



Captured in Tajikistan 4: Pomir Special

It's a long time ago, since Sebastian paid me a visit. Sebastian's visit meant for me the first (and so far last) longer trip into this country and it led us to the Pamirs, or "Pomir" as the Tajik calls it. It was in the beginning of September 2008, when we stuffed my Lada Niva and took off for a spectacular 10-days ride. Murghab plain, more than 3000 m above sea level.



On the road. One of the many Russian Kamaz trucks. From the front.



And another one from the back.



The main passage between China and Tajikistan is this sometimes narrow and quite scaring road along the Panj river, which separates Tajikistan from Afghanistan.



The Chinese are coming. There is not much traffic on what becomes later the Pamir highway. But among the vehicles met there was a clear dominance of Chinese trucks supplying the cheap (and often crappy) goods flooding the Tajik markets.



Khorog, the capital of the Pamirs, 2069 m a.s.l. Lenin is still standing high, overlooking the square in front of the city hall (or was it the university?). The golden busts are some of the Tajik national heroes, displayed on many main squares and in every school entrance hall.



The Aga Khan is omnipresent in the Pamirs, where a large majority of the people professes the Ismaili faith. Everyone has a story of an encounter with the 49th Imam of the community to tell. Here our host in Kalai khum, presenting the picture of his daughter receiving her graduation at the University of Central Asia in Khorog from the Aga Khan who visits the Pamirs regularly. Interestingly, this is the second country I stumble upon this liberal, education and business oriented Muslim religion: In Tanzania, most of the successful shop and hotel owning Indian descendents also display the images of themselves with their Imam behind their counters.



Evening view over the Alichur plain. Indicated to the left: Some UN project—"Fishermen's village Bulunkul". Fish for a change? Of course we take this turn.



Bulunkul: The strangest place. No fishermen. No fish. But the handful of villagers is suspiciously starring. No home stay as announced in the Lonely Planet. More people starring from the cabin of a pensioned-off truck. Not only my companions Lithida and Sebastian got the creeps so we decided to leave even though it was getting dark already; another 40 km to Alichur.

And of course: Just after the night had fallen pitch black over the Pamiri scenery we ran out of fuel in the middle of nowhere. Sebastian put on his pyjamas and started brushing his teeth. But help came quick: A minibus driver gave us one litre from an old pet bottle. And with the last drop we rolled past the village sign of Alichur.



After the escape from Bulunkul: Our Kyrgyz host in Alichur. No bath, just a traditional earth closet in the goat's house. For dinner "Rolton", the notorious Russian noodle soup you will even find in the remotest village store. Convenient food: Tear open the pack, pour the included oil and bouillon sachet, hot water, stir. Enjoy. Breakfast was also simple but more exquisite: Rice pudding prepared with sheep's milk. When I think about it now I realise that this were the best meals we got in the Pamirs (except for the carrot-onion-tuna-sweetcorn-salad we prepared ourselves). This region is not famous for its kitchen. One reason why most Tajiks from the lowlands made pitiful comments when I told them I was going to Pomir. Bearing in mind that the Tajik cuisine itself is not exactly the most outstanding this should tell you something...



The salt lake Sasyk Kul in the Alichur plain, 3820m a.s.l.



Murghab, our farthest destination, 3630 m a.s.l. Bad food again: The plov is nothing more than overcooked watery rice (not to rescue, even with a ton of chilly powder) and the fried potatoes are actually potatoes cooked in oil.



Spanish Biker on the way to Langar. Pardon: Catalan biker. An exception among the travellers who chose this long and hard way: Usually these crazy guys are Swiss.



Village Vrang, below Karl Marx and Engels peaks; Vakhn valley. The whole community is bringing in the harvest. Idyllic like on the propaganda posters of the good old days...



The green Vakhani valley and especially the village Vrang present an enormous contrast to the barren land of the upper Pamirs. And the depicted peacefulness and idyll feels real—should there be a link to the 4th century Buddhist stupas above the village? (I didn't exactly get the concept of a stupa. However, it's those rock formations with the caves; probably they looked quite different 17 centuries ago...)



Ishkashim market: A colourful mix of Afghan vendors, Tajik clients and lots of different camouflage suits. The Saturday morning event in the no man's land between Tajikistan and Afghanistan was created by the European Union to enhance market opportunities between the neighbouring countries.



Along the Afghan border there are still plenty of minefields created to protect the Southern Soviet border. Additionally, Tajikistan bears the weight of minefields to the west, set up by the Uzbeks to prevent Tajik extremists from crossing the border and internal minefields set up between the different factions during the civil war in the early nineties. Even though different organisations are involved in clearing the mines people get killed and mutilated on a regular basis.



Driving straight on... somewhere on the Pamir highway.



And this is me and my Niva. The beard didn't last long, too prickly it was...

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