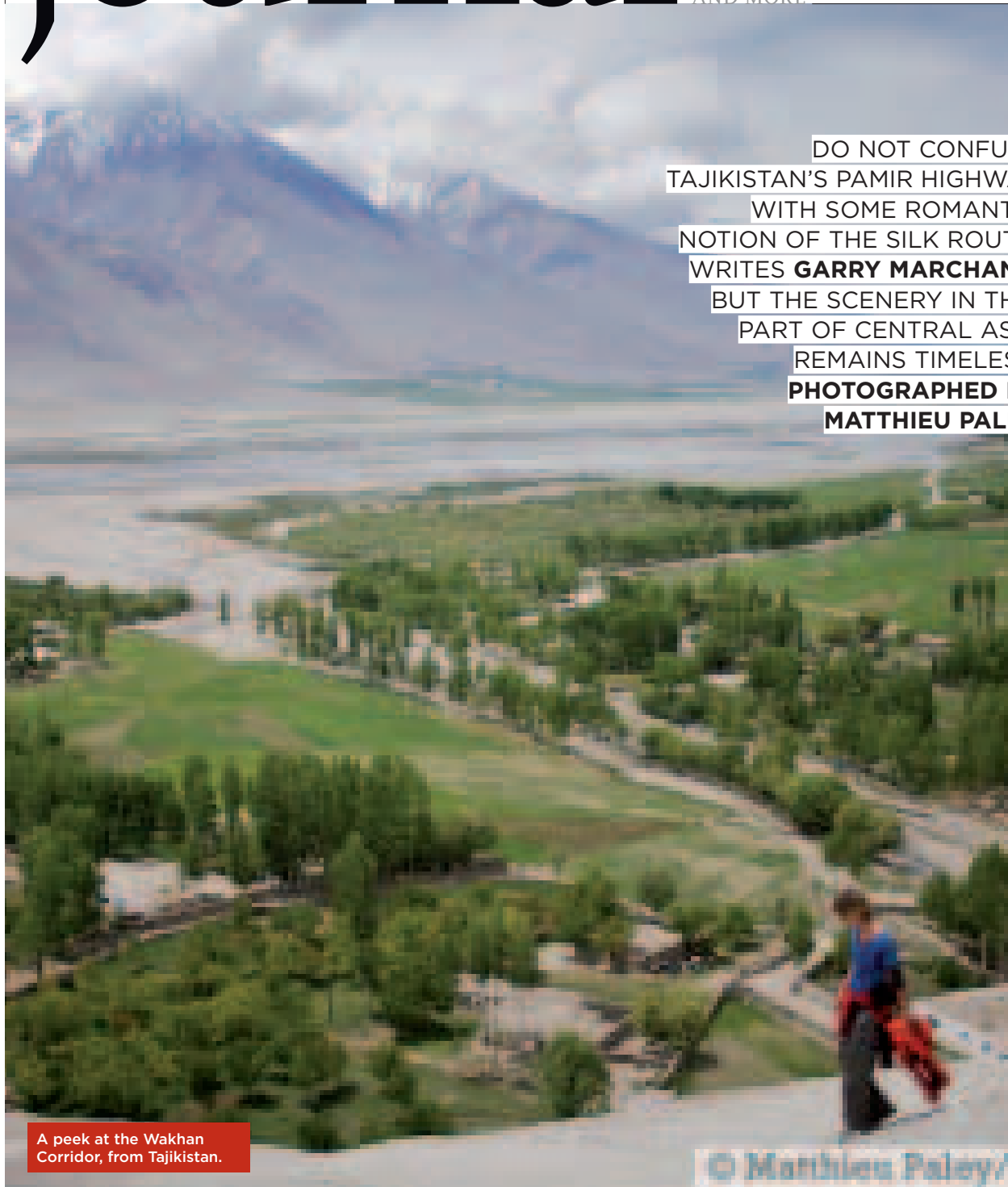


journal

TRAVEL TOPICS
IN DEPTH,
VIVID VISUALS
AND MORE

DO NOT CONFUSE
TAJIKISTAN'S PAMIR HIGHWAY
WITH SOME ROMANTIC
NOTION OF THE SILK ROUTE,
WRITES **GARRY MARCHANT**,
BUT THE SCENERY IN THIS
PART OF CENTRAL ASIA
REMAINS TIMELESS.
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
MATTHIEU PALEY



A peek at the Wakhan
Corridor, from Tajikistan.

