

TO DO! 2014

Contest Socially Responsible Tourism



Award Winner

**MITAN RESPONSIBLE
TOURISM PROJECT**

represented by:

**Ravshan Turakulov, CEO and owner of the
incoming tour operator „Silk Road Destinations – C.A.T.I.A.“**

Samarqand

Uzbekistan

Award Rationale

by

Dr. Christian Adler

of the oldest towns in the world. Under Islamic rule, it was the most important trade hub in Central Asia.

During the Timurid dynasty between the 14th and 16th century, an ensemble of magnificent monumental buildings was constructed in the city centre of Samarqand, at the so-called “Registan” (= “sandy square”). These so called “madreses” are considered unique examples of architectural design and craftsmanship in urban development during the middle ages. Today, these cultural monuments are the main attraction and reason to visit Uzbekistan.

In contrast to the magnificent buildings of Samarqand, the surroundings are rather desolate. Once steppe, the area is relatively densely populated at first. Moving further west, one reaches the original open steppe that eventually turns into desert.

From Samarqand on drives about 60 km to the North-West, the drive leads along a road peppered with potholes to Mitan. The area looks very rural to the beholder. There are farm houses everywhere, partly built of burnt, partly of raw clay bricks. The houses have an oblong layout with a broad front, with several windows in the middle. Behind these windows, there is a large room where the family spend their time during the hot summer (up to 45 degrees). There are more rooms on both sides and to the back. There is enough space for individual members of the extended family to retreat in private. During the cold winter, the family – men and women with children separately – live in two more congested rooms, heated with very simply gas-fired iron furnaces.

Detached from the main building of the farmstead, the inhabitants reach the adjacent kitchen. In front of it, there is an egg-shaped clay oven to bake bread, and in front of this oven, there is a water pump. A bit further away, there is an outhouse and a sink. In addition, there are stables for the cows and sheep, and a granary to keep seeds and other stocks.

Every farmer family owns a few cows, sheep and goats for milk and meat. Around the farm houses, vegetables are cultivated for subsistence purposes. Further away, there are paddy and wheat fields, and especially cotton fields which are of economic importance for the families. It was surprising to learn that one farmer’s extended family can harvest 20 tonnes of paddy and seven tonnes of cotton.

During the summer, the cotton fields dominate the scenery. The bolls that have sprung open are harvested by hand and are taken to a nearby government-owned factory for further processing.

The farmers in this area also rear caterpillars of silk moth and supply the cocoons to a factory in Tashkent for the production of silk. Furthermore, Mitan started bee keeping on a small scale. However, so far, there are only a few bee colonies and the honey harvested is just about enough to meet the families’ own needs plus those of tourists who may sometimes buy some of the honey.

The people – in Mitan about 150 persons in total – live in extended families (grandparents, parents, children including their spouses), if not in the same house, then close by. In Mitan, everyone is connected to everyone else in some kind of family relation. Several families belong to one clan community. The ties to the own clan seem to be very strong. Head of a clan is an old man who enjoys a lot of respect by all the members and whose decisions find general approval. He is called “Aksakal” (man with long white beard). In the clan community of the Turakulovs, Mr. Bakhriddin Turakulov is head of the clan.

The people are religious and pray before every meal. Only the men join the Muslim Friday prayer which is also attended by Aksakals from other villages. This provides an opportunity to discuss common concerns.

3 MITAN RESPONSIBLE TOURISM PROJECT

3.1 History and Setting

The Mitan Tourism Project cannot be understood without explaining the history of the tour operator Silk Road Destinations (SRD), for both are closely connected.

The initiator was Mr. Ravshan Turakulov, who, after completing his Master's in French, first found a job with a travel agency in Samarqand and worked as a tour guide for a couple of years. In 2001, he became self-employed and founded his own company, the tour operator Silk Road Destinations. What he had started together with his wife as a business run by two persons soon turned out very successful.

The incoming tour operator Silk Road Destinations (SRD) organises the Uzbek programmes for the package tours of several tour operators. Today the tour operator takes about 1,000 tourists to the sights of Uzbekistan and has 38 permanent staff. Furthermore, if there is demand, Mr. Turakulov employs eleven tour guides and interpreters on a freelance basis.

He now also owns a small hotel with 14 rooms, and three coaches (40 seats each).

His customers are tour operators from France and Italy, as well as an operator from Germany who organises study tours.

