

A JOURNEY TO THE AFGHAN PAMIR

The Forbidden Corridor of Wakhan

Go Hirai

Introduction

On July 19, 2001, I stood on the eastern edge of Lake Victoria (Zorkul). It lay like a pure blue belt stretching westward between two sepia-colored mountain ranges running in parallel. The altitude was 4,200 m above sea level according to an altimeter (hereinafter expressed as ca. xxxx m). This documentary report is on my third visit to the Wakhan area in the Afghan Pamir since 1999. This journey was successfully completed under a guard provided by Commandant General Masood, who was assassinated by Taliban terrorists in September 2001.

The Afghan (hereafter abbreviated as A-) Pamir refers to the east depth of the Wakhan area which is said to occupy one-tenth of the whole Pamir and consists of three Pamirs: Qalan (Great), Khurd (Little) and Wakhan. The area is adjacent to Tadjikistan, Pakistan and China.

At the end of 19th century, it was decided that the area should belong to Afghan territory as a buffer zone among the three nations mentioned above (i.e. Imperial Russia, British India and China). Since the beginning of the 20th century, entry into the area has been under strict control. To the best of my knowledge, only A. Stein (1915), H.W. Tilman (1947), R. & S. Michaud (1967), Kabul University (1971), S. & A. Gladiew (1968), *et al.* walked into the area. They stepped mostly into Khurd Pamir area, except for A. Stein.

Ishkashim – Qala • I • Panja - Sarhad

After stopping at Ishkashim at the western extremity of Wakhan by crossing the border, we arrived on June 20 by a 4WD car at Qala-i-Panja, 100 km from Ishkashim to the east of the River Oxus (Amu Darya) along its left bank. The river runs along a valley between the Shakhdarrha range to the south and the East Hindu-Kush range to the north.

It was a village of Wakhi (Wakhan's people) with a population of a few hundred. On the river side, there are the ruins of a castle of a past Mir (a local king). The river was about 100 m wide to the opposite bank (Tadjikistan). It can be easily forded in the dry season. In February 1838, J. Wood crossed the river in this area and marched along the right bank of the Darya Pamir (Pamir River) upstream to discover its origin: Lake

Victoria. The downstream area from here is also called Ab-i-Panj (Five-River).

The following day, we moved to Sarhad, 80 km to the east. The party consisted of an interpreter, an Afghani cook, a guard and myself. At a point 6 km ahead, a tributary of the Oxus (Pamir River) issuing from Lake Victoria flows into the main stream.

The Selsela Wakhan (Wakhan Range) extends eastward for 160 km, flanked by the two rivers. Last summer (2000) I visited Lake Victoria in Qalan Pamir along the former. This time we walked along the latter. At Sust, 10 km to the east, we crossed a suspension bridge built by former USSR troops to the right bank. We had seen similar bridges at three points before reaching Sarhad. Every bridge was built over a rapid stream point where the river bed was narrowed to about 20 m. A rough truck road of gravel and crushed stones along the river ran in the valley or on the rock bank.

After encampment, we passed by Koh-i-Baba Tangi (6513m) soaring on the left bank and crossed Issik Jurab (Valley), the core part of the Selsela Wakhan, where there are Koh-i-Khan (ca. 6020m) and the highest Koh-i-Balandarin (ca. 6286m). Sarhad (ca. 4200m) was near at hand. We saw three hot springs by the road.

The northern slope of the snowy East Hindu-Kush Range extending to the Boroghil Uwin pass (3840m) was some 10 km away in the far south. One darya (river) coming down from the range joined the main stream and the river bed was stony. Here, in the fields watered through the valleys of the Selsela Wakhan Range in the north, we saw wheat, barley, and several kinds of beans and potatoes.

A number of *guspan* (fat-rumped sheep) and horses, and cattle (not raised east of this area) were grazing in the pasture. In the east, *kash-gow* (yak) replaced them. This was the east limit of farming for Wakhi. Apricot disappeared in the Baba Tangi area. Large trees also disappeared in this area, such as willows, birches and aspens surrounding mud and stone houses scattered on both sides of the alluvial fan. The maximum temperature here was 54 °C and the minimum night temperature was 2 °C.

People say that on the west side of the confluence, there was a Tibetan Lien-yun that was captured by Chinese general Kao Hsien-chih in the 8th century. One of his three battalions that captured it came down from Qalan Pamir via the "Northern Gorge" to the south and gathered here. Our purposes of study were as follows:

- (1) to take a route directly reaching Sarhad from the Qalan Pamir side without taking the route along Spat Kish Jurab (Valley) to Bahark, a half day eastward course that we covered in 2000.