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HIGH AND OUTSIDE



THE NEWS, WHEN IT COMES, IS MOST welcome. We can't take the helicopter as planned, because the tight passage between Tajikistan's 6,000-meter peaks prevents flights in anything but cloudless skies. Instead, we will drive the arduous 523 kilometers to Khorog, capital of the country's Gorno-Badakhshan region. Some in our group groan. I'm delighted. We'll head overland through some of the world's most remote and dramatic countryside. The return journey we'll likely be able to make by helicopter, but today is our chance to follow some of the Silk Route, where Marco Polo traveled overland to China in the 13th century.

We start in Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan, a Central Asian crossroads due north of Afghanistan and Pakistan and just west of China. Few outsiders have ventured to this remote region, which was out of bounds to visitors during the Soviet era. As recently as 2005, only 500 tourists a year visited the region, and that number increased to only about 3,000 in 2009. Like something out of a bad novel, the city was dubbed Stalinabad from 1929 to 1961, and today Dushanbe still has a vaguely Soviet feel, with stolid architecture and broad streets. Here, police and army

officers sport hats with huge brims that wouldn't look out of place in a Russian May Day parade.

Yet, I also find Tajikistan a modern, relaxed Muslim country. It is like Turkey, locals say. "People confuse us with Afghanistan," one man, in a suit and tie, complains. "They think we are covered with veils, grow big beards, have guns in the street." Here, men are mainly in Western clothing and sometimes ornate, square hats called *toqi*. Women, especially in the countryside, wear colorful, brightly patterned dresses that usually hang down to the ankles, but rarely veils.

Mid-morning, instead of taking that easy 90-minute helicopter ride, we start on what should be a 15-hour drive to Khorog. Our group of a dozen foreigners, accompanied by a handful of locals, travels in a convoy of a half-dozen new 4 x 4s. On the wide, quiet Pamir Highway outside the capital, there is no evidence that the 1992–1997 civil war here was the most violent in any of the post-Soviet states, resulting in more than 50,000 dead and creating some 1.2 million refugees. Instead, today it's a rustic scene. Fuel trucks parked at the side of the road sell gas by the bottle to farmers. Small donkeys pull carts piled high with hay. Farmers plow fields with large, ancient wooden plows and young boys sell bunches of rhubarb.

Before starting on our journey, locals warn us that the mountainous country is more prone to landslides, avalanches and floods than to political upheavals. The warning proves prophetic: Tajikistan is both blessed and cursed by geography. The scenery along the Pamir



Trekking high in the Pamir Mountains. Indoors on a bitter night, opposite. Right: A weathered face along the Pamir highway.



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Highway—the world's second highest roadway after the Karakoram that links China and Pakistan—is stunning. All day, we pass outsize snow-capped peaks, broad valleys, glacial lakes and rushing rivers. But geography can also be an obstacle. In places, we slow to splash through water that reaches the floorboards, where rivers cut through the gravel road. All too frequently, we drive around fallen boulders that could easily crush our convoy like so many beer cans.

A few hours out of Dushanbe, the road veers south towards the Khaburabot Pass where the valley drops off on one side to a river hundreds of meters below. There are no guardrails, and there's little sign of human habitation. The road surface deteriorates to a mix of gravel, mud and water-filled potholes the size of bathtubs. We started late, lingered too long over lunch, and at the end of our first day our headlights are the only light to slice through the darkness. In the black night, we pass through white tunnels of snow.

