NOT QUITE THE SILK ROAD, TRADE ON AND AROUND THIS BUMPY DIRT TRACK SUSTAINS THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THIS ISOLATED REGION

THE HIGH ROAD TO KYRGYZSTAN

IT IS ONE OF THE HIGHEST AND CRAZIEST DRIVES IN THE WORLD, WHICH IS WHY **CHRIS WRIGHT** JUST COULDN'T RESIST THE PAMIR HIGHWAY

PHOTO: REUTERS

PHOTOS: LONELY PLANET IMAGES (RIVER); REUTERS (TRUCKS)

LEFT: ACROSS THE MEANDERING PANJ RIVER, AFGHANISTAN BECKONS
RIGHT: HEAVILY LADEN TRUCKS STOP FOR A BREAK NEAR THE CHINESE-KYRGYZ BORDER

It is two in the morning when we blow a tyre, 4,000 metres up in the Pamir Mountains and 90 kilometres from the nearest village. It is minus 10 degrees Celsius and we are driving through a blizzard. As the driver sets to changing the wheel in the freezing snow, he hands me a torch and tells me to keep walking in circles around the car. "Watch for wolves," he says.

I could have flown. But where is the fun in that? When a friend at the World Bank invited me to come to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to write about how microfinance works in some of the poorest and most obscure nations on earth, it quickly occurred to us that there was an alternative to the glued-together certain-death turboprop flights that bob and wobble between the mountains separating the two capitals, Dushanbe and Bishkek. We could drive. And doing so would take us on the legendary Pamir Highway — a remote, mountaintop route built by the Soviets in the 1930s and until recently closed to civilian traffic. If we did so, we would need to make it between the two cities in 72 hours, far too little time for comfort. But still, who could refuse such a challenge?

START YOUR ENGINES

Our trip starts in the Tajikistan capital of Dushanbe, after a hefty delay on landing caused by a roaring dust storm. There are not many countries harder for most of us to find on a map, so here are a few things you may not have known. Tajikistan is arguably the poorest of the 15 nations that the Soviet Union dissolved into in 1991, and was crippled further by a catastrophic civil war. Like many Asian nations, it is a bizarre shape without much logic to its borders, bringing together not only Tajiks (and not nearly all of them) but other races, including the Pamirs.

Two days of meetings inform me of something else too: increasingly, women are the future of the place. With tens of thousands of working-age men dead in the civil war, and so many more having gone to Russia for work, often never to return, the burden of moving out of poverty has fallen to the nation's women. I meet Mastura Asoeva, who started out making baskets from home, got a microfinance loan and built a business not only making baskets but teaching others to do so. I meet Khakifa Sobirova, who turned a family bakery business into an entity supporting her daughter's burgeoning embroidery enterprise; and Nazovat Hafizova, who used microfinance to open a beauty parlour. Every microfinance bank head I meet is a woman. The chair of the association of microfinance lenders is a woman. The president of Kyrgyzstan, where our journey will end, is a woman when I visit (she has since stepped down). In this conservative and patriarchal society, it is magnificent to see.

The drive out of Dushanbe is at first calm and non-eventful; a flat and dusty jaunt amid the cotton fields. We have left far too late and it is quickly becoming dark. Which is a mistake, as further

A HOPELESS ROAD, BUILT BY FORCED GERMAN LABOUR UNDER THE SOVIETS DURING WORLD WAR II, AND APPARENTLY BARELY MAINTAINED EVER SINCE

south the highway is set to become a hopeless road, built by forced German labour under the Soviets during World War II, and apparently barely maintained ever since. Soon, we lose our way in riverbeds, a bouncing and slamming of axles in the dark. But the mood is enlivened when the driver points across a river at hills on the other side, announcing: "Afghanistan".

