

# Tajikistan

## Таджикистан/Тоҷикистон

A Persian-speaking outpost in a predominantly Turkic region, Tajikistan is in many ways the odd one out in Central Asia. With its roots in ancient Sogdiana and Bactria, the modern country is a fragile patchwork of clans, languages and identities, forged together by little more than Soviet nation-building and the shared hopes for a peaceful future.

That peace was shattered in the 1990s, when a brutal civil war claimed over 50,000 lives, turning the remote mountainous republic into the bloodiest corner of the former Soviet empire. Though the wounds are still raw, a decade after the war most Tajiks are moving forward with their lives, as if awakening from a bad dream, and a mood of guarded optimism has returned.

The good news is that today Tajikistan is safe, stable and scenically spectacular. The Pamir region – ‘the Roof of the World’ – is easily the country’s highlight, offering breathtaking high-altitude scenery, excellent ecotourism options, humbling mountain hospitality and the Pamir Highway – one of Asia’s greatest road trips.

Once the playing fields of ‘Great Game’ spies and explorers, Tajikistan is now the playground for cutting-edge adventure travel, from walks through the Wakhan Valley to 4WD trips out to remote valleys and nights in remote Kyrgyz yurt camps. For fans of remote mountain scenery, or anyone who ranks places like northern Pakistan or western Tibet as their favourite destinations, Tajikistan will glimmer as the most exciting republic in Central Asia.

Anyone following this road has the added thrill of knowing that few ‘foreign devils’ have passed this way since Francis Younghusband, the consummate ‘Great Game’ player, was expelled from the Pamirs by the Russians in 1891, marking the region’s closure to the outside world for the next 100 years.

### FAST FACTS

- **Area** 143,100 sq km
- **Capital** Dushanbe
- **Country Code** ☎ 992
- **Famous for** Civil war, Pamir Highway, mountains, hospitality, drug trafficking
- **Languages** Tajik, Russian, Uzbek and half a dozen Pamiri languages
- **Money** Tajik somani (TJS); US\$1=3.4TJS, €1=4.3TJS
- **Phrases in Tajik** *khob.* (OK.); *mebakhshed.* (sorry.); *khair.* (goodbye.)
- **Population** 7.32 million (2006 estimate)



### HOW MUCH?

- Snickers bar US\$0.40
- 100km shared taxi ride US\$8
- Internet connection per hour US\$1.20
- Tajik skullcap US\$2
- Homestay US\$5-6
- Litre of bottled water US\$0.40
- Litre of petrol US\$1

### HIGHLIGHTS

- **Pamir Highway** (p386) One of the world’s great road trips, offering jaw-dropping high-altitude lakes and fine community-based homestays.
- **Wakhan Valley** (p384) Remote and beautiful valley, shared with Afghanistan, and peppered with Silk Rd forts, Buddhist ruins and spectacular views of the snow-bound Hindu Kush.
- **Yurt stays** (p388) Breakfast on fresh yogurt and cream while overnighting with a Kyrgyz family on the high pastures of the Pamir plateau.
- **Fan Mountains** (p373) Austere but beautiful trekking destination of turquoise lakes and Tajik shepherds, easily accessible from Samarkand.
- **M34** (p368) The mountain drive between Dushanbe and Khojand or Penjikent takes you over high passes and into towering mountain scenery.
- **Iskander-Kul** (p373) Lovely lake at the eastern end of the Fan Mountains and a great place to relax or go hiking.
- **Istaravshan** (p371) Exotic bazaar and lazy backstreets full of forgotten mosques and domed tombs.

### ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Drive from Samarkand or Khojand to Dushanbe (with an overnight stop in Iskander-Kul if you hire your own taxi) and then fly out of Dushanbe to Bishkek or Almaty. Alternatively, visit Penjikent from Samarkand, continue to Khojand via Istaravshan and then dip back into Uzbekistan.
- **One week** Khojand to Dushanbe with stops in Istaravshan, Iskander-Kul and Hissar. Or perhaps a short trek in the Fan Mountains. You could just about travel the

Pamir Hwy from Dushanbe to Osh in a week, but only with your own transport.

- **Two weeks** Ten days is really the minimum amount of time required to travel the Pamir Hwy if you plan to arrange things as you go. Try to budget an overnight in the Wakhan Valley and at least one yurtstay in the eastern Pamirs, as the area has so much to offer.
- **Three weeks** This will be enough time to get you from Khojand in the north, over the mountains to Dushanbe via Istaravshan and then along the Pamir Hwy to Osh, with maybe a short trek in the Fan Mountains. Try to add on an overnight trip from Murgab to somewhere like Jalang, Pshart or Bulunkul.

### CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Northern, central and southern Tajikistan sizzle in summer (June to September), with temperatures over 40°C (105°F). Unfortunately this is the best time to visit the mountains. Spring (March to May) brings mild temperatures but frequent heavy showers. April is the best time to visit southern Tajikistan in bloom.

In winter (November to February) temperatures in Dushanbe hover near freezing, while temperatures in the Pamirs plummet to between -20°C and -45°C. The Anzob and Shakhristan passes between Khojand and Dushanbe are generally closed from late November to late May, though the new tunnel under the Anzob pass should keep the road to Penjikent open year-round.

March, April, September and October are probably the best times to visit. The best time of year for trekking is September. The Pamir region is best visited in July to late September, though the Pamir Hwy technically remains open year-round. During early summer (June and July), meltwater can make river crossings dangerous in mountainous areas.

### HISTORY

#### Tajik Ancestry

Tajik ancestry is a murky area, with roots reaching back to the Bactrians and Sogdians. Tombs from the eastern Pamir show that Saka-Usun tribes were grazing their flocks here from the 5th century BC, when the climate was considerably lusher than today.

In the 1st century BC the Bactrian empire covered most of what is now northern



### TRAVELLING SAFELY IN TAJIKISTAN

There are few specific risks in Tajikistan. The mountain passes between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been land-mined, as have parts of the Pyanj River banks that form the border with Afghanistan, so don't go for a stroll in these areas.

If you're going to be travelling the Pamir Hwy, particularly if you are headed from Osh to Karakul or Murgab in one day, there are serious risks associated with altitude sickness (see p479) for more information).

Southern Tajikistan has a malaria risk along the Afghan border and along the lower Vakhsh Valley as far north as Kurgonteppa. See p477.

Don't drink the tap water in Dushanbe, as there are occasional water-spread typhoid outbreaks.

Afghanistan. Their contemporaries, the Sogdians, inhabited the Zerafshan (Zeravshan) Valley in present-day western Tajikistan (where a few traces of this civilisation remain near Penjikent). Alexander the Great battled the Sogdians and besieged Cyropolis (Istaravshan), before founding modern-day Khojand. The Sogdians were displaced in the Arab conquest of Central Asia during the 7th century AD. The Sogdian hero Davanstik made a last stand against the Arabs at Mount Mug in the Zerafshan (Zeravshan) Mountains, before he was finally beheaded by the Muslim vanquishers.

Modern Tajikistan traces itself back to the glory days of the Persian Samanid dynasty (AD 819–992), a period of frenzied creative activity which hit its peak during the rule of Ismail Samani (AD 849–907), known in Tajikistan as Ismoili Somoni. Bukhara, the dynastic capital, became the Islamic world's centre of learning – nurturing great talents such as the philosopher-scientist Abu Ali ibn-Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) and the poet Rudaki – both now claimed as sons of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

### A Blurring of Identity

Under the Samanids, the great towns of Central Asia were Persian (the basis of Tajikistan's modern-day claims on Samarkand and Bukhara), but at the end of the 10th century a succession of Turkic invaders followed up

their battlefield successes with cultural conquest. Despite contrasting cultures, the two peoples cohabited peacefully, unified by religion. The Persian-speaking Tajiks adopted Turkic culture and the numerically superior Turks absorbed the Tajik people. Both were subject to the vicissitudes of Central Asia and weathered conquests by the Mongols and, later, Timur (Tamerlane). Most of the territory of modern Tajikistan remained on the fringes of the Timurid empire.

From the 15th century onwards, the Tajiks were subjects of the emirate of Bukhara, who received 50% of Badakhshan's ruby production as a tax. In the mid-18th century the Afghans moved up to engulf all lands south of the Amu-Darya (Oxus River), along with their resident Tajik population, and later seized parts of Badakhshan (including temporarily the Rushan and Shughnan regions). The Amu-Darya still delineates much of the Afghan–Tajik border today.

### The 'Great Game' & the Basmachi

As part of the Russian empire's thrust southwards, St Petersburg made the emirate of Bukhara a vassal state in 1868, which gave Russia effective control over what now passes for northern and western Tajikistan. But the Pamirs, which account for the whole of modern-day eastern Tajikistan, remained a no-man's-land, literally, falling outside the established borders of the Bukhara emirate and unclaimed by neighbouring Afghanistan and China. Russia was eager to exploit this anomaly in its push to open up possible routes into British India.

The Pamirs became the arena for the strategic duel between Britain and Russia that British poet and author Rudyard Kipling was to immortalise as the 'Great Game', a game in which Russia's players eventually prevailed, securing the region for the tsar (p45). It was in the eastern Pamirs, after visiting Murgab, Alichur and Rang-Kul, that Francis Younghusband was thrown out of the upper Wakhan by his Tsarist counterpart, sparking an international crisis between Britain and Russia. Russia backed up its claims by building a string of forts across the Pamirs. The Anglo-Russian border treaty of 1895 finally defined Tajikistan's current borders with Afghanistan and China.

Following the Russian revolution of 1917, new provisional governments were established in Central Asia and the Tajiks found themselves part of first the Turkestan (1918–24),

then the Uzbekistan (1924–29) Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), despite pushing for an autonomous Islamic-oriented republic. The next year Muslim *basmachi* guerrillas began a campaign to free the region from Bolshevik rule (see the boxed text p367). It took four years for the Bolsheviks to crush this resistance, and in the process entire villages were razed. The surviving guerrillas disappeared into Afghanistan, from where they continued for years to make sporadic raids over the border.

### Soviet Statehood

In 1924, when the Soviet Border Commission set about redefining Central Asia, the Tajiks got their own Autonomous SSR (ASSR). Although only a satellite of the Uzbek SSR, this was the first official Tajik state. In 1929 it was upgraded to a full union republic, although (possibly in reprisal for the *basmachi* revolt) Samarkand and Bukhara – where over 700,000 Tajiks still lived – remained in Uzbekistan. As recently as 1989 the government of Tajikistan was still trying to persuade the Soviet leadership to ‘return’ the area lost in this cultural amputation. Territorial tensions with the modern government of Uzbekistan over the two cultural centres remain.

The Bolsheviks never fully trusted the Tajikistan SSR and during the 1930s almost

all Tajiks in positions of influence within the government were replaced by stooges from Moscow. The industrialisation of Tajikistan was only undertaken following WWII, after the loss of much of European Russia’s manufacturing capacity. But living standards remained low and in the late 1980s Tajikistan endured 25% unemployment, plus the lowest level of education and the highest infant-mortality rate in the Soviet Union.

For most of the Soviet era Tajikistan was heavily reliant on imports from the rest of the Union – not just food, but fuel and many other standard commodities. When the Soviet trading system started to disintegrate, Tajikistan was left badly equipped to fend for itself, and dangerously unbalanced.

### From Civil Unrest...

In the mid-1970s, Tajikistan began to feel the impact of the rise of Islamic forces in neighbouring Afghanistan, particularly in the south around Kurgan-Tyube (Kurgonteppe). This region had been neglected by Dushanbe’s ruling communist elite, who were mainly drawn from the prosperous northern city of Leninabad (now Khojand). In 1976 the underground Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) was founded, gathering popular support as a rallying point for Tajik nationalism. Although in 1979 there had been demonstrations in opposition to the

### DIGGING UP THE PAST

Southern and Central Tajikistan is amazingly rich in archaeological sites. There’s little to actually see today but finds from the region are displayed in museums across the world.

The site of **Sarazm**, west of Penjikent, ranks as one of the oldest cities in Central Asia. Finds include a fire temple and the grave of a wealthy woman dubbed the ‘Queen of Sarazm’, dating from the 4th-century BC.

The Sogdian site of **Bunjikat**, further north near Shakhristan, was the 8th-century capital of the kingdom of Ushrushana, and is noteworthy for a famous Sogdian mural depicting a wolf suckling twins, in a clear echo of the Roman legend of Romulus and Remus.

The ancient site of **Kobadiyan** (7th- to 2nd-centuries BC) in southern Tajikistan is famed as the location for the discovery of the Oxus Treasure, a stunning 2500-year-old Archaemenid treasure-trove that is now in the British Museum ([www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/), search for ‘Oxus Treasure’).

Nearby is the ruined Greco-Bactrian temple of **Takht-i-Sangin**, where a famous ivory portrait of Alexander the Great (see p362) was discovered. It was close to here that Alexander crossed the Oxus in 329 BC.

South of Kurgonteppe is the 7th to 8th-century **Adjina Tepe** (Witches Hill), where in 1966 archaeologists unearthed Central Asia’s largest surviving Buddha statue (see p362).

Other nearby archaeological sites include the 9th- to 11th-century citadel and palace of Khulbak at Khurbanshaid, 7km from Vose, not far from Kulyab.

Explore the website [www.afc.ryukoku.ac.jp/tj](http://www.afc.ryukoku.ac.jp/tj) for more on these and other sites.

### THE OPIUM HIGHWAY

Central Asia is a major transit route for the global trade in heroin, most of which comes from Afghanistan, the world’s largest producer of opium and supplier of 90% of Europe’s heroin habit. Most of the illicit trade crosses the porous border between Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan. In fact, Tajikistan seizes roughly 80% of all drugs captured in Central Asia and stands third worldwide in seizures of opiates (heroin and raw opium).

Not all of the drugs leave the region; addiction in Central Asia has mushroomed in recent years and in its wake has come one of the world’s fastest growing rates of HIV infection.

Warlords and criminal gangs control most of the business, although the army, police and border guards all have fingers in the opium bowl. Drugs have even turned up in Kazakh diplomatic bags and on Russian military flights. In 2005 a homemade aircraft (a parachute with a motor attached!) was shot down flying above the border with Tajikistan with 18kg of heroin. Drug money has financed everything from arms for Tajikistan’s civil war to the new villas you see lining the Varzob valley north of Dushanbe.

In modern Central Asia, camel caravans of silks and spices have been replaced, it seems, by Ladas packed with heroin. The Silk Road has become an opium highway.

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the first serious disturbances were in early 1990 when it was rumoured that Armenian refugees were to be settled in Dushanbe, which was already short on housing. This piece of Soviet social engineering sparked riots, deaths and the imposition of a state of emergency. Further opposition parties emerged as a result of the crackdown.

On 9 September 1991, following the failed coup in Moscow and declarations of independence by other Central Asian states, Tajikistan proclaimed itself an independent republic. Elections were held 10 weeks later and the Socialist Party (formerly the Communist Party of Tajikistan or CPT) candidate, Rakhmon Nabiev, was voted into power. There were charges of election rigging but what really riled the opposition was Nabiev’s apparent consolidation of an old-guard, Leninabad-oriented power base that refused to accommodate any other of the various clan-factions that make up the Tajik nation.

Sit-in demonstrations on Dushanbe’s central square escalated to violent clashes and, in August 1992, anti-government demonstrators stormed the presidential palace and took hostages. A coalition government was formed, but sharing power between regional clans, religious leaders and former communists proved impossible and Tajikistan descended into civil war.

### ...To Civil War

During the Soviet era, Moscow managed to hold the lid on a pressure-cooker of clan-based tensions that had existed long before

Russian intervention. Tajikistan’s various factions – Leninabadis from the north, Kulyabis from the south and their hostile neighbours from Kurgan-Tyube, Garmis from the east, and Pamiris from the mountainous province of Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO) – had all been kept in line under Soviet rule. When independence came, the lid blew off. Civil war ensued and the clan struggles claimed around 60,000 lives and made refugees of over half a million.

As a way out of the internecine conflict Imomali Rakhmanov was chosen from the Kulyab district to front the government. The Kulyabis simply fought their way to power with a scorched-earth policy against their Islamic-leaning rivals from the Garm Valley and Kurgan-Tyube.

Rakhmanov was sworn in as president after a disputed election and an all-out assault from Kulyabi and Leninabad forces to get him into office. Kulyabi forces, led by Sanjak Safarov (who had previously spent 23 years in prison for murder), then embarked on an orgy of ethnic cleansing. Anyone found in Dushanbe with a Badakhshan or Khatlon ID card was shot on the spot.

The November 1992 elections did nothing to resolve the conflict (the opposition in exile refused to take part in the voting) and the Islamic opposition continued the war from bases in the Karategin region and Afghanistan, echoing the *basmachi* campaigns of 70 years earlier. An economic blockade of Badakhshan led to famine in the Pamirs during 1992–93.

Rakhmanov was propped up by Russian forces, which had been drawn into the conflict as de facto protectors of the Kulyab regime. Russian troops controlled some 50 military posts along the Afghan border. 'Everyone must realise', Boris Yeltsin said in a 1993 pronouncement, 'that this is effectively Russia's border, not Tajikistan's.' Russia (and later Uzbekistan) feared that if Tajikistan fell to Islamic rebels, Uzbekistan would be next.

In late 1994 a second presidential election was held, in which Rakhmanov romped to victory. This surprised no-one, as he was the only candidate. Opposition parties had been outlawed.

### Precarious Peace

A bad peace is better than a good war.  
*Khatlon villager*

Pressure on Rakhmanov from Russia (and the faltering loyalty of his own commanders) forced the government to negotiate with the opposition, which was then in exile in Iran. Finally, in December 1996 a ceasefire was declared, followed up by a peace agreement on 27 June 1997. The agreement set up a power-sharing organisation, the National Reconciliation Commission (CNR), headed by the opposition leader Sayid Abdullo Nuri, which guaranteed the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) 30% of the seats in a coalition government in return for a laying down of arms.

When the dust settled, it was clear that independence and civil war had proven catastrophic for Tajikistan, which had always been the poorest of the Soviet republics. During the civil war Tajikistan's gross domestic product

(GDP) per capita shrank 70% to US\$330, plunging it from part of a global superpower to one of the 30 poorest countries in the world within a decade. Two complete harvests were missed and the region suffered major subsequent droughts. Standards of living in the country had gone back 20 years or more.

Spirits were lifted in September 1998 when the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Islamic Ismaili sect, visited GBAO. The Aga Khan Foundation had effectively fed the Pamir region since the start of the civil war and some 80,000 Pamiris came out to hear their spiritual leader tell them to lay down their arms, while another 10,000 Afghan Tajiks strained their ears across the river in Afghanistan.

### CURRENT EVENTS

Though the Tajik economy remains on life support, health and education standards remain low and life in the region remains hard, Tajiks are savouring the stability and prospects for the near future are improving.

The million or so Tajiks who work abroad, mostly in Russia, send back around US\$200 million a year in remittances, the equivalent of the Tajik national budget. Largely thanks to this injection of cash, the economy is finally picking up, with annual growth rates hovering between 6% and 10%.

That said, the annual national budget of Tajikistan remains less than the budget of a major Hollywood movie, and 40% of that is required for the upkeep of the military presence on the Afghan border. Over 70% of Tajikistan's people live on less than US\$2 per day. The legal minimum wage was only recently doubled to just over US\$4 per month.

### POST-SOVIET NAME CHANGES

Few cartographical changes accompanied the transformation of the Tajikistan Soviet Socialist Republic to the independent Republic of Tajikistan. Dushanbe was once Stalinabad but shed that unfashionable name in the 1950s. Only with the demise of communism did Tajikistan's second city, Leninabad, revert to its ancient name of Khojand, and the *oblast* (administrative division) of which it is the capital became Sughd. Ordjonikidzeabad (25km east of Dushanbe), named for the Georgian who imposed Bolshevism in the Caucasus, reverted to Kofarnikhon. Ura-Tyube became Istaravshan. Komsomolbad reverted to Darband.

Up in the mountains, Tajikistan's Pik Kommunizma became Koh-i-Samani, Pik Lenin became Koh-i-Istiqal (Independence Peak, though it's still widely referred to as Pik Lenin) and Revolution Peak became Koh-i-Abu Ali Ibn Sino (Avicenna).

Tajik was made the state language in 1989, though Russian was reintroduced as the second state language in 1995. Street signs in Dushanbe now sport the Tajik forms *kuchai* (street), *khiyeboni* (avenue) and *maydoni* (square).

### RECOMMENDED READING

The new *Odyssey Guide to Tajikistan* (2007), by Robert Middleton and Huw Thomas, is a literate and detailed guide to Tajikistan.

*Travel through Tajikistan* (2006), by Fozilov Nurullo, is a locally produced guidebook with some useful background information on Tajikistan. It's only available in Dushanbe.

For something more old school, George Curzon's *The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus* is a classic text delivered to the Royal Geographical Society in 1896 and recently reprinted in paperback by Elibron Classics. It's full of lovely detail on the Pamir region.

Elibron have also republished TE Gordon's 1876 *The Roof of the World* and John Wood's 1872 *A Journey to the Source of the River Oxus*.

Fans of antique travel literature will also like Anna Louise Strong's *The Road to the Grey Pamir*, detailing a journey on horseback in 1930 from Osh to Murgab, but it's hard to find.

More up-to-date (2006), *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia: Geopolitics, Great Power Rivalry and Radical Islam* by Lena Jonson (IB Tauris), is a scholarly, and modern look at Tajikistan.

Frank Bliss' *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs* is an encyclopedic but fascinating examination of Badakhshan: from its history, culture and complex ethnography to the effect on the region of the collapse of the USSR and the civil war. It's a pricey tome, so try to track it down through a library.

Presently, the country exists on a drip-feed of credits and loans. Tajikistan has been forced to mortgage its future to the Kremlin, giving Russia half of the shares in the Nurek hydroelectric plant, as well as controlling interests in other national industries.

Thanks to the very passable 1300km border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan is one of the world's major drug conduits. Tajik customs officials make 80% of all drug seizures in Central Asia and the country is the world's third-largest seizer of heroin and opium, seizing literally tonnes of the stuff every year. Up to 50% of Tajikistan's economic activity is thought to be somehow linked to the drug trade.

