



TRAVEL /

# EAST ASIA CHINA TO KYRGYZTAN

Adventure in the Pamirs by Lance Manion

The main road from China to Kyrgyztan crossing the Pamir mountain range..

### The Drive of My Life: From Kashi to Osh

I was six o'clock in the morning when I was picked up from QiniBagh; once a British Embassy but now a shabby hotel in central Kashgar. I had chosen to go by taxi as there was no train or bus to the China/Kyrgyzstan border, but I very quickly regretted it – within an hour into the drive, we were so lost that the driver got out of the car and crossed the four-lane highway to try and flag down passing trucks for directions. Naturally, as it was still pitch black outside, nobody stopped.

#### A long wait

I ended up arriving at the border three hours late, and just five minutes before they closed the immigration office for lunch. They took my passport, then promptly told me the other side was closed, so I would have to wait two-and-a-half hours before I could cross over into Kyrgyzstan.

Finally I was taken across the border in a mini van, and left to hike the last kilometre, past the waiting trucks, to the Kazakhstan immigration post. They were far quicker, and I was through in a flash. I hopped in a taxi heading to Osh, and managed to haggle down the journey to a price of \$80 I settled down in my seat... but I wasn't going anywhere just yet.

The taxi waited more than an hour-and-a-half for other travellers to fill its vacant seats, then spent even longer haggling a price with them. Finally, after it looked like we were ready to go, I was removed from the taxi and put into a minivan... clearly there was no longer room for me! Although a little miffed, it was 14 hours since I left Kashgar so I was simply glad to be moving.

#### A stuttering start

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Almost the moment the minibus had moved off, it stopped at a trailer house to pick up a local man bearing sheep skins. And then another, and then another, until the minibus was full to the rafters. Finally, at around 7pm local time – as it was getting dark and beginning to snow – we started our journey in earnest. Although we were packed together like sardines, and I was sitting next to a rather large woman who smelt like a wet goat, I could still enjoy the beautiful mountains; until we started climbing up them in howling wind and snow!

The higher we climbed, the worse it got, and I could hear the minibus' tyres slipping on the icy roads. Despite this, the driver was bombing along at an impressive pace. It was two hours to the first stop in Sari Tash, and while the woman next to me was screaming in my phone, the views outside and the music on the stereo made it an enjoyable journey. And at Sari Tash, she got off!

Making calculations as I went, I had estimated we'd arrive in Osh by about 11pm, but I hadn't factored in the thick fog that started to surround the minibus. The driver cut his speed to a slow hurtle and it was just in time, as when we rounded the next curve we came face-to-face with a jack-knifed truck – and the driver had to slam on the brakes to avoid him. There was just enough space to squeeze through, so after making sure everyone was okay we were soon moving again.

#### A near miss

As we made steady progress along the pass, I suddenly noticed we were being passed by the taxi I was waiting in earlier! As the taxi is a right-hand drive, and the minibus is a left-hand, the two drivers wind down their windows and start to have a conversation – on the edge of an icy foggy road! I'm biting my nails as the taxi winds up its window and pulls in front of us to turn a corner.

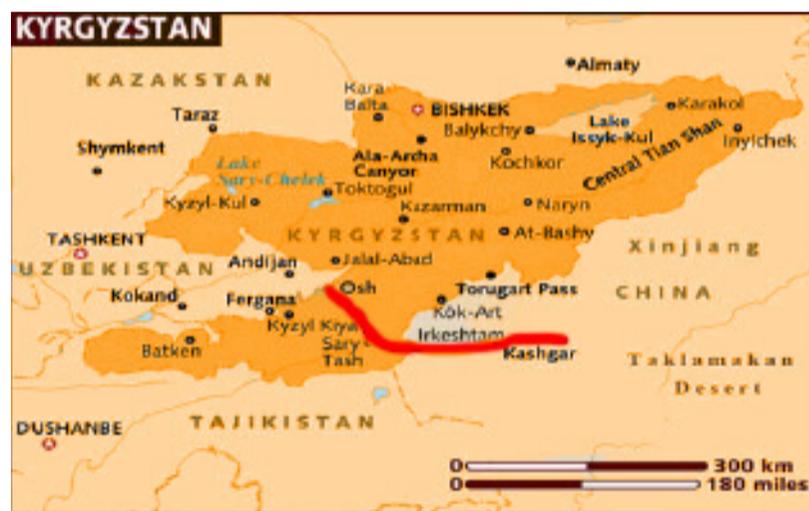
Then there's an almighty SMASH, and it veers into another jack-knifed truck on the road ahead.

