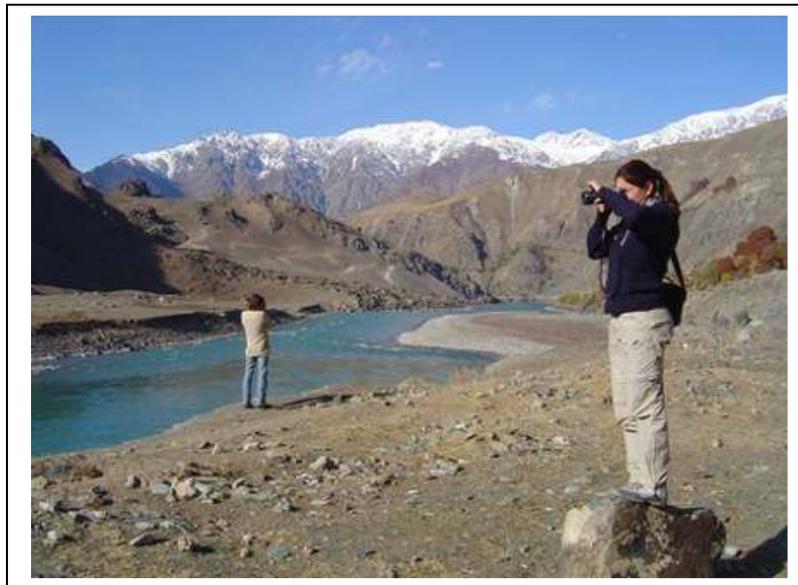




Tajikistan

The Pamirs

**Tourism Product Portfolio
for International Travel Trade**



The Pamirs of Tajikistan

Introduction

The Pamirs, located in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in eastern Tajikistan, are one of the highest mountain ranges in the world, containing peaks over 7000m. The territory comprises a large high plateau area (Murghab district in the east) and several deep valleys running west into the Panj river (in antiquity known as the Oxus; in local languages “panj” means “five” and the name Panj is said to come from the fact that the five main Pamir valleys feed into it). GBAO shares frontiers with China in the east, Kyrgyzstan in the north and Afghanistan in the west and south.



The Pamirs from the air

During soviet period the region was inaccessible to road traffic for as much as six months in winter and was considered as a strategic border area to which special permission was required for travel. It is therefore very much “virgin territory” for tourism, with little relevant infrastructure. As such, it combines extraordinary attractions for adventure and eco-tourism with untouched high-altitude landscapes and many opportunities for walking and trekking. The Pamirs were on one of the southern branches of the Silk Road and possess fortresses and other monuments bearing witness to the traffic of goods and ideas (petroglyphs, Buddhist monasteries, shrines and caravanserais). The “Great Game” was played in the Pamirs.

The population of GBAO comprises a minority of ethnic Kyrgyz on the high plateau (originally nomadic but today mainly sedentary) and several ancient Iranian ethnic groups occupying the valleys and lower lying areas: their hospitality is legendary, as is their love of music and dancing. During the Soviet period, because of their isolation, Pamiris were able to preserve their religion and culture while benefiting from the remarkable social achievements of the USSR (99% literacy and universal health care). They practice a very tolerant form of Islam.

As a result of community-based tourism projects implemented with support of Government of Tajikistan by the Aga Khan Development Network, the European Union and other international agencies, a very basic infrastructure combining a tourist information centre, homestays, trained guides and handicraft production has been put in place and a number of hotels and local tour operators have started business. The aim of the projects currently being implemented is to increase rural livelihoods – village organisations are supported and part of the fees received by homestay owners are returned to a village fund.

A few outbound tour operators in Europe (Switzerland, France, Germany and others) have begun to offer the Pamirs as part of their catalogue. The region is currently attractive mainly to tourists willing to accept a certain amount of adventure in search of exceptional experiences.

Access to Khorog, the capital of the GBAO is by small plane (Yak 40 or Antonov). All flights originate in Dushanbe and are only operated when there is no cloud cover. The alternative road journey takes approximately 12 hours in a 4x4 and offers en route spectacular views of the Panj river and of high mountain passes. The road journey can be broken with attractive home stays in a relaxing natural environment.

There is a developed road network throughout the Tajik Pamirs, extending up to the furthest villages at the head of the valleys and on the high plateau; it was built during the Soviet period and has not been much maintained since independence in 1991 (N.B. the “Pamir Highway” between the Pamirs and Kyrgyzstan was actually started in the 19th century during the “Great Game”). Access to sites and sights is therefore easy, although roads are bumpy and dusty.

