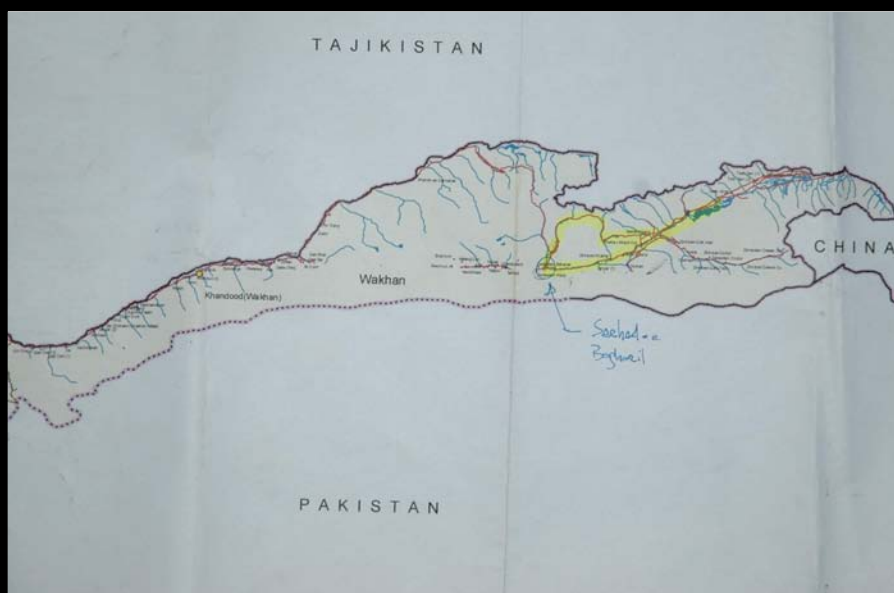


A SHORT WALK IN THE AFGHAN PAMIR

July 2006



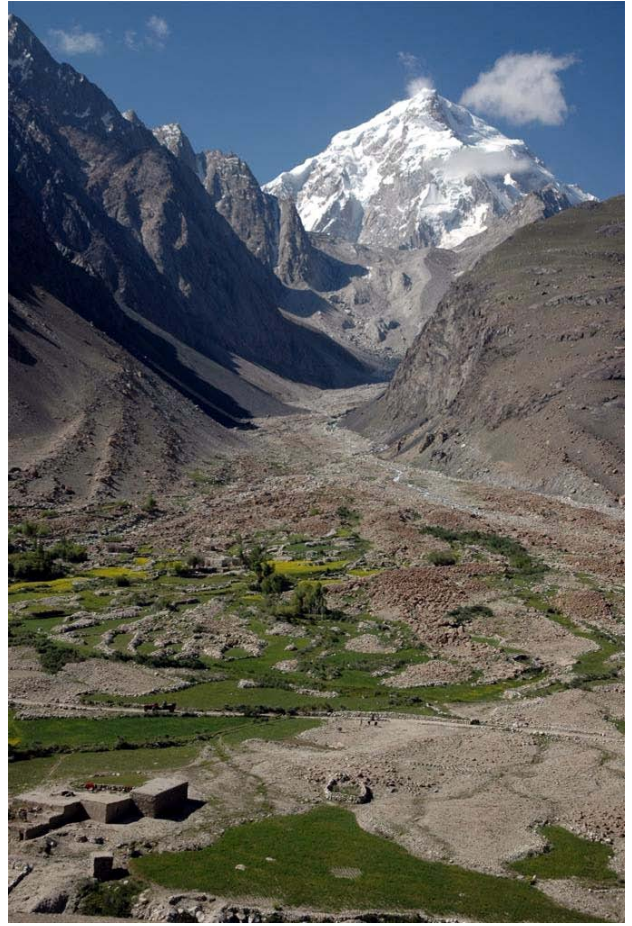
Take a larger map of Afghanistan, and look for that odd finger up in the North East corner of the country. There is Pamir...

Two days before our departure the Faísabad airstrip up North was partly destroyed by an overloaded NATO plane, so we had to drive from Kabul about 800 km. It took 5 days. We reached the final stretch of road in a sunny morning of July: the Wakhan Corridor, 180km West to East, between Ishkashim and Sarhad-o-Boroghil – 10 hour drive eastwards, along the Amour Daria river, and later the Wakhan river. The corridor is squeezed in between Tajikistan and Pakistan, stretching towards China. It became Afghan territory when the British marked it at the end of the 19th century as a buffer zone between Imperial Russia and the British Empire in India.