Having become wealthy through the success of his company, Mr. Ravshan Turakulov remembered where he came from. His family hails from Mitan. As a person who thinks and acts socially responsibly, he searched for a way to make the villagers participate in the success of his company. This soon gave birth to the idea for the project "Mitan Responsible Tourism" which started in 2008.

3.2 The Tourism Product

The tourism season in Uzbekistan lasts from mid March to November.

One usual route of the tours offered leads from Tashkent to Samarqand, Buchara, Khiwa, and back to Tashkent. It takes nine days. There are also individual programmes for smaller groups, e.g. a tour to the ruins of Ak-Saray, the former palace of the founder of the Timurid dynasty, Emir Timur. This tour costs USD 55 for two persons, USD 110 for three to six persons, and with a guide USD 30/day extra.

SRD also sells tickets to all the sights in Samarqand, flight and train tickets, organises bus excursions, lunch and dinner at the city's restaurants (at USD 10/person). The range of services offered also includes a trip from Samarqand to Mitan at USD 45 for two persons and USD 80 for three to six persons. In Mitan, guests get the opportunity to meet an Uzbek family and get to know a bit about their way of life and customs. One-day excursions can be booked, but longer stays including overnight are also possible.

In Mitan, the guests are assigned by the Aksakal to a family and very heartily welcomed by the family members. In line with an old custom, somebody will bring a jug of water and the guests must first symbolically clean themselves and wash their hands.

The visitors will then be guided around the farmstead and in the early afternoon, they will be invited to an opulent meal with local delicacies.

With every meal, two flat breads will be offered. One of these must traditionally first be broken by the head of the family and distributed in small pieces before the family and guests may eat from it. The meal is taken while sitting on the floor covered with carpets, on thick blankets or cushions, around a table that is about knee-high. First only the male members of the family assemble, women and children eat in the kitchen, but join the men after food.

Before and during the meal, green tea is taken from a small, semi-filled bowl. It would be very impolite to fill the bowl up to the rim. It would be equally impolite if a guest did not remove his/her shoes before entering a house.

Through SRD, the guests learn about the rules of conduct even before their visit.

As the key member of the extended family, the Aksakal joins all the activities and is ready to answer the visitors' questions.

Those booking an overnight stay learn even more about the everyday rural lives of the Uzbek farmers. For example, they can see how the clay oven is heated with dried cow dung and how crispy flat bread is baked over the embers. They get to know the sericulture, are taken to the cotton fields and may make themselves useful by helping with the harvest.

Different clan members accompany the guests during their walks around the village to other houses and introduce other relatives to them.

The Uzbeks are extraordinarily hospitable. Wherever they go, strangers are received very warmly and with great courtesy. In the evenings, there are opportunities to exchange views and opinions. Of course, the local people are also interested in knowing what guests from the West think of Putin and the conflict in Ukraine, for example.

Always being accompanied by an interpreter, however, is essential, as in Mitan only Uzbek is spoken.

Depending on the group of visitors, SRD sometimes also engages musicians who perform Uzbek folk music on traditional two-stringed instruments.

Those who have booked only a oneday excursion and return to Samarqand in the evening pay USD 9 for the lunch. Those wanting to stay longer pay USD 30 per night.

A stay of three days and two nights is recommendable. Up to six persons sleep in one of the large rooms on the floor, well equipped with mattresses, blankets, and many colourful cushions.

4 EVALUATION AGAINST THE TODO! CONTEST CRITERIA

Comparing the activities of Silk Road Destinations in Mitan to the TODO! criteria for socially responsible tourism leads to the following assessment:

4.1 Taking into account the different interests and needs of the local people through participation

When Mr. Ravshan Turakulov approached the families of his clan with the idea of providing them with an additional income from excursionists and temporary guests staying overnight, they were immediately very open to his suggestion. All the families involved were to be able to participate in the income from accommodation, food, guide services, etc. The project would not affect their usual life with its economically important processes. Furthermore, it should offer an opportunity to expand people's knowledge through intercultural exchange. In this context, special attention was given to a planned youth involvement.

After all, the villagers trusted Ravshan, because he himself is a member of the clan, and so he readily got the Aksakal's consent to operate a pilot tour. After the pilot tour with French guests, the local hosts were very happy with this first encounter. So the members of the clan had no objections to more guests visiting in the future.

4.2 Enhancing the awareness of the local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development for their economic, social and cultural lives

The families of Mitan were able to experience that the services they provide for the guests generate an additional income that makes their lives easier. SRD's responsible way of handling the project did not yet create any awareness among local people with regard to possible negative impacts of tourism.

