

Adventure

travel

JANUARY | FEBRUARY 2014

www.adventuretravelmagazine.co.uk

THE MAGIC OF THE MATTERHORN

Hike and snowshoe around the world's most iconic peak

YOUR
INSPIRATION
FOR THE
NEW YEAR!

10 Aurora Adventures

The most exciting ways to see the northern lights

Top charity challenges

Make 2014 the year for your dream expedition

Non-stop snowsports

- Ski tour Greenland
- Off piste in the Alps
- Winter fun in Finland

Central America

Hike among volcanoes in sunny Guatemala

Discover AFGHANISTAN

Trek a spellbinding region untouched by conflict

ON TEST: Winter warmers! Gloves, hats, ski jackets, thermals and more

£3.99 ISSUE 109 JAN/FEB 2014

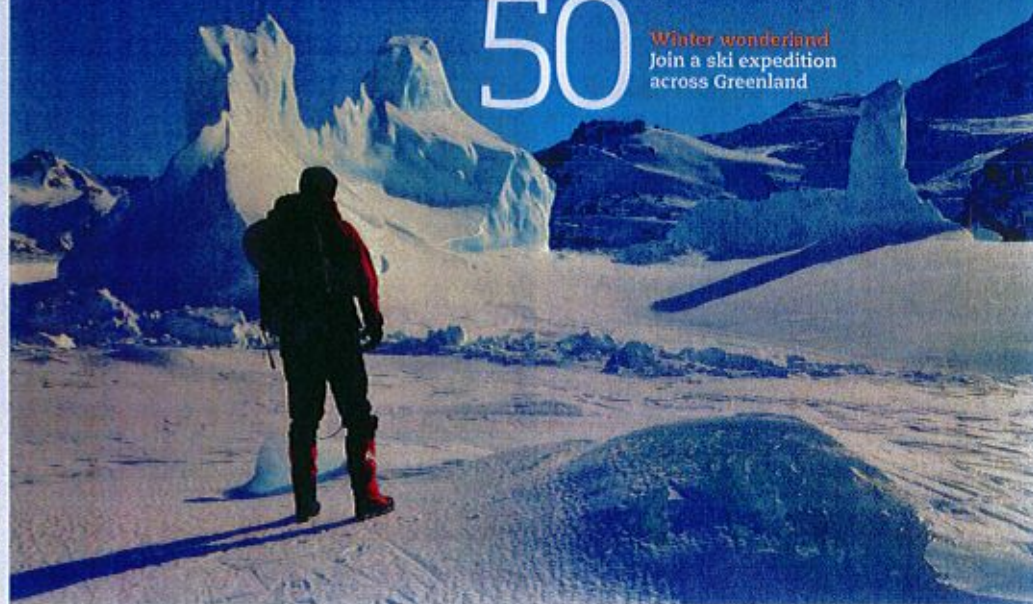


CONTENTS

January/February 2014/ISSUE 109

50

Winter wonderland
Join a ski expedition
across Greenland



Adventures: the big ones...

18 Top five Colorado

Colorado is home of adventure in the USA. Rosie Fuller tells us her top five things to do there

22 Charity challenges 2014 expeditions

Is 2014 the year of the big trip? Do it for a good cause - we've got inspirational ideas from trekking the Great Wall of China to rafting the Zambezi

44 Northern lights adventures

The northern lights are one of nature's most spellbinding sights. Here are the most adventurous ways to see them, including a pimped up 'tundra buggy' in Canada and cross-country skiing in Sweden

50 Ski it Greenland

You don't need to be a hardened polar explorer to ski across Greenland - novice Jonathan Smith joins a 12-day expedition across the stunning frozen fjords. Pulling a sledge isn't as difficult as he expected, he learns how to camp in -15°C temperatures and the northern lights are spectacular

64 Hike it Central America

Like the sound of New Year in the sun? Melissa Denchak is hiking through the adobe villages, rocky mountains and sheep-studded valleys of Guatemala, finishing at a volcano crater lake on New Year's Eve. There are no showers, but there are traditional Mayan saunas...

