

The Source of the Oxus River: A Journey to the Wakhan Pamir & Across Dilisang Pass to Misgar July-August 2004

by John Mock & Kimberley O'Neil © 2004

In early April 2004, we received a call from Cynthia Amon of W.L. Gore, Inc. informing us that we were recipients of a 2004 Shipton Tilman Grant. Earlier that winter we had submitted an application, which, frankly, we thought nobody would be willing to fund. Our objective was to traverse the length of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor to the source of the Oxus River (Amu Darya) in the Little Pamir near the western base of the Wakhjir Pass and then cross the Dilisang Pass to Misgar village in the upper Hunza Valley of Pakistan's Northern Areas. Simple enough, right?

Although we had spent much of the past twenty-five years living, working and trekking across the great mountain ranges of South Asia, we had never set foot in Afghanistan. Given our track record of reconnoitering unknown mountain passes, we figured that finding a mountain pass not marked on any maps would be easy, but would we really be safe? Afghanistan is not exactly the number one destination for travelers nowadays. Would the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan give two Americans permission to cross their international border while our country was waging a war in Afghanistan? Pakistan, after all, was refusing American troops permission to do just that, despite being an American ally. If we didn't think we could pull it off, we wouldn't have submitted the application. But now that W.L. Gore believed in us too, we were going to have to make it happen.

With just three months to go before we would get on an airplane, we began planning this complex expedition. Sitting in our mountain home in California's Sierra Nevada, we considered our options. The strategy we settled on was simple - tell everybody the truth about what we wanted to do and where we wanted to go. Anything else was too risky. And, for reasons we may never fully understand, all along the way everyone said "yes" to us.

Planning

Politics

To avoid arrest, getting shot, or otherwise creating an international incident, we would need special permission from the governments of both Afghanistan and Pakistan to enter Pakistan via the Dilisang Pass from Afghanistan. The only glitch was the Dilisang Pass is not an open international border crossing.

We were counting on our years of experience living and working in Pakistan, during which we had become very well-known figures with many friends in the government. It seemed like time to call in a few favors. Additionally, John's membership in the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies (AIAS) and the American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS) would provide us with academic credibility and official contacts if needed. We decided to go as high up as necessary to get permission - even to Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf and Afghanistan's President Hamid

Karzai. We just weren't certain exactly how to do that. What we did know is that we were not willing to do anything illegal that might jeopardize our future ability to work and travel in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Jeopardizing our long-term interests for a short-term goal, no matter how appealing, would be a mistake.

We began our permission quest with a letter writing campaign two months in advance of our departure. We wrote the Pakistani Ambassador, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, at the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington D.C. and to the Federal Minister for Tourism, Rais Munir Ahmed, at the Government of Pakistan's Ministry of Sports & Tourism in Islamabad. Although we made numerous follow-up calls to Washington and had friends in Pakistan contact the ministry in Islamabad, we never got a reply to these letters before our departure. But then again we didn't really expect one. Things in Pakistan usually happen face-to-face at the last minute and we knew it. The letters were just a beginning, and although we did not know it at the time, they proved useful later on.

Earlier that spring we had received an invitation from the Government of Pakistan to the "Golden Jubilee Celebrations of K-2 & 51st Anniversary of Nanga Parbat". We were to be official guests of the government in July, the week before we planned to fly to Kabul. We were certain top government officials would be attending the celebration where we hoped to gain access to the right people.

Afghanistan was another matter entirely. We weren't certain where to start our quest for permission. The country was still a "conflict zone," and Kabul's authority over remote areas like Wakhan was uncertain. We secretly kept hoping we wouldn't need any special permission to exit Afghanistan. Why would Afghan officials in Kabul care if we slipped out of Wakhan and into Pakistan? Once we left, we wouldn't be in their charge any longer and as far as we knew, there were no government officials in Wakhan to stop us.

The only other Westerners to cross the Dilisang Pass were Jean and Franc Shor, a husband-and-wife team who recounted their journey in "We Took the High Road in Afghanistan," *National Geographic*, November 1950. Although it had been more than fifty years ago, we were purposefully following in their footsteps. We turned to Jean Bowie Shor's book *After You Marco Polo* to see how they had dealt with Wakhan. The Shors had sought and received written permission for their journey in Kabul from the King of Afghanistan Mohammed Zahir Shah and his Minister of War General Mohammed Omar Khan. Their plan had been to cross the Wakhjir Pass into China, and it was only because of a border war and the subsequent communist takeover of China that they evacuated over Dilisang Pass and ended their journey in Pakistan's Hunza Valley.

We were still pondering what to do when in early May 2004 we received an unexpected invitation to attend a 30-person luncheon in honor of Hamid Karzai to be held in California. Since the King of Afghanistan is in exile and no longer in power, we thought meeting President Karzai would be ideal. Not that we cared, but the guest list was impressive - Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger would be there. We envisioned President Karzai granting permission and presenting us with a very official-looking letter on state letterhead. Who in Afghanistan could refuse us with a letter like this? In the week leading up to the luncheon, we were granted clearance to attend the function by the U.S. Secret Service. But a few days before the luncheon Ronald Reagan died, and both President Karzai and Governor Schwarzenegger attended the funeral, cancelling the luncheon. We didn't give up hope, but it would have been an honor to meet the president.

What About Those Warlords

We knew that whatever authority Afghanistan's central Kabul government had in remote provinces was in the hands of local commandants or "warlords," as they have come to be called. These men were tough, local *mujahideen* commanders who resisted the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980's. In northeastern Afghanistan, where we were going, these commanders also fought against the Taliban government. Some of them were said to be facilitating the lucrative opium-heroin trade now flourishing in Afghanistan. No matter their politics or funding sources, these men were still regarded by local people as heroes who resisted the Russians and fought for a free Afghanistan. The commanders had been in charge for so long that they were the defacto authority. You just can't argue with a man pointing a gun at you. Our route would pass through several warlords' areas, but we weren't certain how we would both steer clear of them and gain their permission to proceed. The good news was that Wakhan, as part of Badakhshan Province, was under control of commandants who were part of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and the Northern Alliance supported the government in Kabul. Maybe the local commandants would acquiesce to permission issued from Kabul.

We did know that the commandant in Ishkashim, the district headquarters and main town along the Amu Darya in Wakhan, was the chief authority for Wakhan with all local commanders under his authority. We even had his name and telephone number - Abdul Wahid Khan. But who the other commandants were, and who was the chief commandant in Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan Province, we had no idea.

We also knew that the Afghan Tourist Organization (ATO), located in Kabul, issued special permits for travel in Wakhan. Although we were told that getting a permit was simply a matter of paying the required fee, we had our doubts. One of our friends, a professor and Afghan specialist, told us of how he had been denied permission to travel to Wakhan without a special permit. We decided that we would have to approach ATO - what other choice did we have? We also decided to involve a Pakistani friend whose brother worked in Wakhan for a small non-governmental aid organization. Perhaps, we thought, working from both ends, we might be able to make our way along the chain of Badakhshan commandants.

How Do You Get There?

When we first considered a trip to Wakhan about three years ago, we had decided we would travel with an old friend as our local counterpart. We met Alam more than ten years ago and had trekked with him across several mountain passes and glaciers in Pakistan. Alam, a Wakhi mountaineer and poet from Pakistan's Chapursan Valley, is related to Wakhi people living in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor. He had visited there recently, and we were sure his family contacts would come in handy. It was his older brother who was working in Wakhan and who knew the Wakhan commandants.

Our plan was for the three of us to fly from Islamabad to Kabul. From there, we would be faced with the drive from Kabul to Badakhshan. Not only was it a journey of several days over rough roads, passing through areas not yet cleared of land mines, but it also passed through multiple warlords' domains. Exposing ourselves to that indeterminable risk seemed pointless - our goal was to traverse Wakhan, not to traverse central Afghanistan. But what way to best get to the mountains? The Wakhan Corridor is in the far northeastern part of the country. Faizabad, the capital of

Badakhshan, was the nearest town with an airstrip and we decided we would have to fly.

Some checking showed that there was no domestic flight service from Kabul to Faizabad. Another professor and friend even suggested that we start our journey from Tajikistan! We read in the 2nd edition of *Crosslines Essential Field Guide to Afghanistan*, just published in May 2004, that several private companies provided humanitarian air service to Faizabad. It was a stretch, but we would try to get on one of these flights.

Maps: Where's the Dilisang Pass?

The seventy-five to 100 miles of the upper Wakhan, which comprises all of the Little Pamir, lies above the highest year-round settlements. The Little Pamir has two distinct branches: to the northeast is Chaqmaqtin Lake, which is the source of the Murghab River, and to the east is the Wakhjir Valley. The route to Dilisang Pass branches south off of the Wakhjir Valley.

The Wakhjir Valley is of geographical and geological interest, where the eastern edge of the Hindukush Range meets the northern tip of the Karakoram Range and the southeastern extent of the Pamir Range. The region is sometimes referred to as the Pamir Knot.

Dilisang Pass, once used by the Kyrgyz nomads of the Little Pamir and the Burusho people of Misgar in Pakistan's Northern Areas, is now in disuse and is essentially unknown. The pass is not marked on maps. H.W. Tilman, who had crossed the Wakhjir Pass from China into Afghanistan in 1947, remarked in his book *Two Mountains and a River* that from ". . . some yurts [yurts] on the south bank of the [Wakhjir] river where the Kama Su nallah joins it . . . there is a pass leading . . . over the Hindu Kush to Misgar . . ." This was the only description we found that indicated where the Dilisang Pass might be.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) published a seven-map series, the 1:500,000 *Pakistan Satellite Image Maps*. Two of these maps, *N.W. Frontier Pakistan Map I-2587-B* and *Northern Areas Pakistan Map I-2587-C*, show most of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor and Little Pamir, including the Wakhjir Valley, and the adjacent areas of Pakistan. These satellite images provided a graphic overview of the mountain range we would cross. Although we didn't know precisely where Dilisang Pass was, we spent hours studying the satellite imagery and evaluating all the possibilities.

