



Captured in Tajikistan 2

27th January 2008. Starting with a capture from above: a beautiful last view of my hometown and its lake—just before diving into the clouds, heading east...



Same day in Istanbul. Waiting for the connecting flight to Dushanbe I went to a beach restaurant near Atatürk Airport to have the most expensive kebab of my life: 25 USD for an Ishkender kebab (the meat comes on pieces of bread, accompanied by sauce and fresh yoghurt). Not a discount kebab but tasty anyhow and especially for the views around the foggy lonely beach it was worthwhile.



Getting back to Dushanbe in the end of January was getting back to a very cold and unfriendly place. An old woman told me she didn't remember a winter being this hard since 1936, UN organisations and the BBC (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7243704.stm) wrote about the coldest winter for 50 years. Luckily I had just missed the worst part of several weeks with temperatures around minus 25°C. Now, it was only about ten below zero... The hard thing about these temperatures is that most houses are not well (or not at all) insulated and heating is very basic (electrical radiators in town and wood heating in the village). This year, an extraordinary winter met a severe shortage in electricity supply. In towns like Dushanbe where many people solely depend on electrical heating this was much tougher than in the villages where nobody expects to have electricity in winter nowadays...



The Nurek reservoir—locked by the world's highest earth filled dam—is the main source of the Tajik power supply. This winter, electricity had to be rationed drastically in fear of a drop of the water table below the minimal level necessary for production. This could have caused a complete blackout and a major humanitarian disaster. At the moment the water is about 30–50 meters beneath the level, which allows Tajikistan in summer to sell electricity to most of its neighbouring countries.



A scenery observed all over the country: in dire need of heating fuel the alley trees in several little towns were cut at about four meters. This peculiar type of coppicing however, seems to be a common practice around Tajikistan. In many places such trunks can be seen, which have regrown arm-thick branches above the cut.



Between Dushanbe and Muminabad. Cold cold winterland of hills.

I should also write something about work. At least in general. It is going better. Still a lot of work, too much actually, the frequency of my capture-compilations is a little piece of evidence. But I feel better at work than last year; maybe it's the habituation. And I like my team; I like to work with them. If only we had more time... Otherwise, I am ok. I miss Tanzania and you who I met there. And I miss you who are in Switzerland and all the other places around the globe. Sometimes, I miss you very much.



Back in Muminabad I undertook my first hike into the hills: through meter-high snow to the village of Gulzor, where we are hoping to pilot a small agro-forestry project soon. Many little villages in the hills can only be accessed by horse or on foot in winter. There is no money to pay for the diesel necessary to fuel the tractors that could clear the snow on the roads. The villagers don't deny that it's an extraordinary hard winter but the access is the only worry they bring forward. Being out here the whole hysteria of the UN and many international NGOs who were literally lobbying for a humanitarian crisis just seemed inappropriate. Of course I can only talk for the region I live in; according to reports in other places, especially in towns, the conditions were much worse.



However, life out here is certainly tough in general and this winter there was even less feed for the animals. And, after some more talking the host family says that some people have lost a lot of seeds, especially potatoes have frozen in large quantities. Interestingly, this was never a big issue in all the debates of the UN-organised crisis meetings. But it might become a much more serious problem—regarding the next winter and thinking of the last harvest, which was poor already...



This is the typical view when you are invited to whoever's house. Bread, cookies, sweets, black and green tea and fruits (if available) are the basic outlay on the dastarkhon, the "tablecloth" (even if it is never on a table but directly placed on the floor). In this case there was also excellent honey from the bees now sleeping in their boxes under the snow in front of the house and nuts, pistachios and raisins. While you are eating all the mentioned you actually wait for the main dish, which is always shurbo, a soup with vegetables and (fatty) meat or osh, the Tajik plov or both. Then, you go outside the house to brush your teeth and when you get back your bed is made already just where you had been eating before. This is how you get accommodated in Tajikistan—almost everywhere because you will rarely find a hotel or guesthouse outside of the capital.



After only five months I had the chance to see a buzkashi. Buzkashi means “goat-pulling” and it is the traditional rider’s game played in the whole region e.g. Afghanistan (cf. Rambo III). There is something mystic about this game. I met several people who have been here for a long time and have never witnessed it—or only after more than a year. In our case we were asking around for weeks already but nobody knew anything about a buzkashi. Then suddenly, someone turned up at our office and told us the first buzkashi would take place in 4 days. Still nobody knew about it and we were wondering how on earth it could be possible to organise the event in such a short time, to spread the word alone seemed impossible to us as usually riders come from all over the district or even the whole country.



But it did take place. At least 100 horsemen turned up and about trice as many spectators. I didn't find anyone who could really explain me the rules but it seems to be very simple: you grab the headless goat (which has been kept a week in cold water in order to get really tough and rip proof) and beat the shit out of your horse. Your horse runs as fast as it can and if you get back to a certain place (I didn't quite get that part) with the goat you win a prize. All this is not that easy because everyone is against you and they do not only hit the horses with their plaited leather whips. But in the end you can win a carpet or a TV or a cheap perfume at least (my favourite one is—not for its scent but its tone: “One Man Show”). And the last prize is always the heavily mistreated goat. They say it's a delicacy amongst the buzkashi guys and if you are the lucky winner you better don't forget to invite all of your mates to the feast.



2nd February. After buzkashi, I felt like getting in the saddle myself. And soon I had the chance as the buzkashi referee organised horses for my housemates and me and we rode into the hills for two days. In my very limited experience with horses, this was the best horseback riding! My horse was very energetic but I only fell off once as it stumbled and bolted—and I was lucky to land soft.



In the beginning of March, springtime had started already. Within three weeks, the temperatures had risen by about 20 degrees to 10° at night and 20° during the day. Suddenly blossoms everywhere, announcing the wide range of fruit I am already looking forward to: apricots, quinces, peaches, almonds, cherries, sour cherries and, a bit later, the apples and the pears.



March 22nd is Navruz, New Year. Everyone puts on their best suits and dresses and every institution—from school class to farmer's association—presents itself on the town's red square with a stand. Main feature are breads of various kind, young wheat and plastic flowers. The whole fabulous spectacle follows weeks of preparation but seems to be set up only for one man: the Rais of Hukumat, the president of the district government (centre-right, with tie, listening to the recitation of national praise by a schoolgirl). After his inspection walk the stands are packed up within record time: after a few minutes the whole fuss is over. They say the Rais of Jomhuri (President of the Republic) will visit Muminabad later this year—I can't wait to see that circus...



And the bold green of the pastures: another incredibility after my first impressions of emaciation and dust of last fall.

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