

Tajikistan / Kyrgyzstan

xxpedition guide

XXPEDITION

UNXXPLORED

Tajikistan XXpedition: Pamir Highway & beyond

The Pamir Highway -Central Asia's greatest road adventure - the second highest highway in the world. Travelling in 4x4s, we follow this rugged mountainous route through the remote Pamir range, discovering an area along the Afghan border, much of the time alongside the Panj River, that only the most adventurous ever explore. On the way, we visit the ruins of Zoroastrian castles and shrines, crossing towering mountain passes and following ancient trade routes. We also head off the main highway to go even deeper into the country, encountering lands where the language changes from one valley to the next. This is the ultimate adventure. Please read through the xpedition guide to know what to expect. We are as honest as possible, as this is not one of our journeys where you are spoiled with nice hotels and restaurants. This is as raw as it can get and you need the right mindset for it!



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CLIMATE

The climate of Tajikistan is continental, with hot summers and cold winters, but it fluctuates depending on the elevations of the regions and seasonality. Summers in the mountains can be warm, and winters very cold with heavy snowfalls. The lowest recorded temperature was -63C in Bulunkul Lake in the Pamirs. The temperature in summer can get as high as 50C in the Khatlon region. Around 280 days of the year, the sky is clear, sunny and blue.

The climate in the Pamirs (where this trip spends most of the time) is extreme continental: very dry and harsh. The average daytime temperature from May to September is 20C-25C at night, the temperature can drop to freezing point or below. After a long sunny day, you can have light snowfall. In Dushanbe at this time, the average temperature can be 25C-40C .



ACCOMMODATION

Most of the accommodation on this trip is in simple homestays. The homestays are very basic, but are the only option in many places and are the best way to gain an insight into life in this region and meet local people.

Some homestays don't have a dining table, so guests are expected to sit cross-legged on the floor during meals.

On several nights, you must share a room with more than one person; we make every effort to ensure men and women who are not travelling together don't have to share a room, but this cannot be guaranteed. On these nights, single supplements do not apply. Please note, some places along the trip have squat toilets outside of the house and no running water.

Standards of cleanliness vary. Be vigilant in your personal hygiene regime – use soap or hand sanitizer gel before and after toilet breaks, snacks and mealtimes. Generally, the more remote the location, the more basic the accommodation. You may like to bring a lightweight sleeping bag.



FOOD

Be prepared for the meat-heavy cuisine of Central Asia. Beef and lamb are most commonly eaten. In the Pamirs, you might get to try yak meat in homestays, the food tends to be high in fat. Non (a flatbread) is served with meals.

Dinner in a homestay usually consists of two courses: a bowl of soup and a main dish with sides, homemade bread and jam. Usually, it is noodles or rice soup with or without meat, stewed or fried potatoes, plov - a rice dish with meat (usually lamb) and vegetables (usually carrots) - and fried vegetables with beef. Expect jam, sweets, biscuits and jurgot, a local Greek yoghurt made from yak or cow milk.

For breakfast, a traditional meal is shirchoy, a mixture of milk, butter and salt boiled with black tea leaves. Pieces of bread and a little pepper can be added.

Vegetarians can be catered for if we are aware before travel, though there will be limited choice. Other dietary requirements are likely to be difficult to accommodate on this trip.



CARS

The market is still young and quiet, and due to difficult roads, high import taxes, lack of competition and a severe climate, prices are generally higher than elsewhere.

You can usually arrange a drop-off so you do not need to drive your car all the way back to your starting point.

Since there is more demand than supply at the moment, popular rental cars are booked out weeks or even months in advance during the high season (July-August). All of this makes renting a car in Tajikistan quite expensive. Even more when you consider the age of the cars.

For our journeys we work with the best available and reliable rental car company based in Dushanbe. The models we are using are most likely:

TOYOTA 4RUNNERS, Model SR5, Power – 4.0 liter V6, Five-speed automatic transmission, 4WD, Year: 2003 – 2004

Therefore, please make sure you are prepared to drive a car that is as modern as the ones you are likely familiar with from your teenage years!



ROAD CONDITIONS

Pamir Highway is a road running for more than 1500 km, starting in Dushanbe and ending in Osh. The peculiarity of the road is that it lies on the height from 900 to 4655 meters, and the route goes through picturesque mountainous regions of Pamir. Due to the harsh mountain climate, road conditions in many places are bad.

Our days are long with frequent stops but still there is some time to endure! Be positive, bring some music and see what each day brings with it!

This trip is not recommended for people who suffer car sickness and, in the interest of fairness, you should be prepared to alternate seating positions in the vehicle and not expect to always sit in the front. In and around Dushanbe, we usually travel by minibus.



SAFETY & SECURITY

The Pamir Highway is very safe. People are lovely and crime is unheard of.

Therefore, the only danger you may encounter is anything related to trekking, mountains, and adventure in general.

Remember that you will be at a very high altitude and the health care in the area is quite rudimentary.

Photographing of airports, railways stations, wharves, police stations, military installations, bridges and government offices are generally not allowed. Please use discretion when photographing people, especially with tribal people, who may have superstitions against this. For close-up shots, always ask first.



HEALTH

Sanitary conditions on the Pamir highway are very basic and hygiene standards pretty low. Furthermore, health facilities are far in between and only provide very rudimentary health care. There are small hospitals in Khorog and Murghab, but for anything serious you might need to go to Dushanbe or Osh.