For the field, we photocopied the relevant sections of the U.S. Defense Mapping Agency's topographic maps for pilots: the 1:500,000 *Tactical Pilotage Chart (TPC) G-6B* and *G-7A*. A map at a scale of 1,500:000 isn't much on the ground, but we continued to look at this map for an overview of our route.

We also had a photocopy of a sketch map called "Pamir Und Wakhan Östlich Qala Pandjia (NE - Afghanistan)" from *Die Kirghisen Des Afghanischen Pamir*, a book by Austrians Rémy Dor and Clas Naumann published in 1978. This sketch map included many local place names - including all the side valleys. Was Dilisang at the head of the side valley called Mohammad Nazar or the Kamansu? From looking at the satellite imagery and reading Tilman's account, we were certain it could only be one of these two side valleys, but the Austrian sketch map placed "Kotal-e-Delsang" between 15 and 20 kilometers farther east at the very head of the Wakhjir Valley. Crossing their "Kotal-e-Delsang" would clearly involve extensive glacier travel through the highest elevations along the Afghan-Pakistani border, yet this was the only map known to us that indicated the Dilisang Pass. Could it be right? It seemed unlikely.

The maps we coveted were the 1,100:000 topographic maps with 40-meter contour intervals made by the Russian military, labelled in Russian. These maps cost \$75 each, which was way beyond our budget, and we would need several map sheets to cover our route. Fortunately, the University of California at Berkeley map library had all the sheets we needed. As a Berkeley alumni and current University of California faculty member, John was able to copy the digitized map files and later print them at a friend's architectural office using their oversized color printer. Although these detailed maps did not show the Dilisang nor any other pass leading from the Wakhjir into Pakistan, having these Russian map sheets was key to our successfully finding Dilisang Pass. From west to east, the map sheets are:

- *J 43-99* shows from Sarhad to Borak
- *J-43-100 Langar* shows from confluence of Borak and Wakhan Rivers, up Shpodkis Valley, across Uween-e-Sar and Aqbelis, to Kashch Goz.
- *J-43-101 Chakmaktin* shows the Wakhjir Valley east from the confluence of the Bozai Darya and Wakhjir River to the Wakhjir Pass and the glacier with the ice cave, and the Little Pamir north to Chaqmaqin Lake
- *J 43-113 Babakhundi* shows the Kamansu Valley south across Dilisang Pass into Pakistan.

Speak to People in Their Own Language

John speaks fluent Urdu, the lingua-franca of Pakistan, and is also competent in Afghan Dari Persian, the lingua-franca of northern Afghanistan. And, as a linguistic anthropologist, John is the only American and one of only a handful of scholars worldwide who knows Wakhi, the language spoken in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor. John's language skills and cultural familiarity always pave the way. In Wakhan, the only explanation local people had when meeting this Wakhi-speaker was that he was from Kanjut, a local name used to describe Hunza, which has a long history of interaction with the Wakhi people of Wakhan. We didn't dispel these beliefs and said, "Yes, we're going home to Kanjut." It made sense to them and to us.

The Journey

Islamabad: From Tourism to Interior Ministries

Mid July found us in Islamabad packed and as ready as we'd ever be to get on a flight to Kabul. Amir, a Pakistani friend who was now operating a travel agency in Kabul, had booked rooms for us and would meet us at the airport. But seventy-two hours left before our flight, we still had no permission for our expedition. This was not what we'd planned on and we were determined to keep trying. We had received no response to our formal written request to the Federal Minister for Tourism for permission. Let's at least, we figured, get their reply. But how to contact a Federal Minister on short notice?

We called on our long-time friends at Nazir Sabir Expeditions, the office of the renowned Pakistani mountaineer Nazir Sabir. They contacted the ministry and learned that the federal minister

had received our letter some weeks previously, but would only meet us if we wrote him to request a meeting! Mushir Anwar at Nazir Sabir Expeditions wrote an articulate, flattering and wonderfully persuasive letter to Rais Munir Ahmed, the Federal Minister for Tourism, requesting a meeting and faxed it over. To our delight, he granted us a meeting for the next day, Friday, July 16th at 11:30 a.m.

Sultan Khan from Nazir's office picked us up in a new rented Toyota Corolla. "You need to have a nice car when going to ministries," he observed. We drove across Islamabad to the government ministries, where the guards at the gate looked at our appointment slip, glanced under the car with their long-handled mirrors, peered in at us, and waved us through the gate and into the fenced compound. We made our way among the many buildings to "C" Block and parked. The driver stayed with the car as we walked inside. After calling upstairs to verify our appointment, the guards at the building entrance handed us a pass.

We took the elevator to the top floor and walked down the air-conditioned, carpeted hallway to the office of the minister's personal assistant (PA). Taking our visiting cards, he went in to the minister's office while we waited outside. The PA returned, announced we were expected, and asked us to follow him into the minister's office. Behind a large, dark well-polished desk, wearing a vest over his fully buttoned half-collar shirt, sat the Federal Minister for Tourism, his aquiline face inscrutable beneath a black lamb's wool peaked hat. After exchanging pleasantries and briefing him on who we were and the purpose of our visit, he asked for John's passport, glanced through it and remarked,

"You come to Pakistan often." John replied that he'd been doing so for more than twenty-five years and had studied at Punjab University in Lahore. The minister flinched slightly, involuntarily, as though that information surprised him. Then, looking again at the passport, he remarked that he saw no problem with our request, as we had multiple-entry visas, valid for mountaineering, and that we could, of course, enter Pakistan at any checkpoint!

"But," he quickly added, "this seems like it is actually a matter for the Interior ministry."

Our momentary elation vanished. Our ship has run aground on the shoals of bureaucracy, and it was back to a non-existent Plan B for us. But lo and behold, as the words we thought spelled doom for our expedition left the minister's lips, he reached under his desk, pulled out his "2004 Green Book," the official directory of Islamabad government telephone numbers, and dialed the Secretary of the Interior. The secretary and the minister conferred, and much to our surprise we heard the minister say,

"Yes, that's just what I thought. No difficulty at all. They have proper visas, and can enter Pakistan at any checkpoint."

Evidently, the minister had already made up his mind about our request and this meeting was a show staged for our benefit. But the key was to get their assurance in writing. Well aware of this need, the minister concluded his chat with the secretary, saying,

"I'll send them right over." We had an immediate appointment with the Additional Secretary for Political Affairs (External), Abdul Rauf. Speed was of the essence, because the time for Friday prayers was fast approaching. We had less than forty-five minutes to get this done.

We shuttled across the complex to "R" Block and got an entry permit slip from the three door-keepers inside. Passing through the metal detector (much more security here in the Ministry of Interior - we're not in "C" Block anymore) we took the elevator to the 4th floor, the Narcotics

Control floor. Uniformed armed guards in the hallway where we got off the elevator examined our entry slip and escorted us down the hall to the correct office.

Inside Rauf *Sahib*'s office, a map of Afghanistan adorned the wall, the sole indication that we had arrived in the Afghan wing of the External Political Affairs division of the Ministry of Interior, a very serious place. But Rauf *Sahib*, too, seemed favorably inclined to our proposal, and agreed that a letter was a good idea. He telephoned to his Joint Secretary superior for confirmation, but the Joint Secretary had been instructed by the Secretary, and so the Additional Secretary instructed us to see the Deputy Secretary, Political Affairs (External) [Afghanistan], Arshad Mahmood. We were taken down the hall to the Deputy Secretary's office, where three cronies perched on chairs in front of the Deputy Secretary's desk. We sat on a brown couch against the wall in this rather drab but air-conditioned office.

Arshad *Sahib* examined John's passport while the three underlings debated the merits of our proposal.

"But who will ensure your security in Afghanistan?" asked one of them, "These are dangerous people. You remember what happened to poor Daniel Pearl. They pretend to be your friend until they have you where they want you, and then . . ." He trailed off ominously. All we could do was reiterate our years of experience with assurances that we were not likely to be led astray.

Their debate moved on to the wording of the required letter. What should it say? The Section Officer, who would actually have to type and sign the letter, was summoned. Standing at the side of the Deputy Secretary, he hemmed and hawed about the wording, trying his utmost to avoid having to type this letter to which he would have to affix his name. But by now it was past 12:30 p.m., and the call for prayers had been made from the nearby mosque. Time to close the office for the day. The Deputy Secretary stood, already rolling his sleeves in preparation for his ablutions prior to prayer, and brusquely ordered the Section Officer to write the letter and sign it. Off went the Deputy Secretary with his three cronies, and we rode with the Section Officer in the elevator up to the non-air conditioned and decidedly more shabby 6th floor, where Chaudhary Muhammad Khan, Section Officer, typed out the requisite letter stating that we could enter Pakistan at any entry point/check post. Amazing! Chaudhary *Sahib* inked Kim's passport number onto the letter. We'd done it! In less than two hours, we had official permission to cross the Dilisang Pass from Afghanistan into Pakistan, where we would report to the Sost entry checkpoint.

