UNVEILING THE PAMIRS

Travelling Tajikistan

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Dear Traveller
I well remember first coming in 1999 to my job as Programme Director for Aga Khan Health Services in Khorog. I had arrived in winter to the sunlit city of Dushanbe, with its backdrop of glittering peaks, to find elegant neo-classical architecture, magnificent parks and the ubiquitous wafts of shashlik cooking. Travelling up the Pamir Highway, I was open mouthed – I could not believe my luck – I was coming to my home and place of work for the next three years.

I lived surrounded by the snow capped peaks of the Pamirs and travelled along the intersecting valleys with crystal clear rivers and villages of traditional mud brick Pamiri houses. Most important, I found an unfailing welcome from the villagers, to whom hospitality is an integral and natural part of their lives. There were so many places of wonder – ancient shrines, petroglyphs and the great ruined fortresses of the Wakhan corridor. Up on to the high plains in the east live the tough Kyrgyz herders with their horses and yaks. Here can be seen the rare Marco Polo sheep, ibex, marmots and maybe even bears, wolves and the shy snow leopard.

In 1999 times were hard. The resourceful local people fell back on tilling their small plots of land, herding a few cattle, sheep and goats. With support from the Aga Khan Foundation and others life has improved. Markets are buzzing, roads, water supply and electricity improved. People regained their pride and joy in welcoming guests from all around the world. Adventurous travellers started to come and their arrival had a discernible effect on the local economy.

Later in co-writing a guidebook I visited all parts of Tajikistan. The Pamirs are the jewel, but there is so much to see in the rest of Tajikistan – the Fan Mountains with superb trekking, the beautiful lake of Iskander Kul, the ancient city of Penjikent, the ancient mosques of Istaravshan; the fortress of Hissar, a staging point on the Silk Road; and far south to the Afghan border Takhti-Sangin where the famous Oxus treasure was discovered.

It is with great pleasure that I write this editorial to "Unveiling the Pamirs", an inspirational publication which will now be available to a wider audience – Tajikistan is lucky to have such an enthusiastic champion.

Khush Omaded ba Tojikiston!
Welcome to Tajikistan!

Yours

Huw Thomas
Co-author of "Tajikistan and the High Pamirs"
(Odyssey Publications)
I’ve always wanted to explore the Pamir Highway! When, in 2014, I finally fulfilled my dream, I’d never have guessed that 18 months later I would be holding a new travel guidebook in my hand and among the authors’ names on the cover would be mine – I had become enchanted by Tajikistan and the Pamirs.

Anyone who is planning to lose their heart should travel to the Pamirs – it will inevitably happen. I don’t know how Marco Polo fared, having also mentioned this part of the world in his records. Was he greeted with a friendly wave when he, his father and uncle, probably riding on camels, trekked down the Wakhan corridor? Was he also invited into those Pamiri houses, which, built according to age-old Zoroastrian rules, lined the caravan trail? I don’t know, but they certainly waved at us.

In a part of the world where owning a mule already testifies modest prosperity, a car causes quite a sensation. Cars suggest foreign guests, and guests – ‘mehmon’ – are sacred. Children wave exuberantly, the elders gracefully, young women mostly restrained, and young men according to their mood. Almost always the waving is accompanied by a smile, and many wave with the left hand while placing their right hand on their heart.

Wherever you are in Tajikistan, when you get out of your car you’ll be spontaneously invited into the local host’s home for ‘tea’. However, such an invitation won’t just involve a drink, the invitation will be accompanied with every food and refreshment that the household can provide. It is deeply touching when you see how these ordinary people share all with pleasure with their guest.

‘Feel the Friendship’ – is the phrase that symbolises Tajikistan and the hospitality of its people. Feeling that friendship every day, almost every hour is something you’ll really cherish on your journey through Tajikistan.
I thought it would never end. Coming from the lush Wakhan valley in the very south of Tajikistan we had been driving and climbing for hours now, a further 2,000 m in altitude. Northbound we went, on and on, crossing the Khargush pass and reaching the ‘Roof of the World’.

