

## “Tajikistan and the High Pamirs” – Odyssey, 2008

### (INTRODUCTION TO THE PAMIRS SECTION – pp. 515-539)

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#### 1.1 THE PAMIRS (738 words)

The Pamirs, from which several of Asia’s highest mountain ranges radiate, including the Karakoram, Himalayas, Hindu Kush and Tian Shen, were known to early Persian geographers as *Bam-i-Dunya*, or ‘roof of the world’. They are the most interesting tourist destination in Tajikistan, but also the most physically (and mentally) challenging. Air connections to Khorog, capital of Gorno-Badakhshan - although regularly scheduled - are frequently irregular because planes from Dushanbe only leave if visibility is near perfect and there are enough passengers. Roads are pot-holed and dusty and the distances that need to be travelled both to get there and to enjoy the main attractions can be daunting. Accommodation and sanitation leave much to be desired for the fastidious traveller. Finally, altitude sickness – as well as stomach upsets – can unexpectedly bring down even the most hardened travellers. The ‘tourist season’ is short: the ideal time to visit is between May and October – at other times of year travel can be hampered by snow and extreme cold.

Having said this, however, the rewards far outweigh the risks and inconveniences. The unspoilt scenery is spectacular, Pamiri hospitality is legendary, the local people are unlike any other people on earth and they are more than generous in sharing their love of music and dancing, religious and secular, even with the most casual of visitors. As a virtually undiscovered tourist destination, the Pamirs offer a freshness no longer found in other locations that share similar natural advantages.

The Pamiri people are fervent Muslims and have one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world. A visit to the Pamirs, however, gives the visitor a new perception of the meaning of some common-place terms such as ‘happiness’, ‘poverty’, ‘joy’, ‘hope’, ‘faith’, ‘Islamic fundamentalism’. Tajikistan belonged to the former Soviet Union, a statue of Lenin stands in front of the government building, the main street in Khorog is still called Lenin Street and portraits of Lenin hang in many public offices. A visit to the Pamirs, where there is almost 100% literacy and good - if declining - health services, also offers a chance to get some current political and economic terminology in better perspective: ‘capitalism’, ‘communism’, ‘free enterprise’, ‘progress’, ‘development’.

For most travellers, a visit to the Pamirs is likely to be different from any previous travel experience and the rewards for the unhurried and open-minded traveller include, in addition to the above reflections and a wealth of new visual impressions:

- § tangible traces of human settlement and civilisation going back to the Bronze Age
- § an understanding of the strategic importance of this region (from the time of the Silk Road and the ‘Great Game’ to contemporary geopolitics)
- § and, perhaps, time for self-discovery.

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The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (‘province’) - abbreviation GBAO - is in the far eastern part of Tajikistan. It borders Afghanistan in the south and west, China in the east and Kyrgyzstan in the north. The southern and eastern boundaries are determined by the Pamir and Panj rivers. The Panj becomes the Amu Darya after being joined by the river Kunduz from Afghanistan, before continuing along the Uzbek border on the way to what is left of the Aral Sea - the Panj/Amu Darya was generally known until the twentieth century by its ancient name of Oxus

Gorno-Badakhshan offers:

- § the warm hospitality and vitality of its people;
- § a tolerant interpretation of Islam – with links to the Sufi tradition and marked in particular by respect for women;
- § some of the highest mountains in the world: Pik Ismoil Somoni – formerly Pik Communism – (7,495m), Pik Lenin (in 2006 renamed ‘Independence Peak’ - 7,134m), Pik Karl Marx (6,723m) and Pik Engels (6,510m) as well as the Fedchenko Glacier – the longest mountain glacier in the world (77km); from Murghab there are views of Mustagh Ata – ‘Father of Ice’ (7,546m) just across the border in China;
- § spectacular unspoilt lakes, rivers and landscapes;
- § traces of the Silk road and other archaeological sites, including over 10,000 rock paintings and petroglyphs going back more than 10,000 years, castles and fortresses going back more than 2,000 years and ancient shrines to Muslim saints, witnessing the fervour of the local religion;
- § one of the most successful development programmes ever implemented.

The archaeological wealth of the region was fairly comprehensively explored during the Soviet period, but very little of this research has been reported in Western languages. The present guidebook is the first to deal extensively with the history of the Pamirs, drawing on this work. Gorno-Badakhshan is therefore almost ‘virgin territory’ for eco-cultural tourism.

## 1.2 WHAT IS A PAMIR? (2,108 words)

Nineteenth century explorers of the Pamirs concluded that the term ‘Pamir’ was used in Central Asia to describe any high mountain area of valleys and plateaux. Francis Younghusband, one of the most intrepid Great Game players, whom we shall meet later, noted that the Kanjutis of Hunza used the term for “a nearly level plain or very shallow and wide trough between high mountains on either side.” He also gave a useful and succinct explanation of their geological origin:

