



## **Introduction**

Tajikistan. It had been on our minds for such a long time.

There is an attractive force in the exotic name that makes you want to know more about this landlocked nation, neighbored by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China and Afghanistan.

So little is known about the country in Europe, and when naming it to friends and family, the reaction would often be “Tajiki-what?!”.

Surprisingly, once you start reading about the history of Tajikistan, you find yourself in a different world.

At once, you would find yourself walking in the footsteps of Alexander the Great on his march to the East, on what was then completely unknown ground. The following moment you could see Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna, sitting at his desk, noting his findings on what would grow out to be the fundamentals of modern medicine. You would see the dawn and dusk of majestic empires built around the cities of Bukhara, Xiva, Samarkand and Merv. You would follow traders crossing the highest mountain passes along the Silk Road on their way to China. You would look out over the Pamirs with a climate so harsh that only huge wild sheep could survive in the unforgiving landscape, and you would see that through the eyes of Marco Polo. You would see Kyrgyz herders setting up their yurts surrounded by the enormous peaks of the Hindu Kush in present Afghanistan and the Pamir range in Tajikistan, gathering their cattle for the night as the last rays of sunlight reflected on ancient petroglyphs telling stories of the first human activities in the surrounding valleys and their close coexistence with nature. You would see how the Great Game developed, where Russian and English spies were involved in tactical operations to gain influence in the region. You would see Dushanbe, a

small village only known for its Monday market, become one of the prettiest capitals of Central Asia. You would then see how more and more tourists find their way to the dramatic mountain landscapes and fascinating, hospitable cultures of the region every year. You would see how rich the region is in wildlife, ranging from the enigmatic Bukharan markhor to the largest wild sheep in the world, the Marco Polo Argali, while also hosting a large population of snow leopards and so much more.

Three questions remained:

1. With a cultural and natural heritage this rich, how come we know so little about this country?
2. Can you travel there?
3. How difficult is it to see the indigenous wildlife of the region?

This report will provide more detailed answers as we had to discover most of it on our trip. We hope it is a good read and that it can inspire you to head to the region as well...

## **Practicalities**

### **Visa and flights**

Setting up a trip to Tajikistan takes some preparation if you want to reach the best areas for wildlife viewing. That said, getting there has actually become very straightforward recently, as it is possible to get a tourist e-visa for Tajikistan via an easy online procedure. During the For an additional fee, you can get a permission to visit Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO) as well, which is needed if you want to visit the Pamirs or any of the places we visited on this trip.

We took the Turkish Airlines flight from Brussels to Dushanbe over Istanbul. Prices are reasonable if booked well in advance. If you want to travel the Pamir highway from Kyrgyzstan, flight to Osh or Bishkek are available and often not expensive.

### **When to visit**

We traveled in August as all places are accessible and we wanted to do some longer trekkings higher up in the mountains as well. For wildlife viewing, it is not the best period, but if you have the time to go higher up in the mountains (and enjoy the most scenic views), it is possible to see all the species. In the lower areas, e.g. Dushanbe, temperatures get extremely hot in the summer months.

For easier observations of markhors and other ungulates, the months of October to February are definitely better as all animals can practically be observed from the road. This should also be a good period for snow leopards.

### **Getting around**

To travel along the Pamir Highway, the best option would surely be to rent a car with driver. Driving yourself should be fine, but you will need to deal with some strenuous driving conditions, technical car problems and army and police checkpoints. Do notice that costs easily add up due to the prices of fuel and the long distances to be traveled. Furthermore, speaking at least some basic Russian would be helpful as English is not often spoken along the road. An English speaking driver or an additional English speaking guide could be an option.

Some of the stretches are really remote, especially in the high Pamirs. But more and more touristic infrastructure is becoming available and especially when traveling from Dushanbe to Khorog and in the Wakhan, you will find enough homestays and places to eat along the road. Places like Khorog and Khala-i-Kumb hold some hotels with wi-fi as well.

Different tour operators are available and for nature viewing, H&CAT (Hunting and Conservation Alliance Tajikistan) is definitely the reference. Other tour operators in the region are available and the industry seems to be growing fast. PECTA is another tour provider located in Khorog that could set up the logistics for a trip in the Pamirs and the Wakhan.

### **Traveling with ANCOT – Association for Nature Conservation Organizations in Tajikistan**

All the logistics of our trip were arranged by ANCOT (previously H&CAT – Hunting and Conservation Alliance Tajikistan). And they did an amazingly good job.

At first, we were quite skeptical about traveling with an organization that also organizes hunting tours in the region. However, after some online research and several Skype calls with the founders of the organization, we decided to organize our tour with them.

When several researchers and conservationists were realizing that protecting nature and more specifically mountain ungulates in large parts of Central Asia is almost impossible through the traditional means of protected area establishment -due to the remoteness of the terrain and the hunting habits of local communities-, they started experimenting with a different approach. Instead of imposing a total ban on hunting, they established an umbrella organization for several family or community owned conservancies who profit from sustainable hunting and ecotourism. ONCAT management, almost solely managed by non-hunters, maintains the responsibility to perform assessments of ungulate numbers and to issue the hunting quota per area each year. They also decide on the different investments within the conservancies and related communities, e.g. the building of new tourist infrastructure or schools. Apart from that, they also train local people from rural communities to become tourist guides, with an important focus on the empowerment of local women.

The results have been astonishing when it comes to numbers of mountain ungulates. An example of this is the population of markhors that doubled in certain conservancies within 5-10 years time periods.

We found the H&CAT team extremely inspiring people and very professional in setting up a tour with us which was customized completely. We can warmly recommend them to anybody wishing to travel to Tajikistan for both specific wildlife watching activities as well as to set up trekkings in their

conservation areas, which are mostly located right along the main roads crossing the Pamirs and the Wakhan and are thus easily reached.

For more information, visit <https://tajwildlife.com/about/>.

## **Safety**

End of July 2018, 4 tourists were killed and two others wounded in a deliberate attack in the Danghara region. The attackers were most probably inspired by IS. This withheld many people of going there, but on the other hand, attacks are extremely rare and we did not want to give in to these threats as attacks also occurred in Belgium and other Western European countries. The attackers were caught in the meantime and the Tajik government is undertaking different initiatives to make things safer for tourists. However, as the travel advice from most Western countries states, attacks are possible and you should remain vigilant at any time. Recently there seem to be some tensions around Khorog as well so consult with a local tour operator and your government foreign affairs travel advice in advance.

Personally, during the time of our visit, at no time during our travel have we felt unsafe. On the contrary, we were amazed by the hospitality, genuine interest in other cultures and beauty of almost all people we met in Tajikistan (and we met many). Many of them said that what had happened had touched them deeply as well.

The driver as well as the local guides in the areas we visited were very professional.

## **Recommended literature**

In general, despite some very long days in the car, the landscapes and views are so stunning that we actually did not read a lot at all.

### *Lonely Planet Central Asia*

Needs no further introduction.

### *Sovietistan - Erika Fatland*

A fantastic trip report of a journey through Central Asia. Gives a splendid context of the region's rich history and current society. A very good book to read before, during or after the trip. Or even if you're planning on not going. A must-read.

### *Silk Roads - Peter Frankopan*

If you simply want to know everything about the Silk Road.

### *Birds of Central Asia*

Obviously the best bird guide of the region. Expect to see some species in Tajikistan which are marked blank or unknown on the distribution map.

## **Recommended music for the road**

Very important. You will need some good tunes to hit the road. Most jeeps would probably have AUX or USB connections. Apart from your traditional road singalong songs, consider the following Tajik music:

- Farzona Khurshed - Irresistible danceable Tajik beats. E.g. Yagon Yagon was a clear favourite
- Nigina - Very popular singer as she also covers the more traditional spectrum of Tajik music, e.g. "Oftobak", literally translated "My little sunshine"
- Shabnam Surayo - Another very popular artist with hits like "Nesti Nesti"

### Itinerary and map

Day	Place	Remarks
Fri 10/08	Flight from Brussels to Dushanbe	
Sat 11/08	Drive from Dushanbe to M-Sayod conservancy	
Sun 12/08 - Wed 15/08	M-Sayod	4 day hike in search for markhor and bear
Thu 16/08	Drive from Zigar to Khorog	
Fri 17/08	Drive from Khorog to Darshay village in the Wakhan valley	Morning walk in Khorog and several stops on the way
Sat 18/08 - Tue 21/08	Darshaidara	4 day hike with scenic views over the Wakhan and Hindu Kush mountains
Wed 22/08	Drive from Darshay village to Langar	Stop at Bibi Fotima hot springs and Yamchun fortress
Thu 23/08	Yuz Palang conservancy	1 day walk around Zong
Fri 24/08	Drive from Langar to Alichur	
Sat 25/08 - Sun 26/08	Alichur	
Mon 27/08	Drive from Alichur to Khorog	Visit to Yashikul lake
Tue 28/08	Drive from Khorog to Kisht	Stops on the way to look for large-billed reed warbler
Wed 29-08- Thu 30/08	Kisht	2 day walk in search of markhors
Fri 01/09	Drive from Kist to Dushanbe	
Sat 02/09	Flights back to Istanbul and Brussels	



## Summary of areas visited and species to be seen

### 1. M-Sayod

Absolutely fantastic area along the narrow Pyanj gorge in the Darwaz mountains. Constantly looking out over the irresistible Afghan mountains on the opposite side of the river, this is a perfect spot to see **markhors** year round. In summer, female and young markhors can be seen from the main road but in order to see good numbers of them and to encounter the large males, you need to embark on a 4 day challenging hike in a remote valley. As from October, the animals move down and are easier to see without too much effort throughout the winter.

**Bears** are almost everywhere and we enjoyed fantastic views every morning and evening of at least 5 different individuals.

**Siberian ibexes** are definitely here but, given the low amount of snow during our stay in summer, are easier to see in winter and there are probably better places in summer. We saw at least 4 individuals (females and young) during our visit.

M-Sayod is also said to be the best place to see **snow leopards** in the winter season, with the staff of the reserve being confident that you could see them in a 7 day stay.

### 2. Darshay

Darshay was high on our wish list to visit as we wanted to spend some time in the Wakhan area with its rich history and culture from the Silk Road times. The landscape, spectacular trail with as a highlight

the old overing and the views over the Afghan Hindu Kush Mountains makes this place worth a visit in itself. The place is known for holding a good population of **Siberian ibexes** although we did not see any on a four-day trek. Lots of **long-tailed marmots** though and great stories about large packs of wolves that roam the area.