According to official statistics from 191 000 tourists visited Tajikistan in 2009, more than 50,000 visited GBAO, but the potential is much higher.

Tourism in the Pamirs is far from self-sustaining and is as yet a fragile flower, but one that is destined to grow in importance as one of the only available sources of long-term sustainable income for the local population.

Itineraries in the Pamirs

The itineraries proposed below are for combined jeep/hiking tours. Specially tailored (and more arduous) trekking tours, with qualified guides, incorporating various destinations described below are easily organised on request (see maps in the Annex and list of trekking routes and details on www.pamirs.org/trekking.htm). Longer hikes can be organised within some of the itineraries described below, with tented accommodation in lieu of Homestays according to visitors' wishes. In all village locations, traditional musical entertainment can be organised with local musicians and dancers on request. N.B. In the Pamirs "a cup of tea" (*Yak piula choy*) is understood to mean a sit-down meal.



An informal musical gathering



"Yak piula hoy" - Photo Surat Toimastov



A musical picnic in the botanical garden

The itineraries assume arrival from Dushanbe by air (tickets can be arranged). Road travel from Dushanbe can also be organised, with one or two interesting overnight stays and sightseeing en route. Given the uncertainty about flights in adverse weather conditions, the road option may be preferred by some tour organisers (add 2 or 3 days to the itineraries described below).

All the tours described below, since they include overnight stays in local homes, provide exceptional opportunities for getting to know the people of the Pamirs and their culture, traditions, legends, music and religion.

Note on traditional Pamiri houses:

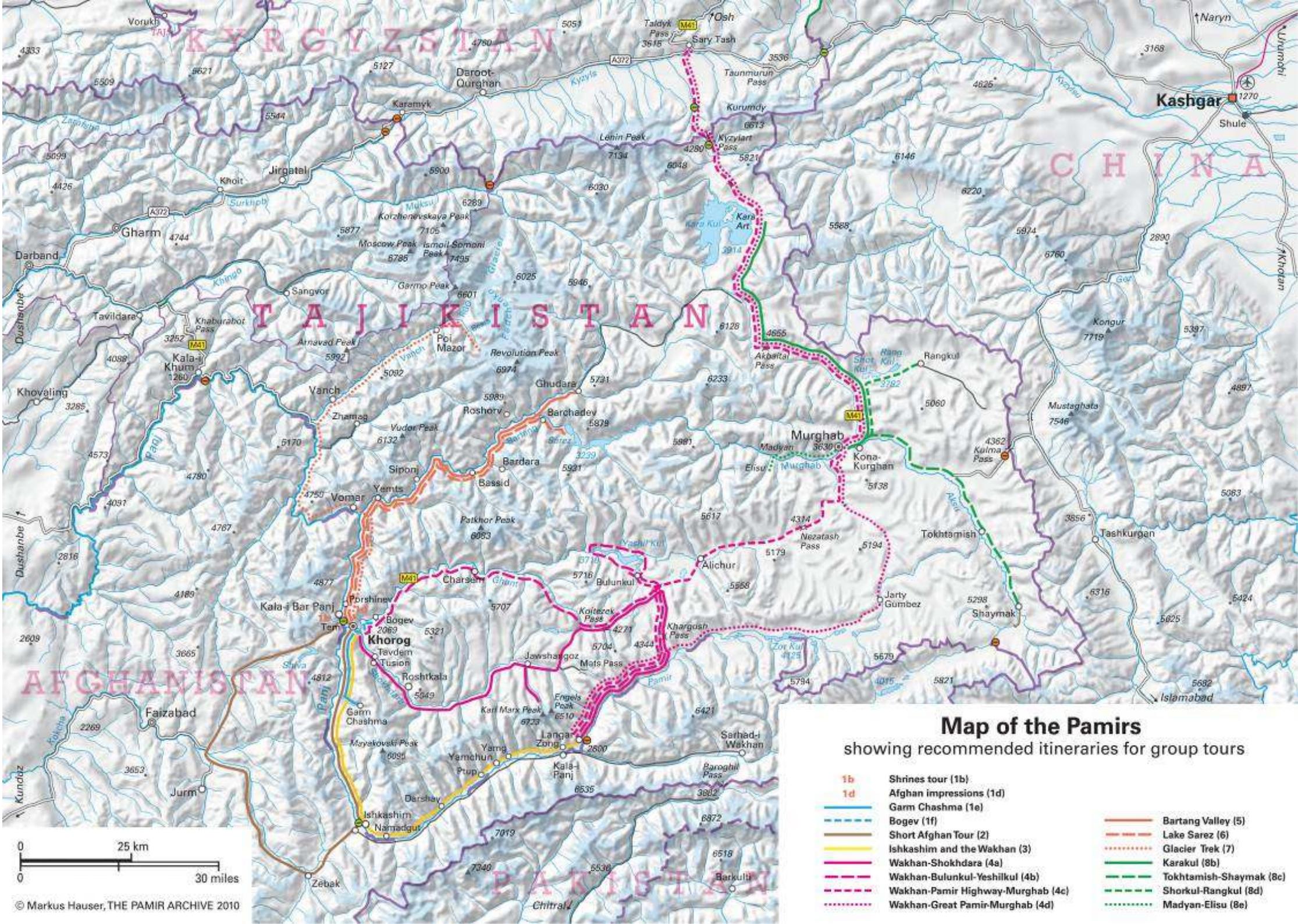
One of the most important repositories of the culture of the Pamirs is the traditional Pamiri house, locally known as 'Chid'. The symbolism of specific structural features of the Pamiri house goes back over two and a half thousand years. It is the symbol of the universe and also the place of private prayer and worship for Pamiri Ismailis (the Ismailis have as yet no mosques in Gorno-Badakhshan) and embodies elements of ancient Aryan philosophy – including Zoroastrianism – many of which have since been assimilated into Pamiri Ismaili tradition. What to the untrained eye looks like a very basic – even primitive – structure, is, for the people who live in it, rich in religious and philosophical meaning. For more information see: www.pamirs.org/pamiri%20house.htm.