The other Pamirs which we visited differed but very slightly, so that a detailed description of this one [the Little Pamir] will suffice. We have, then, a level plain bounded by ranges of mountains of varying height on either side; and perhaps the best idea of what this is like will be gathered from an account of how it is formed. We must therefore look back some hundreds of thousands of years, to the time when these mountains were first upheaved. Whether that upheaval was sudden, ... or gradual, ..., there would in either case be clefts and hollows between the unevenness which formed the various ranges of the mountain chain. Snow would fall in the upper parts, collect in masses in the hollows, and gradually form into glaciers. Then these glaciers, each with its burden of *débris* of rocks and stone from the mountain-sides, would come creeping down and gradually fill up the bottoms of the valleys parting the various ranges. In former times, in these Pamirs, glaciers descended much lower than they do now, and in all parts of them the moraines of old glaciers may be seen down in the valley bottoms to which no glaciers now descend. All these Pamirs were therefore in former times filled with vast glaciers, and as the ice of them melted away the stony detritus remained and formed the plains which are seen to this present day. If the rainfall were more abundant, this detritus would of course be washed out by the river flowing through the valley; but in these lofty regions, where the very lowest part of the valleys is over twelve thousand feet above sea-level, the rivers are frozen for the greater part of the year, they are unable to do the work that is required of them, and the valleys remain choked up with the old glacier-borne *débris* of bygone ages. Lower down, however, in the states of Wakhan, Shighnan and Roshan, where the rivers have reached a level low enough to remain unfrozen for a time sufficiently long to carry out their duties properly, the valleys have been cleared out, the Pamir country has disappeared, and in place of the broad flat valley bottom, we see deep-cut gorges and narrow defiles.<sup>1</sup>

Ralph Cobbold, who, in 1898, was one of the first Europeans in the Western Pamirs, defined a ‘Pamir’ as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Younghusband, *The Heart of a Continent – a narrative of travels in Manchuria, across the Gobi desert, through the Himalayas, the Pamirs and Hunza 1884-1894*, London 1904, p. 231 and pp. 259-260.

The main characteristics of a Pamir are the bordering presence of snow-crowned mountain peaks, a valley of varying width in parts consisting of sandstone-covered wastes, in others covered with stunted grass broken with swampy patches, the whole intersected by waterways, which in places unite and expand into lakes of considerable size. A Pamir is, in plain fact, a mountain valley of glacial formation, differing from ordinary mountain valleys only by reason of its superior altitude and the degree to which it has been filled up with alluvium, until it has obtained almost the appearance of a plain. The leading visible features of the Pamirs are the scarcity of trees, the abundance of pasturage and the severity of the climate.<sup>2</sup>

St. George Littledale, who travelled with his wife (the first non-indigenous woman to cross the Pamirs) in 1892, noted that the combination of high valleys of glacial formation and wide plateau areas is specific to the Pamirs, and has no real counterpart in other high mountain regions such as Tibet.<sup>3</sup>

Willi Rickmer-Rickmers, the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century German explorer of the Pamirs, linked the distinctive nature of the Pamirs to their glacial formation.

The glaciers of the Pamirs have certain distinctive features. We owe to the climate the wonderful preservation of those elementary geomorphological shapes and signs of glaciation which, in the Alps, are scoured by the rain and overgrown with vegetation. In the Pamirs, rivers have sawn sharp-edged canyons into sediments without carrying away the walls. There are many instances of rocky projections from the valley flanks, cut through because they were embedded in sediment like microtomic specimens embedded in paraffin. The remnants of valley floors attached to the mountain side make platforms dotted with tarns. Bluffs and terraces abound, and the traveller finds himself in a veritable geological museum. No self-respecting glacier is without its black tail of ice moraine, or dead ice—half rock and half ice. Anything between a mile or 10 miles up stream, this ice moraine abuts on to the end of the white, or live glacier; comparatively sudden starvation has forced the glacier to sacrifice part of its living body. It is, however, possible that the connection has not been severed entirely, so that the upper end of the ice moraine still receives a modicum of supply, and therefore does not melt as fast as the lower end. This ice moraine owes its preservation to the mantle of rubbish that partly shelters it from the sun, partly offers openings through which hot air gnaws at its vitals. The nearer its end, the more the ice moraine presents a welter of hummocks, ridges, chasms and deep funnels with a lake at the bottom.

The most likely explanation of this formation is the very fast retreat of the glacier, processes in the Pamirs being subject to what may be termed the law of extremes— which is the law of the desert. The Pamirs occupy a place in the line of transformations between desert and luxuriant jungle. They are sensitive and react quickly, whereas the Alpine glaciers are sluggish, and their tongues have longer in which to melt. Without the glaciers on the Roof of the World, there would not have been empires in Turkestan. By the way, I do not like the new fashion of calling the Himalaya ‘the Roof of the World’; the Pamirs can justly claim priority to this legendary and poetical title.<sup>4</sup>

The etymology and precise meaning of the name ‘Pamir’ are problematic. The name is encountered for the first time in Xuanzang’s account of his travels as “the valley of Po-mi-lo” (see Chapter 2)<sup>5</sup> which corresponds to no known expression in modern Chinese and must have been Xuanzang’s attempt to transliterate the name then used by the local inhabitants. This designation was confirmed six hundred years later by Marco Polo, who recorded the name as ‘Pamier’.

There are many theories of its etymology<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph P. Cobbold, *Innermost Asia*, William Heinemann, London 1900, pp. 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> 1911 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, entry ‘Pamirs’.

<sup>4</sup> “The Pamir Glaciers,” *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 131, No. 2 (Jun., 1965), p. 219.

