

LAND OF YURT AND YAK



The Kyrgyz tribal people of China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region hold on tight to their traditions in a place where lines between nations blur. Daniel Allen reports

Adilet doesn't own a watch. His life is governed by the season, not the second. Just as he did last year, and the year before that, he and his family will live in a collection of yurts in the shadow of the towering Muztagh Ata mountain until the first winter snow forces them down to lower altitude. At over 4,500 metres, their summer camp is a fleeting footnote to human endurance among the massive contours of a timeless landscape.

Jambulak, the camp to which Adilet returns home most evenings with his herd of yak, has been used by Kyrgyz nomads for decades. It is just one of many spartan camps and villages that cling to the Karakoram Highway, the world's highest paved international road, as it winds through this remote corner of western China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

The Karakoram Highway might end somewhere near Islamabad, capital of Pakistan, but Adilet's nomadic existence is strictly confined by international borders. While he, his wife Cholpon, and their two sons Jyrgal and Terenk, consider themselves purely Kyrgyz, they remain forever separated from nearby Kyrgyzstan by arbitrary borders and mass migrations of a bygone era.

'We live on Chinese soil but will always be Kyrgyz,' says Adilet, proudly. 'My sons will grow up Kyrgyz. They will learn Kyrgyz songs and read about our >



Pillar of society:
a yak takes a well-earned drink in the shadow of Muztagh Ata

'When two young people get married we hope they will have many children in front of them, and lots of yaks behind them.'



nation's history. Of course things change, but we shouldn't forget our heritage or traditional values.'

Muztagh Ata, or the 'father of all ice peaks', dominates the Jambuloh skyline. Soaring to 7,546 metres and often wreathed in cloud, its massive granite bulk forms part of a sub-range of the Pamir Mountains that delineate the Tibetan Plateau's northwestern edge. Twin glaciers extend from the snow-bound summit toward Jambuloh, and the weather here can change from kind to cruel in an instant.

While Adilet is out grazing his yaks, Cholpon stays at home with her mother, tending the camp, milking livestock and making cheese, yogurt and butter. Even in summer it's a constant struggle for Adilet to find enough vegetation for his bovine charges above 4,000 metres, and he often wanders far in search of the most succulent grasses, herbs and lichens. The yaks must be corralled every night

to protect against predators and prevent nocturnal scattering of the herd.

The yak is vital to many Kyrgyz of the Xinjiang Pamir, so it's little wonder that a large part of Adilet's life is dedicated to the happiness of his herd. Renowned for their hardiness, yaks can live up to 25 years, and provide everything from transport, meat and milk to hair for making ropes and rugs, dung for fuel, and wool and leather for yurts, clothing and various other household items.

Although early explorers of the Xinjiang Pamir such as Swedish adventurer Sven Hedin were inclined to dramatise their encounters with the wild yak of the region, domestic animals such as Adilet's are usually far less feisty. They can live anywhere from 3,000 meters to very high altitude, although when Hedin attempted an ill-prepared ascent of Muztagh Ata in 1890, he complained that his beasts of burden soon expired above 6,000 metres.

The importance of the yak to the Kyrgyz way of life is highlighted by some of their customs. 'We often greet each other with the expression: "Are your cattle well?"' says Adilet. 'This is generally followed by: "Are you living a peaceful life with your children?" When two young people get married we hope they will have many children in front of them, and lots of yaks behind them.'

Although some trappings of modern society have penetrated the Xinjiang Pamir, Adilet knows it is relationships with land and livestock rather than technology that sustain most of his people. 'The Kyrgyz here have always been *chaban* [cowboys],' he says. 'We will always depend on our animals, and always live off the land. The yak and horse are part of our culture, and unless we change our way of life, they always will be.'

Living in such a demanding environment, even the most basic of materials are hard to come by for Adilet and Cholpon.

Daniel Allen

Every couple of months Adilet will drive some of his yaks to the local market for bartering. He returns with sacks full of flour, tea, tobacco, matches, batteries, light bulbs and toys, as well as planks of wood, nails, and even solar panels.

'Being able to generate our own power has made a huge difference to life here,' says Cholpon. 'Before we had to use yak butter lamps in the evening and it was difficult for the boys to do their homework. Now we have solar panels we can have bulbs in the yurts, and even play DVDs.'