Kid and small brothers on a donkey



Second ridge on the southern side, bordering Pakistan



At the end of the Wakhan corridor in Sarhad, the road bumps into the first walls of the Pamir Fortress, yet another 130 km away from the Chinese border. The trek begins in the narrow Wakhan river gorge. Our first companions and hosts will be the Wakhis, a people of poor farmers who have adopted the Kirghize semi nomadic habits of moving to higher pastures with their herds in the summer.

Sarhad-o-Boroghil is the last permanent settlement of Wakhis, where Kirghizes come to re-supply every 3 or 4 months – life at the end of the world – A new guesthouse (we are the first clients) and old “Hammam” (a clear but smelly hot sulfur spring)



We leave Sarhad with 1 “tourist guide” – a former Taliban fighter, trained as “mountaineer” by an old Italian man, through the Disarmement programme – all good, but this was his very first time as guide and first time in Pamir. To carry the bags and 2 weeks worth of food, we have 1 yak – who will escape after 6 days of good services, 1 (tiny) horse, and 2 Wakhi men to lead the animals



First night, camping with a caravan of 4 kirghizes and 16 yaks bringing back supplies for the summer, 6 days away from home in Little Pamir

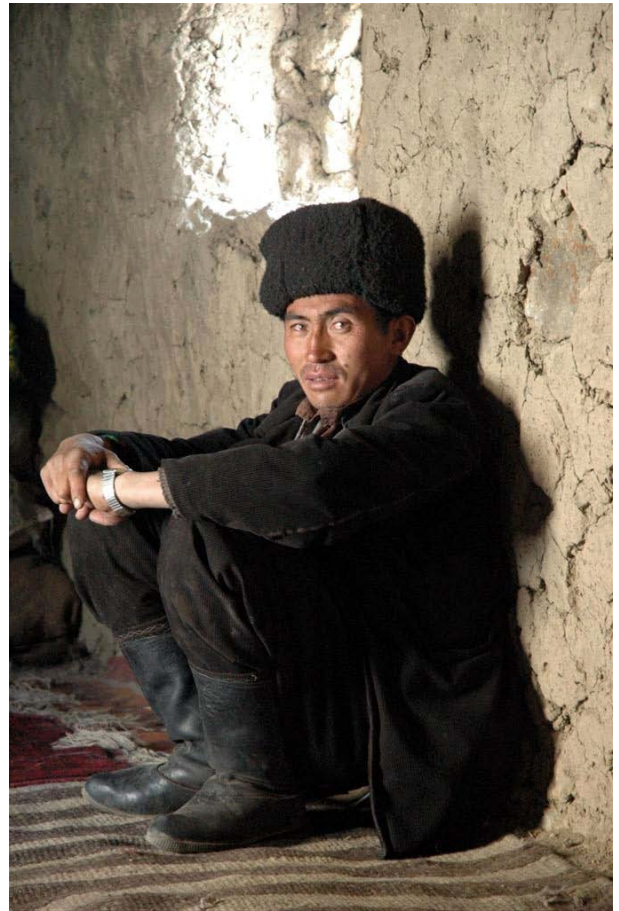


tea break with the kirghizes

First (of many) river crossing



Kirghizes in winter house - We make a detour to meet the richest family of Little Pamir. Effendi Bey the patriarch, was sleeping the whole day, stoned with opium, we could not meet him. They said 3 millions USD in yaks and other animals (a poppy trader?). They could not rent any horse to us, but we tasted a wonderful cream and most (yogourt)



Lake Chaqmatin, on the high plateau of the little Pamir



Our best friend, relaxing and enjoying the view on the fourth evening

Day 5: we meet 2 Wakhi workers from Pakistan building a winter house for Kirghizes. They drove from Gilgit (northern Pakistan) to the Afghan border in one day, crossed and walked to Lake Chaqmatin in 2 days, with a donkey. Paid 10 USD a day during 40 days to do the building work which Kirghizes don't know how to do. We got the usual offer of tea and fresh cheese. Foreigners are not yet allowed to cross the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.



On the 6th day, we realised we would never have time to reach China (the faintest peaks in the furthest background) and come back to the Big Pamir, so we crossed over to the other side of the marshlands, and struggled for 4 hours before reaching safer ground.