Our minibus breaks and stops literally inches before we plough into the car. But we're not out of danger yet; we're sitting ducks on a sharp bend in the fog. I decide to take my chances – I run off the bus, into the darkness, skidding on the ice until I reach the relative safety of the roadside. In fact, I had almost slipped over the cliff into the blackness below, but I had just stopped in time.

I watched as the taxi driver emerged from the car to shake the hand of the truck driver. Despite the perilously twisted metal, it seemed like nobody was hurt, and before long the taxi driver was reversing to untangle himself from the truck and jumping on the hood to iron out the creases. He clearly decided it was in good enough shape to make the remaining 180 kilometres to Osh, as within five minutes he had ushered his passengers back in and set off again... leaving a long trail of radiator fluid behind. I saw my bus driver planning to do the same, so I rushed back on board.

#### A shocking discovery

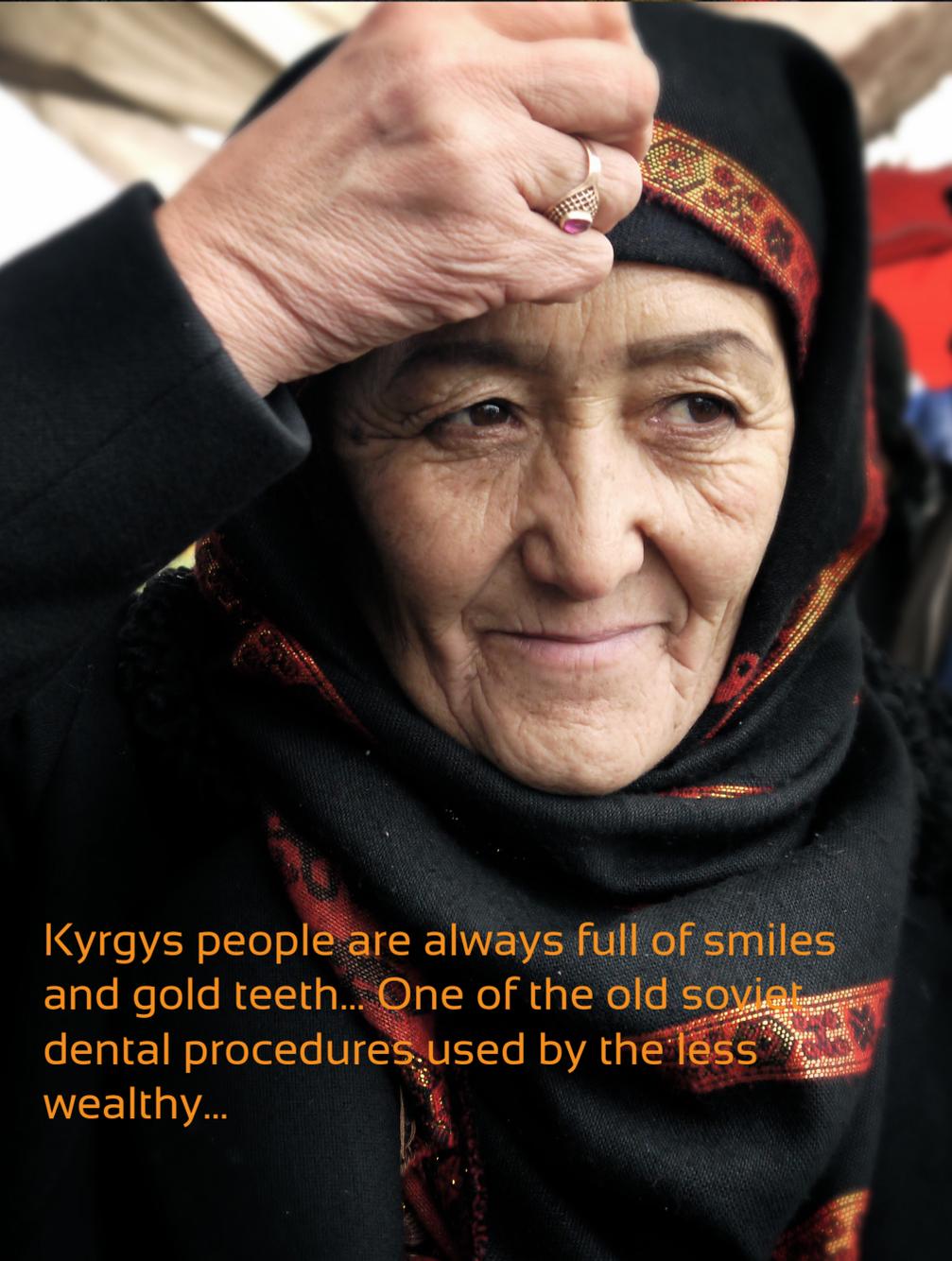
Shortly after, the bus stopped for a dinner break at a strange, dimly-lit place at the side of the road. With my heart still beating and palms still sweaty from our previous exploits, I didn't have much of an appetite – which was fortunate as I didn't have any money left either! Within half an hour three of the passengers returned, but another was still busy shooting glasses of whisky. By the time he did return, he was utterly drunk, and as we set off he was repeatedly falling onto me and looking like he was going to throw up. We stopped again so the driver could relieve himself, and the drunk fell out of the minibus and into the snow. I took the opportunity to reseat myself in the front. If everything goes well from now, I told myself, we can still be in Osh by midnight!