Up here, the scenery has changed – we are on a high plateau. Scraggy rubble desert alternates with wide, green valleys in which herds of cattle, sheep and goats are grazing. Wasn’t that a yak over there? The horizon expands as the highway in front of us extends arrow-like into the distance. Our driver is listening to Tajik pop music with the same songs looping every 30 minutes. The constant irregular rocking of the car on the heavily-potholed road makes us sleepy and the thin air, up here above 3,500 m, adds to that.

A few haphazardly pitched yurts in the valleys and the ramshackle container market in Murghab are the only notable features of habitation. The rest is an immense and barren mountain desert. But I am not bored at all – my mind becomes free. As free as the epic vista across the surface of implacable Lake Karakul, the ‘black’ lake, which, on the next day, lays before us in the vast plain, surrounded by the snow-covered 7,000 m peaks of the Pamir-Alai.

**ALONG THE PAMIR HIGHWAY**

**ACROSS THE ‘ROOF OF THE WORLD’**

High-altitude desert plains, snow covered mountains and glaciers in the horizon. In front of you stretches the Pamir Highway, a long and lonely road across the vast remoteness of the Eastern Pamir. Somewhere out there, between Murghab and Karakul, your mind becomes as wide and as free as the high plateau.

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**sm**
TAJIKISTAN - A WINTER FAIRY TALE

We trek far above 4,000 m altitude across a snowy landscape, the sun shines into my face and I feel like I’m massively overdressed.

Up here every step is made doubly difficult by the reduced amount of oxygen in the air. However, our reward is now within reach – an old Caravanserai, right in the middle of nowhere! We are in Bashgumbez, an ancient edifice just off the Pamir Highway. If you didn’t know that the place exists it is likely that you’d not see the turnoff and never know what you have missed. It is just the same with Tajikistan in the winter – the few tourists that travel the Pamir Highway at this time of the year all know each other and share the same special experience. You just meet each other again and again. “Did you also meet the Japanese guy…?” “The one traveling by bicycle? Yes, awesome!”

I have no clue about Tajikistan in the summer but for me winter is an intimate part of the story of this country. Through snow and wind the landscape becomes sculpted and enchanted just as in a fairy tale. A fairy tale full of wonder – you find yourself in front of a lake of crystal clear warm water surrounded by deeply frozen snow and ice, a metaphor for this country. So challenging and at the same time so cordial and surprising.

The wind whistles in my ears and brings tears to my eyes. We are in Tajikistan’s allegedly coldest village, Bulunkul in the Pamir Mountains. In the winter of six years ago they measured -69°C here. MINUS SIXTY-NINE degrees centigrade! The men, waiting for the bus in the middle of the little village, laugh. “At the moment it’s only -20°C, that’s summer.” Close by there is a hot spring and if I lived here, I’d probably visit that spring every day. Life in another world – an enchanted, winter world. | yz
Situated right at the base of the giant southern face of Peak Engels (6,507 m), the second highest peak down in the Southern Pamirs, the ‘Engels meadow’ was given its name during Soviet times to honour Marx’s companion Friedrich Engels. However, no one would be surprised if the name had been applied to describe its heavenly atmosphere, as Engel in German means ‘angel’.

It’s often said that the first impression is the correct one and looking at the Engels meadow this is true. We’ve strolled for three hours up from the final village, passing through a rugged, narrow valley whilst listening to the quiet splashing of an old irrigation canal. The pack mules set an even pace, easily carrying our equipment up to an altitude of almost 4,000 m and, again and again, we fight our stiff necks from craning up the steep scree slopes to our left and right. Finally, after a steeper rise we reach a crest and, following a gentle curve in the glacial stream, this place of paradise is revealed.

The wide valley is covered by a lush green meadow with a turquoise stream meandering through it. Above the valley towers the sky-high...
steep south face of the mighty Peak Engels. Further up the valley sheep are grazing and in the sky above an eagle is circling majestically. You would be hard pushed to find a more beautiful place to put up your tent! We stay two nights and enjoy the beauty of this panorama, taking a small trip to the nearby glacier and following a small path up to an easy-to-reach nameless 5,000 m peak. This provides for grandiose 360° panoramic views of the Southern Pamirs, reaching across the Wakhan to the Hindukush mountains.

