

We Took the Highroad in Afghanistan

BY JEAN AND FRANC SHOR

With Illustrations from Photographs by the Authors

REMOTE Wakhan! Some 700 years ago this Afghan district on the Russian border linked Orient and Occident. Great caravans of Marco Polo's time inched their way across its craggy peaks and crevasses. Today, by-passed by modern transport, it stands virtually "out of this world."

But should the Communist drive for world power push south, Wakhan, a thin strip of no man's land separating Russia from Pakistan, lies like a gigantic tank trap across the most direct route to the riches of the Indian subcontinent (map, page 676).

A year ago the idea struck us; why not explore the ancient highroad on the rooftop of the world? We set our plans in motion, but met discouragement from all sides. It was barely possible that our proposed journey across prohibited military zones of Turkey and Iran might be arranged, we were told, but Wakhan was strictly taboo.

A number of scientists and explorers in recent years had requested permission to traverse the Wakhan corridor, but the Afghanistan Government had refused everyone. Even if permission were granted, the trip would be too dangerous, we were told. The tribesmen of the Pamirs were fierce and inhospitable.

We decided to go ahead with our plans anyway. We were well received in Ankara and Tehran and crossed Turkey and Iran without difficulty.

Then we went on to the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, an up-to-date, progressive city with a population of about 250,000 (page 675).^{*} Here we expected our romantic journey to come to an abrupt end. We were advised to present our request to the director of the press, His Excellency Syed Kasim Khan Rishtya (page 701).

"What magazines do you write for?" Rishtya asked. When I mentioned that Jean and I had recently done an article for the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, Rishtya smiled broadly.

"I am a reader of THE GEOGRAPHIC," he said, "and so is His Majesty the King. You couldn't have a better recommendation."

Indeed, we couldn't. Two days later Rishtya summoned us.

"His Majesty," he said, "has ordered an exception in your case. You will be the first foreigners in more than 100 years to make the full journey. The Minister of War will

furnish a military escort, and I will send a journalist from my office as an interpreter."

We later discovered that one man had preceded us in the Wakhan traverse. H. W. Tilman, English mountain climber, in 1947 tried to cross the northeast tip, but the Kirghiz arrested him and took him down the corridor to Faizabad. Being under arrest, he had little freedom of observation. We were the first Westerners since the time of Marco Polo to explore fully the entire length of the corridor.

A Visit with the King

We tried to express our gratitude, but Rishtya waved our thanks aside. "His Majesty will also receive you for an interview at his palace at Paghman. There you may photograph him and his son, Prince Nadir Shah."

Mr. Rishtya drove us to the palace, where we had a friendly chat with His Majesty Mohammed Zahir Shah. The King is well above medium height, slender and handsome, with a lean face and piercing eyes (pages 674, 682). He pointed to the current copy of the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE on his desk and said, in perfect French, "I look forward to its arrival every month. I know of no better way to learn about the other peoples of the world."

The next two days were a whirl of last-minute preparations. Finally we struck out in a rented station wagon for Faizabad, capital of Badakhshan, with Ghulam Hazrat Koshan, the young journalist from Rishtya's office (page 685).

After a two-day trip over poor roads, we reached Faizabad, where we met the governor of Badakhshan, Mohammed Sawar Khan. He explained we should have no difficulty traversing the Wakhan because the snows would not come for another month. He said he would provide us with riding horses and pack animals, as well as military escort.

It all seemed too good to be true—and, as it turned out, it wasn't true. But that night we went to bed in high spirits, believing for the first time that we were going to succeed where so many had failed.

We spent the following two days preparing

^{*}See, in the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE: "Back to Afghanistan," October, 1946, and "Afghanistan Makes Haste Slowly," December, 1933, both by Maynard Owen Williams.



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Afghanistan's King Authorizes the Americans' Trip Through Forbidden Wakhan Corridor

His Majesty, Mohammed Zahir Shah, a subscriber to the *NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE*, keeps a copy on his desk in Kabul (page 682). His War Minister, Gen. Mohammed Omar Khan (standing), lent the Shoen an altimeter from one of his precious military planes. The friendly intervention of these two enabled the authors to retrace Marco Polo's steps across an ancient mountain gate between Occident and Orient (page 675).

for the next lap of our journey. The governor insisted we should wear Badakhshan costumes, since much of our trip would be along the south bank of the Oxus River, in plain view of the Russians on the other side. So we shopped in bazaars for long-sleeved, ankle-length white woolen *chapons*, the standard outer garment in that region, and for hand-knit stockings, scarves, hats, and gloves.

To the governor's assistant, Mohammed Wajid, we suggested that it might be advisable for us to purchase our own horses in Faizabad and sell them at the end of our journey. He was indignant. After all, he informed us, we were the guests of the Government, and horses and pack yaks would be furnished by the Army. The only money we would need, he insisted, would be perhaps 100 *ajghanis*, about \$7.50, for tips. I kept 1,000

afghanis and mailed the rest of our currency to a friend in Kabul.

The next day we met Cadet Syed Rashid, who, with two young soldiers, was to provide our escort. Cadet Rashid was a slender-waisted young man with a haughty look, a tired hand-shake, and heavily padded shoulders. We all climbed into the now-crowded station wagon and started on our adventure.

For 20 miles the road climbed steadily through a narrow valley following the foaming Kokcha River. The road is new—only two cars had preceded us over it, the King's and the governor's—and frighteningly steep and narrow. Our progress wasn't helped by the fact that the telephone line is laid, in places, right down the middle of the highway.

A solid wall of rock, 45 miles from Faizabad, marked the end of our travel by motor.



678 *Scene at the end of the Kabul River, near Mazar-i-Sharif, W. Afghanistan*

Kabul Buses, Home from Peshawar and Khyber Pass, Unload Tall, Turbaned Passengers

Old Kabul has dusty streets, high prices, and few Western goods. The authors recall from life and shipment of Swiss cheese and chocolate which we all but bought out. A new city has been laid out in the suburbs, but construction lags for want of funds. Kabul River appears at low ebb; a border drive in stock feeds the ruckie. Buses carry enormous luggage platforms; overflow passengers frequently ride on top.

Men were waiting with horses, and our luggage was quickly transferred to horseback.

An hour after dark we reached a road engineers' camp and had an excellent dinner of mutton, chicken, and rice (page 699). In Kabul and Faizabad our hosts had provided utensils for us. But here the engineers ate Afghan style—picking up the meat in their fingers, dropping it into the rice bowl in the center, rolling it into a ball, and popping it into their mouths. We used our own spoons.

I awoke at dawn, thinking how wonderful it was to be in the real wilderness of the whole world, beyond the reach of mechanized civilization. A little brook rippled by our tent, the horses moved softly on the hillside above, and bright-plumed birds sang.

Suddenly I was brought bolt upright by the jangling, ear-splitting ring of a telephone. A

second ring, not four feet from my head, permanently shattered my illusions of primeval peace. It was the field telephone strung along the new road. The governor was calling to see if we were all right.

We were in our Mongol-style saddles for 13 hours that day. Several times we had to lead our ponies across swaying bridges made of flat rocks laid across thin poles. The natives we met along the way were friendly, but tragically poor. Their homes are low huts of stone plastered with mud, their flocks small, and the grain in their tiny fields scant. Yet in every village we were invited to stop for tea and bread. The villagers all stared at Jean, the first Western woman to visit that nook of the world.

The afternoon ride was sheer torture. We had not been on horseback for months, and



671. Drawn by H. E. Eastwood and G. H. E. Altmann

Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, Touching China, Insulates Pakistan from Russia

Alexander the Great campaigned along the Oxus, where Afghan and Russian today keep suspicious watch. Marco Polo saw its 20,000-foot peaks when he trod the Wakhan going to Kublai Khan's court in Cathay. Latest Westerners to penetrate the corridor were Americans, Franc and Jean Shor. Map traces their route.

our aching muscles complained at every step. Two hours after dark we reached Zebak, cold and hungry, to find that no food was available. We brewed a pot of tea and slept in a half-ruined mosque.

The next morning Koshan announced that the rental of the horses which had carried us the previous day was 150 afghanis—about \$11. I told him of Wajid's insistence that the Government would provide our transportation. Koshan knew of no such plan. I was most embarrassed, for, having listened to Wajid's advice, I now had less than 1,000 afghanis. Obviously, we would run short on a 12- to 15-day journey at 150 afghanis a day.

As we waited for fresh horses, Jean busied herself with a little mending, and I tried to multiply 150 by 15 and get an answer less than 1,000. We were interrupted by the arrival of three ragged teen-age girls with matted hair, who kissed Jean's hand and invited us to their home for tea.

We found two families of about 15 people

living in a tiny smoke-filled hut, with no furniture. An ancient iron kettle steamed merrily over a fire in the center of the floor. We had tea, presented the elders with some sugar, and gave the children fruit drops wrapped in cellophane. They popped them into their mouths immediately, and, before Koshan could translate our warning that the wrapping should be removed, most of the youngsters had swallowed them.

Place Where the Salt Ends

Ultimately fresh horses were procured, and we started out for Ishkashim. The trail winds along a pleasant valley at an altitude of about 8,500 feet, with barren mountains rising to 15,000 feet on either side. Numerous springs provide ample irrigation, and the thin soil produces wheat, barley, and a few vegetables.

Zarkhan, where we stopped for lunch, is known as the "Place Where the Salt Ends." No salt is found in the area, and inaccessibility and poverty have discouraged imports; so

for centuries the people of the Wakhan have lived without salt. Their diet consists chiefly of goat milk, dried peas, and a flat, crisp bread baked from pounded whole wheat.

Few villages in the world are more beautifully situated than Ishkashim. It sits atop a cliff overlooking the silvery ribbon of the Oxus, surrounded by green fields and by the great snow-capped peaks of Russia, half a mile north, and Pakistan, a few miles to the south.

The telephone line from Faizabad ends at Ishkashim, and I asked Koshan to have the governor approve a \$100 check by telephone. The governor graciously authorized the village treasurer to receive the legitimate exchange, and we went to bed confident the problem was solved.

The next morning, however, the village treasurer refused to accept the check, even with the approval of the governor. Koshan had a brilliant idea.

Let me have the picture of you and the Shah of Persia," he said.