74 Trek it Afghanistan

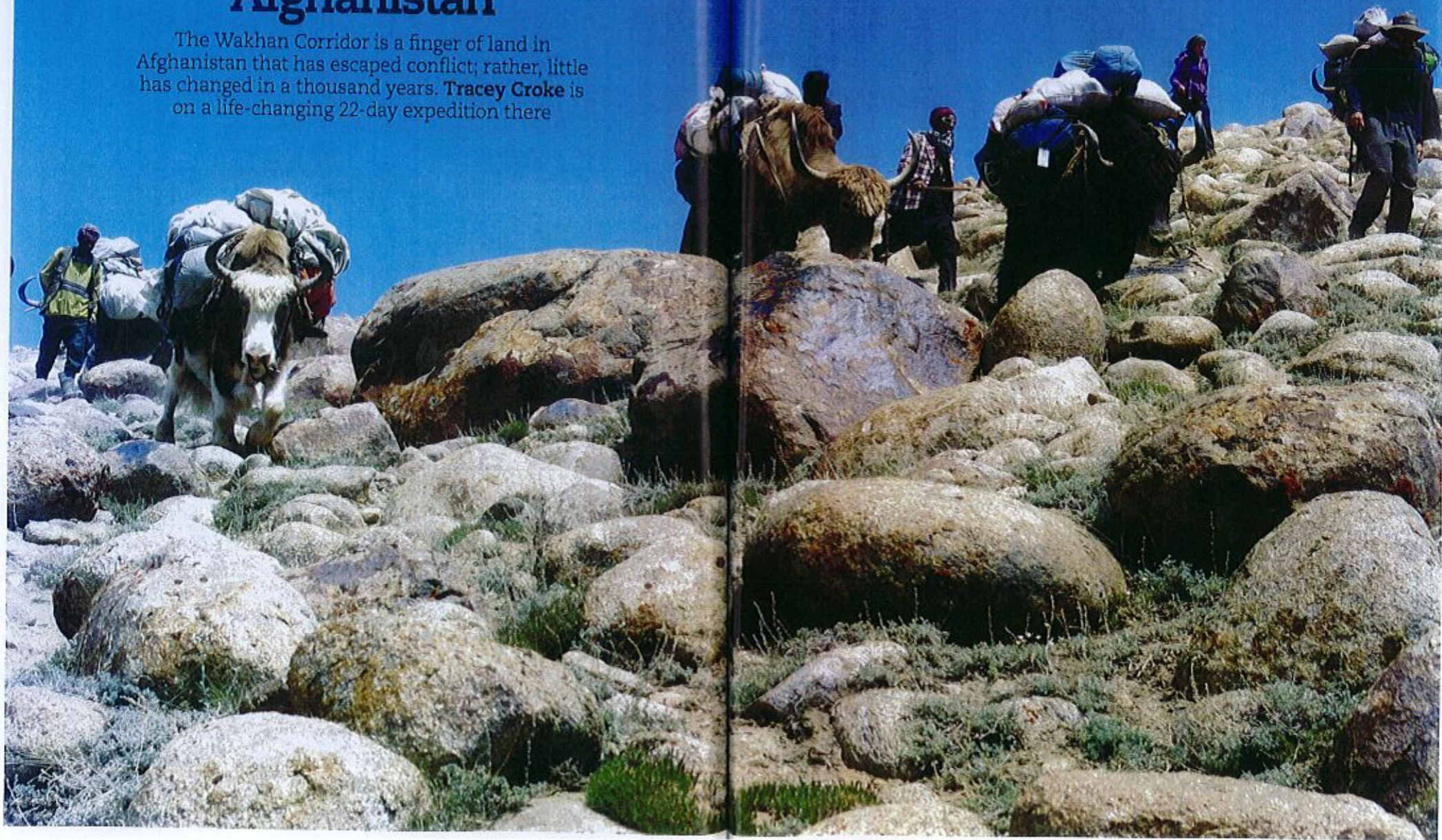
In the far northeast of the country, Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor is peaceful - and extremely hard to reach. Tracey Croke braves the journey and finds a breathtakingly beautiful land where little has changed in hundreds of years. The scenery is out of a Hollywood movie, but you have to be prepared for sheep's teeth in your stew

86 Trek it Indian Himalaya

Veteran mountain guide Steve Berry introduces his dream trek, from Ladakh to the kingdom of Zaskar in the Himalaya. It crosses passes of almost 5,000m, cuts through stunning gorges and has some exciting river crossings

Trek Afghanistan

The Wakhan Corridor is a finger of land in Afghanistan that has escaped conflict; rather, little has changed in a thousand years. **Tracey Croke** is on a life-changing 22-day expedition there



I reached the top of the ridge with my mouth agape, both from the altitude and the scene below. You can see why this place is known as the rooftop of the world.