Finally we reach the first “summer” camp of Kirghize nomads. It is the end of the day, the beautiful golden light is soothing to the eyes, the animals have not yet been brought back and the camp is quiet after the strong wind blazing across the Pamir plateau



The old woman said she was 100 year old and she did not want to be taken into picture, until she saw the pictures of the men on the screen of the digital camera. Like most other people we met during the trek, her questions to us were about getting drugs for sore eyes, bad headaches and respiratory infections. The kirghizes and the wakhis live in very poor hygienic conditions, with no bathroom, smoked filled yurts and drinking nothing else than tea, thus being in a constant state of dehydration. The first doctor is 5 day walk away, and children born during the winter rarely survive.



The yurt is made of felt from yak/camel wool, supported by a strong wooden structure inside, and ropes outside, where women dry the clothes. The top remains open for the bukhari chimney, and when it snows/rain, it is closed with plastic sheeting. The inside ground and walls are covered with carpets. A partition on the side hides the food reserves, mostly milk, cream and yoghurt, with the occasional gun... In most places, women/children and men have separate yurts, the women's yurt often being the kitchen yurt as well. Most yurts were made in and imported from Tajikistan.



This woman was the wife of the headman, and was very excited to meet a foreign woman. While the men were drinking tea and resting from the heat and the violent wind, she took me all around the other yurts and wanted me to take pictures of everybody and everything. A photographer's dream!!



Girls wear amulets and red headdress, while married women wear necklaces from Pakistan and white veils on their braided hair



Lady showing her wealth attached to her hair



self portrait with the ladies. All the family belongings, including musical instruments, pictures, radios, soap, etc... are carefully stored in locked trunks, covered by blankets and mattresses used for sleeping and receiving guests.



Young boy serving tea. Kirghize children do not go to school, as the entire population is scattered across the Big and little Pamir, each house being 3 or 5 hours walk from the others. The level of illiteracy is very high amongst all groups

13th of July 06, altitude 4300 m: it started snowing in the night at 3 am, and it would only stopped 18 hours later. We pitched the tent next to the "guesthouse" of the camp. It was not appropriate that I slept in the guesthouse, as there were already other "guests", 4 itinerant merchants coming all the way from Kabul to barter various goods for sheep and goats, which they would later bring back through the Panshir valley



The Pashtoon merchants and the Kirghize host (in the local guesthouse) are killing time waiting for the storm to pass. They tell us about their 5 month trip that take them across all the highest mountains of the country. They ask for my phone number, as they "really" want to get a visa for France, where life is certainly much easier. Meanwhile the Kirghize ladies are worried about me stuck in the little tent and invite me for tea. The day goes by quickly eating bread, cream with sugar, and yogourt, and listening to their stories from back when they were refugees in Turkey.



14th of July, 6am,: it is minus 12 celsius, the sky is crystal clear, and the men are busy removing the snow from the yourts, we get ready to leave again. The wakhi yak has disappeared during the night, taking advantage of the storm to quit his duty. We get 2 fresh Kirghize yaks and leaders.



The shepperds leave before us with the herds. The sheep were crying all night long next to the tent for the sudden extreme cold



Hardly any sign of modernity are to be found with the Kirghizes, but a few households have adopted solar panels, which they used for one or two light bulbs for the yurt in the evening.



Sunglasses are another very much sought after item, and the merchants were sporting the latest fashion!



First river crossing, this time we jump on the animals, the water is frozen on the edge



Akbilis lake, altitude 4700 meters, a beautiful day, and nobody around ;-)



Down towards Said Qadam house, back into Wakhi territory



Between Little and Big Pamir



Wakhi Shepherds in their smoked filled summer house



Wakhi women sewing



Wakhis are poorer than Kirghizes, less astute and less proud. The yurts feel luxurious in comparison to the low ceiling rock houses in which the Wakhi shepherds live. Kids in school age stay in the villages down in the Wakhan valley with elderly folks, while the rest of the family move to the pasture for 3 or 4 months.

Cheese making on the house roof. The cheese balls are left to dry 20 days in the sun, becoming "Crut" which the Wakhi and Kirghizes will melt with hot water in the winter, to supplement a meager diet of bread and rice.



Final trekking day: Mataq pass, altitude 4800. The far range of high peaks in the south is the Pakistanese border. The last walk is an exhausting 1500 meters of descent in a rough and steep scree slope.



Back on the back breaking Afghan roads, towards Ishkashim, next to the Amur Daria, bordering Tajikistan



unhappy sheep crossing the river (the platform is above 10 meters above the raging waters). This system is used in most valleys in Badakhshan where bridges have been destroyed



Many Greetings from Afghanistan....



poppy flowers in full blossom shortly before being harvested for opium gum