

Tajik-Afghan Border Trade in No Man's Land

Article # :	29384		
Category :	CULTURE > CROSSROADS		
Issue Date :	11 / 2013	→ Print → Close	
File Size :	1,610 Words	Page :	N/A
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We awoke to a bright sunny morning and to the sound of the river gushing down the valley. We continued along the M41, also known as the Pamir Highway, towards Khorog, the capital of GBAO, the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province in eastern Tajikistan. The *Stans* tend to conjure up images of war and poverty and most would never dream of holidaying here. After all, there are plenty of negative stereotypes attending this region. "Ta-what?" everyone asked when I told them where I was going on holiday. "I have never even heard of it", I was promptly informed. Yet, the *Stans* offer some of the world's most dramatic landscapes of jagged mountains, turquoise lakes, steaming geysers and endemic wildlife.



Tajikistan is the poorest of the ex Soviet Republics, and I was intrigued to see how much power and influence Russia and the old Soviet regime still exerted here, contrasting dramatically with neighboring Afghanistan, a land the Soviets never managed to control. The country was on a road to peace following a bloody civil war that tore the country apart for most of the '90s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. I wanted to know what relationships were like between the two countries since Tajikistan gained independence.

Tajikistan has long been of strategic importance in the region and it was in the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush that the Great Game between Russia and Britain was played out in the 19th century. During the Soviet occupation, Tajikistan was a vital supply route for Soviet military operations in Afghanistan.

The Pamirs are among the highest mountains on the planet, and are commonly referred to as "The Roof the World". The Pamir Highway, now a dusty dirt track with the occasional paved stretch dotted with potholes, was built by Soviet engineers in the 1930's as a means to control this remote outpost of the USSR's expanding empire. It snakes its way through a series of valleys and follows the path of the river Panj below, which acts as a border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Afghan villages dotted the neighboring mountainside, just a stone's throw away across the river's emerald green waters. The Afghan dirt track that paralleled ours soon morphed into a stony path, before withering into nothing, swallowed up by jagged rock. Ironically, due to the lack of road infrastructure, the

Afghan police have to patrol their own border from Tajik soil. A Toyota Hilux rushed past us at breakneck speed. Four Afghan men with masked faces clutched onto their AK47s as they clung onto the sides of the pickup's hatchback.

We were on our way to a market along the border with Afghanistan, where Tajik and Afghan traders meet weekly to exchange their goods. What better place than at a market to experience the true relationship between these two peoples? Various Afghan markets, as they are referred to on this side of the frontier, attract crowds along the bordering river, the largest of all being that of Ishkashim, which we visited 48 hours later.

Donkeys grazed on our flank of the mountain, while mangy looking goats scuttled across our path, as a shepherd tried to herd the recalcitrant beasts that dismissively hopped in all directions, ignoring the wooden stick that was violently flung around them. At the turn of the road, scrawny cows made their way across the dirt track, our car screeching to a halt and raising clouds of dust. An old man apathetically sat at the side of the road on a wooden spindly chair, fingering his coarse grey mustache.

On the Afghan side, a cluster of mud houses blended in with the barren rocky terrain that lay behind. Close to the riverbanks patches of greenery contrasted sharply with the arid surroundings. Half a dozen women wearing bright blue chadors scuttled across the path towards their local village. The two men accompanying them stood out in their immaculate white dress, walking a few feet ahead. Further along, a man fiercely pulled a reluctant donkey laden with goods. It was early morning, yet the sun pounded down on both sides of this border valley, casting a shadow at the bend of the river, which screamed for warmth in the crisp spring air. Yet, it would have to wait for another few hours for a ray of sun to reach its sandy banks. The jade colored waters of the Panj steadily flow west until they converge with those of the Vakhsh, thereafter forming the greatest river of Central Asia, the Amudarya, which flows through Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, eventually spilling into the Aral Sea. At each bend of the river the scenery took on a new personality. Jagged mountains sat cheek by jowl with verdant swathes of green, which in turn blended into infertile patches of land. Three young Afghan girls covered in bright red chadors hurried along the track that had by now narrowed down to a stony path. I soon learned that young Afghan girls traditionally wear red, while elder women must wear blue.



