

Afghanistan without Taliban



ERIC LAFFORGUE

There is a region in Afghanistan where the Taliban have never really been able to impose their rule. Wedged between Tajikistan and Pakistan, the Afghan Pamir is an area of precarious peace.

Promoted by the Afghan government to try and attract tourists in search of adventure, it is also the gateway to the Wakhan Corridor that Marco Polo used in the 13th century and it is where the legendary nomads have lived isolated from the rest of the world at an altitude of 4,500 meters, with the only company of their yaks.



The diversity of the Afghan people is obvious from the very first encounters. Blond hair and light eyes are common. Educated Afghans love referring to the passage of Alexander the Great in the region to explain this phenomenon.



A black-haired father introduces me to his blond son. *"I am very proud of my son's blond hair. It is a sign of beauty for us."*



No one misses the Taliban times, especially not men. "We were deprived of music and TV. We had to grow a beard, we were controlled and beaten in the street if we didn't follow their rules... Moreover, since women were not allowed to go out, we had to go grocery shopping at the market"



Afghan Coca-Cola, which label slavishly copies its American cousin.



Ishkashim market. When he sees me, the butcher brings his bloody knife to his chin to mime cutting one's throat, much to the hilarity of the crowd.



The population of Pamir is predominantly Ismaili, a branch of Shia Islam that follows the precepts of the Aga Khan, but some areas are controlled by conservative Sunnis who demand the wearing of the burqa. Moderate Afghans dubbed them the "*long beards*" referring to the Taliban.



Zebeck village. Once inside the houses, burqas are removed to reveal smiling welcoming faces. This woman told me how fed up she is to have to hide in public. *"It is suffocating under the burqa!"*.



Khandood village is famous for the colorful outfits of its women. Despite the presence of a Sunni mosque in the village, women walk around in the streets freely without wearing burqas. They had to hide under the Taliban regime. A husband explains, "*The Taliban kept saying that colors incited vice.*"



Men and women wear kohl around their eyes. Afghans believe that it improves the eyesight and possesses medicinal properties.



Under the cradle, a small puddle indicates that his penis was placed in a wooden pipette to allow the urine to flow out without soiling his clothes. My guide warns me: do not compliment a newborn for fear of drawing the attention of the evil eye.



The villagers are poor, which they acknowledge without shame but without ever asking for anything. On the contrary, they show great generosity despite their limited resources. Nobody begs in the street.



Never shake hands with the owner on the door step of their house – it is bad luck.



To protect the family, ibex horns are placed at the entrance or in the courtyard of the house.



The houses have several rooms which are connected by small corridors and inner courtyards. At first glance, they appear basic but they reveal symbols and beliefs when you ask the owners.

For centuries, they have been designed to withstand the many deadly earthquakes in Pamir. In each room, five wooden pillars – symbolizing the five pillars of Islam – support a beam skylight called Chorkhona, the Four Houses. It symbolizes the four Zoroastrian elements : earth, water, wind and fire.

The kitchen is monumental. This is where women prepare the tea and make bread in a large oven. The only light comes from the octagonal hole in the ceiling, which also allows the smoke to escape. Soot-covered walls add to the strange atmosphere of the place.



Men and women sleep in separate rooms. Married men do not share the same room as single men.

Another room is reserved for guests, but also the deceased, who are considered as important guests in the Pamiri culture.

On the main beam, one always places the umbilical cord of a newborn and the first grass cut during the harvest..



The only touch of fantasy in this dark decor: an alcove called the sanctuary, which is decorated with naïve drawings made with flour during the Nowroz celebrations. They are reminiscent of Zoroastrian drawings in India. People also pray in the house as Ismailis do not build mosques.



The timber to build the house must not be stolen but purchased honestly, otherwise, misfortune will befall those who live in it. The prosperity of the house owner will also depend on his generosity toward the carpenter.



The state of the road network makes any trip painful. One often has to share the roads with herds and drive through collapsed roads. The road follows the legendary Silk Road, which nobody has bothered to pave..



A two-day walk from Wuzed is necessary to reach the first Wahki villages at 3,500 meters. Totally isolated from the rest of the world, they blend into the landscape with their stone houses and their yurts. Here, there is no more TV, radio, electricity, or mobile phones..



Wakhi village in the Big pamir. The altimeter indicates 4,582 meters. The nomads have allegedly lived in these mountains for over 2,000 years. There are still 10,000 of them who still maintain this pastoral lifestyle. In the summer, they climb up to find the best pasture for their cattle..



At night, everyone meets up in the only yurt equipped with a solar panel powering a weak LED lamp to share tea. The yurt is not very large and is divided in two by a bamboo panel decorated with candy wrappers. On one side is the room and the fire, on the other the kitchen..



The milking is an essential activity managed by women. Mixed with tea and salt, milk is the quintessential staple food.



Afghans are stunned to learn that in Europe, there are also terrorists who blow up bombs and kill innocent people, a daily tragedy in Afghanistan. They thought Europe was a peaceful heaven..



Those who went down to the plain, like the village chief, have come back upset. *"You have to pay for everything! We wouldn't be able to live down there. We have no money."* No one would even think of changing their lifestyle despite the complete lack of comfort, education and healthcare in this part of Pamir..



Women have kept their traditional outfits: long skirt, embroidered vest, small hat and veil. A shimmering mosaic of red, purple and pink, which barely covers long braids finished with beads and cowry shells. There are no more burqas in sight..



Some women have left the village for the two summer months with their yaks to seek new pasture. Their relatives will not receive any news from them and will not be able to have any before their return.



Distractions are rare for children. Nobody knows Messi or Ronaldo. Tourists are eagerly awaited as they provide some excitement in this monotonous existence. I am the first to visit them this year. We are in early August and the tourist season will end in September. Then, the snow will cover the mountains for six months.



5AM. Dogs howled to death all night long, wolves are around. The village chief leaves with 200 sheep to find new pasture. He checks his old gun before leaving the yurt.



"They say that in the plain, peace has returned and tourists are back in Afghanistan. I hope that many of them will come and visit us to discover our culture."



This smile should not distract from a cruel reality: only one in four children reaches the age of 5 in Afghanistan while life expectancy is 50 years. 3,500 people died in attacks or fighting in 2015.



www.ericlafforgue.com
lafforgue@mac.com