### 3. Yuz Palang

The Yuz Palang conservation was established to support communities in living together with wildlife after a snow leopard entered a village multiple times. Situated in the mountains above Zong, the place offers the most beautiful views over the confluence of the Wakhan and Pamir rivers. The Himalayan vultures breeding on the ridges are a part of the attraction and, scanning the area on the Afghan side of the river is your best bet to see **Bukharan urials** (although there is no consensus yet on whether they are not Ladakh or even Afghan urials). We managed to see a group of 5 of them from the backyard of our hostel in Langar.

### 4. Alichur

Situated right on the Pamir plateau, this the place to see **Marco Polo sheep** and **Siberian ibexes**. An incredible atmosphere is part of the game as you approach the village of Alichur and realize how remote it is. **Wolves** are frequently seen as are **bears** and snow **leopards**. **Fantastic for birdwatching**, with good wetland areas around the village and some of the key high altitude species around such as Himalayan and Tibetan snowcock. We were lucky to catch a glimpse of a **lynx** on one morning as well.

### 5. Kisht

Absolutely stunning landscape scenery with eroded hills and stretched out pistachio forests. If you decide to do the full day strenuous trekking to the highest point of the area and camp there, you will be rewarded with the most magnificent views and almost guaranteed markhors. Markhors are the main attraction but also bears are often seen. **Probably the easiest place to see large male markhors.**

## Mammals observed

	Species	Place	Remarks
1	Markhor	M-Sayod and Kisht	All different age groups present, although to see the adult males you do have to work hard in the summer months
2	Siberian ibex	M-Sayod and Alichur	First observation of females and young ibexes in M-Sayod. All different age groups in Alichur.
3	Urial	Afghan side of the Wakhan but seen from Langar	Group of 5 urials on a hillside in the early morning. Currently, discussions are ongoing on whether this is Bukharan or Ladakh urial.
4	Marco Polo argali	Langar and Alichur	1 individual crossed the road on the road from Langar to Alichur 15 km from Langar. Multiple groups of different ages seen in Alichur.
5	Bear	M-Sayod	At least 5 different individuals seen in M-Sayod. Tracks seen in Alichur and Kisht
6	Lynx	Alichur	1 brief and far observation by Kristine during an early morning scanning session for lynx and snow leopard
7	Long-tailed marmot	Darshay and the Pamirs	Common once you reach the Pamir plateau.
8	Tolai hare	Alichur	Several seen in Alichur
9	Large-eared pika	Alichur	1 observation in Alichur Common in boulder fields of Darshaidara
10	Gray dwarf hamster	Kisht	One attacking the tent at night
	Wolf	Alichur	Not seen. Common in the area. Multiple tracks.
	Snow leopard	Alichur	Not seen. Multiple tracks on different locations.

## Birds observed

	Species	Place and Remarks
1	Himalayan snowcock	One group of 4 seen in Alichur
	Tibetan snowcock (?)	Snowcocks heard in Alichur in area where, according to the rangers, only Tibetan occurs. Not seen so hard to confirm.
2	Chukar	Common in all areas
3	Ruddy shelduck	Several seen at high altitude lakes in the Pamirs.
4	Black crowned night heron	One seen near Rushan while looking for large billed reed warblers
5	Kestrel	Several seen, different locations
6	Hobby	Several seen, mostly around Zigar
7	Lammergeier	Seen in all locations
8	Egyptian vulture	Not common, at least two individuals seen from the car between khalai-Kumb and Rushan
9	Himalayan griffon	Seen in M-Sayod, Zong (Wakhan) and Alichur.
10	Eurasian griffon	Seen in M-Sayod
11	Cinereous vulture	One seen in M-Sayod
12	Black kite	One seen in Wakhan valley not far from Darshay
13	Eurasian sparrowhawk	Several seen, different locations
14	Long-legged buzzard	Several seen, different locations
15	Golden eagle	Seen in all locations
16	Short toed eagle	One seen from the road near Danghara
17	Baillon's crake	At least two seen while visiting some wetlands along the road north of Khorog
18	Common moorhen	Several seen in wetlands near Rushan
19	Lesser sand plover	Alichur
20	Little ringed plover	Alichur
21	Common redshank	Several seen at high altitude lakes in the Pamirs.
22	Marsh sandpiper	Alichur
23	Common greenshank	Alichur
24	Little stint	Alichur
25	Temminck's stint	Alichur
26	Brown-headed gull	Several seen at high altitude lakes in the Pamirs.
27	Great black-headed gull	Several seen at high altitude lakes in the Pamirs.
28	Caspian tern	One seen at Yashikul
29	Common tern	Alichur
30	Rock dove	Seen on different locations
31	Hill pigeon	One group seen near the pass at 4000 meters during the trek in Darshay
32	Oriental turtle dove	Common around villages (e.g. Zigar)
33	Eurasian collared dove	Several seen, especially between Dushanbe and Kulob
34	Laughing dove	Common in towns and Dushanbe
35	Eurasian eagle owl	One seen in Alichur

36	European nightjar	M-Sayod
37	Common swift	Common
38	Alpine swift	Different locations
39	European roller	Several seen in lowlands between Dushanbe and Kulob
40	European bee-eater	Common, e.g. in Zigar
41	Common kingfisher	One seen near Rushan
42	Eurasian hoopoe	Common
43	Eurasian wryneck	Seen near Langar
44	White-winged woodpecker	Several seen, e.g. in Zigar
45	Scaly-bellied woodpecker	One seen in village of Kisht
46	Turkestan shrike	Common
47	Long-tailed shrike	Common
48	Common magpie	Common
49	Red-billed chough	Lower mountains
50	Yellow-billed chough	Higher elevations (e.g. Darshai and Alichur)
51	Carrion crow	Common
52	Common raven	Common
53	Eurasian jackdaw	Locally common
54	Indian golden oriole	Locally common, e.g. in Zigar
55	Turkestan tit	Several seen on different locations, e.g. in Kisht
56	White-crowned penduline tit	Kisht
57	Azure tit	Locally common, seen in M-Sayod, the Wakhan and Kisht
58	Eurasian crag Martin	Locally common
59	Barn swallow	Locally common
60	Red-rumped swallow	Mostly lowlands
61	Bimaculated lark	At least two seen in rocky slopes on the lower end of the Shuroaboad pass coming from Kulob
62	Crested lark	Locally common
63	Hume's lark	Common at higher altitudes in the Pamirs
64	Eurasian skylark	Locally common
65	Cetti's warbler	Several seen in wetlands along the Pyanj river
66	Large billed warbler/Blyths	Several seen in Wakhan as well as between Khala-i-Kumb and Khorog. No decent pictures available and given the presence of both in this time of the year, we could not make a distinction.
67	Upcher's warbler	At least one seen near Kisht
68	Mountain chiffchaff	Higher altitudes
69	Sulphur-bellied warbler	One seen near Langar
70	Hume's leaf warbler	Locally very common (e.g. Darshay)
71	Greenish warbler	Locally common
72	Eastern Orphean warbler	Seen in Zigar
73	Lesser whitethroat/Hume's whitethroat	Several seen in Wakhan as well as between Khala-i-Kumb and Khorog. Not sure about determination.
74	Streaked laughingthrush	Common in Zigar, M-Sayod and Kisht
75	Asian paradise flycatcher	One seen from the road in Zigar
76	Eastern rock nuthatch	Common
77	Common myna	Common

78	Common starling	Common
79	Blue whistling thrush	Several seen especially along the road between Kisht and Zigar.
80	Common rock thrush	Alichur
81	Blue rock thrush	Common
82	Eurasian blackbird	Common
83	Rufous scrub robin	Seen in M-Sayod
84	Black redstart	Locally common, especially at higher altitudes
85	Güldenstadt's redstart	Common at higher altitudes (Darshay and Alichur)
86	White-capped redstart	Several seen along fast flowing rivers at higher altitudes (Darshay, road between Langar and Alichur)
87	Isabelline wheatear	Several seen, e.g. east from Langar
88	Desert wheatear	At least one seen in Alichur
89	Red-tailed wheatear	Locally common, e.g. in the Wakhan and driving from Khorog to Ishkoshim
90	Variable wheatear	Locally common, e.g. around Zigar
91	Spotted flycatcher	Seen in Kisht
92	Rusty-tailed Flycatcher	Seen in Kisht
93	Indian sparrow	One group seen at gas station near Kisht
94	Eurasian tree sparrow	Several locations
95	Rock sparrow	Several locations, e.g. in Kisht
96	Brown accentor	Several seen at higher altitudes (Darshay and Alichur)
97	Alpine accentor	Alichur
98	White wagtail	Common
99	Citrine wagtail	Locally common around wetlands at higher altitudes (e.g. Darshay and Alichur)
100	Yellow wagtail	Several locations
101	Grey wagtail	Different locations, e.g. at bridge in Zigar
102	Water pipit	High altitudes, M-Sayod
103	Eurasian goldfinch	Kisht
104	Twite	High altitudes
105	Red-fronted serin	Alichur and Darshay
106	Plain mountain finch	Alichur and Darshay
107	Brandt's mountain finch	Alichur and Darshay
108	Crimson-winged finch	Alichur
109	Common rosefinch	Common in different places, e.g. near Langar
110	Hawfinch	M-Sayod
111	White-capped bunting	M-Sayod
112	Rock bunting	M-Sayod
113	Grey-necked bunting	Wakhan and Alichur

## Trip report per day

### Friday August 10th - Off to Tajikistan

This is it. We are off! Three backpacks ready for check-in at Brussels Airport. Off to Istanbul it goes. It's always a pleasure to be at the Istanbul Atatürk airport. This is where east meets west. It is arguably one of the best places in the world for people watching and that is what we do for a couple of hours. The colorful mix of cultures you see here is inspiring and, amidst the buzzing movement of so many travelers, each with an own story, it's easy to dream away to any location for a couple of minutes. We decide to have a curry at the Indian place before emotions rise to unseen levels.

And so also the hours fly by at Atatürk Airport until the boarding to Dushanbe starts. We will be landing in Dushanbe at 3am. We want to sleep, but knowing that our Tajikistan adventure is about to kick off, the excitement is just too big. So we don't sleep at all.