By the time we set off again, the snow had picked up, and so the visibility was getting worse and worse. However, we continued progressing at a steady pace, passing through some very small and interesting villages along the route, until suddenly in the headlights there appeared a large lump in the road ahead. The driver swerved to avoid it, but as we skidded on the snow-covered road the lump bounced off the car bonnet anyway. My blood ran cold as I realised what it was.

#### A human being.

Without any hesitation, the driver stepped on the accelerator and started to drive off. I snapped back to my senses and screamed at him to stop – we had just hit a person! Looking back at the street behind, it was



Kyrgys people are always full of smiles and gold teeth... One of the old soviet dental procedures used by the less wealthy...

clear that he had been run over several times already, as the snow around was covered in blood – he was like regular road kill, almost certainly dead – but I still felt we had to do something! I asked the driver to pull over and call the police, which he did, but as soon as he'd made the call he ushered us back on the bus to continue. We left the man lying in the road.

#### The final stretch

The driver decided to take everybody else home before me, which meant a 50-minute detour from the road to Osh, but by now I was too emotionally fraught to really protest. The drunk guy was dropped off in a shipping container town, and we were then stopped a police checkpoint. It took them fifteen minutes to figure out my passport, and once we were cleared it took another fifteen minutes to restart the van, but by 2.30am we were finally on the home straight to Osh.

By the time we arrived in the city, it was no surprise to find that most of the hotels were closed, and those that were opened were either fully booked or unwilling to accept new guests in the early hours. But finally, after half a dozen attempts and a even more hours, I was finally offered a room in the enormous 15-storey Soviet-era Osh Intertourist Hotel. The elevator was broken, so I had to drag my stuff up five floors, and the room was like something out of a horror movie, but I didn't care. It was now 4.30am – 22-and-a-half hours – and after a nightmare journey I was finally alone in a dark room with somewhere horizontal to lay my head. This was absolute bliss!

As I flopped down onto the pillow, I tried to reflect on a crazy journey where I had seen death, and faced my own mortality. But before I could form a coherent thought, I had fallen fast asleep.

It seemed dealing with what had happened over the last day would have to wait for tomorrow... ■

### Kyrgistan at a Glance

Capital: Bishkek  
 Airport Code: FRU  
 Language: Kyrgyz / Russian  
 Currency: Som (KGS)  
 Calling Code: +996



Visa Required: No  
 ATM/CC: Yes but tricky/ Only in major towns

Rail: No  
 Air Travel: Yes  
 Taxi/Bus: Yes  
 Travel Difficulty: More than usual

***"KYRGYZSTAN is not for the uninitiated, but if you want adventure this is where to find it"***

LANCE MANION - EDITOR AT LARGE