A vast, flat valley rolled out into a U-shaped range of pastel-coloured mountains, diluted by distance and a vivid blue sky. Groups of horsemen from three separate settlements casually cantered to a central spot, where I could just make out a gathering of young boys huddled around a fire and drinking chai.

It was a scene that could have been plucked straight out of a million-dollar Hollywood epic about a bygone era when Alexander the Great was kicking up dust around the region in 300BC. But it wasn't. The scene unfolding before me was real and present day life in the Wakhan Corridor, Afghanistan.

When I signed up to the 22-day expedition, trip organiser Secret Compass warned that it might not all go to plan. It hadn't, as you would expect in a place where there is no connectivity or electricity, where running water is confined to the glacial rivers, where all the transport is four-legged and where infrastructure is nothing more than time-trodden trade trails, animal tracks and the odd rickety bridge cobbled together from fat branches and twigs.

Secret Compass was founded by former parachute regiment officers Tom Bodkin and Levison Wood, and the company specialises in taking film crews and intrepid explorers to high-risk, remote and little-explored parts of the world. Its motto is 'achieving the extraordinary,' and the extraordinary isn't found in convenient places. "It's a four-day jeep ride just to get to the start of the trekking location," explained Tom. "Not many places are as difficult to access as this."

Our mission was to connect two parts of the Pamir Mountains by crossing the 4,850m Showr Pass. It was the first commercial trek to attempt the route, said Secret Compass, which also meant it was a first for our expedition leader Ade Summers and his number two, Luca Alfatti. Everyone on the trip had to expect the unexpected.

The hardy semi-nomadic tribes call this slice of Afghanistan the rooftop of the world for good reason. They live in two long, glacier-carved valleys hidden

high in the Pamir Mountains – the Little and Big Pamir – mostly above an oxygen-deprived 4,000m. The Showr Pass divides the two Pamirs and the two tribes of herders, the Wakhi and Kyrgyz, who are cut off by snow eight months of the year. They cross the pass in the summer months to trade livestock, food and other materials.

Tom had only found one record of a westerner crossing the pass in the last 30 years. We'd taken that number into double figures and reached the Big Pamir, but we'd been battling unexpected summer snowstorms that gobbled up our rest days. One day we would be able to smell wild thyme in the hot dry air, the next we hiked blue-lipped against a blizzard.

A typical day started at 5am to pack up the tents and gather in the family

When I signed up, the organisers warned that it might not all go to plan. It hadn't, as you would expect in a place where there is no connectivity or electricity, where running water is confined to the glacial rivers and where all the transport is four-legged

yurt for porridge and bread. Those with bad stomachs from the altitude could ride a yak or a horse if there was one spare. For the rest, a 15km to 25km trek lay ahead. Over every ridge a new vista surprised us with microclimates and changing terrain, from mushy carpets of bright green to ankle-straining dusty rock beds. The reliable, unflappable, endearing yaks never failed to raise a smile as they sauntered down into the valleys, as did the sight of children running around herding goats in the distance. They were a sign that we would soon be in a cosy yurt, chatting, laughing, drinking tea and making friends.

Stopping at settlements was a welcome rest. We were tired and so were our horses and yaks. The dollars we were about to distribute to hire fresh legs and finish the expedition would help the nomads get through the unforgiving winter. But horse haggling

Who's writing



Tracey Croke is a freelance writer, journalist, world traveller and arthritic adventurer who'd like to high-five the person who invented full-suspension mountain bikes. She claims to love 'out there' experiences but the fact that she had almost completed Australia's longest off-road bike trail when she got sidetracked by an award-winning bottle of Barossa Valley Shiraz reveals a weak yet classy streak. The ex-Mancunian can be found around Sydney's northern beaches, writing, mountain biking and scoffing Vegemite. See www.traceycroke.com.



Yak's the way: loading up supplies



Everybody yurts: a traditional dwelling



Epic landscape: the scenery felt like it was from a Hollywood film

5 THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE WAKHAN REGION

1 Due in part to its unique location between biomes (geographical areas of distinctive plant and animal groups), Afghanistan has nine species of wild cats: snow leopard, leopard, lynx, caracal, leopard cat, jungle cat, wild cat, Pallas's cat and sand cat – the same number found in all of sub-Saharan Africa.