### Saturday August 11th - First day, first target species in sight!

The wheels of the airplane hit Tajik ground. At least we've made it to the country.

It takes us a while to get through the border control and outside the airport. Mustofo from H&CAT is waiting for us at the exit and we meet with Saiddali, our driver. We have an early breakfast and freshen up while going through the last practicalities of the trip with Mustofo. In the meantime, we are happy to hear the cheerful calls of **common myna's** waking up. After withdrawing some cash, we start our drive to the village of Zigar.

The temperatures in the lowlands of Tajikistan soar to 50°C at noon and we enjoy the views over the dry hills and of the villages we drive through. **Long tailed shrikes, bee-eaters and rollers** were common on the electricity wires. After passing the Nurek reservoir, we also pass the monument in honour of the victims of the Danghara attack. We make it to the larger city of Kulob before we head over the last pass to descend in the Pyanj river valley. On the way up to the pass, we see some **bimaculated larks** and we enjoy the stunning views over the Shuraobod conservancy on the right side of the road, where **crag martins and red-billed choughs** welcome us with their amusing calls and acrobatics.



And then we see it: Afghanistan. We will be traveling along the border with this mysterious country for the largest part of our trip during the coming three weeks, separated only by the Pyanj river. And we would never get tired of the views of the life on the other side of the river, the extremely remote and steep mountains and the narrow, handmade road, often hanging straight against a cliff. There's something so attractive about this land. You would look at it with a mix of suspicion and admiration. And we believe our heart has been beating faster every time we looked across that river....

We stopped along the river for some views across the border and were happy to see an **Upcher's warbler**. Further down the road, our first bird on the Afghan side of the road was a **blue whistling thrush**, not bad!

Enjoying the views of the narrow gorge, we arrive at our first destination: the homestay of the M-Sayod Conservancy. A warm welcome from the staff and a table full of delicious fruits and nuts from the incredible garden. We add **Eastern Orphean warbler variable wheatear, streaked laughingthrush, alpine swift, white winged woodpecker, Indian oriole and griffon vulture** to the list. The area looks great for **Asiatic paradise flycatcher** as well and it is often seen here by the staff. **Bee-eaters** are swarming around the beehives.

We start the preparations for the 4-day trekking we will start tomorrow. In the meantime, we have the honour to meet Davlatchan, former hunter and the founder of the first hunting conservancy in Tajikistan. His stories about the area and the wildlife are intriguing and he is still recognized as one of the absolute pioneers in the domain.

As the evening sets in, we drive a bit further down the road and scan some side valleys for **markhors**. And yes, we are happy to see some females with young! We enjoy the views of a herd coming down an incredibly steep rock face to drink in the valley. They just don't seem to care about anything related to gravity... We are looking at our first target species on our first evening in Tajikistan. Fantastic.



We spend the evening enjoying the sunset in the valley and head back for dinner. The next days promise to become heavy, but we want to see some of the famous markhor males of the M-Sayod conservancy. Markhors are the biggest capra species in the world and we'll have to work to see the elusive males that live in small groups high up in the mountains during this part of the year



## Sunday August 12th - The only way is up...

Early morning. Breakfast is ready as we get the last things packed to go. The great news of the morning is that Davlatchan himself wants to join our 4 day trip! And we will soon find out that, despite his youthly age of 73, he still moves like a markhor in the steep terrains of the M-Sayod conservancy... We meet Odil and Mir who will also join us. We take the jeep to a remote separate valley of the conservancy which is one of the most undisturbed ranges in the Darvoz region. The climbing will be challenging, but the abundance in wildlife should compensate for all of that, we are told. Let's see...

Getting out of the jeep, Davlatchan and Odil weigh our bags and start laughing out loudly. These are the normal weights we took with us for trekkings in Georgia, Morocco and on other occasions. They both agree that there is absolutely no way that we can take these bags up to the higher areas 'zdec ne khoroshoje garax'. "These are not nice mountains". Under the necessary pressure, we start unloading some stuff but actually, there is not that much we can take out: it is just the tents, sleeping bags, telescope, a jacket and water. We will need lots of water, as the temperatures in the valley on the first day are around 40°C with about 1000 vertical meters to climb over the trail length of about 8 kilometers. They still find our bags too heavy but we are ready to set out on the trail, where a donkey is waiting to carry the food supplies up to the first basecamp. We have a look at the opposite side of the river, where hundreds of stones are colored white - a minefield on the Afghan side. We wonder, in steep terrains like this where landslides and erosion are common, how many of these mines are actually still in the places where they are marked.



Davlatchan says that we have a long day ahead and hits the trail. Off we go!



The hike starts in a picturesque valley that renders our only **black vulture** of the trip as well as some more **blue whistling thrushes**, **variable wheatears** and **a pair of rufous-tailed bush robins**. We cross a stream and refill the water bottles.



That's when the climb begins... For several hours we make our way up the steep path to the first basecamp. It's hot and, after two nights with almost no sleep, we all find this a tough start. And still, we have a lot of fun ascending as Davlatchan starts telling about his youth, asking us questions about our daily life and activities as well. The thing is: we are so out of breath that we can't really speak while

Davlatchan, with his 73 years, moves up the trail effortlessly, casually explaining us the history of the M-Sayod conservancy. He is quite a personality. Occasionally takes breaks to go in full sleep mode against a rock, then moving up again. Odil and Mir are clearly also amused as this strange gang makes its way up through the steep terrain.

We arrive at the campsite, carry ourselves to the water source and enjoy the stunning views over the mountain landscape that unfolded in front of us. What a majestic place... We set up the tents while Odil start making some delicious soup, spiced with wild cumin, which grows here in the mountains. While we are checking out some **azure tits and a white-capped bunting**, Mir tells us that he sees a **mother bear with a young** on one of the slopes. A new species for Kristine and Sander... We enjoy watching them forage until they disappear in a dense forest. **Different groups of markhors, females and young**, start appearing as they descend to forage when temperatures decrease. In the last light of the day, very far away and much higher up, two fantastic males appear on a ridgeline for less than a minute. This is where we will be heading to in the next days...



A small vodka to celebrate... Exhausted, it is a matter of seconds before we sink in a deep sleep, while the rain starts dropping onto the tents. It will be the only rain during our three weeks in Tajikistan.



### **Monday August 13th - Markhors on your left, bear on your right**

Another day of climbing awaits towards the alpine meadows of this splendid valley. After some morning scanning with views of **several groups of markhors** moving back up to higher elevations to escape the heat of the day, we start walking.

Initially, the trail leads through dense forest and everywhere, literally everywhere, there are tracks and poop of bears. Bear ate berries, bear ate porcupine, bear ate apples, bear ate larvae, ... You could completely understand the personalities of these bears before you've ever seen them...



The hike is again strenuous but not as hard as the first day. Moreover, we don't need tents for the coming night as we are staying in another mountain hotel. Correct. The spot where we will spend the night is an enormous overhanging rock which just fits all of us. We scan the environment in the afternoon and see a first female Siberian ibex.

We decide to walk to a very good viewing point which leads us past an impressive cliff edge, and, looking down from it back into the valley and over the Afghan mountains, we are impressed by the gain in altitude after two days. We walk a bit further and decide to set up the telescope when suddenly a group of young male markhors pops up from behind a rock less than 10 meters away from us. They run off, but at about 200 meters start foraging again. They were clearly not bothering about us all that much. Hunting is strictly limited in this area and only a couple of hunts on individual markhors take place every fall/winter. The rest of the year, the animals are completely undisturbed and it was remarkable to see how all animals in M-Sayod were not all that shy.



We sit down and put up the scope to scan the ridges where, the evening before, we had seen the large male markhors. **Different groups of markhors** show up everywhere, some pretty close on the other side of a deep canyon. We enjoy fantastic views all evening and also **a bear** walks onto the stage. As usual, just doing bear stuff digging the ground and rolling over some stones, we are impressed by just how close the markhors approach the bear. In the end, it is difficult to choose where to look; markhors on the left, bear on the right... A **golden eagle** comes gliding past to complete the scene. Stunning. The landscape, the wildlife, the great company and the mysterious evening light with the far mountains of Afghanistan on the horizon. Simply magic.



The walk back at dusk is done in silence. Odil stayed at the camping spot and has by now prepared a delicious dinner. The calories are much appreciated after two days of climbing. From our sleeping place under the overhanging rock, we enjoy an infinite starry sky. What a place...



### **Tuesday August 14th - The first tourists on Mount Titanic**

4am as the alarm goes off. We discussed the planning the day before and we had agreed that this day, we would walk up to Mount Titanic. Now you might wonder, what the hell is Mount Titanic. Well, it is one of the peaks in the M-Sayod territory and its shape bears some resemblance of a sinking ship indeed. So the plan for today is to use the morning to walk up towards Mount Titanic to get some good views of markhors and possibly ibexes.

And so we set off in the darkness, following a steep path up. And up. And up. The climbing just keeps going as the first rays of sunlight hit the ridge leading to the peak of Mount Titanic to our right. A silhouette shows up on the horizon. A large male **markhor** looks down on us, almost curious about what is going on here. Sunrise and a group of three Belgians grasping for breath in one the remotest mountain ranges of the region. He obviously has not seen many tourists before and is probably rather unimpressed. Then more silhouettes join the spectacle. A group of **19 male markhors** descends from the legendary Mount Titanic. Seeing no threat in us, they slowly make their way down and disappear behind the ridge.



Fantastic observation. We all agree it was definitely worth the early wake-up and the horrible climb to get closer to Mount Titanic. Davlatchan looks at us in an amused way, then in Russian “What do you mean with it was worth it? We are not yet there.” Then slowly pointing towards the summit of Mount Titanic.

And so the climb continues. We settle in the high grass on the ridge from where we can see the group of markhors again as they forage between some colorful herbs. It seems like a strange scene from a fairytale. In the far distance, we find a group of 2 females and 2 juvenile **Siberian ibexes** as well. We have breakfast as the temperatures start rising and follow the markhors with the telescope as they slowly retreat to the glacier to spend the day in the coolest place of the area.



There is not so much snow left, and so also no large ibexes. Davlatchan, Odil and Mir say that it has been extremely hot and dry and it gets worse already for a coupled of years. Obviously climate change can and will have a very strong impact on mountain ecosystems and communities living there.