Home for Adilet and his family in Jambuloh is a combination of yurts and primitive, mud brick houses. A masterpiece of low-tech design, the yurt has been used by Kyrgyz nomads for over 1,000 years, and is so well matched for its purpose that it has evolved little since conception. The yurt is the pinnacle of Kyrgyz craftsmanship, and erecting one is a social affair that involves whole families and communities. ➤



Visions of the Silk Road: (from top left), a view of a *tunduk* - the wooden circle at the top of a yurt; local fashions and transport; youngsters in typically warm attire

Herd instinct: sheep graze the plains (left); looking ahead - in a Kyrgyz hat (right)



Kyrgyz nomads often refer to their yurts as *bozuy*, or 'grey houses'. In times gone by ordinary families couldn't afford to use the best quality felt to cover their yurts, so they used felt scraps, which were generally grey. Wealthier, more powerful Kyrgyz would use white felt, and their more impressive homes were known as *ak orgo*, or white yurts.

Yurts are still used across Central Asia, but there are subtle variations in their design. 'I've been told that Kyrgyz ones are taller than Kazakh ones,' says Adilet. The roofs of Xinjiang Pamir yurts have to be steep to keep off the snow and rain, and despite the inhospitable climate, they can last for many years.

'To make a yurt you start with the doorway, or *bosogo*,' says Adilet. 'Then you build a circular trellis wall (*kerege*), which is made from sections called *kanats*. Each kanat is made from long birch poles, bent and tied together with leather ribbons and ropes. The curved uprights are then added, and finally you need the wooden circle at the top [*tunduk*], which allows light in and smoke out.'

Once the wooden skeleton of the yurt is complete, it is wrapped in thick felt blankets that provide protection from the wind and cold. A final blanket is placed on top of the *tunduk*, which can be removed and replaced according to the weather. Considered almost

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sacred in Kyrgyz culture, the *tunduk* is so symbolically important that it forms the centre of the national flag of Kyrgyzstan.

Cholpon explains that Kyrgyz yurt space is traditionally divided according to gender and status. 'The left side is the woman's part and the right side is the man's part. Opposite the entrance is the most special part, where we store the best carpets, and entertain guests.'

Since their creation, the Himalaya, Hindu Kush, Kunlun and Pamir mountain ranges have impeded travel between China, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Until recently the only force to break through this turbulent terrain was water – major rivers such as the Indus, Hunza, and Gilgit. Today, a limited but growing network of roads crisscross the region, but the camel and horse are still as important as the motorbike and beaten-up jeep.

Although Adilet remains blissfully unaware of any strategic importance, the area around Jambuloh is, in fact, a major cartographic crossroads. As natural forces across the region continue to force up the world's highest peaks, so lines drawn on a map

have brought China, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan into close proximity. Friction here hasn't always been of the tectonic variety.

However tough travel may be in the Xinjiang Pamir today, it's certainly safer than it once was. Across the centuries, without the benefit of modern road-building technology, Silk Route traders moved through this hazardous wilderness, negotiating precipitous paths and raging torrents with their precious cargoes. Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun all marched armies through these mountain passes, as they sought to divide and conquer.

Adilet, a conquering hero to his family, looks forward rather than back, and is unfazed by the challenges that lie ahead. 'Of course our lives are changing,' he says. 'More tourists and Chinese come here now, and trade is increasing. Sometimes change is good, sometimes bad, but if we remember who we are and look after the land, then it will look after us.'

Like the lowly yurt, this simple philosophy would appear to need little improvement. ■

HOW TO GET THERE

The nearest major Chinese town to Jambuloh is **Kashgar**, which is a one-hour flight from Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

From Kashgar take a regular bus or taxi to **Lake Karakul** (four to six hours) on the Karakoram Highway, which itself boasts some spectacular views. Most travellers opt to stay at least one day at **Lake Karakul** to explore and admire the scenery – lakeside yurts are available as accommodation for a very reasonable price.

TREKKING POINTS

From **Lake Karakul** trek (or ride motorbikes) to Jambuloh via Subash. Take time to acclimatise to the altitude, and pack cold weather gear as the weather at both Lake Karakul and Jambuloh can change very quickly. From Jambuloh it is a further (short) trek up to **Muztagh Ata Base Camp** and glacier.

TAKE THE TOUR

Travel agencies in Kashgar can arrange the whole trip to Jambuloh, including taxis, camels and guides. Alternatively, there will always be people on hand at Lake Karakul for camel hire, bike hire and guiding.

Uyghur Tours

Seman Hotel, Kashgar
www.silkroadinn.com
E-mail: abdultour@yahoo.com

WHERE TO STAY

● **Hongfu Hotel, Xinjiang**
No26, Huanghe Road
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