2 The largest species of wild sheep, which have horns that can span over six feet from tip to tip, is found only in the Pamirs. They were named Marco Polo sheep after the explorer who crossed this region on his way to China in 1273.

3 Afghanistan's last king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, had a hunting lodge deep in the Wakhan Corridor.

4 Part of the Wakhan Corridor is applying for World Heritage Site status, which will bring global attention to this isolated area.

5 A large proportion of the Kyrgyz population of the Wakhan region emigrated to Pakistan in 1980 when the Russians invaded and then subsequently, in 1982, to Turkey, where they still live today.

is a process that cannot be rushed.

Our group of 12, along with our two mountain leaders and local guides, couldn't have attempted the journey self-supported even if we'd wanted to. Every eager man and his reluctant donkey wanted to be part of our 200km trek. The rare moneymaking opportunity would, quite rightly, have to be debated with tribesmen in each settlement, who would then make sure the spontaneous prosperity was fairly distributed.

On one occasion, while Ade, Luca and our local Wakhi guide Melang began negotiations with village elders, we were invited into a yurt; a circular temporary dwelling made from felt placed over a latticed wood frame. A dried-yak-dung fire burned in the middle, brewing chai in an ornate blackened pot. Women brought in freshly baked unleavened bread. Shy giggling children peeked in through the felt door. Drinking chai and breaking bread is how friends are made in the Wakhan.

Living on the outer limits of civilisation has made the people here among the most irrepressible and resourceful of the human race. We were intrigued by everything, from their temporary homes of mud huts and yurts, to the felt, cheese and yoghurt produced from their woolly weather-resilient yaks. They were fascinated by our gizmos and clothing. The interest was two-way, as was the entertainment and sign-language banter.

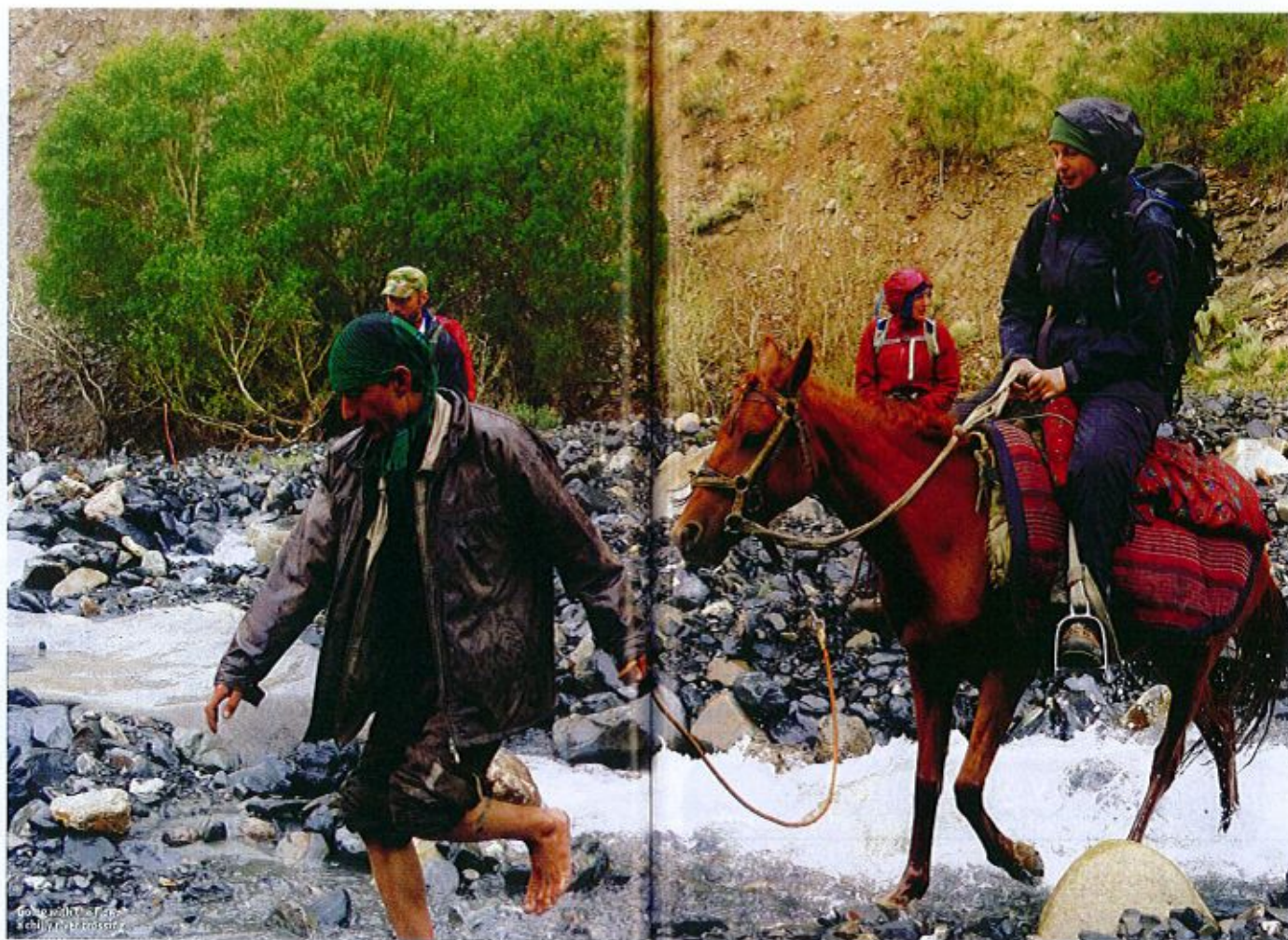
This time negotiations were swift, much shorter than usual. There would be no horses for hire under any circumstances. Even here, in the poorest region of one of the poorest countries in the world, there is a matter more important than our dollars. It's a celebration for the three settlements of people who travel far to these high altitude valleys for summer grazing. And celebration in this part of the world means an afternoon game of *Buzkashi* – an ancient sport played on horseback with the headless carcass of a freshly slaughtered goat.