After a breakfast in this incredible scenery, we start walking up the ridge. A final push as we make it to the summit of... Mount Titanic. We made it to the freakin' top of of Mount Titanic!!! As the first tourists ever! There is a lot of dust in the air so the views are not as good as they could have been, but it will not take away any of the joy of having been on this summit. Davlatchan says that he will write this down in his notebook as a new milestone for the M-Sayod conservancy - *"Tuesday August 14th 2018 - The first tourists on top of Mount Titanic"*.



The way down along the steep slope with loose scree is spent mostly on our back, with Davlatchan occasionally looking back and telling us not to rest all the time. We feel like idiots but in the end make it back to the overhanging rock in one piece.



After some rest, we pack the bags to descend to the first basecamp again. The tents are still there and we spend the evening scanning for wildlife. **Different groups of young male markhors, females and young** are seen high up in the meadows where we had been walking earlier that day. **A mother bear with young** forages on a nearby hillside. We follow them through the telescope until it gets too dark to see anything. They wander off in the night.



We also decide to call it a day and settle in the tents when we suddenly hear the falling of some rocks and scree very close to our sleeping place. Odil comes out of his sleeping bag as well, smiling “Bear, everywhere bear. Sleep tight”. We laugh.

#### **Wednesday August 15th - Down to Zigar**

Time to pack. While breaking down the tents, we have a last look at some distant **markhors** and also the **mother bear with her young** is still there. By the end of the morning, they leave the open and walk into a cave to spend the day.

The walk down goes well and Saiddali awaits us on the bridge where he had dropped us off 3 days ago. We enjoy a delicious lunch underneath the apple trees of Davlatchan’s garden and spend the afternoon reading and walking around in the garden, enjoying the views over Afghanistan.



It is time to say goodbye to M-Sayod as tomorrow we set off to the East, to the city of Khorog; the gate to the exotic Wakhan and the mighty Pamirs.

#### **Thursday August 16th - Do you need a doctor?**

We leave M-Sayod after an early breakfast and a warm goodbye to all the wonderful crew members. What waits is a 10 hour drive to Khorog, all along the border with Afghanistan often just meters away from us. We see a biker and pass him some chocolate from the car "From Belgian with love!". This ritual would be repeated a couple of times on the way. We had carried several kilograms of Belgian chocolate with us on this trip and our driver Saiddali would often joke about it when we got out of the car to distribute them to some locals or anyone along the road. The road winds through the valley and is a major attraction in itself.

You just keep gazing out of the window in admiration.



A **Himalayan pit viper** crossed the road. Some **Egyptian vultures** on the Afghan side, lots of **variable wheatears**. We make a stop at a breathtaking toilet as well. Quite literally breathtaking. Time to drive on.

Along the road and especially straight after Rushan and onwards to Khorog, there are some good areas for **large-billed reed warbler** but the heat (and late time in the season) made some short stops unproductive. 2 kilometers before Khorog, we have a flat tyre to fix.



Check-in at the hotel and a stroll through the lovely park of Khorog on the way to the famous Delhi Dabar restaurant. We do not know yet what is about to unfold and, looking back at it, that might just be good as well. Entering the restaurant, we are happy to meet some fellowpassengers from the flight to Dushanbe. They are a German-Swiss group traveling through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and happen to be here at the same day, what a surprise! The food and staff are wonderful and we enjoy some of the finest curries in the center of Gorno Badakshan. During the dinner, one of group members at the other table suddenly starts throwing up, possibly from a food poisoning caught somewhere earlier on the trip. But it doesn't stop. While one of the other group members grabs him by the neck and another one holds his forehead, it just keeps on coming. The staff comes running in with a plastic baby bath. In the end, we ask whether we need to contact a doctor. Someone pulls up his shoulders and says "He IS a doctor". That's the moment we lose it... Apparently, it is indeed impossible to travel the Pamir Highway without the necessary bugs... Also the electricity shuts down as the restaurant turns into darkness. Maybe better that way.



Tomorrow we leave to the Wakhan.

A valley of unseen beauty, locked between the snowy peaks of the Shakh-dara (Tajikistan) and Hindu Kush (Afghanistan) mountain ranges. The valley was one of the main passages of the Silk Road and many remnants can still be found up to this day. The Great Game decided differently though, and the

ruins of once impressive fortresses overlooking the valley are the only real remnants that show how important this valley once was. The Great Game was a strategic war the Russian and English empires once fought here, without any direct violence between the two parties involved. Wanting to gain influence in Central Asia, direct conflicts became more and more likely in this region where the Russian and English empires met. It was the Wakhan that paid the price when a pact was made between England and Russia to grant the valley to Afghanistan, which none of the parties could conquer. As such, the Wakhan would form a safe barrier between the two empires. Look at the map of Afghanistan and, in the northeast, you will see a strange finger sticking out of the territory, that's the Wakhan. The divide of the Wakhan resulted in the decay of this once so thriving region and it also resulted in a sudden separation of villages and people who were culturally the same, sharing the same habits, beliefs and language (Vaksh). Now suddenly separated by a solid border. Still one of the most beautiful and intriguing places in the world.

### Friday August 17th - Off to the Wakhan

We start the day at ease. We walk in the beautiful park, generously supported by the Agha Khan foundation, which is still very influential in GBAO and especially Khorog. Then on to the bazaar, where colorfully dressed women sell fresh bread, clothes and about everything you would like. An absolute recommendation to go there. We buy some souvenirs and head back to the hotel, where Saiddali awaits us to start the drive to the village of Darshai.





We leave Khorog via the Southern route, of to Eshkashim village. We make a stop for some samosas in a lovely small cafe with a terrace over the Pyanj river, where a girl helps her mother out during the school vacation.



Some stops for bird watching along the road result in greenish and Hume's warblers as well as azure tits. We meet an old lady and her son working gathering hay on a field and join them with some Belgian chocolate.



As we near Eskhashim, we look out over an island connected with bridges on both the Tajik and Afghanistan sides. Some abandoned barracks are the only things that remain from the cross-border market that was once here and where Tajik and Afghani people as well as tourists could meet on Saturdays. The market has been closed for over three years now, after the Taliban entered the area on the Afghan side and captured the village of Zebak, a couple of kilometers from Eshkashim. The Afghan army reacted immediately and pushed the Taliban back in a matter of days, the gunshots of the fights were heard from Eshkashim. The market was closed because of the incident and remains so for the time being. It's a sad sight.

A lammergeyer flies by.



We gather some supplies in Eshkashim and drive on to the village of Darshay, making a stop at some old ruins of a Silk Road fortress on the right of the road. There is an army post as well and the soldiers allow us to walk around as long as we do not take pictures of anything military. As the evening is falling, we are the only visitors. We wander through the ruins as the setting sun symbolically casts the long shadows of once impressive walls and towers on the red soil. All against the background of the majestic peaks of the Hindu Kush and the Pyanj river. In the complete silence of the site, we are taken back to the times of the Silk Road.



We start walking back to the car. Silence. We are deeply impressed. Descending the improvised stairs on one of the ancient walls, we are surprised. “Hello dear friends, welcome to the Silk Road!!” A complete souvenir store has opened in the time we had walked around here. Complete with Tajik, Kyrgyz and Afghan hats, scarves and diverse ornaments. How did they know we were here? And how did they set up that store in such a brief timeframe?! There is no time to think about that before we all find ourselves covered with 3 scarves and a hat. After a lot of laughing, picture taking and price negotiation, we leave these modern Silk Road merchants with two Afghan hats and some scarvers.



It is already dark when we arrive in Darshay village. We are welcomed by Said Ali (note the subtle difference with Saiddali) and Anvar Alidodov and enjoy a dinner while arranging the last practicalities for the 4-day hike we will start tomorrow in the Darshay Conservancy.

### **Saturday August 18th - Past the ovring**

We are ready packing the backpacks and the last supplies being loaded on the two donkeys that will join us. As all the donkeys here seem to be having a different but strong character, they are a good part of the humor and memorable moments that come with trekking through the mountains of Central Asia. Someone else is also ready to join. Saiddali, our driver, has decided to join us on this trek. “Are you looking forward to the trek Saiddali?” “Not really, but what else can I do? Sit here waiting for you for 4 days?” We laugh and set off on a new adventure.

On the road before the path starts ascending into the Darshay valley, an ancient holy site with a Marco Polo and several Ibex skulls is worth a visit. People tend to leave something there, like a coin or some food, for other people who pass by and need it. It has been like that for centuries.



A bit further up, past the volleyball field, different petroglyphs can be found, the most remarkable picturing an ibex. Nobody knows how old they are exactly, they're just 'very,very old'. And beautiful against the background of the Wakhan valley.

The path climbs gently and soon we pass one of the star attractions of the conservancy: an ovring. Ovrings are trails built against steep cliffs and stabilized with iron wires, sticks and stones. That's it. Otherwise it would a sheer vertical cliff. Not so with an ovring. The ovrings are maintained by the local community and are used on a daily basis to reach the higher areas in the valley, especially in summer when all the cattle is up there in the alpine meadows. Fantastic to see how local people have been making these constructions and still do so.

We cross the river and see a **white-capped redstart**, very beautiful birds they are. We set up camp after a walk of about 17km and go to sleep early, as Kristine is not feeling well. Tomorrow is another day, and another 20km to climb towards a bivac just below 4000m.

Scrolling through some pictures of the day, we realize that every day we are starting to blend in with the locals more and more. Especially in black and white.



### **Sunday August 19th - A starry night**

Kristine is feeling better again as we set off for another long day. The distances are long in Darshay, but the paths are not so steep, making it a quite comfortable walk. We pass some boulder fields where **large-eared pika's** turn out to be common. Some alpine wetlands are good for **citrine wagtails and**

**plain mountain finch.** Occasionally scanning distant slopes and ridges for ibexes, we see some **long-tailed marmots.**



We set up camp near a house built by the conservancy and scan for animal activity. Said Ali and Anvar lock the donkeys in a separate shelter and tell us about the many wolves around and the amounts of times they have lost cattle to them. In the meantime, we admire a wonderful starry sky, different planets and the full milky way. Said Ali and Anvar are convinced that, if the donkeys would not be in the safe shelter tonight, they would be dead tomorrow. “Yes, dead”, his finger slowly stroking his neck. Sleep tight.

### **Monday August 20th - Up to the ridge...**

We get up early to hike up to the ridge and to explore the alpine pastures and wetlands beyond. This time it is Frans who is not feeling so well, running nose and irritated eyes make it a difficult morning. Probably an allergic reaction to the many carpets in Tajikistan, reminder to take some meds in case you suffer from allergy to dust mites...