We had not known we were taking a route this far south. In fact, we follow the Panj river — Tajikistan on one bank, Afghanistan the other, sometimes just a mere 30 metres away — for several hundred kilometres. At first we travel it at night, catching glimpses of village lights across the river, and sometimes motorbikes, flashing lights mischievously at us and alarming the drivers. Occasionally we pass a troop of local soldiers, staring across the river. In groups of four they face the blackness, looking for opium smugglers. Big trucks from China trundle by. We pass a car, broken down; we are not allowed to stop, the drivers say. A goat herder appears in the darkness, shoving hundreds of sheep up a road on this barren hillside; it is difficult to think of what they could possibly eat. The road condition declines again, to rubble, like a *wadi* (dry stream bed). Cows and dogs appear in the way. A steady stream of remotely located police flag us down and administer curious shakedowns around our visas.

Progress is slow and it is 3am before we get to Kalaikhum, a border town around 400 kilometres from Dushanbe. We stop at what seems to be a guesthouse, and Lotte, my travelling companion, emerges with high expectations. "We need separate rooms." "There is one room." She looks alarmed. "Oh. Well we'll need separate beds." There is an uncomfortable silence. "Beds? There are no beds." It hardly matters: we unroll our sleeping bags

THE DRIVE TOOK 75 HOURS, BUT FLYING FROM DUSHANBE TO BISHKEK WOULD HAVE TAKEN A LITTLE OVER TWO HOURS

on the carpeted floor of the modest wooden house and are quickly asleep.

CRUISING ALONG

A few hours later we wake up to the smiles of local young women with golden teeth. Back on the road, we have our clearest view of Afghanistan, as life goes on as normal across the river, following a track parallel to the road we drive on. It looks good. Passing the footbridges, which do not look to be marshalled with particular vigour, it is tempting to cross and see what looks so ordinary from a distance: people panning for gold on riverbanks, women carrying their loads on their heads, bikes and donkeys navigating the cliff-hewn path. There is no sense of threat from them, but stories abound of gunshots across the river; the worst that we get this time is a boy with a slingshot aiming rocks at our Land Cruiser.

A drive along this distance of border brings renewed sympathy for any attempt to control the drug trade. Tajikistan is at the heart of it, with not enough enforcement resources; a few people policing the river is nothing compared to the apparent ease of crossing. There are places where it looks calm enough to cross on foot, and countless places where a simple rowboat would do the job.

This is a poor and fairly desolate place, yet there's evidence of skills forgotten in so many other places. The dry stonewalling is immaculate, perfect: you simply cannot see it in Britain anymore. The roads are inconsistent, though crews from Italy, Iran and Turkey are doing their best to alleviate it, with mixed results.

We continue among the cows and the A-frame wooden electricity pylons, to the town of Khorog. This is the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, or GBAO: a separately administered part of the country which requires separate permits beyond the original visa, a perennial cause of delay for foreigners hoping to visit the region.

This is Aga Khan territory: a place where the spiritual leader of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims is revered not just as a leader and prophet, but as a living god. Here, in a place where things got so bad during the civil war that money ceased to exist and the entire economy shifted to a barter system, we can now see the impact of the Aga Khan's money, in particular a new Central Asian university. For our part, we meet with friends of the drivers and head to a local bar for a dinner involving the inevitable consumption of mutton. It is delicious, and the Baltika No. 3 Russian beer goes down a treat. The old men start dancing a slow and arms-raised little tango with an expression of great hope that we will join them. But we have agreed that we should press on tonight, to Murgab.

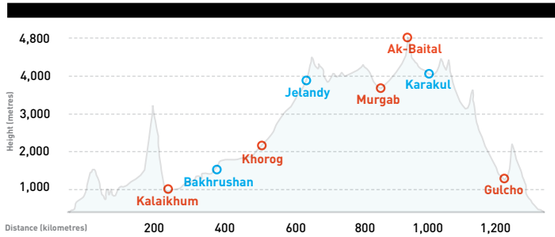
THINGS GOT SO BAD DURING THE CIVIL WAR THAT MONEY CEASED TO EXIST AND THE WHOLE ECONOMY SHIFTED TO A BARTER SYSTEM

THE REAL DEAL

This puts us finally on the Pamir Highway itself, marked by the first car ever to make the journey from Osh to Khorog, now mounted on a plinth. The road is truly an engineering triumph: steering across numerous passes over 4,000 metres high through Tibetan plains, in isolated land near hostile borders. It also has a troubled history as a supply route for Soviet military, not least into Afghanistan.