Our descent, which lasts for hours, ends in the town of Qalai Khum. It's too late to continue. Our home for the night, a two-story guesthouse, stands out for its peeling paint and a single Western toilet. And it's the best accommodation in town.

The next morning, after a fitful night's sleep, I awake to an early breakfast of instant coffee, an omelet with tinned sausages, bread and delicious honey, and small sweet cherries. Then it's time to hit the road. Today's route follows the Panj River, a twisting, shallow but fast flowing tributary of the Oxus fed by the snowmelt. The Panj forms much of Tajikistan's 1,330-kilometer border with Afghanistan.

Although only a few hundred meters separate the two countries, it feels like we're a universe away and in a different century. On the far side, in the Afghan province of Badakhshan, there is no road, just a precarious path that cuts its way high across a steep cliff of solid rock, in some places with flimsy wood supports. It looks terrifying, but our Tajik guides say the locals even take donkeys and horses along the treacherous trail. Further along, where the valley broadens, Afghans in traditional *shalwar kameez*, baggy pants and a long brown jacket, work the fields, a dull contrast to the Tajiks on this side. Where this narrow valley widens, level patches of green appear, examples of local agriculture.

Young Tajik soldiers in camouflage and floppy jungle hats, carry what look to me like AK-47's, and patrol the road in groups of three, a reminder that this is one of the world's major heroin trails. From Afghanistan, the drug passes through Tajikistan and the neighboring Central Asian »

On the far side, there is no road, just a *precarious* path that cuts its way across a steep cliff of **SOLID** rock



A policeman in Khorog. Right: The Serena Inn with Afghanistan beyond. Opposite: At the market in Khorog.



republics into Europe. Weapons head in the opposite direction through Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Finally, almost a full day after leaving Dushanbe, we reach the pleasant town of Khorog, where the streets are lined with poplar trees and the Aga Khan Foundation is present at every turn. It's the jumping-off point for Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor. This long, narrow strip of land separating Tajikistan from Pakistan is the safest part of Afghanistan, so attracts adventure tourists, who come to trek and climb in the Pamir mountains.

Leaving the Pamir Highway we head south, sleeping and eating in home stays. In these windowless Tajik-style houses, five pillars support the roof and carpets are spread on raised platforms around an open area of the main room. With no tables and chairs, we eat sitting cross-legged on the elevated benches, an ordeal for the less nimble. Typical Tajik meals include nuts, raisins, dried fruit and chocolates, as well as sliced cucumbers, tomatoes and green onions, potato salad, cabbage with dill, yogurt soup with potatoes or noodles and beef, cold soggy chips, and flat bread. One place also serves a local dumpling filled with cabbage and ground meat. It is tasty, but messy and greasy.

A bridge over the Panj River to the Afghan market town of Ishkashim at the western end of the corridor was built in 2006, but it was difficult to cross the border there until two years ago. Now, visitors can get an Afghan visa in a few hours in Khorog. We stop to look across at the forbidden land but without visas, can't go further. The Tajik armed guards who glare at us are intimidating, so we don't linger. Staring at Afghanistan arouses my curiosity: what must it be like now? I can only wonder. I'd traveled across southern Afghanistan years ago, but others in our group are disappointed at missing this rare chance to set foot in the

country. A few decades ago, Afghanistan was part of the backpackers' trail between Europe and Asia. Kabul was relatively open then, peaceful and not severely strict. There were Western-style hotels, clothing, movie theaters and music. However, in rural Afghanistan, men wore a traditional headdress and knee-length coat with baggy trousers, women were in burqas. Looking across the river today, I see only men in traditional garb, but no women.

A few hours further east, we do spot some colorful tents in the gray landscape. It's a group of yak trekkers, across the shallow river. We shout across, and discover they are from Canada and the U.S. on a week-long excursion along the corridor. I envy the hiking, as we travel by car the whole time, but not the camping, which looks even more uncomfortable than the home stays.

