

A motorcyclist wearing a helmet and gear is riding a motorcycle on a dirt road that winds through a high-altitude mountain range. The road is partially covered in snow and has visible tire tracks. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains with snow-capped peaks and reddish-brown slopes. The sky is a clear, deep blue.

Pamir Highway and Silk Road  
**THE ROUGH  
SIDE OF**

*Silk*

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**T**he Pamir Highway: since time immemorial, the Silk Route (M41) in Central Asia has existed as an artery of trade connecting west to east and north to south. Contrary to its name, the Silk Route is not a singular road but a web of ancient tracks and rock-strewn trails trodden for a millennia by travelers, merchants, explorers, soldiers, and kings. Over 3,000 years of meandering history is carved into one of the most striking landscapes in the world. Our dream of riding the Silk Road was now a reality, and we must ride it successfully if we are to reach Iran and continue our westward journey.

We wake in Kochkor-Ata, a small village northwest of Jalal-Abad in Kyrgyzstan. We sit cross-legged around a tattered Persian rug joined by ten or so construction men, each covered in paint, mud, and sawdust, watching us intently as we munch down mouthfuls of stale bread and pieces of fruit as the strong smell of concrete hangs in the air. We pay our bill for last night's accom-

modation in their locked compound by handing over two pirated DVDs we'd acquired, giving thanks that money isn't the only currency when you travel.

The Siberian town of Novosibirsk, where we collected our Kazakhstan visas three weeks before, seems all but a fuzzy memory. We now only remember Kazakhstan as a blur, with fragile recollections of paperwork, more visa applications, and depressing overnights in old mental asylums now posing as motels.

It's midday as we ride southeast around the low-lying Fergana Mountains before turning southwest and entering the ancient Kyrgyz city of Osh. Market stalls spill their wares into the streets, selling all manner of items from flashlights to goat heads. A few domed mosques dot the city skyline, making the scene feel familiar, almost Moroccan. Riding into the center of Osh, our cheerful waves of greeting are received without a response by the locals whose

blank looks make me feel uneasy. Hidden from view inside a small café, we devour a bowl of rice flavored with the ubiquitous mutton fat. As we eat, locals stop, stare, and finally crack huge smiles as they walk past the parked bikes.

### The Teeth of the Pamirs

We head down the road after lunch, and Lisa's 650 thumps a steady rhythm as we pick up speed on serpentine tar that now stretches out below us. The M41 disappears from view and reappears as it snakes its way between layers of orange and caramel mountainsides; in the distance, the teeth of the Pamir Mountains rake the sky. My GPS lists our destination as Sary-Tash, a small village on the Kazak-Tajik border, and we need to press hard if we are to cross the Taldyk Pass before nightfall.

With investment from China, the length of the lower M41 is being torn up and replaced. It'll be a delight in a year, but right now it's a nightmare. Standing up on the

pegs for better control over the mixture of tumbling large rocks and loose soil, we round a wide bend, our progress brought to a sudden halt as a half-hearted flag bearer waives us to a stop. The scene down in the lower valley through which we are about to cross looks decidedly post-apocalyptic. Dozens of eight-wheeled, rolling metal giants belch black diesel fumes into the sky as they claw and tear at the mountainsides. We choke on the thick clouds of dust these monsters produce as we are stuck behind two of them as they barrel through the long, narrow gorge. With a deep breath and fingers crossed, we plunge into the airborne debris and emerge safely on the other side. We are instantly transported back to northern Argentina, the landscape painted in shades of yellow and tangerine red, the tall peaks of the Alay Mountains in the distance brought out in sharp relief by the royal blue sky.

Perched atop the Taldyk Pass at 12,000 feet, we gulp down the thinner air and watch the panorama bathed in a translucent mauve. Night is coming fast. Looking out across the Alay Valley, we watch the lights of a distant village twinkle to life as small generators kick into nightly action. The temperature has plummeted to 15 F, and the snow-fringed track and slippery switchbacks tug on our already frayed concentration as we work our way down the backside of the pass toward the sanctuary of the village below.

On an unlit path in Sary-Tash, I suddenly barrel into a deep-water crossing and bare-

ly stay upright before pulling up outside a small homestay. We painfully peel our stiff bodies from the frozen bikes. Exhausted and wet, we settle down in a whitewashed room lit by a single candle. We can barely move inside our sleeping bags under the weight of half a dozen old rugs for warmth and soon fall into an exhausted sleep.

Wearing as many layers as we can find and heavy with 20 gallons of fuel, we head for the Tajikistan border. We ride the short 3 km track to the base of the Alay range, the route ahead indistinguishable among the vast slabs of rock and thick, snow-covered ground. Inside the small border compound, we complete the exit paperwork and steel ourselves against the plummeting temperature outside.

Soon the patchy tarmac turns to red clay as we climb in altitude in second and third gear. We'd read countless stories of the severe weather in this region even in summer, and here we are with winter closing in around us, literally. We are giving this range the full respect it's due. Two tired Brits without cell or satellite phones could easily get in trouble up here.