Later that afternoon, much to our surprise, Alam announced he had second thoughts about accompanying us because the letter did not mention his name! We reiterated that Sultan had told the Deputy Secretary that we would be accompanied by a local person, and that the Deputy Secretary thought that a good, even essential thing, but Alam was still perturbed. He stated flatly that unless his name was added to the letter, he refused to cross the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan, and furthermore, he refused to return alone from Wakhan, fearing that he might be arrested if he returned without the two Americans. This, of course, threatened to scuttle our entire program. We had no time left. Our flight to Kabul was the next morning. But, we agreed to return to the Ministry of Interior and request that his name be added. We persuaded Sultan that he, too, must accompany us, though he was highly reluctant to risk a second venture into deepest bureaucracy.

That evening, after dining on *kabobs* and *nan*, we bought food supplies at one of the upscale markets in Jinnah Super. Coffee, macaroni, tea, milk powder, porridge - dry food that would sustain us through Wakhan. Very little besides MREs (meals-ready-to-eat) was available in Kabul, we'd

been told.

At 9 a.m. the next day, we breezed into the ministry compound and returned to “R” Block. Alam waited in the car with the driver, while John and Sultan went in, taking Alam’s passport and Pakistani National Identity Card with them. But the trio of door-keepers would not give us a pass to see the Section Officer on the 6th floor or the Deputy Secretary on the 4th floor. Without an appointment we were rebuffed. Realizing we would not get by these three men, we left the building and once outside, Sultan began working his cell phone. He soon had things smoothed out, and we re-entered the Ministry of Interior and proceeded to the 4th floor, proper slip in hand. Inside the Deputy Secretary’s office, we handed him Alam’s passport and identity card, explained our dilemma and requested him to add Alam’s name to the letter.

“But where is this person?” he asked. “Let me see him.”

Sultan leapt to his feet and headed down to the Corolla, returning with Alam. The occasion called for some ceremony and soon we were all served cups of green tea with sweet biscuits on the side. The Deputy Secretary and his several cronies conferred and decided they should consult their Joint Secretary. After taking our letter and Alam’s documents to his superior, the Deputy Secretary returned and pronounced that there was no need for Alam’s name to be on the letter, because after all, Alam is Pakistani, and cannot be kept out of his own country. Realizing that no new letter will be forthcoming, nor the existing letter amended, John enquired of the Deputy Secretary if he might be contacted in the event of any problem. He could hardly say no, and we carefully noted his name, title, office and telephone number as he reassured us that we could proceed with our program. Thanking him, we quickly got up and left the office before anyone could change their mind. We had seriously tempted fate by twice entering the Pakistani bureaucracy, but somehow, we had succeeded. It was now 11:00 a.m. and we had to get to the airport.

We quickly settled our bill at the guest house, loaded our bags into the same Corolla, thanked Sultan as we bid him farewell, and headed to the Islamabad airport for our flight to Kabul. Check-in at the airport went smoothly. Waiting for our flight, we glanced through the newspaper and came across an item stating that the U.S. and Pakistan had just signed a debt relief agreement worth \$495 million. Perhaps the remarkable good will and cooperation we received from the Pakistani government came on those nearly half a billion dollar coat tails!

Kabul to Faizabad: Meeting General Warduk

Peering out the window of our Pakistan International Airlines’ Boeing 737 flight we saw Afghanistan from the air. Along the Kabul River the land was green, but barren everywhere else. The Peshawar-Jalalabad-Kabul road, mostly unpaved, wound towards Kabul. A few vehicles were visible on it. Flying low, we came in over the airport and touched down into a scary landscape. Rusting vehicle hulks, bodies without motors or wheels lined the runway. Old, inoperative aircraft were parked along the tarmac, which was potholed in places. Many International Security Force (INSF) cargo planes sat near the terminal where our plane taxied to a halt. We disembarked and walked across the tarmac to the terminal where a huge portrait of Ahmed Shah Masood welcomed us to Afghanistan. No real customs check here - our passports were stamped and we walked out of the airport with our bags.

The idea of going to Kabul was more mentally taxing than the reality. We had very little idea what to expect and were relieved to see Amir with his red Pajero and driver. Our long drive into

town took us through an upscale neighborhood and past the United States Embassy. All along the road were walled compounds, with concrete vehicle barriers at their corners and a heavily armed security presence at their solid steel blast gates. The rest of Kabul was dusty and mud-walled, but clearly “under construction.” Our guest house, the Park Palace, was also a walled compound with a steel gate and armed guards. No sign marked its presence. The rooms were clean, with attached bathroom, a big bed, ceiling fan and satellite TV. The other guests all seemed to be aid and development workers and election officials, here for a long stay.

The next morning John and Amir went to pick up our tickets for the Kabul-Faizabad flight booked on PACTEC, one of the humanitarian air service companies operating in Afghanistan. The small ten-passenger plane had strict weight limits - 20 kilograms per person, including carry-on. Because we were carrying food for our trip, our luggage totaled 90 kilograms - 30 kilograms overweight. At the PACTEC office, John tried to buy a fourth seat, but the flight was full. PACTEC told us we would have to call them at 8 p.m. the night before the flight to confirm the exact departure time once they received their amended schedule form Regional Air Movement Control in Qatar.

Holding Faizabad tickets, but with our travel logistics still very unclear, John and Amir drove to the Afghan Tourist Organization (ATO) near the airport to get a Wakhan permit. Rusted vehicle hulks lay behind the building, typical debris in the post-war Kabul landscape. Dr. Hessamuddin Hamrah, the ATO president, welcomed us into his spacious office, graced by Marco Polo sheep horns mounted on the wall. After listening to our program, the president called in his assistant, Basir. The three of us, John, Amir, and Basir, went to Basir’s much smaller office, where we met Rauf and Khalil, ATO guides. Basir explained that we would need an ATO guide with us as far as Sarhad, the end of the road in Wakhan. After that, they agreed, we could proceed with local guides. The rate for an ATO guide was U.S. \$60 per day, plus transportation costs. Basir said we would need to pay the guide for ten days, which included his return to Kabul. Fortunately, Basir was sure that a seat for the guide could be managed on KamAir, a new domestic airline that had just days ago begun commercial service between Kabul and Faizabad. At 4,000 afghanis for the round-trip ticket, it was slightly less expensive than our PACTEC seats. Basir appointed Abdul Khalil to be our guide, and John advanced Khalil US\$200 - \$80 for his KamAir ticket and \$120 so he could purchase what supplies he would need. Basir and Rauf typed out a letter to the Ministry of Interior requesting permission for our itinerary. They carefully examined our letter from the Pakistani government and proceeded to prepare an even more detailed letter that actually mentioned we would depart Afghanistan from Wakhan and arrive in Pakistan at Sost, the Pakistani immigration post. John and Amir departed ATO with Khalil and dropped him at KamAir to buy his ticket. He would then take our paperwork to the Ministry of Interior and the following afternoon come to our guest house.

The next day Khalil arrived, greeted us, and announced we should all go together to the Ministry of Interior and bring our passports. Khalil hailed a local taxi outside our guest house - a beat-up old Corolla - and we drove to Passport Lane, one block from the ministry. We could go no closer, and we walked the last block. At the entrance was a mandatory frisk search, with separate rooms for men and women. Kim proceeded into the women’s room, while Khalil, Alam and John went into the men’s. Reunited inside, we headed toward the rear of the large compound, past INSF Stryker armored vehicles, artillery placements, and too many armed uniformed Afghan army soldiers to count. At the rear of the compound, we entered a small building, passed through another security point, and came into an office where two uniformed army men and a uniformed woman typist were

busily working on our papers. Khalil sat near one of the men, and they began to whisper busily, no doubt about us. One of the men struck up a conversation in broken English with John as he made entries in Persian in a large ledger book. Uncertain, we sat, hopefully. Suddenly a thick-set man with short, almost spike-ish hair and exaggerated wild eyes came in. His green army uniform had four stars on the red shoulder boards.

“Who wants to go to Wakhan?” he asked. John stood and shook his hand, and he continued to hold onto John’s hand. “Come with me,” he ordered. “All of us?” John asked. “All,” he said, “who want to go to Wakhan.” Holding John by the hand, he led us into his office. “Wakhan,” he asked, “so who will look after your security there?” John replied that United Nations personnel who drove to Sarhad in Wakhan last year reported it to be the safest place in Afghanistan.

“Where are you from?” he asked. “California,” replied John. “Which part?” “Santa Cruz,” replied John as he handed him his University of California, Santa Cruz business card. As he took the card from John, his head trembled slightly in an involuntary, nearly steady tremor. His hands remained calm, though, so his shake seemed not Parkinsonism, but perhaps from a wound. “I’ve been there,” he remarked, “drove trucks through there. I lived in the San Fernando Valley. Reseda. My family still lives there. I’m a U.S. citizen, a dual national. We are colleagues, you and I, from the same place. I should do what I can to help you.”

We were astonished at what we were hearing. This guy was speaking English with a California accent! He liked us, as though we were neighbors or something. “My name is General Zalmay Warduk, Head of Foreign Affairs at the Ministry of the Interior. Here’s my phone number,” and he wrote his name and number on a piece of paper which he handed to John. “Anytime you guys are in Kabul, give me a call. We’ll have dinner together.” Later we learned that he was also former Deputy Minister of Defence and a mujahideen hero.

It was too much. This guy looked like the mad scientist/renege general from some Hollywood ‘B’ movie, but here he was, the biggest general in Kabul, our friend. “Really, anything I can do to help you guys, you just let me know. Your papers are ready. I already approved and signed them. I just wanted to meet you guys.”

We departed the Ministry of Interior with a letter, containing our names and passport numbers, that declared we would travel to Wakhan for three weeks, and then exit Wakhan to Sost, Pakistan! Alam was pleased to read his name on a list at last. We stopped to make multiple photocopies, one for each of us and many extras. With all these permits, we were now just too legit to quit, and on our way to some kind of real adventure.