Since 1992 Tajikistan has been a parliamentary republic with legislative power vested in an elected 230-member parliament, or *oli majlis*. The political landscape remains heavily clan-based. The parliament is fronted by the president, Imomali Rakhmanov, who won a third term in 2006 in an election that international observers described as 'neither free nor fair'. A referendum in 2003 gave him the green light to run for another two terms, until 2020.

### PEOPLE

It's only last century that 'Tajik' came to denote a distinct nationality. Despite their predominantly Persian ancestry, there has been so much intermarrying that it's often hard to distinguish Tajiks from their Turkic neighbours (Tajik skullcaps closely resemble Ūz-

beks, adding to the confusion). Pure-blooded Tajiks tend to have thin European-looking faces, with wide eyes and a Roman nose.

There are some recognisable ethnic subdivisions among the Tajiks. As well as the Pamiris (p375), there are dwindling numbers of Yaghnabis (or Jagnobis), direct descendants of the ancient Sogdians, in the mountain villages of the Zerafshan (Zeravshan) Valley. Sogdian, the lingua franca of the Silk Road and last widely spoken in the 8th century, is still spoken there.

About 65% of Tajikistanis are Tajik, 25% are Uzbek, 3.5% are Russian and 6.5% are other groups. Much of the population of the eastern Pamirs are Kyrgyz, who arrived here from the Alay valley in the 18th and 19th centuries.

For more information on the people of Tajikistan, see p60.

### Population

Population figures are only approximate because the demographics of Tajikistan have been fluctuating wildly since the civil war of the 1990s. In addition to the 60,000 or so killed, more than half a million Tajiks were displaced from their homes during the war, while the majority of the country's 600,000 Russians headed north. Another 60,000 Tajiks fled to Afghanistan, joining the 4.4 million Tajiks who have lived there since the southern region of Badakhshan was annexed by Kabul in the 18th century. One in four families now has a family member working abroad.

Tajikistan exemplifies the demographic complexity of the Central Asian republics. Its 4.4 million Tajiks constitute only 65% of the country's population, and fewer than half of the world's Tajiks (there are more Tajiks in Afghanistan than Tajikistan, and large groups also live in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and China's Xinjiang province). Some 25% of Tajikistan's population are Uzbeks, with whom there is considerable ethnic rivalry. Average family sizes remain high, with seven or eight kids the norm. Over 40% of Tajikistan's population is under the age of 14.

## RELIGION

About 80% of Tajikistan's people are Sunni Muslim, though most Pamiris are Ismailis and follow the Aga Khan (p377). Between 1990 and 1992, over 1000 new mosques were built in Tajikistan.

In the late 1990s radical Islamist organisations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) used Tajikistan (particularly the Sangvor and Tavildara Valleys) as a base for armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, with the implicit support of the Tajik government and Russian military. These organisations have largely lost relevance with the removal of support from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, though the recent arrests of members of the largely peaceful Hizb-ut-Tahir movement show the continued support for Islam as a political force.

## ARTS

When Tajikistan was hived off from Uzbekistan in 1929, the new nation-state was forced to leave behind all its cultural baggage. The new Soviet order set about providing a replacement pantheon of arts, introducing modern drama, opera and ballet, and sending stage-struck Tajik aspirants to study in Moscow and Leningrad. The policy paid early dividends and the 1940s are considered a golden era of Tajik theatre. A kind of Soviet fame came to some Tajik novelists and poets, such as Mirzo Tursunzade and Sadruddin Ayni, the latter now remembered more as a deconstructor of national culture because of his campaign to eliminate all Arabic expressions and references to Islam from the Tajik tongue.

Since independence, ancient figures from the region's Persian past have been revived in an attempt to foster a sense of national identity. The most famous of these figures is the

10th-century philosopher-scientist Abu Ali ibn-Sina, author of two of the most important books in the history of medicine. He was born in Bukhara when it was the seat of the Persian Samanids, to whom Rudaki, now celebrated as the father of Persian verse (and with a tomb outside Penjikent in Tajikistan), served as court poet. Tajiks also venerate Firdausi, a poet and composer of the *Shah Nama* (*Book of Kings*), the Persian national epic, and Omar Khayyam, of *Rubaiyat* fame, both born in present-day Iran but at a time when it was part of an empire that also included the territory now known as Tajikistan. Similar veneration goes out to Kamalddin Bekzod (1455–1535), a brilliant miniaturist painter from Herat.

Pamiris have a particular veneration for Nasir Khusraw (1004–1088), an Ismaili philosopher, poet and preacher who worked in Merv and was exiled to Badakhshan, where he wrote his *Safarname*, the account of his extensive seven-year travels throughout the Muslim world.

Tajik Persian poetry is fused with music by *hafiz* (bard musicians). *Falak* is a popular form of melancholic folk music, often sung a cappella. Music and dance is particularly popular among the Pamiri and Kulyabi.

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

At 143,100 sq km, landlocked Tajikistan is Central Asia's smallest republic. More than half of it lies 3000m or more above sea level. The central part encompasses the southern spurs of the Tian Shan and Pamir Alay ranges, while the southeast comprises the Pamir plateau. Within these ranges are some of Central Asia's highest peaks, including Koh-i-Somoni (former Pik Kommunizma) at 7495m. The Fedchenko Glacier, a 72km-long glacial highway frozen to the side of Koh-i-Somoni, is one of the longest glaciers in the world outside of the polar region and, at 800m thick, allegedly contains more water than the Aral Sea.

The western third of the country is lowland plain, bisected to the north by the Hisar, Zerafshan (Zeravshan) and Turkestan ranges – western extensions of the Tian Shan that continue into Uzbekistan. The mountain peaks with their sun-melted icecaps are the source of a fibrous network of fast-flowing streams, many of which empty into Tajikistan's two major rivers – the Syr-Darya (Jaxartes River), rising in the Fergana Valley

and flowing through Khojand, and the Amu-Darya, formed from the confluence of two Pamir rivers, the Vakhsh and the Pyanj.

Together, the Amu-Darya and the Pyanj mark most of the country's 1200km border with Afghanistan. Tajikistan's other borders are much less defined: in the east, 430km of border with China meanders through Pamir valleys, while to the north and west are the seemingly random jigsaw borders with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

For administrative purposes the country is divided into three *viloyat* (provinces): Sughd (Khojand), Khatlon (Kurgonteppa) and the 60,000-sq-km autonomous mountain region of Kohistani Badakhshan (Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, or GBAO), with much of the central region (including the Garm Valley) ruled directly from Dushanbe.

Tajikistan's territory also includes the strange northern enclave of Vorukh, stranded inside Kyrgyzstan.

## Wildlife

Tajikistan's impressive megafauna includes snow leopards (perhaps 200 or so), a dozen brown bears, between 5000 and 10,000 Marco Polo sheep and around 12,000 ibex. The best place to see Marco Polo sheep (*arkhar* in Kyrgyz) and ibex (*echki* or *kyzyl kyik*) is around Jarty-Gumbaz in the eastern Pamir, particularly after December, when they come to lower altitudes for the rut.

Poaching (largely by border guards) is a major problem. Marco Polo sheep numbers have fallen 300% since independence and down 800% from the 1960s. Marco Polo sheep meat is sold openly in Murgab bazaar, for less per kilo than mutton.

## Environmental Issues

The 2.6 million hectare Tajik (Pamir) National Park was founded in 1992 as the largest in Central Asia, covering a whopping 18% of Tajikistan. That's the good news. The bad news is that the park exists only on paper, with only four employees to police and administer it (and none stationed inside the park).

The lack of burnable fuel in the eastern Pamir has led to the disappearance of the slow-growing (and fast-burning) *tersken* bush within a radius of 100km from Murgab, adding to desertification in the treeless region. The population of Murgab is still considered environmentally unsustainable. Several or-

ganisations are trying to introduce solar ovens but progress has been slow.

Recent reports indicate that Tajikistan's glaciers have started to retreat as a result of global warming. The area of Fedchenko Glacier has shrunk by 10% in recent years.

## FOOD & DRINK

For a general rundown of common Central Asian dishes, see p82.

Tajik dishes include *nahud sambusa* (chickpea samosas) or *nahud shavla* (chickpea porridge). Tajiks also prepare many bean and milk soups, while *oshi siyo halav* is a unique herb soup. *Tuhum barak* is a tasty egg-filled ravioli coated with sesame-seed oil. *Chakka* (*yakka* to Tajik speakers around Samarkand and Bukhara) is curd mixed with herbs, and delicious with flat-bread. *Kurtob* is a wonderful rural dish of bread, yogurt, onion and *cilantro* (coriander) in a creamy sauce. In Badakhshan you might try *borj* – a meat and grain mix that resembles savoury porridge.

In Kyrgyz yurts, expect lots of tea, yogurt, *barsook* (fried bits of dough) and *kaimak* (cream). If you're lucky you might get *beshbarmak* (noodles and mutton) or *oromo*, a rolled-up steamed pastry flavoured with meat and butter.

*Shir chai* is a salty, soupy brew of tea with goats' milk, salt and butter that makes a popular breakfast in the Pamirs. It sits somewhere between milk tea and Tibetan yak butter tea and is guaranteed to put hairs on your chest. Rice pudding (*shir gurch* in Kyrgyz; *shir brench* in Tajik) is another popular Pamiri breakfast choice.

Both Hissar and Dushanbe brew their own beer, though bottled Russian imports like the Baltika range are the most common. Obi Zulol and Pamir are the best brands of fizzy mineral water, bottled in Istaravshan and Khorog. Dushanbe and even Khorog manufacture their own sickly sweet colas and luminous lemonades; the best of these is RC (Royal Crown) Cola.

## DUSHANBE ДУШАНБЕ

☎ 37 / pop 600,000 / elev 800m

With a cool backdrop of mountains, lazy tree-lined avenues and pastel-hued neoclassical buildings, Dushanbe is Central Asia's best-looking capital – especially now that the bullet holes have been plastered over. Once scary and

## DUSHANBE MUST-SEES

### Museum of National Antiquities (p362)

Stand face to face with Central Asia's largest surviving Buddha and the ivory portrait of Alexander the Great.

**Hissar** (p367) Get out of the city on a half-day excursion to the fort, museum and medressas here.

**Restaurants** (p364) Savour the big-city comforts of the city's Turkish, Georgian, Iranian and even Ecuadorian restaurants before heading to the survival cuisine of the mountains.

**Rudaki** Stroll leisurely past the pastel-coloured buildings and tree-lined cafés of Dushanbe's main drag.

more than a little dangerous a decade ago, the Tajik capital is currently blossoming and is now one of Central Asia's most pleasant cities, if just a little dull.

## HISTORY

Although the remains of a settlement dating to the 5th century BC have been found here, modern-day Dushanbe has little history beyond last century. As recently as 80 years ago, Dushanbe (then spelled Dushyambe) was a small, poor village known chiefly for its weekly bazaar (Dushanbe means Monday in Tajik).

In 1920 the last emir of Bukhara took refuge in Dushanbe, fleeing from the advancing Bolsheviks. He was forced to continue his flight early the next year as the Red Army added the Tajik settlement to the expanding Bolshevik empire. The Russian hold was shaken off for a spell when in 1922 Enver Pasha and his *basmachi* fighters liberated Dushanbe as part of their crusade to carve out a pan-Islamic empire (see the boxed text, p367), but following his death in a gun battle in southern Tajikistan, Bolshevik authority was quickly reasserted.

With the arrival of the railroad in 1929, Dushanbe was made capital of the new Soviet Tajik republic and renamed Stalinabad – a name it bore until the historical reinvention of the Khrushchev era. The region was developed as a cotton- and silk-processing centre and tens of thousands of people were relocated here, turning the rural village into a large, urban administrative and industrial centre. The city's numbers were further swollen by Tajik émigrés from Bukhara and Samarkand, which had been given over to Uzbek rule.

After almost 70 uneventful years of relative peace, if not prosperity, 1990 saw festering

nationalistic sentiments explode into rioting, triggered by rumoured plans to house Armenian refugees in Dushanbe. Twenty-two people died in clashes with the militia.

There were further demonstrations in the autumn of 1991, organised by opposition factions dissatisfied with the absence of political change in Tajikistan. The statue of Lenin that stood opposite the parliament building disappeared overnight, and young bearded men and veiled women took to the streets of Dushanbe, calling for an Islamic state.

During the civil war the city remained a capital of chaos. It was kept under a dusk-to-dawn curfew, with armed gangs controlling the roads in and out, and lawless brigands patrolling the streets. Shoot-outs between rival clans were common and most Russians fled the country. Random acts of violence continued through the 1990s (such as the storming of the Presidential Palace in 1997), but by 2002 the situation had stabilised enough to lift the citywide curfew. These days Dushanbe is savouring its peace and on the upswing.

## ORIENTATION

The focus of Dushanbe is the wide, tree-lined prospekt (avenue) Rudaki, which runs north from the train station on Maydoni Ayni (*maydoni* means square). Roughly central on Rudaki is Maydoni Azadi, surrounded by government buildings and now under the stern gaze of a sorcererlike Shah Ismail Samani, the founder of the Samanid dynasty. His statue ousted Lenin's from the top spot in 1999 on the 1100th anniversary of the Samanid dynasty.

Almost everything useful or interesting is within a 15-minute walk of here. The exception is the main bus station, which is some 3km away on kuchai Ibn Sina in the western part of town. The airport is in the southeastern suburbs of the city, 5km from the centre, along Ahmad Donish.

## INFORMATION

### Cultural Centres

**Bactria Centre** (☎ 227 02 57; dushanbe.ecotourism@acted.org; Mirzo Rizo 22; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Sun) The 3rd-floor of this language and cultural centre houses an ecotourism centre which offers information on community-based tourism projects in the Pamirs and homestays in Dushanbe. Contact Ruhafzo. It also houses the Handicraft Centre (see p365). If you fancy chatting to Tajik students, come along for English hour every Wednesday at 4.30pm.

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## Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 03)

**Police** (☎ 02)

## Internet Access

**Klub Plasma** (☎ 227 15 14; Rudaki 84; pr hr 4TJS;

☎ 24 hr) Above the Skytel office. Also offers IP phone calls for 50 dirham per hr.

**Tsentr Interkom** (Rudaki 81; pr hr 3TJS; ☎ 8am-10pm) Opposite the post office.

**Volshebni Sir** (Magic Cheese; ☎ 224 43 43; Rudaki 98; pr hr 4TJS; ☎ 8am-11pm) Reliable connections and cheap IP phone calls, plus it serves iced coffee and pizza.

## Medical Services

Your best bet in case of illness is to call the nearest embassy (p392), which should have contact details for recommended doctors, medical services and hospitals.

**Prospekt Medical Clinic** (☎ 224 30 62, emergency 93-5000447; www.prospektclinic.org; Sanoi 33, Medgorodok) In the west part of town.

## Money

There are licensed moneychangers throughout the city and these are the easiest places to change money (cash in US dollars and euros only).

You can find ATMs at the airport departure lounge, Hotel Avesto, Hotel Tajikistan, Hotel Dushanbe, TsUM and the post office. All accept Visa, Cirrus and Maestro cards.

**Oriensbank** (☎ 221 63 96; www.oriensbank.com; Rudaki 95; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Offers cash advances on Visa, MasterCard and Maestro for 1% (2% if you want the money in US dollars). The smaller branch at Pushkin 28 (the corner of Shotemur) is quieter and easier to deal with.

**Tajprombank** (☎ 221 33 15; Rudaki 22; www.tajprombank.tj) Changes cash and has an ATM.

## Post

**DHL** (☎ 224 47 68, 221 02 80; Rudaki 105) Enter around the back of the building.

**Post office** (Maydani Azadi, Rudaki 57; ☎ 8am-8pm)

## Registration

**OVIR** (☎ 227 55 66; Mirzo Tursunzoda 5; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) The central OVIR office near Shah Mansur Bazaar is the one to try if you want to register yourself, though in theory they don't accept registration from individuals, so don't expect an easy process. It's generally easier to get a company to do it for you (around US\$35 to US\$45). The process can take as long as three days. The bottom line; do it elsewhere if you can. See p393.

## Telephone

Most internet cafés and communication centres offer international IP (internet phone) calls for 50 dirham per minute to all destinations. **Central telephone office** (Rudaki 55) Next to the post office. Calls are expensive at 2.50TJS to most countries.

## Travel Agencies

**Azimuth Travel** (☎ 223 40 91; azimuth\_travel@tajik.net, karimov@skifed.tajik.net; Shevchenko 46/58) Contact Dilshod Karimov for skiing and hiking trips.

**Central Asia Tourism** (CAT; ☎ 226 25 43; www.centralasiatourism.com, rules@cat-dushanbe.tj; Ahmad Donish 1) Branch of a reliable Kazakh travel agency at the airport; good for international tickets and can arrange homestays and GBAO permits (US\$45).

**Dushanbe Ski Federation** (☎ 505 05 67, 223 01 33; www.tajiktraveller.com, petrova@skifed.tajik.net) Director Gulya Petrova runs hiking and skiing trips, and runs the ski base at Takob in the Varzob Valley. Her weekend hiking trips from Dushanbe are popular with expats and good value at around US\$20 per person.

**Great Game Travel Company** (☎ 224 76 73; www.greatgame.travel; Pulod Tolis 5/11) Can arrange full tours and/or independent travel. Individual travellers can apply for GBAO permits (US\$65) and flight ticket bookings at their sister website www.traveltajikistan.com. Located in the Adventurer's Inn.

**Tajikintourservice** (☎ 221 71 84, 223 52 80; Pushkin 22; www.tis.tj, tis@mkf.tj) Air tickets, GBAO permits (US\$40), letters of invitation (US\$30), OVIR registration (US\$35) and tours. Credit cards accepted.

**Vostok Trading Tour** (☎ 221 10 22, 93-5555557; vtt\_travel@mail.tj; Pushkin 14) Irregular opening hours but cheap for GBAO permits and visa extensions if you can get a reply. Contact Iqbol Shabozov.

## SIGHTS Museums

The **Museum of National Antiquities** (☎ 227 13 50; www.afc.ryukoku.ac.jp/tj; Rajabov 7; admission 10TJS; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) is the best in the country, focusing on the Greco-Bactrian sites of Takht-i-Sangin (including a small ivory image of Alexander the Great) and Kobadiyan, plus original Sogdian murals from Penjikent and a 6th-century scabbard and hilt in the shape of a griffin. The highlight is the 13m-long sleeping Buddha of Adjina-Tepe (Witches Hill), excavated in 1966. It dates from the Kushan era, 1500 years ago, and was recently revealed as the largest Buddha figure in Central Asia. Photos aren't allowed. You must put on plastic booties before entering.

The **Bekhzod National Museum** (☎ 221 60 36; Rudaki 31; admission 6TJS; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun), on a commanding site on Maydani Ayni, includes standard exhibits on natural history, art, ethnography and archaeology, but little English text. There are a few gems among the filler, including a lovely *minbar* (mosque pulpit) and *mihrab* (niche marking the direction of Mecca) from Istaravshan and a fine painting of Lenin meeting oppressed women of the world in Moscow's Red Square. There's a chilling reconstruction of a *zindan* (jail) on the 2nd floor. The top floor is given over to a Soviet/presidential collection – look for the alabaster carvings in the stairwell.

The **Museum of Musical Instruments** (☎ 223 32 10; Bokhtar 23; admission 5TJS, student 1TJS; ☎ 11am-6pm) is also known as the Gurminj Museum after the owner, Badakhshani actor Gurminj Zavkybekov. There are lots of antique instruments, including a *gijak* (fiddle), *doira* (tambourine/drum) and *rubab* (six-stringed mandolin), plus old photos and memorabilia. Ask about upcoming musical concerts. The museum is hidden across from the mosaic of justice and next to a district court.

## Mosques & Monuments

With its crescent-topped minaret and burnished golden dome, the **Haji Yakoub mosque** and **medressa**, just west of the Hotel Avesto, is one of the few visible manifestations of Islam in Dushanbe. The mosque is named after Haji Yakoub, a Tajik religious leader who fled to Afghanistan. Women are only allowed in the courtyard.

Tajikistan's Persian past is invoked in the façade of the **Writers' Union Building** (Ismoil Somoni). It's adorned like a medieval cathedral with saintly, sculpted-stone figures of Sadriddin Ayni, Omar Khayyam, Firdausi and other writers from the Persian pantheon.

Dushanbe's most visible monument to nation-building is the rather kitsch **statue of Ismail Samani (Ismoil Somoni)**, the 10th-century Samanid ruler, occupying prime place on Maydani Azadi (Freedom Square). The monument replaced a much smaller statue of Lenin, which now stands in the Bagh-i-Markazi (Central Park).

## Markets

While not particularly exotic or Eastern in flavour, the large, covered **Barakat Bazaar** (Ismoil Somoni) is the centre of commercial activity in

Dushanbe. It's north of the Hotel Tajikistan. The more interesting **Shah Mansur Bazaar** is a block north of Maydani Ayni.

## SLEEPING

Dushanbe's accommodation options aren't fantastic. Homestays exist but are hard to track down. The main midrange and top-end choices are either ageing Soviet-era hotels or private modern mansions that cater mostly to local businessmen and visiting consultants.

## Budget

**Hotel Dushanbe** (☎ 221 96 55; Rudaki 7; dm US\$10) The 4th- and 5th-floor rooms here are the cheapest in town, but are stiflingly hot in summer and the shared bathrooms are grotty. You may have to share a room.

**Acted Homestay** (☎ 918-689925; 178 Mirzo Tursunzoda; dm US\$10) This simple local home has a pit toilet. Try also the Bactria Centre (see p360) for other possible homestays.

**Vakhsh Hotel** (☎ 227 81 88; Rudaki 24; s/d 38/75TJS, lux 140TJS) During the civil war this hotel was occupied by bands of bearded mujaheddin rebels and peppered with bullet holes, but don't worry it has since been renovated! Rooms are simple but clean and there's hot water. Try for a room with a balcony view of the Ayni Opera & Ballet Theatre. The *lux* suites aren't really worth the extra money.