Interior of traditional Pamir house

Overview of itineraries in the Pamirs and map

Number of tour (* see map, next page)	Name of itinerary	Number of days
1a)	Town Tour	Day tour
1b)*	Shrines Tour	Day tour
1c)		Day tour
1d)*	Afghan Impressions	Day tour
1e)*	Garm Chashma	Day tour
1f)*	Bogev	Day tour
2)*	Short Afghan Tour	3 – 7 days
3)*	Ishkashim and the Wakhan	2 – 6 days
4a)*	Wakhan – Shokhdara	7 – 8 days
4b)*	Wakhan – Bulunkul – Yeshilkul	8 days
4c)*	Wakhan – Pamir Highway – Murghab	9 days
4d)*	Wakhan – Great Pamir - Murghab	9 days
5)*	Bartang Valley	2 – 10 days
6)*	Lake Sarez	5 days
7)*	Glacier Trek	6 days
8a)	Jailoo Tour	2 – 5 days
8b)*	Karakul	2 days
8c)*	Tokhtamish – Shaymak	Day tour
8d)*	Shorkul - Rangkul	Day tour
8e)	Madyan - Elisu	Day tour



Map of the Pamirs
showing recommended itineraries for group tours

- | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| — 1b | Shrines tour (1b) | — 5 | Bartang Valley (5) |
| - - - 1d | Afghan impressions (1d) | - - - 6 | Lake Sarez (6) |
| — | Garm Chashma (1e) | · · · · · 7 | Glacier Trek (7) |
| - - - | Bogev (1f) | — | Karakul (8b) |
| — | Short Afghan Tour (2) | - - - | Tokhtamish-Shaymak (8c) |
| — | Ishkashim and the Wakhan (3) | · · · · · 8d | Shorkul-Rangkul (8d) |
| — | Wakhan-Shokhdara (4a) | · · · · · | Madyan-Elisu (8e) |
| - - - | Wakhan-Bulunkul-Yeshilkul (4b) | | |
| · · · · · | Wakhan-Pamir Highway-Murghab (4c) | | |
| · · · · · | Wakhan-Great Pami-Murghab (4d) | | |

Description of itineraries in the Pamirs

1) Day Tours from Khorog

1a) Town Tour – comprising:

Bazaar – see how Khorog families do their shopping, talk with traders



Afghan trader at Khorog Afghan market

Afghan Market– Every Saturday Afghan traders are permitted to cross the bridge across the Panj river carrying their wares to a specially created customs-free zone – everything from used auto parts to colourful fabrics and traditional herbal remedies. Buy an Afghan hat, talk to the traders and learn about life in Afghan Badakhshan.



Khorog Regional Museum – with explanations of the history of the Pamir region from the Stone Age and Silk Road to the Great Game and the Soviet Union; see the piano carried on foot from Osh by 20 bearers for the daughter of the Russian Commander in 1914.