<sup>5</sup> *Ta-T’ang-Si-Yu-Ki*: translated by Samuel Beal in *Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London: Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1884), p. 291. (Reprint by Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 2004.) Part also available on the Silk Road Seattle website: <http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/texts/xuanzang.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Shokhumurov Abusaïd, *Pamir - the land of Aryans*, Dushanbe 1997, pp. 31-32; B.I. Iskandarov, *История Памира (History of the Pamirs)* Khorog 1996, p. 11; George Nathaniel Curzon, “The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus”, in *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1896, pp. 29-30; and *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society (PRGS)* Vol 14, No. 1, 1892, p.34.

Sanskrit:

‘upa’-’mery’ – the country behind the bank of the river;

‘upa’-’meru’ – the country above Mount Meru (legendary holy mountain of Hindu mythology, abode of the gods and centre of the universe)

Old Persian:

‘poye’-’mehr’ – the land at the foot of the sun;

‘pa-i-mikhr’ – pedestal of Mitra, the sun god;

‘bom’-’ir’ – land of the Aryans;

‘pai’-’mir’ – foot of the mountain peaks;

‘pa-e-Mir’ – foot of the Mir (Hazrat Ali)

‘fan’-’mir’ or (‘famir’) – the lake country of the *Fani*, who according to Strabo founded Balkh – here ‘mir’ is etymologically identical with Indo-European words for sea or lake, as in the name ‘Kashmir’ and modern German ‘Meer’.

Turkic:

a desert; or

a plateau

Most of what is today known as ‘The Pamirs’ is located in Gorno-Badakhshan in the Republic of Tajikistan. Cobbold defined eight different ‘Pamirs’:

1. Taghdumbash Pamir, situated immediately to the north of the Kilik pass. This stretches from the upper Wakhan to the Chinese town of Tashkurgan on the north-east.
2. Great Pamir, comprising Zorkul (Wood’s Lake) and a number of smaller lakes.
3. Little Pamir, with Lake Chakmak as far as Aktash (Shaimak).
4. Alichur Pamir, which stretches to the borders of Shughnan, and contains Yashilkul and Sasikul.
5. Sarez Pamir, which includes part of the upper Murghab river and the town of Murghab.
6. Khargosh Pamir, including Karakul.
7. Rangkul Pamir, in the area of the lake of that name, in today’s Murghab district.
8. Pamir-i-Wakhan, the smallest, comprising the extreme upper reaches of the Panj.

Some would add a) the ‘Sarikol Pamir’, the mountainous area north of the Taghdumbash Pamir, south of the Rangkul Pamir and east of the Little Pamir and b) the ‘Tagharma Pamir’<sup>7</sup> to the north of it and to the west of the peaks Mustagh Ata and Kongur. Today, moreover, ‘Western Pamirs’ is used conveniently to describe those regions east of the Panj and adjacent to the other Pamirs (in the districts of Ishkashim, Shughnan, Rushan, Roshtkala, Vanch and Darwaz), together with the eastern mountainous part of what is today Badakhshan in Afghanistan and belonged to the historical territories of Wakhan, Shughnan, Rushan and Darwaz.

The local Tajiks, together with the Russians, French and Germans, however, use Pamir in the singular to describe the whole area. Colonel B.L. Grombchevsky, one of the first Russian explorers in the Pamirs, explained with typical Russian pragmatism that “I term the whole of the table-land ‘Pamir’, in view of the resemblance of the valleys to each other.”<sup>8</sup> Willi Rickmer-Rickmers commented with some humour in 1929:

The term Alai-Pamirs covers the mountainous regions between the Amu Darya, the Sir Darya and the Chinese border. Hence it applies to the Pamir block and its westerly fringes. In accordance with

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<sup>7</sup> Younghusband, p. 241

<sup>8</sup> *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, quoted by Dr. G.W. Leitner in *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society (PRGS)* Vol 14, No. 1, 1892, p.34.

political frontiers one might also speak of the Russian Pamirs. Besides having acquired a definite morphological meaning (a pamir = a valley of the Pamir type), the Pamir has become very elastic in a topographical sense, not to speak of the plural which appears to be of English origin. Khargush Pamir, Alichur Pamir are divisions of the whole (that part of the Pamir called Hare Pamir) like West London or South London. The Londons would therefore correspond to the Pamirs. We observe a transition from place-name to general term. It reminds me of a Russian peasant who once asked me: "Is your Volga as big as ours?"<sup>9</sup>

As in the case of 'Pamir', the name 'Badakhshan' occurs first in the narrative of the travels of the Chinese Buddhist traveller Xuanzang in about 630 CE<sup>10</sup>, as the kingdom of *Po-to-chang-na*, located by him in the Upper Oxus; it is also mentioned in the 'Book of Kings' by the Persian poet Firdowsi (*Shahnameh*, i, 24) composed in the tenth century. Much earlier, however, Greek and Roman historians and geographers wrote about the lands beyond the Oxus (Amudaria) and Jaxartes (Syr Daria) and the people who inhabited them; their maps record contemporary 'knowledge' of the Pamirs. The southern extensions of the 'Silk Road' passed through the Pamirs and, from the second century BCE to the seventh century CE, traders and Buddhist pilgrims brought back accounts of the lands near the western frontiers of China. Following the Arab conquest of Bactria in the eighth century CE, Arab travellers and geographers also contributed records of the region.