In order to maintain a balance of money flowing in and external influence in the community, SRD only allows up to six persons to stay overnight, and that only twice a week. The number of excursionists is also limited to 15 per day. According to Mr. Ravshan Turakulov, this is the only way to achieve sustainability and to maintain this model over a longer time frame without upsetting the existing social structure and causing damage to the village community as a whole.

In this context, even before starting the project, SRD had agreed with the villagers that certain guidelines will need to be observed, differentiating between local people and guests (details see point 4.5).

4.3 Participation of broad local population strata in the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism

Providing many people with an opportunity to participate in the benefits and economic advantages of tourism is an important objective of socially responsible tourism operations. So far, however, the guests in Mitan are assigned to only three extended families. The author found this insufficient, considering the aspect of participation and given the fact that there are more families in the village. In the medium term, the others might develop envy and as a consequence there might be conflicts.

Even though Mr. Turakulov could bring many more tourists to Mitan through SRD, – in fact, there is demand from the customers –, he is reluctant to expand tourism in Mitan.

Before SRD started the project in Mitan, he had made bad experiences in three other villages and had witnessed the negative impacts of tourism in a drastic manner. In cooperation with other local tour operators, his company took busloads of tourists to these villages day by day. Within a short time, local people got much more money than they ever had before. Their character changed quickly, and along with it came an increasing cultural superficiality and adaptation to commercialisation. There was little interest left in actual contact with the strangers. All that mattered was the material benefit they left behind. A begging mentality had emerged, not only among the children.

Mr. Turakulov does not want to repeat the same mistakes in the village where he has family ties. That's why he currently strictly limits access. The author suggests to slowly involve more families in Mitan in the project and to realise distribution using a rotational system.

Besides, Mr. Turakulov pointed out that his company also contributed to social concerns and that he took care of projects that eventually benefited all the villagers.

SRD kept supporting the village in the past when there was not enough money for certain projects. For example, the community sent the son of a poor family to a school in Samarqand, at the beginning with donations from some of the tourists. When that money was spent, SRD stepped in, so that the child could continue his education. But only with half of the amount needed for this purpose.

In another case, SRD contributed to the construction of a new bridge, after the old one had been washed away by a flood. In this case, too, SRD deliberately took over only half of the costs. "I could have financed the bridge myself without any problems", explained Mr. Ravshan Turakulov. „But then it would have been my bridge. However, if the villagers have to raise the money themselves and pay at least half of the money, it is their bridge. They'll then take better care of it. In the same manner, they should also pool their own funds to help a poor child in the village.”

He appeals to the villagers' sense of responsibility, thus strengthening solidarity and a sense of community among them.

In any case, right now the inhabitants of Mitan seem to be very content with SRD. The guests are most welcome by all the villagers because they contribute to the well-being of the host families in an essential manner and respect the culture of the villagers and their personal rights. There are discussions and a cultural exchange between tourists and hosts that benefits both sides.

4.4 Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism or of income opportunities for the local people

In order to create jobs in tourism, it is important to first train the people, to build their capacities. In some developing countries and emerging economies, this is not an easy task. As an entrepreneur in tourism, one might be forced to take the initiative and start training people from scratch. In Uzbekistan, this is not the case. The educational system once established by the Soviets is of a high standard. In Samarqand, there is a “University of Languages” and an “Institute of Tourism and Services” where students of different disciplines can obtain their Bachelor’s or Master’s degree.

The employees of SRD were recruited among the graduates from these educational institutions. On their jobs, they have the opportunity to gain experience and to get to know the work in a tourism enterprise. The author noticed the good working atmosphere within the company. Mr. Turakulov treats his employees in a very friendly manner.

Depending on the demand, SRD expands the number of jobs offered and also employs bus drivers on a seasonal basis. The different tourist groups, especially the guests in Mitan, will always be accompanied by an interpreter who also works as a guide. At the moment, SRD employs seven French speaking, two Italian speaking, and two English speaking interpreters, and a teacher who guides the guests in German. All of them are from Samarqand.

Mr. Turakulov now also wants to make these jobs accessible to the inhabitants of Mitan, focussing on the youths. It is easier for them to learn foreign languages, especially as most of the children of Mitan are still very young. Mr. Turakulov made an agreement with a French school according to which in the future the school’s students may spend their holidays in Mitan in order to communicate with the local children. So these children will learn a bit of French in a playful manner.