(2) to find out about how Kirghizi (Kirghiz race), who do not care for any vegetables, fruits and green tea, obtain their necessary vitamin C.

Langar - Carwan Balaci - Bozai Gumbaz - Wakhjir Bil

On the second day, our caravan with two horses and two donkeys headed for Bozai Gumbaz, 40 km to the east. A wide spreading river bed suddenly turned into a deep gorge which lasted as far as immediately before Bozai Gumbaz. Crossing the pass, we repeatedly made detours on mountainside and the rapids. On the third day, we passed Langar with Jialat (Holy place) and camped at Mirza Murat where several Wakhi families were settled.

On the fourth day, after passing by the stone tower of "Carwan Balaci" identified by Stein as the "Red Buddha" referred to in Kao Hsien-chih's record of war quoted by Tilman, we saw the end of gorge soon. People cross a suspension bridge there, and go down along the left bank. Changing the direction to the south at Bai Kra of Wakhi's *Iraq* (grazing encampment in summer only), they go over Irshad Uwin (4925 m), and reach Baba Gumdy, one of Pakistan Jialat. In the eastern vicinity of the suspension bridge, two rivers meet; a muddy main stream (locally called Ab-i-Wakhan) issuing from Wakhjir Bil (Uwin or Pass) and a clear tributary (called Darya Khurd Pamir) from eastern Khurd Pamir. The confluence was in a stony river bed of a few hundred meters wide.

We proceeded through the arid right bank to Bozai Gumbaz, Kirghizi's graveyard, where Kirghizi's living grazing encampment (hereafter abbreviated to l.g.e.) started. Gumbaz, the grave, is built with a conic tower on a square base made of adobe and is approximately three meters high. There were over ten graves standing there. However, no one could identify the grave of Bozai (a personal name). Here was the headquarters of Soviet troops, which came via Gunji Bai on the border at the time of the invasion. Rusty entangled barbed wires were left over. On the steppe in the valleys of the Selsela Wakhan Range branches extending for several kilometers to the north, there were encampments Ak Belius, summer l.g.e. of Wakhjir way residents.

On the fifth day, we went along the right bank of the main stream. Bushes of slim willows, birches, low conifers and wild roses were absent on the west side of Langar. Instead, *Showaq*, a firmly rooted grass, and *ote*, dry dung of *zou*, replaced them as fuel. Around noon, I saw several *yurts* (portable tent house) and Kirghizi for the first time. The *yurt* is made over 50 willow stems and home made sheep felt. They belong to the Sunnis. The control on women's behavior is not so strict as in Wakhi who are Ismailis.

They exposed their faces. Married women wear white shawls covering deep round caps of colored embroideries down below the waists. Those with crimson colored shawls are unmarried women. Men wear rubber shoes or black boots of *zou* skin. At first glance, you can tell Kirghizi from Wakhi and other races. They are of Turko-Mongolian descent. Incidentally, Wakhi call themselves descendents of Alexander the Great. However, they are regarded as Tadjik race.

Assembling a *yurt* takes three hours by several people, and disassembling takes two hours. Kirghizi move in summer and winter (some move three times a year including spring) with loaded *zou* and the family members, and all the cattle such as *zous*, *quis* (*guspan* or fat-rumped sheep), goats, and a small number of horses and donkeys. Most of their family members remain in a settled place. Wakhjir way (or valley) is a winter (occasionally even spring) l.g.e. All move to the Ak Belius in summer.

On the next day, we camped in steppe. I found here and there the cranial bones of Marco Polo's sheep (*Ovis poli* or big wild sheep) with horns, some as long as 1.5 m, on pile *ote*, a fuel. The river beach continued for three km to the southeast and ended at a glacier end.

On the seventh day, we marched through a steep slope for 200 m along the main stream then ascended slowly to the east in the valley of desert and steppe a few hundred meters wide. The southern mountain range was higher and we saw small glaciers at 5,000 m and above. Passing through boulders, we reached a 1.5 km wide shoulder of Wakhjir Bil pass (ca. 4950m) in three hours after the departure, where there was a boundary mark with descriptions in the Afghan and Chinese languages. To the far east, there were snowy mountains more or less of the same height, 5,000 m.

A lengthy glacier a few hundred m wide ran down from the north. When we approached the glacier end several hundred meters ahead, we found an exposed moraine 30 m high and springing water which I didn't see two years before. That was the headwaters of the River Oxus. Water running from several points gathered and formed one stream. It soon separated into several branches then joined a southern stream. Forming a few clear streams each several meters wide, they flowed down westward.

