

# Silk Road Tae Kwon Do Quest - Part V

*By Gegory Brundage*

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## Border Crossing

Following the directions of Rizo, the friendly taxi driver from Bukhara, Uzbekistan, after exiting the taxi near the border, I walked a short distance to a minibus. After a short ride costing 4,000 Som (\$1), I went through a passport checkpoint, then had to fill out a currency statement upon exiting Uzbekistan, as I did last summer at the airport. (A word to the wise: keep that currency statement you have to fill out when entering Uzbekistan. It's important.) I took another minibus, paid another 4,000 Som to the driver, and then walked to the Immigration station for Turkmenistan.

At customs they wanted to check my bags carefully, very concerned about the possibility of my having cigarettes (which is illegal everywhere there except in international hotels and inside people's homes) and were rather curious about the beef jerky I'd brought with me from China. (I suppose it might have looked like heroin. I don't know for sure.) So I opened one and offered it to the customs official, who didn't seem to want to try it. So I took a bite, and he tentatively smelled it, finally agreeing it really was beef jerky. Smiles and nods all around. I thought I was finished, but . . . no, they kept going further through my old red backpack until the security personnel saw my Tae Kwon Do black belt earned in Korea some ten years ago. Suddenly the light went on. They smiled. I smiled. Everybody smiled. The search stopped. Tae Kwon Do saved the day, and we were brothers of the

dojang. I was feeling a bit nervous there for a while, but suddenly a kinship had formed—the international brotherhood of Tae Kwon Do.

Then after this early morning inspection I got my entry visa stamp on my passport. A note here is in order. Turkmenistan is not a big tourist center partly because of very strict immigration policies. I considered myself very lucky to have been allowed to enter this amazing ancient nation.

Then there was another minibus to the pickup point where I'd finally meet my guide, but not before another passport check. While waiting about three minutes for the minibus to show up, I found out the guard at this last border stop liked TKD too and had practiced for several years. And this is the true story of my crossing the land border from Farab Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan, and once again being helped by the international brotherhood of Tae Kwon Do. (By the way, nobody mentioned WTF or ITF. Tae Kwon Do is Tae Kwon Do and "we-are-fam-i-ly," as the old song goes.) This last minibus let me off at the pickup point, and I met my guide, "Guvanch." We were to become good friends over the next nine days.

## Ancient sites in Turkmenistan

First we went to my very nice hotel in Turkmenabat and shortly after went to visit the most authentic and untouched ruins of an ancient Caravansarai—Silk Road trading center and "hotel"—I've ever imagined. Called "Dayahatyn" and about a three- or four-hour drive north of Turkmenabad, it definitely needs a team of 50 archeologists working day and night



for about five years to stabilize and excavate the ruins, but even as it was, it was magnificent—a dream come true for a Silk Road aficionado like me. We strolled around, and I took pictures for hours, exploring the rooms and corridors, the different levels, inside and out, and inside and out of the outer wall some distance away. I love that place. It's the real Silk Road with no artifice, looking virtually undisturbed for the past few hundred years, except the front gate, which had been restored. On the way back we stopped at Gosha Gala IC twin fortress, which didn't survive as well but was awesome nonetheless.

Waking the next morning in Turkmenabat again, we were in for another several-hour drive to Astanababa Mausoleum—Akmuhmet Isan Madrassa and other locations rich in history that, though not as old—a mere 800 and 900 years or so—had generally been well maintained. Astana-baba is an 11th and 12th century mausoleum which subsequently became a “zyurat” pilgrimage site for believers over the past 800 years. The Astana-baba complex contains the mausoleums of Zed-Ali and Zuveid Ali. Astana-baba is considered a holy place with remarkable healing power. Thousands of sick people travel great distances to this location for its widely reported curative powers. The well there still has



Kakajan, G. Brundage and Kakajan's older brother

water, and I drank some—cold, fresh and yes, I believe quite restorative! After that we drove to the Akmuhmet Isan Madrassa, another major Silk Road stop for true believers with awesome historical significance. If someone wants to get the feel for the real Silk Road, they have to get out of the big cities and visit these ancient crossroads, which at least here in Turkmenistan remain untouched by the modern world.

Returning that evening to Ashkhabad, we had to wait for a few hours for a train, during which time the driver (a big, humorous guy named Kakajan) invited us to his farm. He has a beautiful place and family, and what a kind-hearted guy to bring a stranger from afar to share dinner. I also met his brother, who is a school teacher, speaks some English and rather likes computers. It's friendly gestures like that that endear a nation and culture to travelers like me. No pretense, artifice, or





money involved, just real people being kind to a traveler. That's real Silk Road hospitality. The train that night was a sleeper train, and we woke the next morning in Mary/Merv, location of one of the oldest civilizations on earth.