Badakhshan was famous in antiquity for its rubies and *lapis lazuli* and was the only known source of the latter. The 'balas' ruby (in gemmology, a spinel) takes its name from 'Balasian', the medieval name of Badakhshan. Probably the most famous spinels are the 170-carat 'Black Prince's ruby' worn by Henry V on his battle helmet and now in the Imperial State Crown of Great Britain, and the 352-carat 'Timur Ruby', part of the UK Royal Collection, on the face of which are engraved the names of some of the Mughal emperors who previously owned it. The account of Marco Polo's travels in the 13<sup>th</sup> century mentions ruby mining in Shughnan and the *Lale Badakhshan*, as it is known in Shugni and Tajik, is still mined today in the Pamirs.

No sapphire in Inde, no Rubie rich of price,  
There lacked than, nor Emeraud so grene,  
Balès, Turkès, ne thing to my device.  
(Chaucer, *Court of Love*.)

L'altra letizia, che m'era già nota  
per cara cosa, mi si fece in vista  
qual fin balasso in che lo sol percuota.  
(The other joy, a precious thing  
that I had seen, now seemed to me  
like a fine balas ruby, lit by the sun.)  
(Dante, *Paradiso*, ix. 67)

Mentions of 'sapphire' in ancient texts in all probability refer to *lapis lazuli*: Pliny refers to 'sapphirus' as "a stone sprinkled with specks of gold" and the Book of Job refers to sapphires that contain "dust of gold" (xxviii, 6). Wherever *lapis* is found in antiquity, therefore, there is *prima facie* evidence of trade with Badakhshan. Egyptian records, for example, show that lapis lazuli was being imported in the late predynastic period (fourth millennium BCE) and much lapis lazuli was found in the Sumerian tombs at Ur (Mesopotamia) and the royal palace in ancient Ebla (Syria), which date to the third millennium BCE. The most famous ancient object incorporating lapis is probably the funeral mask of Tutenkhamun (second millennium BCE). Written records of the Pamir region are not, however, found until much later.

<sup>9</sup> "The Alai-Pamirs in 1913 And 1928", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol LXXIV No 3, September 1929.

<sup>10</sup> *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, p. 297.

## 2.1 TRAVEL TO GORNO-BADAKHSHAN (2,288 words)

There are two main ways of getting to Gorno-Badakhshan and the Pamirs: through Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, and through Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. There are now bridges at Khorog, Ruzvay (Darwaz district) and Ishkashim giving access from Afghan Badakhshan, but it is prudent to verify with the Tajik and Afghan consulates whether this mode of access is available before starting out in this direction.

### 1) *via Dushanbe*

Once in Dushanbe, unless they have been able to obtain a mention of Gorno-Badakhshan on their visa, travellers must obtain a special permit authorising them to travel there. (See the section on Permits for help in obtaining this.)

From Dushanbe, travel to Gorno-Badakhshan is either by air to Khorog or by road. Subject to the provisos listed below, there are one or more flights every day to and from Khorog. Although the flight from Dushanbe to Khorog is obviously less physically tiring, it is worth considering the road journey: it offers splendid scenery and will give you a better idea of the isolation of Gorno-Badakhshan. The road journey can, of course, be continued along the Pamir Highway to Osh.

### *By air*

Flights to Khorog are in a small plane that must cross a high mountain range (the 'Rushan gate') before swooping down to follow the narrow Panj valley to Khorog - sometimes, it seems, almost within touching distance of the valley walls.



The 'Rushan gate'

Outward flights only leave Dushanbe if there is no cloud cover on the mountains on the way into Khorog and if Tajik Air determines that there are sufficient passengers to make the flight economical. All flights originate in Dushanbe, which means that there is only a flight Khorog-Dushanbe if the flight Dushanbe-Khorog has taken place. In the absence of flights, arrangements must be made for travel by private car or bus.

### ***By road***

The alternative to the flight is one of the two road routes from Dushanbe into the Pamirs, both in very bad repair for most of the distance.

- a) through Kulob, to the southeast of Dushanbe and then from Shurabad along the river Panj to Zigar (the first village in Darwaz district) and Kala-i-Khum (Kulob route); or
- b) along the valley of the Surkhob to the east as far as the junction with the Khingob (Obikhingou) river and then along the course of the Khingob as far as the bridge at Dasht-i-Sher (the territory of Gorno-Badakhshan lies on the other side of the river); then from Kala-i-Husein across the Khaburabot pass to Kala-i-Khum (Saghirdasht-Tavildara route).

Dushanbe-Khorog by both routes takes some 16 hours in a modern 4x4, considerably more in a minibus (called locally 'marshroutka'). A seat in a Russian jeep for the 530 km from Dushanbe to Khorog will cost at least 150 Somoni (USD 44) – and probably slightly more in winter, when you should allow 2 days), though if you are a group it may be better and more comfortable to hire the whole vehicle for about USD 300. A ticket in an overcrowded minibus ('marshroutka') will cost at least 80 to 100 Somoni (USD 23-29), and probably more than USD 250 for the hire of the whole vehicle (about ten seats). Cars, jeeps and minibuses depart Dushanbe early in the morning from Avtobaza 2929, Ahmadi Donish Street, just before the airport - you would be advised to organise this the day before you wish to travel.