Photo Khorog Museum

Picnic in the *Khorog Botanical Garden*, second highest in the world, with its museum and displays.

Khorog Park – recently redesigned

Tea with a Khorog family

Optional:

- Site of *Aga Khan University* Campus with explanation of University's aims and academic programme
- Visit to *Aga Khan Lycée* – first private school in Tajikistan – during term time participate in English-language cross-cultural discussion with students
- Visit to a Khalifa (religious leader) for discussion
- Visit to a musician's home for a concert and dancing
- Visit to *Mountain Societies Development Support Programme* for discussion of development programmes in the Pamirs.

1b) Shrines tour – with explanations by religious leaders; picnic and tea in traditional Pamiri house:

Tem – *Imam Zainulabiddin* (third Ismaili Imam);

Porshinev – *Piri Shoh Nasir* with holy spring and statue of Nasr Khusraw (approx. 1004-1077), who is recognised as one of the great poets of the Persian language and an important Muslim philosopher – in the Ismaili community of Central Asia he is revered as a saint and the founder of Ismailism in the Pamirs; *Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadoni*; *Gumbazi Pir Sayyid Farrukhshoh* with superb calligraphic decoration on the ceiling; *Sumbi Duldul*, named after Hazrat Ali's horse who is reputed to have left a footprint here.



Shrine *Gumbazi Pir Sayyid Farrukhshoh*



Nasr Khusraw in Porshinev village

1c) Accompanied Walks – There are several attractive and easy hikes in and near to Khorog. Day excursions with picnic and guide can be organised (e.g. the *Shrines Tour* above can be done as a walking tour).

1d) Afghan impressions: Guided walking Tour from Khorog across the bridge to Afghanistan and up to the historical site of Kala-i Bar Panj (“Fortress of the upper Panj”), the residence of the rulers of ancient Badakhshan – picnic on the site with views of Khorog, Porshinev and the Panj. A guide will explain the historical background to the site. The round trip is approx. 20km.

In 1880, the pundit and holy man Mukhtar Shah was here spying for the British and described the fortress then:

“Passing for half a mile through the cultivation and hamlets of Bar Panjah village (200 houses) to the right and left I reached the fort of that name with a garden before the entrance to the right. This fort, situated on the left bank of a branch of the Panjah, which river here splits up into three channels, enclosing low forest-covered islands, is an oblong 400 paces east and west and 300 north and south. The walls are more than 20 yards high and 6 yards in thickness, with a rampart and parapets for the protection of the defenders. The wall towards the river is built on a rock rising out of the water. The bastions, eight in number, are, as usual, placed at the corners and intermediately. There is a spring of water in the fort. Behind the fort is a large garden, also well-fortified and well-supplied with all sorts of fruit.”

1e) Garm Chashma – Bathe in the legendary hot spring with reputed magical healing properties. Garm Chashma is located about 35 kilometres south of Khorog up a picturesque side valley from the Panj. Visit shrine to Hazrat Ali. Travel by jeep – Picnic at the hot spring, tea on the way back with a family in a traditional Pamiri house.

1f) Bogev fire temples, ruins of medieval *Kafirkala* fortress and *Mushkilkusho* shrine – ten kilometres from Khorog by jeep, picnic at the site and tea in a traditional Pamiri house (option hike)



Bogev fire temple (Photo Peter Burgess)

2) Short Afghan Tour (3-7 days)

This trip takes the visitor high above the river Panj to the beautiful deep blue Shiva Lake ("Kol-i Shewa – 3,110m) and over the mountains on paths worn by local nomads since time immemorial to Ishkashim, where the Panj is crossed again into Tajikistan.



Sheva Lake, Afghan Badakhshan

John Wood (explorer of Zorkul in 1838 – see below) and Dr. Albert Regel (the Russian explorer who was here in 1882) recorded the beauty and size of the lake. Ole Olufsen, leader of a Danish expedition in 1888-9, noted that the lake was believed by the local people to be full of sea-horses, that “come out of the water to graze, and then pair with the horses in the fields, and this crossing is said to be very good for the breed. To venture out on these lakes is death, as the sea-monsters would immediately pull one down into the deep.”

This isolated mountain area has so far been untouched by security problems. The trip can be undertaken by jeep or on horseback. Homestays are available, but camping is an option.

3) Modular Tours to Ishkashim and the Wakhan (2-6 days)

All these tours are modular in the sense that they can be extended from the preceding tour on the list. All offer spectacular views across the Panj river to Afghanistan and the snow-clad peaks of the Hindu Kush; historical and archaeological sites will be explained by qualified guides.