After bidding farewell, we continue up a flat, wide valley, where the wind begins to howl and the rain pelts down. Women harvesting the fields wrap their faces in their bright scarves for protection. Further along, a guide in a fedora waits at the side of the road to lead us up a steep path to the huge but decrepit, third century B.C. Qah-Qaha Fort. The fort has deteriorated so badly, it is difficult to identify the towers and walls, which are piles of grey mud eroded by the



wind. From the top of the ruin, we look over the Hindu Kush to the south, and along what was the southernmost part of the Silk Route. From here, when the rest of the group moves on, I stand alone on the wall. The only sound in this wide-open space is of the wind howling down the valley, a feeling of utter solitude.

Detouring up into the mountains, we pass crumbling Yamchun Fort on the way to Bibi Fatima Springs, where several of the men, and all the women, separately soak in the hot water in a bare concrete block room. On the way down, we pause to look up the cliff at a Buddhist stupa and some caves near the town of Vrang.

Returning to Khorog along a different route, our convoy leaves the valley and heads into the mountains, up a terrifying, winding road. Often the cars pass within centimeters of sheer drop-offs, hundreds of meters down to the broad and barren valley. A windswept and ruggedly beautiful drive, it's also stomach-churning.

On the way, at a bleak military post, a former Soviet army base, boy soldiers in worn, ill-fitting uniforms check our papers. The landscape here is bare and desolate, stark but stunning. Along the wild Khargush Pass, marmots stand atop rocks to inspect our passing convoy. Where the road rejoins the Pamir Highway, we dine on dried fish from a nearby lake and drink yak milk at a Kyrgyz yurt. From here, it is another long, bone-jarring ride back to Khorog.

Our last day breaks sunny and clear, so that helicopter is looking good. Mid-morning, word comes: the pass is socked in with clouds. We will have to return by road. We depart

late in the morning after stopping at the local market. Unlike in Afghanistan, where the market traffics in heroin, weapons and women, this one is a mundane affair, selling produce, household goods and brightly patterned clothes.

So we continue the long ride home. A few hours out of Khorog, a landslide blocks the road, with dilapidated trucks and muddied jeeps are backed up a dozen deep in both directions. The drivers keep adding rocks to a makeshift ramp, and one by one we cross. Finally, late one afternoon at Qalai Khum, we leave the river and start the long climb back up to the Khoburabot Pass. The road climbs steadily up the mountain, reaching the snow line we passed in the dark a few days before. Finally, we reach the summit at dusk, and scramble out of the cars to snap pictures in the fading light.

Then we plow down the stone-strewn, potholed road in the dark. At one point, we're separated from the convoy, and about 2 a.m., we get stuck. Three of us get out to push, shin-deep in the mud. The driver is grateful. We're just tired. Finally, at 5 a.m., we arrive back in Dushanbe and those essentials of civilization, hot showers and cold beer. ✚



GUIDE TO TAJIKISTAN

Traveling in Tajikistan offers the rare opportunity to go to a safe part of Afghanistan, the historic Wakhan Corridor, with its traditional culture. Travelers must get a multiple-entry visa (US\$160) for Tajikistan before they arrive so they can cross the bridge and come back. Tour operators can now arrange an Afghan visa in Khorog in just a few hours. A car and driver for the Afghan side costs about US\$1.20 per kilometer.

Pamir Silk Tour When traveling in Tajikistan, it is essential to work through a reliable tour operator. Azizbekova 1 St., Khorog; 992-3522/22299; info@pamirsilk.travel.

Khorog Serena Inn While accommodation outside Dushanbe is basic, the Aga Khan Foundation operates this pleasant six-room hotel in Khorog. 992-3522/23288; serenahotels.com/serenakhhorog; doubles from US\$95.