*Kulob route:* The route through Kulob is open throughout the year, except when some of the northern tributaries of the Panj are in flood and cannot be forded – this can happen occasionally if there has been a heavy snow fall in winter and a sudden and sustained rise in temperature in April or May. At these times of year, it is therefore advisable to try to get up-to-date information on the state of the road before leaving.

From its junction with the Panj, this road follows the river all the way to Khorog. While for most of the distance it clings to the rock face of the cliff, sometimes with only the width of a single vehicle and at some height above the river, there is an unreal stretch of nearly 40km of perfectly paved two-lane highway between Zigar and Shkev, with curb stones and insets for bus stops. This 'mirage' does not last long, however, and any talk of a highway from Dushanbe to Xinjiang in China is premature.

*Saghirdasht-Tavildara route:* The second route travels east from Dushanbe through Kofernihon and follows the Surkhob river and, from the entrance to the Rasht valley (also known as Karategin or Garm), the Khingob (N.B. 'ob' is Tajik for 'water' or 'river'). It then crosses the Khingob into Gorno-Badakhshan at Dasht-i-Sher and goes over the Khaburobot pass (also called Saghirdasht) – closed approximately December to April – to the Panj at Kala-i-khum – offering superb views en route – where it joins the Kulob route described above.



View near Kala-i-Husein

The section of the Kulob route along the Panj (from Shurabad and then from Kala-i-Khum) offers magnificent views of the villages and mountains on the Afghan side.



Although life on the Afghan side has improved somewhat over the past ten years as a result of the work of international development agencies - especially the Aga Khan Development Network - there is somehow a feeling of timewarp between the Soviet-funded infrastructure on the Tajik side - asphalt roads and power and telephone lines, albeit rapidly deteriorating - and the total lack of infrastructure on the Afghan side.

## **2) via Osh in Kyrgyzstan**

Osh, the second largest city in Kyrgyzstan, is situated in the south of the country. A paved road runs south from Osh to the Kyrgyz checkpoint at Bordoba, south of the last Kyrgyz settlement Sary Tash, (about 200km, 4 hours by private vehicle). From there a partially paved road leads across the Pamir plateau to Khorog (530km, 12 hours – several passes at altitudes higher than 4,000m). The various checkpoints may not allow travellers to pass unless their Tajik visas mention specifically the destination of Gorno-Badakhshan or they are in possession of the special GBAO permit listing their intended destinations.

There is no public transport available between Osh and Khorog. Travellers must try to make their own arrangements either with private vehicles or with one of the trucking companies operating out of Osh.

With the exception of a small settlement at lake Karakul, the road from Osh in Kyrgyzstan is uninhabited between the last Kyrgyz town of Sary Tash and Murghab (230km, altitude 3,640m). A good way to break the journey is by short side trip west from Sary Tash to the village of Sary Mogol where, if the weather is clear, you will have breathtaking views of Pik Lenin and the snow-covered Transalai range. For about fifty years, this village was a Tajik enclave inhabited by people originally from Murghab, and the land was leased from Kyrgyzstan for the purpose of growing fodder for cattle in Murghab; they have recently been given Kyrgyz nationality but retain their Tajik traditions of hospitality. The excellent Kyrgyz Community Based Tourism Association (CBT, 58 Gorkiy St., 720031 Bishkek, tel. +996 312 44 33 31, mobile +996 502 570 67, e-mail [reservation@cbtkyrgyzstan.kg](mailto:reservation@cbtkyrgyzstan.kg)) has a homestay in Sary Mogol – otherwise contact the village chairman, Kutmakam Kenjebaev.

On the way to Murghab, the Pamir Highway from Sary Tash lies close to the no-mans-land between Tajikistan and China (it follows about 200km of boundary fence) and goes over some very high passes, of which the highest is Akbaital at 4,655m: if you have no problems at Akbaital, you will probably not suffer from altitude sickness in the Pamirs. On the other hand, if you do, then the first thing to do is to reduce all physical activity to a minimum and increase blood sugar by eating dried apricots, glucose tablets or sugar - aspirin also helps relieve the accompanying headache.

There is much to see in Murghab district (see section What-to-see below) and simple accommodation – including yurts – is available through the Murghab Ecotourism Association META ([meta@acted.org](mailto:meta@acted.org) – tel. +992 3554 21 453). META is located in a large yurt-like building on the Pamir Highway on the outskirts of Murghab, in the direction of Osh.

The Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP) has a guesthouse in Murghab town and there is also a privately run guesthouse, where travellers are assured of a warm welcome and there is plenty of room: on arrival in Murghab, ask for Suhrob Garibmamadov.

At the start or end of your trip along the Pamir Highway, you will find several hotels and bed-and-breakfast places in Osh: one of the best is the Guest House of Zhukov, 40 Frunze Street (actually at the back of Alymbekova St.), 714018 Osh, Kyrgyz Republic; e-mail [ladaosh@mail.ru](mailto:ladaosh@mail.ru), tel. +996 3222 2 75 76, mobile+996 503 24 73 54. The owner, Lada Khasanova, also offers tours of Osh and the surrounding area.