I would have loved to have stayed a week; it is so beautiful up here. But, eventually, we have to say goodbye to this most idyllic place and only two hours later we are back at our vehicles, enjoying a picnic of fresh flatbread, cheese, grapes and melons. We then continue on our journey along the Pamir Highway - the mother of all mountain roads - bringing more new impressions each day. However, to me the scenic beauty of the ‘Engels meadow’ remains the highlight of our two-week-trip across Tajikistan. | mw
WAKHAN CORRIDOR
A CUP OF TEA IN THE PAMIRS –
A TRUE STORY FROM THE WAKHAN

Our vehicle rumbles on along a track on the Tajikistan side of the Wakhan corridor. It’s a wide valley and our view to the long chain of glaciated 5,000 m peaks of the Hindu Kush, on the other side of the Panj River, is magnificent. On that side of the valley are also the Afghan villages, surrounded by poplar groves with terraced fields, arduously cultivated amidst steep scree slopes.

Awestruck and quiet we look out of our vehicle's windows. The Tajik villages on our side have strange names – Shitcharw, Zumudg, Vitshkut, Vrang. It seems as if the region had even inspired Tolkien when he wrote his book ‘The Lord of the Rings’. The people are friendly. As soon as they see our green mini-bus they come down to the road to wave us. Children, men, elders, even some women – all wave. You wave back and they beam with joy. The first clay houses, called Tschids, appear. We recognise them from the glass structures on the roofs that look like mini greenhouses. Someone from our groups asks, “Can we stop and have a look around? Maybe we could ask for hot water or tea for our picnic?”

The driver has brought the mini-bus to a halt in front of a Tschid and just three minutes later we are all sitting in the central room of the house, with the owner explaining the meaning of the five compulsory wooden columns and an intricately interlaced skylight. Of course, we are served much more than only hot water for tea and food is plentifully provided. Much later, our money offered in gratitude for the tea and pastries is only accepted reluctantly. We recognise that the people in the Pamirs are poor, and they should not regret their hospitality. Never will I forget the time we spent in their home with those kind people. Their names are Schafron and Nawruz – Saffron and Spring. Isn’t that nice? | ds
We were looking for a high alpine tour, a bit off the beaten track and with a nice mountain peak to climb. The plan was to go to the Pamirs of Tajikistan. However, time was scarce and so we found ourselves in the Fan Mountains, just north of Dushanbe – an absolute stroke of luck.

Seeking a challenge, we choose Chimtarga, at 5,500 m the highest peak of the Fan Mountains, for our tour. Descriptions for our planned ascent and ridge crossing were difficult to find. Thus, the planning of our tour was done using all available satellite images and just hoping that it would work out.

We started the tour on the banks of the 2,600 m high Lake Alaudin. During that first day of trekking, rain turned into snow and we were all pretty frozen when we reached our day’s destination, Lake Mutnoye (3,500 m). However, despite the first day’s rather tough start, the next morning began wonderfully with glorious sunny weather in an untouched winter world. Travelling westwards, we navigated our way across a glacier. On the route we passed numerous big rocks sitting atop icy bases and resembling giant mushrooms. In the light of the evening sun we reached our intermediate summit at 4,600 m. What a moment! At our back were the peaks of the Fan Mountains in ‘Alpenglow’ and in front of us were the gorgeous Kulikalon Lakes. There we made camp for our second night of the tour.