3a) 2 day tour:



Day 1 – to Ishkashim via Garm Chashma (as above under day tours from Khorog) – Overnight in nearby homestay.

Panj river near Ishkashim



Day 2 – visit: ruins of Silk Road Caravanserai in Nut; *Kakhkaha* fortress, named after the legendary leader of the *Siahposh* (“black robed”) people (now living in Nuristan in Afghanistan), who is reputed to have ruled the Wakhan region in pre-Islamic times; the oldest parts of the fortress are actually dated to the Kushan period (first to third centuries BCE);

Kakhkaha fortress in Namadgut village



Ostoni Shohi Mardon shrine in Namadgut, with fine carving on the doors and the five stone balls with which, according to local legend, Ali juggled when defeating Kakhkaha.

Interior of shrine Ostoni Shohi Mardon

Return to Khorog. Tea in traditional Pamiri house.

Option: Afghan market: every Saturday except in Winter and early Spring (or on official holidays) local inhabitants are permitted to cross the bridge across the Panj to an island in mid-stream where Afghan traders offer their wares, as in Khorog (see above 1a).

3b) 3 day tour: as above.

Day 2 – i) Hike to visit Petroglyphs in Darshay – some dating back to the Kushan period, others with Islamic inscriptions.



Petroglyphs in Darshay and Langar (Photos Vatani Alidodov)



ii) Visit shrine *Shoh Isomuddin* in Ptup village with a fine garden filled with old twisted sacred trees. The shrine is dedicated to Shoh Hasan Medina who is believed to be one of the first Ismaili envoys who preached to and converted the local people.

Shrine *Shoh Isomuddin* in Ptup

iii) Visit the vast fortress complex *Zamr-i-atish-parast* (Fortress of fire worshippers) near Yamchun village, also attributed by legend to Kakhkaha. Parts of this fortress date to the Graeco-Bactrian and Kushan periods (3rd to 1st centuries BCE) – other parts are early mediaeval.



Zamr-i-atish-parast (Fortress of fire worshippers) near Yamchun

iv) *Bibi Fotima* hot spring in Yamchun, believed by the local people to improve female fertility Overnight in nearby home stay. Day 3 – return to Khorog, with tea in traditional Pamiri house.

3c) 4 day tour: as above.

Day 3 – visit:

i) Museum in Yamg village in the residence of the astronomer and scholar Sufi Muboraki Vakhoni (1839-1930). The museum houses his manuscripts and exhibits a collection of traditional tools, musical instruments and clothes and is a very fine example of a traditional Pamiri house with superb carved pillars and beams.

Just outside the museum is the solar calendar used by Sufi Muboraki for determining the start of the Navruz (Spring) festival.



Skylight in Yamg museum



Entrance to Yamg museum



Stupa in Vrang

ii) Vrang village: Buddhist stupa and shrine/museum *Osorkhonai Abdullo Ansori*, dedicated to the mystic and Sufi poet Abdullo Ansori, who lived in the 11th century CE.

Overnight in nearby homestay.

Day 4 – return to Khorog, with tea in traditional Pamiri house.

3d) 5 day tour: as above.

Day 4 – Travel to the village of Langar and hike to see pre-historic Petroglyphs. Visit shrine *Mazori Shoh Kambari Oftob*, meaning literally ‘Holy Place of the Master of the Sun’, which would suggest that, like many other holy places in the Wakhan, it was revered already in pre-Islamic times.

Overnight in nearby homestay. Bactrian camels are bred near Langar and camel trekking can be organised.



Shrine Mazori Shoh Kambari Oftob

Day 5 – Return to Khorog, stopping en route in Zong village for hike to visit site of *Vishimkala* fortress (‘Silk Fortress’ in the Wakhi language, also known by its corresponding Tajik name of *Abreshimkala*) dating from the medieval period. According to legend, the fortress was once covered entirely in silk.



Vishimkala fortress in Zong

4) Wakhan Circuit Tours

4a) Wakhan - Shokhdara (7 - 8 days)

As 5-day Wakhan tour, visit *Vishimkala* on Day 4 and
Day 5 – travel from Langar up the beautiful Pamir river to the Pamir Highway (look out for Bactrian camels en route) and into the upper Shokhdara valley. Overnight in homestay in Jawshangoz village.



