



Uzbekistan Update

I arrived in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, in the wee hours of the morning of 23 November following a six hour flight from Bangkok. Talk about contrasts. When I left Bangkok it was a scorching 33 degrees Celsius. Stepping off the plane in Tashkent I encountered a temperature of 3 degrees Celsius.

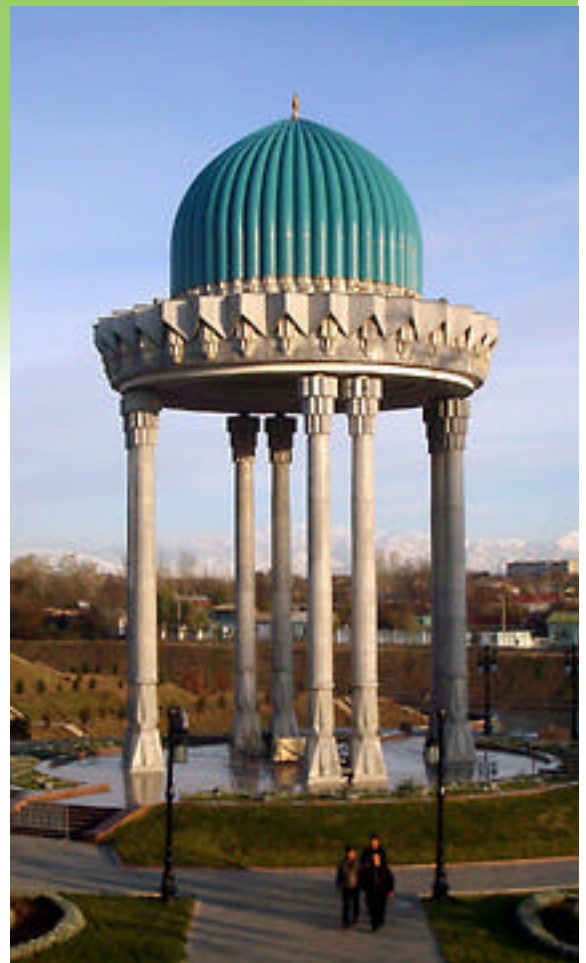
I'm "enjoying" the cold for a couple of weeks as I participate in the design and delivery of a training course on health promotion for 50 national and provincial level staff of the Ministry of Health. This piece of work is part of the "Primary Health Care Project II" funded by DFID — the Department for International Development of the British government. I'm working with three other "health promotion practitioners". We're delivering the course in English...with simultaneous translation into Russian. Uzbekistan was one of the Central Asian Republics belonging to the USSR. Since independence in 1991 Uzbek has been made the official language. However, many people in Tashkent continue to use Russian.

So far my time has been spent working with my training team mates preparing for the course which starts on 26 November. We haven't had much of a chance to explore Tashkent — an ancient city dating back to the days of the Great Silk Road from China to Europe. Tuesday, however, was a holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting.



One of the Uzbek brides we visited.

As is Uzbek tradition, women who have been married during the past year open their homes to women friends and family to share a meal. We went to two different homes, friends of the two women who are our local counterparts here. We stayed about 30 minutes at each home, sampling the food and admiring the beautiful wedding costumes. Food was a combination of very nice flat breads similar to Indian nan, kababs (spiced mutton cooked over coals), yoghurt based salads, various nuts and dried fruits, and lots of honey based sweets. (see **Tashkent** — page 2)



Islamic style structures are found throughout the city of Tashkent. Eighty-eight percent of the population of Uzbekistan is Muslim (mostly Sunni).

Background:

Russia conquered Uzbekistan in the late 19th century. Stiff resistance to the Red Army after World War I was eventually suppressed and a socialist republic set up in 1925. During the Soviet era, intensive production of "white gold" (cotton) and grain led to overuse of agrochemicals and the depletion of water supplies, which have left the land poisoned and the Aral Sea and certain rivers half dry. Independent since 1991, the country seeks to gradually lessen its dependence on agriculture while developing its mineral and petroleum reserves. Current concerns include insurgency by Islamic militants based in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, a non-convertible currency, and the curtailment of human rights and democratization.

Facts and Figures:

Uzbekistan lies in the middle of central Asia. It borders Kazakhstan to the north, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the east, Afghanistan to the south and Turkmenistan to the west. The population density is approximately 26 million.

State power in Uzbekistan is vested in the president and a 250-member parliament (effectively authoritarian presidential rule, with little power outside the executive branch (an ally, by the way, of GWB). Uzbekistan has 121 cities, of which 55 are of national significance, as well as 113 urban settlements and 163 rural districts. Tashkent, the capital, has a population of approximately 2.5 million.

There are more than 120 nationalities in Uzbekistan: the largest group is Uzbeks (77.2%). Other nationalities each making up more than 1% of the population are: Russians — 1.2 million (5.2%), Tajiks — 1.1 million (4.8%), Kazakhs — 0.9 million (4.0%) and Tatars — 0.3 million (1.4%). The largest ethnic groups are Karakalpakhs, Koreans, Persians and Turks.



Tashkent: Due to its advantageous geographical location, Tashkent was one of the main points along the Great Silk Road. Today Tashkent, once the fourth largest city in the former USSR, is Central Asia's hub for air travel. That said, it's not a picture-postcard destination. Thanks to a huge earthquake in 1966 and the subsequent enthusiasm of Soviet city planners, little remains of the city's 2000-year history. Although I've never been to Russia, Tashkent has what I feel to be a "Soviet feel" to it; monolithic apartment blocks and

chunky government buildings. The fact that it's home to scores of Russians adds to the air of Russian-ness.



A mosque, not too far from the hotel. Note the snow capped mountains in the background.



Tashkent fast-food — the ubiquitous kebab and shashlik stand, found all over the city.



An elderly gentleman on his way out for an afternoon stroll.