

Heart of ASia

MODERN-DAY TRAVELS IN CENTRAL ASIA.

Text and Photos: CHRISTOPHER HEDWIG

As a child, I was always fascinated by the Age of Exploration. Its incomplete maps with large, blank spaces stirred up a sense of curiosity and excitement within me.

Today, we live in a world of GPS, Google Earth and satellite mapping. As a result, there are few question marks left about the earth. With print and TV media, we know so much of life in the rest of the world. However, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan remained a blank for me. Locked away until 1991 behind the Iron Curtain, they seemed impossibly remote. It was this burning curiosity of the unknown that led my wife and I to move to Kazakhstan in 2003.

This region was once at the heart of the Silk Road. For thousands of years, Central Asia was not the end of the world, but its very centre, its heart. Armies, empires and caravans of traders swept back and forth over these lands – Alexander the Great marched from the west, while Genghis Khan surged from the east. In the 20th century, recklessly brave Russian and British secret agents played out their 'Great Game' of espionage in the mountain passes and markets of far-flung kingdoms and khanates. »



Uzbekistan



Turkmenistan



Kyrgyzstan



Kazakhstan



Tajikistan



The Darvaza gas crater in the Karakum Desert of Turkmenistan glows with a fire caused by Soviet-era gas explorations.

» Uzbekistan



Deprived of the moderating effects of the oceans, much of Central Asia experiences bitterly cold winters and boiling hot summers. The steppes and deserts of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan stands in contrast to the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These extremes of climate and geography make these countries challenging to explore.

All in all, by car, train, bus and foot, I ended up covering over 40,000 kilometres. Traveling between these former Soviet states required much patience as visas and special permits, although by no means impossible to obtain, did require much effort (and sometimes, for a photographer, a creative way with words). I used two Canon SLRs, one digital (EOS 10D) and one film (EOS 1), and primarily used two lenses, a 20–35/2.8 and an 85/1.8. Later I upgraded to the Canon EOS 5D and stopped shooting film. Perhaps as a result of the region's Soviet past, I was often hassled even when I was photographing the most ordinary things. As a result, I had to be as discrete as possible when I was shooting. »



Republic of Uzbekistan

Population **26.9 million**
Total Area **447,400 square kilometres**
Capital **Tashkent**
Major Religion **Islam**



Top: Mir-i Arab Madrasah in the city of Bukhara, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Bukhara is the fifth largest city in Uzbekistan, and at its height, was one of the great centres of learning in the Islamic world. **Right:** Playing football at the Kalyan Minaret, first built in 1127 and likely the tallest structure in Central Asia at the time. It remains the most striking landmark in the city.

