

The Goliard Scholarship

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Sid Richardson College 2010

Dancing Along the Silk Road
Pit Stop: Tashkent, Uzbekistan

When I meet someone new, I would say that at least 70% of the time, they automatically assume I am Hispanic. The next guess is Hawaiian and a couple times I've even been mistaken for Indian. No one ever guesses that I am from Uzbekistan, let alone really knows where it is—the best commentators may respond with a vague nod of a “oh yea, I have heard of the ‘stans’,” while older generations may refer to Central Asia in the context of Russia/the former Soviet Union. Nonetheless, that is my heritage and I'll admit that I feel pretty unique about it. The problem is...while I was born in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, I only spent a total of two years there as a child. Due to my father's job, we traveled to Japan and Italy and finally settled in the U.S. when I was six years old. Since then, while we have kept close ties with our extended family in Uzbekistan and welcomed relatives in our home in the US, I have not had the chance or the financial means to return to Uzbekistan. Growing up, I spoke Russian and heard Uzbek spoken at home, helped prepare Uzbek dishes, and danced to Uzbek music. While this atmosphere has allowed me to develop an intuitive feel for my heritage, I would like to place it into context. With this generous opportunity provided by the Goliard Scholarship, I would like to personally experience the rich culture of Uzbekistan by immersing myself into the world of traditional Uzbek dance in Tashkent and in several key cities along the ancient Silk Road.

Dancing is one of my passions – I enjoy the freedom of movement, the rhythm of the music, and the means of social and artistic expression. Over the years, as a member of several dance groups, from the school drill team to competitive dance troupes, I developed as a dancer and team player, improving on my technique and learning to coordinate my dance movements with the movements of others. Dancing for two years now with Rice Dance Theatre (RDT) has opened my eyes to modern dance and ballet, as well as the freedom to dance outside of conventional forms. Through my dance experience at Rice, I matured not only as a dancer but also as a choreographer, and have been able to create dance pieces for RDT shows and teach Hip Hop at the Rice recreational center. However, ballet, modern, and hip hop are all forms of dance that are widely studied throughout the world. The particular dance styles that spring from different cultures, such as Uzbek dance, are unique in that each style has its own personality. Drawn from the traditions and lifestyles of the people, dance transforms into a form of cultural expression and social communication.

Dance is an integral component of Uzbek culture today and has evolved from as early as the 5th century. It has been said that the talent and grace of professional dancers attracted audiences in the palaces of the great Emirs and even courts of Chinese emperors. At the crossroads of the Silk Road, Uzbek cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent became centers of intellectual and cultural exchange and it is in these cities that the culture of music and dance originated and evolved. For a long period of time, women were banned from public performances due to the Arab invasion in the 7th century that imposed conservative laws. Public dances by women reemerged only in the 20th century, with the

notable debut of Tamara Khanum, a dancer, who first exposed Central Asian dance to the West in a performance in Paris in 1924.

Uzbek dance is characterized by elegant movements of the upper body. The arm movements range from beautiful arcs above the head to fluid sweeps across the body and are complemented by hand gestures and wrist circles. The chin and shoulders serve to accentuate particular beats in the music. The dance is fluid and travels across the stage, incorporating twirls and spins but it does not resemble ballet or lyrical dance due to the absence of leaps, jumps, or pirouettes. The light footwork is fitting as it balances the intricate movements of the arms, wrists, and occasionally, the head. While the dance can be performed solo, the group repertoires are fascinating as the compositions work like a mosaic of geometrically-staged movement and color.

Growing up, I learned the basics of Uzbek dance by observing family and relatives at celebrations. The upbeat and catchy rhythm of Uzbek music, a mix between Arabic and Turkish, always made me want to start dancing, and soon I started to improvise my own arm and wrist compositions to the tempo of the songs. While I had a chance to share Uzbek dancing with a number of school talent shows and family audiences, my knowledge is very basic. I would like to formally study Uzbek traditional dance, by learning the variations in movements, discovering new combinations, and exploring the different regional styles of Uzbek dance, such as Khorezm's *lazgi*. The formal dance instruction would also allow me to further develop choreography skills. My goal is to progress to the level of creating my own Uzbek dance compositions to share with dancers and peers here in the U.S.

I would like to pursue my professional Uzbek dance training at the Tashkent State Higher School of National Dance and Choreography, the main dance academy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. After speaking with relatives and former dance students, I found out that the School offers accessible traditional dance classes that explore the different regional styles of Uzbek dance: Bukhara, Ferghana, and Khorezm. The classes cost from \$7- \$8/hr depending on the level and instructor. In addition, I would like to take several classes with independent dance instructors, as most of them would be able to personally share their dance experiences. My grandmother, a member of the arts community, knows a number of accredited dance instructors and has offered to help me in contacting them once I arrive in Tashkent. I believe that attending class 15 hours a week for four weeks would allow me to grasp the technique and structure of traditional dance and gain an appreciation for its regional variations.