DRIVING THE MOUNTAINS

ALTITUDE MAP



EN ROUTE STATS

100 MILLIMETRES
AMOUNT OF PRECIPITATION PER YEAR THAT REACHES THE EASTERN PAMIRS, IN THE FORM OF RAIN

OVER 2 METRES
AMOUNT OF PRECIPITATION THE FEDCHENKO GLACIER WEST OF THE HIGHWAY RECEIVES PER YEAR, AS SNOW

4,655 METRES
HIGHEST POINT OF THE PAMIR HIGHWAY, AT THE AK-BAITAL PASS

3,914 METRES
ABOVE SEA LEVEL — LOCATION OF KARAKUL LAKE, THE HIGHEST LAKE IN CENTRAL ASIA

66%
PROPORTION OF KYRGYZSTAN THAT IS RURAL

34%
OF THE COUNTRY EXISTS BELOW THE POVERTY LINE

PHOTOS: CHRIS WRIGHT AND LOTTE PANG MAP: KURT PARTON (THE ILLUSTRATION ROOM)

THE LONG DRIVE

We completed our drive between Dushanbe, in Tajikistan, and Bishkek, in Kyrgyzstan, in a Toyota Land Cruiser. And we needed it. The problem was not so much the Pamir Highway itself, which is mostly paved and in decent condition, but the roads near the Afghanistan border in Tajikistan, which very often involve nothing but a lakebed.

On a trip like this, a four-wheel-drive vehicle is absolutely vital, and they come in many different forms. Anything with an engine with fewer than four cylinders would have been hopeless; ours was six-cylinder.

One thing we had not foreseen when planning for the trip was the lack of decent diesel. Fuel stops were everywhere, but our drivers were very particular: only at Gazprom stations, they said, could they be sure they were not getting fuel that was terribly watered down.

The drivers — Parvez, who was also a fixer responsible for negotiating our many brushes with police, and Umed — represented our most vital assets. Note the plural. Knowing the distance we would cover, in probably half the amount of time that would be sensible, we intentionally found two to help us; so when the hours and distances got too great, one could sleep while the other drove. This greatly increased the cost, but then again, we are still alive.

Water was essential, as were deep-cold sleeping bags, plus a hand-powered torch to fight off the wolves. At the start of the trip, I thought the chunks of fat-riddled lamb the drivers had in a bag were utterly objectionable. By day three, I was coveting them with unspeakable jealousy. And to this day, neither I nor my companion have forgiven the other for failing to bring wine.

Our initial progress is short: within minutes we have hit a roadblock that delays us for an hour while we argue, yet again, about our visas and permits.

It is once again dark and within an hour it begins to snow. We all agree to stop several hundred kilometres earlier than planned, at a town called Jelandy, early along the Pamir Highway. Yet driving in what is now becoming a blizzard, we just can't find it; a whole village lost in the weather. We could turn back, but instead press on. Which is when the tyre blows.

Standing there, looking for wolves in the moonlight, is a low moment of the trip, yet is exactly what we drove out here for in the first place. We change the wheel twice, as the first will not lock to the four-wheel drive. It is seriously cold, though in early October, this is apparently nothing. Later, a guesthouse worker will tell us it gets down to minus 45 Centigrade in mid-winter.

We make the guesthouse at first light, at 5am, and are up again three hours later to get ready to move on. The drivers cannot be roused, and since there is little sense in them being exhausted, I head outside to look around Murgab. Despite a glamorous location in the midst of craggy peaks, there is little to the place itself; until recently electricity alternated between

DRIVING IN WHAT IS BECOMING A BLIZZARD, WE JUST CAN'T FIND THE TOWN, A WHOLE VILLAGE LOST IN THE WEATHER. SO WE PRESS ON — WHICH IS WHEN THE TYRE BLOWS

one half of the town and the other, never simultaneously, no matter how cold. I watch children come to a Japanese-funded well near the guesthouse. They pump with great gusto, often working in pairs, sometimes as young as four or five, putting the water into metal pails and staggering off lopsided with it to their homes. Smoke starts to rise from the houses, as people in big Kyrgyz hats say hello. We can't be far from the border.