Pamir river



Bactrian camels on Pamir river



Karl Marx Peak

Day 6 – hike southwards the Mats Pass with spectacular views of Karl Marx Peak (6,723m) and Engels Peak (6,510m). Return to Jawshangoz. Horses are also available.

Day 7 – return to Khorog, visiting fortresses in Deruj (late Kushan period, 2nd-3rd centuries CE), Shashbuvad (19th century CE) and Roshtkala (7th century CE) and shrine of *Sayyid Jalol Bukhori* in Tavdem village. Tea in traditional Pamiri house.



Shrine of Sayyid Jalol Bukhori



Deruj fortress

Optional additional day hiking above the Shokhdara river with overnight in Tusion village.

4b) Wakhan – Bulunkul - Yeshilkul (8 days)

As 5-day Wakhan tour, visit Vishimkala on Day 4 and

Day 5 – travel from Langar up the beautiful Pamir river to the Pamir Highway and to Bulunkul village for overnight stay.

Days 6 and 7 – visit Bulunkul lake and hike around spectacular Yeshilkul lake (it means green lake and lives up to its name) with Scythian burial grounds and Chinese caravanserai.



Bulunkul



*Caravanserai in Sumantash
Photo Surat Toimastov*



Yeshilkul

Day 8 – return to Khorog down the Pamir Highway, with stop in Bogevo (see 1f above) and tea in traditional Pamiri house.

4c) Wakhan - Pamir Highway - Murghab (9 days)

This and the next trip are especially suited to visitors continuing to Osh and Kyrgyzstan, e.g. with return air flight from Bishkek – road transport to Osh can be organised as well as flights Osh-Bishkek)

As 8-day Wakhan-Bulunkul-Yashilkul tour, and

Day 8 – Bulunkul to Murghab – overnight in yurt.

Day 9 – to Osh (427km) or return to Khorog (311km)

Optional: the itinerary can be shortened by 2 days (days 6 and 7) by excluding the visit to Bulunkul and Yeshilkul and travelling from Langar to Alichur on day 5 – overnight in yurt in Alichur.

4d) Wakhan - Great Pamir - Murghab (9 days)

As 6-day Wakhan tour, visit *Vishimkala* on Day 5 and

Day 6 – travel from Langar up the beautiful Pamir river and through the checkpoint at Khargush to Zorkul lake (the first non-local visitor was Captain John Wood in 1838 and the lake used to be called Wood's Lake or Lake Victoria by British Great Game players) and to the hunting camp at Jarty Gumbez for hot spring bath and overnight stay.



Zorkul



Great Pamir to Bendersky Pass



*Istyk River near
Jarty Gumbez*

Day 7 – hiking around Jarty Gumbez with guide from hunting camp who will show visitors the Scythian burial grounds and (if possible) flocks of Marco Polo sheep (*Ovis Poli*) on the distant hillsides

Day 8 – travel to Murghab for overnight yurt stay

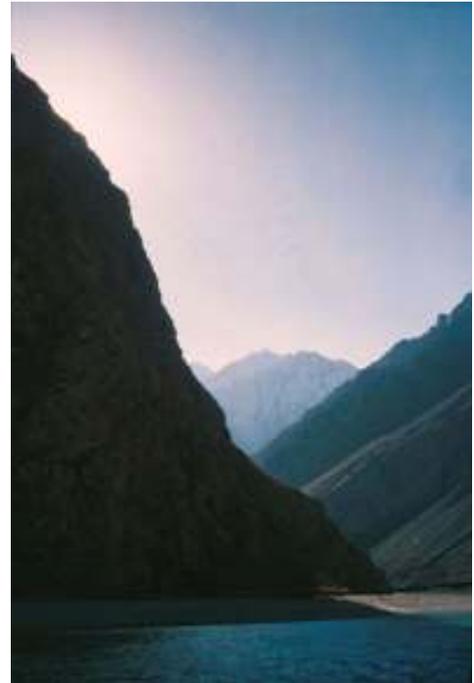
Day 9 – continue to Osh (427km) or return to Khorog (311km)

5) Bartang Valley (various options from 2 to 10 days)

The valley of the Bartang river is one of the most picturesque in the Pamirs (Bartang means “narrow passage” and its people are among the most hospitable, keeping alive many of the old Pamiri traditions.



Yapshorv village (Bartang)



Bartang near Yemts village



Rasuj village (Bartang)

The valley is long (158 km to the last village, Ghudara) and there are many homestays in traditional Pamiri houses on the way. Both jeep and hiking tours can be organised, or a combination of both. A Bartang tour can be combined with the Sarez tour (see below). N.B. This trip and the Sarez tour are best undertaken in late spring, early summer or autumn, as the road along the river is often flooded in the hottest months.