The next morning we soon had to master some difficult terrain. A lot of fresh snow had made progress hard. In addition, we had to cope with an incline of up to 50°. We finally crested a ridge, which was a true stairway to heaven, but unfortunately, we realised we were already too late to reach the summit of Chimtarga. We contented ourselves with reaching the neighbouring Peak Mirali which, at 5,120 m, is the second highest peak in that area. Our rapid descent through the Zindon Valley took us past beautiful Lake Allo. We now look back and are very happy about a gorgeous tour and a wonderful peak – a truly fine mountain adventure!
WITH KIDS ON THE ‘ROOF OF THE WORLD’
As we collect together our gear we start to look forwards to our prospective trip even more. As with previous years, we planned to once again spend a few summer weeks with all our family up in the Pamirs. The mountains are calling, the high plateau beckons and, what’s more, this year we have a special purpose – to paddle down the Alichur River. In order to do so, we had brought along our inflatable canoe.

As usual, the first days of the trip we spend in Khorog, the Tajik Pamirs’ nice and lively ‘capital’ at 2,100 m. We meet friends, enjoy the fresh mountain air and acclimatize. To satisfy our wanderlust we go on a multi-day hike in the Jizev valley, an already popular trekking destination. Overnight, we use homestays, simple friendly guesthouses run by local families.

Taking a side-trip we visit the famous ‘Engels meadow’ as we travel along the Wakhan corridor and up onto the Eastern Pamir plateau. Finally, we seek a good spot to inflate our canoe, park our car by some nearby yurts and we set off on our river cruise – a life-long dream comes true. For three days we follow the Alichur River across the plateau and on to Lake Yashikul. Near a hot spring on its banks we happily reunite with some friends who came to pick us up.

We then return to our vehicle and go on, towards Murghab, which has become an established stop-over for travellers along the Pamir Highway. From here we travel in the direction of Lake Karakul but turn west before reaching it to go across the Kok Jar pass with its fabulous views up the Tanimas valley. Then, we enter the Bartang valley and follow it down towards its meeting with the Panj and return to Khorog. What a splendid tour!

With a little planning and enough time you can travel easily across the Pamirs with your family. In the summer it actually hardly ever rains. You can pitch your tent wherever you like and at many locations you can find donkeys to rent and homestays for overnight accommodation. With children you are welcome anywhere and anytime. Finally, whenever we thought that the altitude might be a bit challenging, we were relieved to see our two kids were still running along the trail in front of us full of joy and energy.

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**Do something different, come to Tajikistan!**

**Interview with Philip Riddle, tourism adviser to the Government of Tajikistan and ex-CEO of VisitScotland, the Scottish National Tourism Agency**

Mr. Riddle, why should people come and visit Tajikistan?

“Tajikistan is one of the world’s last great travel adventures. Spectacular scenery, unique culture and over two thousand years of history combine for a truly memorable experience away from the pressures of mass tourism and commercialisation. The country is at the heart of the world, at the crossroads of east and west, and yet is relatively undiscovered.

Walk in the footsteps of Marco Polo on the Silk Road or trek in the high Pamir mountains, rising to over 7,000 metres, and you will feel liberated and yet connected to the origins of the world. The people are hospitable, the days are mostly clear and sunny. Getting around can be challenging but exciting and facilities are steadily improving for foreign visitors whilst not affecting the equilibrium and authenticity of the local way of life. Do something different, come to Tajikistan.”
BARTANG VALLEY

FACING THE ELEMENTS

"Who has not been to the Bartang, has not seen the Pamirs", the Soviet explorer and scientist Pavel Luknizki wrote about this valley in the heart of the Pamirs back in the 1950s. Even today the people here still exercise agrarian techniques, rites and customs, long forgotten in other valleys.

From a scenic point of view, the Bartang Valley is one of the most spectacular regions in the Pamirs. ‘Bar’ (wide) and ‘tang’ (narrow) explains how this valley goes from a broad expanse into deep canyons, weaving between distinctive 5,000 and 6,000 m peaks including the beautiful Pik Revolution (6,940 m). Beyond the mountains of the Bartang you can also find the deep blue Sarez Lake, created in 1911, when an earthquake caused a landslide to form the most massive natural dam in the world.