Early the next morning our alarm rang, even though our flight was not scheduled to depart until 11:20 a.m. Khalil was flying to Faizabad on KamAir, and John went with Khalil to the airport. Our ATO guide had agreed to carry one food duffel so that we would meet the strict weight limit of our humanitarian air service flight. Khalil had almost no baggage himself, so it was easy for him. The KamAir flight, scheduled for 7:30 a.m., had not even arrived in Kabul until 8:00 a.m. The check-in was fast - KamAir had no counter and no scale - just a guy with a list taking tickets in one corner of the Kabul airport departure area. No one even looked at the bright yellow duffel holding our food, and Khalil had to put the baggage tag on it himself. Off he went, and not long after, Kim and Alam arrived to meet John at the airport.

Our PACTEC flight was departing from a separate location, so we trooped out across the runway and sat in the shade of the PACTEC hanger. The staff meticulously weighed our bags, our

handbags and even us! The twin-engine turbo-prop Beechcraft King Air 200 would carry ten passengers plus pilot and co-pilot over the Hindukush Range to Faizabad. We got in, fastened our seat belts and took off, climbing rapidly to 24,000 feet. It was a one-hour flight to Faizabad, which had no terminal and a runway covered by linked metal plates - the kind used by militaries for quickly establishing a hard-surface runway. We hitched a ride into town with a Toyota pick-up truck operated by a French humanitarian medical service that had brought two people to the airport. They took our seats on the PACTEC flight, which continued on to Kunduz and Taluqan.

Faizabad, the capital of Badakshan Province, lay along the Kokcha River. Dry hills rose above the town, which was several kilometers from the airport. We passed through a long bazaar as we wound into Faizabad. At the center of the market we came to the public hotel, but it was not for us. The driver suggested that we should go to the government guest house near the river. We hired a van in the market and soon were walking up the several flights of concrete stairs to the Pamer Club, a newly decorated guest house perched on a giant rock that stuck out into the Kokcha River. "Good for security," remarked Alam.

The Pamer Club turned out to be the former residence of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik leader who was once president of Afghanistan and belonged to the Northern Alliance that fought with the Americans to defeat the Taliban. We settled into our room overlooking the river and asked for some food. We were the first guests of this place, and we didn't mind the lack of electricity, as it was clean, pleasant, and evidently secure. After *kabobs*, *nan* and *pulao* for lunch, Alam and Khalil headed into the bazaar for kerosene, soap, utensils and sugar. Kerosene proved hard to find. In Badakshan, people were burning diesel fuel in their lamps, and kerosene could be found only at a shop near the airport, where it was being sold as 'aviation fuel.' That afternoon, we began negotiations with a young driver of a Toyota TownAce 4WD van to take us to Sarhad. He had been there before, he told us, and we agreed on a price of \$400 - expensive, but we had no other options for the three-day drive.

Faizabad to Sarhad: The End of the Road in the Wakhan

There were no jeeps or other rugged vehicles for hire in Faizabad. All the best vehicles and drivers were working for aid organizations - UNOPS, the United Nations Office of Project Services, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the Aga Khan Development Network. So we had to settle for the little 4WD van. Idris, the young driver, turned out to be a relative of the driver for the French aid organization who brought us from the airport into town. Idris assured us he knew the way to Wakhan.

The next morning, Khalil took our permit letter from General Warduk to the Badakshan authorities, and returned with letters from them granting us permission to travel to Wakhan and the Little Pamir. Thank you General Warduk. We loaded our bags into the van, paid our bill (a staggering \$130), and set out on the rough dirt road for Baharak, the only major town and bazaar between Faizabad and Wakhan. We hoped to reach Ishkashim, the district headquarters of Wakhan, located along the Amu Darya by evening. Though the countryside looked peaceful, we kept in mind a warning we read in Kabul, "Do not walk off the road to find a bush to spring a leak behind - you may walk into a minefield." Good advice. Along the way we passed the occasional shell of a tank or an armored personnel carrier, grim reminders that war had raged here, too.

Baharak, a two-hour drive from Faizabad, had a big bazaar. We stopped at the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) compound and asked about two Pakistani friends who were working there. They, however, had left on home leave, and we drove on. The villages beyond Baharak had one crop ripening in their fields - opium. Harvest was underway, and Khalil told us that Pakistani smugglers had come into these villages now to purchase the raw opium, which would be converted to heroin in labs along the Pakistani-Afghan border. Village men, carefully incising the poppy bulbs to allow the gummy resin to ooze out, hardly noticed us as we drove by. Too apprehensive to stop, we kept driving. Opium is a multi-billion dollar crop for Afghanistan and with that kind of money on the line, smugglers might not hesitate to eliminate a couple of nosy Americans.

As we drove higher in elevation, the poppies were still in bloom and not yet ripe for harvest. The fields of maroon flowers were gorgeous. Occasional fields had red and white flowers. Badakshan, one of the primary opium producing districts of Afghanistan, seemed to have no restriction on growing, and farmers had gone almost exclusively for poppy production. We drove for hours alongside field after field.

The rough track wound upwards through granite gorges where waterfalls tumbled down cliff faces. Low clouds blocked our view of the 7,000-meter Hindukush peaks of Noshaq and Tirich Mir on the Pakistani border. We reached a grassy, well-watered plain at about 8,000 feet. The village of Zebak was near here, from where a road headed over the Dorah Pass to Chitral in Pakistan. This was a major *mujahideen* route during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. We reached the top of our climb, near 9,000 feet, and began descending towards the Amu Darya and Ishkashim.

It was nearing 5:00 p.m. when we entered Ishkashim's small bazaar and turned right at the solitary crossroads. We passed the government guesthouse on the outskirts of the bazaar and went down to the AKDN compound. Khalil told us that camping in Ishkashim was not safe. Opium smugglers operated here, taking drugs across the river into Tajikistan. We could see large, well-lit buildings and vehicles driving on paved roads across the river in Tajikistan. But here in Afghanistan, the roads were rough and electricity was provided by small portable generators.

At the AKDN compound, we parked our vehicle, greeted the staff, and arranged to stay the night in their small guest house. Soon we were invited for dinner of meat and potato stew with slabs of Afghani bread, and we talked about Wakhan over dinner with the AKDN staff.

Beyond Ishkashim, the road through Wakhan was decidedly rougher. Built just a few years ago by AKDN, it had seen no real maintenance since. There were no bridges spanning the rivers that pour down the northern flanks of the Hindukush from glaciers high above. Vehicles must have high clearance to drive through these torrents. Four particularly large streams lie ahead, and the AKDN staff was skeptical about our little van getting through. They named the villages where we would face difficult river crossings - Khandud, Qila Panja, Wardi and Issik. Idris drove back into Ishkashim to fill his fuel cans with diesel, and Khalil took one of the Faizabad letters to the Wakhan district authorities. They soon returned, bringing a young boy with them. He was the son of Pir Shah Ismail, the political head of Wakhan and the spiritual leader of the Isma'ili Muslim population of Wakhan. The boy had finished school in Ishkashim and wanted to go to his father's house in Qila Panja. We made room for him in our van and departed Ishkashim.

Following the southern bank of the Amu Darya, our road was just a track over the stony river bed. By noon we reached Khandud, a large village, and stopped for lunch at the home of Mullah Mohammad, a Wakhi man who had traveled to Pakistan. Khalil took his second Faizabad letter to

the local commandant and returned with a hand-written note for the commandant in Qila Panja.

Beyond Khandud, we came to the first difficult river. Idris took one look at it and said his vehicle could not cross the stream. "Perhaps in the morning?" we asked, but Idris had lost his desire to go on. We returned to Khandud and Mullah Mohammad's home. Idris wanted to go back to Faizabad, but he also wanted to get paid the entire amount, even though we were still a day's drive from Sarhad and the end of the road. He had never been beyond Ishkashim, and had no idea about the road to Sarhad. Nothing was resolved, and we pitched our tent on a grassy terrace beside Mullah Mohammad's house. Our hosts prepared a feast for dinner - rice *pulao*, chicken, potatoes, yogurt and nan. After dinner, they hauled out a TV and DVD player and proceeded to show Bollywood films dubbed in Persian. When they switched to Iranian music videos showing bikini-clad women, we thanked our hosts and went outside to our tent. Here in Wakhan, among Wakhi people, we were at last safe from the drug mafia and Taliban remnants.

We slept soundly in the fresh air, and enjoyed a big breakfast of bread, butter and tea in Mullah Mohammad's home. It was clear that Idris would not continue and that Khalil would also return with him. We liked Khalil, who had worked hard on our behalf. But he could not risk getting stranded in Wakhan. Khalil told Idris he could have the full \$400, but that Idris must then find another van to take us to Sarhad, and pay for that van from the \$400! Idris was not happy. The Khandud traffic policeman also came and took Idris aside. In his green uniform and tall-brimmed white officer's hat, he was a curious presence in Khandud, where there was almost no traffic. But he lent his authority and told Idris that he could not just abandon us. The traffic policeman brought another driver, who agreed to take us to Sarhad in his Toyota Hi-Ace for \$150. It was a bigger vehicle with higher clearance, and the driver had been to Sarhad. But Idris refused to accept just \$250 for driving us from Ishkashim to Khandud and demanded \$300. Finally, we explained to Khalil that we only had \$400 for transport and another \$400 left to pay to him. Of the \$400 for transport we would have to pay \$150 to get to Sarhad, which left \$250 for Idris. Khalil, who was both quick-witted and generous, understood that the only way he would get back to Faizabad was if he took \$50 of his \$400 and gave it to Idris.