We scan the nearby ridges regularly for Siberian ibexes and soon reach the ridge where a beautiful alpine wetland unfolds. There is domestic cattle everywhere, however, and for wildlife viewing it would certainly not be the best place in summer. From a landscape point of view however, it is a

splendid place. We see our first **Güldenstadts redstarts** of the trip as well as **Brandt's** and **plain mountain finch** and **brown accentors**.



Frans' eyes are tearing to such an extent now that walking down is done with eyes closed. Once at the sleeping place, we pack the tents and backpacks and decide to walk straight to the first sleeping location. Somewhere along the trail, we follow a small path along the river, which suddenly gets extremely steep straight next to the wild river that comes down with tremendous power in this location. The real path is higher on the valley slope and we must have missed it somewhere long before. We pass the spectacular narrow path and proceed down to the sleeping location.



It is a long walk and we arrive as it starts getting dark. We sit down against the walls of the cabin that was made here by H&CAT for hunters visiting in winter and wait for Saiddali, Said Ali and Anvar. We fall asleep against the wall.

We wake up with one of the donkeys inspecting us. They sure have humor. We set up the tents and have dinner. Tomorrow is the time to say goodbye to the Darshay valley as we make our way down back to the village. The hike is strenuous because of the length, but the trail climbs and descends gently in general, making it a very pleasant and beautiful walk for people interested in trekking and culture.

#### **Tuesday August 21st - The final stretch**

Today's walk is all the way down. We take our time on the way back, constantly looking out on the spectacular snowy peaks of the Afghan Hindu Kush. Saiddali wants to descend faster as his feet hurt

too much. After some bird watching stops, he is already nothing more than a distant spot on the horizon.



We walk back past the ovring and the petroglyphs, as the Wakhan valley unfolds below us in perfect afternoon light.





The ovring is a star attraction...



We enjoy the views as this was exactly why we wanted to do this trekking, more than looking for a specific species. It is then that we note that, below us, a white jeep is parked along the road. Saiddali waves at us. Seriously, he picks us up for the last 150 meters of the trek, which in total had been way over 90 kilometers... We laugh and hurry down. We put some beers cold in the stream next to the guesthouse and enjoy a warm shower. To celebrate the walk, the guesthouse prepared us some Belgian fries as well... Only in Tajikistan!



Tomorrow will be another day of exploring as we drive through the Wakhan to Langar, at the confluence of the Wakhan and Pamir rivers. On the way, we will make some stops at the Bibi Fotima hot springs, the Yamchun fortress and the picturesque town of Zong.

### **Wednesday August 22nd - Fertility**

In the morning we meet with Munavvar, the brother of Anvar and conservator of the area. We scan for urial activity but no luck.

Today will be a leisurely drive through the Wakhan. We have time as we need to reach Langar on the far east side of the Tajik Wakhan. Today is all about relaxation that is.

And where better to relax than in some natural hot springs, surrounded by Silk Road relicts?

And so we set off for the famous Bibi Fotima hot springs and Yamchun fortress, picturesquely looking out over the Wakhan valley.

On the way there, we make some stops for birdwatching and see **Eastern Orphean warbler** and most probably **large billed reed warbler** (no pictures and Blyth's might be migrating through as well).

We drive up the hill to Bibi Fotima and explore the Yamchun fortress on the way there. What a dramatic location and even when it is one of the more touristic places in Tajikistan, apart from a local father and son strolling past the ruins, we do not see anyone else here. We watch the amazing Wakhan scenery through openings in the walls and imagine what it would have been like here in the times of the Silk Road, caravans slowly traveling through the valley far below.

The notorious Bibi Fotima hot springs. Long expected, we have heard many stories from different reports. Women and men go in separate rooms where you get undressed and enjoy the thermal springs. Whereas one of the bathing rooms is not more than a square hot pool, the other room has the complete natural wellness experience as hot water pours in the basin from little waterfalls and caves. This second room is the place to be (it switches from woman/man entrance every 30 minutes).. A small cavity within the cave itself is the central holy place of the Bibi Fotima hot springs. Bathing yourself in the water of this little cave is said to increase your fertility, hence the amount of women visiting the cave on a daily basis. While Sander and Frans enter the square basin, Kristine is welcomed by several Tajik ladies in the main basin.

Kristine's intermezzo on the Bibi Fotima experience:

*"4 local ladies kindly gesture that this is indeed the right place. Under their watchful eye I enter the water, and after greeting each other they continue their ritual. The womb-like calcite formations of the Bibi Fotima springs are believed to boost women's well-being and female fertility (we all agree afterwards that there was indeed no way that the extremely hot water would boost male's fertility). A specific water hole in the hot spring forms the most sacred place, and women follow a ritual which involves pouring water from the hole a few times over head and shoulders. We talk a bit and they explain to me that the woman carrying out the ritual doesn't have children yet, and has hope the springs will help change this. When they hear I don't have children either their eyes fill with pity and*

*they encourage me to carry out the ritual as well. I don't really master it yet but try to simulate what the woman before me did...Then it is time to get out of the water, as it is almost the men's turn to enter this part of the springs. Suddenly the spiritual and calm atmosphere is replaced by nervously drying and dressing. When they see I have nothing to cover my wet hair going out they bind a scarf around my head. When I want to give it back afterwards they insist I keep it as a gift and souvenir We thank them with chocolate. The scarf is one of many memories of the warm people we met."*

Sander and Frans' intermezzo on the Bibi Fotima experience:

*"Are we sure this is the place? We pass a door. Another door in front of us. Open it. A dark room filled with steamy clouds. Can't see anything. Then, through the mist, a group of intimidating-looking locals watching us, indicating to get undressed. Step back, close the door. The guard from the complex behind us. This is the place, enter, he says. We enter. Are we sure we want to do this? I don't believe we have a choice, do we?"*

We leave the premises clean and energized. In case of any remaining doubt, Bibi Fotima is a must-visit!



The drive to Langar continues and we decide to make a stop in Zong to walk to another fortress which supposedly gives excellent views over the confluence of the Wakhan and Pamir rivers. It is actually where the Pyanj river is born. Pyanj means as much as “five” and the name stems from the 5 rivers that together form the Pyanj - the Wakhan, Pamir, Gunt Bartang and Vahj rivers (although sometimes other rivers are named in stead of the Gunt river). After the confluence with the vanj river, the Pyanj river becomes the Amu Darya. The Amu Darya, together with the Syr Darya, formed the main tributaries to the Aral Sea. Due to horrible management of these rivers, which huge water losses due to irrigation for cotton production during the Soviet times, the Aral Sea has shrunk dramatically. We all know this from school and different documentaries and articles, so looking at the place where it all starts, at the confluence of the Pamir and Wakhan rivers, is an experience in itself. Although so beautiful, with the current additional challenges of climate change and energy production, in a way the view also carries a weight of sadness and worry.

We walk up to the valley slope through the village but instead of at the fortress, we stumble upon a military base and start walking down from the other side of the village. We are invited for tea by a local family and enjoy the incredible hospitality which seems to be the main characteristic of almost all people we meet in the Pamirs. We get some chocolate and presents from Belgium as well and exchange stories on how life in Europe is compared to here. After long conversation on life in the Wakhan and life in Europe, we say goodbye to the family. A beautiful evening sun casts a magnificent light on the Wakhan valley below us. They are still waving as we turn down the tree-lined dusty street.

It turns out that the guest house in Langar is fully booked. A Slovenian-Spanish couple, an American couple and a Dutch traveler are all there. Frans and Saiddali will sleep outside. We spend the evening exchanging stories from the present and past trips, drinking beers and toasting to about everything with the gathered vodka bottles.

The moonlight unravels the Afghan Hindu Kush mountains on the other side of the river.

#### **Thursday August 23rd - Bones, vultures and hotspots**

We get up early to scan the ridges on the opposite side of the river for any urial activity. But the hills are empty and we take our time for the breakfast and to say goodbye to our fellow travellers. It was a pleasure to meet such enthusiast travelers and even more so to see why people from all over the world want to travel in this country - biking, adventurous road tripping, looking for remnants of the Silk Road, wildlife watching or climbing some of the 7000m + summits of the Pamirs.

We are happy to be in contact with Khalil, who reports us that our father (Lieven) has arrived well in Dushanbe and is ready to start the very long drive to Khorog. Tomorrow, if all goes well/insha'allah, we will meet in the village of Alichur.

After the breakfast, we meet up with a guide from the Yuz Palang conservancy area, Davronov Farrukh. The Yuz Palang conservancy lies high above the village of Zong. The area holds some good lakes for birdwatching and views of the Karl Marx and Engels peaks as well as over the confluence of the Wakhan and Pamir rivers. It was created when a snow leopard attacked livestock in the

neighbourhood, resulting in a famous picture in which a snow leopard is hiding under a rock with a dog barking at it from the top of that rock.

We drive up to the road toward the entry of the conservancy and are greeted by a couple of impressive shepherd dogs. One of them is clearly the leader and walks towards us with great charisma and self-confidence, welcoming us to 'his place'. ....Farrukh asks us if we know that dog. No, we nod, we've never seen him. "Yes you did, remember a picture with a snow leopard and a dog on a rock? That's him!" This dog is a local hero for sure. The group of dogs decides to join us on the walk.

Some bird watching around the lakes results in **citrine wagtails, rock bunting** and some other species. There are some very old remnants of old shepherd houses and a Silk Road castle. This walk is not so similar to any other walk we did in Tajikistan so far - it's a leisurely stroll, here and there looking for old Silk Road relicts, some bird watching, some talking, proceeding, sitting down with some locals at the side of the lake, discussing politics, listening to Belgian music, listening to Italian music on request, ... No stress today...

Most of all, our guide is rather different as well - he knows all the historical places and wildlife here very well for sure and he looks like a local rock star legend. Skinny jeans, pointy shoes, characterful head, no stress. Fantastic.



He asks us if we want to see some caves way higher up in the mountains. Of course. We move up a path along the slope and end up at some ruins. In between the ruins, an entrance into the rocks becomes visible. We crawl under the ruins to enter the cave. Kristine decides to wait at the entrance in case... something goes wrong.