4.5 Strengthening local culture and cultural identity of local people in the tourism destinations and avoiding/minimising any social and cultural damage caused by tourism in tourist destinations

A brochure preparing tourists for their stay in Mitan reads: *“The trip is inconceivable without respect to a local people, goods, culture and lifestyle of the country visited. This respect is expressed through simple attitudes. The traveller must realize that his attitude and actions can be on site to host populations as a factor of development or a destabilizing element. Consequently, it undertakes to refrain from any attitude and any intervention that could upset the social balance, cultural and ecological of the host community.”* [sic]

Polite and reserved behaviour is expected. In an Islamic environment, this includes adequate clothing. Furthermore, it includes using water sparingly, as it is scarce in the steppe, and avoiding waste.

No gifts must be given to children, not even small things. Those who want to give something or want to donate money to their host families must hand it over to the Aksakal who will then see to a fair distribution among the families and their children.

Taking photos is allowed on certain occasions. The family is happy to pose for a group photo. The women do not object if their photos are taken during their everyday work. Nevertheless, they do not feel like photo models at all, so there is a need for restraint.

Tourism as it currently happens in Mitan will not change the farmers’ culture. As mentioned, activities that are mainly focused on the lives of the farmers are at the core of all programmes. The cultural offer is limited to a few performances in the village and to imparting knowledge. From the discussions with visitors, local people learn that the guests appreciate their local living environment. This without doubt strengthens their cultural identity.

4.6 Environmental compatibility

Waste disposal in Mitan happens outside the village in a pit which time and again is covered with a layer of soil. SRD discourages inhabitants and foreign guests from using plastic bags. Therefore, plastic waste in the surrounding of Mitan is hardly found, contrary to other places in the steppe.

4.7 Participation of women and men in planning and implementation processes – improvement of gender relations

In Mitan, the division of labour happens very naturally on the basis of traditional gender roles which are partly defined by Islam. For example, it is mainly the men who communicate with the guests. The women look after the house and prepare food. They do not wear yashmacs, but headscarves. Strangers may talk to them and they will respond, but apart from that, they will not actively get involved in the men's conversations.

For the women of Mitan, guests mean a welcome improvement of their living situation. They anyway cook for a large family every day, so that it not much of a burden for them to cook for a few guests in addition.

The amount paid by the visitors for the food (USD 9 per meal) will – after a deduction of five percent for the administrative costs of SRD – be handed over to the Aksakal who will, after deduction of the food expenses he had given in advance, hand over the money to the women who prepared the food.

4.8 Measures to ensure economic and institutional sustainability of the project

Since the project was started, the numbers of guests in Mitan have been increasing year by year.

An overview:

Year	Excursionists	Guests staying over night	Total
2008	18	0	18
2009	47	13	60
2010	145	25	170
2011	289	40	329
2012	284	56	340
2013	505	77	582
2014	525	52	570

SRD is currently a flourishing enterprise with a steady growth in turnover. As a next project, the management decided to now also tap the German market, apart from the Italian and French markets.

SRD has a lot of attractively designed promotional materials in Italian, French, Spanish, and English. The company does not only promote its own business and programmes, but also the city of Samarqand and the country as a whole, including even hotels (apart from its own) – with high quality print publications of maps, flyers and brochures about the sights of Uzbekistan.

As long as tourism to Uzbekistan continues, there is no doubt that SRD will continue to be successful.

5 CONCLUSION

In the past, the TO DO! award was often given to projects that had gained importance in a regional context or even at a national level and thus attracted particular attention. Mitān, however, is only a small village in the Uzbek steppe and has no spectacular features to boast of. But it represents the idea of "soft tourism" in an ideal manner, with guests and hosts finding common ground at a human level. This is made possible by the warm hospitality of the local people, their openness and readiness to allow strangers to authentically take part in their lives for a short while. The guests, in turn, cannot get around this, they must adjust to the typical realities of the country. They are considerate and try to approach local people with respect and humble restraint. No hotel, not even the postcard idyll of Uzbekistan's magnificent monumental buildings can offer the kind of personal experiences that this village offers.

The initiator of the project, Mr. Ravshan Turakulov, deserves special mention. He is an entrepreneur who does not place his own advantage and personal gain in the foreground of his actions, but who is ready to allow others to participate in the success of his business. With his company SRD and the villagers of Mitān he managed to launch a participatory tourism project that now involves many villagers.

The responsible, restrictive approach in sending tourists to Mitān led to a high degree of identification of the villagers with the project. It can be expected that it will be successfully continued for a longer time and that this model will hopefully also be expanded to other families and villages.

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