In Tehran Jean had photographed me chatting with Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. We handed over the photograph, and in five minutes had the money.

Said Koshan: "The treasurer rules that if you are a friend of the Shah of Persia you must be good for \$100."

U. S. S. R. 200 Yards Away

From Ishkashim our path lay directly along the Russian border, so we changed into our Afghan costumes. The valley of the Oxus is less than a mile wide. The river narrows to a mere 200 yards, and the people of Russia's Tadzhik Soviet Socialist Republic



An Elderly Musician Plays a Sad Solo on His Bulky Fiddle

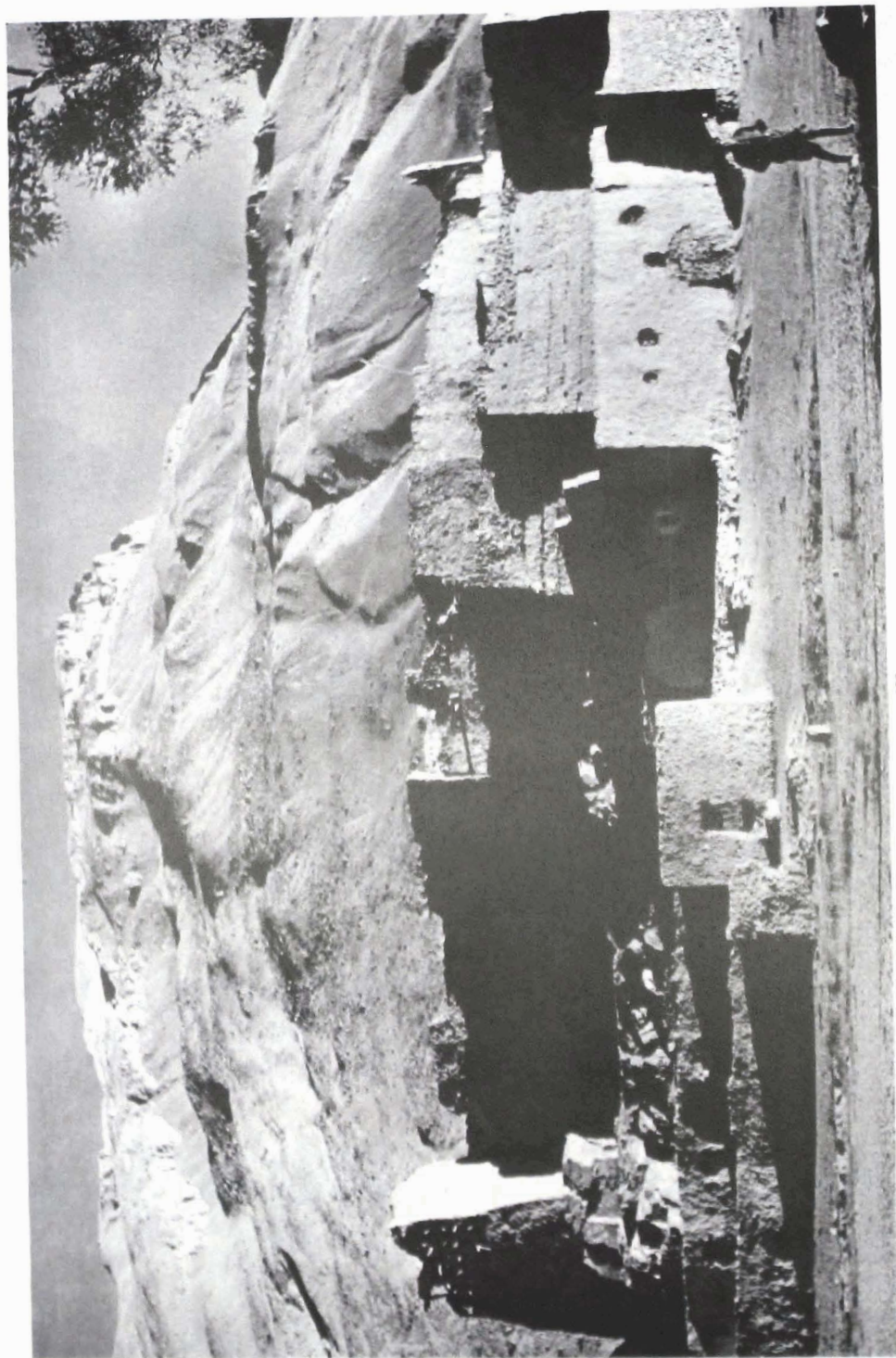
Kabul honoring the authors, arranging a concert of Afghan music. Its haunting tones suggested wild Gypsy airs. Some of the instruments had sound boxes fashioned from bueg-gorok. This *rebab* had some 20 strings. Ghulam Hoss, though 75 year old, was the virtuoso of all the performing. After one practice session he joined Jean Shor in playing "The Eyes of Teva."

are plainly visible on the north bank. An auto road skirts the Russian bank, and frequent trucks pass in plain sight of the Afghan side, where not even a wheeled cart exists.

Ordinarily, in such a remote area boundaries have little meaning, but here there is apparently no intercourse between the two banks.

Our hosts were obviously concerned for our safety. Our escort was increased to four soldiers, and when we stopped at Shikarj armed guards walked post all night around our little hut. Jean asked Koshan why such precautions were necessary.

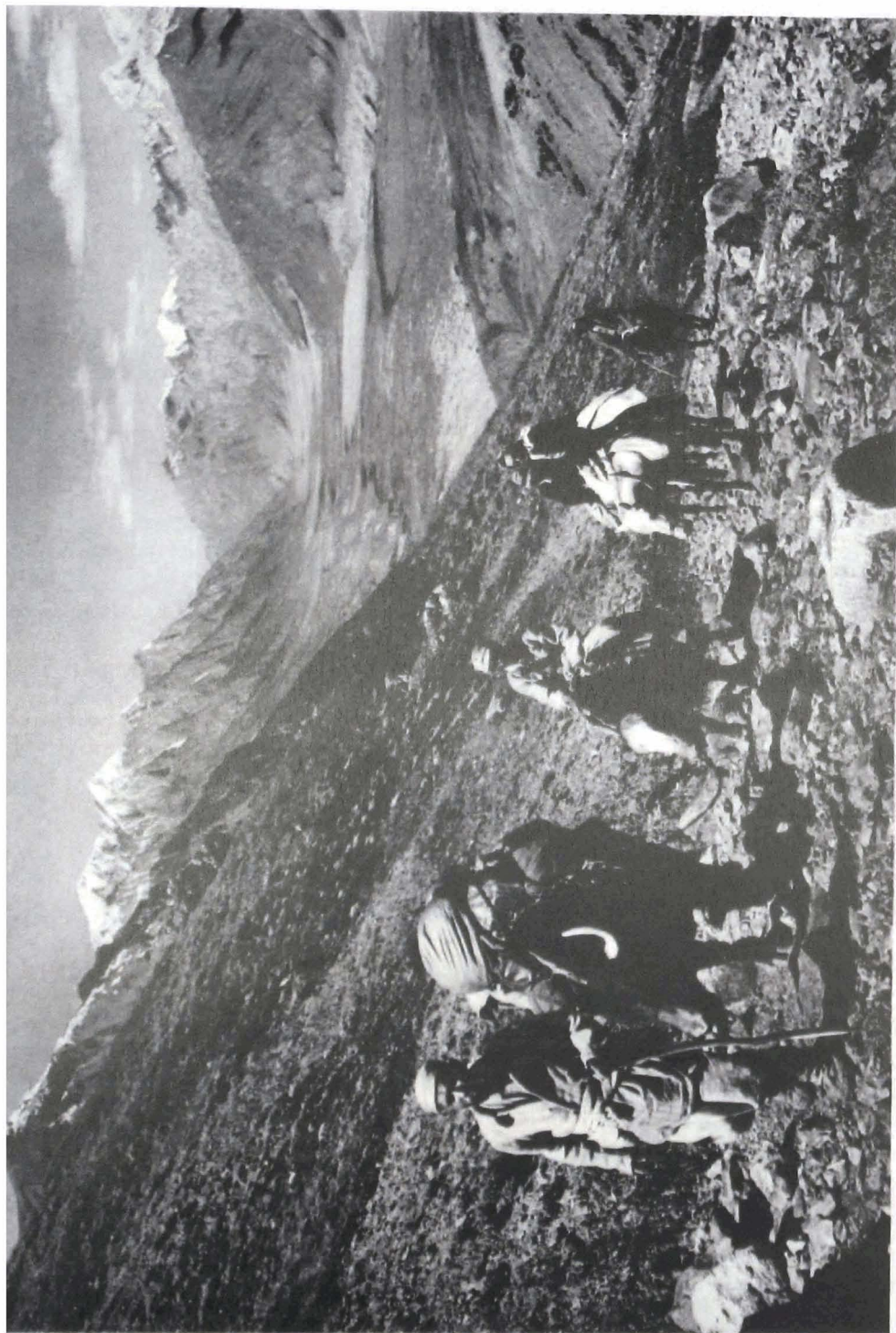
"There is a Russian military post only 200



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In Ancient Times This Crumbling Fort Commanded All Movement Along the Oxus and Through the Wakhan

Within Qala Panja's thick walls the authors found cisterns and stables (page 680). Antique as it seemed, the fort was the most modern of three built on the site. One heap of ruins appeared to date from pre-Christian times. Hills lie on Russia's side of the Oxus (not shown).



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Toiling Yaks and Horses Stumble Up a 15-degree Grade in Pamir Pass. The Oxus Twists Through Its Gorge Far Below

yards from here," he whispered. "We are afraid the Russians might cross the river at night and *catnip* you."

The Russians didn't "catnip" us, but the bedbugs did. They ignored our DDT powder and swarmed in by the thousand.

The next day we lunched at Urgand, a little village at about 9,000 feet altitude. Finding a heavy crop of wheat that high up amazed us. This grain takes only 40 days from planting to harvest. It produces a heavy yield, and is apparently quite impervious to cold. We brought samples of the seed back to Washington, where the Department of Agriculture is experimenting to determine whether it can be grown here (page 687).