**our pick** **Adventurer's Inn** (☎ 224 76 73; www.greatgame.travel, guesthouse@greatgame.travel; Pulod Tolis 5/11; s/d US\$20/30) Despite a temperamental shower and the occasional grubby sheet, this is still our pick for the best sleeping spot in town. Major pluses are the shared bathroom (bigger than many hotel rooms), the excellent breakfasts (included in the price) and the relaxed vibe. There are only four rooms (named after Pamiri explorers), so book in advance, especially in July and August. The guesthouse is run by the Great Game Travel Company (see opposite), who can also arrange homestays (US\$15 to US\$20 per person), OVIR registration (US\$45) and airport pickup (US\$30). The guesthouse is hidden in the backstreets behind the Vadanosos (Varzob) Bazaar, across a bridge over the sewer pipe behind the German embassy (!), so can be tricky to find the first time.

## Midrange & Top End

**Hotel Dushanbe** (☎ 221 96 55; Rudaki 7; d US\$25, lux US\$50-80; ☎) The rooms capture the dubious charms of a 1970s Soviet apartment block but

have nice leafy views of Maydani Ayni, at the southern end of Rudaki, and the bathrooms are surprisingly clean. The multiple arms of this peaceful monster are kept in check by a crack army of floor ladies in dressing gowns. There's an ATM and a bowling alley.

**Hotel Tajikistan** (☎ 221 62 62; Shotemur 22; s/d US\$50/70, pol-lux \$90, lux \$130) English may be spoken in the reassuring lobby but everything else here is 100% Soviet and horribly overpriced. Rooms are small and come with hot water, a kettle and fridge. Only some rooms have air-con. South-facing rooms benefit from park views. A newly renovated wing should soon offer four-star rooms. Credit cards are accepted.

**Hotel Kayon** (☎ 221 62 29; kayon@tajnet.com; Bokhtar 7; s/d US\$50/60, lux US\$100/120; 🍷) Live the nouveau riche life in comfortable modern rooms with breakfast, satellite TV and very clean bathrooms. There are two half-lux rooms and six lux. Not much English is spoken.

**Hotel Kayon II** (☎ 223 07 61; Kuybeshov 1; d US\$80; 🍷) Connected to Hotel Kayon, is much the same, but bigger and harder to find.

**Hotel Mercury** (☎ 224 44 91; www.hotel-mercury.tj; Tolstoy 9; r US\$60-80, lux US\$100-130; 🍷) This privately-run hotel is probably the best value top-end place in town. The 20 spacious modern rooms come with satellite TV, computer and a kettle, and the reception can order in food from a variety of local restaurants. Credit cards aren't accepted but the hotel has its own ATM. There's even a kitschy garden waterfall.

**Hotel Avesto** (☎ 221 12 80; fax 224 62 84; Rudaki 105; s/d US\$55/70, pol-lux US\$90, lux US\$100; 🍷) Old-fashioned and chronically overpriced monster with a dreary Soviet feel, though some rooms have a fine view of the mosque and the suites are big enough to get lost in. The management must be waiting for the Brezhnev-era wallpaper to come back into style. The US and Russian embassies used to be here, so expect some rooms to be bugged. The 4th-floor business centre offers broadband internet.

**Marian's Guesthouse** (☎ 223 01 91, 93-5050089; marians@tajnet.com; Shotemur 67/1; per person US\$80-100; 🍷) Visiting consultants love this comfortable refuge, so reserve a room in advance (there are only eight) or you won't even get past the paranoid security guards. There's laundry, satellite TV, wi-fi internet, breakfast included and evening driver service. One room has its bathroom down the hall. The guesthouse is hard to find; head down the

little alley just after the TV-station building (with its satellite dish) across from the Children's Park and look for the black-and-white gates. Contact Gulnura Razukova.

Three five-star hotels are under construction: the **Serena Hotel** (www.serenahotels.com) at the southern end of Rudaki; the Turkish-built **Hotel Ismoil Somoni** (Rudaki), further north on Rudaki; and a **Grand Hyatt** (Ismoil Somoni), located beside Komsomol Lake. All are due to open in 2008.

## EATING Cafés & Chaikhans

The cheapest eats are to be found at the *chaikhans* (teahouses) in the markets and in Bagh-i-Markazi (Central Park).

**Georgia Café** (☎ 227 13 26; Rudaki 29; mains 4-8TJS; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Expand your culinary horizons with dishes like *khachapuri* (like a pizza with no toppings), *solyanka* (beef in tomato sauce) and *sacsivi* (cold chicken with nuts in cream sauce) in this intimate little café, washed down with a glass of imported Georgian wine.

**NBM Restaurant** (☎ 227 37 72; Rudaki 74; mains 5-11TJS; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Rivalling the Merve is this equally excellent Turkish café, with pleasant open-air seating overlooking Rudaki. The food is great, from *pides* (Turkish-style pizzas) to excellent Iskender kebabs, and don't overlook the salad counter inside for some great aubergine dishes. Top it off with a sweet pastry rather than the unjustifiably popular homemade ice cream.

**our pick Café Merve** (☎ 221 94 09; Rudaki 92; mains 7-10TJS, snacks 2-4TJS; 🍷) 7am-midnight) Our favourite eatery in town is this excellent bustling cafeteria, churning out Turkish kebabs, Turkish *börek* (little pies), pizza, salads, cakes and coffee, plus the best breakfast bets in town (feta cheese and olives). It can be hard to get a seat at lunchtime.

**Chaykhona Rokhat** (☎ 221 76 54; Rudaki 84; mains 7-10TJS; 🍷) lunch & dinner) This unusual, Soviet-era attempt at a grand Persian-style *chaikhana* is great for people-watching but is perhaps better for a drink or snack than a meal. Lose yourself in the ceiling paintings while you wait for your waiter, as the service borders on neglect.

## Restaurants

**Kellers** (☎ 224 79 21; Ismoil Somoni 6; mains 6-14TJS; 🍷) lunch & dinner) A mix of expats and local business people come for the house-brewed

German-style beer (2TJS for 0.5L), pleasant outdoor seating, and authentic Chinese and European food.

**Delhi Darbar** (☎ 224 66 11; delhi@tajik.net; Rudaki 88; mains 9-11TJS, Fri buffet 22TJS; 🍷) lunch & dinner) The self-proclaimed 'gateway of Indo-Fusion cuisine' offers popular Friday-night buffets. The food is more 'fusion' than Indian but it's not bad. Offers takeaway.

**Salsa Restaurant** (☎ 224 88 57; cnr Karamov & Omar Khayam; starters 4-9TJS, mains 10-14TJS) Just what you didn't expect in Dushanbe; an Ecuadorian restaurant serving everything from carrot cake and cocktails to Mexican and Italian dishes, complemented by a decent selection of wines and real coffee. This is definitely your only chance in Central Asia to try Ecuadorian *llapingachos* (fried potato and mozzarella cheese with peanut sauce).

**Al-Sham** (☎ 227 12 00; Rajabov 11; starters 6-10TJS, mains 12-15TJS; 🍷) lunch & dinner) This Lebanese and Syrian restaurant (Al-Sham is the Arabic name for Damascus) has sophisticated décor, with carved wooden grills and outdoor seating and there's an authentic range of *meze* (starters), plus all your main-dish grills and kebabs. There's no English menu, so take a knowledgeable friend if you don't know your *kubba* (croquettes of lamb and cracked wheat) from your *baba ganoush* (smoky eggplant dip).

**La Grande Dame** (☎ 935-010089; www.lagrandedame.café.com; cnr Bukhoro & Shevchenko; mains 20-37TJS; 🍷) 10am-10pm) If you need a slice of Western familiarity to go with your Lavazza coffee, try this cool French-style brasserie. The menu (available online) offers everything from lunchtime baguettes to salmon blinis with sour cream and caviar (19TJS) and a Sunday brunch with treats like French toast and eggs benedict.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Nightlife is a bit hit and miss in Dushanbe. You'll have to try to decipher the Cyrillic notice boards outside the following theatres to find out what's on.

**Ayni Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 221 44 22; Rudaki 28) There's still life left in this classy theatre, with the odd opera and classical music concert, plus it has possibly the finest interior in Dushanbe. Tickets cost from 10TJS.

**Bactria Centre** (☎ 227 02 57; dushanbe.ecotourism@acted.org; Mirzo Rizo 22; 🍷) 8am-5pm Mon-Sun) Screens foreign (and occasional Tajik) films every Tuesday and Thursday evenings at 6pm as well as occasional exhibitions and music

concerts, and is a good place to tap into Dushanbe's cultural life. See also p360.

**Bobat Concert Hall** (☎ 221 59 58; Ismoil Somoni 26) Hosts occasional Tajik music concerts.

There are Tajik plays at the **Lahuti Drama Theatre** (☎ 221 37 51; Rudaki 86) and the nearby **Mayakovsky Drama Theatre** (☎ 221 31 32; Rudaki 76), the latter with a Russian emphasis.

There are several nightclubs, including **Port Said** (☎ 224 88 02; Rudaki 114; 🍷) Mon, Wed, Fri 9pm-4am; cover 10TJS) and the flashier **Vastan** (☎ 224 09 36; Rudaki 88; closed Mon; cover 10TJS). Most women in these clubs are prostitutes so solo female travellers should think twice about going alone.

## SHOPPING

**Barakat Market** (Ismoil Somoni) The place to pick up an embroidered *tupi* (skullcap) for US\$3, or a *chapan* (cloak) for around US\$8. You'll also find plenty of sequined, gold-stitched trousers and colourful dresses.

**TsUM** (☎ 221 51 11; Rudaki 83; 🍷) 8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) The central department store has some souvenirs among the shampoo and mobile phones. Items include *suzani* embroidery, stripey cloaks, hats, Pamiri socks, ceramic Central Asian figures, musical instruments and lots of *ikat* silks, plus practical items such as camera batteries, memory sticks and print film.

**Handicraft Centre** (☎ 227 02 57; Mirzo Roza 22) Also called Tillya Teppe, this shop in the Bactria Centre (see p360) sells a good range of Pamiri handicrafts from both the Yak House (see p388) and De Pamiri (see p382), as well as maps of the Pamirs (US\$12), music CDs and museum guidebooks.

**Modigliani** (☎ 227 04 74; art\_modigliani@yahoo.com; 4a Chekhov/Nissor Muhammed) A small shop crammed with carpets, paintings, embroidery, pottery and especially jewellery.

**Silk Road** (☎ 227 43 05; Shotemur 32; 🍷) 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) One of the best souvenir shops, and particularly good for Tajik robes, embroidery, carpets, scarves and those hard-to-find postcards.

**Orima** (Rudaki) This well-stocked Turkish supermarket is useful for imported Western food, cold beer and toiletries. There are branches next to Café Merve and across from Ayni Opera & Ballet Theatre.

**Tajik Painters Union Exhibition Hall** (cnr Rudaki & Ismoil Somoni; 🍷) 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat) Worth a visit for three floors of modern Tajik art, much of which is for sale.



## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Tajikistan Airlines (see below) theoretically has flights to Garm, Penjikent, Ayni, Isfara, Vanj (Vanch) and Kulyab, most of them in winter only. In practice the only reliable regular services are to Khojand (three daily, US\$55) and Khorog (daily, US\$60).

Tickets for the 8am flight to Khorog (see p382) only go on sale at the airport at 7am the day before the flight and are grounded at the first sign of bad weather. Note that you can pay for tickets with a credit card at the main booking office, though if your flight is cancelled it's much easier to get a refund if you paid with cash.

For details of regional and international flights, see p395.

### AIRLINE OFFICES

**Ariana Afghan Airlines** (☎ 227 27 09; ariana5duy@yahoo.com; Rudaki 7; ☎ 8am-3.30pm Mon-Sat) Located in the lobby of the Hotel Dushanbe. Confirm any booking as soon as you arrive in Dushanbe. Cash only.

**Iran Aseman Airlines** (☎ 221 97 03; cnr Ayni & Adkhamov; ☎ 8.30am-1pm, 2-5pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 8.30am-2pm Sat) Weekly to Mashhad and Tehran.

**Tajikistan Airlines** (☎ 229 82 06; cnr Chekhov & Lokhuti; ☎ 8am-7pm)

**Turkish Airlines** (☎ 227 78 05; thydushanbe@mkf.tj; Rudaki 18; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Popular weekly flight to Istanbul.

### Minibus & Shared Taxi

Frequent minibuses to Varzob (50 dirham) and Takob (3TJS), and irregular buses to Khoja Obi Garm (4TJS) depart from the bus stand west of the Vadosas (Varzon) Bazaar in the north of town.

Shared taxis to Penjikent, Ayni, Istaraavshan and Khojand leave mornings from the Tsementzavod (Cement Factory) stand in the north of town. A seat to Khojand costs anywhere from 70TJS to 100TJS, depending on the price of fuel, though many drivers ask for much more than this. Choose your car with care as the mountain roads are rough. Take minibus 24 here from along Rudaki or from near the Vadosas (Varzon) Bazaar.

Minibuses and 4WDs to Khorog (556km, 21 hours, 100TJS) leave from the *Badakshanskaya avtostansiya* (Badakhshan bus stand) transport yard on Ahmad Donish (the road to the airport), near the railway bridge.

Minibuses 1 and 8 pass here. Shop around and try to get a front seat and expect to hang around for hours for the vehicle to fill up. See p382 for more.

Transport to Garm (six hours, 25TJS) leaves mornings from a lot 8km east of the centre on the road to Kofarnikhon. Take a taxi or any minibus heading east from the Hotel Dushanbe and ask to be dropped at *devyati kilometr* (ninth kilometre).

Routes to southern Tajikistan (Kurgonteppa, Kulyab and as far down as Dusti and Pyanj) leave in the mornings from the main bus station in the western suburbs, 3km from the centre, though some services also leave from the Sahawat market in the 63rd *mikrorayon* in the southwestern suburbs. Bus Nos 29 and 18 run to the main bus station from Ismail Somani, or take a taxi (7TJS).

## GETTING AROUND

Buses and private minibuses buzz around town. Bus 3 (50 dirham) and trolleybus 1 (40 dirham) shuttle up and down Rudaki, stopping frequently; others such as trolleybus No 11 and minibus Nos 8 and 22 turn off at Ismoili Somoni.

The airport is a quick ride on buses 2, 8 or 12, all caught from Rudaki and marked *фурӯдгоҳ* (*furudgoh*). A taxi will cost from 10TJS to 15TJS, a little more in the middle of the night.

## AROUND DUSHANBE

The main M34 winds north through the valley of the Varzob River, past dozens of villas built in recent years by the city's nouveau riche. There's no one particular place to head for but there are plenty of picturesque locations, including the **Varzob Gorge**, 56km out of Dushanbe. Minibuses run to the village of Varzob and the ski resort at Takob (60km from Dushanbe), where there is some nice summer hiking.

Popular hiking destinations in Varzob Valley include the pretty 20m **Gusgarf Waterfall**, a 2½-hour walk up a side valley 7km south of Varzob (31km from Dushanbe), and further north, the Khoja Obi Garm valley (behind the sanatorium of the same name) and Siama Valley.

For a day or weekend hike, expatriates recommend the **Karatag Valley**, 80km east of Dushanbe (turn north from the main road to Tursanzade at ShakhriNAV). From the village

## ENVER PASHA & THE BASMACHI

As the Bolsheviks were celebrating their victory in Central Asia, a dashing, courageous Ottoman Turkish soldier named Enver Pasha was making his way towards Central Asia. A Young Turk, Enver had served as the Ottoman Empire's minister of war during WWI but was forced to flee Turkey after the empire's defeat in 1918. He wound up in Moscow, where he convinced the Soviet leader that he was just the person to deliver Central Asia and British India on a platter. In exchange, Lenin would help him win control of what was left of the Turkish empire.

Enver left Moscow for Bukhara in November 1921, ostensibly to make ready an army for Lenin. In reality he had already decided to jilt his benefactors and follow his own dream: to conquer and rule a pan-Turkic state, with Central Asia as its core.

In Bukhara, Enver (known locally as Anwar Pasho) made secret contact with leaders of the *basmachi* (local bands of Turkic and Tajik freedom fighters), whose grassroots support and intimate knowledge of the mountain geography had already proven to be worthy foes of the infant Red Army. Enver gave his Bolshevik hosts the slip and rode east from Bukhara, gathering 20,000 recruits. Enver styled himself 'Commander in Chief of All the Armies of Islam' and people flocked to his campaign as to a holy war.

Initial successes were stunning. Enver's small army took Dushanbe in February 1922 and by the spring they had captured much of the former emirate of Bukhara. Enraged, the Bolsheviks sent 100,000 additional troops in to crush him. Moscow also played a political trump card: it permitted the Islamic courts to reconvene, gave residents of the Fergana Valley a massive tax cut and returned confiscated land. Support for the *basmachi* faltered.

With his rural support drying up, and with the Emir of Afghanistan turning a cold shoulder, Enver refused to surrender. He and a small band of his closest officers set out for the mountains east of Dushanbe, never to emerge again.

On 4 August 1922, less than nine months after his portentous arrival at Bukhara, Enver Pasha met his end in legendary fashion. Accounts of the final moments differ but the most popular holds that he galloped headlong with sabre drawn at the head of a suicidal charge against the machine-gun fire of a Bolshevik ambush. Even the location of his death is unknown, suppressed by the Soviets in case it became a nationalist rallying point (locals now say the location is near Badjuan, southeast of Dushanbe). Had he succeeded in his grandiose vision, Enver Pasha would have been the first Turkic conqueror of all Turkestan since Timur. The fact that he made the attempt is fuel enough for myth.

The *basmachi* (who today would be called *mujaheddin*) fought on, scattered and dwindling, until the early 1930s. They are now the subject of intensive research by post-Soviet historians, the first generation able to commemorate the *basmachi* without fear of repression.

of Hakimi it's a two- to three-hour (6km) hike to Timur Dara Lake. **Payron Lake** is about 8km further north, up the main Karatag valley and then northeast up a side valley.

In the same region, the **Shirkent Valley** has tricky-to-see, difficult-to-reach and hard-to-forget dinosaur footprints a 90-minute hike from the trailhead. You'll need a guide to find them (see p362).

Dramatic but no longer picturesque, the 330m-high **Nurek Dam**, the world's highest hydroelectric dam, used to be a big favourite with Intourist. The dam is 80km east of Dushanbe, near the new town of Nurek. If you are travelling on your own, take a Nurek or Dangara bus from Dushanbe's main bus station.

## Hissar

☎ 3139

On a wide mountain-fringed plain, 30km west of Dushanbe, are the remains of an 18th-century **fortress** (☎ 8am-6pm; admission 1TJS), that was occupied until 1924 by Ibrahim Beg, the local henchman of the Emir of Bukhara. Once a *basmachi* stronghold (see the boxed text above), the fortress was destroyed by the Red Army and all that remains is a reconstructed stone gateway (Darvaza-i-Ark) in the cleavage of two massive grassy hillocks. A scramble up the hill on the right (the former residence of the *beg*, or landlord) offers excellent views. The fort is depicted on the 20TJS note. The ticket office hawks postcards and Tajik skullcaps.

In front of the fortress are two plain medressas, the 16th-century **Medressa-i-Kuhna** and the **Medressa-i-Nau**, a later overspill (*nau* means 'new'). The older medressa (facing the fortress gate) contains a small **museum** (☎ 8am-5pm; admission 3TJS), which has displays of clothing, ceramics and jewellery with English captions. Next door are the foundations of a caravanserai built in 1808 and, in front of the medressa, the remains of the town *taharatkhana* (bathhouse). Behind the medressas is the **mausoleum** of 16th-century Islamic teacher Makhdum Azam.

At the foot of the slopes around the fortress is a **holy spring** and pleasant chaikhana.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get here from Dushanbe, take bus 8 west on Ismoili Somoni to Zarnisar Bazaar, then a minibus (1.50TJS) or shared taxi (3TJS per seat) to Hissar (30 minutes). In Hissar bazaar take a shared taxi (1TJS per seat) across from the bazaar to the fort, some 7km further past cotton fields. Ask for the *qala* (fortress; *krepast* in Russian).

## NORTHERN TAJIKISTAN

Tajikistan in the north squeezes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan before oozing across the mouth of the Fergana Valley, the Uzbek heartland.

South of Istaravshan, the twin Turkestan and Zeravshan (Zeravshan) ranges sever northern Tajikistan from Dushanbe and the bulk of the country's landmass. The M34 connects the two parts of the country, crossing the 3378m Shakhristan Pass (from Khojand) and the 3372m Anzob Pass en route, and offering superb views. An Iranian-financed tunnel has been built under the Anzob Pass but flooding means that it isn't yet fully operational; until then the route is closed from November to May.

Possible stops en route are Iskander-Kul lake (see p373) and the heavily eroded 13.5m-tall Varz-i-Minor minaret in Ayni village, dating from the 10th-century.

### KHOJAND ХОДЖАНД/ХУЧАНД

☎ 3422 / pop 164,500

Khojand (or Khojent) is the capital of northern Tajikistan (Sughd province) and the second-largest city in the country. It's also

one of Tajikistan's oldest towns, founded on the banks of the Syr-Darya by Alexander the Great as his easternmost outpost, Alexandria-Eskhate. In 1986 Khojand – or Leninabad as it was then named – celebrated its 2500th anniversary. Commanding (and taxing) the entrance to the Fergana Valley, Khojand built palaces, grand mosques and a huge citadel before the Mongols steamrolled the city into oblivion in the early 13th century. Today the economically booming town is of marginal interest to visitors, useful mainly as a springboard to the spectacular overland route south to Dushanbe.

Khojand, made up mostly of Uzbeks, has remained aloof from Dushanbe, although it always provided Tajikistan's Soviet elite. When President Nabiev, a Khojand man, was unseated in 1992 and Tajikistan appeared to be becoming an Islamic republic, Khojand (Leninabad) province threatened to secede. Secure behind the Fan Mountains, it managed to escape the ravages of the civil war and remains the wealthiest part of the country, producing two-thirds of Tajikistan's GDP, with 75% of the country's arable land and only one-third of the population.

### Information

**Agroinvestbank** (Lenina; www.agroinvestbank.tj/eng; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) The ATM on Lenina accepts foreign cards. The main office is on Kamoli Khojandi.

