has proved to be. Night Tashkent.

Day 11: Friday 26 May - Tashkent to UK flight home. All too soon we will have to pack our bags and head towards the airport for our mid-morning flight to London, conveniently arriving late afternoon.

Special thanks to Paul Doherty, Ian Smith, Timor Abduraupov for use of their fantastic photographs.



Mir-i Arab Madrasah in Bukhara.

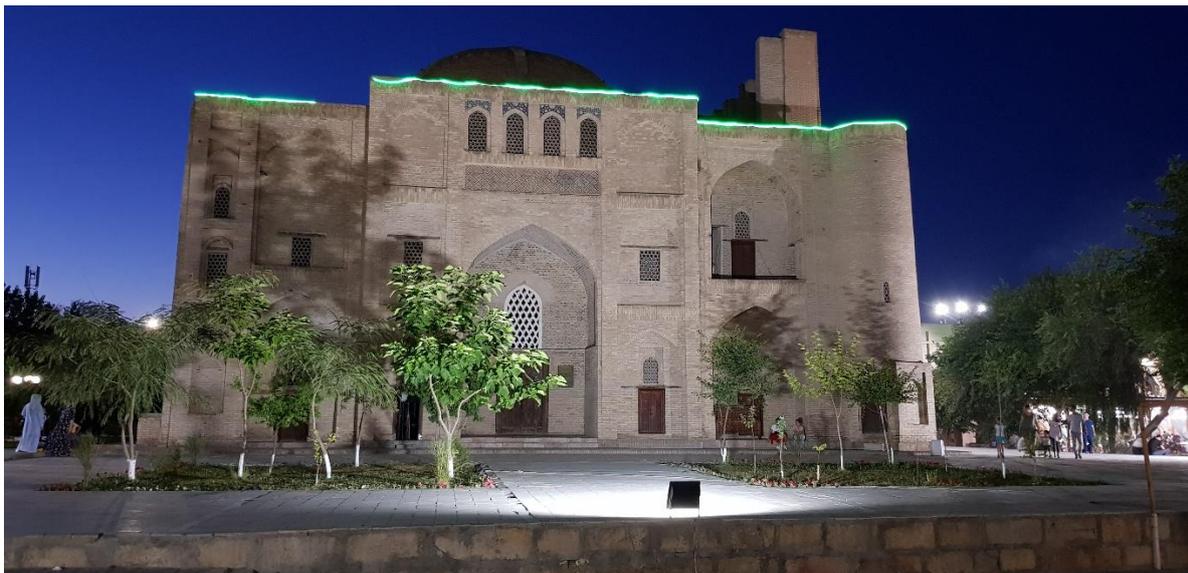
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Night scene in Bukhara, near our hotel