We're offered a place to pitch our tents and invited to watch the afternoon's festivities. *Buzkashi* is an every-man-for-himself unparalleled display of horsemanship. I didn't grasp the exact rules, but it involves a horseback scrum from which two or three men emerge wrangling over the

goat – sometimes with both hands and clinging one-legged to their galloping horses. The rider who wins the tug-of-war gallops away, drops the goat at a designated point (with much gusto) and picks up a bright red ribbon as a reward to display on his bridle. It's fast, violent and after a few close shaves for participants and spectators on a playing field without any obvious markers, I returned to the safe haven of the yurt with two vets and a doctor from our group who all helped patch up the injured men. Tomorrow would be another Sam start to make back time for another memorable delay.

The Wakhan Corridor once formed an arduous part of the 4,000-mile Silk Road, one of the greatest trade routes in history, which connected the civilisations of Europe and the Far East. The corridor was established

6 Celebration in this part of the world means a game of *Buzkashi*, an ancient sport played on horseback with the headless carcass of a freshly slaughtered goat



Start point: unloading after the mammoth journey

5 TOP TIPS FOR TRAVELLING IN AFGHANISTAN

A few cultural dos and don'ts...

1. Alcohol is forbidden in Afghanistan (but fine in Tajikistan).
2. Dress appropriately: wear long trousers and long sleeves. Women will also need a headscarf.
3. Do not point the soles of your feet directly at another person.
4. Take shoes off when going inside, or when sitting on rugs outside.
5. Only use your right hand to eat and offer food.



In the late 19th century as a buffer zone between the former British and Russian empires, which turned the Wakhan into a peculiar finger of land pointing out eastwards from Afghanistan towards China. The Wakhan was cut off altogether when Mao Zedong completed the Communist takeover of China. The borders were permanently closed, closing off the 2,000-year-old caravan route and sealing in the semi-nomadic tribes. The famous Silk Road became a 300km cul-de-sac. At the end, three of the world's loftiest mountain ranges – the Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Pamir – converge to form the Pamir Knot. That's one spectacular dead end in any mountaineer's guidebook.

This corner of Afghanistan is so remote it escaped the recent conflict and repression of the Taliban. Even Manchester United merchandise hasn't made it to the Wakhan yet. Understandably, I had questions at the time of booking the trip. "In a life or death situation, we'll be able to reach you in around 12 hours at the most remote point," confirmed Tom. The mention of a helicopter extraction plan gave me both comfort and a childlike sense of excitement.