The Blessing of the Prophet

By noon the next day we reached Khandut, the administrative headquarters of the Wakhan district. There we met the judge of the Wakhan, a 70-year-old gentleman with a magnificent white beard.

He greeted us warmly. The Koran, he explained, urged all Moslems to travel widely, to know more of the other peoples of the earth, and ours was thus a mission which undoubtedly had the blessing of the Prophet.

We reached Qala Panja, the Fort of the Oxus, at dusk (page 678). The garrison consisted of about 50 soldiers quartered near by, captained by an officer who wore a United States Army blouse and Afghan trousers tucked in Russian boots.

The garrison commander had disturbing news of an incident at the Afghan-Chinese border. The Afghan Kirghiz, he reported, had been fighting with tribes on the Chinese Turkistan side of the border during the past few days, and the border might be closed. Koshan and Cadet Rashid made tentative suggestions about turning back, but we announced we would go as far as possible.

In four days of travel from Zebak to Qala Panja we had climbed only about 500 feet, from 8,500 to 9,000, but after leaving the fort we turned sharply upward. For hours we toiled up a rocky cliff, our horses picking their way carefully along a narrow ledge.

We rode hard all afternoon, crossing one ridge of mountains and dropping down once more to the rocky river valley. As dusk fell, Rashid began to look worried. There was no trail, only a broad valley full of great boulders, crisscrossed by foaming mountain streams. We plodded on for two hours after dark, our horses stumbling and slipping on the stones. Rashid would not admit he was lost. But he was, so we called a halt for the night.

Our bedrolls were with our baggage animals

and the soldiers, who had gone on ahead of us, so we prepared to sleep in our chapons. Rashid informed us that the country was full of wolves, so we took turns standing guard.

At 3 I awoke, to find Rashid sound asleep and the horses stirring restlessly. Jean awoke and insisted on guarding for a couple of hours too, so I dozed off.

Half an hour later I was awakened by a blinding flash and the howling of an animal obviously scared to death. I ran to Jean's side and found her holding our flash gun. A wolf had attempted to attack our horses, and Jean, having no more lethal weapon, had fired a flash in his direction. It did the trick.

One of our soldiers found us shortly after dawn. The whole group had spent the night searching for us. They had been worried because of the wolves. I smiled at Jean and explained that American girls were trained to take care of themselves around wolves.

Private Bath in Public

An hour's ride brought us to Kharat, where we slept for a few hours. When we awoke, the villagers brought us tea and saltless bread, and Jean went off with the women of the village for a bath in privacy.

"Privacy, indeed!" Jean said later. The women brought her a pot of warm water, but the room unfortunately had no door. So off they went, looking into every hut, until they found one that did have a door. The girls evicted a protesting gentleman, brought in the water, and departed. Jean undressed and started to bathe. A moment later, one of the older women returned, squatted on the floor, and stared at Jean. Before long, half the female population of the village was watching.

They insisted on helping Jean dress. They had never seen laced boots before and kept wrapping the laces around Jean's legs, Afghan fashion. The zipper on her jacket fascinated them, and they took turns zipping it.

"My soap delighted them. One asked for a piece of it, and I smiled a 'Yes.' She cut off a chunk, and so did all the others. I ended up soapless; even had to borrow a piece back to wash my dirty clothes. I finally finished dressing and returned to find Franc writing in our log that I'd gone off to 'bathe in privacy.' Men!"

I asked Koshan to find out if we were the first Americans these people had seen.

"They have never even heard of America," he said. "They never see foreigners."

We left the friendly village at noon and worked our way over rugged trails until dusk. Jagged mountains shaded the trail, those in Pakistan towering over 20,000 feet. Here we



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Kodachrome by Franc Shor

Jean Shor, Crossing the 20,000-foot Dehli Sang, Stands in the Pamirs, Roof of Asia

This American girl and her husband were among the very few Westerners ever to traverse the Wakhan corridor, the ancient East-West trail followed by Marco Polo. Here Afghanistan looks into Pakistan.



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Kodachromes by Jean Shor

↑ **Afghan Prince Gets a Camera Lesson
from Franc Shor**

The King of Afghanistan (below) likes to see other peoples pictured in the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE. He considered it only fair that they see the Afghan royal family. So, for the camera's sake, he dressed Prince Nadir Shah in native raiment. They received the authors in Paghman Palace, near Kabul.

↓ **Mohammed Zahir Shah, Tailored King,
Wears Karakul Cap and Parisian Tie**

Afghanistan's urbane monarch, breaking with tradition, issued the order allowing the Americans to cross forbidden territory. His golden lambskin cap must have cost \$250 or more, reports Mr. Shor, who paid \$10 for his own black outfit (above). Both wore ties bearing the same French label, Mr. Shor noted.





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Kodachromes by Jean Shor

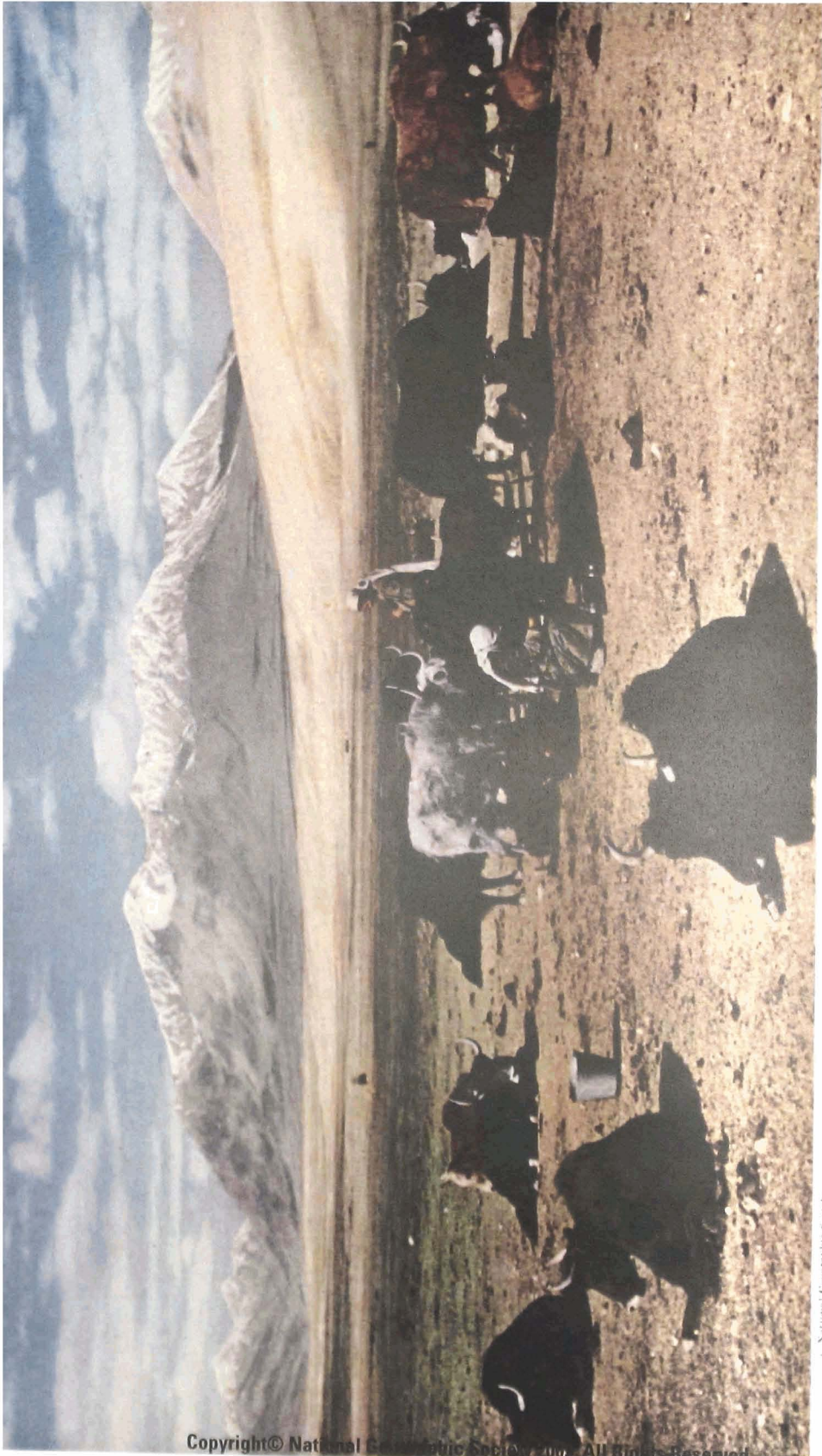
↑ Badakhshan Drum Dancers Celebrate Afghanistan's Independence Day

In Faizabad, capital of Badakhshan, the provincial governor gave a concert in honor of the Shors. Here the master of ceremonies wears his own creation, a checkered pajamalike outfit with a chef's-style cap. Mr. Shor (right) inspects competitors about to start a dance marathon (below).

↓ Dizzy Drummers, Dancing to Reed Pipes, Spin and Drum until They Drop

Four men, beating drums with sticks, revolved at constantly increasing speeds, meanwhile shifting their awkward burdens from neck to waist to knees. One by one they succumbed to vertigo and collapsed. Finally only the one on the right remained. After 15 minutes he too fell. Musicians played a monotonous melody.





Kodachrome by Frantz Shor

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Kirghiz Maids Milk Shaggy Yaks. Snow-clad Peaks Overhang the Herd's 15,000-foot Pastures on the Pamir Plateau

The bisonlike yak, as mount, milker, and wool- and hide-bearer, serves Central Asia's highlanders as the reindeer serves Scandinavia's Lapps. Its hair makes tough ropes; its tail becomes Hindustan's fly switch; its milk is scant but creamy. Here at Rahman Qul's camp near Bozai Gumbaz, calves are tied to a picket line. Unmilked cows grunt rather than moo their impatience. Grazing bull (left), sheep (center), and horseman (right) dot the vast plain.



5. Mr. Koshan Reclines on the Stones of a Ruined Fort

The young Kabul journalist had been told by the Sher-pas that they were strictly a city people, and he found little to justify his first impression.

The remaining half, including a Feroz, studied no other means of livelihood save the fact that he was locally known as "Kufan Han" for his Muslim

background.