## **TRAVEL IN GORNO-BADAKHSHAN**

From Khorog, there are now cheap minibus ('marshroutka') services along the main valleys - down the Panj as far as the district centres of Rushan, Vanch and Kalaikhum, and upstream to Langar, the furthest Tajik village in the Wakhan in Ishkashim district. Bus services also operate to Djelondy, the furthest village on the Ghunt in Shughnan district, and Sezhd, three-quarters of the way up the Shokhdara valley (Roshtkala district). For an additional fee, bus drivers may be willing to take you further up the valley than their normal final destination. Minibuses leave from the bus station near the Khorog bazaar on the main road on the way to the airport. It is advisable to check early in the morning when buses are expected to leave: you may have to wait some time, since the bus will not leave until the driver thinks he has enough passengers, but by getting there early you will at least get a window seat.

To travel up the Bartang (Rushan district) and Vanch valleys and through Murghab district you will need to hire a car or jeep in the bazaar in Khorog (or other district centre). There is also an increasing amount of private traffic (cars and trucks) along all the main roads in

GBAO, and you will have very little trouble in getting a vehicle to stop for you, at least when one finally comes along. Travel in the back of a 20-year old Russian truck is slow, cold and uncomfortable, but – for the true adventurer – infinitely superior to the confines of a bus or comfort of a Toyota Landcruiser.

The Aga Khan Foundation and its local NGO the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP) has just set up a Pamirs Eco-Cultural Tourism Association (PECTA) that is the central point for marketing and information on local tourist service providers (travel agencies, homestays, drivers, guides etc.). During the course of the next few years PECTA will be establishing quality criteria and training programmes for the improvement of these services. Up to date information on the PECTA list of local service providers can be found on [www.pamirs.org](http://www.pamirs.org) (section 'Help for Tourists') or directly from PECTA.

Contacts:

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73600 Khorog Central Park  
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Tel. +992 91 926 2965 – e-mail [info@pamirspecta.com](mailto:info@pamirspecta.com)

## WHERE TO STAY

At the time of writing there were only a few hotels of acceptable standard in GBAO: the *Serena* in Tem, just outside Khorog, run by the Aga Khan Development Network; the *Parinen* in Khorog, 69/50 Lenin Street (in the centre of town, near the bus station and main market); the *Pamir Lodge*, at Kuchai Gagarin 46, UPD Microrayon; and the Bizmitch Hotel, Karamshoeva Street 17/4, Khorog. This situation is rapidly changing, however, and a number of new bed-and-breakfast places are being opened. Again, up-to-date information can be obtained from PECTA or the website [www.pamirs.org](http://www.pamirs.org).

The *Serena* offers the high quality associated with the *Serena* group (see [http://www.akdn.org/agency/akfed\\_8b.html](http://www.akdn.org/agency/akfed_8b.html)) and is recommended for those seeking the best comfort available in the Pamirs. The 2008 basic room rate for tourists is USD 80 for a single and USD 100 for a double room - including breakfast, but not tax - with substantial discounts for groups of three or more and for stays longer than a week. The *Serena* also offers four-bed tent accommodation for USD 120, including breakfast. Reservations can be made at the following address:

*Serena Inn*,  
Tem (Khorog)  
Tel (local line): +992 35222 3228  
Satellite Tel/Fax : +882 1689 802184  
Mobile : +992 93 511 4474  
e-mail: [khorogserenainn@akdn.org](mailto:khorogserenainn@akdn.org).

At the *Parinen*, 2007 room rates were USD 35 for a single and USD 50 for a double room. Reservations can be made by e-mail: [parinen\\_hotel@mail.ru](mailto:parinen_hotel@mail.ru) ; or by phone: +992 35222 5499. The *Pamir Lodge* is a bed and breakfast, run by a married couple who know western tastes well; he is from the UK and she is from Khorog. Reservations can be made by phone +992 35222 6545, mobile + 992 93 592 1004 - e-mail [pamirlodge@hotmail.com](mailto:pamirlodge@hotmail.com). Their website is <http://www.geocities.com/pamirlodge/>. 2007 room rates at the *Bizmitch* were USD 25 for a

single and USD 50 for a double including breakfast (tel. +992 35222 6492 or mobile + 992 93 581 4696 - e-mail [bizmich.gh@mail.ru](mailto:bizmich.gh@mail.ru)).

Subject to availability, the Pamirs Eco-Cultural Tourism Association (see above) can arrange reservations in Khorog hotels and some homestays. As already noted, the Murghab Ecotourism Association has a similar programme in Murghab district.

The adventurous traveller will find that there is a welcome for foreigners in every village in Gorno-Badakhshan and accommodation will certainly be found at short notice. Please, however, do not abuse this simple traditional hospitality and insist on leaving some money with your hosts – \$5-10 per night would be appropriate in rural areas, adding \$3-4 for each meal taken.

## TOUR OPERATORS

There are not many tour operators offering packages to and in the Pamirs and the offer is not constant. It is best to search the Internet when planning your trip to see what is on offer: for general information begin with the search terms Tajikistan and tours – refine your search with one or more specific locations, e.g. Pamir, Somoni, Pik Lenin, Sarez, Bartang, Zorkul. For tour operators located in the Pamirs, contact the Pamirs Eco-Cultural Tourism Association (contact details above).