### **Mary/Merv**

Talk to a local in any city in the world, and one easily finds martial arts clubs. Stop in for a moment and chat with the teacher, and one can very quickly get the phone number for the national director of that martial art, or at least, someone very close to him. I've done this kind of "bottom-up" research in innumerable cities and countries looking for the masters of various martial arts. In this case, it was in a picturesque little city called Mary in Southeast Central Turkmenistan, which is adjacent to the ancient Merv Oasis, once known as Margush

in an inscription of the Persian King Darius the First, close to the ancient caravan route leading from Babylon to the city of Hamadan. The State of Margush in the Bronze Age almost 40 centuries ago was regarded as the birthplace of Zoroastrianism. Over time it also was a center for Buddhism, Christianity, and then Islam.

Today Mary/Merv is the home of one of the world's largest collections of awesomely huge ancient fortresses and places of worship, and is recognized by UNESCO as the location of many world heritage sites. I spent my first day there in a terrific snowstorm photographing the ancient ruins. Eighty percent of Turkmenistan is in the Karakum Desert, one of the driest deserts in the world with less than half an inch of precipitation a year. So the locals were quite happy with the snow that started upon my arrival, and several joked I had brought it

with me. Ha! In spite of gale force winds and snow, the ruins were spectacular, and perhaps my photos are somewhat unique, bathed in pure white snow. The local history museum too has a collection that is the rival of the world's best when it comes to truly ancient artifacts.

## Master Ayhan 7th dan in Mary, Turkmenistan

After exploring the ancient ruins, I went in search of Tae Kwon Do and happened upon a Tae Kwon Do teacher named Orazmyrat Charyev, who then gave me the phone number of his Master, Aydogdy Atabayev, known as Master Ayhan, who just so happens to be Vice President of the Turkmenistan International Taekwondo Federation (a 7th dan master, no less); coach of the Turkmenistan National Team, which also trains in lovely Mary; and an internationally recognized and licensed Class "A" Tae Kwon Do umpire/referee.

And, just to prove how lucky I can occasionally be, he turned out to be free for a short chat on his way to a city council meeting. Proving what a kindhearted gentleman he is who truly loves Tae Kwon Do, he graciously stopped by my hotel, saving me the effort of finding my way around, which is sometimes a challenge, as people in most of Central Asia and East Asia don't usually use addresses, but rather proximity to larger more famous places, helpful at least to those who know the "hood." His Tae Kwon Do odyssey began in 1989 in Tashkent when he came upon Master Kan Pen Mei, then 5th dan, now 7th. I found out his ITF has about 500 students in Turkmenistan, and held the Turkmenistan ITF Championships in Mary February 13th and 14th of this year. Turkmenistan, by the way, has a total population of around five million, less than a quarter of Beijing.

Asked why he's made Mary such a center of Tae Kwon Do when Ashgabat is, after all, the capital city, Master Ayhan said Mary was his birthplace and he likes it there. He also mentioned that he'd lived in Ashgabat for ten years, and though it's a great city, he prefers the town of Mary. Having spent a couple of days in Mary, I could easily understand his sentiments. Ancient places radiate a certain aura of peace and serenity and are perhaps more conducive to concentrated study than big capital cities with their infinite distractions. Thus it was not a great surprise that he'd moved the entire national ITF team to Mary for training.

He looks about 35 or so. I was surprised to find out he's actually 52. He'd only become a 7th dan in 2014, and a 6th dan in 2005 while in Australia. He explained that 1st, 2nd, and 3rd dan are assistant instructor degrees, while 4th, 5th, and 6th dan are International Instructor ranks, while a 7th dan can be called a master, an 8th dan is a senior master, and 9th dan, grandmaster. Chatting about mutual acquaintances, I wasn't surprised to find out he knew Umida in the also very ancient but simultaneously very different city of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, as well as Master Han in Tashkent and ITF President Vitalii Oleinichenko in Bishkek\_Kyrgyzstan. (Parts III, II and I of this series.) After chatting for half an hour or so, Master Ayhan had a meeting to attend and after exchanging e-mails we bid farewell. Then it was off for the Local History Museum of Mary, which was a once-in-a-lifetime treat. Their collection is jaw-dropping fabulous and dates back to around 4,000 BC.

Next stop Ashgabat, capital city of Turkmenistan. **TKD**

*Gregory Brundage started TKD under 6th dan Mr. Lee at the YMCA in Milwaukee in 1969. Since then he's trained in Europe, South America, and several Asian nations, including South Korea for seven years. He also trains in several other martial arts. He is currently a high school teacher in Beijing, still practices TKD, and competes in triathlons.*