6. Welcome, Stranger!

This elderly trader, traveling alone from Kasgar to Ferozabad, and the Wakhan country, asked a Marva Pado, who had only a few cartridges left, to buy a couple of his Ben-Galton's. The man who was carrying home a couple of others, hobbled with the pain and confusion of a broken Turkoman.

We are told that the Lashari, Pado, and Mr. Sleat, with a few strong-minded Englishmen, had made a party to invade the local and Afghan territories.

Went to the Lashari, heard and then a great number of the English, and he was a very good friend of the Sher-pas. He had a very good horse, and a very good dog, and a very good dog. He had a very good dog, and a very good dog. He had a very good dog, and a very good dog. He had a very good dog, and a very good dog.

The Sher-pas were very friendly to the English.

They were very friendly to the English.





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A 5-foot Wakhaneese Shoulders a 200-pound Burden Which the 6-foot Photographer Couldn't Budge

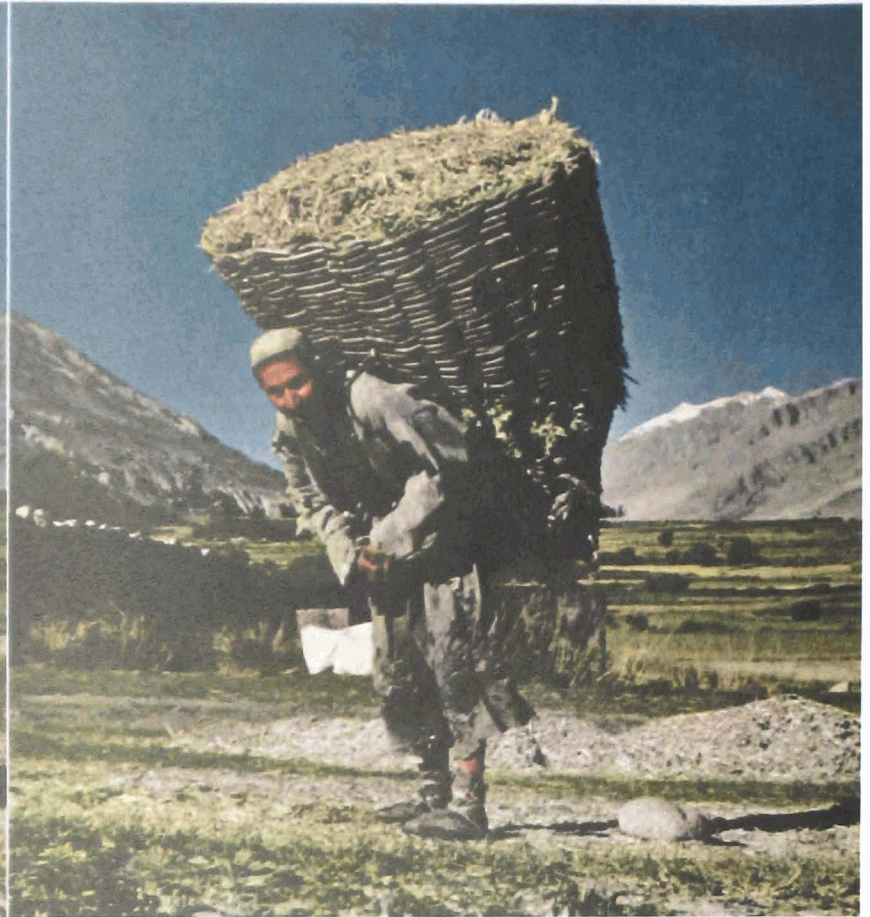
Twenty centuries have not changed farming methods in the Wakhan corridor. This field at Urgand was plowed with a wooden stick. Its cold-resistant wheat, grown at 9,000 feet, matured in 40 days. Mr. Shor brought back seed to be tested in the United States.

Opposite page: Mrs. Shor examines a hot spring bubbling out of Nurss valley (page 694). She bathed in the 100° stream, but did not dare drink its mineral waters. White Afghan robe and skin boots were adopted to escape recognition by suspicious Russian lookouts across the Oxus River frontier.

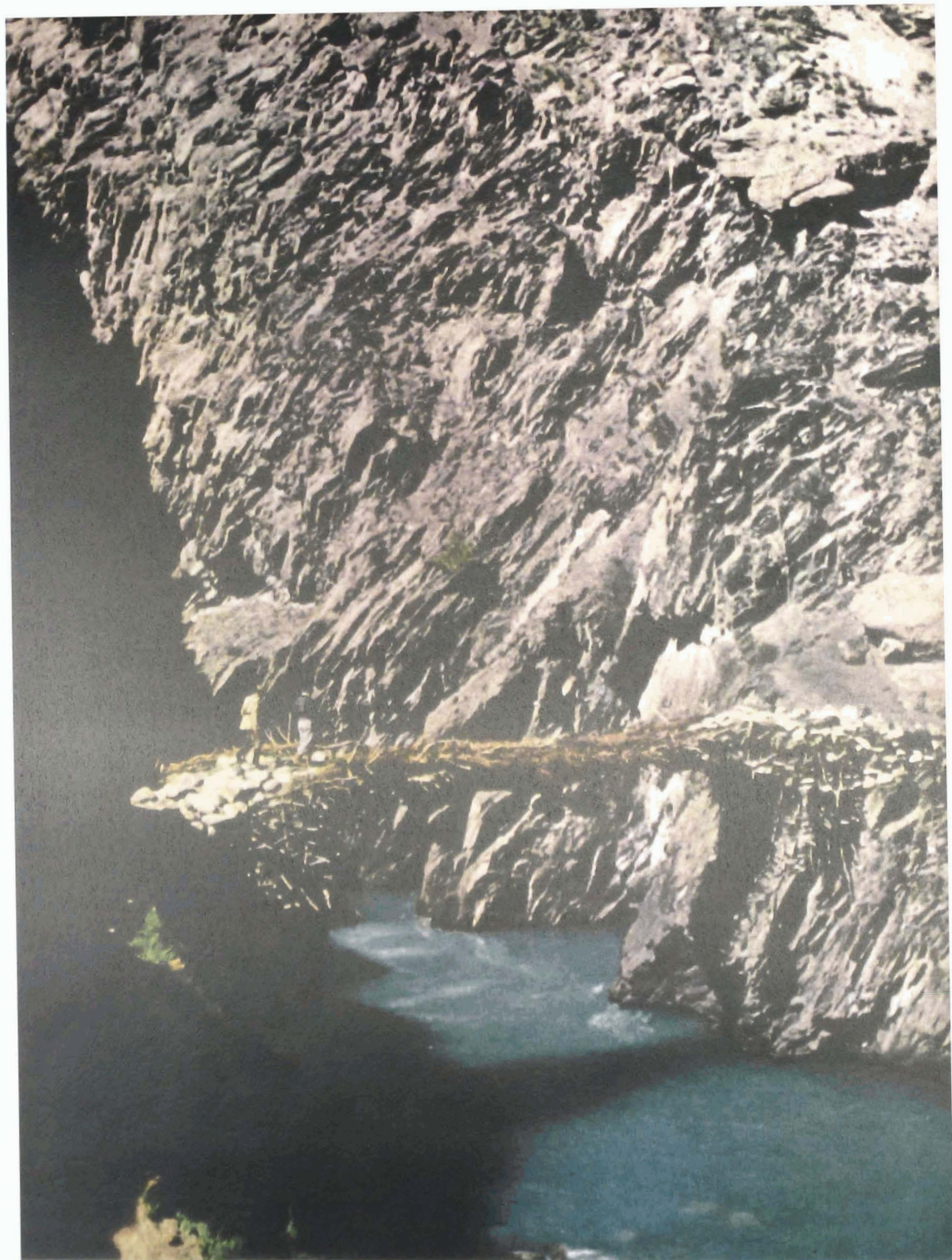
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Kodachromes by Franc Shor



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Kodachrome by Frank Shor

Log Bridge, Paved with Twigs and Stones, Sways Like a Tightrope, Creaks Like an Oxcart
Here Mr. Shor, scrambling down for a drink, slipped into the icy water. While drying out, he map-identified the scene of his misfortune. His reward for traveling 11,000 miles into the Pamirs was a dip in the Shor River!



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Kodachrome by Frane Štor

↑ **No Bottles, No Formulas—Kirghiz Mothers Lead the Simple Life**

At seven years the girls, costumed like their mother, help milk the yaks and keep house. Brother, bundled to his ears, will be a daring horseman by the time he's eleven. All are healthy and playful.

↓ **Štor and Friends Compare Nomad Boots with Paratrooper Leather**

These fur-hatted Kirghiz admired the way the author packed a yak with diamond hitch, but disliked his boots (too cold, they said). Quolan Larh (right), who never heard of the U. S., learned to sing *Oh! Susanna*.

Kodachrome by Jean Štor





Cool in Summer, Warm in Winter, the Yurt Makes a Snug Home

The Kirghiz, a Turkic-speaking tribe akin to the Kazaks, roam Russian Turkistan, northern Afghanistan, and Chinese Sinkiang. Tireless horsemen, they brave raging fords and icy passes. Scorning to grub the soil, they live off the produce of their herds.

Their herds' seasonal needs mold most Kirghiz into a migratory routine, but these people settle down at Bozai Gumbaz (pages 684 and 693) to enjoy the Pamir Plateau's year-round pastures. Their domed tent is fashioned of felts lashed to a circular willow trellis. The flapping reed door admits light and breeze; a vent in the roof exhausts smoke from yak-dung fires.

In one of these tents, carpeted richly and lined with bright tin trunks, the Americans were welcomed to the encampment. They drank hot yak-butter tea, ate roast sheep, and slept in a smaller yurt.

Weather-beaten father, mother, and two children, attended by a servant, occupy this yurt. Necklaces, the family treasures, contain Iranian, Indian, and Russian coins.

"We gave them a handful of French, British, and United States coins," the authors report. "Some future traveler is going to have a time figuring where they came from."