Farrukh, Sander and Frans move into the darkness. Our headlights reveal an endless network of caves, remnants of houses people had inside the caves with still intact wooden structures that sure looked incredibly old and most of all, bones, bones, bones. At some places, the ground is literally covered with hundreds of bones, mostly from domestic animals. Cow skulls, limbs and hoofs of donkeys, ... "Who or what did this?". Our guide raises his shoulders "It's probably a mix - people who used to live here centuries ago or in times of war, wolves, snow leopards, lynx, ..." We decide to move in deeper. Expecting to tumble across a pack of wolves around a dark corner any time now.

“How well do you know this place?”

“I don’t know it that well really, but every time I explore a new tunnel, I mark where the exit is on a rock”

We look around. There are some indications indeed. But they point at all possible different directions. We look at each other.

“Ok, I don’t remember all the signs. It might be that there are other exits. I’m not sure but I think there are.”

“How far do you think those tunnels go?”

“They go all the way to the valley floor, under the Pyanj river and the into Afghanistan, where you have another entrance to the complex”

(we are about 1000 meters above the Pyanj river)

“How do you know the cave complex goes all the way to Afghanistan?”

“I have seen the entrance on the Afghan side as well”

We assume that it is better to turn back now.

As we exit the cave, a shadow is cast over us. **Two Himalayan vultures** patrol the ridgeline and decide to inspect us as well. They pass overhead at less than 20 meters, leaving us thrilled at the spot, such impressive birds. We spent more than an hour looking down into the Wakhan valley. We could have easily spent a month in this region.



We drive down and have some tea with the local shepherd and his wife before we head back to Zong. Our guide comes up with another good idea though - a stop at the hot springs. If you wouldn't know, you would simply drive past the improvised cabins on random places against the slopes above the village. The whole village comes here to bathe, that much is clear. Kristine and Sander will go first but after some horrible screaming, it turns out that the water is simply too hot. Saiddali and Frans decide to give it a try as well and it turns out, with some patience, to be quite pleasant in the end. These hot springs are clearly strongly embedded in local social and hygienic culture

It's time to say goodbye to the remarkable Farrukh. We make a stop between Zong and Langar to scan the Afghan Hindu Kush slopes for any urial activity. Empty slopes.

As it gets too dark to see anything, we proceed to the guest house in Langar. This time, we are the only guests. The silence in the house forms a lonely contrast with the liveliness of yesterday evening. The Wakhan is a place of unknown beauty, remote yet so hospitable, fascinating in a way not like any other place we've ever seen. Saying goodbye to this place leaves an undefined emptiness in the three of us. And we suspect in Saiddali's heart as well, although that is probably directly related to the presence of these hot springs.

Yet tomorrow we will drive on to the roof of the world. We will follow the remote road between Langar and Alichur, where we hope to meet our fourth group member.

Spokoinoi notchi.



### **Friday August 24th - Urials!**

Finding fuel in the Wakhan can be a serious matter. After passing by at the gas station in Zong two times over the past two days, Saiddali understood that there would only be a fuel delivery at around

3am that night. Saiddali drove there at that time and was happy to get fuel as apparently more than 10 cars were there to do the same. We were lucky to get fuel, and if it were not for Saiddali's effort, we would have spent some more time in Langar - until the next delivery that is - and when that is, you never know.

Early morning at the guesthouse. We set up the scope one more time to scan the slopes on the Afghan side. For 1,5 hours, there is absolutely nothing to see and Frans just wants to start packing the scope when he looks one more time. 5 animals walks into the scopeview. **5 Urials** making their way up to the ridge. Kristine, Sander and Saiddali come running in and all catch a glimpse while the distant group crosses the ridge into another valley. It had been a matter of seconds... What a moment!!

There is currently some discussion on the type of urial that populates this area. Originally, they were thought to be Bukharan urials, but they might be closer linked to Ladakh urials. We trust Stephan Michel to come up with a clear answer on this one day. Until that moment, we stick to Bukharan urial.



We enjoy a breakfast outside and start the engines for the long drive to Alichur. A couple of kilometers on the way after leaving Langar, we make a stop at an interesting spot for birdwatching. A small and rocky canyon is good for **sulphur-bellied warbler, wryneck and some grey-necked buntings**. Good stop. It would be great to have some more time here but we have a long way to drive today. Along the road, we see some **Isabelline wheatears** as well.

A couple of kilometers further we have an unexpected encounter with... **a Marco Polo sheep** crossing the road just a couple of meters in front of the car! Supposedly the animal had gone to drink in the Pamir river and was now making its way up to the high plateau again. Completely unexpected and a very close observation! We enjoy the **many marmots** along the way.



At the army checkpoint of Khargush, for the first time during this trip, we drive away from the Afghan border, driving deeper into Tajikistan, heading to the center of the Pamirs.

We make a stop at one of the lakes we pass and see our first **brown-headed gulls, Mongolian plovers, casarca, and redshank as well as large groups of Hume's larks.**

At great moment when we our road hits the Pamir Highway! We turn right, to the east, for a couple of more kilometers to Alichur. Here, we expect to see papa (Lieven is the father of Kristine and Frans). What a place to meet. As we see the village appearing, we wonder how on earth people could live here year-round. The village of Alichur lies in a fantastic valley surrounded by wetlands and meadows amidst stunning mountain scenery. The sense of remoteness hits us immediately, but in a strangely comforting and accommodating way.

We park the car at Seroshdin's homestay, where a splendid traditional Kyrgyz yurt was set up next to the premises. We have some tea while trying to reach the driver of papa, but it is not possible to reach anyone. Mahan, the director of the Alichur-Burgut Conservancy walks in as well, as we discuss about the history, present and future of the area from a cultural and natural point of view. After a while we decide to try to reach the driver of papa again when Mahan says "Oh, your father? He arrived already a couple of hours ago and was my guest at home. He should be walking around the village somewhere I believe..." We jump in Mahan's jeep, accompanied by his little daughter, and start the search.



No need to search for a long time, we believe. Just drive to the edge of the village with the beautiful wetlands. That's where the birds are. That's where he will be. And so we meet with our 4th travel companion in this remarkable place, on the roof of the world.

After a joyful reunion, we spend some time watching birds around the wetlands, occasionally joined by some of the youngsters of Alichur. Birdwatching in the wetlands surrounding the village is fantastic. For a full overview of the species, see the detailed list.



As night falls, we are able to catch a glimpse of some **Marco Polo sheep** on a distant ridge, quickly vanishing in the last evening light. What a place.



When we return, Seroshdin and his family have heated the yurt and prepared a fantastic dinner. As the temperatures drop to below 0°C, we fall asleep in the heat of the Kyrgyz yurt.

This is it, we're on the roof of the world now.

### **Saturday August 25th - Shoe thieves**

Commotion. Loud voices, men screaming. Dogs barking. What is going on?

We launch outside the warm yurt, into the cold morning. The air is thin. The silhouettes of the mountains vague. Seroshdin appears on the alley holding a shoe in one hand. He meets us with a big smile, handing over the shoe. It's one of Kristine's walking boots, and there's a slimy substance covering it. Saiddali appears on the scene as well, out of breath, trying to get some air. What happened?

At about 5am, one of the local dogs linked to the police station had tracked down a suspicious tourist shoe and had stolen it, running off in full speed. Seroshdin had seen this and started running behind the dog everywhere in the village together with more and more people of the village who desperately

tried to retrieve the shoe, preferably in one piece. In the end, they had to give up as the dog disappeared between the houses. Seroshdin was walking back, probably already visualizing the expression on Kristine's face while explaining that one of her walking boots had been lost for good. Walking past the police station however, he noted a lonely shoe on the entrance stairs. Could it really...? Yes, the dog had brought the suspicious new shoe in the village to the police, really. Only in Alichur. And so Seroshdin had the pleasure to bring back the shoe, inclusive some fresh dog drool. A present from the Pamirs.

After all this traditional Pamir commotion, we discuss the planning for the coming two days with Mahan, who will join us personally. A great honor we all agree. We will move to a remote valley in the enormous territory of the Burgut Conservancy (ca. 100.000 ha.) where no domestic cattle is allowed and where various groups of Marco Polo argali roam as well as Siberian ibexes, bears and snow leopards.

And so we set off, making a first stop for some birdwatching and immediately seeing **eagle owl, grey-necked buntings; golden eagle** and **lammergeier**. We make several stops in this spectacular conservancy for birdwatching. The first **Siberian ibexes, Tolai hares** and many **long-tailed marmots** are spotted. In the afternoon we have our first meet with the impressive **Marco Polo Argali**. A big mixed group of about 50 individuals on the move. They stop as we keep our distance and gather photogenically against a rock. We can imagine Marco Polo in awe when he encountered the largest wild sheep in the world: "They have horns of at least 6 hand palms long...".



In the late afternoon we set up our camp and prepare for a cold night. In the evening we head up a steep hill that leads to an excellent viewpoint for scanning, and a good location for snow leopard. Beautiful image of a group of **Siberian ibexes** on the ridge. We scan until we don't see anything anymore, except the full moon. We light our torches and head down. It is bitter cold, and after a shot of vodka we crawl into our tents. Tomorrow very early we'll head back to the viewpoint...





### **Sunday August 26th - On the roof of the world**

Did we say 4:30? And why? It also seems too cold to get out of our sleeping bags. But a chance, even small, to see snow leopard, makes it all worth it. We put on all the clothes we have, and start to climb again to the panoramic viewpoint of the valley. It is not too far nor high, but at this altitude every step up takes our breath away. Arriving at the top, the worst is yet to come, as the cold is harsh, and the sun won't be there for a while. We scan the

surrounding mountain flanks, now and then doing some spastic exercises to shake of the cold. It doesn't really help. **Siberian ibexes** at the horizon. Beautiful. We keep scanning. We have never felt happier feeling the first sun rays warming our faces and we try to get the most of it. We don't see snow leopard, but the morning atmosphere is fantastic.



Back at the camp we have breakfast and later make our way back to the point in the valley where the **Marco Polo sheep** roam during mornings. We pick up a camera trap nearby, and the images show an assertive bear who decided there wouldn't be any filming taking place in his territory, and knocked down two separate camera traps. One shows as last images a bear nose followed by a rotated view of a bear walking away.

Our journey continues to another valley that is also snow leopard territory, and where a new camera trap will be installed. After lunch we walk up to a viewpoint for some prospection. Against the rocky slopes we spot a **lammergeier** that seems to observe us, but doesn't seem impressed. We, on the other hand, are always again intrigued by these charismatic animals, and while resting we keep observing him. Frans spots an ideal overhanging rock for the installation of the snow leopard camera trap.