On the following day, we ascended along the river beach on the right bank extending southeastward for a while. A muddy tributary soon disappeared. It was issuing from the end of a long glacier to the south not far from Pakistan.

Chaqumaqtin Kul - Qala Jilga - Sayutik - Ak Belius

On the ninth day, we returned by the same route. All Kirghizi had already settled in its summer I.g.e. Their stone-piled huts were deserted. On the morning of the second day, the way heading for the north made a sharp turn eastward for Khurd Pamir. Passing by a salty hot spring with crystallized salt in around, we saw a small stream of the Khurd Pamir River disappearing in a northern valley toward its source. They went through a plateau-like desert and came to Chaqumaqtin Kul (Lake), amid sphagnum and low plants. We were attacked by a swarm of mosquitoes there. The distance from the south of the lake to the mountain foot was assumed to be up to 1 km. In 10 km ahead, we passed the east end of the lake from where the Ak Su (White stream) issued.

On the tenth day, we passed by several groups of *yurts* with many *zous* and *quis*, then arrived at Qala Jilga. There lived more than a dozen people in six *yurts* and two stone cottages accommodating a group of soldiers. We stayed at a *yurt* of Mr. Abdul Rasheed Khan, a chieftain of Khurd Pamir. He told me that their latest Kirghizi population in the A-Pamir was a little over 700.

During the following two days, we visited Sayutik (A-Kirghizi's easternmost I.g.e.), 20 km east of Qala Jigla, near Gunji Bai on the Tadzhikistan border, and returned. We saw Ak Su with 200 m long river beds in the north of the desert in Sayutik, a broad valley 4 km wide, and three rocky peaks of over 6,000 m covered with snow. They seemed to be either in Tadzhikistan or China.

On July 9, we left Qala Jilga and went along the northern bank of Chaqumaqtin Kul for Ak Belius, which was the starting point of Qalan Pamir.

Kirghizi's Foods - Northern Bank of Chaqumaqtin Kul - Heaviest Opium Smoker - Ak Belius

The daily foods of Kirghizi include 30 cm-across round thin *non* (Bread), *luogan* (butter), *kaimak* (cream), *istach* (cheese), and *kara chai* (milk tea seasoned with rock salt).

The salt content of *kara chai* was 0.3 to 0.6%. To important guests, they sometimes serve boiled sheep heads, mutton, soup, pie-like *katama* with *kaimak* inside, and *shier brinji* (boiled rice in milk). For portable ration, they prepare *bulsak* (small fried bread). Flour and daily necessities are obtained in the *bazaar* or barter with a caravan merchant. The items are *luogan*, *kurt*, woolen felt and cow hide. A small amount of flour is also supplied annually by Agha Khan, the leader of local Ismaili. In summer, they eat stems of a wild grass called *chigri* that grows by a small stream. They sometimes mix something like millet grains with *kaimak*. In summer and winter, they eat small onions

called *piaz*. However, these can hardly be considered sufficient for their vitamin C needs.

On the following day, we crossed a limpid stream of Ak Su – 20 m wide - to the north bank at the east end (ca. 4020m) of Chaqumaqtin Kul. The Ak Su formed a large pool several hundred m downstream, where the water turned slightly opaque and flowed further down. Standing on a dike-like height (ca. 4050m) at the east end, we saw a small rock, which is called Chaqumaq (making fire) tin (stone), in the lake on the north side; the name of the lake was taken from this rock. Chilap is not the name of the lake but of a nearby place. The mountain range on the north bank of the lake was lower in height than the northern, gentle, and with small foothills. The valley was even smaller than that along the Ak Su. Residential areas of Kirghizi in winter were mostly located on the left (northern) bank of the Ak Su. People say that on the left bank they have less snow in winter than the southern (right) bank. The foot of the mountain was a desert with grassy spots. We saw tracks of large vehicles of former USSR troops continuing toward Bozai Gumbaz.

On that day, we stayed at the l.g.e. of the man of the greatest wealth in A-Pamir, Apandi Boi (rich man or local owner). He is a notorious *taryak* (crude opium) smoker and daily consumes one *turi* (about 18 g) a day. Ten *turis* of opium was bartered for two sheep. Over a half of the raw material for the total heroin consumed in Europe is said to be exported from Afghanistan. On the next day, we camped near the *Yurt* of Bostan Boi in Ak Belius.