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K. Johnson/Corbis Sygma

Women, Weaving Straps for the Yurt and Milking the Herds, Do the Tribe's Hard Work While the Men Play

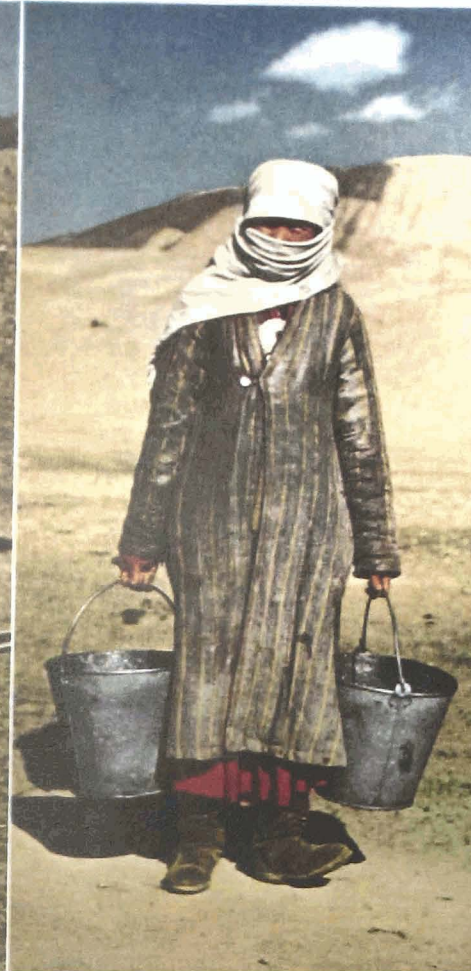
Kirghiz wives, all covered with their tribe's white bonnets, keep the fires, mind the babies, and pitch the tents. Though they are orthodox Moslems, they do not go into veiled seclusion. The little milkmaid (right) covers her face only against sun and rain. Her pails came from Russia.

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Kodachrome by Franc Shor

Kodachrome by Jean Shor



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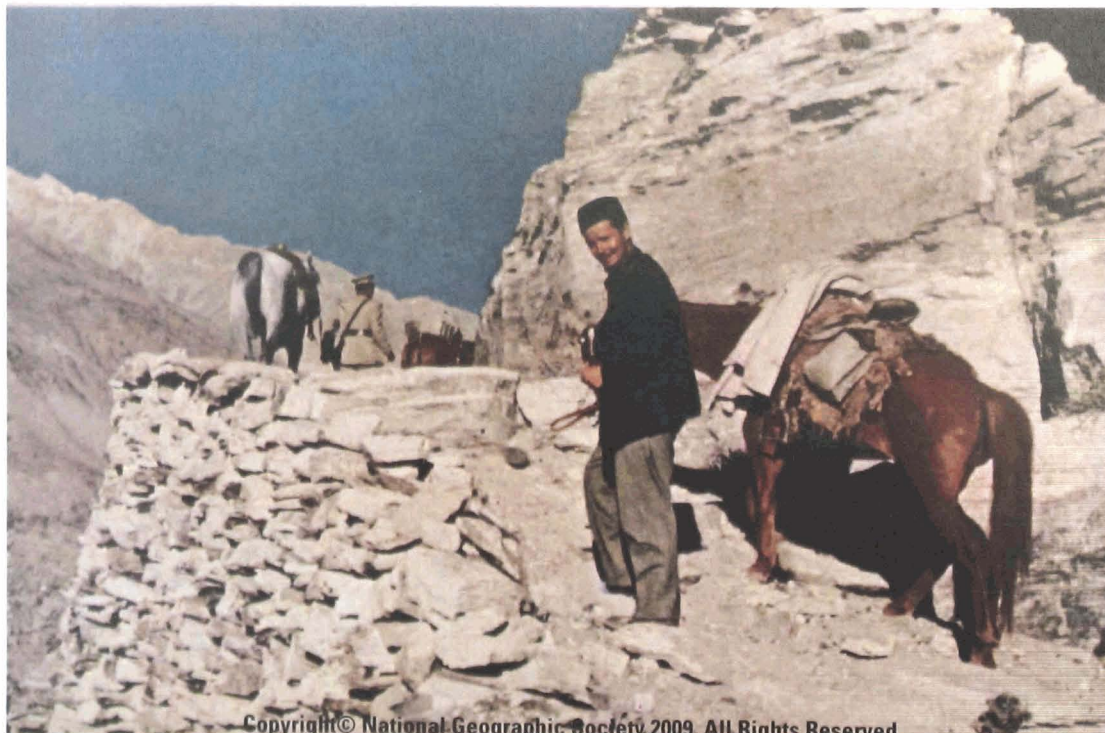
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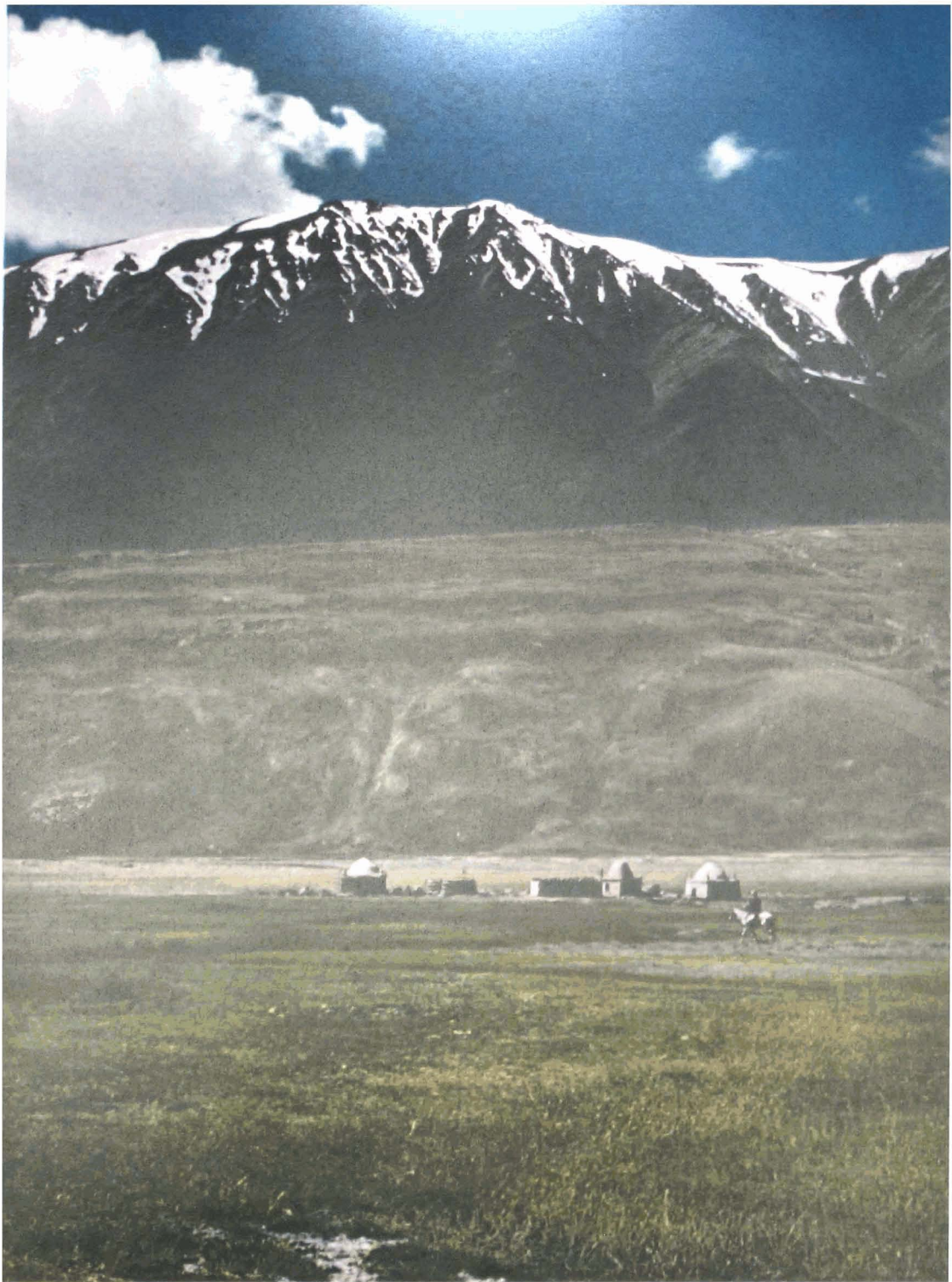
↑ **Altitude-loving Yaks Carry Afghans
Across 14,000-foot Pamir Pass**

Easy-gaited and sure-footed, the yak is too broad-backed to be comfortable. Grazing wherever it can, it weaves in and out of the trail, defying the pressure of a rope through the nostrils. These hardy soldiers formed the Shors' military escort.

↓ **Up and Up the Panting Ponies Labor;
Riders Dismount to Spare Them**

Where the Sarhad-Langar trail narrowed to two feet, Jean Shor's mount started bucking. Another horse dropped dead. Men grew so weary on the dawn-to-midnight journey that they wanted to lie down on the rocks. Loose stones plunged thousands of feet.





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Kodachrome by Jean Slor

Tombs of Forgotten Warriors Break the Plateau's Grassy Monotony at Bozai Gumbaz

Kirghiz herders camp a mile away (page 684). Though they can no longer name the dead, they keep up the graves. Ibex and long-horned *Ovis poli* roam the 20,000-foot peaks; men find no reason to tread the snowy heights.



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Kulshome by Frank Shaw

In a Silent, Empty No Man's Land the Expedition Rides Past Towering, Nameless Peaks
In the loneliness around Nurss, civilization's comforts seemed but a dream (page 686). So deceptive was the clear air that peaks 40 miles away appeared within an hour's ride. The jutting mountain ahead lies in Pakistan. Though it soars more than 22,000 feet, maps give it no name.

Amu Darya, the Ancients' Oxus River, Gathers the Pamirs' Snow Waters and Carries Them 1,560 Miles to Russia's Aral Sea Alexander the Great crossed the lower Oxus some 23 centuries ago, and people here still remember him by his Persian name, Iskander. Franc Shor here prepares to ford an upper branch. In it he found fighting 4-pound trout. For 680 miles the Oxus forms the Afghan-Russian border.