**Internet Klub Fortuna** (cnr Lenina & Kamoli Khojandi; ☎ 24 hr; per hr 2TJS)

**Orienbank** (Kamoli Khojandi; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri) Cash advances on a Visa or MasterCard for 1% commission.

**OVIR** (Lenina; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) For OVIR registration you'll need a photocopy of your passport, one photo, and the equivalent of US\$15 plus 23TJS, paid into a nearby bank. If there are any problems (or if you are staying in a hotel outside of the centre) you may need to go to the main OVIR office on Kamoli Khojandi (same hours as Lenina office).

**Post Office** (Ordjonikidze; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

### Sights

The city's oldest remains are the formless baked-earth walls of the 10th-century **citadel**, which once boasted seven gates and 6km of fortifications. This was also the site of Alexander's original settlement. The fort was the site of pitched battles in November 1998 between a rebel Uzbek warlord and govern-

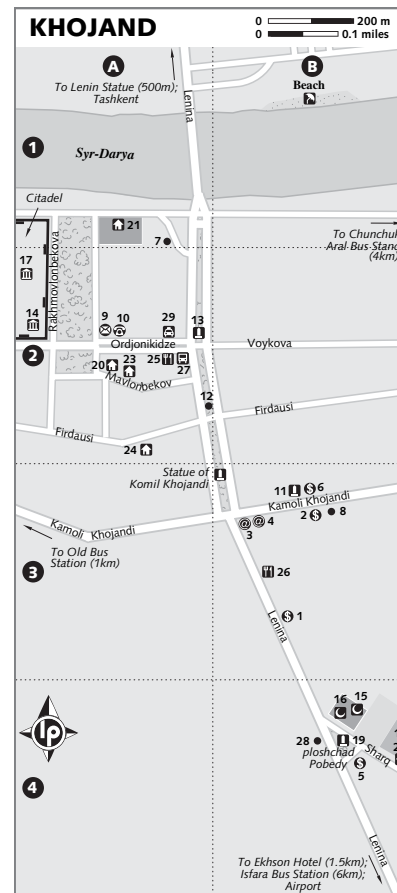
ment troops, during which 200 people were killed. The reconstructed eastern gate houses the **Museum of Archaeology and Fortifications** (Rakhmovlonbekova; admission 1TJS; ☎ 8am-5pm), which has some interesting 19th-century photos and plans of the original citadel. An English pamphlet explaining many of the exhibits is available for 7TJS. Be careful when photographing from the ramparts, as the citadel behind is occupied by the military.

At the other end of the reconstructed city walls, the new and strangely pointless **Historical Museum of Sughd Province** (admission 6TJS; ☎ Tue-Fri 8am-3pm, Sat & Sun 10am-3pm) has vaguely interesting displays on Timur Malik, the local hero who defended Khojand from the Mongol onslaught, and a mock-up of a traditional

Tajik house, but for the moment at least, a real paucity of actual exhibits. A classic example of too much marble, too little substance. All in all, save your money.

At the south end of kuchai Lenina is **Panchshanbe Bazaar**, one of the best-stocked markets in Central Asia, especially on Thursdays (Panchshanbe in Tajik). The core of the bazaar is an elegant, purpose-built hall (1954) with arched entrance portals and a pink-and-lime-green neoclassical façade – think Stalin meets 1001 Nights.

Opposite the bazaar, shielded from the hubbub by a calm white wall, are the **mosque, medressa and mausoleum of Sheikh Massal ad-Din**, a modest, relatively modern complex that is quietly busy with serious young men clutching Qurans and old white-bearded men reclining in the shade. Take a look at the carved wooden pillars lining the side *aiwans* (covered porticoes). The impressive khaki-coloured mausoleum was built in 1394. The 21m-tall minaret was added in 1895.



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Since the removal of its giant rival in Tashkent, Khojand's 22m-tall **statue of Lenin** is now the largest in Central Asia. It was moved here from Moscow in 1974. He's on the north side of the river, 300m beyond the bridge.

Other eye-catching Soviet memorabilia includes the bright red **hammer and sickle** in the centre of Lenina, a **bust of Marx and Lenin** on the side of an apartment block on Kamoli Khojandi and the **WWII monument** across from the Panchshanbe Bazaar. A statue of the poet **Komil (Kamoli) Khojandi** sits studiously in the middle of Lenina, not far from an eternal flame.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Sharq** (☎ 6 78 83; Sharq; d/tr/q 14/21/20TJS) Bunk down with Tajik traders on the top floor of this friendly but basic bazaar hotel. Rooms are spacious but there's only one toilet and no hot water (staff can direct you to a *banya* nearby).

**Ekhsun Hotel** (☎ 6 69 84; Lenina; s/d 25/50TJS, lux 50/100TJS; 🍴) The cheapest rooms offer the best value here, since the suites only add satellite TV and several bizarrely unfinished rooms (the building was meant to be an apartment block). Bathrooms are fragrant but have hot water, as long as the electricity doesn't cut out. The hotel is about 1.5km south of the Panchshanbe Bazaar, at the fork in the road.

**Hotel Leninabad** (☎ 6 55 35; s/d 32/58TJS, lux 60/84TJS) This unfashionably-named state hotel is well placed on the cornice beside the Syr-Darya but is in a state of neglect. The rooms are Soviet hangovers, with stinky bathrooms, dim lighting and a broken lift, but are bearable. Communal showers (sometimes hot) are down the hall. The *lux* rooms are much more comfortable but for this money you are better off at the Ekhsun Hotel (see above).

**Hotel Vahdat** (☎ 6 51 01; Mavlonbekov 3; pol-lux 160TJS, lux 200TJS; 🍴) Next door to Hotel Khuchand, this place is similar, with slightly smaller rooms but satellite TV and English-speaking reception. Like the Khuchand and Tavkhid, rooms here only have one double bed.

**Tavkhid Hotel** (☎ 6 77 66; 117 Firdausi; pol-lux/lux 150/180TJS; 🍴) A midrange option similar to Hotel Khuchand, with 12 rooms and foreign exchange facilities. Breakfast is included

**Hotel Khuchand** (☎ 6 59 97; Mavlonbekov 1; lux 170TJS; 🍴) Probably the best hotel in this price range, with five absurdly large luxury rooms, a fridge, clean bathrooms and balconies overlooking the opera house fountain. No-one speaks English here.

## Eating

The bread is particularly good in Khojand; glazed and sprinkled with cardamom or sesame seeds. There are many *chaikhana*s, shashlyk grills and vats of *plov* around the bazaar.

**Café Ravshan** (Ordjonikidze 102; mains 5-7TJS; ☎ 11am-8pm) The great chicken kebabs (*shashlyk akaro-shka*) here make this our favourite place in town. There are also several *plov* stalls outside, which offer a cheap lunch.

**Kavsar Café** (Lenina; snacks 1-4TJS; ☎ 11am-8pm) The wide range of salads and cakes are the draw here, plus the atmosphere is pleasant.

**Orien Café** (Kamoli Khojandi; mains 5TJS; ☎ 10am-8pm) A bright and airy café next to Orienbank and a pleasant place to take a break or grab lunch.

## Getting There & Away

From Khojand there are daily flights to Dushanbe (US\$55), plus flights to Bishkek, Moscow and various Siberian cities. **Tajikistan Airlines** (☎ 6 02 49; Lenina 56; ☎ 8am-noon, 1-6pm) is near the Panchshanbe Bazaar.

For more details on getting to/from Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan see p396 and p396.

Minibuses to Kanibadam/Kanibodom (328, 2.50TJS), for Uzbekistan, and to Isfara (301, 3.50TJS), for Kyrgyzstan, leave from the **Isfara bus station** (Lenina) in the southeast suburbs, on the road to Chkalovsk. There are also quicker shared taxis (10TJS per seat) from here to both destinations.

There are frequent minibuses (314; one hour, 3TJS) and shared taxis (10TJS per seat)

### STALIN'S BUM DEAL

The crazy jigsaw boundaries of northern Tajikistan are in fact the result of sober thought. Before 1929 Tajikistan was an autonomous republic within the Uzbek ASSR, but because of its sensitive location on the edge of the Islamic world, Stalin wanted it upgraded to a full republic. But there weren't enough Tajiks; full-republic status required one million inhabitants. They simply topped up numbers by adding the (mainly Uzbek) population of the Khojand region (then Leninabad) to Tajikistan's. There may also be some truth in the theory that this was in partial recompense for the loss of the culturally Tajik cities of Bukhara and Samarkand – a bum deal if ever there was one.

south to Istaravshan from the **old bus station** (Kamoli Khojandi) in the west of town. Shared taxis to Penjikent (seven hours, 80TJS) also leave from here when full.

For shared taxis to Dushanbe (12 hours, 100TJS per seat) you need to take minibuses 18, 45 or 55 in the early morning from Lenina to the Chunchuk Aral bus stand in the north-eastern suburbs. Minibuses also run from here to Buston, from where you can take a taxi to the Oybek border crossing with Uzbekistan.

## Getting Around

Minibuses 2 and 80 run to the airport. For the Isfara bus station take minibus 35 or 55. To get to the old bus station on Kamoli Khojandi, take minibus 29. You can catch all these buses at the stand on the corner of Lenina and Ordjonikidze. To get off in the centre, alight at the bus stand by the hammer and sickle monument.

## ISTARAVSHAN ИСТАРАВШАН

☎ 3454 / pop 50,000

Called Kir by the Parthians, Cyropol by Alexander the Great and Ura-Tyube by the Russians, this small historic town has one of the best preserved old towns in Tajikistan, punctuated with some lovely traditional architecture. Bukhara it's not, but then there aren't any tourists either.

You can easily visit Istaravshan as either a day trip from Khojand or as an overnight stop en route to Dushanbe.

## Sights

The **Shahr-e-kuhna** (old town) is an interesting maze of alleys west of the main drag, Lenina. Buildings to track down include the working 15th-century **Abdullatif Sultan Medressa**, also known as the Kök Gumbaz (Blue Dome) after its eye-catching turquoise Timurid dome, and the nearby 19th-century **Hauz-i-Sangin Mosque**, with its fine ceiling paintings, dried *hauz* (pool) and tomb of Shah Fuzail ibn-Abbas. On the main road is the **Hazrat-i-Shah Mosque and Mausoleum** (Lenina 98), the town's main Friday mosque.

West of the old town, the four tin cupolas of the **Mazar-i-Chor Gumbaz** conceal Tajikistan's most impressive painted ceilings. To get here, walk west from the Abdullatif Sultan Medressa for five minutes to the main road and then take marshrutka 3 north to the tomb. If you're keen, you could also take a taxi from here for

the short ride to the 17th-century **Sary Mazar** (Yellow Tomb), a complex of two tombs, a mosque and some 600-year-old chinar trees in the southwest of the old town.

The hill to the northeast of town is **Mug Tepe**, the site of the Sogdian fortress stormed by Alexander the Great in 329 BC (there are faint remains in the northwest corner). The imposing entry gate was actually built in 2002 during Istaravshan's 2500th anniversary celebrations. To get to the hill take the road just north of the Istaravshan Hotel. The Regional Museum across the road at the foot of the hill is always closed.

The colourful central **bazaar** is one of the biggest in the region and well worth a visit, especially on Tuesdays.

## Sleeping

**Istaravshan Hotel** (Lenina 80; s/d 10/20TJS) Rooms at the town's main hotel are spacious and quiet (you'll most likely be the only guests) but they've seen better days and the old lady in charge is quite batty. The ensuite bathrooms are just a tease – the hotel hasn't had water for years.

**Hotel Chashnobar** (☎ 2 49 61; s/d/q without bathroom 16/20/36TJS, d with bathroom 40TJS) The simple rooms here are a bit grubby but the pleasant courtyard seating area, hot showers and a good sauna/steam room make this the best place in town. It's 500m south of the bazaar, along the road to Dushanbe, and is sometimes referred to as the 'Muhib'.

**Isroil Hotel** (d 20-40TJS) Simple rooms with bathroom and satellite TV make this an OK bet but, just to the right of the main entrance to the bazaar, it can be noisy.

## Eating

Istaravshan is famed for its pears and sweet *kishmish* grapes. Invest in a kilo and retire to the **Aka Musa Chaykhana**, a nice Soviet-era *chaikhana* with fine tea beds but lacklustre service. It's next to the car-parts market, 200m north of the bazaar; the entrance is marked by a large mosaic.

There are lots of kebab places in front of and at the back of the bazaar. **Bar Tajikistan** across the main road from the bazaar serves up roast chicken and beer.

## Getting There & Around

Shared taxis to Dushanbe (276km, 10 hours, 50TJS to 100TJS per seat) leave from the southern end of the bazaar. Cars marked

'Tranzit' are generally often cheapest, since they are headed to Dushanbe for sale. Cars to Penjikent (seven hours) are a little further south. A taxi to Dushanbe via an overnight in Iskander-Kul starts at around US\$100.

The easiest option to Khojand is one of the shared taxis (1½ hours, 10TJS per seat) across from the bazaar, otherwise minibuses (3TJS) run from the main bus stand, 3km north of the centre. Marshrutki 4 and 7 (25 dirham) shuttle up and down Lenina between the bazaar, the Hotel Istaravshan and the bus station.

## PENJIKENT ПЕНДЖИКЕНТ

☎ 3475 / pop 50,000

On a terrace above the banks of the Zerafshan (Zeravshan) River, 1.5km southeast of the modern, pleasant but somewhat dull modern town, are the ruins of **ancient Penjikent**, a major Sogdian town founded in the 5th century and abandoned in the 8th century. At its height the settlement town was one of the most cosmopolitan cities on the Silk Road and a rich trading centre, whose palace was decorated with ornate hunting scenes and pillars carved in the shape of dancing girls.

The ancient city has not been built upon since it was abandoned. You can make out the faint foundations of houses, two Zoroastrian temples and the shop-lined bazaar of the main *shakhristan* (town centre), as well as the obvious citadel to the west, but the best of the frescoes (some of them 15m long), sculptures, pottery and manuscripts were long ago carted off to Tashkent and St Petersburg. A small **museum** (admission 2TJS; ☎ 10am-5pm) chronicles the excavations. Surrounding the site are scattered remains of a *rabad* (suburb) and necropolis. The ruins are an 800m walk from the end of marshrutka 5 (40 dirham) or a 15-minute walk from the bazaar. Visit in the early morning or afternoon to avoid the heat. For more on the excavations, including a map, see [www.orientarch.uni-halle.de/ca/ca-page.htm](http://www.orientarch.uni-halle.de/ca/ca-page.htm).

Some more finds and reproduction frescoes are on display at the **Rudaki Museum** (Rudaki; admission 3TJS; ☎ 8am-5pm), 1.5km west of the bazaar in modern Penjikent. There are also tools from the nearby Neolithic site of Sarazm and a copy of documents found at Mt Mug, where the Sogdians made their last stand against the Arab invaders. A statue of Devastich, the last

Sogdian leader, dominates the roundabout at the west end of town.

The museum's name arises from the claim that Penjikent was the birthplace of Abu Abdullah Rudaki, the Samanid court poet considered by many to be the father of Persian poetry. His modern **mausoleum**, a popular pilgrimage place, is located 58km west of Penjikent in the village of Panjrud, along with a small museum and guesthouse.

The best local excursion is to the picturesque **Marguzor lakes**, up in the Fan Mountains – see opposite for details.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Ourpick Homestay of Nematov Niyozkul** (☎ 53134; [niyozkul@mail.ru](mailto:niyozkul@mail.ru); Rudaki 22/16; dm US\$10 full board) This comfortable traditional home is the best place to stay, hands down. There are plenty of duvets on the floor and the modern bathroom has hot water. Niyozkul can also arrange transport and treks in the Fan Mountains. His house is at the west end of town, about 700m from the Rudaki Museum, before the roundabout; ask for the '*ostanovka Samarkand*'.

**Hotel Penjikent** (☎ 52230; Borbadi Marvazi 22; d/st US\$10/20) The former Intourist hotel is poor value, with run-down rooms and a chronic lack of water.

**Dusti Restaurant** (Rudaki; mains TJS2-4; ☎ lunch & dinner) Canteen cuisine in grand style here, in an echoing dining hall opposite the post office on the main street. Otherwise, try the *chaikhana*s and canteens around the bazaar.

## Getting Around

Minibus 1 runs along Rudaki from Niyozkul's homestay, past the museum to the bazaar and then the bus station.

## Getting There & Away

Shared taxis run along the scenic mountain roads to Khojand (seven hours, 80TJS per seat) and Dushanbe (225km, eight hours, 100TJS per seat) from the bus station, 2km east of the central bazaar. Winter flights to Dushanbe (US\$45) operate infrequently. The airport is 4km west of town.

Buses leave at around 9.30am, noon and 2.15pm for the Rudaki Mausoleum (5TJS, one hour), returning at 6am and 2.30pm. A third bus departing at 8.30am (and maybe 2.30pm) also makes a stop here before

continuing 9km to Artush, for access to treks in the Fan Mountains.

For details of getting to Samarkand, in neighbouring Uzbekistan, see p396.

## FAN MOUNTAINS ФАНСКИЕ ГОРЫ

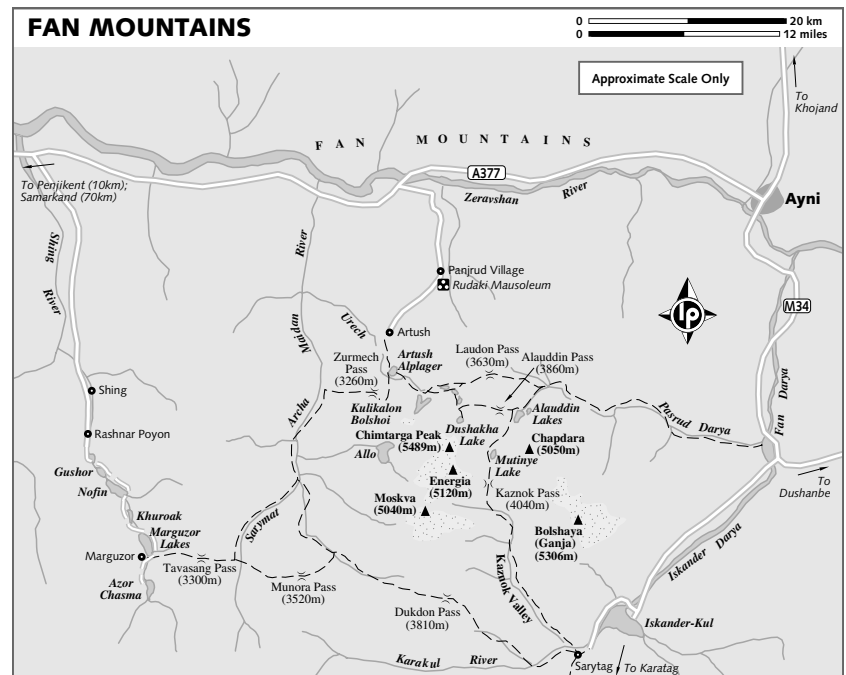
The Fannsky Gory (Russian for Fan Mountains) are one of Central Asia's most popular trekking and climbing destinations, being only a couple of hours from both Samarkand and Dushanbe. See the boxed text *Trekking in the Fan Mountains* (p374) for trekking route overviews.

If you don't have time for a trek, a great way to get a feel for the Fans is to make the day trip from Penjikent to the **Marguzor Lakes**, a 20km-long chain of seven turquoise lakes that is strung along the western end of the range. Try to make it to the last lake (Azor Chashma), 2km beyond Marguzor village and 63km from Penjikent, from where you can hike along the dramatic lakeshore (bring a picnic).

To hire a car for the day-trip costs around US\$40 from Penjikent. Nematov Niyozkul (see opposite) is good at arranging reliable transport. Shoestringers could take the bus

to Rashnar Poyon (just before the first lake), which departs Penjikent between noon and 2pm. Coming back, try to track down the possibly cramped 4WD that runs daily between Marguzor village and Penjikent's Takhta Bazaar, just downhill from the main Penjikent bazaar.

One other gem accessible to nontrekkers is **Iskander-Kul**, a gorgeous mountain lake 24km off the main road, at the eastern end of the range. The lakeside **turbaza** (former Soviet holiday camp; per person 20TJS) enjoys a lovely spot, with 30 quiet chalets and a great lakeside restaurant. Bring warm clothes as the lake is at 2195m. There are pit toilets but no showers. You can get great overviews of the lake from the hill behind the *turbaza*, where a couple of Orthodox crosses mark climbers' graves. You can take a one-hour walk around the lake to the President's *dacha* (holiday bungalow), and there are plenty of longer overnight hikes further up into the Kaznok Valley behind Sarytag village. For a shorter hike the *turbaza* administrator can give directions to a 30m-high waterfall half-an-hour's walk downstream.



There's no public transport to the lake. It's just about possible to find a taxi at the mining settlement by the main M34 turn-off but it would be much easier to hire a car between Dushanbe and Penjikent/Khojand and visit

en route. If you are hitching, weekends see the most traffic but are far less serene. Note that the road to Iskander-Kul branches off the larger road (to the mine) shortly after leaving the main M34 and crosses the river.

### TREKKING IN THE FAN MOUNTAINS

The Fannsky Gory – located in Tajikistan but most easily accessed from Samarkand – are one of Central Asia's premier trekking destinations. The rugged, glaciated mountains are studded with dozens of turquoise lakes, where Tajik shepherds graze their flocks.

Many Uzbek and Tajik travel agencies offer trekking programmes here, as do some overseas trekking companies (see p101), though it is a possible destination for experienced and fit do-it-yourselfers. To get to the Fans as an excursion from Uzbekistan you will need a Tajik visa and a double-entry Uzbek visa.

Daily buses run from Penjikent to Artush or Shing/Rashnar Poyon, the main trailheads. You might be asked to pay a trekking tax (see Travel Permits, p394) in Artush. You can get supplies in Penjikent, though it's better to bring your own lightweight foodstuffs. The region can be very hot and dry at the end of summer (August to early September). It's possible to hire pack donkeys at the trail heads for around US\$10 per day.

The best maps are the hard-to-find 1:100,000 *Pamir Alay – Severno-Zapadnaya Chast* (1992 Tashkent) or the 1:100,000 *Fan Mountains Map and Guide* published abroad by EWP ([www.ewp.net.com](http://www.ewp.net.com)).

