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A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Tajikistan is perhaps the least known of the former Soviet Central Asian states. **Nick Redmayne** explores the High Pamirs and beyond

Beyond the Panj River, the Afghan massif of the Hindu Kush is quickly obscured by an unforgiving veil of sandy rain. From nearby houses, peels of excited Ishkashmi chatter spill out – people discussing the weather, perhaps.

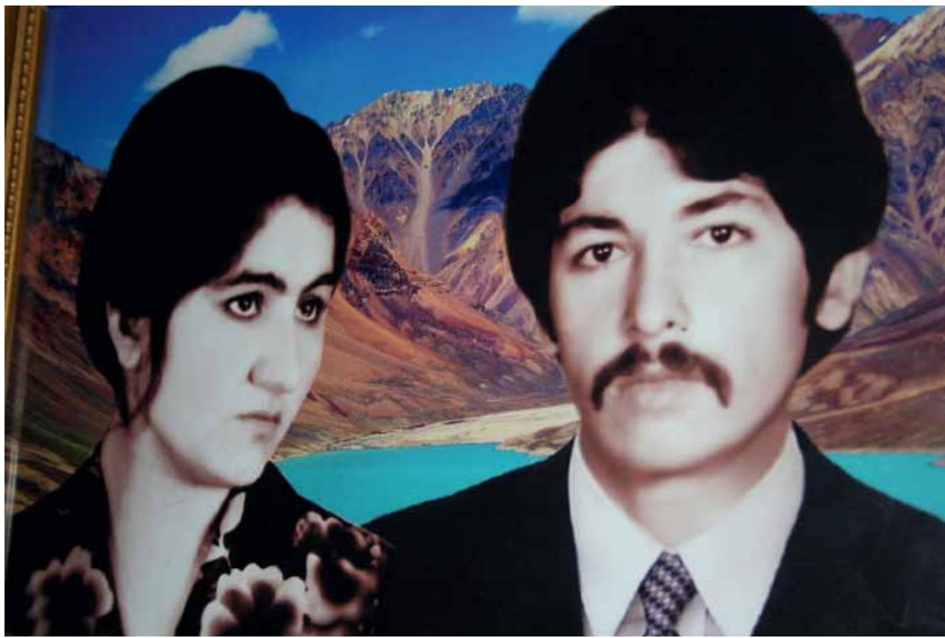
Ordinamamad Mirzoev, historian and herbalist, huddles me through the downpour into his home, where a lunch of dried apricots, mulberries, and watery stew is already laid out. Removing my shoes, I greet the assembled crowd of women and children, shake myself dry and take a seat on the floor. Above the ambient chatter, drips falling from a window in the ceiling land musically in a tin bath below. One bulb out of four glows feebly, lighting the damp scene as best it can. 'We don't have rain often in the Pamirs,' observes my host.

Ninety-three per cent mountainous and sharing a 1,200 kilometre border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, the poorest of the former Soviet republics, is caught between a rock and a hard place. And then some.

In 1992, cast adrift at the farthest extent of a collapsed empire, friction between a neo-communist government and a politically disenfranchised populace ignited an incendiary cocktail of repression, democratic reform and Islamic revival. The flames of the resulting civil conflagration, fanned by regional ➤

Panos. Map: David Atkinson

Pick of the crop: a Tajik family goes in search of cherries



Natural highs: (from top left) Ordinamamad Mirzoev and his wife in John and Yoko mode; ethnic Kyrgyz yak herder Otomboy; the view from the road from Khorog to Afghanistan

burned until 1997, costing over 50,000 lives according to UN sources. Peace between the United Tajik opposition and the government was finally brokered in 2007 and, though flawed, Tajikistan has become the first Central Asian state to espouse political pluralism.

A 19-hour drive from the capital Dushanbe, over precipitous 5,500-metre mountain passes and an unmetalled road prone to drifting snow, rock falls and mudslides, lies southern Tajikistan's remote and sparsely populated Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) region. Here, life for the people of the Pamir mountains has always been eked out at the margins. Most areas lie above 3,000 metres, the highest peaks at almost 7,500. Rock, water and ice surround occasional islands of intense green cultivation and characterise the landscape.