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Kobehrone by Jean Shor





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Kodachromes by Jean Shor

↑ **Shor and His Kirghiz Guides Near Dehli Sang's Icy Summit**

For four hours they fought their way across the snow field's "frozen mile of torture . . . The last few hundred yards . . . we crawled on hands and knees, dazed by exhaustion . . . On we went, five yards at a time, (until) we stood on the top of the world" (page 681).

↓ **Shor Repacks a Yak for a Rough 4-hour Crossing of the Oxus**

Yaks regularly carried 160-pound burdens. On steeper climbs their drivers oftentimes jumped aboard. The two skullcapped gentlemen from Nurs owned the beasts. Having leased them for the day's journey to Sarhad, they went along to take them back.



met our first yaks, great ponderous animals with shaggy coats, sure-footed as goats on narrow mountain paths. We spent the night at Nurss, a tiny village at 10,500 feet, sleeping near a hot bubbling mineral spring (p. 686).

Pack yaks replaced our baggage horses the next morning. For four hours we forded the Oxus, crossing eight separate streams in the mile-wide river bed. The water was swift and ice-cold, and the animals staggered and struggled to keep their feet in the raging current. The water frequently came far above our stirrups, and we balanced our feet on our horses' necks.

An hour beyond the ford we came to Sarhad, the last military post in the Wakhan. The commissar greeted us warmly and led us to a pleasant grove on a mountainside.

Eating Fresh Peas Shocks Natives

While Jean napped, I took a stroll through the village. To my amazement, I found a garden full of green peas. It had been days since we had seen green vegetables. I bought peas, yak butter, milk, and a chicken, borrowed a pan, and returned to our grove. I built a fire and went to work.

When Jean awoke an hour later, our lunch was ready—fried chicken, fresh peas, toasted Afghan bread and butter, and a cup of cold milk. The children were horrified to see us eating green peas, and warned us, in sign language, that they would make us ill. Koshan later revealed that these people never eat fresh peas. They dry them, pound them to flour, and mix them with wheat for bread.

The commissar and Mr. Koshan returned with bad news. The earlier reports of border warfare were true. From Sarhad to Mintaka, the Chinese border post, the trail leads across the Pamir Plateau, at an average elevation of more than 15,000 feet. There are no villages on the way, only a few settlements of wild Kirghiz tribesmen, contemptuous of any authority. Even the commissar, in two years at Sarhad, had never ventured onto the great plateau. He warned us the journey would be difficult and dangerous.

If we wished to risk the trip, he would help us. But he stressed the danger and suggested that we cross Baroghil Pass southward into Pakistan. I left the decision to Jean. She knew the dangers and knew her own strength. Did she want to try the journey over the Pamir (Daliz) Pass?

"With that fried chicken under my belt I can go anywhere," she laughed. "Why are all you men sitting around talking when we should be packing?"

The commissar smiled and shook her hand.

"The commissar says he is proud to know you," Koshan translated. "He will come with us himself."

We started out at dawn the next day. The trail from Sarhad rises straight up, over paths of shifting shale and around rock chimneys. In some places the path is literally stuck against the cliff—rocks wedged into cracks in the stony wall, more rocks piled on top of them, and a thin covering of brush. Few sights are more disconcerting than to see daylight *through* the trail you are traveling.

The Pamir Pass is a series of 14,000-foot crests, interspersed with 10,000-foot valleys. Up and down we haltered, leading our horses and prodding our gasping yaks. The commissar kept pushing us forward. We had a dangerous bridge to cross, he remarked, and must make it before dark (page 692).

We reached the bridge at 5 o'clock. It was about 60 feet long, with a drop of 50 feet to the raging river. We crossed one at a time, leading our animals, while the structure swayed and creaked. One yak lost his footing, and the bridge lurched frighteningly. But we made it (page 688).

Fairyland by Moonlight

We were soon on our way down the trail. The mountainsides were masses of wild flowers: pink wild roses, showy daisies, dandelions, buttercups, blooming thistles, and great patches of edelweiss. The sun went down and a full moon rose, bathing the whole scene in an unreal, golden light. It was fairyland.

As we *plodded on, hour after hour*, men and animals reached the point of exhaustion. By 9 o'clock we were ready to sleep on the rocks. Mr. Koshan asked the commissar when we would stop.

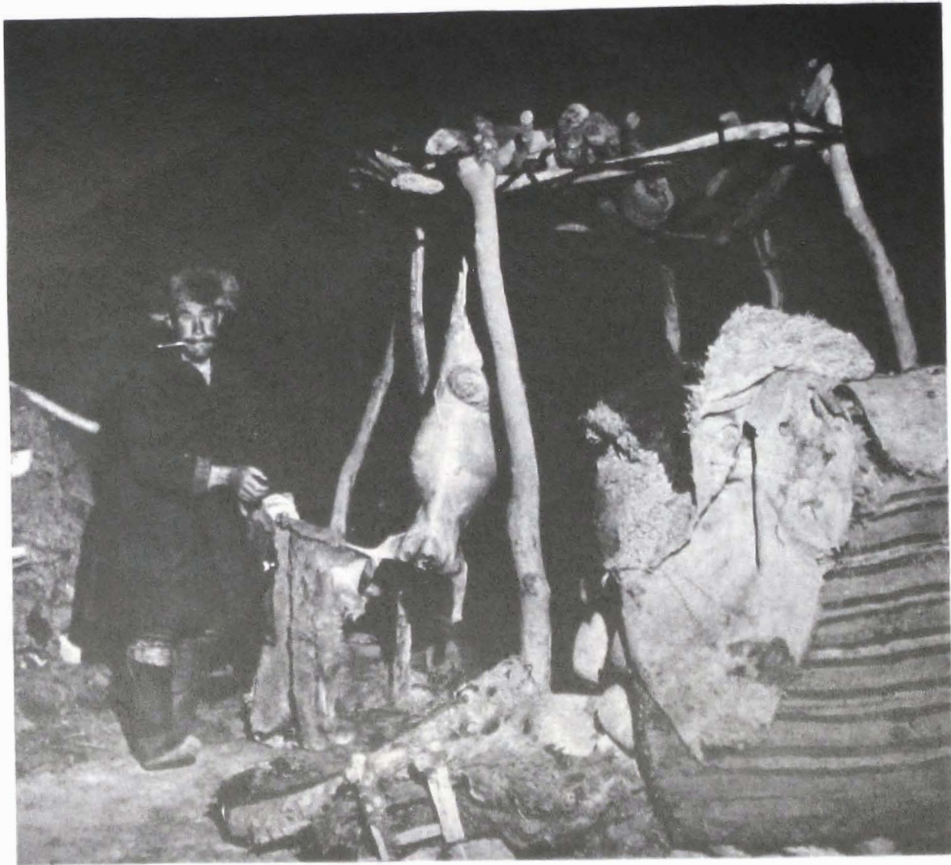
"He says there is a Kirghiz camp a few miles ahead," he translated. "We may reach it by midnight."

I looked at Jean. She bit her lip.

"Jeepers!" she breathed. "Why did I make that foolish speech back at Sarhad? Now I've *got* to keep up."

We reached the camp an hour later. As we halted in front of the two yurts (circular tents) which appear on the map as Langar, the commissar's horse dropped dead.

We slept that night in a felt-walled Kirghiz yurt, with a dozen-odd members of two Kirghiz families. A fire of yak dung burned on the dirt floor. Despite the 12,000-foot altitude, we were warm and comfortable. In the morning we checked our pulses to see how we were reacting to the extreme height, and found both our hearts beating at 110 a minute; otherwise, we noticed no ill effects.



Knife in Mouth, a Kirghiz Skins a Sheep for Roasting in the Authors' Honor

This fierce fellow, camping at Boz-i-Gumbaz, slit the animal's throat at dusk and fed the blood to a pack of savage dogs. He yanked off the skin as one might pull off a sweater. Liver and kidneys he saved for a before-dinner snack. The main feast was served catch-as-catch-can and eaten with the hands. One tribesman, gnawing at the skull, grazed an eyebrow with his long sharp curving knife each time he took a bite.

Our friendly, broad-chested Kirghiz hosts all stood six feet tall. Their attractive women kept the yurt spotlessly clean. About a third of the large structure was partitioned off with a woven mat of wool and reed. Behind it the women store yak milk in big open vessels.

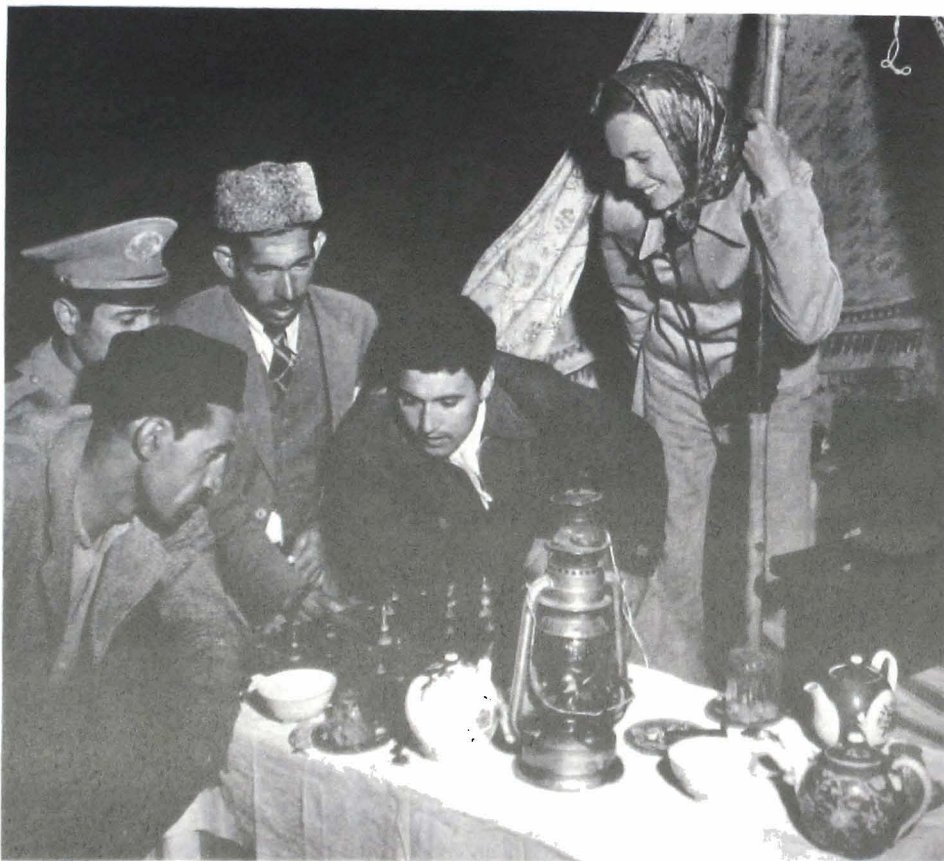
Getting Acquainted with Pamir Kirghiz

The Kirghiz of the Pamirs live almost entirely on yak- and goat-milk products. They wash down yoghurt, their principal fare, with a concoction of tea, salt, yak butter, and milk, served boiling hot. They eat bread only during two winter months, meat only at feasts. They are among the finest physical specimens in the world and are capable of great endurance, even at the high altitude in which they live (page 705).