"It is enough", he said, "but let me have the full \$650 now. If I pay Idris his money now, he will find a way to leave me before we reach Faizabad. I will hold all the money and pay him \$300 when we reach Faizabad. For me, \$350 is good."

We gave Khalil the \$650 and loaded our bags into the larger Toyota van. We could not have gotten this far without Khalil, and we fondly bid him farewell. He said he would take the bus from Faizabad back to Kabul, and save the air ticket expense, as well as the lodging expense in Faizabad, thereby more than making up for the \$50 he would give Idris. He was happy, and we were finally on our way again.

The Toyota Hi-Ace crossed the river easily, whose water level was now much lower than yesterday afternoon, and we continued to Qila Panja. Pir Shah Ismail's home was large, with a shaded garden. We sat inside, and had delicious yogurt and bread. People stopped continuously to greet Pir Sahib, a mild, soft-spoken but decisive middle-aged man. He clearly was well-respected and wielded considerable authority. He was grateful to us for bringing his son from Ishkashim and invited us to stay, but we were eager to move on. We presented him with a small watermelon we had purchased in Faizabad and he gave us each knitted woolen knee-high stockings of typical Wakhi design. He was very glad to meet an American who knew Wakhi language, and as we departed,

embraced John, kissing him lightly on the cheek.

Just beyond Pir Sahib's compound, the local commandant, armed with an automatic rifle, stopped us. We showed him our letter from Khandud and he waved us on. Thank you General Warduk, thank you Khalil!

Qila Panja sits at the confluence of the Wakhan and Pamir Rivers. The Pamir River descends from the Big Pamir and Lake Sarikol. We followed the larger and wider Wakhan River upstream towards the Little Pamir. Our drivers were two young Pathans from Kabul, here, they said, to make money. They soon proved themselves, however, to be masters at getting the vehicle stuck. They were abysmal drivers and had little idea about how to drive through sand and mud. We just hoped they didn't plunge the van off the narrow road into the raging river below! By evening, we were finally nearing Sarhad. Here, the river braided across an enormous silty plain, remnants of a former lake bed. Verdant grass rimmed the borders of the plain, with occasional Wakhi households perched on the hillside. Cows, sheep and goats, and occasional yaks and two-humped Bactrian camels grazed the grassy verge. Near one village named Chilkand, the villagers had blocked the road because beyond, they told us, the road was washed out and we could not proceed. We were only three kilometers from Sarhad, but we would have to spend the night at Chilkand. The elevation was now higher than 3,000 meters and we relished the thought of sleeping in our tent. It had taken us eight hours to drive 100 kilometers, about 12 kph!

We camped at Chilkand, where a huge rock rose above the river bed. The Russians, we were told, built their base on top of it. As usual in a Wakhi settlement, a large bowl of yogurt arrived for us, and the local people told us that there was another vehicle track to Sarhad running between the massive rock and the river.

In the morning, our two Kabul drivers got the vehicle stuck several times in the soft turf near the river bed and finally, half way between Chilkand and Sarhad, became irrevocably mired in the boggy ground. It was the end of the road for us. We happily unloaded our bags, picked them up, and carried them on thirty minutes to Sarhad. On a grassy knoll next to the village, we pitched our tent. On the other side of the settlement we found a mildly sulphurous hot spring, enclosed in a bath house. It would be our last hot bath in weeks, and for just 10 afghanis, we were clean. Our friends from Chilkand organized a yak for our onward journey, and we enjoyed a rest day in Sarhad.

"Come to my home, meet my wife and family, take pictures!" proclaimed one man. A young boy stopped at our tent to offer us a trout he had just caught in the river. Shy young girls offered to bring spring water for us to drink. All in all, Sarhad was a friendly village, but the headman told us that infant mortality was high - more than a hundred children died last winter. UNICEF had just begun operating schools in tents in Chilkand, and a small British NGO was attempting to begin basic health care. Remote Sarhad, which means 'border' lay just north of the grassy Broghil Pass, which leads into Pakistan. The Wakhi people here still have problems with opium addiction, and food is not sufficient to feed everyone year round.

We had been told that last year people in Wakhan accepted, in fact wanted, Pakistani rupees and that nobody wanted afghanis, as the Afghanistan currency was called. But this year was different. Supplies were now beginning to come from Afghanistan, and in Sarhad, people wanted afghanis, or "Karzais" as they fondly termed them after the current president of Afghanistan. We only had 750 afghanis when we left Kabul - about \$16 - and now we had even less. We had a suitcase load of Pakistani rupees that weren't going to help much here. The local economy was rebounding (even

though the Afghani economy was highly overinflated because most transactions were conducted in U.S. dollars), and local people had less of a need for rupees because there was less need for them to travel to Pakistan since the fall of the Taliban and arrival of international aid two years ago. We managed to exchange some of our rapidly-dwindling supply of \$100 bills for Afghani notes to pay the Wakhi man who would accompany us to the Little Pamir and whose yak would carry our bags. So far, so good, and with the blessing of esteemed war hero General Warduk and revered religious leader Pir Shah Ismail, we set out the next morning.

Wakhan: Trekking from Sarhad to Kashch Goz

Finally after months of planning and anticipation, we were on foot heading to the Little Pamir. Even though we'd spent almost two days in Sarhad and met nearly everyone in the village, questions arose on the morning of our departure. "How will you go to the Pamir?" The question puzzled us at first until we realized they were talking about a woman walking to the Pamir. Local Wakhi women go to summer pastures with their husbands and children as far as three days' journey beyond Sarhad. But, they only ride on yaks. And, the Pamir - in the local context - referred to the Little Pamir, which was the territory of the Kyrgyz not the Wakhi. Wakhi women don't go to the Pamir. We assured our new friends that we were both capable of walking to the Pamir, but they were skeptical.

We were so eager to start that we hadn't really discussed what the trek to the Little Pamir and the Wakhjir Valley would be like. We knew it couldn't be as physically difficult as many of the treks and mountaineering routes we had done in Karakoram. Our journey was to the headwaters of a major river, so we thought we would just follow the river upvalley. We soon realized that wasn't the case.

West of Sarhad the Wakhan River was braided into many channels filling the wide valley. East of Sarhad, the river emerged dramatically from a deep gorge. Two routes led east to the Pamir, a river route and a high route. Both routes bypassed this first gorge and crossed two mountain passes before descending to a place called Borak at the confluence of the Borak and Wakhan Rivers. At Borak, the two routes diverged. The river route continued through the Wakhan River gorge, but in midsummer, the water was so high as to make the river route nearly impassable. It would be possible to scramble up and down steep ravines to avoid the high water, but local people preferred the high route as easier and shorter at this time of year. We would follow the high route, which certainly wasn't shorter according to our maps and crossed two more mountain passes en route to the Kyrgyz settlements in the Little Pamir. We were accompanied by Nek Bakht ("fortunate") Shah, who was taking two yaks to his family's summer settlement near the Little Pamir. One of his yaks would carry our bags and the other would carry his supplies.

Our first day was unexpectedly strenuous. We hadn't had any exercise during the more than a week it took us to reach Sarhad, and we found the steep ascent tiring. Leaving the river valley immediately, the trail ascended and crossed Daliz Pass (4,267 meters). Daliz Pass was really two distinct passes, which we took to calling Daliz Saddle and Daliz Pass. (One map labeled the first pass Daliz Pass and the second pass Kotal-e-Toghuz. Local Wakhi people disagreed with the first name and had never heard of the second name.) Daliz Pass itself was a broad meadow carpeted with wildflowers offering views to the north side of the Hindukush Range. We descended from the pass and traversed into a deep, birch-filled ravine called Shaur to camp. What it lacked in level ground

it made up for in mosquitos, but our grassy campsite adjacent to a clear stream seemed pleasant nonetheless.

We climbed out of the ravine to traverse level pasture occupied only by marmots, although several huts showed Wakhi herders occasionally used the pasture. From a viewpoint high above the river, we could see the confluence of the Borak and Wakhan Rivers. Our juniper-dotted descent led to a wooden footbridge, one of only two footbridges in the Little Pamir, that spanned the blue waters of the Borak River just below the mouth of a narrow gorge.

Beyond that footbridge, the high route climbed steeply, leaving the Wakhan River and heading north towards Tajikistan. It hardly seemed the right direction since we wanted to go to Pakistan. But north we went into the Shpodkis (“rhubarb”) Valley. At the summer settlement of Alimi, we visited with five Wakhi households grazing their sheep and goats. In Wakhi society, women shepherd the livestock. Men accompany women to protect them from Kyrgyz men who also frequent the area. The Wakhi people had dogs to help guard their livestock from predators. Having heard of chronic food shortages in the Wakhan, we wondered what the dogs ate. They drink buttermilk (left from making butter) and hunt marmots, we learned. Continuing upvalley, we arrived at the summer settlement of Digarch. It was one of the worst camp sites we’d encountered, with no flat areas anywhere and water that was beyond silty - it was pure mud. The shepherds greeted us warmly, though, and brought us the traditional bowl of yogurt.

As we set off the next morning, we watched the Digarch shepherds preparing to move to greener pastures higher upvalley. This seasonal migration of livestock and people is called *kuch* in the Wakhi language. From a hillside above their settlement, we watched the *kuch* assemble, loading all their goods onto yaks while the dogs ran back and forth, excited by the bustle of departure. Midmorning we stopped at Sang Nevishta, which means “written on the rock” in Persian. This broad area, where numerous boulders dot low ridges above grassy meadows, was more than one square kilometer. Mostly we found petroglyphs of ibex and bow hunters, suggesting an ancient history of ibex hunting here. The boulders had some writing in Persian, but no Tibetan or old Sanskrit inscriptions. Between the boulder-covered hills lay grassy areas and five mud-and-stone walled Wakhi houses. Nearby were two felt yurts and a clear stream.