» Turkmenistan

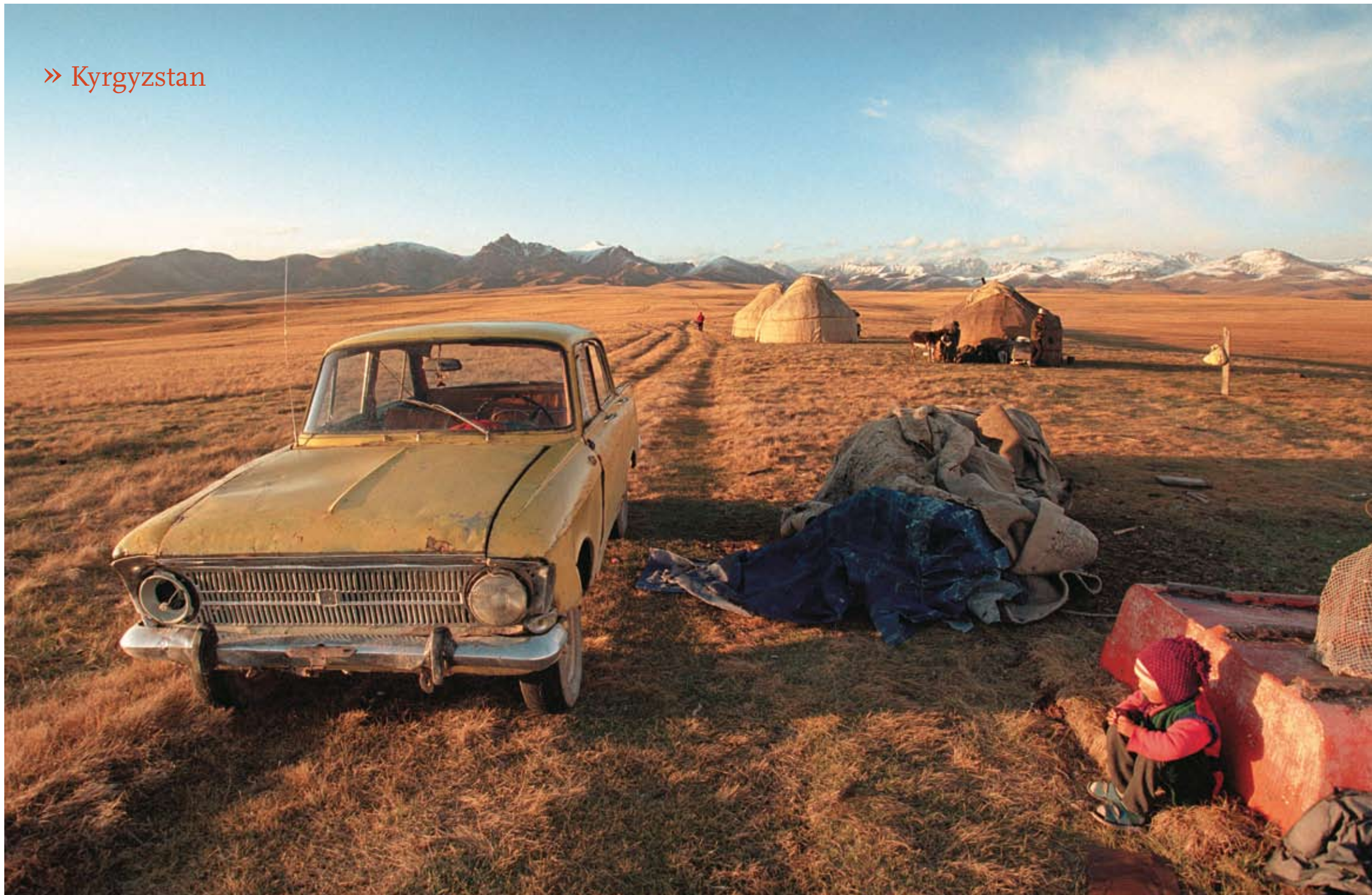


This Page, Top: The majestic Yangykala Canyon in the northwest regions of Turkmenistan.
 This Page, Bottom: At Tolkuchka Bazaar, on the outskirts of the capital city of Ashgabat.
 Opposite Top: Shepherds tend their flock within the ruins of Merv, a city that was sacked by the Mongols in 1221. Merv is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
 Opposite Bottom: Damla Oasis in the Karakum Desert.



Turkmenistan
 Population **5 million**
 Total Area **488,100 square kilometres**
 Capital **Ashgabat**
 Major Religion **Islam**

» Kyrgyzstan



Kyrgyz Republic

Population **5.1 million**
Total Area **199,900 square kilometres**
Capital **Bishkek**
Major Religions **Islam and Christianity**



On my travels, I often experimented with various techniques of hands-free photography in Central Asia. Sometimes I would hang the camera around my neck and either set the self-timer (so I could push the shutter before getting into position), or run a cable release clipped to the inside of my shirt (so I could shoot at will with the trigger in my pocket).

Even though the land and weather was sometimes harsh, this was not the case with the people I met, many of whom were extremely warm and hospitable, and who offered me countless cups of tea, horse's milk and shots of vodka, as well as a warm bed for the night.