The Kirghiz are a nomadic people. They live in the Russian Pamirs, Chinese Turkistan, and Afghanistan, having practically no regard for national borders. On the Pamir Plateau, however, many families have abandoned their migratory ways. They find the rich grass of the great plain adequate for their flocks the year round (pages 684, 689-692).

The next day our ride took us straight across the Pamir Plateau. It stretches for miles in every direction, covered with lush grass and watered by the upper Oxus and by the melting snows from the 20,000-foot mountains which surround it.

Our host at lunch, a magnificent young Kirghiz well over six feet tall, wore a great fur hat, Russian-style blouse, corduroy breeches, and high boots of fine black leather. Quolan



Tea and Chess by Lantern Light Enliven an Evening on the Faizabad-Zebak Road

Glodon Hazrat Koshan (right) matches wits with a highway engineer. Cadet Syed Rashid (military cap), the mayor of Zebak, and Jean Shor watch. In this tent, pitched in a stony wilderness, the authors were startled by a telephone's ear-splitting ring at dawn; Badakhshan's governor was calling to see if they were safe. They talked over a line strung, in places, down the middle of the new road (page 675).

Larh was reluctant to have us take pictures, but an hour of friendly conversation thawed him out. He not only permitted us to photograph the women of his family but insisted on trying our cameras himself. He decided to ride with us to our evening stop.

Our horses did well on the flat plain, and Quolan Larh and I spent the afternoon teaching each other songs. He mastered *Oh! Susanna*, and I finally managed a few bars of his Kirghiz war song (page 689).

We reached Bozai Gumbaz, the largest Kirghiz settlement in the Pamirs, an hour before sunset. A score of yurts stood beside a swift stream, and women were milking their yaks. We were bowled into an enormous yurt (pages 690, 691, 693).

Brightly painted tin trunks lined the walls,

and in one corner stood a dozen teapots of Russian design. An iron tripod topped the inevitable fire, and we were soon warming ourselves with cups of yak-butter tea. A group of tall Kirghiz joined us, smiled, and bowed a welcome. After half an hour of noisy tea sipping, we were escorted to a small yurt of our own.

Koshan, Rashid, and the commissar soon engaged in intent conversation with Quolan Larh and some Bozai men. They shook their heads, frowned, and frequently glanced at us. At dusk a tall, fine-looking Kirghiz, obviously the leader of the group, left the circle and spoke to two young men sitting near by. They mounted horses and rode off.

Since the villagers had roasted a sheep in our honor, the conference adjourned for din-



Cross-legged in a Kirghiz Tent, Franc Shor Puts His Life in Rahman Qul's Care

When lending tribes blocked the American's road and their military escort balked, the Kirghiz leader agreed to see them through. "I will be responsible for your lives," he said. Rahman Qul proved to be a man of his word. But when the Shors arrived in Misgar, they learned their protector bore an international reputation as a highwayman (below and page 706).

ner. We asked Koshan what was being discussed, but he insisted it was only a friendly chat.

After dinner the two messengers returned, bringing some fierce-looking men in huge fox-fur hats. They joined the whispering parley. Jean and I dozed off, full of worries.

We awoke to find our worst fears realized. Over morning tea Koshan dropped the bombshell. The Kirghiz, he reported, had been fighting for two weeks with tribes on the Chinese side of the border. The area beyond our encampment was a no man's land, he said, and several men had been killed there in the last few days. The Kirghiz would not guarantee our safety beyond Bozai Gumbaz. He insisted we turn back.

Jean and I held a conference of our own. We had set out determined to reach the Sinkiang border. We were only two days from our goal. It was obviously dangerous to go on, but we had known we might face danger. We would go on.

I told Koshan of our decision. He was miserable.

"There is great danger," he said. "These tribesmen have no respect for life, not even

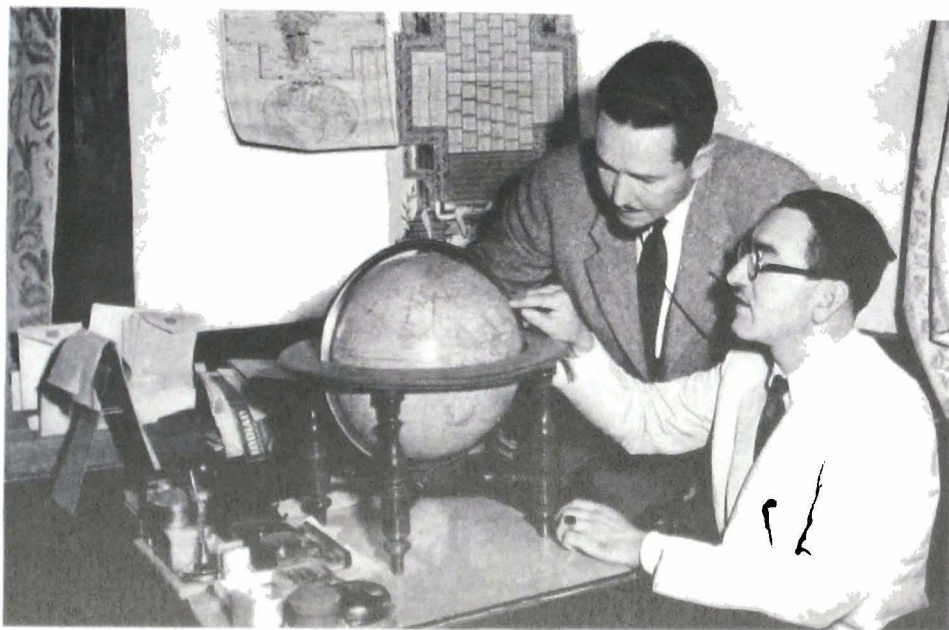
that of soldiers or government officials. Even if you and Mrs. Shor are willing to take the chance, you must think of others. Remember that we have an escort of Afghan soldiers. Certainly it would never do to expose an Afghan soldier to an area where there might be shooting. It might cause an incident."

Rahman Qul Accepts a Trust

I had not, I admit, considered it in just that way. After much persuasion he agreed to interpret for me while I talked to Rahman Qul, the Kirghiz leader.

Rahman Qul speaks Persian, Russian, Pashto, Urdu, and Turki in addition to the Kirghiz dialect, and he can read and write in Persian and Russian. He can even spell out a few words of English. He has a frank, smiling face, and we instinctively felt he could be trusted.

"We have traveled more than 11,000 miles to reach your village," I said, "and here, only two days' ride from our goal, we face disaster. Our escort will go no farther. We wish to leave the escort behind. We put our lives entirely in your hands. If you will help us



A Finger on the Globe Traces an Age-old Trail Through Wakhan Corridor

Mr. Sheer, in Kabul, confers with Syed Kaim Khan Rabbia, Afghanistan's press director (page 673).

reach the Chinese border, we will pay whatever you ask."

The tall Kirghiz smiled and put both his hands on mine.

"I accept your trust," he declared. "I will be responsible for your lives. I can accept no pay. You are our guests."

Receipt for Two Shors

Koshan was not happy about the arrangement, since he felt personally responsible for our safety. We agreed to give him a letter absolving him of all responsibility. But first he wrote a half page of Persian script and presented it to Rahman Qul. The Kirghiz chieftain read it carefully, then signed it. Koshan tucked it into his wallet.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A receipt for the two of you," Koshan said. "You are now out of our hands."

We asked Rahman Qul again to let us pay him. He refused. Then Jean had an idea. From her luggage she took a lapel watch and pressed it into the Kirghiz's big hand.

"Tell him," she said to Koshan, "that it is for his wife."

With a smile and a bow of thanks the chief accepted the gift.

We had a pleasant farewell dinner with Koshan, Rashid, and the commissar. We had

covered some rough ground together, and the next morning, when we said good-bye at dawn, it was with genuine regret.

Our new guide, Tiluh Waldub, looked like a real desperado—tall and slender, with drooping handlebar mustache and brilliant black eyes. With him came two yak pullers.

Rahman Qul came to see us off, and he and Tiluh Waldub huddled for a brief whispered conference. Then we were off across the grassy plain. The yak pullers prodded their lumbering animals into a rapid gait, and we were soon out of sight of the Kirghiz camp.

An hour from the camp Tiluh Waldub pointed out our path in sign language, and indicated he would ride the flank to watch for danger. He loped off across the plain, climbed a low ridge, and disappeared.

Specks in Infinity

We had an uncanny feeling of being remarkably little and alone. The great emptiness of the Pamirs spread around us, punctuated by jutting peaks. There was no sound except for the steady pace of our horses and the measured breathing of the yaks. Jean and I drew closer together, riding boot to boot. The miles fell away as we rode on into that incredible silence (page 679).

Carefully we scanned the crest of the flank-



One by One, Horsemen Cautiously Cross a Teetery Bridge Spanning the Raging Kokcha

Badakhshan's new automobile road here meets an old trail. It is wide enough for just one car, but that's width enough for the province's only automobile, the Governor's. The authors came this way on horse (page 674). Villagers (on foot) have been conscripted for road work.



Paved with Loose Stones, the Narrow Trail Threatened to Slip into the Oxus

Journalist Koshan, who follows Jean Shor, bundles face with handkerchief against the sun. "We should have done the same," say the authors. "Jean's nose was burned, her lips swollen and split." Sometimes the trail rose 2,000 feet above the river. At this dip the caravan rode near Nurs.

ing hills, but not once did our outrider appear. The yak pullers plodded silently behind us; the empty distance stretched ahead. Somehow the feeling grew on me that we were the only people left in the world, that the civilization of skyscrapers and automobiles was all a dream. There was nobody else—nothing else in the world, just the two of us.