### Kalashnikovs and Toenails

We crest a rise and the Tajikistan compound comes into sight. Two large, rusting fuel tankers rest in the red mire and are now in active duty as the passport offices. A half-dozen young (and presumably bored) soldiers, Kalashnikovs slung over their shoul-



ders, saunter outside. Inside the cramped room the scene is bizarre. By some miracle, a set of bunk beds is squeezed in, occupied by a guard who sets about our paperwork. He's only wearing his stained thermals; the longest set of yellow toenails I've ever seen stick out of the holes in his woolen socks. A TV hisses in the corner, and a small, smoky iron furnace belts out a bit of welcome heat.

Two hours later we pull alongside Lake Karakul, the highest lake in Central Asia. At 12,800 feet, the vista is nothing short of spectacular, the lofty silence only broken by the dark, icy waters lapping the shore. The sight of a lone bicyclist coming toward us is reason enough to pause. The cyclist pulls up alongside and introduces himself. Ben, from the U.K. He looks as exhausted as we surely feel. He describes the conditions ahead of us as "tough," and we quickly realize we aren't going to cross the 15,000-foot pass before nightfall. A quick scan of the small dusty village to our west reveals a hand-painted sign that reads "home stay," and as we look at the towering mountains behind us casting long shadows across the landscape, we quickly make up our minds. We cross the hard ice and at last park in the

cramped yard. Inside the simple room, a low fire sits in a grate waiting to be stoked. We sit around a low table sipping on sweet, warm tea and swap information about each other's upcoming journey.

In the morning, a thick layer of frost covers both bikes, making them glisten in the pristine morning air. Straining our eyes, we watch Ben become a speck on the northern horizon as we head south. We begin our own steady push to the Ak-Baital Pass. We rise from the plains too quickly, without the chance to acclimatize. At 13,000 feet, waves of nausea hit Lisa thick and fast; along with a pounding head, she's showing signs of altitude sickness, which is a deadly concern in this remote location. We have to push on. Our fastest way down is up and over; returning won't get us low enough, fast enough. It's -7 F, and 50 feet to our left a seemingly endless fence of wooden posts and barbed wire marks the Chinese border.

#### Acute Mountain Sickness

At 15,000 feet, the switchbacks require our concentration. We're up on the pegs and riding rough over ice-encrusted muddy streams and loose rock. The snow drifts across the track, an addition we could well

do without. Even with sunglasses and dark visors, the glare from the snow is painful. This is truly a giant's playground, and we are just specks passing through.

Our progress is halted 3 km from the summit, the thinning dark trail we have been following now lost under deep snow. Lisa is feeling worse, and I haven't told her that her lips are now dark blue and her eyes have the sunken look of the oxygen-deprived.

From over my shoulder the coughs of an ancient Russian 4x4 grabs my attention, and I wave it down explaining, "My wife is unwell!" Without question, they agree to carry Lisa to the top of the pass, leaving me with the two bikes. I ride mine to the top (15,309 feet) and walk back for Lisa's, truly tough going. We stop only for the briefest of moments at the top of the pass to take in the view, but have no way to document it because freezing temperatures have killed the camera batteries.



We ride dusty gray roads as late afternoon rolls by. The reduction of 3,000 feet has improved Lisa's altitude sickness enough that we know we are out of the woods. Murghab is our chance to feel some much needed warmth. This is the highest town in Tajikistan at 12,000 feet, just below the altitude Lisa needs for any kind of overnight stay.

Heading down to the sad little bazaar, we are in search of water and somewhere to exchange dollars for Tajik somoni, the local currency. Dozens of small stalls line a single street, some wooden but most just rust-ravaged shipping containers or the rear carcasses of 4x4s. As we walk the bazaar, we see that the few vendors braving the cold stocked little more than a ramshackle mix of old clothes and out of date Snickers bars. A lonely bottle of toxic-colored shampoo sitting on a wooden plank is the highlight of our shopping experience.

#### Dusty Sanctuary on the Silk Road

Murghab's dusty streets are now two days behind us. We are in the Pamir Mountains proper, riding Tibet-like high plateaus and wide, remote valleys. Bolivia (now almost four years behind us) was the last time we'd ridden this high and felt so utterly separated from the rest of the world. The Chinese call this range the Congling Shan, or "Onion Mountains," and we can see



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why. We are not riding a single mountain range but rather a labyrinth of layers of differing ranges, each larger than the next. By midafternoon we're racing across the Alichur plain ahead of a snowstorm that has pushed in from the south. A wall of freezing air and heavy snow threatens to catch us before our route takes a westerly course.

As the afternoon disappears, we summit the Koi-Tezek Pass at 14,097 feet and are painfully aware at just how cold we've become. Our concentration wanders and wanes as our blood centralizes in our cores to protect important organs.