### Routes from Artush

From Artush walk two hours (6km) up to the *alplager* (mountaineers' camp) where rooms and food are generally available (US\$10 to US\$15). From here it's a hard three-hour uphill hike into the Kulikalon bowl, home to a dozen deep blue lakes. Excellent camping can be found near Dushakha Lake, at the foot of Chimtarga (5489m – the highest peak in the region).

Then it's a hard slog up and over the Alauddin Pass (3860m) to the Alauddin lakes, where you can find good camping and sometimes a food tent in summer. From here you can make a long day-hike up to Mutinye Lake and back.

From Alauddin Lakes you can head downstream to the Chapdara Valley and then west up to Laudon Pass (3630m) and back down into the Kulikalon bowl.

An alternative from Mutinye Lake takes you over the difficult Kaznok Pass (4040m, grade 1B), where you may need an ice axe. From here head down the long Kaznok Valley to Sarytag village, the main road and Iskander-Kul (p373).

There are daily buses from Penjikent to Artush at 8.30am and noon. Four-wheel drives can normally get as far as the *alplager*.

### Routes from Shing/Rashnar Poyon

The other main trailhead is at Shing or, preferably 9km further, at Rashnar Poyon, from where you can walk up past the Marguzor Lakes in a day. From here trails lead over the Tavasang Pass (3300m) to the Archa Maidan Valley. Trails continue down the valley to the foot of the Zurmech Pass (3260m) and then over to Artush.

Alternatively, when you hit the Archa Maidan Valley, you can climb up to the Munora Pass (3520m) and down into the valley, and then up over the Dukdon Pass (3810m) into the Karakul Valley and, eventually, Iskander-Kul.

There are daily buses from Penjikent to Shing at around 9am, noon and 3pm and a bus to Rashnar Poyon sometime between noon and 2pm.

### Routes from the South

From Dushanbe it's possible to take a taxi to Karatag or Hakimi (see p367) and start a three-day trek north over Mura Pass (3787m), crossing the Hissar range, to drop down into the Sarytag Valley and Iskander-Kul.

## THE PAMIRS

The plain is called Pamier, and you ride across it for twelve days together, finding nothing but a desert without habitations or any green thing, so that travellers are obliged to carry with them whatever they have need of. The region is so lofty and cold that you can not even see any birds flying. And I must notice also that because of this great cold, fire does not burn so bright, nor give out so much heat as usual.

Marco Polo,

Description of the World

They're known locally as Bam-i-Dunya (Roof of the World), and once you're up in the Pamirs it's not hard to see why. For centuries a knot of tiny valley emirates, the Pamirs feel like a land a little bit closer to heaven.

The word *pamir* means 'rolling pasture-land' in ancient Persian, which is apt indeed, though some sources say the derivation is Paw-i-Mur or 'Legs of the Sun'. The Chinese called the mountains the Congling Shan, or 'Onion Mountains'. There is not one obvious Pamir range, rather a complex series of ranges separated by high-altitude valleys.

The western half of the region, Badakhshan, is characterised by deep irrigated valleys and sheer peaks reminiscent of the Wakhi areas of far northern Pakistan (which are also ethnically



Tajik). The eastern half of the region is the high, arid and sparsely inhabited Pamir plateau, home largely to Kyrgyz herders and their yurts. For the most part, the Pamirs are too high for human settlement.

The Pamirs contain three of the four highest mountains in the former Soviet Union, the apex of which is Koh-i-Samani (former Pik Kommunizm) at 7495m. Less than an Empire State Building shorter is Pik Lenin at 7134m. (There is much confusion over this peak's new name, which is either Koh-i-Istiqlal/Independence Peak or Abu Ali ibni Sino/Avicenna in Tajikistan, or Peak Sary Tash or even Achik Tash in Kyrgyzstan!). The Pamir is drained by the numerous tributaries of the Vakhsh and Pyanj Rivers which themselves feed into the Amu-Darya, Central Asia's greatest river.

Kohistani Badakhshan (still most commonly known as the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous oblast, or GBAO) accounts for 45% of Tajikistan's territory but only 3% of its population. The 212,000 souls that do live here are divided between Pamiris and Kyrgyz. Culturally speaking, Badakhshan extends over the Pyanj River into Afghan Badakhshan, centred around Faizabad.

The slopes and high valleys are inhabited by harder creatures, near-mythical animals such as the giant Marco Polo sheep, which sports curled horns that would measure almost 2m were they somehow unfurled, and the rarely seen snow leopard. During the Soviet era several scientific teams tried to track down the similarly elusive 'giant snowman', but in vain.

Chance encounters with yetis aside, the Pamir region is generally safe to travel in,

despite a healthy penchant for red tape. Tajik border guards assumed the unenviable task of keeping a lid on smuggling after the Russian troops departed the region in 2005.

## HISTORY

### The Legacy of Isolation

With no arable land to speak of and no industry, Gorno-Badakhshan has always relied heavily on Moscow and Dushanbe for its upkeep, with most of its processed goods and all of its fuel coming from outside the region.

The collapse of the USSR was a particularly hard blow for the region. As money and fuel supplies dried up, so the region's markets, state farms, irrigation channels and bus routes slowly ground to a halt. Suddenly local farmers and herders had to remember how to harvest their crops without machinery, skills that had been suppressed for decades. The largely Russian Soviet scientists packed up and left behind half-abandoned mines, research stations and observatories scattered across the Pamirs.

Frustrated by its marginal position and seeing no future in a collapsing Tajikistan, GBAO nominally declared its independence in 1992 and chose the rebel side in the civil war. Since then, the government hasn't been sending much in the way of aid or reconstruction.

Through most of the 1990s, humanitarian aid convoys kept the region from starvation, while establishing agricultural and hydroelectrical programmes in an attempt to create some degree of self-sufficiency. In 1993 the region grew 16% of its basic food needs; by 2006 that figure had risen to 80%.

### PAMIRI HOUSES

If the chance arises it is worth accepting an offer to look inside a traditional *huneuni chid* (Pamiri house). Guests are received in the large five-pillared room with raised areas around four sides of a central pit, but there is also a smaller living space, a kitchen and a hallway. There are few, if any, windows; illumination comes through a skylight in the roof (*tsorkhona*), which consists of four concentric squares, representing the elements of earth, fire, air and water. Carpets and mattresses take the place of furniture and also serve as decoration along with panels of photographs – the most prominent of which is often a portrait of the Aga Khan.

The five vertical pillars symbolise the five main prophets (Fatima, Ali, Mohammed, Hassan and Hussein), as well as the five pillars (literally) of Islam and, some say, the five deities of Zoroastrianism (the structure of Pamiri houses goes back 2500 years). In a further act of symbolism, the number of roof beams relates to the seven imams and six prophets of Islamism. The place of honour, next to the Hassan pillar (one of two pillars joined together), is reserved for the *khalifa* (village religious leader), so visitors should avoid sitting there. For some pointers on etiquette when visiting a Central Asian home, see p87 and p63.

The next stage is to create employment, much of which depends on education and tourism (see p388).

Despite this, 80% of the local population still earns less than US\$200 per year. The region's largest employer, the Russian military, pulled out of the region in 2005, further worsening the situation. Over 15,000 Badakhshans have left their homes in search of work outside the region.

It is hoped that the new highway between Murgab and Tashkurgan in China will help lift the region out of its isolation, though it's hard to see quite what the region currently has to export. Meanwhile the Aga Khan Foundation has been busy rebuilding bridges, literally, with Afghan Badakhshan on the other side of the Pyanj River, reuniting communities severed since the formation of the USSR.

## PAMIRI TAJIKS

Centuries of isolation in high-altitude valleys has meant that the Pamiris of Gorno-Badakhshan speak languages different not only from those of lowland Tajiks but from one another. Each mountain community has its own dialect of Pamiri, a language that, although sharing the same Persian roots as Tajik, is as different as English is from German. Shugnani (named after the emirate of Shugnan once based in the Gunt Valley) is the dialect spoken in Khorog, the Gunt Valley and among Badakhshani Tajiks in Murgab. Other languages in the mosaic include Wakhi, Ishkashimi and Rushani. *Khologh* is 'thank you' in Shugnani.

The mountain peoples of the eastern Pamirs are, however, solidly bound by their shared faith: Ismailism, a breakaway sect of Shiite Islam, introduced into Badakhshan in the 11th-century by Nasir Khusraw. Ismailism has no formal clerical structure, no weekly holy day and no mosques (rather multipurpose meeting halls called *jamoat khana*, which also double as meeting halls and community guesthouses). Ismailis greet each other with *yo-ali madat* (May Ali bless you), rather than the standard Islamic *asalam aleykum*. Each village has a religious leader known as a *khalifa*, who leads prayers and dispenses advice, assisted by a *rais* (community leader).

One of the few visible manifestations of the religion are the small roadside *oston* (shrines), covered in ibex horns, burnt offerings and round stones, at which passers-by stop to ask

for a blessing. The horns are often the remnants of hunting trips and ensuing community meals known as *khudoi*. The shrines also act as charity stations; in return for a blessing, the Ismaili customarily leaves some money or bread for anyone in need.

The spiritual leader of the Ismailis is the Swiss-born Aga Khan, revered by Pamiris as a living god and the 49th imam. He's no remote, abstract deity – it's the Aga Khan's charity that has kept almost certain starvation at bay in GBAO; Pamiris venerate him as 'Our God who sends us food'.

Not having two potatoes to fry together has done nothing to lessen the legendary hospitality of the Pamiris.

## INFORMATION

### Permits & Registration

It is essential to have both a Tajik visa and a GBAO permit to travel in the Pamirs. To get the latter you'll need travel agency help; META in Murgab (see p388) charges US\$24, Munduz Travel in Osh (see p336) charges US\$25, Tour De Pamir (see p381) in Khorog charges US\$30, Stantours (see p117) charges US\$40 and the Great Game Travel Company (see p362) US\$65. It's best to apply a couple of weeks in advance. There are rumours that the GBAO permit may be discontinued.

The permit is a separate piece of rather unofficial-looking paper and lists the districts to be visited, so make sure you get all the regions you want to visit (these are Ishkashim, Murgab, Vanj, Darvaz, Shugnan, Rushan and Roshqtala). Like registration, the GBAO permit is valid only for the duration of your visa.

If you can't pick up your permit in Dushanbe (ie if you want to travel from Osh) you'll have to ask the travel agency to email you a scan of the permit. You can then travel with a colour printout in its original size (around 6.5cm by 11cm) as far as Khorog and pick up the original there. Munduz Travel in Osh (see p336) claim to arrange GBAO permits in a day.

Permits are checked throughout the Pamirs, including at Kalaikhum, Khorog airport, Suchan (10km east of Khorog), outside Murgab, Karakul and Kyzyl-Art. Off the main highway, there are border checkpoints at Tokhtamysh and Rang-Kul, and also at Ishkashim and Khargush, at either end of the Wakhan Valley.

You will also need additional permits if you want to visit Sarez or Zor-Kul lakes (see p394).

If you haven't registered previously in Tajikistan (see p393) you will have to register in Khorog. Coming from Osh, you should first register with OVIR in Murgab and then register again in Khorog (no fee for the second registration), where you'll get a passport stamp.

Moreover, travellers are supposed to register with the Kizmat-i-Amniyat-i-Milli (National Security Service, generally referred to as the KGB) in Murgab, even if you have registered elsewhere in Tajikistan. There is no fee and the Murgab Ecotourism Association (META; see p388) can help with this.

### What to Bring

Khorog has a fairly well-stocked bazaar but Murgab's is limited to bad Kyrgyz beer and expired Snickers bars so bring some snacks from home, especially if you're trekking or travelling off-the-beaten track. Gifts of photos of the Aga Khan go down well. Sunscreen, sunglasses and a torch (flashlight) are essential. Water purifying tablets are advisable.

It's essential to have warm clothing, though a fleece and windproof shell should generally suffice in midsummer. Amazingly strong winds can pick up very quickly in the Pamirs, something even Marco Polo moaned about. A sleeping bag is useful but not essential, as most homes and yurts can provide plenty of duvets. A tent is only really useful for wilderness treks.

Despite the high altitudes, mosquitoes can be voracious during early summer in the river valleys of Murgab and Ak-Suu and around Rang-Kul, so bring repellent if travelling in June, July or August (they are largely gone by September).

There's little electricity outside Khorog and reliable batteries are impossible to buy in the Pamirs so bring enough camera batteries to last until Osh or Dushanbe.

### MAPS

Cartographer Marcus Hauser has produced an essential 1:500,000 colour tourist map to the Pamirs. It is for sale at the Bactria Cultural Centre (see p360) in Dushanbe and, less reliably, from META in Murgab, or directly from [www.geckomaps.com](http://www.geckomaps.com).

### Money

Make sure you change enough money before arriving in the region. In Khorog it's possible to change cash (US dollars) and even get a cash advance off a credit card. In an emergency you

might find someone willing to change dollars in Murgab (bring small denominations). Kyrgyz som are accepted between Murgab and the Kyrgyz-Tajik border.

### SLEEPING

Most of the tourist accommodation in the Pamirs is in homestays or yurtstays, which are simple but comfortable. Homestays generally have an outdoor toilet and a place to wash. Yurts don't supply toilets or bathrooms so you'll have to find a spare rock to squat behind (see p94). For a rundown on the structure of a yurt see p273. The ecotourism organisation META (see p388) offers accommodation throughout the eastern Pamirs.

If you are getting off-the-beaten track in the eastern Pamirs, check with MSDSP (See p380) about their guesthouses and homestays. Tourists can normally stay at **MSDSP guesthouses** (dm US\$15) at Kalaikhum and Kala Hussein if they are not being used by MSDSP staff members. To find the local MSDSP office in any village ask for *Hazina* (treasure chest), the name by which the organisation is known locally.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

The major transport options for the 728km Pamir Hwy between Khorog and Osh are hitching on trucks, renting a 4WD with driver or cramming in the occasional minivan.

### Minibus

There are dailyish minibuses between Murgab and Khorog and, less frequently, between Osh and Murgab. In Kyrgyzstan daily public buses run from Osh to Sary Tash (see p341). From Khorog, minibuses and shared 4WDs go to some surrounding valleys such as Jelandy, Ishkashim, Rushan, Langar and Roshtqala, though the timings generally require an overnight stay.

### Car Hire

Hiring a private vehicle (normally a Russian UAZ Jeep but possibly a Lada Niva) and a driver is relatively expensive, but gives you a flexibility that you will value on this scenic and fascinating trip. Please note that the transport rates listed in this section will doubtless change as the price of fuel rises.

At the time of research, META (see p388) in Murgab was offering 4WDs at between US\$0.34 to US\$0.38 per km, plus 15% com-

mission, which worked out at US\$315 from Murgab to Osh (420km), or US\$330 from Murgab to Khorog via the Wakhan Corridor (you have to pay for the car's return trip to Murgab). To save costs from Osh you could take a shared taxi to Sary Tash in Kyrgyzstan and arrange for a META 4WD to pick you up there.

Great Game Travel (see p362) charges US\$0.70 per km for Land Cruiser hire. For other company's rates see p381. Independent car hire from Dushanbe to Khorog costs around US\$200 for a Lada Niva.

The availability and cost of fuel is a significant factor in the cost of transport (prices generally rise in autumn, when supplies are scarcer), but what really counts is whether you have to pay for the vehicle's return trip; this essentially doubles the cost. META was considering introducing a one-way rate of between US\$0.60 and US\$0.70 at the time of research.

Hiring a 4WD independently costs less than going through an agency but you'll need to negotiate hard and speak decent Russian. Generally speaking, car hire is cheaper in Murgab than in Khorog. Make sure any rate includes petrol, vehicle maintenance and the driver's pay, food and accommodation. For every extra day that the driver waits for you (if you wish, for example, to do an excursion), add about US\$10. Give the vehicle the once-over, check that the 4WD is operational and, if coming from Osh, check that the driver has a GBAO permit.

As a rough guide, a Russian UAZ Jeep needs around 16 litres of petrol per 100km, which works out at around US\$0.16 per km for the petrol alone. Lada Nivas are generally cheaper than Jeeps, though the spiffier Chrysler Nivas cost more. The main problem with Russian Jeeps is the limited visibility from the back seat.

Finding petrol can be a problem in the Pamirs. A trip into remoter corners of the region generally involves at least one dash around town to find a obliging local with a jerry can of diluted fuel and a bucket.

### Hitching

Traffic is light along the Pamir Hwy and hitching is hard work. The main commercial traffic these days is the Chinese trucks which shuttle between the Qolma Pass, Murgab and a terminal 30km east of Khorog. It helps if you

speak a few words of Chinese. If you break a journey you could end up waiting a long time for another ride, as trucks midroute are often full. Controls at checkpoints are particularly tedious for trucks.

Hitching from Osh is possible but finding a ride from Sary Tash to Murgab is problematic, as most vehicles are full by the time they get here.

### DUSHANBE TO KHOROG

If you are hiring a car between Dushanbe and Khorog, you have the choice of two routes; the main summer-only route via Tavildara and the Sagirdasht Pass to Kalaikhum, or the longer but year-round southern route via Kulyab and the Afghan border road. Minibuses take the Tavildara route

The condition of the Tavildara road is particularly bad and without prospect of improving any time soon. The southern route is longer but slowly being upgraded by Turkish road crews (there is a surreal three-lane stretch of highway at Zigar!), plus there are great views of the amazing cliffside footpaths and traditional villages on the Afghan side of the river, often less than 100m away. You pass several lovely Tajik villages en route, such as Yoged. Signs warn of mines along parts of this route so don't go wandering by the river bank.

The best place to break the trip is in Kalaikhum (also known as Kala-i-khum, Darvaz or Darvaz). The **homestay of Bakhrum Sangkakul** (dm US\$5), by the bridge, is a good bet, as is the **homestay of Katya Khudoyidodova** (☎ 21444). There's also an **MSDSP guesthouse** (dm US\$15) 1km down the road to Kulyab.

### KHOROG ХОРОГ

☎ 35220 / pop 27,800 / elevation 2100m

A small mountain-valley town, Khorog is the capital of the autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO) region. It is strung out on either side of the dashing Gunt River and pined in by dry, vertical peaks. A few kilometres downstream, the Gunt merges with the Pyanj, marking the border with Afghanistan.

Until the late 19th century, present-day Khorog was a tiny settlement that loosely belonged to the domain of local chieftains, the Afghan Shah or the Emir of Bukhara. Russia installed a small garrison here following the Anglo-Russian-Afghan Border Treaty of 1896, which delineated the current northern border of Afghanistan on the Pyanj River.

Khorog was made the administrative centre of GBAO in 1925.

Khorog suffered badly in the wake of independence (at the depths of the economic crisis money disappeared altogether, replaced by barter) but things have picked up in recent years. In 2003 the Aga Khan pledged US\$200 million to establish one of the three campuses of the University of Central Asia in Khorog's eastern suburbs. Khorog has one of the brightest and best educated populations of any town in Central Asia.

The town park, dug up to grow crops during the famine of the 1990s, is being renovated by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Note that the town largely closes down on Sunday, when open restaurants and transport can be hard to find.

## Information

**Afghan consulate** (☎ 2 24 92; Gagarina) Visas are theoretically possible here, though you'll likely be referred to the embassy in Dushanbe. Phone ahead, as opening hours vary.

**Mountain Societies Development Support Project** (MSDSP; ☎ 2 26 99; msdspkhorog@msdsp.automail.com;

Lenina 50) Can help with car hire for US\$0.46 per km, plus US\$20 per day, and can help with homestays in remote areas of the Pamirs (see opposite).

## INTERNET ACCESS

**Interkom Internet Café** (☎ 2 50 09; Khubonsho 1/1; per hr 3TJS; ☎ 7am-7pm)

**Uslugi Computer Photo Club** (Lenin 50; per hr 3TJS; ☎ 8am-8pm) At the post office.

## MONEY

**Agroinvestbank** (Garagina; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) Offers cash advances on MasterCard, Maestro and Visa cards for a 2% commission. There's no sign, just look for the word 'Agrobank' scratched onto the side of a rusty tanker!

**Amonat Bank** (☎ 8am-12pm & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Changes cash (US dollars and, at a pinch, euros) into somani.

## REGISTRATION

**OVIR** (Lenin; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) If you haven't already registered in Tajikistan, do so here, next to the Amonat Bank. Enter through the blue door to the left of the main entrance. Registration costs US\$20 and takes two minutes.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Pamir Silk Tour** (☎ 505 23 61, 2 57 77; PST\_pamirs@yahoo.com; Azizbek 1) Can arrange homestays, transport and GBAO permits. Contact Mullo Abdul Shagarif or Manzura Saidzoirova. Shagarif is also the local representative of the state tourism agency Sayoh, with an office at the GBAO *aqimat* (government building) on Lenina 26. Four-wheel drive hire costs US\$0.70 per km.

**Pamir Tourism** (☎ 93-5009947, 2 52 99; pamirstourism@yahoo.com; www.pamirs-tourism.org; Lenina 55) Can arrange GBAO permits for US\$35 and homestays throughout the eastern Pamirs. Four-wheel drive hire costs US\$0.48 per km. Contact Ismoil Konunov.

**Tour De Pamir** (☎ 93-5007557, 2 37 96; tourdepamir@yahoo.com; Lenina 77) Contact Ergash or Abridol, in the same building as De Pamiri. GBAO permits cost US\$30 and 4WD hire costs US\$0.50 per km.

## Sights

Khorog's surprisingly good **Regional Museum** (Lenina; admission 3TJS; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) is well worth an hour of your time, if only to see the fabulous cross-bow mousetrap, as well as the first Russian piano to arrive in Badakhshan (10 Russian soldiers spent two months carrying it over the mountains from Osh!).

Tourists can visit the Saturday **market** by the bridge on the border with Afghanistan, by the Serena Inn, 5km west of town. It's not very exotic but you say *salaam* to local Afghan traders.

The **Pamir Botanical Garden**, 5km east of town, has a couple of hundred hectares of parkland and is the world's second highest botanical garden, reaching 3900m.