Three Swiss agencies, *Horizons Nouveaux* in Verbier, *Globotrek* in Bern and *Indo Orient Tours* in Zurich have organised tours to the Pamirs in recent years. See <http://www.horizonsnouveaux.com>, <http://www.globotrek.ch> and <http://www.indoorient.ch>. Two other agencies – *Oriensce Voyages* in France and *Nomad Reisen* in Germany – added the Pamirs to their 2007 programmes: see <http://www.oriensce.fr> and <http://www.nomad-reisen.de>.

For trekking, contact Surat Toimastov in Dushanbe: e-mail [pamirad@tjinter.com](mailto:pamirad@tjinter.com) or [info@pamir-adventure.com](mailto:info@pamir-adventure.com); tel (00 992 372) 23 54 24, mobile (00 992) 95 151 7567 (See also his website <http://www.pamir-adventure.com>). – see section on Trekking.

If you are a hunter, or want to see Marco Polo sheep - or just want to visit one of the most remote corners of the Pamirs and stay in a hunting camp with a hot spring (Jarty Gumbez in the Great Pamir), get in touch with

Atobek Bekmurodov  
Murghab +992 355421 333  
Khorog +992 35222 2982  
Dushanbe +992 37 223 34 00  
Moscow +7495 362 0830 / +7495 361 4284  
E-mail: [murgabhunt@mail.ru](mailto:murgabhunt@mail.ru).

or

Tolibek Gulbekov, 66 Lenin Street, Murghab Tel: +992 355421 639  
Also in Dushanbe: Dekhoti Street 21/3, Apartment 33  
Tel: +992 37 234 0620

## OTHER SERVICES

New tourist services in the Pamirs are developing rapidly. At the time of writing, mountain bikes are available for rent in Murghab for USD 6 per day from Marbet and Kanibek Saparov, 62 'Seventy years street' ('Ulitsa Semdesyat let'), above the market. META also organises rafting.



Istyk river at Jarty Gumbez



Yurt and interior in Murghab

### 2.2 PRACTICAL TRAVEL ADVICE (1,574 words)

**Vaccinations:** There are no compulsory vaccinations required for entry to Tajikistan.

**Malaria:** Malaria prophylactics are recommended by the UN and the WHO website states: 'Malaria risk—predominantly due to *P. vivax*—exists from June through October, particularly in southern border areas (Khatlon Region), and in some central (Dushanbe), western (Gorno-Badakhshan), and northern (Leninabad Region) areas. Chloroquine and sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine resistant *P. falciparum* reported in the southern part of the country. Recommended prevention in risk areas: III.'

This text has been included *in toto* from the WHO website. However, the inclusion of Gorno-Badakhshan in this list at recommended prevention level III is very surprising since malaria is almost unheard of in the Pamirs, apart from a few cases in the 1990s that were almost certainly the result of infection in other areas of Tajikistan. Moreover, Gorno-Badakhshan is definitely not a 'western' area!

**Altitude sickness:** Travellers in Gorno-Badakhshan may have trouble with altitude sickness, which can be totally debilitating. Consult your doctor for advice and medication. N.B. The Mirza, one of the British 'pundits', who travelled on foot in the Pamirs in 1869, recommended eating a little dried fruit and sugar. I can confirm this from personal experience: an aspirin is helpful too, combined with plentiful tea or water. Local drivers on the Pamir Highway also eat 'kurut', a hard ball of cheese that can be found in most Central Asian markets. The only effective remedy is to descend as soon as possible to a lower altitude.

**Stomach upsets:** Beware also of stomach upsets and diarrhoea - take appropriate medication with you. Be prepared also for food heavy in fat.

**Sanitary conditions:** Sanitary conditions are basic. Be prepared – especially if staying in private homes in villages – for:

- the absence of hot and running water
- primitive (squat) pit toilets.

**Health facilities:** During the Soviet period, Gorno-Badakhshan had an extensive system of hospitals and medical centres. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an immediate decline in health services and the availability of medicines. A number of development agencies (Aga Khan Foundation, Médecins Sans Frontières, Pharmaciens sans Frontières, International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent and others) began funding projects to arrest this decline. There are now basic facilities and trained personnel in all districts of GBAO; the Aga Khan Health Services have rehabilitated the Oblast Hospital in Khorog, and provided some basic equipment and training for staff; the Rotkreuzspital Lindenhof in Bern, Switzerland has also provided equipment and training.

There are other hospitals in various stages of rehabilitation in Kalaikhum, Vanch, Vomar (Rushan), Roshtkala, Ishkashim and Murghab. If you need special medicines, take them with you: they may not be available locally. Be aware that medical emergency evacuation will be dependent on the availability of flights from Khorog (see Travel section); the distances between the districts and Khorog must also be borne in mind when assessing risk.

**Clothing:** Almost all locations in Gorno-Badakhshan are above 2,000 metres (in Murghab above 3,500 metres); take appropriate dress for high mountain climate - warm during the day in summer and autumn but cool in the evenings (early/late summer and autumn); from late October to early April it can be extremely cold. MSDSP guest houses are adequately equipped with blankets, as are the private homes recommended by MSDSP. Nevertheless, sleeping bags, while not essential, can be useful during this period.