6) Lake Sarez (5 days)



The sapphire-coloured Lake Sarez was formed in 1911 by the blocking of the Murghab river by a massive landslide, provoked by an earthquake. Sarez is the name of the village that lies submerged at its bottom. (N.B. This itinerary requires adequate physical fitness).

Day 1 - Drive from Khorog up the Bartang valley to the spectacularly located village of Barchadev approx. 130km from Khorog). Overnight stay in a traditional Pamiri house.

Day 2 – Sarez is reached in six to eight hours after a fairly steep climb (16km – height difference approx. 800m – Sarez is at 3,339m) up a well-constructed path. Camping.

Lake Sarez (Photo Misha Romanyuk)

Day 3 – Walking and trekking near the lake (a boat trip can be organised). Camping.



Barchadev village

Day 4 – Return to Barchadev. Overnight stay in a traditional Pamiri house.

Day 5 – Return to Khorog – tea in a traditional Pamiri house. Visit shrines in Bardara, Bassid and Vomar.



Carvings in shrine in Bardara village



Shrine in Bassid



Exterior of shrine in Bardara

The tour can be extended on the return journey by one or more overnight stays in the pretty villages en route to Khorog.

7) Glacier Trek (6 days)

The Pamirs contain, of course, many glaciers, among which the *Fedchenko* Glacier, the longest mountain glacier in the world (77km – 270 km²). Willi Rickmer Rickmers, one of the pioneers of European skiing, who traversed several of them in 1913 and again in 1928 as leader of an official German-Soviet expedition, linked the distinctive nature of the Pamirs to their glacial formation. “The glaciers of the Pamirs have certain distinctive features. We owe to the climate the wonderful preservation of those elementary geomorphological shapes and signs of glaciation which, in the Alps, are scoured by the rain and overgrown with vegetation. In the Pamirs, rivers have sawn sharp-edged canyons into sediments without carrying away the walls. The Pamirs occupy a place in the line of transformations between desert and luxuriant jungle. They are sensitive and react quickly, whereas the Alpine glaciers are sluggish, and their tongues have longer in which to melt. Without the glaciers on the Roof of the World, there would not have been empires in Turkestan.”

Ascent to the *Fedchenko* and other high mountain glaciers requires much experience, preparation, and specialised equipment. At the end of the Vanch valley, however, there is a relatively accessible if arduous trekking route to glaciers below the *Fedchenko*. N.B. Glacier trekking is always dangerous and this trip must only be undertaken with qualified mountain guides who know the route well.

Day 1 – Drive from Khorog to Poi Mazor, last village in the Vanch valley. Visit reputed grave of Hazrat Ali. Homestay.

Day 2 – Drive to end of jeepable road beyond Poi Mazor and trek to the snout of the Bears (Medvezhiy) glacier; this gives you a superb view up the steep Russian *Geographical Society* (*Geograficheskogo Obshchestva*) glacier, down which, it is said, Soviet mountaineers used to ski after visiting the Fedchenko glacier) with Peak Garmo (6,595m) at its head. Camping.



Poi Mazor



Bears Glacier
Photo Markus Hauser

Day 3 – Trek along and across the moraine-covered snout of the Bears glacier, wading through its icy stream, across the snout of the *Abdulkhagor* glacier and steep climb up the lateral moraine / ablation valley (3,500m). Nice views of surrounding peaks. Trek across moraine to *Abdulkhagor* Glacier. Camping.

Day 4 – Trek in and out of the ablation valley – tremendous views down and across the plunging, steep crevassed section of the *Abdulkhagor* glacier, free of moraine, with smaller feeder glaciers coming in (4,400 metres). Begin descent to Poi Mazor. Camping.



Peak Garmo

Day 5 – Return to Vanch valley. Overnight in traditional Pamiri house.

Day 6 – Return to Khorog - tea in a traditional Pamiri house.

8) High Plateau Yurt Tours from Murghab

Murghab (“river of birds” - 3,650m) is the main town of the Eastern Pamirs and the centre of the district known also as Murghab. The majority of the population are of Kyrgyz ethnic extraction and until the 1950s led an essentially nomadic way of life. Due to a decrease in numbers of livestock at the end of the Soviet period, the population has become sedentary and fewer migrate to yurt encampments with their livestock in the summer.