In the secluded settlements of the Bartang you can find sacred sites, caves, castles and petro glyphs – perhaps not in the dimensions as can be found in the Wakhan. Instead, those in the Bartang are a little more mysterious with an unclear history and are often concealed from the eyes of the tourist. To the Pamiri people, hospitality is their most important virtue and it is lived to the full in the Bartang valley, coming straight from the heart. The local people do not welcome and entertain guests because they have a monetary interest. Instead, they offer hospitality because they receive barakat, the ‘blessing of god’. This is more than sufficient reason to risk an adventurous trip along the entire valley or to ‘just’ take advantage of the many possibilities for trekking and overnighting in local homestays at the western end. You also bring a little bit of extra income to the amiable Bartangi people! | sk
KARAKUL LAKE

SAILING THE ‘ROOF OF THE WORLD’

The ‘Roof of the World’ Regatta is the highest altitude sailing event in the world, held in September each year at 3,916 m on Lake Karakul (‘Black Lake’) in the Eastern Pamir of Tajikistan.

The 2015 ‘Roof of the World’ Regatta was held for its second year from 24 to 27 September on Lake Karakul at the altitude of 3,916 m. It remains the highest altitude sailing event in the world. The purpose of the event is to take adventure sailing to new heights whilst promoting the sport and the region for all those who have a wild heart and passion for doing the extraordinary. Our participants were again world class kite-boarders (we do hope to one day have catamarans appearing on the lake for the first time) who surfed in the evening wind and amazed the locals with their skills whilst learning the special techniques required for high-altitude sailing.

The ‘Roof of the World’ Regatta is not just about the sailing - we also want the local inhabitants to have fun and build some festival community spirit. To this end we organised a series of shore-side spectator participation activities ranging from an exhibition of a professional juggler to competitive races and sports. Kite-flying was also a feature along with more traditional volleyball. Plans are now being put in place to make this event a permanent feature in the calendar of the Pamirs, last but not least to also attract tourists to this end of the world. We hope to be sailing again in September 2016 with more participants and a great range of onshore activities for the locals. Come and try ‘Sailing with Altitude’! | tn
GOOD TO KNOW - TRAVEL INFORMATION

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TRAVEL INFORMATION

ACCESS BY AIR AND LAND:
Somon Air flies Frankfurt-Dushanbe once a week. Somon Air and Turkish Airlines currently connect Istanbul-Dushanbe six times a week. In addition, Turkish Airlines flies twice a week from Istanbul to Khujand. Flights are also available to Dushanbe from Almaty / Kazakhstan, Bishkek / Kyrgyzstan, Urumqi / China, Tehran / Iran, Delhi / India, Lahore / Pakistan, Dubai / VAE and several cities in Russia. An alternative route to the Pamirs is flying Turkish Airlines from Istanbul to Osh in Kyrgyzstan, currently 4x a week. The country can also be accessed by road from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and China.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS & VISA REGULATIONS:
You can easily obtain a Tourist Visa at any Tajik Embassy or Consulate without an invitation letter. A Tourist Visa allows you to stay in Tajikistan for up to 30 days without registering. To visit the Pamirs a special permit to enter GBAO (Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast) is necessary. It can be obtained together with the visa at Tajik Embassies or Consulates. A visa, but not a GBAO permit, can also be obtained upon arrival at the airports in Dushanbe and Khujand by citizens of 80+ countries. A third and very recent possibility to obtain a visa and the GBAO permit is online through www.evisa.tj.

‘UNVEILING THE PAMIRS’ is also available as e-magazine on: www.unveiling-the-pamirs.com (Supported by: FERIENSTRASSEN.INFO)

TRAVEL BOOKS/MAPS

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RECOMMENDED READING

With Our Own Hands
A Celebration of Food and Life in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan
Frederik van Oudenhoven and Jamila Haider
LM Publishers; Mult edition

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At PECTA’s Information Centre we can help you plan tours, book day-trips, reserve accommodation. Discover the latest information on events and festivals taking place in the Pamirs. Our shop has a selection of guide books, maps, and postcards. In addition, we rent out a broad range of camping gear. Drop by to make sure your trip to the Pamirs is one to remember.

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