

The Spring of Fleas and Butterflies

**A journey into the land of the smallest
Afghan ethnic minority, the Kyrgyz nomads.**

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“**Y**ou can’t go any further. ‘Meshkele,’ problems.” Alexander the Great and Marco Polo passed through here, as did Buddhist monks, tsarist troops, Queen Victoria’s spies and an array of adventurers. But we won’t be among them. We’re at the end of the Wakhan Corridor, in the highlands around the Pamir River. But the nation of the nomadic Kyrgyz is a cul de sac, a point of no return. The east wind lurks like a thief. China is a step away. You could hear it singing.

We gather around a stove staring at a broken TV and a live swallow. Haji Osman slices up candy four ways, one piece for each of his grandchildren. He’s known as



Bamyan in Hazarajat or Hazaristan, the homeland of the Hazara people in the central highlands of Afghanistan.

Haji because every day he makes the mythic round trip to Mecca. In the protected Pamir highlands amid impenetrable borders – Tajik, Chinese, Pakistani, and the Hindu Kush Mountain wall that separates it from the rest of Afghanistan – old Osman the Kyrgyz, knight of deserts and steppes, a nomad supreme, keeps Mecca in his heart.

The old man opens a book. It's diary full of stories. In a tiny scrawl are stories of a people, of flour and livestock prices, of an escape from Soviet Kyrgyzstan, of a biblical exodus from Pakistan, where women grew sick because they are forced to wear a veil, the "purdah," despite the brutal heat. Haji Osman scours the battered book and re-

calls the decision of the "kommandhan," Abdul Rashid, his father, not to desert the highlands. There are stories of subterfuge with the Russians, of landmines and closed borders. As a winter guest, I must sign his book. I become a tiny sliver of Kyrgyz history.

By winter, the Kyrgyz, Afghanistan's smallest minority population, disappear at a rate of five to ten percent per year. Women die in childbirth, infants die of bronchitis, men die while dreaming of nonexistent schools where their daughters might be trained as midwives to save their population from extinction. Opium becomes the only way to stave off hunger, blunt the pain, so much



A nomad home in Balkh Province.

Below: A Wakhi "black house" in the Wakhan Corridor.



so that it's even given to infants. A gust of wind opens the double doors and clouds of dust and snow kick up in the dark. No one rushes to close them. Instead, they sit around drinking Chai.

The repertoire of human gestures is limited to the indispensable. Life is too hard for petty movements or any unnecessary efforts. Faces are washed in half-a-glass of water. People sleep in the same clothes they wear daily. No one takes off their boots lest their feet swell. For the first time ever, I see a Muslim with shoes on a prayer rug.

Children play. Their toys are a button, a wire, and a battery. The house is filled with bits and pieces of broken technology, junk hauled through the Baltisan pass, 5,000 meters up, brought back from landfills to be resurrected here. It has its own symbolic value: that somewhere out there is a world.

A hand poking at my sleeping bag wakes me. It's Mir-





za, a Wakhi shepherd; he's picking up wheat grain near a fallen burlap sack. Now, everyone's awake: four Wakhi shepherds, three Kyrgyz shepherds, and a mullah. We light lamps to help with the cleanup, after which, "shab-bakhai," goodnight.

The Wakhi are Tajik Shiites, veteran residents of the region. They're of Ismailist faith, heirs to the Nizaris, an order of the knights of god that combine prayer and violence, like the Teutonic Templars and the Taliban. A phalanx once sacked Mecca and stole the Black Stone, the umma's compass. The Ismailists replaced the idea of martyrdom and waiting virgins with respect for living women; it chose mannered, esoteric rituals over suicide gestures. Their spiritual leader is the Aga Khan IV, a king without land.

The Ismailis of the Wakhan Corridor don't pray, at

Top: Winter Kyrgyz home near Lake Chikmatin, pictured below, in Pamir Khord on the Chinese border.

Two shots of Charai Kambar, the largest refugee camp in Kabul, populated by displaced families from Kandahar and Helmand provinces as well as refugees back from Pakistan and Iran, as well as Kyrgyz nomads.



least I don't see them pray. But they tell me to do so as God commands. Their spiritual dimension is intimate and clandestine. By contrast, the Kyrgyz Sunnis hosting us pray often and at length, this while the Wakhi Shites chat loudly and eat, indifferent to the rituals. The spiritual practices exist symbiotically. Afghanistan never fails to surprise. We sleep together, a foreign woman among men, the woman respected as queen might, and what's more the night is spent in a mosque.

While Afghanistan hosted the Silk Road, a vital Asian trade route, Russian and British officials sketched out the Wakhan Corridor on paper to create an artificial wedge between the two empires during the time of the Great Game, when the two states warred for this rugged territory. It is now among the most isolated of Afghan valleys but also the most secure and the only one not permeated with burkas.





It begins at Iskashim, with its Breughel-like landscapes, some 20 settlements gathered together at an altitude of more than 3,000 meters. There are men with plows, with wooden sledges pulled by oxen; there are rows and rows of birch and aspen; weather and magic are inextricably linked. The “black houses” of the Wakhi, set up like beehives around a central fire, are profoundly revered and protected by countless “fingerprints,” with crow’s feet and the imprint of the hands of children smeared on smoke-blackened walls to protect against the evil eye.

The months are named after Zoroastrian archangels. I descend from the Kyrgyz plateau, westbound toward Iskashim, up and down between sparkling jade and silver peaks. I smell pine, the garlic of the nomads, and sandalwood. Traveling westward is steeped in aroma. The trees come fist, willows like so many lampposts on whose birch wood the mullahs write out their spells. I



Top: Sheva nomad home.

Below: Wakhi dwelling in Sarhad.

Top: Kyrgyz nomads and Wakhi farmers
in Pamir Khord.

Below: Kyrgyz nomad encampment.



sleep on a horse, do laundry in the sun, and cook on the stones using burning yak dung. The dawn and warming sun puts the day in motion, one that continues until sunset. If I kept on going, my horse and I would arrive “home,” like Marco Polo.

Occasionally I climb onto the yak, which gallops around softly, running on light feet like a dancer on the precipice of soaring cliffs. The yak’s soft hair warms my fingers. Before getting to the land of Wakhi, we climb and descend 1,000 meters seven times. We’re on the same road the Kyrgyz trek for months to get to Kabul where they will again plead with the government of Prime Minister Hamid Karzai to send doctors and medicine, to build schools and dispatch teachers. Only traveling with them is the extent of their isolation fully apparent.

Erkichbaj, a nomadic Kyrgyz, is my guide. He has the face of a Sioux Indian. He never speaks. Instead, he points me to gentle part of the slopes and then disappe-





ars. His discretion intrigues me. One night he says cryptically: “I am 40 years old and a tooth. For 200 Afghans I eat opium that’s the size of the tip of my index finger. I do this three times a day for three days. Otherwise I’d collapse into the ravine. I wouldn’t have the strength to walk. I have no wife or children. I married opium.”

The first Wakhi village I reach is called Sarhad. My big Kyrgyz horse greets the Wakhi ponies with a festive neigh. The village awakens. The movement excites my horse, a friendly animal. We’re met by women on horseback smiling broadly and entirely at ease, something alien in much of Afghanistan. They wear bright red skirts, scarves, ribbons, and sequins. Wakhi men run toward us from far away, stumbling over themselves just to get close and shake our hands. At the first Pashtun market, these proud and haughty southern merchants look suspiciously at the wild Shiites touching their women.

It’s spring. The fleas and butterflies have awoken. ●



Top: Kyrgyz nomad children fishing.

Below: The Central Asia institute school in Sarhad.