In the late afternoon we climb back up in the gorge to scan for snow leopard. Frans, Sander, Mahan and the rangers see a group of ibexes who make their way further into the gorge. We all head a bit back and kneel next to a big rock to scan. When it is getting darker we start heading back and pass by the overhanging rock where Frans and Mahan install the camera trap. We see **scratch marks and scat of snow leopard**. This should indeed be in ideal location. We leave the canyon without having seen snow leopard, but it is a comfort we'll hopefully receive camera pictures of this location...We head back along and through the water stream, from rock to rock. It is dark now but we all arrive safely back where Saiddali is waiting. **Wolf tracks** are everywhere on the road. The drive back to Alichur in the dark is impressive, also in dark this area is breathtaking.

Back at the yurt Seroshdin and his family prepared again an gratifying meal, and afterwards we head to the warm yurt which feels like home already. This time we take all the shoes inside...It will be a more quiet, but very short night. Tomorrow we'll leave early, and try our luck to see a glimpse of the ghost of the mountains.

### **Monday August 27th - The ghost of the mountains**

It is 3:30am when Makhan wakes us, although 'wakes' is a big word. Again, it is a struggle to get out of our warm and cosy sleeping bags and face the cold and darkness outside of the yurt. And it is cold, very cold.

As we decided that Saiddali needs to rest with two long driving days on the schedule for the coming two days, we join Mahan and the two rangers in the jeep. That makes 7 of us, and we laugh about how cramped we are in the jeep with telescopes sticking in our necks from all sides. And so we start driving the Pamir Highway towards the East, the only ones on the road at this hour on such a remote road.

We drive for kilometers and kilometers while the stars and moon cast a mysterious light on the unearthly mountains. You lose all impression of time and space easily here. Then suddenly a huge "BAM" as the jeep start moving strangely. Mahan pulls over. Flat tyre. We get out of the jeep and here we are. In the middle of the Pamir Highway, surrounded by the cold and in complete silence. We work together to replace the tyre and are all impressed by how fast and efficient Mahan moves while changing the tyre. "Not the first time".

A light glow appears in the East as the darkness of the night makes place for the morning dawn. We are getting in the car when some **snowcocks** (both Himalayan and Tibetan occur here) start calling on a nearby ridge. But it is still too dark to see and we need to move to have a chance of seeing snow leopard.

We arrive at the entrance of a small and narrow valley. As we get out of the car, Mahan tells us that we need to split up. Now, given some earlier mammal watching occasions, splitting up has often resulted in frustrating moments... In the end we agree that Sander and Frans will join the two rangers, moving into the valley on foot, while Kristine, Lieven and Mahan will proceed to another place by car to scan various rocky outcrops. It's a risk, but we agree that it for sure increases the chances on good observations.

### ***Sander, Frans and the two rangers' morning***

*The jeep drives off as we stand at the entrance of the gorge. We will move in on foot while scanning every interesting place. Only minutes after entering, we are able to find fresh snow leopard footprints and scat under an overhanging rock. We scan the ridges and rocks for any activity. The excitement of simply being here this morning and knowing that snow leopards are out there is incredible. All senses on sharp, focused on only one thing. We stumble over rocks and climb steep sections as we proceed further and further into the valley. A **Himalayan vulture** looks at us from its nesting place. We find **snow leopard tracks all along the gorge**. Mahan did not lie when he said this is an excellent location.*

Nearly every corner holds some excellent places for snow leopard and we assume, as the sun is coming through, that the animals, after a long and cold night, will be taking advantage of that to enjoy the warmth. We arrive at the farthest place in the gorge. We can't go further here as that would for sure require some good alpinist skills. A group of snowcocks flies over the gorge and lands on a nearby ridge. They turn out to be **Himalayan snowcocks** and we are able to follow these fantastic mountain chickens as they start singing -and that is arguably the coolest sound nature has ever produced- and soon disappear on the other side. We have been in the gorge for almost two hours now. As we start making our way down, we try to contact Lieven, Kristine and Mahan. The batteries of the walkie talkie turn out to be defect. We wait at the entrance of the gorge, accompanied by a couple of brown accentors and a male *Güldenstadt's* redstart. With no news of the others, we sit down and scan some distant ridges. The sun warms us up as the rangers fall asleep. It's symbolic for the drop in adrenaline after such an intensive morning, when we realize that we did everything we could but that it is just not our moment yet. Soon we'll be driving westwards on the Pamir Highway, away from the snow leopard territories towards Khorog. Mahan's jeep appears, at first a distant spot surrounded by a dust cloud. He pulls over.

"Did you see anything?"

"Lynx"



### ***Kristine, Lieven and Mahan's morning***

We drive with Mahan through an impressive valley surrounded by excellent snow leopard territory. We stop now and then to scan the slopes. It feels like a promising morning. To be in area roamed by snow leopard has something magical, we hope the hills have eyes. While scanning Kristine sees an animal at far distance moving up a rocky slope, Mahan gets a better view and confirms we are looking at a **lynx!** We pass by a yurt where a family is busy with their morning activities. Mahan takes jeep driving/manoeuvring/sliding again to a whole new level. Always when we think we'll get out he finds a way to pass the obstacle, sometimes it feels like we're driving on 2 wheels. We spot a small group of **Siberian ibexes** far away. We keep scanning intensely. After a while we head back to the roadside from where we scan the entrance side of the gorge where Sander, Frans and the rangers are scanning. Mahan tries the walkie talkies but we don't manage to make a connection, and he goes to find them. Maybe they have seen snow leopard, or will we have one more reason to return?

We make an additional stop in an impressive canyon where snow leopards are regularly seen. But it is getting towards noon and the distances are quite far to have a chance of finding one resting on a rock. A local Kyrgyz shepherd tells us that he has seen a snow leopard here a couple of days ago, hunting for marmots at the entrance of the gorge. We carefully scan the ridges before deciding that we need to start moving to Khorog.

Back at the yurt, an impressive smell meets us as we enter to gather our camping material and bags. A complete sheep is boiling on a fire in the yurt. That smell would accompany us for the coming days to say the least. We say goodbye to our fantastic host family and start the long drive to Khorog. On the way, we make a detour past Yashikul and Buulunkul. Buulunkul village is said to be the coldest place in the Pamirs, and that means something. The village is one of the strangest yet most fascinatingly attractive places we have ever seen. We enjoy the views over Yashikul while a **Caspian tern** flies by. Time to move to Khorog!

The road is long and we arrive in Khorog just in time to make it to our favourite place in town - the Delhi Darbar. It's a happy reunion with the staff after our previous passage. Everyone in the restaurant seems to be in good health tonight though...

#### **Tuesday August 28th - Back to the start**

After some more bazaar exploring (really, this is a recommendation), we start the long drive to Kishit. We have one more target species for the trip: large billed reed warbler.

We make few stops between Khorog and Rushan. A place not so far from Khorog results in two **Baillon's crakes and a large billed/Blyth's warbler**. Just south of Rushan, we have a view of another large billed/Blyth's reed warbler as well as a **black-crowned night heron**. For the large-billed reed warblers, hard to say by the looks, we keep it in the middle for all the birds we have seen both in the Wakhan and here and happily assume that we saw at least one large-billed warbler...



Although we have driven this road earlier, the 9 hours of driving never bore. Driving along the border with Afghanistan is like reading a book; the life in the villages as well the people traveling the narrow paths clinged to the vertical rock face along the river each form separate tales. Sometimes the river is so narrow that Afghani wave from the opposite side, and for some reason, those are really moving moments.

It is late night when we arrive in Kisht, where Yourali and his family greet us and serve a delicious meal. Yourali and his family own the Kisht markhor conservancy, which we will visit in the coming two days.

### **Wednesday August 29th - We love markhors**

A new sunny and hot morning arrives. Frans and Lieven are woken up by the entire male company of the family. Still stretched out on the different mattresses they are surrounded by friendly and patient eyes and smiles. Hospitality lifted to another level, and later today to other heights. After a colourful and delicious breakfast we drive to the entrance of the valley of the Kisht conservancy.

Yourali and we are joined by Mummin who is guiding three donkeys. Later we would notice that they don't need too much guiding and have strong opinions about what is the high road. We first enter through a narrow and impressive gulch and through some small water streams. We leave some beers in a water pond for when we return. We climb up through narrow paths, and it is getting warmer. Beautiful observation of **golden eagle**. Around midday we arrive at the first shelter, a lovely place with an orchard and a view. We have lunch, enjoy some fruits, and bond with the donkeys. Why not just stay here? But we want to get to the highest shelter today, to scan for markhors. We look forward to seeing them again since our trekking in M-Sayod at the start of our journey. Yourali shows us a bag of cumin that grows in the area. What an amazing smell. Later we all bought cumin to take home, and when we now use it in our kitchen the smell brings us right back to Tajikistan and its magnificent landscapes.



The donkeys are excited to head further up, we hear that they are in a hurry because they know the female donkeys are up there, at the second shelter. That explains a lot. Yourali says we are about halfway. That is not too bad! We fill all our bottles at a water source and head further, first through more open area with grazing cattle and then through pistachio forest, where **rusty-tailed and spotted flycatchers** are both present as well as **azure tits and lots of streaked laughing thrushes**.. After a while we head onto a steeper hill and more narrow path. Here the exhaustion starts, but Yourali assures us we'll soon arrive. After quite some climbing we arrive at the "mountain bridge", that we have already hear about: a narrow path with on both sides very steep ridges, or "the edge of the world". Standing in front of the mountain bridge it seems intimidating, but also spectacular. Frans goes on prospection, it seems fine except for the last part where the path gets smaller and exposure higher. We all pass and are relieved we are one obstacle closer to the highest shelter.



We start noticing that Yourali is very good in making us believe that we are almost there, although there is always another stretch. But it is good to stay motivated and to keep faith. In total we gain well above 1400 meters in elevation, but then finally, after a last steep stretch of forest, we arrive. The road there is breathtaking in every way. But "landscape without wildlife is just scenery", we once read, so we start scanning. It doesn't take long to see some beautiful male **markhors** in the telescope. We are once again amazed by their charismatic look. We meet the other rangers staying at the shelter, among which a brother of Yourali. A fire is lit, and when it is completely dark we head inside the tent to eat. Yourali and the other rangers are incredibly hospitable, and the tent is spectacularly equipped. We never ate this well (delicious soup, vegetables and fruits) at such a unique location. Near the shelter the rangers also manage a kitchen garden. After dinner and some drinks we go to sleep. Kristine is starting to have stomach pains at the lower right side so is most of the night awake, together with a **Gray dwarf hamster** raiding the food supplies in the tent. We look forward to enjoy the view from here again in the morning...



