

DESTINATION TAJIKISTAN

Kidnappings, downtown shootouts, poverty and desperation - Washington DC? No, it's Tajikistan. This beleaguered Central Asian republic has its own flag, a national airline and a scattering of embassies abroad, but despite these emblems of sovereignty it remains a curiously incomplete and terribly troubled country. The north of Tajikistan is in all but name a part of Uzbekistan; the mountainous Pamir region, despite Soviet attempts to populate it, remains almost a vacuum; while the capital, Dushanbe, a city not yet three-quarters of a century old still feels like an apartment awaiting its tenants. The high point of the country's unparalleled scenery are the Pamirs, which dwarf anything found outside Nepal. The Pamir Highway provides all the high-altitude thrills you could ever hope to get without donning crampons.

That Tajikistan was easily the most artificial and ill-equipped of the five Soviet-fashioned Central Asian republics was tragically illustrated by the way it bloodily fell apart as soon as it was free of direct rule from Moscow. Civil war raged until a late-1996 ceasefire, and in mid-1997, Iran, Russia and the United Nations got together to broker a peace agreement. Despite celebratory dancing in the streets of Dushanbe and hopes for a peaceful future, the country has proved far from stable, surviving on a drip feed of credits and loans from Moscow while the Pamiris survive on the largesse of the Aga Khan. Visitors should definitely check the latest security situation before turning up.

Warning

Tajikistan was embroiled in a bloody civil war from 1992 to 1997 after independence let the lid off clan-based rivalries. Somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 people have lost their lives and there are half a million refugees. Although a peace agreement was signed in June 1997 between President Imomali Rakhmonov and Islamic opposition leader Sayid Abdullo Nuri, tension is high and the Afghan border region is still not the kind of place you'd walk your dog. In late 1997 a foreign aid worker was killed; in July 1998 four UN workers were murdered. Though many countries have pulled their citizens out, it is possible to travel in Tajikistan providing you're cautious and listen to local advice about your itinerary. Talk to your foreign office before you leave and find out all the information you can in Dushanbe before venturing out of the city.

Travellers should also note that the economy is in ruins, and in many places trade takes place using a bartering system rather than cash. Food, and just about every other commodity, is in short supply, especially in the mountains. Do not venture out at night in Dushanbe and keep hotel doors locked at all times.

Visas, Embassies & Border Crossings

The Tajikistan Embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, is now located at Tarobiy Kuchasi, 16. The telephone number is: 54 99 66; fax: 54 89 69.

To obtain a Tajikistan visa in Dushanbe, take your visa support letter to the Consular Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan. This is now at 42, Prospekt Rudaki. The telephone number is 21 15 60; fax: 21 02 59. The contact person is G Shahbozov, Consul. At present, only a valid visa for Russia and Kyrgyzstan will give you 72 hours of transit.

Bruno de Cordier, Belgium (Jan 2000)

Travel Tips

One site really worth checking out is <http://www.traveltajikistan.com/>. It is especially useful for information on how and when to get a Tajikistan visa, travel security, OVIR registration, etc.

Bruno de Cordier, Belgium (Jan 2000)

Scams & Warnings

Dushanbe can no longer be considered as safe as before. Shooting sometimes took place during the night, and we heard two very unpleasant stories about western women who were threatened by local gunmen. All official buildings, offices and the better hotels are guarded by armed persons, sometimes wearing uniforms, sometimes not. Quite often, one can notice well-dressed men, carrying pistols in the waist belt. Getting around by day is generally said to be no problem, as long as one stays in the better central areas. At night, it is recommended that you use a car with a local driver/guard.

Our plans to fly from Dushanbe to Khojand and to drive from there to Tashkent had to be cancelled because the Tajik/Uzbek border became a difficult obstacle for travellers. The hostage crisis and the recent fighting triggered by Tajik rebels who entered Krygyzstan on their way to Uzbekistan make people at border checkpoints nervous. We were recommended by locals to avoid those places.

Juerg Mueller, Switzerland, (Sep 99)

HEALTH

Hepatitis A & E, altitude sickness, cholera, diphtheria, typhoid, undulant fever, and a slight risk of malaria in the south. Don't drink the water, even if the locals say it's OK to drink

Money & Costs

Currency: Tajik rubl (R)

Relative Costs:

- Budget meal: US\$1-2
- Moderate restaurant meal: US\$10-20
- Top-end restaurant meal: US\$20-30
- Budget room: US\$1-10
- Mid-range hotel room: US\$40-90

Outside of Dushanbe and Khojand, services are scarce and costs highly unpredictable. As a rough guide, if you twin share in modest hotels, get your food from cheap restaurants and street stalls and travel by bus and train, you should be able to keep daily costs to around US\$25-40 a day. Budgeteers relying on trains, streetside cafes or bazaars and truckers' hostels may need little more than US\$10 a day. Foreigners often pay substantially more than locals for services, and there's not much you can do to avoid this. Watch for budget blowers like imported beer and chocolate bars.