## Sleeping

The best places to stay are the town's homestays, though there are now a couple of mid-range hotels for those requiring more comfort or privacy.

## HOMESTAYS

There are two main concentrations of homestays; in the centre of town east of the football pitch, and out in the pleasant UPD district, a half-hour walk (2km) southeast of town. Most homestays cost US\$6 to US\$8 per person without meals, unless otherwise noted. Khorog's travel agencies can arrange homestays in Khorog and throughout the Pamirs for US\$10 to US\$15 per person.

The following places are in the centre of town:

**Azimshah Akdodshoev** (☎ 2 27 45, 2 44 26; Khubonsho 1a; r US\$10) One of the nicest traditional Pamiri homes but not overly friendly. Rates include two meals.

**Khursheda Mamadrainova** (☎ 2 47 54; Khubonsho 11; dm US\$10) Good place with three comfortable rooms, an upper balcony and new indoor bathroom.

**Mariam Imunnazarova** (☎ 2 57 22, 2 30 62; Gagarina; US\$10) Modern block with a Western toilet and hot shower. Next to the Afghan consulate.

**Gulaisuf Takhmina/Navruzbeq** (☎ 2 45 54; Khubonsho 9) Lovely garden but basic toilet and very basic shower.

The following homestays are in the UPD district:

**Lotofat Shakarmamodova** (☎ 2 55 81; Bandalieva 506) Look for the black gate across from the Pamir Lodge.

**Soivdaviat Koimododova** (☎ 2 39 70; Bandalieva 42) Traditional Pamiri home, with a bathroom planned; look for the black gate.

**Robiya & Nodira Mirzomamdova** (☎ 2 35 28; Bandalieva 47; dm US\$10) One of the most comfortable, and able to take groups of eight, with a modern bathroom and garden tapchan (tea bed).

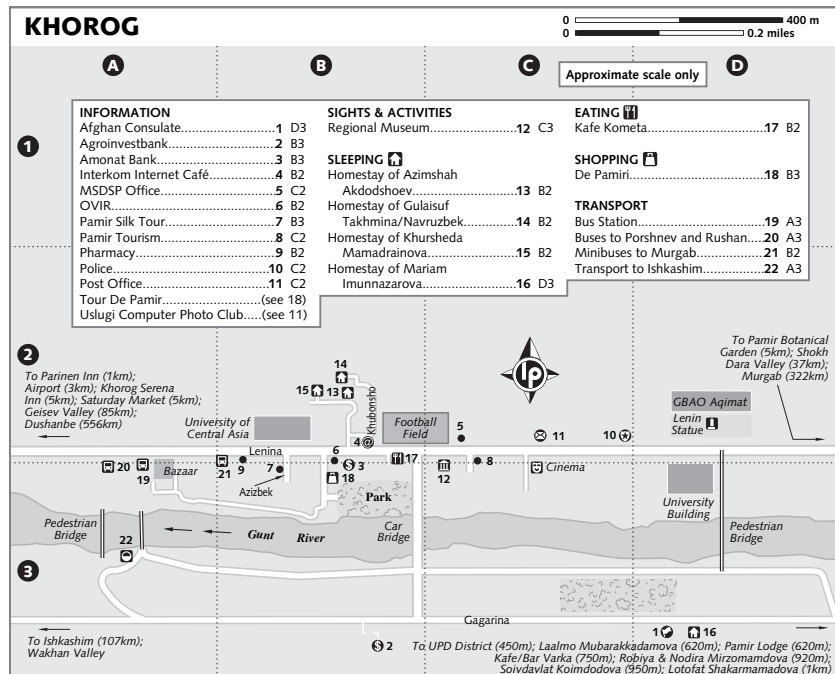
**Laalmo Mubarakkadamova** (☎ 2 69 99; Bandalieva 61/10)

## HOTELS

**Ourpick Pamir Lodge** (☎ 2 65 45; www.geocities.com/pamirlodge; Kuchai Gagarin 46; US\$5 per person, breakfast & dinner US\$3) The five rooms here are simple, with mattresses on the floor, but it's a lovely spot and Zubaida and Saidaziz Ilolov are delightful hosts. The shared Western bathroom and hot sauna are a luxury and the food is excellent (ask Zubaida to prepare her homemade *kurtob* - layered bread, yogurt, onion and coriander). The lodge was set up by Pakistani scholar Dr Ali Muhammed Rajput to fund the local *jamoat khana* (Ismali prayer and meeting hall), which is in the grounds. The lodge is just past the football pitch of the Gagarin School.

**Parinen Inn** (☎ 2 54 99; Lenina 69/50; s/d US\$25/50) This private midrange hotel has seven clean modern rooms and Western bathrooms, plus a large lounge, riverside garden seating, satellite TV and parking. It's a little overpriced but is probably the best midrange option.

**Khorog Serena Inn** (☎ 2 32 28, satellite 00882216-89802194; serenainn@khorog.automail.com; s/d US\$75/100 ind 20% tax) This is the best hotel in town, built in chic Badakhshani style (but with modern amenities) for the visit of Aga Khan. The six rooms are spacious and only used occasionally by consultants and the odd tour group. Credit cards are





not accepted. It's by the bridge to Afghanistan, 5km northwest of Khorog bazaar.

A new 24-room Serena Inn is planned for the university district of upper Khorog in 2008.

### Eating

The best bet for dinner is your homestay or guesthouse.

**Kafe Kometa** (Lenina 6; mains 3TJS) This is the best place for a lunch in the centre, serving up decent Soviet food in pleasant surroundings.

**Kafe/Bar Varka** (Gagarin; mains 7TJS) Out in the UPD district, this slightly Mafiosi-looking place has spuriously dim lighting but a good range of salads and Russian dishes.

**Khorog Serena Inn** (☎ 2 32 28; mains 13-25TJS, beer 8-12TJS) This surprisingly reasonably priced hotel restaurant has the nicest setting in Khorog, with weekend barbecues and a riverside bar.

Look out in the bazaar for bottles of locally made sea-buckthorn juice and tart dog-rose juice (*shipovnik sok*).

### Shopping

**De Pamiri** (☎ 2 37 96; yorali@rambler.ru; Lenina 77) This NGO initiative aims to revive traditional Pamiri crafts by offering a place for 45 artisans from across the Pamirs to market and sell their crafts. Products include excellent felt rugs and bags, musical instruments, Pamiri socks, embroidered skullcaps and Pamiri socks; view a selection of products at [www.pamirs.org/handicrafts](http://www.pamirs.org/handicrafts). Prices are marked and fixed, and 80% of earnings go to the artisans. Contact Yorali or Vatani.

### Getting There & Away

For an overview of transport along the Pamir Hwy see above.

### AIR

One of the main attractions of Khorog is the flight in from Dushanbe (US\$60), which, depending on your confidence in the pilots of Tajikistan Airlines, will be one of the most exhilarating or terrifying experiences of your life. For the best views of Afghanistan sit on the right-hand side when flying from Dushanbe. Baggage allowance is 10kg; excess is 1% of the air ticket per 1kg.

Flights originate in Dushanbe and, in theory, run daily but they are grounded at the first sign of bad weather (which is frequent

### FLYING TO KHOROG

In Soviet days the Dushanbe–Khorog flight was the only route on which Aeroflot paid its pilots danger money. For most of the 45-minute flight the aircraft scoots along mountain valleys, flying in the shadow of the rock face with its wingtips so close you could swear they kick up swirls of snow. It may be reassuring to know that only one flight has failed to make it safely in recent years, and that incident was apparently not as a result of pilot error or mechanical failure, but because the plane was brought down by rocket fire from Afghanistan.

outside of the summer months). Passengers must then take their chances the next day, tussling for seats with those already booked on that flight. It can happen that, after a run of bad weather, hundreds turn up to fight for the first flight's 40 available seats. The bottom line is that you budget an extra day or two into your itinerary in case flights are cancelled and be prepared to travel overland if need be.

The airstrip is 3km west of town and taxis run to the centre.

### MINIBUS

Sturdy 4WD vans and Jeeps leave from the bazaar for Dushanbe (21 hours, 100TJS to 120TJS) when full. Get there in the morning and be prepared to hang around for hours before finally leaving. You might score a ride in a Land Cruiser for 150TJS per seat.

Minibuses to Murgab (eight hours, 50TJS) depart when full from 200m east of the bazaar, assuming there are enough passengers.

Four-wheel drives and minibuses to Ishkashim (three hours, 20TJS) leave in the late morning from a lot just across the river from the bazaar. You'll have to be lucky to find shared transport headed all the way to Langar, though they do exist. Drivers regularly squeeze eight passengers into the four seats!

There are also daily minibuses to Porshnev, Rushan, Roshtqala, Kalai khum and, sometimes, Jelandy. The last three generally leave from the bazaar. Most transport leaves Khorog in the afternoon, taking villagers back home for the night. Note that very little transport runs on Sundays.

### Getting Around

Minibus 3 (1TJS) runs from the bazaar to the UPD district. The same trip by taxi costs around 5TJS.

### BARTANG VALLEY

The stark and elemental Bartang Valley is one of the wildest and most beautiful in the western Pamirs and offers a fine opportunity for an adventurous multiday 4WD adventure. At times the fragile road is only perilously inches between the raging river below and sheer cliffs above. Only the occasional fertile alluvial plain brings a flash of green to the barren rock walls.

The road into the Bartang branches off the main road to Dushanbe, just before the village of Rushan, 61km from Khorog. After the village of **Yemts**, famous for its musicians, look for the footbridge that marks the start of the wonderful hike up the **Geisev Valley** (see below). A further 9km up the main valley is the village of Khidjef, which offers more hiking routes (see below).

The lovely village of **Basid**, 50km further, boasts two shrines (tourists can't visit the upper one) and scenic forests 5km up a side valley. It's a good place to overnight.

About 9km from Basid, it's worth taking the very rough side road 9km up to **Bardara**, at the junction of two gorgeous valleys. The hospitable village has two ancient shrines and foot trails lead up to summer pastures and over high passes to Bachor. Ask to see the village *khalodelnik* (fridge).

### TREKKING IN THE GEISEV VALLEY

The lovely traditional Pamiri villages and multicoloured lakes of the Geisev Valley offer the best short trekking destination from Khorog. Better still, a fledgling ecotourism project is supporting homestays in the valley's three villages, where travellers can buy food and hire donkeys and a guide if needed. This gives travellers the rare opportunity to hike amongst some of the loveliest scenery in the Pamirs without the need to carry a tent and food.

From the suspension bridge, 23km from the turn-off to the Bartang Valley, it's a 2½-hour walk uphill to the first village, by the second lake. From the first village it's an easy half-hour walk to the second village, and a further 30 minutes to the third village. From here it's an hour to the large third lake.

Beyond the third lake, you'll need tents to continue to the fourth and fifth lakes, summer pastures and glacier. For a demanding longer trek, it's possible to hike over the ridge to Ravmed in the Khidjef valley in two days, with the option of continuing up to the head of that valley for views of Patkhor Peak (6083m). A homestay is being established in Ravmed.

An overnight, or, better still, two-night excursion is the best way to soak up the gorgeous scenery. Car travel from Khorog to Geisev is 85km each way, which at current car-hire rates costs around US\$40, plus a daily rate for the driver to wait for you. Cars should park 1.5km past the suspension bridge, up a small side road.

The road to **Savnob** switches back high up the valley side and then down into a protected bowl. The ruined fort (used as a village toilet) and the hillside caves here served as protection against raids by Afghans, Kyrgyz or the neighbouring valley of Yazgulom. The village of **Roshorv**, high above the valley, is another possible detour. From Savnob the road continues to the start of trekking routes (see p391) near Ghudara.

Up a side valley are the villages of Nisar and **Barchadiev**, which is the trailhead for treks up to **Sarez** (see p384). You'll need a permit (see p394) to hike beyond Barchadiev.

### Sleeping

There are three homestays in the Geisev valley (see below). In Basid, tourists can stay at the **homestay** (dm US\$5) of Niyazbek Niyazbekov, the head of the local *jamaat* (village committee).

In Savnob, stay at the homestays of Saodat Niyazova (with satellite TV!) or the garrulous English teacher Tobchibek Bekov. There are also homestays in Nisar (Niyazov Hosil) and Barchadiev (Mavlodaut Moseycayev). Expect to pay around US\$6 per person for a homestay, plus around US\$4 for dinner and breakfast.

### Getting There & Away

Minibuses run between Savnob and Khorog but only every few days (35TJS), so the only practical way to visit the Bartang Valley is by hired car. A trip from Khorog to Savnob and back, via Bardara, eats up about 420km. Make sure your driver has a spare jerry can of fuel, as there is little, if any petrol available en route.

### AN ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN

As if Tajikistan didn't have enough to worry about, geologists warn that the country faces a potential natural disaster of immense proportions. The watery 'Sword of Damocles' lies high in the Pamirs in the shape of Lake Sarez, a 60km-long body of disarmingly pretty turquoise water half the size of Lake Geneva. Lake Sarez was formed in 1911 when an earthquake dislodged an entire mountain side into the path of the Murgab River, obliterating the villages of Usoi and Sarez. Slowly but surely a 500m-deep lake formed behind the 770m-high natural dam of rocks and mud known as the Usoi Dam. If a regional earthquake were to break this plug or create a wave to breach the dam, as some experts think could happen, a huge wall of water would sweep down the mountain valleys, wiping away roads and villages deep into Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, with flood waters reaching as far as the Aral Sea. Experts warn that it would be the largest flood ever witnessed by human eyes.

High river flows often wash away sections of the road in early summer.

Past Savnob, a road of sorts continues on to Kōk Jar (see p390) and Murgab but the road is in *very* bad condition and only worth contemplating at the end of summer and with a reliable 4WD. Check beforehand whether the road is open. As one local told us, 'The road to Kōk Jar is fine but at the end of the trip both the car and driver will be destroyed.'

### SHOKH DAR VALLEY ШОХ ДАРА

A 4WD road winds up the Shokh Dara Valley southeast of Khorog, offering a fine overnight excursion from Khorog or, with your own transport, a loop route option, connecting with the Pamir Hwy and returning to Khorog via the Gunt Valley or the Wakhan.

About 34km from Khorog (7km before Roshtqala) you'll see an alluvial plain on the right that until 2002 was the village of **Dasht**. The huge mud slide killed 24 and diverted the river. Due to the lack of arable land, most Pamiris live on such volatile alluvial plains.

The main town in the valley is **Roshtqala** (Red Fort), named after the ruined fort above the town. The village has daily transport from Khorog and homestay accommodation.

One potential detour is the day-long walk from Vrang to scenic Durum-Kul. Alternatively, drive part of the way and make it a half-day hike (90 minutes each way). Further up the valley look out for **forts** at Shashbuvad and Deruj.

Just before **Javshanguz** are dramatic views of peaks **Engels** (6507m) and **Karla Marx** (6723m). One enticing trekking route follows an old 4WD track over the 4432m Mats Pass into the Pamir Valley.

From Javshanguz the scenery blurs from the jagged valleys of the western Pamirs to the plateau scenery of the eastern Pamirs, as the rough 4WD road runs to **Turuntai-Kul**, 29km away and 6km off the main road. From here the main road winds down to the Pamir Hwy just beyond Jelandy, but there is a difficult river crossing en route for which you'll need a high-clearance 4WD. It's generally easier to cross near the lake; ask herders for the best route.

### Sleeping

There are homestays at Roshtqala and Javshanguz (with Arabshoev Mekhrabshoe and Mazabshoev Mazabsho).

### Getting There & Away

Minibuses to Roshtqala (5TJS) depart Khorog around noon, except on Sundays, returning to Khorog around 7am or 8am. Occasional transport continues further up the valley, or travellers can arrange to pay for the extra leg to Javshanguz (around US\$15 for the vehicle).

A day trip to Javshanguz from Khorog costs around US\$60 for the car.

### THE WAKHAN VALLEY

The Tajik half of the superbly remote Wakhan Valley, shared with Afghanistan, is a fantastic side trip from Khorog, either en route to Murgab or as a loop returning via the Gunt or Shokh Dara Valleys. The route's many side valleys reveal stunning views of the 7000m peaks of the Hindu Kush (Killer of Hindus), marking the border with Pakistan. Marco Polo travelled through the valley in AD 1274.

You will need to have Ishkashim marked on your GBAO permit to travel this road. There are military checkpoints at Khargush and near Namadguti.

Some 46km south of Khorog, and 7km from the junction at Anderob, the hot springs of **Garam Chashma** make for a nice soak and there are several homestays nearby.

Continuing south of Anderob towards Ishkashim, you'll see the **Koh-i-Lal ruby mine** from the road. The region's gem mines were mentioned by Marco Polo (who called the region Mt Shugnon) and Badakhshani rubies are still famed throughout the region. There are good views of Afghanistan from here, with its pyramid-shaped hay stacks and donkey caravans.

**Ishkashim** is the Wakhan's regional centre and largest village. Every other Saturday there is a transborder market at the bridge crossing to Afghanistan, 3km west of town.

Some 15km from Ishkashim, near the village of Namadguti, is the impressive Kushan-era **Khakha Fortress**, dating from the third century BC and rising from a platform of natural rock. The fort is currently occupied by Tajik border guards, so ask before taking pictures, though the lower parts of the fort are generally accessible. Just 300m further on is the interesting Ismaili *mazar* (tomb) of Shah-i-Mardan Hazrati Ali, one of many places in Central Asia that claim to be the final resting place of the Prophet's son-in-law.

Seven kilometres from Namadguti is the valley's major checkpoint, across from a ruined fortress. A further 20km, is the village of **Darshai**, where trekking routes lead over the mountains to the Shokh Dara Valley.

A further 57km from Khakha, 3km past Ptup village, is the turn-off for the ruined 12th-century **Yamchun Fort** (also known as Zulkhomar Fort), the most impressive in the valley, complete with multiple walls and round watchtowers. The site is a 6km switch-backed drive from the main road and sits about 500m above the valley. Climb up the hillside west of the fort for the best views. About 1km further uphill from the fort are the **Bibi Fatima Springs** (☎ 8am-6pm; admission locals/foreigners 1/5TJS), probably the nicest in the region and named after the Prophet Mohammed's sister. Women believe they can boost their fertility by visiting the womblike calcite formations. Bring a towel and keep an eye on your valuables as there are no lockers. Men's and women's bath times alternate every half hour.

**Yamg** village is worth a brief stop for the **tomb** and **reconstructed house museum** of Sufi mystic, astronomer and musician Mubarak Kadam

Wakhani (1843–1903). You can see the stone that he used as a solar calendar. If the museum is closed, ask around for Aydar Malikmadov.

**Vrang** is worth a stop for its fascinating 4th-century Buddhist stupas (some say fire-worshipping platforms). All around the ruins are the sulphurous remains of geothermal activity, as well as dozens of hermit caves. Walk through the village, cross the water channel and it's a steep scramble to the site. Locals can show you the village's water-driven mill. There's a small museum and shrine at the base of the hill.

Four kilometres further on, along the Wakhan plain, is Umbugh Qala, used by the Tajik military and so off-limits. Some 16km from Vrang you'll pass a colourful hot springs area, where locals stop for a hot bath. Four kilometres further, look across the river to the ruined Afghan fort of Qala-i-Panja, once the largest settlement in the Wakhan.

A further 29km (4km before Langar) is **Abrashim Qala** (Vishim Qala in Wakhi), the 'Silk Fortress' of Zong, built to guard this branch of the Silk Road from Chinese and Afghan invaders. The fort offers perhaps the most scenic views of all those in the valley. It's a steep 45-minute hike up the hillside, though 4WDs can drive part way via Dirj village.

**Langar** (population 1800) is strategically situated where the Pamir and Wakhan Rivers join to form the Pyanj, marking the start of Afghanistan's upper Wakhan, or Sarkhad region. It's an excellent base to visit surrounding sites. For a half-day hike, hire a local guide (US\$5) for the hour-long walk uphill (500m vertical ascent) to a collection of over 6000 petroglyphs. The village *jamoat khana* is easily recognisable by its colourful wall murals. Across the road is the *mazar* of Shoh Kambari Oftab, the man who brought Ismailism to Langar.

**Ratm Fort** has a strategic location, surrounded on three sides by cliffs. It's 5.5km from Langar and a 15-minute walk off the main road through bushes. Its name means 'first' as it is the first fort in the valley.

From Langar the road continues 77km to a military check post at **Khargush**. En route keep your eyes peeled for Bactrian camels on the far (Afghan) side of the Pamir River. At Khargush the main road leads uphill over a pass (look behind for stunning views of the Koh-i-Pamir massif in Afghanistan) to the salt lake of **Chokur-Kul**, 25km from Khargush, which is normally teeming with bird life. From here it's 12km to the main Pamir Hwy.

The protected area of Zor-Kul, further up the Pamir Valley from the Khorogush checkpoint, can only be visited with a permit from Dushanbe and permission from the border guards (though there are actually no checks if you approach the lake from its eastern end, via Jarty-Gumbaz – see p390). The lake was determined to be the source of the Oxus River during the 1842 expedition of Lieutenant Wood, when it was named Lake Victoria.

### Sleeping

In Ishkashim, the **Hanis Guesthouse** (☎ 2 13 55; per person US\$10, or US\$15 full board), run by Sanavbar Khonjonov, is a decent MSDSP-assisted homestay at the west end of town, next to the *militia* (police) station. If Sanavbar is home, he can provide information about onward travel in Afghanistan.

To stay in Darshai ask for the friendly homestay of the Dilovar family.

At Yamchun, it's possible to stay the night at the nearby small **sanatorium** (dm 15TJS) or at the simple homestays of Otashbek Nazirov, Mirshakar Nazirov or Alifkhan Makonshoev in the village of Vitckut, below the fort.

In Langar, it's possible to stay at the MSDSP-supported **jamoat khana** (dm US\$10), also known as the House Museum, which boasts a Western-style toilet, and rates include breakfast and dinner. Other options here include the homestays of Nasab Talgunsho or Imomyor Baikaraev, both a five-minute drive away.

### Transport

Ishkashim has transport to Khorog (three hours, 20TJS) every morning (see p383). There are occasional minibuses from Langar to Ishkashim (20TJS) and Khorog (40TJS).