Going Over 4 Bils - Qalan Pamir - Sari Kul (Lake Victoria)

After two day's encampment, we crossed the Ak Belius Bil, Grundy (another name: Warum) Bil and Kara Bil, and headed northwestward. At Shower Bil (ca. 4950m), we changed the direction to the north, and reached the west end of Sari (Yellow) Kul on the fifth day. The lake is called Zor (Great) Kul, too. At the lake debouchment (ca. 4100m), we saw a clear stream about 100 m wide flowing down at a rate of 1 m/s westward. The Tadzhikistan territory on the north bank forms dike-like heights. In the low water season, cattle wade the stream. We went eastward on a gentle mountain foot extending 3 to 4 km in the eastern part of the Selsela Wakhan Range. The foothills always looked sepia-colored all over. Their spurs dropped down to the lake every several kilometers. In the middle of the foothills, a low dike-like terrace extended toward the lake. There we saw the summer l.g.e. of Kirghizi in Qalan Pamir which looked like a green patch. There

were more than a dozen *yurts*. A herd of cattle numbering well over a hundred were grazing. The pasture was some 100 m above the lake and extended 2 to 3 km toward the foothill. In winter the cattle move down to the lake front. On July 19, we reached the easternmost end (ca. 4150m) of the lake stretching east and west for about 18 km. The latitude was 37 ° 26' N and the longitude, 73 ° 42' E, as GPS indicated. To the east was Tadjikistan; on a slightly high hill, there was a stone piled tower with a horn of Marco Polo's sheep erected in the middle of two signs indicating the national borders. The Pamir River running west of the lake also divides the two nations. Kirghizi in Qalan Pamir go down to Khargush in Tadjikistan, one and half days down-stream from the western end of the lake, to receive flour from Agha Khan around May. The Pamir River at that time can be forded easily.

On the way back, we took a route on the south side of the lake. The Selsela Wakhan Range was 1,000 m or more above the lake level. To the west, a glacier was seen. The hilly northern Tadjikistan side was a few hundred meters lower. The northern foot was slightly narrower and looked more gentle. The green field seemed smaller. Nothing like houses or cattle could be observed. There was a road above the bank. There were more spurs, some extending toward the river and formed 1 km-wide channels. On July 21 we passed through desert and steppe and camped in the steppe in due north of Shower Bil (ca. 4300m), where people had remained for the winter I.g.e. In summer 2000, we experienced the night temperature dropping to -15 ° due to snow. This time, the daytime temperature was 13 ° and it fell to -3 ° at night.

Crossing Great Pamir; Shower Bil - Shakhdarrha - Sarhad; (Northern Gorge)

On July 22, we ascended for three hours on an approximately 600 m long rocky zigzag foot path toward the Shower Bil. No grass strips were observed on the way. Right after the pass, we descended on a glacier end a few hundred meters wide to the south. On the way I changed my riding horse for a sure-footed *zou*. In two hours, we came down to a small grass field. A stream issuing from the glacier had grown into a 10 m wide rapid stream. Its banks in the east and west made lush pastures, and dense growths of 60-cm-tall wild onion lasted over 5 km. Valleys in the east and west were up to 1 km long. In the evening, we stayed in Wakhi's *Iraq* around the Sarhad where hundreds of sheep and yak were put out to graze. We saw people making *pamir* (cheese) in a few huts of piled stone. Wakhi churn milk in casks to make *luogan* (butter) and dry the condensed whey under sunlight to make kurt. Kirghizi ferment kaimak in sheep stomachs over one summer to make *luogan*.

On the second day, we went down along a raging torrent called Shakhdarrha for about one hour and crossed it, riding a yak. The stream joined the Spat Kish Jurab several kilometers to the south, beyond one mountain eastward where we had taken a journey last summer, and flowed into the main stream at Baharak. We returned the animals and the guide, and changed the direction to the south. Crossing two Uwins (ca. 4000m), we camped in a depression.

On the third day, it was unusually rainy. We hastily descended in the rain for 1,000 m toward Sarhad. This took us two hours. The rain was over on the way and we had a clear view of the opposite bank of the Oxus. Crossing the A-Great Pamir is achievable in two days under favorable conditions. The battalion of Kao Hsien-chih probably took this route providing sufficient pasture. A few days later we crossed the border and left Wakhan.



Glacier and yaks at the southern basin of Shower Bil (Go Hirai)



The eastern end of Lake Chaqumaq (Go Hirai)



A opium smoker Apandi Boi at the grazing encampment (Go Hirai)



Koyo Zum a, view from Borughil Pass (Go Hirai)



Kirghizi family in the Yurt at Sarma Kol beside Lake Victoria (Go Hirai)