Due to its location in the middle of Central Asia, many of Uzbekistan's cities were along the path of the Silk Road. The trade routes facilitated the exchange of languages, religion, cultures, as well as valuable materials such as silk, satins, pearls. Part of the cultural exchange along this route took place through dance. Therefore, in addition to learning traditional dance in Tashkent, I would like to extend my dance instruction to some of the key cities along the Silk Road, which include Khiva, Bukhara, Shakhrisabz, and Samarkand. By exploring these cities, I hope to discover the spirit of the regional dances that originated there. In Khiva, I am excited to see performances of the rhythmic folk dance, *lazgi*. Bukhara is famous for another key style of Uzbek dance, characterized by the clicking of shoe heels during the dance. Also while in Bukhara, I would like to see the famous Bukhara Dance Ensemble perform and hopefully, take one or two master classes from the Ensemble's instructors. These cities are also known for their beautiful and breath-taking

architecture – the unique turquoise domes, intricately designed columns and arches, and green and blue mosaic facades are a must see.

My proposal is designed for only six weeks since I will be spending the first half of the summer studying for and taking the MCAT on July 8. After that date, I look forward to beginning this self-reflective journey to Uzbekistan. As I have mentioned above, in the first four weeks, I will learn Uzbek dance in a formal setting and then, during the final two weeks, travel around the Silk Road cities and experience the dance in an informal way through shows and possible performance opportunities. I plan to fly west from Tashkent to Khiva and then make a south-east loop back by taking a train and/or bus to Bukhara, Shakhrisabz, and Samarkand.

In addition to dancing and traveling, I hope to experience other cultural aspects of Uzbekistan such as its language and cuisine. My parents were educated in Russian during the Soviet Union and as a result, I grew up speaking mainly Russian, not Uzbek, at home. However, my grandparents and extended family speak Uzbek but I am limited in communicating with them due to my very basic vocabulary and understanding of the language. I hope that through daily interactions with my dance instructors, fellow students, and relatives, I will be able to pick up the language faster. Another key component of any culture is the cuisine. I may be biased, but Uzbek food is unbelievably delicious. I grew up eating Uzbek food through my mother's and grandmother's cooking —a rich menu of dishes prepared mainly from lamb and topped with spices such as cumin, coriander, and black pepper. The richness of Uzbek food stems from the fact that everything is made from scratch and skilled combination of daily ingredients. For example, one of my favorite dishes called *osh*, which is the main dish in Uzbekistan, is best described as a rice pilaf. The ingredients for *osh* are simple – rice, carrots, onions, lamb, and chick peas – and yet the dish requires specific instructions and much practice to get it just right. Under the guidance of my relatives in Uzbekistan, I hope to master this dish. I am eager to experience new flavors in Uzbekistan as well as become skilled in preparing some of the traditional Uzbek foods, including the above mentioned *osh*, *manti* (a form of dumplings), and *somsa* (samosas).

Below, I attach my proposed timeline and budget. I also hope you will enjoy the rich colors of Uzbek culture through my pictures of Uzbek dancers (me included!) and the country's beautiful architecture and delicious food. I would like to thank the Goliard Committee for considering my application and giving me the opportunity to write this proposal, as it has given me an exciting glimpse of the journey I would like to take this summer. I would be happy to come fully dressed in Uzbek dress and show the Committee the basic dance steps that I do know! With this comprehensive trip to Uzbekistan, I hope to discover myself in the context of my birth country and I look forward to growing as a dancer and cultural enthusiast. Upon my return, I hope to share with the Rice community an evening of Uzbek music, dance performance, and delicious cuisine.

Timeline

Dates—Summer 2010	Activity
July 12 – July 31	Tashkent, Uzbekistan: dance classes and cultural immersion
August 1 – August 14	Khiva, Bukhara, Shakhrisabz, Samarkand: further dance journey and exploration of historical significance and architectural beauty of the cities
August 15 – August 17	Back in Tashkent
August 18	Fly back to U.S.

Proposed Budget

Item	Cost	Comment
Roundtrip airline tickets	\$1,800	2 leg-flight: Dallas to NY and a NY-Tashkent direct flight
Accommodation and food in Tashkent	\$0	Provided by relatives
Dance classes	\$420	\$7/hr; 15 hrs/wk for 4 weeks
Travel inside Uzbekistan		
Flight to Khiva	\$60	
Train/Bus to Bukhara, Shakhrisabz, Samarkand, and Tashkent	\$80	
Overnight stay in cities	\$440	11 nights at \$40/night
Food when traveling	\$150	
Total	\$2950	

Photos



Traditional Uzbek dish: Osh



Registan Square in Samarkand



Traditional Uzbek dance attire – On the left, I am getting ready to dance at my sister’s wedding; on the right, an ensemble of Uzbek dancers accompanied by live musicians with a *doira* drum