Diarrhoea is probably the most common health issue among travellers on a Pamir highway tour. Many people struggle with the food that is quite heavy in fat. Bring a water filter with you and a hand sanitizer to minimize the risk of bacterial diarrhoea.

Also be aware that at higher altitudes the sun is much stronger and you can get sunburn more easily. Bring enough sunscreen with factor 30 or higher. Also bring sunglasses and a sunhat for adequate protection.

At last, if you are prone to motion sickness make sure you bring your preferred medication with you.



CONNECTIVITY

With the advent of eSIMs, the connectivity landscape is changing. No more need to buy a new sim card in every country you go to, you just get an eSIM.

There are thousands of offers, best to find your way with a comparison site like Esimdb or Esins.io.

For physical sim cards, the best resource for any of the “Stans” is the SIM card wiki – just click through to the relevant country to learn more about mobile operators and plans.

Coverage in general is pretty pretty good, especially seeing how many remote places you tend to find yourself in while traveling Central Asia.

Pamir is probably the place where getting a signal is most challenging. Right now, Megafon is recommended for Eastern Pamir, with T-Cell better in the Wakhan Valley.

During our drive we are connected via walkie talkies to enable smooth and engaging conversations during the journey.



ELECTRICITY

In Tajikistan the standard current used is 220 volt (or 50 Hz). Hotels offer Plug types C (two round pins) and F (two round pins), but please bring a travel adaptor with you.

In most homestays you can charge your batteries over night. However, some don't have electricity and power cuts are common. Make sure you have spare batteries. A power bank or solar charger might also be useful and a head torch!



MONEY

The local currency Tajikistani somoni (TJS). The rate of exchange (as of December 2023) is approximately 11 Tajikistani Somoni to 1 U.S. Dollar.

We recommend taking cash: US dollars in perfect condition, mostly in small denominations (notes larger than US\$50 should be avoided). Dollars can be exchanged in banks and exchange offices. All payments should be made in local currency. ATMs are available in Dushanbe and Khorog; however, it is best not to rely on them. Visa and Mastercard are the most commonly accepted cards. But please do not expect cards to be accepted.

The amount of extra spending money required can vary depending on how much you spend on drinks and souvenirs; as an indication, we recommend you allow US\$200 for non-included meals and possible purchases of souvenirs. As a rough guideline, you should allow approximately US\$15-US\$20 per meal. A coffee in a cafe costs around US\$2-3, a local beer around \$2, a bottle of wine \$15+.



INSURANCE

YOU MUST HAVE TRAVEL INSURANCE WITH A MINIMUM MEDICAL, EVACUATION, AND REPATRIATION COVERAGE OF US\$200,000 covering all applicable dates of travel with XXPLORA. This insurance must cover personal injury and emergency medical expenses.

You are strongly recommended to extend your coverage to include cancellation, curtailment, and all other expenses that may arise as a result of loss, damage, injury, delay, or inconvenience while traveling and also the excess of car insurance.

You acknowledge that insurance coverage is not included in the cost of any tour offered and you are required to obtain separate coverage at an additional cost.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you have sufficient coverage and comply with the terms of the applicable insurance plans. You are responsible for advising your insurer of the type of travel, destination(s), and activities included in your booking so that the insurer may provide appropriate coverage.



LANGUAGE

The Pamirs only hold 3% of Tajikistan's population, but is very multicultural. The Pamiris are often described as an Iranian ethnic group speaking Pamiri languages. However, in reality there is no such thing as the Pamiri people.

In fact, there is a number of different communities each with their own culture, traditions and languages. Although Tajik is widely understood, most ethnic groups speak their own language. There is Shughni, Rushani, Wakhi, Bartangi, Yazgulyani, Khufi and Ishkashimi. In the Eastern Pamir there is also a large community of Kyrgyz people speaking Kyrgyz. Most people practice Sunni Islam, but in the Wakhan valley you will find the Ismaili, a liberal branch of Shia Islam. Its leader is the Aga Khan whose Aga Khan Development Network has done a lot for the development in the Pamirs.



ALTITUDE WARNING

This trip includes one or more overnight stays over 3,000m where there is a genuine risk of being affected by acute mountain sickness (AMS). If left untreated, AMS can be life-threatening.

Our itineraries are designed to allow most people to acclimatise to these altitudes, but you should be aware that it is still possible for you to be affected by AMS.

Several medical conditions or medications can reduce your body's ability to acclimatise, and thus will affect your performance at altitude and make you more susceptible to AMS.

If you are worried about any pre-existing condition (eg heart problems), or unsure of your physical ability, you must seek medical advice prior to booking.

Please make sure your insurance policy covers you up to the maximum altitude on this trip, your policy should also cover the use of a helicopter for emergency medical evacuation.



ALTITUDE ALONG THE PAMIR HIGHWAY

Dushanbe :	710 meters (overnight)
Khorog :	2123 meters (overnight)
Ishkashim:	2600 meters (overnight)
Langar:	2909 meters (overnight)
Kargush pass:	4344 meters (daytime)
Alichur:	3991 meters (daytime)
Murghab:	3618 meters (overnight)
Ak Baital pass:	4655 meters (daytime)
Karakul:	3960 meters (overnight)
Kyzylart pass:	4280 meters (daytime)
Sarytash:	3170 meters (daytime)
Osh:	960 meters (overnight)

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*If you never go, you will
never know*

