

# have you ever... had your future told on the Silk Road?

## YOUR TALES OF UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES WHILE TRAVELLING

**O**n the fourth round, we toast my fertility. "To your many unborn sons," proclaims Rofi, his eloquent words translated by his teenage son, Rahim. I empty my teacup of vodka in one. "The first will be born next year," he prophesies.

I knew the bottle of vodka I'd brought to Uzbekistan would come in handy, but I couldn't have predicted it would be shared with a family of six I'd met a few hours ago at the Registan, a landmark on the Silk Road.

The Registan is a splendid trio of imposing azure and beige madrassahs. Souvenir shops now surround the courtyards of each madrassah. Rofi and his wife Mohabbat own the one in the corner with the colourful tablecloths hanging outside the doorway.

I had stepped inside to negotiate the price of some Soviet-era postcards. Mohabbat was alone and spoke virtually no English. An hour later, I left with an invitation to dinner, surprised but pleased that this tenacious woman had just asked a stray foreigner into her home.

As the sun set, a bumpy taxi ride deposited me in suburban Samarkand, where multi-storey apartments frame a dusty courtyard. Rofi and Mohabbat and their four boys live in a four-room flat on the second floor.

Rahim spoke a little English. "Please, you are welcome," he said, gesturing to a low table laden with Uzbek specialties.

Nuts, apricots, raisins, strawberries, tomato and cucumber salad, and cabbage with dill all sat in their own china bowls, next to chilled Baltica beer and giant naan breads. Rofi cleansed his hands and uttered a prayer of thanks. Mohabbat presented the evening's star: a massive bowl of steaming *plov*, a greasy Central Asian version of rice pilaf. As the guest, I was presented with the dish's choicest cubes of mutton fat.

Then we opened the vodka.

I meekly request "malinki pazhalsta", a rough Russian version of 'small, please', but Rahim grins and fills the teacup almost to the brim.

Rofi and I take turns composing toasts. First to my health, then to their longevity. The teacup



is filled to support my nuptials and to inspire my plentiful – and apparently imminent – offspring. Rahim pours again while I toast the strapping males he will produce and we finish the bottle as Rofi, his face weary but his eyes gentle, hopes that I will one day return to Samarkand.

The vodka gone, Mohabbat extinguishes the lamp and I sleep on the floor. I awake early with a fuzzy head and Mohabbat scribbles her address on a scrap of paper. We promise to write. Three letters later, I tell Rofi his prediction came true. **Eliza Reid, via email**

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