

# TRAVEL + LEISURE



## THE **STYLE & DESIGN** ISSUE

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FROM TOP Poi-Kalon Mosque, in Bukhara, Uzbekistan; Diana Campbell, curator of the Bukhara Biennial.

## Golden Arches

*A contemporary artistic spirit is awakening amid the Silk Road-era palaces and mosques of Uzbekistan.* By Gisela Williams



WHEN THE contemporary art curator Diana Campbell, who helped shape the art scene in the Philippines and Bangladesh, invites me to go somewhere, I'm all ears. Her scouting trips are always a piñata of wildly inspiring people, places, and encounters. So when she asked me to join her and several artists in Uzbekistan to explore sites for the first Bukhara Biennial, a state-sponsored art and culture festival to be held in the fall, I immediately said yes.

Before I set off, I had known only a few things about Uzbekistan. The Central Asian country declared independence from the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Centuries earlier, it was an epicenter of Islam's Golden Age and a key stop along the Silk Road—a crossroads for architects, artists, and mathematicians who made lasting contributions to world culture, including the development of algebra.

My trip began in Tashkent, the country's capital and the entry point for most foreign travelers. As soon as I landed, I received a

drop-pin from Campbell and a text telling me to head to **J.Kim Objects**, a concept store in the ancient Chorsu Bazaar. "It's really amazing, enjoy!" When I finally found the 400-square-foot store, which was tucked in one of the overflow tents behind the market's iconic turquoise dome, it was like entering another dimension. A jewel box of a shop, it had ceramics artfully arranged on custom-millwork shelves, dramatic lighting, and ethereal flute music playing.

I met Jenia Kim, the store's Korean-Uzbek founder, whose handcrafted clothing is sold at boutiques like the Mohawk General Store in Los Angeles. Kim, one of the biennial's participating artists, explained how she takes inspiration from the Chorsu Bazaar, which sells everything from Uzbek folk clothing and jewelry to spices and artisan bread. Wandering through its alleys, I couldn't help picking up some dried chiles and a few textiles.

The smells of the market sharpened my appetite. Kim suggested I go to the **Central Asian Plov Center** (entrées \$1–\$2), a massive restaurant that specializes in the national rice dish. I watched as dozens of chefs tossed cumin-scented rice in wood-fired pots,

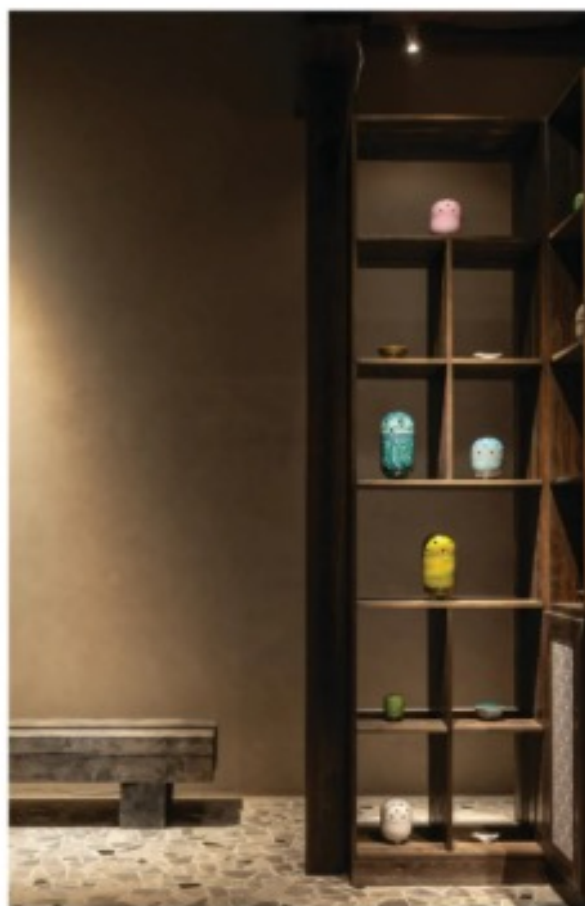


mixing in lamb, onions, carrots, chickpeas, and raisins. *Plov* is so central to Uzbekistan that the dish was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2016.