**Useful items:** Most personal toiletry items can now be found in markets in Gorno-Badakhshan, but may be of inferior quality. The following is a non-exhaustive list of items that may be useful (for trekking equipment, see Trekking section):

- § Personal soap/Shampoo.
- § Toilet paper.
- § Personal medicines, especially against diarrhoea (and altitude sickness and car sickness if you are susceptible to either – most of the passes on the road Osh-Khorog are above 4,000m and much of the rest of the terrain between Osh and Khorog is high plateau above 3,000m).
- § High protection sunscreen in summer (especially for arms when riding in the front of a jeep).
- § Sunglasses.
- § Sun hat.
- § US dollars (NB not earlier than 1990 issues – for the \$100 bill preference is given to the 1996 series with enlarged portrait of Benjamin Franklin) – adequate number of small bills. N.B. You may have difficulty in using credit cards and travellers' cheques in Central Asia, although they will be accepted in the main hotels in Dushanbe, Almaty, Bishkek and Tashkent. Almost all transactions in the Pamirs will be in cash.
- § Torch/Flashlight.

- § Gifts (for hospitality in private homes – soap, tea and children’s toys are always welcome – for gifts from women to women, cosmetics or tights; chocolate is also popular but will melt in your luggage in the hot summer months).
- § Camera / video camera and adequate supply of film and spare batteries – you will be surprised how many pictures you will take, almost everyone runs out of film. If you use a digital camera, remember that there are some places in the Pamirs where there is only limited electricity, and even in others there are occasional power cuts – take at least one extra battery pack and remember to recharge whenever you can.
- § Strong shoes (warm boots in autumn, winter and spring).
- § Warm clothes for visit and/or overnight in Murghab (all seasons).
- § Plastic bottle for water / water purification tablets.
- § Adaptor (or voltage reducer) for electrical appliances (European two-pin – 220v).

### **Do’s and Dont’s**

#### *Responsible Tourism:*

Bear in mind at all times that you are privileged to be experiencing an exceptionally pristine natural environment with a population largely untouched by the negative aspects of the Western development model. Respect the purity of both. The archaeological sites you will see today are unprotected: help preserve them for future generations.

#### *Hospitality:*

- § always bear in mind that the Pamiri people are among the poorest in the world; they will, however, share their last crust with you and go into debt to offer hospitality. Be sure to bring gifts and pay for accommodation and meals even if your hosts do not ask for money;
- § alcohol may be offered – it is expensive and you should only accept if it is clear that your hosts want to drink; you should only drink vodka during a toast.

#### *Manners:*

- § never blow your nose in public;
- § take your shoes off when entering a house, apartment or yurt;
- § avoid displaying the soles of your feet or shoes;
- § when seated on the floor, never cross the tablecloth – always go round it;
- § water will be normally be offered to wash your hands before the meal – always use it;
- § don’t put your feet on the tablecloth – if necessary tuck them under it;
- § even if food is unappetising, take at least a symbolic bite;
- § in Murghab you may be offered a sheep’s head – it is acceptable to cut a small piece of the ear and eat it, and then pass the head to the most important local guest present; if you can bring yourself to eat an eye, you will gain the respect of your hosts;
- § in a traditional Pamiri house, the place next to the pillar closest to the entrance of the living area is reserved for the *Khalifa* (community religious leader) – if you are asked to sit there, leave a little space next to you for the *Khalifa*, even if he is not expected;
- § a prayer will normally be spoken at the end of a meal, sometimes only a perfunctory ‘Allah Akbar’ (God is great) – during the prayer, cup your hands in front of you – when it is finished draw your hands downward over your chin as if you were stroking a beard
- § greeting a man can be done by handshake, while placing your left hand on your heart and bowing slightly; if a handshake is not appropriate (e.g. for a younger single woman), place your right hand on your heart and bow slightly;

- § show respect to an old person by taking his/her hand in both of yours; as a sign of special respect you may also raise his/her hand to your lips, while bowing slightly;
- § whether or not alcohol is served, you will be expected to propose a toast at some point after your host and any VIPs have proposed theirs; at larger gatherings there may be a 'master of ceremonies' ('Tamadan') who will ask you for a toast when it is your turn.

*Bread:*

- § there is a saying in Tajik 'Bread is life': never throw away a piece of bread or give it to a animal;
- § bread should always be broken, never cut and the pieces should never be placed on the table upside down.

*Tea ritual:*

- § before serving tea it is first poured into a cup and poured back into the pot three times (this is called 'marrying the tea');
- § the cup will be passed to you with the right hand while your host's left hand will be placed on his heart; take the cup and repeat this gesture while looking him in the eyes;
- § the teacup is never filled to the brim, and is normally served only half full;
- § in rural villages you may be offered *shirchai* – milk tea with salt.

*Music and dance:*

- § as a courtesy to your hosts, you will certainly be expected to dance and your prowess (and bravado) will be much appreciated and loudly applauded;
- § never refuse an invitation to dance offered by a woman – if you are embarrassed, take a few symbolic steps and thank your partner before sitting down again;
- § Pamiri dancing is highly rhythmic but there is no physical contact between dancers, although eye contact is essential; it is perfectly acceptable for people of the same sex to dance together.