

## By H. Hughes (September 2010)

I have never been one to shy away from an adventure. And when I read about this unique expedition through the rough and rocky terrain of the Pamir Highway, I leapt at the opportunity. So last month, I embarked on this incredible journey through the undiscovered mountains and cities of Central Asia.

The Pamir Highway is one of the highlight of traveling in Central Asia as it passes through some of the most dramatic mountain scenery in the world. The highway is considered to be the second highest international highway in the world with the highest point standing at 4655m. and it stretches over much of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan through the Pamir mountains starting from Osh and ending in Dushanbe but it somehow reaches Mazar -i-Sharif in Afghanistan.

We arrived in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in the morning. Our guide met us in the airport and accompanied us to our hotel for check in. Feeling jet-lagged after the long flight, we took a nap, and then embarked on our tour that afternoon.

Our first stop of the trip was Manas Republic Square. Built in 1984, this square used to hold a large statue of Lenin. Today, the statue is of Manas, an ancient Kyrgyz folk hero. Next, we visited the National History Museum, where we learned the story of the country's independence. We roamed this peacefully quiet city a little longer, taking in a few more of its sights, before heading back to the hotel for dinner and some much-needed rest.



The next morning, rested and fresh, we flew out to Osh, where we visited the 2,000-year-old Jayma Bazaar. We wandered the rows and rows of this enormous market, the sound of hundreds of sellers haggling and the scent of the mouth-watering food permeating our senses. Here, one can buy anything from fresh seasonal fruit, to jeans made in China. Despite being tourists, we felt very welcomed by the friendly vendors. After lunch at a local tea house, we proceeded to the scenic mountain village of Sary Tash, stopping at the Taldyk Pass along the way.

We began our long journey along the Pamir Highway the following day. We crossed into mountainous Tajikistan in our 4-wheel-drive vans, and set out on the narrow, largely unpaved road. Our drivers navigated us up and down the mountains, climbing over some of the highest passes, like the Kyzyl Art Pass (14,000 feet high), and the Ak-Baital Pass (over 15,000 feet high). Aside from a few cargo trucks, we were alone on the road.



For lunch, we picnicked at the majestic Karakul Lake, located near a small village with the same name. We ate our food in silence, breathing in the crisp air, taking in the magical surroundings, and admiring the reflection of the tall, snow-capped mountains on the lake's blue waters.



We headed to the Shorbulak Observatory the next day. Now abandoned, this former Soviet observatory still offers a fantastic look at the surroundings. (Beware that the road leading up to it is a bumpy ride!) From this spot, we had a wonderful view of the Muztag Ata Mountain and the Kongur Peaks.

We stopped to look at some salt lakes, then took in the breathtaking views of Afghanistan and the Wakhan Mountain Range at the Khargush Pass. Later, we spotted a herd of Bactrian camels along the Pamir River. Our day ended in Langar, with a tour of a castle, and then we made our way to our accommodations for the evening – a homestay (a home that takes in travelers). Here, we got to see the way of life of the people of the region.



The homestay was delightful, though a little “old world.” It contained several rooms to host travelers, as well as a kitchen and living area. It had no running water, limited access to electricity, and the bathroom was an outhouse located in the courtyard. Still, even with the minor inconveniences, we had a lovely stay here, and were happy to experience what life in this part of the world is like. The family didn't know what more to do to make us feel welcomed, they have touched everyone's heart with their kindness, generosity and hospitality. We sat in the evening



sipping shots of Vodka (our group, but not the hosts) and asking them all sorts of questions about their lives and their country and everyone found so much information that was beneficial and enriching.

The next day, we took another scenic drive along the Panj River, stopping along the way at the castles and fortresses that once guarded this section of the Silk Road. We saw the ancient Yamchun Fort, which overlooks the Wakhan Valley, and passed several religious sites, including an ancient Zoroastrian Fire Temple. Later, we ended the night at a mini hotel, where we were relieved to find running water, electricity, and flushing toilets.