As if in answer to my thoughts, Jean reached over and took my hand. Until dusk we rode boot to boot and hand in hand, two tiny specks in an infinite space.

Tiluh Walduh rejoined us at dusk. We camped near a little stream, brewed tea, and shared a flat wheel of Kirghiz bread. Our Kirghiz friends stood watch while we slept.

The next day passed in the same fashion. Hours of silent progress through a silent land. Then, a few hours before sundown, one of our yak pullers pointed to a notch in the mountain wall some two miles ahead of us. "Wakhjir," he said. We clapped each other on the back with joy. The Wakhjir Pass—end of the Wakhan. We had made it, first foreigners in modern times to reach China by this ancient route. We kicked our tired horses into a trot.

Suddenly, less than a mile from the pass, a low, clear whistle sounded through the evening air. We stopped, puzzled. Our yak pullers signaled us to dismount. Still mystified, we complied, and the Kirghiz dragged all the animals into a little gully and motioned to us to join them.

In a few minutes Tiluh Walduh joined us. At his signal we crept around a turn of the gully, and he pointed upward to the crest of the pass. Silhouetted against the darkening sky were three Chinese Turkistan soldiers. We looked questioningly at our guide. We tried to explain to Tiluh Walduh that the soldiers would be friendly. He shook his head. He pointed to them, then toward himself and us, and drew his forefinger across his throat. There was no mistaking his meaning.

We sat quietly beneath the bank until dark. Then we mounted, and for 10 hours we rode across the Pamirs, halting only to let our dead-tired horses rest and graze. At dawn we stopped for a few hours' sleep.

When I awoke, I tried to figure where we might be—possibly some 15 miles east and a little south of our starting point.

By now we were scared to death. I tried to tell Tiluh Walduh we wanted to return to Rahman Qul's camp. Whether he understood I shall never know. He simply shook his head and pointed south to a wall of mountains.

Before noon we again reached the Oxus, here confined in a valley so narrow that we

had to ford the torrent half a dozen times (page 695). We ate the last of our Kirghiz bread and toiled endlessly up the mountainside, leading our horses over shifting masses of shale which constantly gave way beneath their feet.

Toward evening we emerged in a lush, green mountain valley. A single yurt stood in the grassy vale. A fierce-looking Kirghiz, an ancient rifle cradled in his arms and a long knife hanging bare at his side, stood beside the low door. Tiluh Walduh spoke to him, and we heard the name "Rahman Qul" half a dozen times. Finally the Kirghiz signaled us to dismount and led the way inside.

All the Witch Wanted Was Everything

The interior was dirty and barren. A baby sat on the ground near the fire, and as we entered, a little girl came from behind the reed partition. Behind her came the most unpleasant-looking woman we have ever seen, a wrinkled hag with the face of a witch. She greeted our reluctant host with a blast of invective. Even the magic name "Rahman Qul" had no effect. There was no question about our being welcome—we weren't! But there was no place else to go, so we sat down with stiff smiles and warmed ourselves.

I offered everyone cigarettes, and the lady demanded the rest of the pack. I lit her cigarette, and she demanded the box of matches. We washed, and she snatched our soap. Jean put a soothing cream on her face, cracked and swollen from exposure, and our hostess demanded the rest of the jar. We opened tins of meat and cheese from our vanishing emergency rations and shared them. Grandmother insisted on the balance of our stock. She didn't get it.

Avarice sometimes brings its own reward. I took a flash picture of the children and ejected the still-hot bulb on the floor. Our acquisitive friend ignored my warning and snatched up the red-hot bulb, acquiring a slight burn. When I treated her hand, she demanded the remaining ointment!

After our meager supper, Jean and I crawled into our sleeping bags and lay talking softly. Things looked bad. We didn't know where we were, or where we were going. Our present hosts were obviously unfriendly, and the next ones might be worse. Our experience at the Sinkiang border had shaken us badly. Since we were traveling with the Kirghiz, anything that happened to them would undoubtedly happen also to us.

That night, sleeping at 17,000 feet, Jean was bothered by the altitude. Her heart pounded so that she could not sleep lying



Jean Shor Learns About Yurt Life from a Kirghiz Family in Langar

Tribesmen's tents, she reports, are snug and scrupulously clean, but smoky and low-ceilinged ("Life is a little stooped-over"). Babies, thriving on hardships and altitude, are as happy as puppies and as fat as butterballs. Mrs. Shor sits beside a cut of roast lamb. Cups contain yak-butter tea. Iron pot holds yoghurt, the Kirghiz clabber (page 698).

down. She found relief in sitting up, so she slept propped against the wall.

At dawn we broke an inch of ice from a little spring, washed, and made tea. Then came the final blow: Tiluh Walduh took both our hands in his, said a polite "Salaam," and explained, in sign language, that our host for the night would take us on across the towering mountains. Then he waved farewell—our last link with people we knew about.

Off we went with our new guide. For an hour we climbed steadily across grassy meadows. The next hour took us around a great mountain shoulder, still climbing, but now over walls of shale, slippery and dangerous. After two more hours of climbing, we halted for a rest on a tiny grass-covered plateau.

Above us stretched a mile-long snow field, ending its steep ascent in a wall of white nearly 200 yards high. It looked almost impossible to cross, but our guide informed us, with gestures, that it could be done later in

the afternoon. At midday, he indicated, the melting snow and ice made it dangerous. So we rested, sharing another tin of cheese and our last bar of chocolate.

For four hours we fought our way across that slippery, frozen field. Beneath the snow was solid ice, and from somewhere far below came the gurgle of running water.

Four times we were halted by crevasses—jagged, bottomless cracks, one nearly five feet wide—which we and the animals had to jump. The sight of our heavily laden yaks leaping gracefully across those yawning openings was one we shall never forget.

Standing on Top of the World

The last few hundred yards were torture. We crawled on hands and knees, dazed by exhaustion, driven only by the knowledge that we must cross the ridge and reach a lower altitude before dark. A night on that glacial ridge could end only in death.

Somewhere we found strength, not only to move our own tired limbs but to drag the floundering animals behind us. Even the Kirghiz, born and bred on their high plateau, were gasping for breath. On we went, five yards at a time, lying in the snow and gasping between those brief advances. A few final steps, and we stood on top of the world!

We were on the crest of a great mountain range. All around us, as far as the eye could see, lay other mountain chains, their magnificent peaks punctuating the endless distance. Exhausted and gasping, we still could not take our eyes from the panorama of beauty.

For half an hour we rested and stared in awe. We were too tired to go on, but we had to go on. There was no trail ahead of us, only snow. Holding our horses by the bridles, we slid across the edge, floundering and slipping downward through the snow.

Two thousand feet below we reached an incline of shale, and worked our way crabwise down and across it. Long after dark we gouged a shelf out of the shale and slept through a flash blizzard.

Pakistan at Last!

Another day of sliding down shifting shale, still *not knowing where we were bound*. On we went, always down. Suddenly we rounded a narrow wall of rock and saw in a narrow valley far below us a square stone fortress, with the flag of Pakistan flying in the breeze.

Our guide pointed to the fort. "Kalam Darchi," he said. I checked our maps and finally found it, formerly a tiny British outpost in the princely State of Hunza.

The tall Pakistani soldiers of the post spoke a little English and told us that the village of Misgar, five miles down the valley, had a guest bungalow. We hurried onward, and two hours later were warmly greeted by an English-speaking telegraph operator and the mayor. They were not pleased, however, to see our Kirghiz guides. We paid them generously, bade them a grateful farewell, and they started back for their Pamir homeland.

After a warm meal and a long night's sleep we got out our maps, plotted the course we had come, and assayed the results of our journey. We were still only a day's ride from the Chinese Turkistan frontier. It would not be difficult to organize a new caravan in Hunza and continue our journey. We had succeeded in our prime goal of traveling the Wakhan corridor from end to end—the first foreigners in modern times to make the journey from west to east.

Two discoveries were left for us. The first came when, plotting our route on our maps,

we discovered that the final pass we had crossed was the towering Dehli Sang, more than 20,000 feet high! We had reached that great height without knowing where we were and without oxygen equipment of any kind (pages 681, 696).

The Legend of Rahman Qul

The second discovery left us a little surprised. It came the day after our arrival in Misgar. The mayor called on us.

"These Kirghiz men you come with," he said, "belong tribe of Rahman Qul?"

"Yes," we nodded. "Rahman Qul is a very good friend of ours, a wonderful man."

The mayor shook his head. "Rahman Qul very bad man," he said firmly. "He rob caravans, kill many people. Very bad!"

We stared in disbelief. And then he told us a few tales about our benefactor. Two years before, the mayor began, Rahman Qul and his tribe had crossed the Russian Pamirs. There they had robbed a caravan and murdered every man in it. Pursued by the Russians, they had fled into Chinese Turkistan and taken up residence near the border post of Mintaka.

Rahman Qul had become a close friend of the commander of the little Chinese border garrison. Less than a month before we met him he had invited the commander and his garrison of eight men to a lunch on a Mohammedan festival day. While the Chinese were eating, Qul's tribesmen had stolen into the tent behind them and murdered every man in cold blood, the mayor reported. They had looted the garrison of guns, ammunition, horses, and supplies, and fled across the Afghan border to resume residence on the Pamir Plateau.

"For many years this Rahman Qul murder and rob people," the mayor insisted. "Very bad man. Why he no murder you?"

I remembered the night we talked with Rahman Qul in his smoky yurt, high up on the great Pamirs.

"We put our lives entirely in your hands," I had said. And his answer: "I accept your trust."

"Why he no murder you?"

I looked at the mayor and shook my head. "I don't know." I looked at Jean. I could see she agreed with me. We didn't know. Probably we never would know. But to us, Rahman Qul would always be the man who saved our lives.*

* For additional articles on Afghanistan, Chinese Turkistan, Soviet Central Asia, and Hunza, see "NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE Cumulative Index, 1899-1949."