Although Tashkent is said to be more than 2,000 years old, its streetscape feels modern. In the 1960s, after an earthquake destroyed ancient mosques and homes, much of the city was rebuilt in a unique Soviet style that blends Brutalism with Uzbek motifs and is now known as "Tashkent Modernism." Today there are some 20 buildings that attract architecture pilgrims, including the curved Hotel Uzbekistan and the monolithic Alisher Navoi Cinema Palace.

The next morning I flew to the ancient city of Bukhara, the site of the biennial. After checking in to the **Mercure Bukhara Old Town** (doubles from \$331)—a 57-room hotel

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
*Hotel Uzbekistan, in Tashkent; I.Kim Objects, in Tashkent; making plov, a rice dish; Sitora-i Mokhi-Khosa, a palace turned museum in Bukhara.*



that opened in 2023 with a pool, a spa, and an excellent restaurant—I met Campbell at the **Sitora-i Mokhi-Khosa**, a former summer residence for the emir of Bukhara. It now houses a decorative-arts museum of the same name. We were joined by several biennial participants, including Laila Gohar, an artist from New York City known for her avant-garde food installations. The group was in town to gather inspiration and scout locations. "We want to immerse the artists in Bukhara's past and present," Campbell said.

After touring the palace and admiring its stained-glass ceiling, we visited the **Gijduvan Ceramics Museum & Craft Center**, about an hour outside the city, where we met artisans and watched them make bowls with intricate Uzbek geometric patterns and rich colors. At the gift shop, I picked up an embroidered shawl, while Campbell chose a painted serving bowl for dinner parties back home in Brussels.

At dusk, we returned to Bukhara and visited the **Nadir Divanbegi Madrasa**, a 17th-century Sufi teaching complex, and listened to the hypnotizing trill of hundreds of warblers flying overhead. The entrance was adorned with a mosaic of two *simurghs*—mythical Persian birds akin to phoenixes.



As we took in the splendor, Gohar shared her plans for the biennial: she would be constructing a full-size house made of sugar at the Sayfiddin Caravanserai, one of the ancient inns built along the Silk Road. "This experience has allowed me to dream," Gohar said. "This is what I try to do in my work: spark wonder."

The following day, Campbell and I visited the studio of Abdulvakhid Bukhoriy Karimov, a master ceramist. For the biennial, he told us, he planned to line an arched room at the Govkushon madrasa, another historic building, with his signature

#### HOW TO BOOK

Catherine Heald, a founder of [Riomoto Lands](#) and a T+L A-List travel advisor, can craft a personalized trip to Uzbekistan (from \$900 per person per day).



turquoise tiles. "His work is so sought after that he has a waiting list of at least a year," Campbell said.

To get a feel for Bukhara's UNESCO-protected center, I toured the old alleys with Wael Al Awar, a Lebanese architect who is the biennial's director of architecture, and Ahmad Angawi, a participating artist from Saudi Arabia. We admired the houses built of mud bricks, some of which are being restored for the biennial. The long-term vision has drawn praise. "I would not have taken this project on if it was a one-time-only event," Al Awar said.

That night, a dozen of us had a feast at a restaurant called **Old Bukhara** (entrées \$2–\$33). The menu included pumpkin dumplings, tandoori chicken and lamb, and a minty tabbouleh salad. The group compared notes on their site visits and biennial plans, before ending up on the rooftop of **Pavillon Kalon**, a new concept store that overlooks the Poi-Kalon Mosque complex, its vast courtyard and 288 domes illuminated with colorful lights.

My two days in Bukhara were coming to an end. This magical introduction to Uzbekistan and its ancient treasures had surprised me at every turn, deepening my understanding of the ancient world—and filling my suitcase with one-of-a-kind treasures. ☺



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** The Mercure Bukhara Old Town hotel; Nadir Divanbegi Madrasa, in Bukhara; Abdullo Narzullaev, founder of the Gijduvan Ceramics Museum.