Pamiri people, or Ismailis, consider themselves altogether separate from the rest of the country, and pretty much from the world. They took the losing side in the civil war; not surprisingly, little development spending ends up here.

It is a morning filled with confusion, as the drivers hunt for new tyres, and we make our way to a local home for a breakfast that never appears. Inside, children watch Russian reality TV, beamed through an incongruous satellite dish between the yaks and the yurts.

We hit the road and finally see the Pamir Highway in daylight. It is a revelation. Who knows this place is here? Who gets to see this? We do, and what we see is, initially, rather reminiscent of Tatooine, Luke Skywalker's home planet: a clay-red desolation. There is no traffic on this generally excellent road, as the hills slowly become mountains and a glacier appears to the west of the road, a sluggish slide of white and grey down the mountainside. After the first pass, 4,600 metres high, we are alongside the Chinese border fence, which runs just metres from the road. It never used to be Chinese territory, and on most maps, the border is nowhere near here. But Tajikistan surrendered territory in return for assistance in road building, another concession to getting off the bottom rung of economic development. China is not doing anything with the extra land. It definitely doesn't need it. But it is there, a statement of relative strength.

PHOTOS: CHRIS WRIGHT (THE LONG DRIVE, ROAD); GETTY IMAGES (SHEPHERD)

FROM TOP: THE LONG AND LONELY ROAD STRETCHES AHEAD, PROMISING SEVERAL HOURS OF DRIVING TO REACH BISHKEK; A YOUNG SHEPHERD WATCHES A FLOCK OF SHEEP WITH THE HELP OF HIS DONKEY

CROSSING THE BORDER

We reach Karakul lake, formed by a meteorite 10 million years ago, and then a second pass, upon which sits the border. Is there anything quite like a Central Asian border-crossing to fortify the soul, to enforce a vast improvement in your patience? A first round asks us to disclose all our funds in any currency; if it is found to be wrong on the Kyrgyz side, they will pocket the difference. A second round inspects everything we own. Everything. Sleeping pills take some explanation, as do Lotte's long-forgotten vitamins. An army man leafs through my wallet and taps a US$100 bill with a raised eyebrow and a smile. "*Dollarov*!" I explain helpfully, with an intensely moronic expression on my face. He does not take the money. Third is immigration and passport control. Every single step involves a fine or a fee. And that is just the Tajik side. But they do bring a friendly warning. "On the Kyrgyz side, they're drunk already."

AT IMMIGRATION, EVERY STEP INVOLVES A FINE OR A FEE. BUT THEY BRING A FRIENDLY WARNING: "ON THE KYRGYZ SIDE, THEY'RE DRUNK ALREADY"

Next comes a 20-kilometre no man's land, already greener than Tajikistan with a tight-clipped scrub on rolling hills. In this gap, nobody maintains the highway, and at one stage it has disintegrated under flooding. Then the Kyrgyz side, where mercifully they are not drunk, but they do delight in exactly the same process.

We press on into Kyrgyzstan, greener by the moment, with golden crops appearing with the backdrop of the white peaks. The road here is immeasurably better; in places the country looks European, with tall cypress trees that wouldn't look out of place in Tuscany or Provence. It seems far wealthier, though statistically, that is hardly true. We have missed dinner again, but eat yak meat and boiled potatoes out of a plastic bag the drivers brought.

Up here we are amid the patchwork of borders that date from Stalin. They are fabulously irrational, dividing tribes, races, valleys and roads. Should you choose to drive from Osh to Khujand, which it is perfectly sensible to do, you start in Kyrgyzstan, enter Uzbekistan, then Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan again, Kyrgyzstan again and finally Tajikistan, without ever having turned left or right off the road.