The safest way into the Wakhan is a two-day drive through Tajikistan along the Pamir Highway, a rough road

cut into the side of the Tajik Pamir Mountains. For part of the drive only the tumultuous Panj River separated Afghanistan from its neighbour. Gorges with unstable edges added to the spectacular but slightly hair-raising drive.

Tajikistan is considered poor yet the stark comparison between the two countries was clear even before we reached the bridge border crossing at Ishkashim; Afghanistan has donkeys instead of cars, mud huts instead of houses and arid brown land instead of lush irrigated fields.

"Welcome to Afghanistan. Welcome to my country," our local guide Melang declared with open arms, a smile from weathered ear to weathered ear and a delight to lift the most jaded of spirits.

Throughout the trip Melang morphed from our guide into our fixer, our negotiator, our translator, our cook, our butcher, our baker, our yak-dung fire-maker. He made western-style multi-tasking look like fanciful faffing. I asked Melang what he thought his country needed most. "People," he answered. "Send people."

Melang was a wonderful relief from the nervous business of having our kit searched by border guards, often one-handed because the other hand held a Kalashnikov by the trigger. One of the group reassured me that the safety was on. I relaxed a little knowing I wouldn't be accidentally shot by an inadequately trained guard with an overly twitchy finger that had yet to wield a razor blade.

In Ishkashim, people were happy to see us and grateful for our dollars. We picked up last minute supplies and got

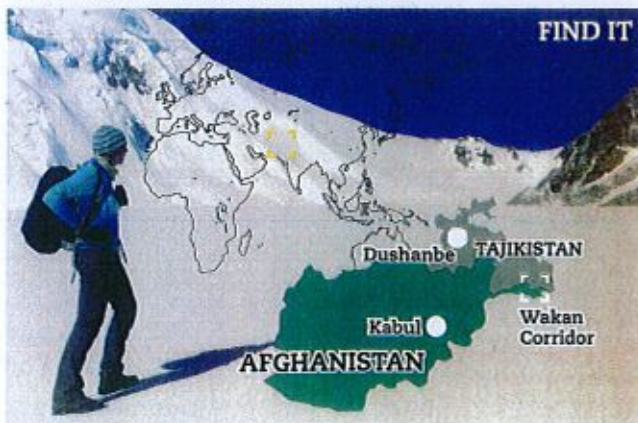
the necessary travel permissions from various authorities before setting off on another long drive into the Wakhan.

We had hired the only four-wheel-drives available, which were supposedly capable of taking us through the next stage of our journey. Roadworthy is irrelevant in a place where there are barely any roads. Needless to say they clattered, spluttered and regularly broke down on tracks that became non-existent. But they somehow made the final punishing hours over rocks and through rivers to arrive at the beginning of the 12-day mountain trek.

I asked Melang what he thought his country needed most. "People," he answered. "Send people" 9

Nothing about this trip was easy. Yet the time-wasting bureaucracy, gun-shing border crossings, lack of roads, clapped-out vehicles and rocky camp spots were experiences in themselves and any difficulties were annulled by venturing into a largely unknown landscape to collect countless memories of ingenious people few have had the privilege to meet.

The nomads of the Afghan Pamir are waiting to welcome you with mugs of hot yak-milk tea. They will open their warm felt-covered homes so you can rest, and trade their yaks to aid a journey into a part of Afghanistan few people see; a world which is centuries away from the headlines that have defined Afghanistan over the past decade. **EW**



HIKE IT: AFGHANISTAN

LET'S GO

Want to do what Tracey did? Here's how you can...

Get there

The safest way into the Wakhan is a two-day drive through Tajikistan along the Pamir Highway. Turkish Airlines flies to Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, weekly, with a change in Istanbul. Prices are around £550 return. See www.turkishairlines.com. After the two-day drive through Tajikistan it's another two days through Afghanistan. All the driving needed 4x4s – we hired them in Dushanbe and then picked up older and more clapped out ones across the border at Ishkashim.

Our transport also involved horse and yak riding. You don't need to be an experienced rider, just comfortable getting on and travelling at walking pace.

Stay there

We slept in guesthouses in Tajikistan and on the way in to the Wakhan valley in Afghanistan. These are basic, usually with an empty communal room for your sleeping mat and bag, a squat toilet and a tank of water. On the trek we generally slept in one-man tents (mostly over 4,000m) although villagers may invite you to stay in a yurt.