In the morning, we set out for Khorog, and a visit to a weekly market in the neutral area between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Architecture in the 6,000 feet high city is a typical Central Asian blend of traditional Pamir houses and Soviet-style buildings. Though the center of town (along the Pamir Highway) is entirely Soviet and rather ordinary, many unique and picturesque Tajik homes are built terrace-like along the river and into the hillsides above the town. A magnificent renovation of the main park along the Gunt River has recently been completed, where hundreds of people relax and spend time in summer. Though the climate is arid and surrounding canyons barren, the city is shaded by huge poplar and fruit trees and is very pleasant during the summer. A botanical garden with plants from all over the world is located on a hillside above the town. We wandered around it, admiring the colorful plant life as well as the background of snowy peaks and pretty valleys.

The next day, we visited Kalaikhumb, a picturesque little village which overlooks the meeting of the Khumbob and Panj rivers. As we drove on, we noted the stark differences between Afghanistan on one side of the narrow winding highway, and Tajikistan on the other.

We continued on to Dushanbe (Tajikistan's capital), where the mountains began to fade in the distance, and the rocky highway was replaced with a real road. Before hitting the city, we stopped to pay some locals to clean off our dusty vans. Our guide explained this was necessary, as driving a dirty vehicle in Dushanbe will get you a ticket. The first-world accommodations of the hotel were a welcome surprise after having spent the last few days quasi-roughing it.

Exploring the capital, we toured the National Museum of Antiquities in Tajikistan, which holds thousands of years of history, including the famous Buddha in Nirvana. Next, we explored the Hisor Fortress, an ancient fort that has been wonderfully reconstructed, and the nearby 16th century Madrasah Kukhna, with its impressive dome and recessed arches. Later, we visited the Gurminj Museum of Musical Instruments, where we learned about the traditional music and instruments of this region.



After a scenic drive and a bit of a delay at the border, we made it to the town of Termez in Uzbekistan. Here, we saw some ancient Buddhist sites. Next, we toured the city's Archaeological Museum. We roamed the halls of the museum, taking in the thousands of years of history in its collection, ranging from ancient statues of Buddha, to medieval coins, to literature from the middle Ages.

Later, we visited the Kirk Kiz Fortress, what is believed to be an old country residence of the region's rulers. Though the fortress has degraded with time, it was easy to imagine its ancient splendor as we walked through the ruins. We saw the Sultan Saodat Ensemble, a collection of beautifully-decorated mausoleums from the Sayyid dynasty. Later, we visited several Buddhist archaeological sites, including Fayaz Tepe, an impressive 1st century Stupa with stairs leading up to a beautiful dome.



The next day, we made our way to Kampir Tepe, where we explored the ruins of the 2,000-year-old port city. We wandered through the ancient complex, seeing the remnants of citadels, moats, and towers. Next, we visited the iconic Jakurgan Minaret, a stunning 68-foot tall structure that is intricately engraved in Arabic script.

We proceeded back to Termez, then to Dushanbe, where we spent our last night of this tour reminiscing over a traditional Tajik meal of Kabuli pulao (a rice dish with meat and vegetables). The next morning, we boarded our long flight home, still dreaming of the rough and bumpy Pamir Highway, and the warm smiles of the Central Asian people.



Striking snow-capped peaks, lonely mountain passes and dusty roads to nowhere make the Pamir Highway the epitome of a classic road trip adventure. For those in the know, it evokes memories of lush grassy plains with meandering yaks, impassable snow-capped peaks, isolated communities, rubble remnants of the ancient silk road and time-ravaged roads through one of the most remote and untouched regions of the world. It was the perfect place for the adventure of a lifetime, whichever way you choose to do it. The sense of excitement that comes from setting foot in a little-explored corner of the world and the thrill of an adventure with the roof of the world at your fingertips cannot be replicated elsewhere.