Originally we had planned to reach Bishkek tonight but that is now plainly ludicrous. So we settle for spending the night at Osh. It was just over a year ago that ethnic cleansing was taking place here, and there is still an edginess. A police officer has been killed the night we arrive. In the short term though, our priorities are fairly mundane: a shower, separate rooms. Finding both, we toast our good fortune with too much Moldovan red wine.

THE LAST LEG

We are on the road at 6am, believing we will be in Bishkek by lunchtime; we have an afternoon of interviews, and it appears we might meet the President of Kyrgyzstan. But it is clear within an hour how late we are going to be. Partly it is the sheer wealth of livestock on the road: donkeys, sheep, goats, cows, yaks. And the sheer majesty of the scenery: first a reservoir amid jagged rock reminiscent of the Hoover Dam and its surroundings; then a stunning, mountain-fringed lake; then two passes amid vivid white peaks, the green foothills like piles of folded blankets punctuated by railway carriages used as houses, shops and schools. But mainly it is the shakedowns. We are stopped seven times in seven hours in Kyrgyzstan, and fined every time. At one stage the policeman finds Lotte's camera and tells her it is illegal to photograph a gas station. He checks through her photos laboriously; there are no photos of gas stations. He fines us anyway.

We have an IFC sign on the front of the car, referring to the World Bank's financing arm; we stress we are seeing the president. It doesn't work. By the time we take the wrong turn down a one-way street in the outskirts of Bishkek, it is clear we are going straight to an interview, shower or no shower, shave or no shave. I change into a suit in the back of the car, remembering at the last moment that hiking boots don't really go with the look. A mere 75 hours after we set out, almost all spent in the car, we have made it. Not for the president, who has postponed, but a bank's chief executive officer, who welcomes our dishevelled appearance with remarkable savoir faire.

Lotte alerts Facebook with some statistics. Time: 75 hours; showers: one; sleep: 11 hours; out-of-focus photos taken from back of speeding car: about 6,000; travelling companions lost to wolves: zero. Our colleagues who flew in look refreshed. But they lack the fortification that comes from looking for wolves in the middle of the night during a high-altitude blizzard. You simply can't put a price on that. ●

CANNING STOCK ROUTE AUSTRALIA

HALLS CREEK →→→ WILUNA

0 KM — 1,850 KM

The 1,850-kilometre Canning Stock Route between Halls Creek and Wiluna in Western Australia is one of the toughest four-wheel-drive tracks in the world.

It is a traditional stock route, driven in the early 20th century by stockmen wanting to traverse Australia's western deserts with

IT REQUIRES A CONVOY OF VEHICLES, WITH FUEL DROPS ARRANGED IN ADVANCE, AND GALLONS OF WATER

their cattle so as to sell beef in Perth. In 1906, it took surveyor Alfred Canning 14 months to make the journey and find places to sink wells for cattle along the way.

The route was upgraded over the years — particularly in World War II, as an escape route if the north was invaded — but today it is still no more than a rugged four-wheel-drive track. Attempting it requires a convoy of vehicles, with fuel drops arranged in advance, and gallons of water carried. It takes two to three weeks, can only be done in the cooler months of April to September, and involves crossing at least 800 sand hills. "The real kings of the Canning are the six-cylinder diesel Land Cruisers and Patrols," notes *Lonely Planet*.

GROSSGLOCKNER HIGH ALPINE ROAD AUSTRIA

FERLEITEN →→ HEILIGENBLUT

0 KM — 48 KM

For an all-tarmac route of magnificent scenery within easy reach of civilisation, have a go at the Grossglockner High Alpine Road in Austria.

The road runs 48 kilometres from Ferleiten, an easy drive from Salzburg, to beautiful Heiligenblut. Opened in 1935, it is an example of staggering pre-war Alpine engineering. Snow permitting, any car can do it, provided you take it slowly. And this is the only one on this list that we would recommend doing with your kids: the playgrounds at some of the pubs and restaurants along the way have the finest views of any swings and roundabouts in the world.

