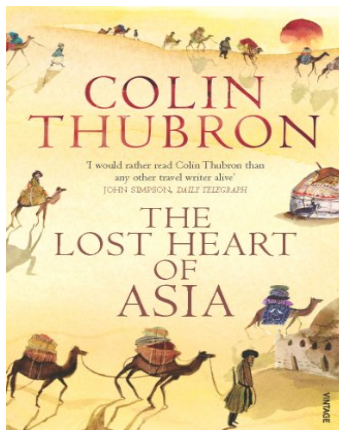


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This is a travel book on the newly emergent countries of central Asia, which contain the magical cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, the Kazakh Steppes, the deserts of Karakum and the Pamir Mountains. This is an enormous land, as big as Western Europe, secret, turned in on itself, heart of the Great Mongol Empire of Tamerlane, Route of Silk roads and scene of Stalin's cruellest deportations. Colin Thubron travelled by train, bus, car and foot throughout the former Moslem Republics, and this is the story of his encounters with their people, landscape and past. Central Asia, which since 1917 has been almost unknown, has become doubly important with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This book is a search into the region's fragmented identity and the crisis of the many once-dominant Russians who remain. Will central Asia fall prey to the Moslem fundamentalism of its neighbour, Iran, or revert to communism, or push into capitalism?

Thubron, a fine novelist as well as an accomplished travel writer, has developed exceptional skills of observation and dramatization. He absorbs every scene and conversation and then distills them into incisive commentary, poignant anecdotes, and remarkable metaphors. His last travel book, *Behind the Wall*, chronicled his journey across China. Now Thubron ventures farther into the great continent of Asia, exploring its landlocked, remote, and "fearful heartland" in

the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As he travels by bus and train from one isolated and disconsolate central Asian city to another, he inhales an overwhelming atmosphere of hopelessness. Without the structure of Communism, life seems to be drifting into chaos and apathy. Communities lack jobs, money, and a sense of purpose. Although many Muslims are pleased to be able to practice their religion openly, they know that faith alone won't revitalize life in their neglected countries. As Thubron explores Turkenia, Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Kazakhstan, visiting markets and mosques, he becomes attuned to a pervasive sense of displacement and vacuousness, of ethnic divides and distrust. In this land of conquerors and tyrants, times of peace and creative flowerings have been brief and infrequent. The future promises to be no different. Donna Seaman