**Thursday August 30th - Cobra's, vipers, gold, bats and a lost group member**

During our journey through Tajikistan we felt very lucky to wake up in magnificent mountain settings, with one view more spectacular than the other. Often these mornings were slightly more peaceful than the nights (raging rodents, dogs with a plan (like delivering a suspicious walking shoe to the police station, blankets, although beautiful/warm, causing severe allergic reactions, etc.:)). Early mornings could arrive then as a relief, holding promises for new explorations and impressions. I (Kristine) spent the night awake with pains feeling like a manifesting appendicitis, and was really happy when the morning arrived. Partly because the view incredible, but so was the pain, so it felt good to be able to start the descend. The truth is we could, during our travel, never really be sure what certain stomach pain, nausea or other intestinal discomforts meant, or what caused them. Sometimes we did have a clue, like when we did try those delicious looking figs and colorful berries and prunes. It were always calculated risks though, and in the end no one of our expedition team felt sick for more than 2 days during this travel (we heard that many travelers spent at least a few days lying down with digestion problems).

We (at least some of us) had a festive breakfast, during which Yourali tried to show us again how to use the many pillows in the hut to comfortably eat while lying down. Different groups of markhors showed up everywhere in the spectacular scenery. Frans spotted a group of younger markhors busy with their morning stroll. On our way down we were suddenly surrounded by a group of dogs that were, let's say, assertive, but after we too made some assertive arm movements and sounds we could head further down towards the "mountain bridge", for a new shot of adrenaline. At the mountain bridge, we spotted the group of younger male **markhors** again further down, elegantly maneuvering down steep rocks at a spectacular speed. It made us feel slightly inelegant, stiff and slow. After affronting these terrains for some days now, our admiration for these mountain acrobates has only grown. It was as if they kindly wanted to divert our attention from the high and intimidatingly high crossing in front of us, and it did help. We crossed without looking down (too much), and we continued our way back, descending quite steeply during the first part, and later through more comfortable terrain, with among more pistachio forest. For me the way down seems much longer than the way up, as the stomach pain was pretty severe.

But luckily there are always exciting encounters on our way to distract. Sander and Yourali freeze as, suddenly, a **Caspian cobra** moves in the grass right next to the trail. We all observe this incredible animal as it slowly goes its own way. No 2 meters further, a young **blunt-nosed/Levantine viper** (macrovipera lebetina), enjoys its portion of sun as well. One to keep an eye on as these vipers can get pretty bad tempered. We know them well enough from previous visits to the Caucasus where the species is locally common and made us freak out on different occasions.

The walk proceeds and also today the donkeys accompanying us display their grand personalities; now and then going off road, roaming freely to better pastures, as the grass is always greener a bit further. They for sure have a lot of fun. And so do Yourali and Mummin while trying to keep them on the right path... Back at the first ranger house we make a stop to rest a while and eat something. The last part down goes fast, luckily, as by now it is already really warm. Down in the valley, almost back at the starting point, we look up to the outlook point at the second ranger hut, a bit impressed we stood there just that morning. We pick up the beers that we left behind to cool in a water pond, they are still there to welcome us. Heading through the last rock formation, the impressive entrance to the area, we find Saidali waiting for us, as always more than in time, and as always it's a happy reunion.



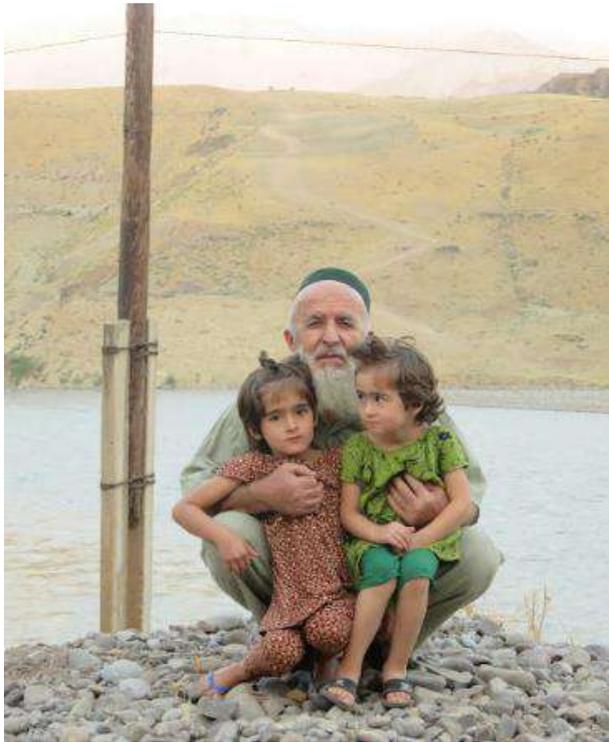


While having a beer we are joined by **two bearded vultures and a golden eagle**. There is even a bat that lands right next to us on the ground, then flying off again. Strange, but then again, Tajikistan.... Perfect images to end our adventure through the impressive Kisht valley, our last trekking during our travel in Tajikistan. It makes happy, and a bit melancholic.

Back at the residence of Yourali and his family, we are treated to “plov”, a traditional dish , a pilaf-style rice mixed with among more meat, onions, carrots. As always, some family members would make sure there is absolutely nothing missing on the table, and provide us with extra, very powerful, peppers.

In the late afternoon I (Kristine) go to rest a bit and Sander, Frans and Lieven went for a walk along the Panj. During our stay in Kisht we have only seen a glimpse of the women in the family, who always quickly disappeared again behind doors and windows. When I am alone in my room the daughter of the sister of Yourali immediately enters with her nephew and 2 nieces, to ask me how I am and show me the shower room (absolutely the best shower we had, a room with at least 6 different blocks of natural soap, two water tanks with a bucket which is very efficient). She takes me to the other women of the family, including her charismatic grandmother, who applies traditional make up. Guess they thought it is needed after a return from the wilderness. It soon evolves into a total makeover, and I find myself in a colorful traditional dress. They are very warm and enthusiastic company, and it is nice to be among women for a change these weeks. They take me for a walk to the river. Sander, Frans and Lieven spot us from further, and the makeover proves to be successful as they only identify me with help of binoculars. All the neighbors come to say hi. We pick fruits in the family’s orchard (they insist

we take some of the nicest pomegranates to Belgium), and visit the small shop that her grandfather used to manage. A combination of a DIY and souvenir shop, and we take some beautiful handkerchiefs home (they insist: for mother, grandmother, sister, neighbor...).



In the evening we gather outside on the terrace, and we soon all find ourselves in traditional outfits, Sander, Frans and Lieven with traditional hats. The family found it highly entertaining, a lot of picture taking.



The hospitality and attentiveness of Yourali and his family are amazing. The charm and hospitality of so many people we met on our way will for sure account for a big part of our warm memories of this trip, and is one of many reasons we look forward to return.

*PS: In Belgium it turns out that it was indeed appendicitis, successful surgery took place.*

### **Friday August 31st - The flag**



Time to say goodbye to the wonderful family of the Kisht Conservancy. After a last group picture, the drive to Dushanbe starts. We make a stop at Saiddali's place and meet his family with a cup of tea. Lieven in the meanwhile is suffering from a stomach bug (it does seem to be inevitable along the Pamir Highway) so we do not plan a lot of stops anymore.

On the .... pass, we briefly get out of the car, looking out over the dry rolling steppe hills we had crossed 3 weeks earlier. A big sign warns us for landmines. The Shuraobood region was once an important frontier during the civil war in the 90's. It is the most heavily mined area territory in Tajikistan and, given the strategic location of the pass, it is no surprise that also here mines are present. Something seems strange though. There are different small trails through the minefield. Saiddali tells us that the land has recently been cleared of mines and released to the community. Although there is still a long way to go, it does give hope for a better future. In the meantime, we have a short talk with a boy from far into the Pamirs. What is he doing here alone? He tells us that he studies in Dushanbe and that he

caught a lift with a trucker on the way from Kashgar (China) to Dushanbe. His driver is taking a brief nap before the final stretch to the capital. We wish him all the best and set course to Dushanbe.

We still have a couple of hours in Dushanbe and decide to make a quick walk around the main attractions of the city. We start walking to the Shah Mansur Bazaar, also known as the Green Bazaar. We walk through rustic green streets, past a green park where children are playing and where, remarkably, we find a statue of a Bukharan Markhor as well. Wildlife, it seems, is an important part of the Tajik and Pamir identity. The Shah Mansur Bazaar is impressive and we buy some cumin, Tajik spice (a mix of spices with chili and salt), nuts and some souvenirs.



Evening is falling when we take a taxi to Rudaki Avenue. We stroll through the beautiful Rudaki park, named after the famous poet. His statue, just like poetry in Tajik cultural heritage, has a central place in the park. Wandering through the green alleys, rose gardens and neighbouring streets, it is both easy and remarkable to see that Dushanbe is without any doubt the most beautiful capital of Central Asia. In the last rays of sunlight, the enormous flag of Tajikistan gently sways in the wind. The flagpole has, for a while, been the tallest in the world. Where the money for such grandeur comes from could come with a question mark.

We arrive back at the hotel as the lady from the reception tells us that we have a couple of missed calls. We reach Khalil, who asks us if we want to go out for dinner. And there's more. Our now good

friend Stefan Michel, one of the top experts on ungulates of the world and absolute pioneer in setting up community-based conservation areas in this part of the world is in town as well. Coincidence? Just Tajikistan we guess.

A brilliant last evening follows, with great food, cool beers and fantastic company. Saying goodbye to such a fantastic crew is always difficult. We forget the time and realize, while walking back to the hotel, that there is not so much time left to sleep.



### **Saturday September 1st - Back to Belgium**

The alarm goes off only an hour after we went to bed. The taxi drive through the empty streets of Dushanbe takes place in a haze. We watch the same safety instruction video -the Lego version- as on the flights that took us here. It all seems such a short while ago. Tajikistan had passed like a dream. The only comfort we find when the wheels lose contact with the runway is that, one day, we will return.