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): LONELY PLANET IMAGES; AFP; PETER KRIMBACHER; HOLGER ELLGAARD

MANALI-LEH HIGHWAY INDIA

MANALI →→→ LEH, TIBET

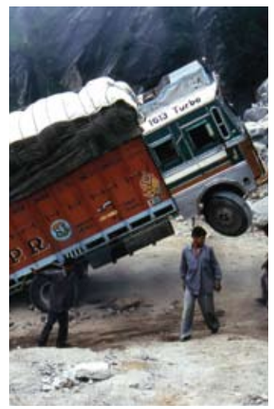
0 KM — 479 KM

I did this on a bus in 1994. At the end of the two-day journey I kissed the road. This is not a trip to take if you're scared of heights. Manali is a hill station and traveller centre where the Himalayas start, in the north

AT THE END OF THE TWO-DAY JOURNEY I KISSED THE ROAD. THIS IS NOT A TRIP TO TAKE IF YOU'RE SCARED OF HEIGHTS

of Himachal Pradesh; Leh is a Tibetan city in Ladakh on a high-altitude plateau, with a palace that brings to mind the Potala Palace of Lhasa. The Indian army built a road between the two, and what a road it is.

It crosses some of the highest mountain passes in the world, in particular Tanglang La, which at over 5,300 metres is one of the highest points any road reaches on earth — many people get altitude sickness. The scenery is breathtaking, but it's also the sights of the other people and traffic that make this extraordinary: the isolation of the road crews, glaring beneath their bandanas, boiling tar and maintaining the road hundreds of miles from anywhere; convoys of Tata trucks, wildly decorated and festooned with Hindu iconography. And the buttock-clenching agony of a bus and a truck trying to pass each other on the same narrow slice of road, a drop of several hundred metres sheer into a river on the side as the wheels flirt with the edge.



THE LONELIEST ROAD IN AMERICA USA

STATELINE OF NEVADA →→→ GREAT BASIN NATIONAL PARK

0 KM — 676 KM

The American southwest is full of the most extraordinary drives. You could spend a year in Utah and Arizona alone and not see everything these rugged, beautiful places have to offer.

For something a bit unusual, consider Route 50, in the US state of Nevada. In 1986, *Life* magazine branded this stretch of road, which cuts straight across the state east-to-west, the Loneliest Road in America. It didn't mean it as a compliment.

The thing is, these days loneliness and isolation are considered quite agreeable things, and Nevada has even used the description in its marketing. The road does often have gaps of utter nothingness, which is is its very appeal: the settlement of Middlegate, which consists of only one building, a roadhouse that has served customers since the days of the Pony Express; or the ghost towns abandoned after the silver mining boom. And it is certainly not without scenery; at the Utah end is the Great Basin National Park, then at the California end, Lake Tahoe. We all need a bit of solitude sometimes.

PARIS-DAKAR RALLY SOUTH AMERICA

MAR DEL PLATA, ARGENTINA →→→ LIMA, PERU

0 KM — 8,300 KM

The first thing to note about this race is that it currently doesn't go anywhere near either Paris, in France, or Dakar, in Senegal, Africa. It used to though; upon inception in 1978 it would start in France, race south through Europe, then through Morocco and the Mauritanian desert into Senegal, and in later years sometimes going via Libya or Algeria. The heart of it was the desert, particularly the sand dunes and canyons of Mauritania's Adrar Region, considered perhaps the most difficult in off-road racing. But in 2008, organisers became aware of a planned terrorist attack on the race in Mauritania; it was called off the day before the start, and has never gone back.

Ever since, it has instead been held in South America. Its 2012 edition began in Argentina's Mar del Plata, before crossing the Andes into Chile and concluding in Lima, Peru. The race itself is a landmark of endurance, and far from safe; the 2012 race saw the 21st competitor death in its history. People do try Paris-Dakar sections outside of the race, but this is true off-road, frontier stuff.