The tours listed below all begin in Murghab. They are also “modular” in the sense that they can be combined with, for example, tours **5c** (Wakhan-Pamir Highway-Murghab) and **5d** (Wakhan-Great Pamir-Pamir Highway-Murghab) above. For those visitors who wish to concentrate on the “high plateau experience” these tours can be planned as a combination tour, with Murghab as the primary destination (either from Osh in Kyrgyzstan or from Dushanbe via Khorog) and starting point for all these tours. Day tours can be extended for hiking according to the wishes of visitors. Mountain bikes can be rented in Murghab as another option.

8a) Jailoo tour (2 - 5 days)

Tours of the high summer pastures (‘jailoo’ in the Kyrgyz language), combining yurt accommodation and participation in the life of the herders (most own sheep, goats, yak and cattle), can be organised at variable lengths according to visitors’ wishes. Camel trekking is also available.



Yurt side valley near Murghab



Yurt interior



Preparing the yak for milking

8b) Karakul (2 days)

This tour is best undertaken either on the way out of the Pamirs, or on the way in, in which case only one day need be planned. The impressive high plateau road to Karakul follows the Akbaital river – in places the desert terrain resembles a moonscape (it was once on the bottom of the ocean).



Pamir Highway North of Murghab



Pool on Pamir Highway



Akbaital River

Travel is by jeep and the round trip Murghab-Karakul-Murghab (total 270km) requires two days due to the poor condition of the surface on much of the Pamir Highway. The village of Karakul has several yurt stays and homestays.



Karakul looking south

Karakul is a spectacularly beautiful lake. Despite its name (“Black Lake”), for most of the year the cloudless skies and pure air (3,923m) give it a translucent azure colour. Enjoy the views from different points around the lake – follow in the footsteps of the great Russian scientist, naturalist and explorer Nicolai Severtsov, who was here in 1878 and brought back 20,000 plant specimens, 60 mammals, 350 birds and 20 fish.



Drawings from Nicolai Severtsov’s collections (Pamir Archive – Markus Hauser)

At the northern end of the lake, at a place known as Kara-Art, a track turns off west to pre-historic geoglyphs and Saka graves, located about 500m from the turnoff.

8c) Tokhtamish - Shaymak (day tour)

From Murghab town, at the junction of the Akbaital and Aksu rivers – where the river becomes the Murghab – a road branches off the Pamir Highway to the east, leading past the village of Kona-Kurghan with its interesting graveyard, up the Aksu valley (“White river”) to Tokhtamish and Shaymak (approx. 250km round trip). Travel is by jeep and the road leads first in the direction of the border crossing to China at the Kulma Pass (not open for tourist traffic at the time of writing) and then follows the fence protecting the no-mans-land border area as far as Shaymak. The road offers views of the peak of Mustagh Ata (“Father of the Ice”, 7,546m) in the Tashkurgan Autonomous County in China on the other side of the Sarikol range. It also passes several attractive lakes and ancient burial grounds. Some are of pre-historic Scythian origin. A small homestay is available in Shaymak.



*Ruins of a caravanserai
the road to Shaymak*



Kyzylgorum lake



*View of Mustagh Ata
from Tokhtamishon*

8d) Shorkul - Rangkul (day tour)

Some 19km north of Murghab town on the Pamir Highway, a road leads east to the beautiful iridescent lakes of Shorkul and Rangkul. Travel is by jeep, but the short distance to Rangkul (65km) and the pure scenery make this also an attractive hiking route. There are yurt stays and homestays in the village of Rangkul. Camel trekking can be organised from here.



Shorkul



Rangkul



Opposite Shorkul there are ancient Kyrgyz graves and a large rock outcrop known locally as *Chiragh Tash* ('lamp rock') from the light that supposedly shines from inside a cave on the eastern side some fifty metres from the ground. According to legend, the light comes from the eye of a dragon guarding a treasure in the cave (the entrance to the cave resembles an eye). Two Great Game players, Ney Elias (1885) and Francis Younghusband (1891) were here and recorded the legend.

From Rangkul there are views of the peak of Mustagh Ata ("Father of the Ice", 7,546m) in the Tashkurgan Autonomous County in China on the other side of the Sarikol range.

Chiragh Tash

8e) Madyan-Elisu (day tour)

At the southern entrance to Murghab town a road leads west along the Murghab river to Madyan and, up a side valley, to the hot spring *Elisu*. The valley on the way to Madyan benefits from a micro-climate that is significantly warmer than the rest of Murghab district and the land supports some grain crops and lush pasture. A yurt stay and homestay are available at the hot spring.



Views along the road to Madyan

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