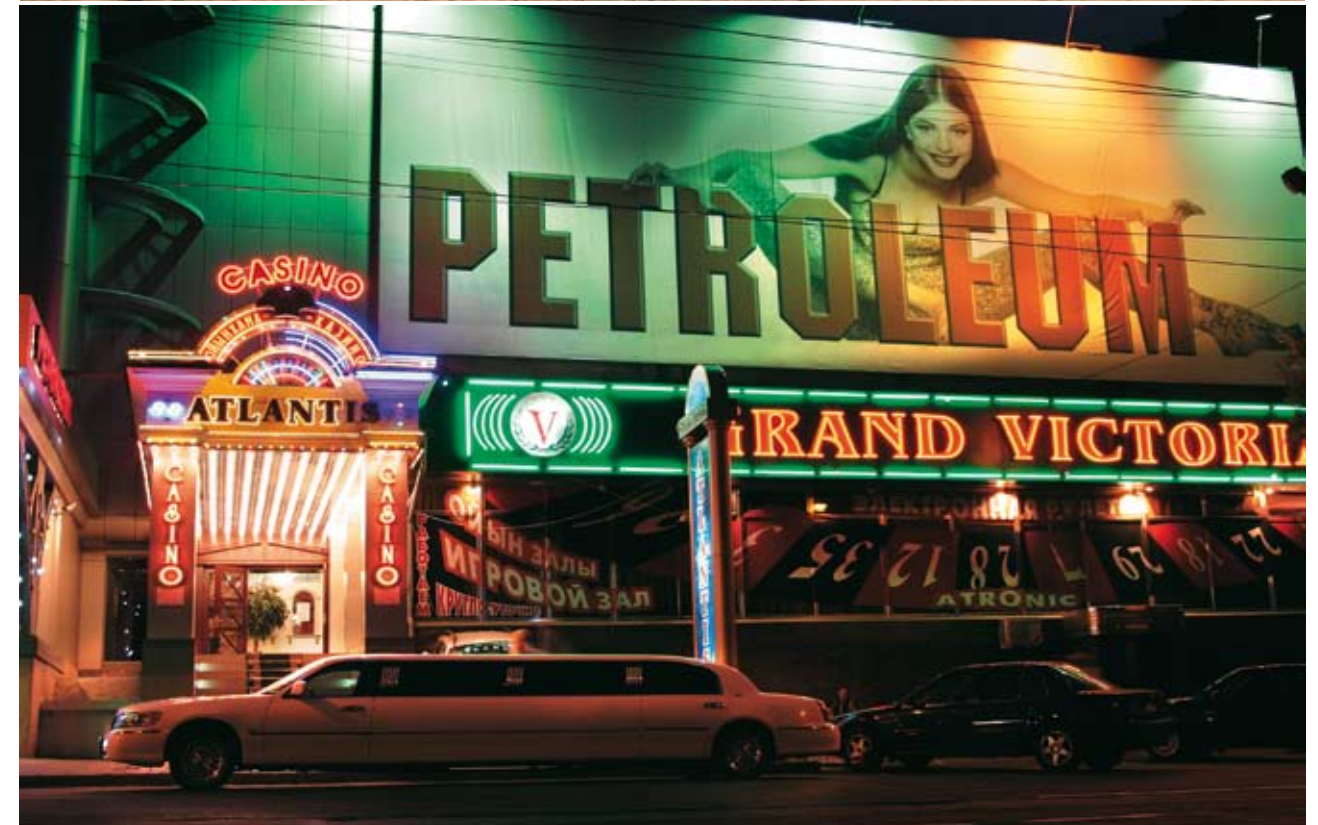
Our three-year stay in Central Asia was enough for me to get a glimpse into life there, while at the same time allowing the region to retain much of its magic and mystery. It often seems that Central Asia is plagued by poor leadership and manipulated by world powers for its resources, while being forgotten by the rest of us. I hope that through my photos, people can get an idea of the beauty of the people and land there, and what they have to offer. ■

Top: Yurts on the alpine plateau.
Right: A view of Kyrgyzstan's mountains. During the summer months, shepherd families and their heard will make their homes in these distant regions.

» Kazakhstan



This Page, Top: Abandoned boats along a coast where the Aral Sea once flowed, an example of how natural resources have been exploited in the region.
This Page, Bottom: The ancient sport of hunting with eagles has survived in Kazakhstan.
Opposite Top: A Soviet-era bus-stop.
Opposite Bottom: Casinos are a common sight in Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan.



Republic of Kazakhstan

Population **15.4 million**
Total Area **2.7 million square kilometres**
Capital **Astana**
Major Religions **Islam and Christianity**

» Tajikistan



Top: On a road cutting through the mountain plateaus of Tajikistan.

Left: Over the New Year celebrations, men gather outside the capital city of Dushanbe to play *buzkashi*, a boisterous, polo-like sport played with the carcass of a goat.



Republic of Tajikistan

Population **6.3 million**
Total Area **143,100 square kilometres**
Capital **Dushanbe**
Major Religion **Islam**

CHRISTOPHER HERWIG was born in Surrey, Canada, where he attended Langara College's professional photography programme in Vancouver. With a background in advertising photography and a love for travelling, he eventually started to focus on documentary work. His images have appeared in numerous magazines and books, and he has published a collection of images from Central Asia entitled *Stanorama*. He is a member of the WPN photo agency and is currently living in Liberia, West Africa, with his wife Malin, who works with the United Nations. His website is www.herwigphoto.com.