Our hosts at Sang Nevishta brought a carpet outside for us to sit on and soon we were filling our bellies with more yogurt, bread and tea. The bread in the pastures, called *khista*, was made with milk rather than water, and had a delightfully rich taste, perfect for hungry trekkers. While we were eating, the *kuch* arrived from Digarch. The yaks were piled high with cauldrons, bedding and household implements, while large mastiff-like dogs trotted beside them. The men were on foot, while the women rode on yaks. Young children clung behind their mothers, while infants rode in cloth-draped cradles perched on the backs of yaks. The women we had met at Digarch were completely veiled with bright red scarves across their face, covering their nose and mouth, and red shawls around their shoulders. One woman wore a full *burqa*, the conservative covering that has only a mesh opening for nose and eyes, but in a shockingly bright shade of scarlet! The Digarch *kuch* also stopped at Sang Nevishta for bread and tea.

The path through the broad, alpine Shpodkis Valley led through swathes of yellow potentillas and pale blue mint. We passed by Wuch Raowen and Math Khuf with more shepherds and livestock. Ahead, we saw some Kyrgyz riders across the river, coming our way. One of them rode over to greet us, and invited us to visit his yurt when we reached the Kyrgyz camp in the Little Pamir. We walked

farther upvalley to Barnoz, an unoccupied pasture area, where we pitched our tent beside a large clear and cold stream.

The next morning we woke at our usual time, 5 a.m. By 7 a.m., we were walking across the head of the valley turning east as we went up the grassy slopes towards Uween-e-Sar (4,887 meters), our third mountain pass. Marmot burrows unearthed and opened from above testified to brown bear presence here. As we neared the pass, we left vegetation behind and crossed a nearly level broad stretch to the pass, marked by stone cairns. We descended to the first tarn, where our companions complained of *tutek* - altitude symptoms - so we stopped for tea.

Continuing down, we left the snow and small glacier and soon reached the grassy floor of the valley. Kyrgyz call this valley Ghorumeh (Garumdee) and the Wakhi refer to it as Waramdih, "the place after the rocks." Wakhi riders on horse and yak overtook us as we forded to the river's east bank. They were from Digarch and were going to the Kyrgyz camp to buy livestock. They rode along with us as we walked south downvalley to Ghareen, Nek Bakht Shah's pasture settlement. Our friends crossed to the river's west bank to stay at his house, while we pitched our tent on a grassy spot on the east bank. Nek Bakht's elder brother forded the thigh-deep river to bring us the traditional welcoming bowl of yogurt.

Tired from crossing the pass, we slept late, not arising until 5:30 a.m. Our route took us south high above the river and turned east into the Aqbelis Valley that would take us over Aqbelis Pass (4,595 meters) or Kotal-e-Aqbelis, and into the Little Pamir. Aqbelis was lovely, carpeted gold with potentillas. Just before the gentle pass, we stopped near a large lake for tea and bread. Refreshed, we crossed the broad, grassy pass and descended into the expansive Pamir-e-Kochak or Little Pamir. It was not so little, and ahead some fifty miles distant we saw Chaqmaqin Lake sparkling in the sun.

We turned southwards to Kashch Goz, a Kyrgyz summer camp of five yurts, whose headman, Jan Boi, greeted us at the mud-walled visitors' house. Several other Wakhi men from Sarhad were there, purchasing livestock. An Afghani trader was also here, bringing grain and opium to barter with the Kyrgyz for livestock. He was from Jalalabad, and looked like a Chitrali with his pale skin, green eyes and curly light brown beard.

Here at Kashch Goz we said goodbye to Nek Bakht Shah and hired a yak from the Kyrgyz for our onward journey. We decided to spend a day at Kashch Goz to plan the logistics for the next leg of our journey. We needed to determine the best route up the Wakhjir Valley - whether to follow its true right or true left bank - and to inquire about Dilisang Pass. After much discussion, we decided to follow the north side of the Wakhjir River upvalley (its true right bank) and then return part-way downvalley on the south side (or true left bank).

We visited the yurts and observed Kyrgyz nomad life here in the Little Pamir. We could have been in another world, another time. We felt very remote and far away from the world we know. An old man named Kyrgyz Boi told us that there are 107 Kyrgyz households in the entire Little Pamir, and 78 in the Big Pamir. That would mean between 1,500 and 2,000 Kyrgyz nomads living in Afghanistan. There was no school here, and the children do not read or write. But Jan Boi owned a Sony DVD player and TV, which he ran with a diesel generator. The Kyrgyz riders we met the day before, we learned, were going to Sarhad to get more diesel for his generator. Pamir video nights, stoned on opium in a yurt, must be strange indeed.

Little Pamir: Kashch Goz up the Wakhjir Valley

We woke to a cloudy sky over Kashch Goz, with even more clouds looming over the Wakhjir Valley. Adaham Boi, an old Kyrgyz man whose son, Hidayat, would travel with us, said we must have made some sort of *tawiz* (a numerological chart made to produce some desired result) to get clouds and make less water in the side streams that we would have to cross. Hidayat loaded his belongings onto his horse, and we loaded ours onto a yak. A young Wakhi lad, also named Nek Bakht Shah, came along to pull the yak via the rope threaded through its nose.

We left the Kyrgyz camp, busy with morning milking, and headed down to cross Bozai Darya, the small, clear stream descending from the Chaqmaqin (“flint”) Lake. We crossed the stream above its confluence with the much larger, glacial Wakhjir River. Above the stream’s bank sat the domed tombs called Bozai Gumbaz, “the domes of the elders.” Made of sun-dried brick plastered with mud, these tombs are quite old. They have been visited by every Western explorer who previously visited the region, and are marked on every map. There was no sign of who built them or when - no writing to mark who may lie buried in them. Just the tan domes, rising unexpectedly above the grass-lined stream. Long strands of barbed wire, left by Russian troops who occupied the site, flanked the tombs. Across the stream, we found a vast garbage dump - rusted cans, wheel rims, wire and bits of plastic for hundreds of yards. It gave us the creeps, and we thought of possible unexploded ordinance lying amid the detritus.

We headed east across the expansive, sandy flood plain and into the Wakhjir Valley, ascending up from the plain to broad terraces above the river’s true right (north) bank. The Kyrgyz nomads spend winter in this valley, which, although higher in elevation than Kashch Goz, is less exposed to the frigid winds that sweep the broad *pamir*. We passed several of their winter sites, each with a small house - Qizilotuq, Tekeli, Khitai Qeldi, Keskentash. Here, too, numerous clay brick tombs indicated heavy winter mortality in this high valley. Wakhjir is a typical *pamir* valley - the mountains are just ragged, crumbly snow-topped peaks, not at all sharp-edged like their Karakoram neighbors. Snow sits easily on them year round, for their slopes are not steep enough for avalanches. The valley floor is broad and U-shaped, scoured by previous glaciation, and well-watered by the continual melt of the snow above. This valley was once a main branch of the Silk Route. Marco Polo himself may have traversed the Wakhjir Valley traveling to China. The grass was abundant, and side streams offered plenty of water. At Guretuk (“walk past the grave”), we did just that to reach a small Kyrgyz winter hut. We pitched our tent on a grassy swale next to a clear stream with sweeping views back down the Wakhjir.

The next day we passed more winter camps each with tombs - Duldul, Karatash and Aqtash (“white rock”), the highest Kyrgyz winter site in the Wakhjir. Cloudy weather held, and although it kept the water level in the side streams low, it also kept the air decidedly cool, especially with the near-constant downvalley wind in our faces. We looked south across the Wakhjir River towards the mouth of the Kamansu Valley wondering which of the several side valleys we saw up the Kamansu might be the one leading to Dilisang Pass. A lammergeier, obvious with its U-shaped tail, soared overhead, probably looking for marmots. Lammergeiers are a sign of Mongol royalty and we took it for a good omen. Hidayat, our Kyrgyz companion, announced that he himself has never been up the Kamansu Valley. Only his old father had been to the pass. Dilisang would be a mystery for us to solve.

We continued up the Wakhjir Valley to Diwanasu (“crazy water” or “mad river”), the side

stream that we were told would be difficult to cross. But the clouds had done their part, and the ford was easy. We learned that to the Kyrgyz in the Little Pamir, “difficult” means a place where animals cannot go. This was different than “difficult” in the Karakoram, which meant a place that may be impassable to a person on foot. Fortunately, today Diwanasu was not difficult at all. Ahead, we found a lush grassy area along the river to camp. Entranced by thick grass, Hidayat announced we must stop so his yak and pony could graze to satiation. By the river was a big set of Marco Polo sheep horns - hunted by Kyrgyz. We fixed soup and dinner to share with everyone - our nightly custom - and settled in. With lowering clouds, we tightened our tent fly and anchored the lines with big rocks.

Rain soon changed to snow and the sound on the tent fly grew soft. By dawn, our tent was weighed down under the heavy snow load. Half a foot covered the ground outside. Our worries about our companions in their tent were relieved by the smell of burning yak dung - they had a fire going. Yesterday afternoon we noticed Hidayat gathering dry yak dung, knowing full well what the weather would bring. Realizing it was impossible to move today, we stayed put. But, our food and fuel were low, and tomorrow we would have to go, come what may.