Sheltering inside one of the Pamiri houses, built according to the rules of robust vernacular architecture, about 20 souls mill around, waiting for the rain to stop. Holding his Cold War fedora by the brim, a formally besuited Mirzoev sits chewing reflectively on a dried mulberry, cataloguing the academic success of those around him. 'The whole family has university education. My three sons, two daughters and my wife. All of them. I'm a biologist by profession,' he says.

Following the civil war, like many in Tajik Badakhshan, Mirzoev returned to his roots. 'I was born in this village and attended university in Dushanbe. I'm the author of a field guide to 100 plants and their medicinal properties,' he adds proudly.

Mirzoev had just led me on a scramble around the ruins of nearby Khakha Fortress, built in the third century by the region's last Kushan kings and once commanding the silk routes of the Wakhan

Valley. Here, lookouts observed Marco Polo's extended 13th century *passeggiata* and, later, witnessed the intriguing antics of the explorers Arthur Conolly and Francis Younghusband and their Russian counterparts playing out the Great Game.

Though the ashes of the fiery Zoroastrian construction workers have long turned cold, the fort's 650 metres of walls and crumbling towers still encompass a Tajik military detachment. A pile of refuse suggests the conscripts are sustained entirely by tinned tuna, a monotony surpassed only by the daily task of ensuring pesky Afghan herders across the Panj don't get too quarrelsome.

I finish my bowl of soup and scan an array of pictures on the wall, drawn to a psychedelic photo-montage of a much younger Mirzoev and his wife imposed on a rugged mountain backdrop. It makes me wonder whether the Mirzoev plant lexicon extends to recreational herbs.

Farther along the wall is a newspaper photograph of Vladimir Putin, thankfully with his shirt on and shaking hands with a dapper Aga Khan. Outside, protracted goodbyes allow time for the clouds to lift, revealing the words 'Welcome to our Imam' spelt out in white stones on the lower mountain slopes.

His Highness the Aga Khan, 49th Imam of Shia Ismailis, direct descendent of the Prophet Mohamed and spiritual leader of the world's 12 million Nizari ➤

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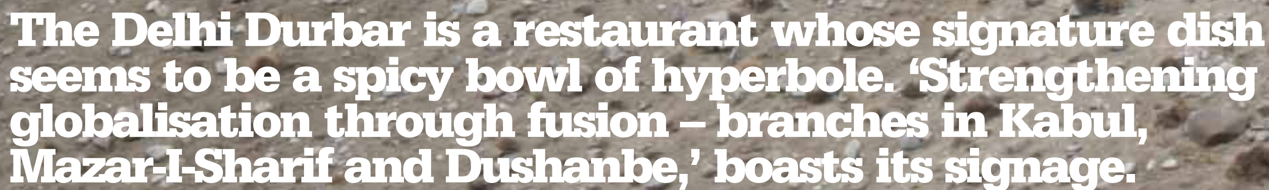


The Delhi Durbar is a restaurant whose signature dish seems to be a spicy bowl of hyperbole. 'Strengthening globalisation through fusion – branches in Kabul, Mazar-I-Sharif and Dushanbe,' boasts its signage.

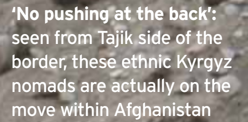
Ismaili Muslims, is a revered figure across Badakhshan. Amid the chaos of Tajikistan's civil war and beyond the withered arteries of centralised supply, GBAO's isolated population was thrown a food aid lifeline by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Despite the hardships of conflict, the absence of Soviet religious persecution saw an Ismaili renaissance, and though Tajikistan as a whole is 95 per cent Sunni, liberal Ismaili Islam is GBAO's dominant faith.

Today, the regional capital, Khorog, receives continuing support from the Aga Khan – his AKDN tags are stencilled on four wheel drives, schools, power stations, bridges and the soon-to-open University of Central Asia. There's also one discretely placed on the town's only luxury hotel.

Such is the penetration of the AKDN into all aspects of Badakhshan's development that, to a casual visitor, government structure is conspicuous by its absence. In winter when roads are snowbound, or when frequent bad weather in the mountains grounds aircraft, Dushanbe must seem very distant indeed.