Banks may not even have a currency exchange counter but tourist hotels will often change money. It's often hard to get small bills but you should try to avoid ending up with wads of large notes in local currency since few people can spare much change. In fact, in much of Tajikistan there is a physical scarcity of money so if you do find a supply of *rubls* and the rate is fair, consider changing enough for your whole stay. In the Pamirs, the 'economy' operates on a bartering system. Credit cards are most useful for picking your teeth.

Tipping runs counter to many people's Islamic sense of hospitality, and may even offend them. Shops have fixed prices but bargaining in bazaars is expected.

Attractions

Dushanbe

With a cool backdrop of mountains, lazy tree-lined avenues and pale, oriental-fringed buildings, Dushanbe may be a good-looking city but personality-wise it's a dead loss. It's an historically isolated, backwater that's boring by day and dangerous at night. The large, covered **Barakat market** is what passes for the centre of activity in Dushanbe, though it's not particularly interesting; the city has many other makeshift bazaars but they're harrowing affairs composed of lines of people trying to sell whatever they can find at home - a pair of old shoes, coverless books, a dismantled washing machine motor, anything that somebody might conceivably trade a little cash for.

The city does have two interesting museums: the professional **Museum of Ethnography**, which showcases Tajik art such as pottery, carpets, jewellery and musical instruments, and the **Tajikistan Unified Museum**, which has interesting exhibits on history, natural history and art. It's worth seeing a performance at **Ayni Opera & Ballet Theatre** since it has the finest interior in the city..

Khojand

Khojand (pronounced 'HO-jan') is the capital of northern Tajikistan and the second largest city in the country. It's also one of Tajikistan's oldest towns, founded by Alexander the Great more than 2300 years ago. Commanding the entrance to the Ferghana Valley, Khojand enjoyed great prosperity and its riches spawned palaces, grand mosques and a citadel, before the Mongols steamrollered the city into oblivion in the early 13th century. A less spectacular Khojand was rebuilt and unobtrusively weathered the travails of Central Asian history only to find itself victim to Soviet gerrymandering in 1929 when it was scooped out of the rest of the Ferghana Valley and plonked in the Tajik SSR; the rest of the valley was incorporated into the Uzbek SSR.

Secure behind the Fan Mountains, Khojand has managed to escape the ravages of Tajikistan's civil war, and has always been safe for travel. It remains the wealthiest part of the country, producing two-thirds of the country's industrial output. It's a comfortable, relaxed city with few spectacular attractions, but its pleasant river and grassy parks make it a fine place to drop out for a day or two. Khojand's **Panchshanbe Bazar** is a typical Central Asian market that bombards with sights, sounds and smells. The modest, relatively modern mosque, medrassa and **mausoleum of Sheikh Massal ad-Din** are also worth a visit.

Activities

Much of what would be prime **hiking** territory is prowled by men with weapons - get local advice on where to steer clear in the Pamir. The Fan mountains, at the western end of the Alay range along the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, are far from civil strife and safely accessible. The safest way to go trekking is through a reliable agency and with a guide, though you're advised to bring your own equipment since gear is hard to come by. The best trekking season is between June and September, though be prepared for bad weather at any time.

Getting Around

Daily buses connect Dushanbe with Tashkent and Samarkand.

The only regular air services are between Dushanbe, Khojand and Khorog. There's no train between Dushanbe and Khojand; you have to take the bumpy bus. Other buses go south to Kurgan-Tyube and Kulyab, and as far down as Pyanj and Ayvadz but get advice on how clever it would be to board these services. Buses to the east reach only around 100km (60mi), as far as Komsomolabad. The scarcity of petrol and spare parts means many vehicles spend time off the road - be prepared for long, rough rides, missed connections and vomiting children. If this doesn't appeal, it's often possible to hire a car and driver: taxis and private citizens are often willing to take travellers between cities.

Pamir Highway

The route from Khorog to Osh on the M41 Pamir Highway is a mind-blowing, suspension-wrenching, two day 728km (450mi) traverse on badly-surfaced road that's worth every dizzying headspin you get from the relentless hairpin bends. The road is no pushover since large sections have been ripped away by landslides and avalanches, leaving only precarious, deeply rutted tracks of frozen mud, but the views, the drive across the Pamir plateau and the crossing of the 4655m (15,270ft) Ak-Baital pass are spectacular. Note that there is no accommodation along this highway, so be prepared.