More snow fell over night, but by morning it had stopped. As we passed more clay brick domes upvalley, we saw that rather than tombs these seemed to be shelters - with vents for smoke high up the dome and a tiny, arched ground-level entrance. These were *rabot*, the travelers’ shelters found in the Pamir. Despite the snow and storms, caravans passed through the *pamir* in winter, the only time the Kyrgyz were not in the *pamir*. Historically, the Kyrgyz were infamous as horse-riding raiders, descendants of Genghiz Khan who plundered and looted those who crossed their territory on the roof of the world. Only in winter could the slow caravans be assured of their safety from raids, and preferring the cold and storms of nature to the cruelty of men, they chose the arduous winter crossing of the Pamir. These shelters were for travelers unlucky enough to get caught in a sudden blizzard.

At the base of the Wakhjir Pass, which leads into China, was another *rabot*. Inside, a fire scar on the floor and smoke stains on the roof testified to recent use. At the door was a broken green glass bottle with a Chinese label, seal intact. Evidently, cross-border visitors still used these shelters. We decided to camp at the base of the pass - an ideal spot from which to reach the glacial source of the Wakhjir and Oxus Rivers, and to explore the upper area below the Afghan-Chinese border.

The Source of the Oxus River: Is there an Ice-Cave?

In 1838 Lieutenant John Wood of the British Navy set out to find the source of the Oxus River. His account of his great expedition through the Wakhan, *Journey to the Source of the Oxus*, became a classic of nineteenth century adventure travel. Wood, however, put the source at Lake Sarikol, which he dubbed Lake Victoria. Native explorers subsequently hired by the British brought back reports of other rivers and other sources, casting doubt on Wood’s conclusion. Lord Curzon, who later became Viceroy of India, took a keen interest in finding the source of the Oxus River and in 1894 crossed the Wakhjir Pass from China to confirm that “the ice-cave in the glacier at the eastern extremity of the Hindu Kush,” was indeed the source of the Oxus not Lake Sarikol. H.W. Tilman crossed the Wakhjir Pass from China in 1947 and wrote about the source of the Oxus:

“Wood’s great journey of 1838 and his discovery of the lake [Sarikol] to which he gave the name Victoria was thought to have settled the matter, and the Pamir river issuing from that lake was held to be the true parent stream. It was upon this geographical basis that the Boundary Agreement of 1872 with Russia was made. The next claimant was the not very significant stream [Bozai Darya] which joins the Ab-i-Wakhan [Wakhan River], twenty-five miles below its glacier source. This stream [Bozai Darya], the Little Pamir, rises in the hills near the western end of Chakmaktin lake. To add to the confusion this same lake is the true source of the Murghab [River] or Ak-su which, emerging from the eastern end of the lake, describes a great loop north round the Pamirs in Russian territory and enters the Oxus in the big bend a hundred miles north of Ishkashim. For many years, this was held to be the main river by reason of its greater length and volume compared with that of the Ab-i-Wakhan. The difference in length, if anything at all, is but a few miles, and the volume varies with the season. Both points were disputed very strongly by Lord Curzon who in 1894 crossed the Wakhjir [Pass], visited the ice-cave giving birth to the river, and followed it downwards as far as Sarhad. His exhaustive description and discussion of the rival claims from every possible angle appeared in the *Geographical Journal* for July, August, and September 1896. The question is now of purely academic interest. My opinion is worth little, but to my mind, speaking as a mountaineer, the only fit and proper birthplace for this mighty river of most ancient fame is the ice-cave in the glacier at the eastern extremity of the Hindu Kush, at the innermost heart of Central Asia. For it is a river whose waters, to use Lord Curzon’s words, ‘tell of forgotten peoples and secrets of unknown lands, and are believed to have rocked the cradle of our race.’ ” (Two Mountains and a River, page 625)

Having forded the Bozai Darya at Bozai Gumbaz, it was obvious that the Wakhjir River was the larger of the two rivers feeding the Wakhan and Oxus Rivers. To us, it looked like Curzon was right.

On August 3, 2004 from our campsite at the base of the Wakhjir Pass, we headed farther east-southeast upvalley towards the snowy glacier filling the valley’s head. The rocky riverbank was dotted with more Marco Polo sheep horns, further evidence of the animal’s abundance here and its unlucky fate from rockfall or hunting by hungry Kyrgyz during winter. Within an hour, we caught our first glimpse of a black cave in the glacier’s mouth. Was the ice-cave really still there? Forty-five minutes farther we were at the cave (37°02'27.2"N, 74°29'28.8"E), a dark gapping hole at the glacier’s terminus whence flowed - icy waters, the source of the Oxus River. We made it! To the best of our knowledge, no Westerner had been to the source of the Oxus since Curzon in 1894. We didn’t linger at the cave (4,554 meters) as the sky darkened, winds picked up and snow started falling. By the time we made our way back downvalley to our tent, a huge storm was raging.

When we woke the next morning after a satisfying sleep, the sun was out, quickly melting the snow. Before leaving the upper Wakhjir Valley, we made an excursion towards the Wakhjir Pass. We wanted to avoid going near Chinese territory, but were interested in another perspective of the upper Wakhjir Valley. Heading north, we climbed alongside the stream descending from the Wakhjir Pass itself and within fifteen minutes the distant ice-cave was once again in view. Reaching the ridgeline, we startled a herd of Marco Polo sheep. From this spot, Lord Curzon, Tilman and others who crossed the Wakhjir Pass from China would have first seen the ice-cave.

Kamansu: The Way to Dilisang

Elated to have found the ice-cave, we now had to switch gears and begin focusing on our second objective - finding the Dilisang Pass and making our way into Pakistan. The icy waters of the Wakhjir River flowed swiftly in front of our camp site. Gathering up our gear, we loaded it onto the yak and shuttled across the water. Rather than ford the cold, deep river, we took turns riding the yak across. We walked along the river's true left bank making our way west back downvalley. We quickly realized that this side of the river (the south) had more advancing glaciers, rockfall and mudslides than the true right (north) bank, which we had previously followed upvalley.

We were in a cheerful mood, warmed by the sun when suddenly a brown bear crossed the river to our side right in front of us. Startled, we watched the bear scamper up grassy slopes to feed. We continued carefully, walking more closely together and looking back over our shoulders for several minutes to make sure the bear wasn't following us.

We had seen hundreds of marmots and marmot burrows in the Wakhan, and had remarked that the greatest threat to our physical well-being was twisting an ankle on one of these holes. After lunch our yak stepped on top of a marmot burrow and crashed through the earth. We extracted the yak and were pleased it hadn't broken its leg!

We must have walked ourselves into pretty good shape by now, because we walked downvalley to the confluence of the Kamansu River in just four hours. Bidding a final farewell to the Wakhjir, we turned south into the Kamansu Valley, staying high above the rocky gorge at its mouth. This gorge gives the side valley its name; *kaman* means "gorge", and *su* "water." From the grassy slopes above the gorge, we spotted a herd of Marco Polo sheep across the river. Warm afternoon light guided us to a plain along the river above the gorge, a perfect place to camp. Here the Kamansu was a raging brown torrent and it took more than an hour of careful searching to find clear water bubbling up into tiny pools along its edge. Looking up the Kamansu, the valley gently curved towards the southeast yielding to higher and snowier peaks and bigger glaciers upvalley.

The name Dilisang was well-known by both Wakhi and Kyrgyz in the Wakhan. We didn't meet anyone who hadn't heard the name. Yet no one could articulate more than the vaguest of directions, and only one old Kyrgyz man said he had crossed it, and that had been decades ago. The word *dilisang* means "heart of stone" (*dil* is "heart," *sang*, a "stone") in Persian, implying that only people with a strong heart who were solid like a rock could cross a pass like Dilisang. We were going to have to figure this one out for ourselves and prove our *dil* was like a *sang*.

We studied our topographic maps again that night, formulating our plan for the pass. We knew the Kamansu was the correct side valley leading to the Dilisang Pass and we knew that we were in the Kamansu Valley. The Russian topographic map showed that the Kamansu Valley branched into five more side valleys. Which one of these five valleys was the one we wanted? After studying the maps a final time, we each weighed in with our opinion. Amazingly, we all agreed that the second one looked to be the feasible route. Done. We would head for the second side valley.

The next morning, under beautiful blue skies we left our riverside camp site and went upvalley no more than ten minutes and stopped. Wait! In an instant we realized that we were standing right in front of the second side valley, but how could this be? The landscape was playing a trick of perspective. We thought that the side valley we saw from last night's campsite was the first side valley. It wasn't just the first side valley - it was the first *and* second side valleys. From our camp site we couldn't see that the valley split right at the confluence with the Kamansu River. Now we could see clearly that the first side valley, almost completely hidden by a fold in the landscape, was

right here. It didn't lead to Pakistan, rather to Mohammad Nazar - a side valley west of and parallel to Kamansu still in Wakhan.

Elated, we took turns riding the horse across to the Kamansu's true left bank and stepped across the trickle coming from the first side valley. A steep grassy slope carpeted with yellow and orange poppies, potentillas and other fragrant wildflowers led directly into the second side valley. Confident we were in the right place, we followed Marco Polo sheep hoofprints along the hillside for an hour high above the deep gorge of the second side valley. We crossed a talus-filled ravine and came to a level, rocky area beneath a glacier that filled the head of the side valley. Here, along the true left bank of the glacier's outflow stream, we noticed some clear pools of water. We immediately decided to set camp here and use the rest of the day to reconnoiter the route across the glacier to the pass. We called this place Dilisang Uween-e-Ben (4,551 meters), which in Wakhi means "the place at the base of the Dilisang Pass."

It was important to camp here not only to reconnoiter the route and for acclimatization, but also to avoid traveling on the softening snow covering crevasses higher up on the glacier. If we found a pass at the top of the glacier, then the cold night would freeze the surface snow to a solid crust that would let us walk quickly and easily to the pass.