Walking the streets of Khorog, I pass the Delhi Durbar, a restaurant whose signature dish seems to be a spicy bowl of hyperbole: 'Strengthening globalisation through fusion – branches in Kabul, Mazar-I-Sharif and Dushanbe', boasts the signage, juxtaposed with the image of an Indian gentleman sticking up two

Panos; Nick Redmayne



'No pushing at the back': seen from Tajik side of the border, these ethnic Kyrgyz nomads are actually on the move within Afghanistan

fingers in an unconsciously Anglo-Saxon gesture. Though hardly a milestone in gastronomy, the restaurant's food is good and the expatriate Indian staff are all very personable.

Elsewhere, inside a utilitarian steel shed forming part of Khorog's bazaar, Zamina is at her stall, selling bags of loose biscuits, Iranian sweets and dangerous-looking Chinese safety razors. A neat, slim woman in her mid twenties wearing a colourful headscarf, she speaks carefully in exacting English. 'I returned from Dushanbe five years ago after studying at the International School of Languages to became an English teacher. There's very little money in teaching. Now I am a businesswoman. It's quite hard,' she says, not looking for sympathy but simply stating facts.

A few kilometres outside Khorog, up a steep and stony track leading to the vegetable-growing village of Dasht, Massain Massainov, master *rubab* player and maker and former star of the Soviet international cultural exchange circuit, is in his workshop.

'By 1963 I'd graduated from the music academy in Dushanbe. I'd travelled to Moscow, Istanbul, Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, always playing the rubab in a folk orchestra,' he tells me.

'When my father died there was no one to take care of the family and the house so I came to Khorog and worked in a music school. At that time in Badakhshan ➤

'Never mind the road, where's the engine gone?' Ageing Lada cars, such as this one, are a feature of Tajik Badakhshan and their reliability leaves something to be desired

people only played the rubab. I thought I'd make something different, create new instruments myself, take inspiration from local art. I need 15 to 20 days to make a rubab and I can sell them for $100 to $200. I'm happy to live here but it's difficult to be far from the town and not have good conditions and good tools. It was easier in the Soviet period – I was working, travelling, now I am an old man.'

Northwards from the Wakhan Valley, away from the Afghan border and beyond the 4,344-metre Khargush Pass, children at the village of Bulun Kul gather to greet our Land Cruiser. They make the traditional offering of bread and salt while singing a song in praise of the regionally contentious Rogun hydroelectric project near Dushanbe.

Away from the village's smattering of ugly concrete structures, a distinguished figure of indeterminate age sits astride a placid, stocky pony. His tanned and weathered face is framed by the white felt cap, worn at a jaunty angle, of a Kyrgyz nomad and the collar of his substantial green and gold great coat. When he has our attention he gently encourages his horse and leads us across the valley floor to where the mountains have relaxed into a flat cinemascopic expanse.

The man, called Otomboy, takes us to his *yurt*, where the walls were covered in warm red fabrics, thick carpets on the floor. Carefully easing past a sleeping baby suspended in a crib, I find a space on the floor. Fried fish from the lake, bread, fresh yak milk and yoghurt have all been laid out for my arrival, all equally delicious.

I ask Otomboy if he lives like this all year. 'This place is just for summer, when we travel with the animals. We're just semi-nomads now,' he replies. He has seen many changes since independence. 'For three years after the Soviets it was very difficult. There was a big crisis, no food, 100 kilogrammes of flour cost one yak. Before, the Soviets brought everything here, food, clothes, everything. We were just living. Everything was owned collectively. Since the end of the civil war people began to work hard, the yak population has increased and now I know these are my animals. One yak will buy 1,000 kilogrammes of flour.'

'Since the end of the civil war people began to work hard and the yak population has increased.'

He pauses to drink some tea, his dark watery eyes staring me out across the carpet. In reply to my query as to whether he meets many foreigners, he says: 'I am Kyrgyz but I speak Tajik, and Tajik people around here speak Kyrgyz. We are happy to live in an international family.'

It's a good answer and one that reveals a perspective some in Central Asia appear to have lost. ■

FIND OUT MORE

Somon Air operates weekly flights from Frankfurt to Dushanbe. www.somonair.com/en

Pamir Silk Tours provides tailor-made tours across Tajikistan and GBAO www.pamirsilk.travel

Aga Khan Development Network www.akdn.org

Further reading
Tajikistan and the High Pamirs
www.odysseypublications.com