The Ishkashim market takes place on a strip of land that lies in no man's land between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Border police patrol the two frontiers, and control the comings and goings of buyers and sellers, making sure they do not infiltrate the border opposite illegally, by keeping their passports and only returning these on the way back.

A short Tajik policeman wore a khaki green uniform, its insignia strongly resembling that of Russian soldiers I had so often seen in Moscow. We dutifully handed over our passports and were granted access to one of the half a dozen bridges that link Tajikistan to Afghanistan.

Vendors had set up shop on the gravelly courtyard, laying out their goods on handmade blankets or plastic covers they had brought with them. Afghan scarves fluttered in the spring breeze, tied to a rope flung between two posts. Colorful plastic pegs firmly secured items of clothing: synthetic dresses, wool shawls and cotton vests. The snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush cast imposing shadows over the valley below and served as a backdrop to the merchandise that had come from across the border. Ahead lay the Marx and Engels Peaks, its names clear reminders of the Soviet regime that had for decades controlled these lands, until just twenty one years ago.

Afghan traders from various villages travel to the border a day prior to the market, sometimes taking them up to 24 hours by mule or horse to reach the Tajik border. Here they spend the night in mud huts, lighting a fire to cook and to keep themselves warm in the colder months when snow covers the ground. On market day they cross the bridge into no man's land to trade goods.

An elderly man sat crossed legged on a plastic tarp, exhibiting a motley assortment of products for sale. A selection of broomsticks had been carefully laid out in the bottom corner, while a small mound of plastic sandals were strewn to the left. Steel containers dotted the rest of the space, while a rice cooker majestically took first place in the center, Persian script beautifully decorating the upper part which glinted in the sun. Behind him, large plastic bags from the adjacent stall showed a smiley Chinese girl in a marine blue outfit. Chinese products here prevail: plastic sandals, lighters, pocket mirrors. Indian goods are also readily available, as the paper boxes of Indian make up attested. Images of pretty women in red saris with ostentatious decorations advertised the latest Rajasthani fashion. These products reach Tajik soil via Pakistan where they are thereafter sold to Afghan traders. From here they travel north to the Tajik border.

Policemen walked in twos from stall to stall, patrolling the market area. Yet, despite the heavy police presence, the atmosphere was calm and composed. Tajiks and Afghans greeted one another with handshakes and pats on the back. Tajik Somoni and Afghan Afghanis – the country's respective currencies – passed from one coarse hand to another. The importance of this market was clear for both countries, possibly even more so for the Afghans: in a country torn by war, this is one of the few places where merchants can trade their goods in a relatively peaceful environment.

Persian carpets were on display on the sidewall along with a selection of handmade fabrics. A man in traditional Afghan costume sat on his blanket, resting his back against a wooden beam that served as support to the market structure. His dress was of a deep orange-brown color; a grey and black V-neck wool jumper was visible under his grey waistcoat, lending him a certain elegance. His fellow vendor sat on the other side of the post, a large smile stamped on his face.

A large colorful blanket had been carefully laid out on one of the mats. Intrigued, I walked closer to take a further look. Homer Simpson's yellow face beamed up at me, his droopy eyes suggesting a pounding hangover, and a pair of skimpy underwear just about concealing his private parts: "Ladies' Man" it read underneath. "What...?!" I exclaimed to our guide, looking up at the scrawny face of the teetotaller Muslim seller, who was evidently proud of displaying such a piece alongside his other assortment of goods. I was soon informed the Americans had donated the duvet to the war cause in Afghanistan; disinterested and unsure as to what to do with a duvet cover, let alone one with a grossly overweight semi-naked man on it, the Afghan merchant was trying to flog it to the Tajiks. I suspect that by now it may have made its way to the nearby Chinese border, somewhat ironically returning to where it was likely made in the first place.