



From left: The Nukus Museum, home to a wide array of Soviet avant-garde art; a woodworker in northwestern Uzbekistan, where the craft is seeing a revival

the attacks of nomadic raiders. Each gust seemed to peel away another layer of soil. I felt—not for the first time on my trip through Karakalpakstan—completely alone.

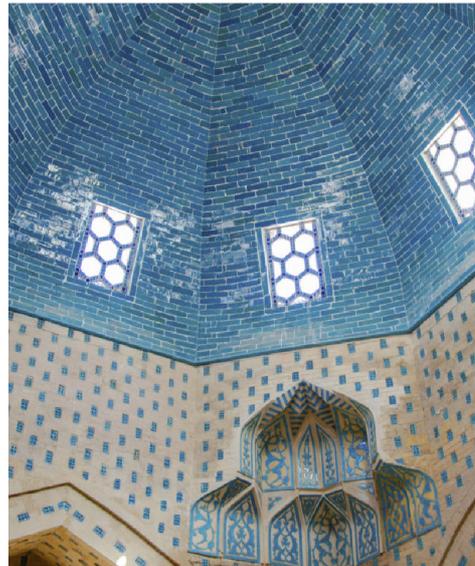
I'd come to this remote corner of Central Asia to attend the Aral Culture Summit, a conference in the Karakalpak capital of Nukus that was organized by the Uzbekistan Arts & Culture Development Foundation, or ACFD. There, architects, agronomists, artists, and anthropologists spoke about ways of reviving the desiccated landscape. Since the 1960s the Aral Sea, once the region's lifeblood, has lost 90 percent of its water—the result of ill-planned Soviet irrigation projects. Visitors who come here usually visit the ghostly ship graveyard in the former port of Moynaq, where rusted fishing boats rest on the sand like beached whales, or head farther north to camp near what's left of the Aral Sea. "We are constantly hearing that the Aral Sea is a catastrophe," Gayane Umerova, the

executive director of the ACFD, said during the summit's opening panel. "Catastrophe is all people know." I'd come to Karakalpakstan looking for something else.

Before and after the summit, I traveled the region, passing stark earth-brick fortresses that rose from the desert like sandcastles and villages built from the same elemental material. I visited millennia-old tombs, a marvelous collection of avant-garde paintings, and, in the village of Chimbay, artisan workshops where woodworkers, jewelry-makers, reed-mat weavers, and yurt builders are conserving craft traditions that had nearly disappeared under Soviet rule. Whereas Uzbekistan's dazzling Silk Road cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva have, over the past few decades, seen aggressive restoration campaigns and increased tourism, Karakalpakstan remains unknown to most travelers. Instead of devastation, I saw in every earthen wall and embroidered swath of wool unexpected links between past and present—and even, perhaps, the building blocks of the future.

My trip began on a crisp spring day in Nukus, with the fruit trees showing their first hint of green. After meeting me at the airport, my guide, Timur Madaminov, brought me to the Mizdaqhan necropolis, a collection of crypts and mausoleums stacked on a hillside like adobe building blocks. The burial ground had its origins, Madaminov told me, among the ancient Khorezmians, who brought their Zoroastrian faith east from Persia into the Amu Darya oasis. While Zoroastrians left their dead on hilltops to be

PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK; AZAMAT MATKARIMOV, WHERE THE SOULS WANDER



Clockwise from this image: A spice market in Khiva; the partially underground Mazlumkhan-Sulu mausoleum at Mizdaqhan necropolis; handwoven wall hangings and carpets



consumed by birds, the arrival of Islam in the eighth century introduced the practice of interment, represented in Mizdaqhan by sand-colored subterranean tombs with interior walls decorated in turquoise and green glazed tiles. Though Zoroastrianism has long vanished from modern Uzbekistan (the majority of the world's Zoroastrians now live in India), the thatches of dry sticks covering the tops of ordinary graves express religious and aesthetic practices that are "half Zoroastrian, half Islamic," Madaminov explained. "This place shows those cultural layers."

After we returned to Nukus that afternoon, Madaminov took me to the strange and staggering Nukus Museum, which stands, like a postmodern cathedral, in the city's windswept central square. Founded in 1966 with an ethnographic mission, it grew under the supervision of its founder, the Kyiv-born artist and bureaucrat Igor Savitsky, to become one of the world's most significant collections of avant-garde Soviet paintings. As I wandered through its immaculately lit galleries, I marveled at daring canvases by largely unknown painters interspersed with thousand-year-old ossuary jars, elaborate silver necklaces, and embroidered bands of wool used to decorate yurts. I saw the works that Savitsky himself had painted as a staff artist on the legendary Tolstov Expedition, which, starting in the 1930s, excavated more than a hundred archaeological sites across Karakalpakstan. Savitsky rendered the newfound wonders, freshly emerged after a millennium under the sand, in dreamy impressionistic pastels.

The next morning Madaminov and I →