

Tajikistan – report by Huw Thomas to Robert Middleton on spring trip

1. Roads Dushanbe to Khorog

The journey time is reduced because of a number of road improvements.

- a. The Chormagsak tunnel is now open, Chinese project – well surfaced and lit. The road from Dushanbe to Kulob is now good.
- b. The road from Shurabad to the Panj was in a poor state, but work was well advanced on bridges over 2 tributaries, just north and south of Kisht. The work is due to be completed in 2014.
- c. A bridge to Afghanistan has been opened beyond Kisht, where the road turns east [just beyond the village of Kaji in Afghanistan on Markus's map.
- d. There is an excellent stretch of 70kms of mainly a two lane tarmac road from near the hunting lodge to Yoged. The awful and dangerous section around Zigar is now very good.
- e. The bridge at Qala-i Khumb to Afghanistan is open.
- f. The road from Qala-i Khumb to Khorog is unchanged.

2. Khorog

- a. We stayed at the Parinen, very pleasant with helpful staff.

There are regular microbus services in the town, with a standard charge of one and a half somonis. There are 2 routes. Both start about 500 metres west of the Parinen on the road to the airport. One route goes to the bottom of the road to the Botanical Gardens, the other on the road to Murghab, as far as the plinth with the first car to reach Khorog. There are scores of these minibuses and they are very popular. It is fun to travel in them and meet local people.

- b. There are banks with ATMs, some dispensing dollars.
- c. There is some internet connectivity. Khorog has 3G. There are a number of internet cafes, but these can be very busy.
- d. There is an air of some prosperity; new buildings, the market is busy, a number of upper range cars, more cafes and shops. There are traffic jams. The airport terminal has been improved. The renovation work in Central Park is excellent – it is a pleasure to be there. Electricity and water supply is much improved. There are garages with proper pumps and some have a shop attached.
- e. Work seems to have stalled on the University of Central Asia.
- f. PECTA was busy. Zandiya Zoolshoeva was very helpful. Sat phones can be hired which is a useful service for travel in the Pamirs. Camping equipment for hire.

3. Hunting Lodges

We stayed at 2 hunting lodges.

Jarty Gumbez

- a. The lodge at Jarty Gumbez, the main hunting lodge for Marco Polo sheep, situated south from Murghab, near the Afghan border, where the track goes west to Zor Kul. [70 degrees 10 minutes/ 37 degrees 30 minutes] A four wheel drive is essential. In winter the lodge is used by hunters, but in summer is open for any visitors. The lodge is well appointed with comfortable bedrooms. There is a very efficient heating system using steam from nearby hot springs. There are spa baths, which are adequate. Staying at the lodge gives the opportunity of seeing Marco Polo sheep and ibex. Overnight stay USD 30. The host, Kyrgyz Mamanov Mamrain [mamrain.hunting@bk.ru] will accompany guests to show them places where Marco Polo sheep are to be found. On our visit we saw several flocks of Marco Polo

and ibex, also fox and hares and many marmots. The food provided was good, but it is likely to be Marco Polo meat. It is also possible to visit summer yurts where families stay in the summer months, tending their sheep and cattle. You are likely to be offered bread, cream and yoghurt – but always give some money. These people are very poor.

- b. One downside is the number of pictures in the lodge of hunters standing over the bodies of superb male Marco polo. Particularly disturbing is a photo of a huntsman sitting next to the body of the largest wild yak ever shot in the Pamirs. Wild yak are an endangered species.
- c. Having said all this, the local guides are extremely pleasant and take pride in their conservation work and photography of snow leopards, and state that hunters are encouraged to only shoot the older male Marco Polos.

Vakhchi-milka

- a. The Vakhchi-milka lodge is situated in the Dasht-I Jum Reserve near Zigar, just off the main road from Dushanbe to Khorog, not long after entering the Pamirs at 70 degrees 15 minutes/38 degrees; 18 kms before the village of Zigar. There is a track up to the left opposite some pens for sheep and goats on the right hand side of the road. The track leads to some outbuildings after 500m. The lodge is a further 50m. Although there have been improvements to the main road, I recommend that the journey from Dushanbe to Khorog is taken over 2 days. Most travellers stop overnight at Qala-I Khumb, but this lodge would be an alternative overnight stay. From the lodge there are impressive views of the surrounding mountains and the Panj valley.
- b. The lodge is well appointed with a dormitory of 4 beds, 2 single bedrooms and 1 double bedroom. There is a very lavish bathroom/toilet on the ground floor. There is a comfortable dining room. The food was poor. Overnight stay USD 35.
- c. The proprietor, Muloyoro Ayub Sayod is an engaging character who speaks English, [m.sayod@mail.ru]. Cell phone: 992 98 881 57 57. Facebook: Ayub. Muloyorov. LLC: 'M-Sayod'.
- d. Dasht-I Jum is home to the rare Bokhara Markhor goats, also snow leopard, ibex, bear, wolves and 4 species of snakes. Sayod is very proud of his record of conservation. There is a strict limit of shooting 6 Markhor goats each season, and these must be old ones. There is also shooting of wild boar. He organizes photographic tours in autumn and winter when it is possible to see the Markhor goats. Due to his work with the local community there has been a significant reduction in poaching and local people gain from the visitors and the limited hunting.

4. Pamirs

- a. It is possible to cross to Afghanistan to the market at Ishkashim. No visa required. The guards take passports as you cross the bridge and return them when you cross back. It is a bustling market with a wide range of goods, including Afghan clothing, and food for. Worth doing just to impress people at home that you have been to Afghanistan!
- b. At Yamg the replica Pamiri house of Sufi Mubrakqadam Wakhani has an informative museum, with fine woodwork and paintings. His nephew gives a talk and plays traditional instruments.
- c. In Langar I was disappointed to see the amount of vandalism to the petroglyphs.
- d. We stayed in Murghab at the Pamir Hotel [www.pamirhotel.com]. Friendly staff, but disappointing bedrooms. Reasonable shower room. Food poor. Recommend travellers try homestays.

Dushanbe

There are signs of prosperity in Dushanbe.

- a. Traffic is heavy, but somewhat more disciplined than in the past – there are plenty of speed cameras.

- b. Much of the neo-classical Russian architecture is being knocked down and replaced by anonymous high buildings with reflective glass. There is a building boom. The enormous library is open. Rudaki Park has been extended. The highest flagpole in the world dominates the west end of the city. The Ismaili Centre is a tasteful addition to the facilities in the city.

10th October 2014