### THE PAMIR HIGHWAY ПАМИРСКОЕ ШОССЕ

The Pamir Hwy from Khorog to Osh (a section of the M41) was built by Soviet military engineers between 1931 and 1934, in order to facilitate troops, transport and provisioning to this very remote outpost of the Soviet empire. Off-limits to travellers until recently, the extremely remote high-altitude road takes you through Tibetan-style high plateau scenery populated by yurts and yaks and studded with deep-blue lakes.

Being a major drug-smuggling artery, the road has several border-guard checkpoints,

where you will have to register. Most of the traffic these days is Chinese trucks and minivans travelling to/from Kashgar over the Qolma Pass.

Blue kilometre posts line the way with the distance from Khorog marked on one side and from Osh on the other.

### Khorog to Murgab

#### THE GUNT VALLEY TO THE KOI-TEZEK PASS

The initial 120km stretch out of Khorog climbs the attractive and well-watered Gunt Valley. At the east end of town, by the campus of the new University of Central Asia, look for a monument to the Pamir Hwy in the form of the first car ever to make the trip from Osh to Khorog. Just past here, near a sign commemorating '70 years of the USSR', a large concrete overhang protects the road from landslides. At Suchan, 10km from Khorog, your passport and GBAO permit will be checked.

At Boge village, 15km from centre of Khorog, it's possible to visit **Kafir-Qala** (Fortress of the Infidels), a faint ruined citadel with two circular Aryan temples. Further up the Gunt Valley, by the roadside before Shahzud, there's a pretty cascade created by a landslide. As the road continues to climb, there are spectacular views back to the dramatic vertical peaks of the Gunt Valley.

About 8km before Jelandy, just past a concrete ibex statue, a dirt road branches left to a **hot springs** complex, where you can soak in the curative hot water pool.

At **Jelandy**, at the 120km post, is a recently renovated **guesthouse** (dm 10-15TJS) with more hot springs and even a disco. This is a favourite stop for truck drivers out of Khorog, so don't expect much peace and quiet. It's a bit off the road; ask for the *kurort* (sanatorium).

A further 12km past Jelandy a rough dirt road branches right uphill to eventually join the Shokh Dara Valley (see p384). A side track on this road offers a challenging detour to the impressive high-altitude lake **Turuntai-Kul** (see p384).

The main road switchbacks to the 4272m **Koi-Tezek Pass**, after which the mountains pull back from the road to reveal the lunar-like high-altitude desert, framed by snowy peaks, that marks the start of the Pamir plateau. Some 16km on from the pass a statue of a Marco Polo sheep marks the entry to Murgab *rayon* (district).

### ADVENTURES AROUND YASHIL-KUL

Several good trekking routes start from the area north and west of Yashil-Kul, including to Sarez Lake or the loop route via Zarosh-Kul and Chapdar-Kul (see p391).

Alternatively, adventurers could spend a couple of days hiking and hitching down the Gunt Valley, along the northern shore of the lake, past Bachor to the Pamir Hwy near Shahzud. You'll need to navigate the cable crossing over the river where the Langor river joins the Gunt. It's possible to hire donkeys or horses (30TJS per day) at Bachor or Shahzud. Bachor, 18km from the Pamir Hwy, has three homestays, of the Sultanshah family, Shoidonboi Tursunbaev and Sangnanad Narodmamadov.

Another possible route, by foot or 4WD, follows the dirt track across the Sumantash plain, between Alichur and Bulunkul, passing the hot spring at Ak-Jar.

### BULUNKUL TO MURGAB

Just 36km after the pass a dirt road shoots off to the left for 16km, to the end-of-the-world Tajik settlement of **Bulunkul**, where it's possible to stay at the META-supported **homestay** (per person US\$6) of Mahbuba Nabieva or at a nearby yurtstay. (For more on META see p388).

From the village it's a short drive or a one-hour walk to get views of **Yashil-Kul** (Green Lake, 3734m), a surreal turquoise lake framed by ochre desert. Look for the warm springs on the southern side. Archaeological sites by the lake include the 4000-year-old stone circles at the mouth of the Bolshoi Marjonai River and the **mausoleum of Bekbulat** on the north bank of the Alichur River. The area was once the major trade route between the eastern and western Pamirs.

Back on the highway, just past the turn-off to Bulunkul pause at the impressive viewpoint overlooking the salt lakes of the sweeping Alichur plain. The highway descends to the turn-off right to Khargush and the Wakhan (see p384), then passes Tuz-Kul (Salt Lake) and **Sassyk-Kul** (Stinking Lake), before reaching **Alichur** village. The plain around Alichur is one of the most fertile in the region and is dotted with Kyrgyz yurts in summer.

Just 14km past Alichur, stop at the remarkable holy **Ak-Balyk** (White Fish) spring by the side of the road. The nearby **fish restaurant** (fish 3-5TJS) is popular with Chinese truck drivers.

Just past Ak-Balyk a 4WD track branches north to the remote 11th-century ruins of a silver mine and caravanserai at **Bazar-Dara**, 40km from the highway in a side valley over the 4664m Bazar-Dara Pass. A visit to the site entails a five-hour 90km return drive along a very rough road. The site was once home to 1700 miners and you can just about make out raised dais and fireplaces and the remains

of nearby baths, complete with underfloor heating. Climb above the site for the best overview. Just 5km further from the ruins are the Bronze-age **Ak-Jilga petroglyphs**, some of the world's highest at 3800m, which depict miniature chariots, archers, ibex and skeletons. META offers a yurtstay in the Shamurat Valley, on the south side of the pass, 12km from the Pamir Hwy.

About 20km further along the highway, 3km outside the village of **Bash Gumbaz** (itself 7km off the main highway) is a photogenic **Chinese tomb**, marking the high tide of Chinese influence on the Pamir. Five kilometres further down the main highway you'll pass **Chatyr Tash**, a large square stone that can be seen for miles.

A further 50km is another turn-off to the right, this time to the Jarty-Gumbaz region (p390). Around 25km down this track and well worth the detour is the wonderfully preserved Neolithic cave painting of **Shakhty** (see p390).

Back on the main road, there are two final police checks, 9km apart, just before you cross the Madiyan Valley and sweep into Murgab.

### Murgab

☎ 3554 / pop 6500 / elevation 3576m

The wild-east town of Murgab is a day's drive (310km) from Khorog. A former Tsarist garrison like Khorog, but rougher around the edges, Murgab isn't exactly charming but it is a good base from which to explore the eastern Pamirs. The town itself is half-Kyrgyz, half-Tajik (the surrounding communities are almost all Kyrgyz) and there is some tension between the two communities. On clear days, the 7546m-high Chinese peak of Muztagh Ata is visible to the northeast of town.

Electricity alternates daily between the two halves of town but is of such low voltage as to

## ECOTOURISM IN MURGAB

Created by the French NGO Acted as part of its Pamir High Mountain Integrated Project (<http://phiproject.free.fr>), the **Murgab Ecotourism Association (META)** has revolutionised independent travel in the Pamirs. Through a network of 60 community-based tourism providers, ranging from Jeep drivers to camel owners, the organisation essentially links together travellers and locals, helping to spread the economic benefits of tourism throughout the impoverished Murgab region. It's a really great place to organise a Pamir adventure, so try to budget a couple of extra days to take advantage of the programme.

The programme offers yurtstays in the Pshart and Madiyan Valleys, Bulunkul and Karakul and can arrange homestays in Karakul, Bulunkul, Rangkul and Alichur. There are more yurtstays further away at Rang-Kul, the Jalang Valley K k Jar/Sheralu and in the Shamurat Valley (south of Bazar-Dara). Note that yurts start to move down from the higher mountain valleys in the middle of September.

Costs are US\$5 to US\$8 per person in a yurt, US\$6 in a homestay, plus US\$6 for three meals. Treks and English-speaking guides (US\$15 per day) can also be arranged (ask them about the three-day trek from Elisu in the Madiyan Valley to Shamurat near Bazar-Dara, via herders' yurts in Chat and Koburgun), and they also organise 4WD hire and even camel trekking. Mountain-bike hire is planned. META collects a reasonable 15% commission on all services to cover its running costs. Feedback on the programme and its services is welcomed.

Acted has also protected several archaeological sites and helped set up the **Yak House** (see opposite), which trains around 250 local women in Tajik and Pamiri crafts to provide much-needed additional income to marginalised families.

be of marginal use, so don't expect to recharge batteries here.

Murgab operates on Badakhshani time, which is an hour after Dushanbe, and the same as neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

Murgab House, a new ecocentre in the northern outskirts of town, houses META (see above), the Yak House (see opposite), a small museum and an internet caf . The cleverly-designed building incorporates architectural elements from both a Kyrgyz yurt and a Pamiri house.

## INFORMATION

The one essential address is the **our pick Murgab Ecotourism Association (META)**; (  217 66; [meta@acted.org](mailto:meta@acted.org); Murgab House; (  9am-6pm); for details on META see the boxed text above. Apart from arranging trips, the office sells useful brochures on archaeological sites in the eastern Pamir, as well as Marcus Hauser's map of the Pamirs (US\$11), plus you can browse its great Soviet-era maps of the region. Ask for Ubaidullah or Aimgul.

Travellers are required to register at the **KGB (Kizmat-i-Amniyat-i-Milli)** office across from the Lenin statue. META can help with this and will get the KGB to authorise any itinerary you book through them.

META can also help you with the required registration with OVIR (free if you have reg-

istered elsewhere in Tajikistan), which is also by the Lenin statue.

The *aqimat* (local government) requires visitors pay a US\$1 per day 'ecological tax'. META collects this from people on its tours but you won't find anyone else asking for it.

## SLEEPING & EATING

META can arrange excellent **homestays** (dm US\$6, meals US\$5) in town, including those of Apal Doskulieva, Aizada Murzaeva, Yrys Toktobekova, Arzybai Matarozov and Gulnamo Nosirshoeva. Expect to get a bed on the floor, tasty homemade food, a clean outside squat toilet, an *umuvahnik* (hand basin), hot water in buckets and a warm welcome. META plans to grade the homestays and create a range of prices from US\$6 to US\$10. Several of the homestays are in the southern Jar-Bashy district of town.

**Surab's Guesthouse** (  2 16 53; per person US\$8, with full board US\$15) This comfortable private guesthouse is run by English-speaking Surab and has comfortable rooms, with an outside toilet and sauna. Choose between beds or traditional mattresses on the floor. Look for the wooden house northwest of the centre.

**Ibrahim/Anara GH** (  2 13 24; Frunze 30; dm US\$10, hot bath US\$3) The former Acted guest house has an indoor bathroom, generator, nice sitting

area and a kitchen but lacks the family feel of the homestays. Breakfast and dinner included in the rates.

META driver Ergesh Tadjibaiev plans to offer a private **homestay** (  2 15 47; Akсуu 7; dm US\$4 or US\$8 with dinner & breakfast) in the Kopr  Bashy district south of town.

You can buy basic foodstuffs at the uninspiring bazaar in the north of town but your best bet for food is to eat in your homestay.

## SHOPPING

The **Yak House** (Murgab House; (  9am-6pm) is a showroom for Acted's crafts project, selling traditional Pamiri-style *chorapi* socks, plus table mats, pillow cases, felt wall-hangings and wool rugs, all decorated with traditional Kyrgyz motifs. Prices are marked, as are the names of the craftswomen.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The easiest way to arrange transport is to band together a small group and hire a 4WD from META. The rate at the time of research was US\$0.34 to US\$0.38 per km, depending on the road quality, but this will doubtless rise over time with the price of fuel.

Minibuses to both Khorog (eight hours, 320km, 50TJS) and Osh (12 hours, 420km, 70TJS) depart every day or two when full. Expect to wait for hours for the vehicle to fill up. Private drivers also hang around the bazaar. One private driver recommended by some travellers is **Pamirbek** (  2 13 38, 93-508 3973).

If you are thinking of hitching, most Chinese trucks headed to/from the Qolma Pass stop at a depot 2km northeast of town along the road to the Qolma Pass.

## Around Murgab GUMBEZKUL VALLEY

One excellent short, but adventurous, trip is to hike up the **Gumbezkul Valley** from its junction with the Pshart Valley, 35km northwest of Murgab. The 9km hike takes you from a META yurtstay (see opposite) over the 4731m Gumbezkul Pass, steeply down the southern Gumbezkul Valley to another META yurtstay, from where a rough 4WD road leads 7km down to the Madiyan Valley, 22km from Murgab. The path is easy to follow and there are stunning views in both directions from the pass, though it's a steep scramble on either side. It's a half-day hike from yurt to yurt. A 4WD hire to drop you off at the northern

yurts and pick you up the next morning on the other side of the pass costs around US\$50 through META. META also offers yurtstays at Kyzyl Jilga and Jar Jilga (*jilga* means valley) further up the Pshart Valley. The turn-off to the Pshart Valley is 6km north of Murgab, by some Saka (Scythian) graves.

For a post-hike soak, the **Madiyan hot springs** (admission 1TJS), 35km from Murgab, are just up the Madiyan Valley from its junction with the southern Gumbezkul Valley – ask for the *issyk chashma* (hot spring in Kyrgyz).

## RANG-KUL

The scenic **Rang-Kul** area, 65km from Murgab, is a potential detour en route to Karakul (see p391). Five kilometres after you turn off the Pamir Hwy are some Saka tombs. Further on are the lakes of Shor-Kul and Rang-Kul, with fine views of Muztagh Ata over the border in China.

META (see opposite) runs camel treks between herders' camps in the three valleys to the south of Rang-Kul. A three-day trek costs around US\$135 per person for camel hire, food and accommodation, plus around US\$100 per vehicle (not per person) to get you to Rang-Kul and back.

The nearby border with China was recently delimited, ceding a 10km strip to China, so you may have troubles getting beyond the border checkpoint at Rangkul village, 15km past the lake.

## SHAIMAK

To really get off-the-beaten track, take the road up the Ak-Suu Valley to Shaimak, 126km from Murgab, at the strategic junction of the borders of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China and Pakistan. This is about as Great Game as it gets! You will need KGB approval to travel past the checkpoint before Tokhtamysh.

After crossing the lovely Subashi plain, the road passes the turn-off to the Qolma Pass (see p396), Tajikistan's only border crossing with China (currently closed to foreigners). You may be rewarded with views of Muztagh-Ata from here.

At the village of Tokhtamysh you could detour 1km across the river to a damaged bow-shaped geoglyph and the faint ruins of a 19th-century caravanserai. The scenery gets increasingly impressive, passing rolling Pamiri peaks, seasonal lakes and scenic yurts.

There's not much to **Shaimak** village (3852m), located below the impressive 5365m bluff of Ak Tash, except for its striking mosque and exciting views of the Little Pamir. The Chinese border is only 10km from here. You might get permission to continue to the geoglyphs and the 2500-year-old Saka *kurgans* (tombs) at Ak Beit, 3km south of Shaimak. Three days a year in June the border is opened to cross-border trade with Kyrgyz herders living in the very remote Little Wakhan region of Afghanistan, and is not open to foreigners.

If you have time on the way back, stop for a quick look at the beehive-shaped tombs at **Konye Kurgan** (Old Tomb), 7km from Murgab.

Return 4WD hire through META to Shaimak costs about US\$100 for the 240km trip.

### SHAKHTY & ZOR-KUL

The impressive Neolithic cave paintings of **Shakhty** (4200m) are 50km southwest of Murgab, 25km off the Pamir Hwy, in the dramatic Kurteskei Valley. Soviet archaeologists apparently took shelter in the cave during a storm one night in 1958, only to awake the next morning open-mouthed in front of the perfectly preserved red-ink paintings of a bear hunt. Check out the strange birdman to the left. Don't get too close to the paintings to avoid damaging them. The cave is a five-minute scramble up the hillside; you'll never find it without a knowledgeable driver.

META offers a day tour that takes in Shakhty, the Shor-Bulak observatory (currently closed to foreigners) and Shor-Bulak pass, with fine views of Muztagh Ata, to the meteorite site of Ak-Bura in the Ak-Suu valley, and back to Murgab.

For a longer trip, continue south over two minor passes and past a seasonal lake rich in birdlife to the Istryk River and the remote Jarty-Gumbaz region. The slightly Mafiaos-feeling **hunting camp** (☎ 3554-2 16 39, 2 33 33; murgabhunt@mail.ru) here is marked by a hot water pool, a small Kyrgyz cemetery and a depressing stack of Marco Polo sheep horns. Contact Atobek Bekmuradov.

Basic accommodation is available at yurtstays in **Ak-Kalama**, 13km south of the hunting camp near the Afghan border, but it's better to continue 17km over a low pass to the impressive yurt camps at **Kara-Jilga**. The superb scenery here is classic Wakhan, with epic views over a string of glorious turquoise lakes (Kazan-Kul and Djigit-Kul) to the snow-capped Wakhan

Range that borders Afghanistan. Continue east to the end of these lakes and you will be rewarded with rare views of **Zor-Kul** (elevation 4125m) stretching into distance. To continue on to Khargush you'll need hard-to-get permits (see p394) from Dushanbe to get past the border posts and watch towers.

From Jarty-Gumbaz it's possible to take an alternative route northwest to join the Pamir Hwy 3km east of Chatyr Tash. From Murgab to Jarty-Gumbaz and Zor-Kul and on to Chatyr Tash is about 225km.

Note that this region can be wet and boggy in early summer (June and July), making transport difficult.

### JALANG & KÖK JAR

North of Murgab and southwest of Karakul are several interesting sites, including the petroglyphs and pastures of **Jalang** (150km from Murgab), which make a great overnight trip from Murgab.

META has yurtstays at Jalang and also at Dangi, back at the junction with the main valley. Alternatively, stay at the yurt of Baba Nazar at Tora Bulak, 4km before Jalang. There are petroglyphs near the *aul* (yurt camp) at Jalang and in half a day it's possible to climb the 5129m peak to the southwest for fine views of the Pamirs.

The dirt road to Jalang branches off the Pamir Hwy near Muzkol and passes south of Mt Urtabuz (5047m). (Fit and acclimatised hikers can climb the peak for dramatic views of Kara-Kul, but you'll need a guide and most of the day to find the right route up.) The dirt road swings into the Kök Ubel Valley, past the small lake of Kurun-Kul, past fine views towards the impressive peaks of Muzkol (6128m) and Zartosh (6121m).

Fifty kilometres further, down the Kök Ubel valley you to the geometric stone symbols of **Kök Jar** (also known as Shurali), which are thought to have acted as a Stonehenge-like solar calendar as far back as 2500 years ago.

From here, the remote Tanymas Valley offers demanding trekking access to the **Fedchenko Glacier**, one of the world's longest. A very rough road continues southwest to meet the Bartang Valley (see p383) at Ghudara, but you should check that the road is passable before considering this very remote route.

If you are heading on to Karakul after Jalang, it's possible to take a short cut along the southern shores of the lake.

### Murgab to Sary Tash

North of Murgab, the road passes the turn-offs to the Pshart Valley (6km) and then Rang-Kul (24km), before swinging close to the Chinese border. In places the twin barbed-wire-topped fences run less than 20m from the road.

Soon the mountains close in as the road climbs towards the **Ak-Baital** (White Horse) Pass, at 4655m, the highest point of the journey. From here it's a long descent of some 70km to Kara-Kul, the highest lake in Central Asia. Just after the pass there are nice views back up a side valley leading to Muzkol Peak.

About 20km from the pass are the remains of a 19th-century Russian tsarist post, later used by the Red Army in battles with White Russians and *basmachi* rebels. A further 6km a dirt track to the left offers access to Jalang and Kök Jar (opposite).

Created by a meteor approximately 10 million years ago, **Kara-Kul** (3914m) has an eerie, twilight-zone air about it. The Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang passed by the lake in AD 642, referring to it as the Dragon Lake. Marco Polo also passed by some six centuries later after transiting the Wakhan, and both Sven Hedin and Austrian traveller Gustav Krist later camped by the lake. Local Kyrgyz call the deep-blue, lifeless lake Chong Kara-Kul (Big Black Lake), compared to Kishi Kara-Kul (Lesser Black Lake) along the Karakoram Hwy in China. Although salty, the lake is frozen and covered in snow until the end of May.

The only settlement of any significance here is the lakeside village of **Karakul**, where META can arrange a homestay at the house of Saodat Kasymbekova or Tildakhan Kozubekova. Karakul lies right next to the CIS-Chinese border security zone and there's a passport check just before the village. Around 7km north of Karakul at Kara-Art, 500m off the road, there are some *kurgans* (burial mounds) and faint geoglyphs.

The border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is 63km from Karakul, just before the crest of the **Kyzyl-Art Pass** (4282m), but the Kyrgyz border post is a further 20km at **Bor Döbö**. Don't forget to look behind you here for a stunning panorama of the Pamir. Kyrgyzstan is one hour ahead of Tajikistan time (but the same as Murgab time). Kyrgyz border controls can take a long time, especially if you are travelling by truck.

At **Sary Tash**, 23km further, the A372 branches off southwest to the Pamir Alay

Valley of Kyrgyzstan and the A371 heads northeast to the Kyrgyz-Chinese border post of Irkeshtam (p340). For more on the Alay Valley see p341.

## TAJIKISTAN DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Lacking Uzbekistan's private B&Bs and Kyrgyzstan's comprehensive network of homestays, Tajikistan has patchy accommodation. Dushanbe is particularly short on good cheap accommodation. In fact, outside of the main towns, there is almost no formal hotel accommodation.

The Pamir region has an excellent network of homestays and yurtstays that offer easily the best accommodation and there are often informal homestays along many other mountain roads. If you hire a car, your driver will most likely know a family where you intend to stay. If you are invited to stay at someone's house a reasonable amount to offer is the equivalent of US\$10 per person, including breakfast and dinner.

As with much of Central Asia, accommodation rates are often quoted in US dollars but you can pay in either US dollars or somani.

### ACTIVITIES

Trekking options are fantastic in Tajikistan, principally in the Fan Mountains and western Pamirs, though these are demanding, remote routes. Mountaineers will be in heaven and even a few hardcore kayakers are discovering Tajikistan's remote white water. See the Activities chapter on p91 for details.