The trip

This was the first commercial trip linking the Little and Big Pamirs via the Showr Pass, but Secret Compass is offering it again in 2014, from 20 July – 11 August. It costs £2,999 which doesn't include flights but does include all logistics from Dushanbe, all accommodation (including tents) and food, and all permits. See www.secretcompass.com.

Safety

Secret Compass has contingency, incident and emergency plans in place for likely and unlikely scenarios. It has assessed the security threat in the Wakhan Corridor to be low, as the region wasn't controlled by the Taliban in the 1990s; there have been no incidents of terrorism in the region for at least 10 years and, as the area is so poor, there is no reason for malign elements to target it. The dangers of this trek are more its remoteness and the lack of infrastructure rather than terrorism.

What to take

Take kit for tough camping and hiking – Secret Compass provided tents and stoves, but we took everything else, including warm sleeping bags and jackets (nights are below freezing). Other things you might not think of are a headscarf for women and sandals for river crossings. All your belongings, including the provided one-man tent, should fit in a soft duffel bag (maximum 90L) for strapping on to the pack animals. Yaks and horses may

be travelling behind or ahead so keep everything you need during the day in your daypack. Don't forget to pack plenty of baby wipes and a sense of humour.

Visas

For Afghanistan you'll need a one-month single-entry tourist visa, and for Tajikistan you'll need a one-month double-entry tourist visa with a GBAO permit (Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast) to enter southern Tajikistan and with 'Ishkashim' listed. If you don't request the GBAO permit, the Tajik border guards will not allow you through.

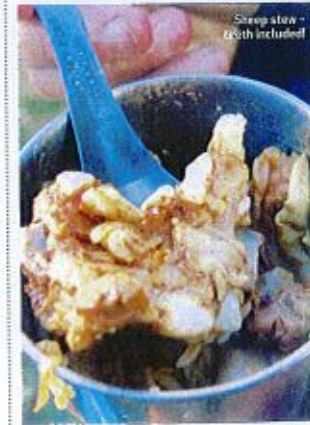
You can apply for visas directly with the relevant embassy or you can use a courier service such as Travcour (www.travcour.com) to organise it for you. Secret Compass registered us with our respective embassies in Tajikistan and Afghanistan before travelling. For Brits, the total cost of all of these will be just over £200.

Insurance

Most standard insurance policies won't cover this kind of trip. At the time of travelling it contravened Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) advice and in this case suitably designed insurance is required. Secret Compass has a specific policy with Travel and General Insurance Services (www.tgic-online.com) that covers people who go on its trips in areas the FCO advises against travel. It costs £159. You're welcome to get your own policy but Secret Compass has a checklist it has to conform to.

Food

Food is kebab and bread based in Tajikistan and more basic in Afghanistan where there is little meat available. A cook



travels with the trek and makes basic rice, potato and pasta dishes. Afghan rice with beans and warm unleavened bread was delicious, albeit with the occasional bit of goat hair, which was overlooked by hunger. Meat is usually only offered on special occasions but we ate a sheep that had died in the unexpected summer snow. The stew broth was tasty but since nothing is wasted, what you get is potluck – teeth and gums in my case.

Is the trip for me?

The adventure is suitable for anyone who is fit enough to cope with 12 continuous days of strenuous trekking (up to 25km a day) in remote areas at altitudes of up to 5,000m. You also need to be prepared for changes of plan, desert-dust to snow-storm weather, river crossings by horse or yak, 5am starts... and a character-building, bewitching and unforgettable experience. If you thrive on the unexpected and can laugh at having to squat behind an inadequate rock with a curious audience, it's definitely for you.

Other operators

Hinterland Travel offers various tours to Afghanistan, including an exploratory 116-mile trek called The Retreat, which involves walking from Begrami to Gandamak, taking place in October 2014. See www.hinterlandtravel.com.

As well as hiking, Untamed Borders offers climbing, horse trekking and even ski-touring in Afghanistan. There's a three-week trek to Chaqmaqtin Lake in the Wakhan corridor and much more. See www.untamedborders.com.

Wild Frontiers offers group adventure tours and trekking trips in Afghanistan and the Wakhan Corridor. See www.wild-frontierstravel.com.

Pamir Trails also offers trekking in the Wakhan Corridor, as well as Tajikistan and Pakistan – see www.pamirtrails.com.