We could see no obvious pass from Dilisang Uween-e-Ben. A rock wall guarded the upper valley to the right (west), and snowy peaks with fluted slopes and obvious avalanche danger lay directly south at the head of the valley. The Dilisang Pass had to be around the corner - out of view to the left (east-southeast) - the only feasible place for a pass. A midday reconnaissance trip along the glacier's margin proved our assumptions correct. Tomorrow we would start before sunrise when the snow would be firm, safely bridging any crevasses. The weather was perfectly clear, so we anticipated a particularly cold night.

Across Dilisang Pass to Misgar

The only published account and previously known crossing of the Dilisang Pass was an accidental emergency evacuation, made by Franc Shor, a former Associate Editor of *National Geographic*, and his wife Jean Shor more than fifty years ago ("We Took the High Road in Afghanistan," *National Geographic*, November 1950 and *After Your Marco Polo*). The Shors traveled through Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor and had intended to exit the Wakhan by crossing the Wakhjir Pass into China, but were turned back short of the pass by armed conflict between the Kyrgyz and Nationalist Chinese. Their Kyrgyz guide took them over the "Delhi Sang Pass" [Dilisang Pass] into Pakistan's Hunza Valley. Jean Shor wrote about their approach to the pass:

"Above us stretched a mile-wide snow field. At its pinnacle was a sheer and forbidding wall of white, perhaps two hundred yards high. Beyond that we concluded there must be a summit . . . but where it might lead we had not the remotest idea. . . . For four hours we fought our way up that slippery, frozen field. Beneath six inches of snow was a layer of ice. . . . We came finally to the last few hundred feet, steep and slick as a ski jump. We had gained two thousand feet in altitude since we started across the snow field. The others, like myself, were talking in air in deep sobs. It was an effort to speak, except in grunting monosyllables. Our lungs were too busy keeping us alive. Up this last stretch we clawed our way on hands and knees, dragging the floundering animals behind us. . . . We were numbed by exhaustion, but

crawled on. . . . We were progressing only a few yards at a time, then lying with our faces in the snow, recovering from the effort of the brief advance, and waiting for another bit of strength so we could crawl a few yards farther. Finally, as I scratched my way upward, . . . we stood together on the roof of the world. We stood on the crest of a great mountain range . . . Ahead was the Karakoram Range . . . on either side and behind us, lay the Hindu Kush (*After You Marco Polo*, pg. 242-3).”

The Shors’ published account lacked any compass directional points or landmarks and was far too romanticized to offer a useful description of conditions we might encounter. The actual location and configuration of the Dilisang Pass remained a mystery.

The Kyrgyz in Wakhan had historically used the Dilisang Pass to trade with the Burusho people of Misgar in the upper Hunza Valley. A few of the elder Kyrgyz remember crossing the Dilisang Pass, but the younger generation of Kyrgyz had no idea about the route. The Kyrgyz had stopped using the Dilisang about twenty-five years ago. The Soviets occupied Afghanistan and put military posts in the Little Pamir. Around the same time, Pakistan constructed a seventy-kilometer long jeep road up the Chapursan Valley to the shrine at Baba Ghundi. With the road came goods for the people of Chapursan and a Pakistan Army post at Baba Ghundi. After the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, the Kyrgyz could easily cross the Irshad Uween, another pass on the Afghan-Pakistani border, and trade with their Wakhi neighbors at Baba Ghundi. The elevation of Irshad Uween is lower than the Dilisang Pass. It has no permanent glacier and is located many miles closer to their summer camps, making the Irshad Uween route much easier and shorter for the Kyrgyz. In the Little Pamir today, all Kyrgyz men speak Wakhi, testifying to the close relationship they have cultivated with their Wakhi neighbors. We had previously met the Kyrgyz at Baba Ghundi on numerous visits during the 1990’s. But the old Dilisang route was now in front of us, holding answers to our many questions.

We rose at 3:15 a.m. on August 6, 2004. By 5 a.m. we were heading up the firm snow covering the glacier’s surface and crevasses. The sun was already touching the tips of the snowy summits visible to the south, so we moved quickly. We ascended nearly 740 meters up five kilometers of snow-covered glacier to reach Dilisang Pass (5,290 meters) in just two and a half hours. Our relatively simple and straightforward ascent to Dilisang Pass bore little resemblance to the Shors’ account. Could they possibly have crossed a different pass than where we stood? It seemed unlikely, unless they had chosen one of the much steeper and more heavily glaciated slopes that led to this same ridge. On top of the pass, we found numerous tall rock cairns. We had made it.

From the pass we saw the obvious and prominent summit of Qarun Koh (7,164 meters) in the distance. The initial 150-meter descent from the pass was steep, and although we encountered a snow-covered slope, it is most likely a scree slope in late-summer conditions. No glacier lay on the Pakistani side of the pass. Once down the initial steep slope, we followed the rocky basin that descended another 600 meters to Misgar Uween-e-Ben, the highest grassy spot in the Dilisang Valley.

Looking back at the pass, it was far more difficult to identify it from the Pakistani side than from the Wakhan side. The pass we had crossed did not appear to be the lowest point on the ridgeline. That seemed to be to the northwest or left as we looked back from the Pakistani side. But that, too, seemed to be a trick of perspective, for the seemingly lower ridge actually lay farther away, making the nearer pass we had crossed seem slightly higher in perspective. Approaching from the Wakhan side, we had no doubt that the pass we crossed was the actual low point on the ridge. We

could, however, see how the view from the Pakistani side could deceive someone about the actual low point on the ridge. Perhaps this explained the Shors' divergent description - they must have crossed the higher and steeper ridge, which, from the Pakistani side, appeared to be the pass. Perhaps it was Burusho from Hunza who had first pioneered the pass in order to trade for livestock with the Kyrgyz, and the Kyrgyz had learned of the pass from the Burusho. Whatever the case, the true Dilisang Pass is actually at the northern end of the ridge, several hundred meters farther east than what from the Pakistani side appeared to be the low point on the ridgeline. The numerous large cairns we found at the top the pass had likely been raised so that anyone approaching from the Pakistani side would not be fooled by the perspective. The pass was also visible farther downvalley from Misgar Uween-e-Ben, deceptively to the right of what seemed the lowest saddle. Crossing at that point on the ridgeline would give the unpleasant surprise at the top. The descent on the Kamansu side is a steep, fluted snow chute with avalanche danger and a significant bergschrund before reaching the relatively level glacier below.

At Misgar Uween-e-Ben we found abundant grass and water and decided to camp. Misgar was less than two days' walk away. The next morning we were reminded that we were back in the Karakoram. We had to make a 240-meter descent across a massive scree slope to the Dilisang River, which we forded to its true right bank. Upstream, we could see Dilisang Sar, a prominent snowy summit with numerous hanging glaciers along the ridgeline. The next twenty kilometers of the upper Dilisang Valley was relentlessly dry, barren and rocky. The scorching sun super-heated the rock-walled valley, making it oppressive and unappealing, despite the red and yellow ochre colors shot through the rock walls.

Relief came when we reached a green grotto, where numerous springs watered copious grassy willow groves. Below this was the highest summer herding settlement in the valley, apparently no longer much used by Misgar villagers. A short distance below the settlement we halted for the night at a very unsteady footbridge spanning the raging Dilisang River. We pitched our tent on a not-so-level patch of grassy near a delightful cascade several minutes' walk beyond the footbridge. In the morning, the river proved still too tumultuous for our horse and yak to swim, and we led them one-by-one, unloaded across the shaky bridge.

Once everyone was safely across the river, we proceeded downvalley across seemingly endless scree slopes. This was our last day on the trail, and it remained rigorous until almost the very last step. By midday we reached the confluence of the Dilisang and Kilik Rivers where we met the jeep road to Misgar. We finally relaxed as we walked the last seven kilometers to the village.

And as we processed through Misgar, elderly women came from their fields and houses to greet us and kiss our hands. Schoolchildren rushed to ask us where we had come from. "Pamir," we said. "Shimshal Pamir?" they inquired. "No, Afghan Pamir," we replied. The astounded villagers quickly spread the news through the village. They couldn't believe it. Soon, village men who knew us from our previous visits to Misgar came riding along on their motorcycles. With an infectious smile on his face, Fida Ali, an old friend, exclaimed in English, "Welcome to Pakistan!" We'd completed a journey that had once been a dream and now was reality. We'd found our way back home.

After You Marco Polo, But After Us . . .

Our partnership embodied not only a spirit of international cooperation and teamwork, but we also hope it will act as an antidote to pervasive stereotypes of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Pamir and their Muslim inhabitants as dangerous and inhospitable. We hope our expedition will help offset these stereotypes and restore some sense that mountain travel and adventure in Muslim population regions is a rewarding and positive experience, with the same risks that mountain adventure anywhere on our planet entails.

Other Westerners have visited the Wakhan's Little Pamir in the weeks and months following our expedition - a British woman in training for a South Pole expedition went to Chaqmaqin Lake, claiming it to still be the source of the Oxus River; a world-renowned American wildlife biologist with an American photographer on a National Geographic Society-sponsored trip to survey Marco Polo sheep; and our Wakhi friends from the Chapursan Valley in Pakistan who returned to assist the National Geographic party. It is our hope that many more Western visitors will make their way to this amazing place.

We had almost no idea what to expect in the Wakhan, despite having read, planned and done our best to think through the logistics of our trip. Our ability to accept the unexpected and not burden ourselves with expectations, which could only be unrealistic (since we'd never been there, and the only book about a journey there seemed largely like fantasy), helped us succeed. We thank W.L. Gore, the explorers who went before us, and our Wakhi and Kyrgyz friends who all provided support and inspiration.