On the western side of Khorog, we fill our bikes to the brim with fuel. Reaching Dushanbe from our current location in a day is a tall order. By midmorning our definition of what we thought of as mountains is being rewritten. We slow our pace, as much because of the onslaught of twisting blind bends as for the sheer majesty of the country around us. We have been skirting the Afghanistan border for two days en route

for Kulyab. Where the Gunt River meets the Panj River, we detour north for 40 miles before again heading west at Rushan. The tar comes and goes whimsically, and for the most part we are up on the pegs.

To our left the Panj River flows fast and full, swollen from the first of winter's heavy snow. On the westerly bank lies Afghanistan and dozens of tiny settlements that cling impossibly to mountainsides. Local Afghans wave to us as we pass. Dozens of dark painted signs come and go, each marked with a skull and bones to denote a heavily mined area. In Dushanbe we set about collecting our Iranian and Turkmenistan visas, a process that takes us two full weeks.

### Police and GPS Games

Into Uzbekistan and on the outskirts of Samarkand, I'm waved to the side of the road by a traffic cop who is fumbling with the buttons of a speed gun. He is doing his best to convince me I was traveling 93 km per hour in a 70 zone, demanding I pay \$50 for an instant fine. He'd not even been hold-

ing the gun when I'd passed him. Catching him off guard, I shake his hand proudly, stating, "I am a policeman in the U.K., we are brothers." I continue, "I have GPS," and tap the screen firmly, flicking through the functions and quickly finding the calculator feature and punch in the numbers 6 and 3. With a half-smile I show my antagonist that my GPS told me I was only doing 63 when I passed him. Suitably impressed, the officer agrees and the fine disappears. I still can't believe it worked!

We sit quietly in the chill of early morning on the steps of the magnificent Registan in the heart of the ancient city of Samarkand. It is slowly sinking in that we are living this adventure halfway along the Silk Route between China and the west, following in the footsteps of Marco Polo. Slurping down mouthfuls of fresh pomegranate juice, we can only imagine what the road ahead has in store. **RR**

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# Facts & Information

Pamir Highway and Silk Road

Total Mileage  
Approximately 1,576 miles.



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Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

### In General

The Pamir Highway, or M41, runs through Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. It is the only continuous route through the mountains, ascending to 15,270 feet as it summits Ak-Baital Pass, the second-highest international highway in the world. Russian is still widely used and understood, but the Tajik people speak Tajik, a dialect of Persian. The majority of this area is over 13,000 feet, so take time to acclimatize to the high altitude. The currency of Tajikistan is the somoni (som). U.S. dollars are easily exchanged in banks and exchange offices. Most transactions in the Pamirs will be in cash.

### Visas

U.S. citizens require a valid passport and visa, which must be obtained in advance. A GBAO permit is required for travel to the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast area of the Pamirs. This must be specifically requested in your application. These areas are: Khorog, Murghab, Darwaz, Ishkashim, Vanj, Rushan. This permit will be checked at checkpoints on the road and in Khorog and Murghab.

### Food & Lodging

Sanitary conditions are basic in rural ar-

eas. Especially if staying in private homes in villages, be prepared for no hot or running water and primitive (squat) toilets. The staple diet in the mountains is Pamiri tea (sheer-chai), coffee, vodka, and yak milk with meals usually consisting of rice, eggs, mutton, and, if you're lucky, freshly made warm bread called non with yak butter. Most villages on the Pamir Highway have homestays. Built in the traditional Pamiri style—constructed of wood, with five pillars, a sky light, and richly decorated with carpets—they provide great hospitality and simple but delicious meals. Prices range from \$5 (no food) to \$12 per person per night including dinner and breakfast.

### Roads & Biking

Distance is deceiving: Allow a minimum of five days to drive from Osh to Dushanbe. The road is partially paved but is mostly unpaved and heavily damaged in places by erosion, earthquakes, and landslides. In spring and early summer, there are risks of roads being blocked by mudslides. In winter, the high passes are closed by snow. The best time to travel is July to October.

### Contact Information

- Up to date information on visa requirements and travel advice at the U.S. State Department:

[www.travel.state.gov/travel](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel)

- Information about travel to and in Tajikistan: [www.tajiktourism.com](http://www.tajiktourism.com)
- For general information on Central Asia: [www.asia-travel-discoveries.com](http://www.asia-travel-discoveries.com)

### Books & Maps

- Central Asia Nelles map, Nelles Verlag, ISBN 978-3865742117, \$11.95
- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan map, GiziMap, ISBN 978-9630083157, available used and new online
- *Lonely Planet Central Asia*, 5th edition, ISBN 978-1741791488, \$32.99
- *The Silk Roads: A Route & Planning Guide*, 3rd edition by Paul Wilson, Trailblazer Publications, ISBN 978-1905864324, \$24.95

### Motorcycles & Gear

BMW R 1150 GS Adventure and BMW F 650 GS  
Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega  
Jacket and Pants: BMW Trailguard  
Helmets: BMW System 5  
Boots: MX boots, Alpinestars Tech 6 and Gaerne SG10