The most obvious treks outside of the Fan Mountains include the following:

**Bazar-Dara** (four days) Loop trek to archaeological site and petroglyphs, heading in over the Bazar-Dara Pass and out via the 4918m Ak-Jilga Pass. See p387.

**Darshai Valley** (three to four days) Up the Darshai Valley to summer pastures and views of Mayokovskiy Peak. Back the same way or over a 4941m pass and down the Badom Valley to Roshtqala.

**Grum Grijimailoo Glacier** (four to five days) Two routes, from Kök Jar in the east up the Tanymas Valley, or north up the Khavraz Dara Valley from Pasor in the upper Bartang Valley.

**Gumbezkul Valley and Pass** (one day). See p389.

**Javshanguz to Langar** (two days) Following a former 4WD track over the 4432m Mats Pass into the Pamir Valley.

**Karatag Valley** (two to three days) To Timur Dara and Payron lakes, see p366.

**Yashil-Kul to Sarez Lake** (six to seven days) Via Bachor village, Andaravaj River, 4587m pass, Zarush-Kul, Vikhynch, Langar Valley, Irkhit dam, Murgab River to Barchadiev.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Tajik Embassies in Central Asia

For Tajik embassies in Almaty (Kazakhstan), Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) see the relevant country chapters. Bishkek and Almaty are good places to get a Tajik visa.

### Tajik Embassies & Consulates

**Afghanistan** (☎ 020 2301565; House 3, St 10, Wazir Akbar Khan) Tajik visas are reputedly difficult to get from here.

**Austria** (☎ 1-409 82 66 11; www.tajikembassy.org; Universitätsstrasse 8/1A, 1090 Vienna) Covering Austria and Switzerland.

**Belgium** (☎ 02-640 69 33; tajemb-belgium@skynet.be; 363-365 Ave Louise, 1050 Brussels)

**China** (☎ 10-6532 3039; 5-1-41 Dayuan Diplomatic Compound, 100 600 Beijing)

**Germany** (☎ 30-347 93 00; www.embassy-tajikistan.de; Otto-Sühr Allee 84, 10585 Berlin)

**Iran** (☎ 21-229 9584, 280 9249; tajemb-iran@mail.ru; Block 10, 3 Shahid Zinali, 610 Maidan-ékhiyobon, Tehran)

**Pakistan** (☎ 51-2294675; House 90, Main Double Rd, F-10/1 Islamabad)

**Russia** (☎ 095-290 38 46; www.tajikistan.ru; 13 Granatniy Pereulok, Moscow, 103001)

**Turkey** (☎ 312-446 1602; tajemb\_turkey@hotmail.com; 36 M Ghandi Cad, Gaziosmanpasha, 06700 Ankara)

**USA** (☎ 202-223 6090; www.tjus.org; 1005 New Hampshire Ave NW, 20037 Washington DC)

### VISAS FOR ONWARD TRAVEL

**Afghanistan** A 30-day visa (US\$30) requires a letter of introduction from your embassy or a travel agency.

**China** Visas cost US\$30 (one week to process) or US\$50 (three days); one passport photo is required.

**Pakistan** Tourist visas require a letter from your embassy, two photos and a photocopy of your passport. You may need to wait for faxed visa approval from Islamabad. Prices are vague ('no more than US\$100').

**Uzbekistan** Visas take three working days with a letter of invitation.

### Embassies & Consulates in Tajikistan

All of the following embassies are located in Dushanbe (map p361):

**Afghanistan** (☎ 221 64 18; fax 224 63 64; Pushkin 34; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri) Reeks of shashlyk and covered with photos of Ahmed Shah Masoud.

**China** (☎ 224 21 88; fax 224 41 22; Rudaki 143; ☎ 8.30am-11.30am Mon, Wed, Fri)

**France** (☎ 221 50 37; douchanbe.mission@netrt.org; Varzob 17)

**Germany** (☎ 221 21 89; www.duschanbe.diplo.de; Varzob 16; ☎ 8.30am-11.30am Mon-Fri) Represents those EU citizens without an embassy.

**India** (☎ 221 71 72; Bukhoro 45; ☎ 10am-noon, 2-4pm Mon-Fri)

**Iran** (☎ 221 00 72; fax 221 04 54; Tehran 18) Enter on the east side.

**Kazakhstan** (☎ 221 11 08; dipmiskz@tajnet.com; Husseinzoda 31/1; ☎ 9am-noon Mon, Wed, Fri) Look for the pastel-blue building set back from the main road.

**Kyrgyzstan** (☎ 221 63 84; kyremb@tajik.net; Studentcheskiy 67; ☎ 9am-noon Tue & Thu)

**Pakistan** (☎ 223 01 77; majeed@tojikiston.com; Dostoyevsky 1-3; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Fri)

**Russia** (☎ 221 10 15; www.rusembassy.tajnet.com; Abuali Ibn-Sino 29)

**Turkey** (☎ 221 22 08; turkdusa@tajnet.com; Rudaki 17/2)

**Turkmenistan** (☎ 21 73 87; fax 21 68 84; Chekhov 22; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri)

**UK** (☎ 224 22 21, emergency 917-708011; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/tajikistan; Mirzo Tursunzade 65)

**USA** (☎ 229 23 00; http://dushanbe.usembassy.gov; 109 Ismoilii Somoni, Zarafshan district) Way out in the western suburbs.

**Uzbekistan** (☎ 224 15 86; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Fri)

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Eid-e-Qurbon and Ramadan are celebrated in Tajikistan. See p449 for dates.

Ismaili communities in Badakhshan celebrate 24 March as Ruz-i-Nur, the Day of Lights, celebrating the first visit of the Aga Khan in 1995, as well as 11 July, the Day of the Imam.

With its links to a Persian past, Navrus (Nawroz) is the year's biggest festival and you are likely to see song and dance performances, and even *buzkashi* (a traditional polo-like game), during this time (the latter most easily seen at Hissar).

### HOLIDAYS

**1 January** New Year's Day.

**8 March** International Women's Day.

**21-23 March** Eid e-Nawroz (Persian New Year), called Ba'at in Badakhshan.

**1 May** International Labour Day.

**9 May** Victory Day.

**27 June** Day of National Unity and Accord.

**9 September** Independence Day.

**6 November** Constitution Day.

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are widespread in Dushanbe and Khojand, and cost around 4TJS per hour. Khorog has patchy internet access and connections are planned for Murgab.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

**Asia Plus** (www.asiaplus.tj/en) News service focusing on Tajikistan.

**National Museum of Antiquities** (www.afc.ryukoku.ac.jp/tj) Superb introduction to Tajikistan's history and the country's best museum.

**Pamirs.org** (www.pamirs.org) Excellent travel guide to the Pamirs, with virtual itineraries and good trekking information.

**Tajik Development Gateway** (www.tajik-gateway.org) News articles, weather forecasts and lots of links.

**Tajik Maps** (www.geocities.com/tajikmap/index.html) Collection of links to online maps of Tajikistan

**Travel Tajikistan** (www.traveltajikistan.com) Comprehensive travel site provided by the Great Game Travel Company.

Send an email to gulya@mariansguesthouse.com to subscribe to 'What's On in Dushanbe', a weekly mini-guide to Dushanbe, with classified ads from the expat community.

### MAPS

Marcus Hauser's 1:500,000 map of the Pamirs (see p378) is the best map of that region. It's available from www.geckomaps.com. A less detailed version is on view at www.pamirs.org/images/maps/pamir-gr.jpg.

Firma Geo in Almaty (see p116) is the best shot for 1:500,000 scale Russian maps covering Tajikistan (J-42 Dushanbe and J-43 Kashgar) from a series called *Generalnii Shtab*.

**Därr Expeditionsservice** (☎ 089-282032; Theresien Str 66, 80333 Munich; www.daerr.de) is one of the few places outside the region to sell these Russian topo maps. The website is in German only.

The University of Berne's Centre for Development and Environment has fascinating interactive topo and satellite maps of the Pamirs online at http://cdegis.unibe.ch/pamir/.

### MONEY

Tajikistan introduced the Tajik somani (TJS; divided into 100 dirham) in 2001. Somani notes come in one, five, 10, 20, 50 and 100 denominations. Dirham come in coins and notes.

Cash in US dollars, euros and Russian roubles are easily changed at numerous exchange booths. There is no black market for currency transactions.

You'll find a credit card and, more likely, cash the most practical ways to carry your money, especially if you are headed into the Pamirs. In Dushanbe, Khojand and Khorog you can access ATMs and/or get cash advances off a credit card, but at the time of research it was still impossible to cash travellers cheques. Both Uzbek sum and Kyrgyz som are accepted in border areas.

Exchange rates, current at the time of research, are listed below:

Country	Unit		Somani
Afghanistan	Afg1	=	0.069TJS
Australia	A\$1	=	2.61TJS
China	Y1	=	0.43TJS
euro zone	€1	=	4.31TJS
Kazakhstan	10 T	=	0.26TJS
Kyrgyzstan	10 som	=	0.87TJS
Russian	R10	=	1.265TJS
UK	£1	=	6.45TJS
US	US\$1	=	3.43TJS
Uzbekistan	100 sum	=	0.28TJS

### POST

Tajikistan's postal service is a bit ropey and it's not uncommon for mail to take a month or more to reach its destination.

An international postcard/letter up to 20g costs around 0.75/1.35TJS to all countries except Russia. A package up to 1kg/2kg costs only around 13/20TJS. Rates to Russia are half this.

Couriers are the only reliable way to send important documents, though they charge up to US\$70 for a 500g package. DHL has offices in **Dushanbe** (☎ 224 47 68) and **Khojand** (☎ 406 17).

### REGISTRATION

Foreigners staying in Tajikistan for longer than three days have to register with OVIR within 72 hours of arriving in Tajikistan. If entering from the north you'll probably have

to do this in Khojand. Coming from Osh you'll probably have to register with OVIR in Murgab and Khorog. Registering in Dushanbe is a real pain and is best avoided if you possibly can (see p362). You get a stamp in your passport when you register and this is generally checked when you exit the country, especially at Dushanbe airport. The fine for not registering is around US\$100.

Registration costs US\$15, plus 23TJS. The main hotels in Dushanbe can register you for a small fee, which makes their rates a better deal. Travel agencies will generally register you but you'll have to hang around for up to three or four days in the meantime.

If you are headed to the Pamirs, it makes sense to head to Khorog straight away and register there painlessly, or make a detour to Khojand and do it there.

Foreign travel companies and organisations are lobbying to get the OVIR registration scrapped.

## TELEPHONE

To call internationally (including to other Central Asian republics) dial ☎ 10, followed by the country code, the local code (without the 0) and the number.

International rates cost around US\$1 per minute. Cheaper are the Internet Phone (IP) calls offered by many internet cafés, which cost as little as 50 dirham (see p362). Domestic local calls cost 20 dirham.

Dual-band GSM phones work in Tajikistan. Mobile network providers include **MLT** (www.mlt.tj), the Tajik-American joint venture **Indigo** (www.indigo.tj), **Beeline** (www.beeline.ru) and **Babilon-M** (www.babilon-m.com); websites are in Russian only. You may need a local to help you open an account. Indigo has roaming agreements with Cingular, O2 and Vodafone, and Babilon-M has similar arrangements with T-Mobile and Bell Wireless. For more details see www.gsmworld.com.

There are dozens of places in Dushanbe, with a concentration around TsUM, where you can buy a SIM card for your phone. Cards cost around 180TJS, which includes 150 minutes of local calls and free incoming calls for a month.

## TRAVEL PERMITS

Tajikistan has many internal checkpoints, particularly in Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO), and the *militia* in all towns are keen to check

a foreigner's papers, so make sure you have impeccable documents. For information on the GBAO permit, see p377.

There is a theoretical trekking tax of US\$50, or US\$100 if over 6000m. Your tour company is supposed to collect this and if you are alone the only place you may encounter this is at Artush in the Fan Mountains. The only place you'll come across the highly spurious 'ecological fee' of US\$1 per day is in the eastern Pamirs (around Murgab) or if booking a tour through a Tajik travel agent.

A permit from the **Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Situations** (☎ 224 30 33) in Dushanbe is currently required to visit Sarez Lake. You will need a travel agency to help to get this. The permit normally takes at least 10 days to issue.

To visit Zor-Kul (which is theoretically a nature reserve) you need a permit from the Ministry of Environment (*Vazorati Tabiyat*). Even then you'll need permission from the local border guards. Great Game Travel and META can help with this.

## VISAS

These days most Tajik embassies abroad (see p392) will issue a 30-day tourist visa without a letter of invitation. There aren't that many Tajik embassies abroad so you may have to post your passport to an embassy in a neighbouring country and arrange return postage and a method of payment (often in a foreign currency). Budget plenty of time for this. Visas from the embassy in the USA are particularly expensive. The Tajikistan embassy in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) has a reputation for being more difficult than others.

A useful new regulation in 2006 entitles tourists from most countries (including the EU, Australia and USA) to obtain a 30-day visa on arrival at the airport without the need for a letter of invitation (LOI).

Even if you require a LOI, it's still possible to get the visa at the airport, as long as you have specified this with the travel agency issuing your LOI. Bring one photo and a photocopy of your passport. Visas at the airport costs US\$30/40/50 for seven/14/30 days. Consular officials only reliably greet the Turkish Airlines flight from Istanbul; if you come on another flight you may have to leave your passport at the airport and return to get your visa the next day. Visas are not issued at land borders.

Tourist visas longer than a month are often available at embassies in Europe, though they may request a LOI and many travel companies are unable to provide a LOI for longer than one month. Visas longer than one month are generally not available at the airport.

The visa specifies exact dates (you have to travel within those dates but not on those dates), but not the towns to be visited.

Bear in mind that by the time you've paid for an LOI, visa, registration and the GBAO permit, red tape will have taken up a significant portion of your daily budget.

If for some reason you need a LOI, Tajikintourservice (see p362) charges US\$30, Stan Tours (see p117) charges US\$40 and Great Game Travel charges US\$65. See p362 for contact details of these and other travel companies. LOIs are generally issued within two weeks (GBAO permits take a similar amount of time).

All Tajik visa issues are dealt with at the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 221 15 60; mfa@tajik.net, kumid@tojikistan.com, www.mid.tj; Rudaki 42) which is the big pink building on Maydoni Azadi in Dushanbe. As you face the building, you need to take the small door on the far right of the façade where you'll be given a pass to enter the building proper and told where to go.

## Visa Extensions

Visa extensions are a pain. If you need an extension, Tajikintourservice or Vostok Trading Tour in Dushanbe is your best bet. Extensions cost around US\$40/50/60 for seven/14/30 days and take about a week to process. If you extend your visa, you'll also need to separately extend any existing registration (and possibly your GBAO permit).

# TRANSPORT IN TAJIKISTAN

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

With a limited number of flights and no international land transport, Tajikistan isn't the easiest republic to get to. This section deals with getting to Tajikistan from other Central Asian countries; for details on flying to Tajikistan from outside Central Asia see p464.

## DEPARTURE TAX

Dushanbe has no international departure tax, whether by air or land.

## Entering Tajikistan

As long as your documents are in order you shouldn't have any major problems. Expect a certain amount of delay and chaos, even at the airport, where visa queues can easily take an hour.

Uzbek-Tajik border crossings are hostage to the current state of political relations between the two republics (which are often poor) and sudden unannounced closure by the Uzbeks.

## Air

### AIRPORTS & AIRLINES

The most popular route into Tajikistan is the weekly flight between Istanbul and Dushanbe on Turkish Airlines (www.thy.com), though it arrives at an ungodly hour (plenty of taxis meet the flight).

Tajikistan Airlines (www.tajikistan-airlines.com) is the national airline – see p461 for flight connections. Other international connections include Pulkovo Airlines to St Petersburg and China Southern to Ürümqi.

Regional flight connections to/from Dushanbe include Bishkek (four weekly, US\$155), Almaty (four weekly, US\$175) and, less reliably, Osh (Air Company Kyrgyzstan, Friday, US\$95). Ariana has a weekly flight to Kabul (US\$106).

There are still no flights between Dushanbe and Tashkent; most people fly to Khojand and then travel overland to the Uzbek capital (five hours; see p396). Khojand has weekly flights to Bishkek (US\$90) and Moscow (US\$300).

## Land

There is almost no cross-border transport between Tajikistan and its neighbours, so you have to take a combination of minibuses and taxis to get to and from the borders.

## BORDER CROSSINGS

### To/From Afghanistan

It's possible to travel between Dushanbe and Kunduz (Afghanistan) in a day. The main and easiest crossing is at Panj-e-Payon (formerly Nizhniy Panj) in the south; don't confuse this with the town of Pyanj (or Pyanzh) 75km

further east. To get to Panj-e-Payon take a shared taxi or, alternatively, a minibus to Dusti (12TJS; six hours) from Dushanbe or Kurgonteppa (Kurgan-Tyube) and then a taxi 27km to the border. A taxi between Dushanbe and the border costs around US\$50, or US\$15 per seat if sharing.

After Tajik immigration and customs checks, barges cross the Amu-Darya between 10am and noon (US\$10 per person), from where you take a bus 1km (US\$1) to the Afghan border controls at Shir Khan Bandar. The US-funded bridge should be finished by mid-2007. After another short transfer, you'll find transport (taxi 80Afg, one hour) running from here to Kunduz. Travellers report that the ferry and border is closed on Sundays.

The crossing at Ishkashim is easiest headed into Afghanistan; into Tajikistan you will need to show a GBAO permit (see p377) and those are technically only available inside Tajikistan (though you can print out an emailed scan of your permit). It's best to arrange someone from the agency to meet you at the crossing. The Afghan village of Ishkashim is 3km from the border crossing and you may have to walk this, as there's little transport at the border. From Afghan Ishkashim there's a daily minibus to Faizabad (600Afg, eight hours), or travel via Baharak.

A bridge over the Pyanj River at Khorog connects the Afghan and Tajik sides of Badakhshan but scant transport options mean this isn't a viable crossing point for most travellers.

### To/From China

A road has been completed from Murgab to China over the 4362m Qolma Pass, to join the Karakoram Hwy in Xinjiang north of Tashkurgan. The border is open to Chinese and Tajiks but currently not open to foreigners, though this may well change in the future. If the pass does open, you'll have to find a way to get through the 7km of no-man's-land between customs posts. Reports of a Kashgar-Khorog bus have not yet materialised. The border is currently only open 15 days per month.

### To/From Kyrgyzstan

From the Pamir Alay Valley you can cross into Tajikistan just north of the Kyzyl-Art Pass (south of Sary Tash). The Kyrgyz authorities generally don't stamp your passport when you enter Kyrgyzstan here at Bor Döbö, so try to

keep some evidence that indicates when you arrived in Kyrgyzstan.

The border crossing into the Garm region at Karamyk between Doroot-Korgon and Jirgital is currently closed to foreigners.

From Khojand you need to get to Isfara (NB not Isfana) and then take a shared taxi or bus to Batken (see p342). Onward transport to Osh normally travels through the Uzbek enclave of Sokh and this creates visa headaches if you don't have multiple-entry Uzbek and Kyrgyz visas. (One way to avoid this is to pay a taxi driver extra to detour around the checkpoints). If you are headed directly to Osh from Khojand and have an Uzbek visa it's easiest to just take taxis through the Uzbek Fergana Valley to Kokand, Andijon and the border at Dostyk (see below).

### To/From Uzbekistan

Most travellers making a beeline between Tashkent and Dushanbe drive to Khojand and then take a domestic flight (US\$55). It's also possible to drive via Samarkand and Penjikent, or even fly to Termiz and then drive to Dushanbe.

From Dushanbe the main border crossing is 55km west of the capital, near Tursanzade/Regar, crossing to Denau. Taxis from Dushanbe's Zarnisar Bazaar to the border cost 8TJS per seat (1½ hours), or take a bus to Tursanzade (3.50TJS) from the main bus station. En route you pass a huge aluminium factory, once one of the biggest in the USST. At the border, minibuses run to Denau town, where you may find a shared taxi direct to Samarkand.

From Khojand there are two main border crossings; Oybek in the northwest for Tashkent, and Kanibadam in the northeast for Kokand and the Fergana Valley. From Tashkent get a bus headed to Bekabad (note that foreigners cannot currently cross at Bekabad) and get off at Oybek (two hours), near Chanak village. The border post is visible from the road. Once across the border take a taxi to Khojand (US\$15) or a taxi to nearby Bustan (5TJS) and then a minibus to Khojand. From Khojand to Tashkent it's easiest to take a taxi (US\$15) to the Oybek border post, cross and then take an Uzbek taxi onwards. For a marshrutka (US\$3) to Tashkent, walk a short way to the main crossroads.

For Kokand and the Fergana Valley take a bus to Kanibodom (2.50TJS), passing the

massive Kairakum Reservoir en route, and then a minibus 9km to the border, cross the border by foot and then take multiple onward minibuses in Uzbekistan from Tamozhnaya to Besh Aryk (Beshariq) and then Kokand. You'll save a lot of time by taking a taxi direct from the border to Kokand.

It's easy to travel between Samarkand and Penjikent through a combination of minibuses and taxis. Shared taxis run from the Penjikent bazaar 22km to the border for 5TJS or 2000S (Uzbek sum) per seat, from where there are plenty of shared taxis on to Samarkand (a further 48km). The whole trip takes less than two hours. Change your Tajik somani into Uzbek sum in the Penjikent bazaar.

## GETTING AROUND

### Air

Tajikistan Airlines boasts domestic flights from Dushanbe throughout the country, but this is limited in reality to Khorog and Kho-

jand. Flights out of Khorog are notoriously unreliable so if you are headed to Dushanbe to catch an international flight, budget an extra day or two in the capital in the event the flight is cancelled.

### Bus, Minibus & Shared Taxi

The bus/minibus network is limited to towns around Dushanbe and southern Tajikistan. Outside these areas you'll find shared taxis making the mountain run from Dushanbe to Penjikent and Khojand, as well as shared 4WDs and minibuses headed east to Khorog. Beyond this, you'll need a combination of hitching, luck and vehicle hire. NGOs are often a good source of information on local transportation.

Taxis are available in Khojand and Dushanbe for both local and long-distance runs and are the best option if you can afford them. See p378 for specific details of transport along the Pamir Hwy.

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