

Cease Fire



Looking north, past Bazarak, up Afghanistan's mountain treasure of the Panjshir Valley. The snowy peak on the left, Koh-i-sia, hits 15,500 feet.

Each spring or autumn in Nuristan, a province in the far reaches of the Hindu Kush range of Afghanistan, groups of young men gather to set up climbing competitions. One will carry an axe or hat to a mountain summit, after which 20 or 30 competitors will race to the top. The first one to return with the prize wins, and a goat will be slaughtered in his honor. A feast ensues, and from then on the victor will be well known in the village. Not only does such a man hold bragging rights, but other villagers will seek him out in emergencies. Such a man is a prime candidate to be a mountain guide.

In his younger days, Abdullah Mayar was an ace at such competitions, and, even as a middle-aged man with a daughter and son, he is strong in the mountains. Mayar currently lives on the western edge of Kabul, in a baked-mud compound cooled by a mulberry tree. On the morning before I met him, in July 2006, to speak about his aspirations to become a mountain guide, a bomb exploded in the middle of the city, injuring four people and sharply punctuating a period of increasing violence in the country.

Mayar's real home lies in the Hindu Kush, mountains that for

decades have been off limits to even the most brazen alpinists, locked away behind war and violence. A branch of the Himalaya, these peaks, many of them unclimbed, stretch across Afghanistan's northeastern regions and cradle the capital, Kabul. They are steep, arid, and ruthless.

Mayar is eager to accelerate his country's transformation from war to peace, especially where mountains and climbing are concerned. "People from Nuristan have a natural relationship with the mountains," he told me. "Their land, their property, their everything is on the mountain."

By the time we met, I'd been in Afghanistan for more than a month, riding with U.S. forces through the wasteland deserts of the south and the terrorist-harboring mountains of the east, and I knew that, even as fighting continued in those places, climbing elsewhere in Afghanistan was possible. Before leaving for Afghanistan, I'd spoken to a writer friend who'd worked in the country, and told him that I would be looking for Afghan guides. It was a nice idea, he said, "but Charlie don't surf," i.e., Muslims don't climb.

Mayar, a lean man with broad shoulders and a neat beard, was a convincing refutation to this, and proof that mountains, no matter where they are, bind people together. Last year, Mayar and his daughter, Saddiqa, joined 20 other Afghans for two weeks, learning climbing and rescue techniques under the tutelage of an Italian mountaineering organization, Mountain Wilderness. The hope was that they might, someday soon, lead Western climbers with Western dollars into the hills.

Mayar clearly had a lot of mountain sense, but no English. We spoke through an interpreter. Saddiqa, meanwhile, represented a good chance for the profession to bloom. The eighth-grader decided to become a guide after Mayar dissuaded her becoming a paratrooper, like her grandfather. She is learning English, she said, and would welcome the chance to show her country to Westerners.

It was her grandfather's photographs of the Hindu Kush that first attracted her to them. Family trips to Nuristan, where Saddiqa would spend all day in the mountains and forests, sunk the hook deeper. At the Mountain Wilderness course, she had her first real taste of climbing—and the first sunburn on her face. In a country where, until recently, women couldn't go outside without full-length burkas or attend school, this caused concern among her teachers and some classmates. But, she was determined to continue.

"I want to be an example for all Afghan girls," she said. "I want to be in this job just to encourage other

Tourism not Terrorism in Afghanistans Hindu Kush

By Brian Calvert • Photos by Ash Sweeting

women from other parts of Afghanistan to be mountain climbers.”

Where foreigners are concerned, the harsh, arid Hindu Kush, Farsi for “Hindu Killer,” originally played host only to Russian and British agents who traveled the mountains in disguise. In the 20th Century, however, explorers began to make long forays into the range. One, Wilfred Thesiger, wrote of “bare, steep, scree-covered mountains” and men who wore red scarves at their throats and carried 50-pound skins of butter. The allure of the peaks and the exotic mountain cultures drew climbers through the 1960s and ‘70s.

“In 1963, I organized my first expedition to the Afghan Hindu Kush and ... the powerful, isolated pyramid of Baba Tangi, [which had] never been attempted,” Carlo Alberto Pinelli, leader of Mayar’s mountain guiding course, wrote me from Rome. “Today, I would suggest to mountaineers looking for a truly fascinating and highly challenging route the northern spur of this peak: a vertical symphony of ice and red granite.”

Babi Tangi (21,373 feet) is not the only objective awaiting climbers. The peaks in Afghanistan’s eastern Hindu Kush push 23,000 feet. The Wakhan Corridor, which stabs into the Himalayas and is bordered by

Tajikistan, China, and Kashmir, is home to the Big Pamir range, with summits like Marco Polo (20,256 feet), Hilal (20,607 feet), and Pamir (20,670 feet). The highest mountain in Afghanistan, Nowshaq (24,580 feet), looms in the western edge of the corridor. The Wakhan is the safest bet for “brave and imaginative mountaineers,” Pinelli wrote, and is accessible via Tajikistan as well.

“The Afghan Hindu Kush peaks offer mostly difficulties on ice and snow, with poor rock spurs,” Pinelli continued. The favorable climate (best in July and August) and easily accessed basecamps have, he added, long been a draw — Pinelli said that as many as 100 expeditions visited Afghanistan prior to 1978, when it succumbed to communism.

Afghanistan’s many years of fighting wrought a different kind of mountaineer: the mujahidin, or “those who struggle,” guerillas like Rahim Khan, another student of the Mountain Wilderness training course.

Now living in the hardscrabble foothills of northern Kabul, past a heap of gutted Soviet armored vehicles and near a rag-tag cemetery, Khan was 19 when the Red Army began its occupation of his country, in 1979. He waged guerilla war for the next two decades, against the Soviets and then the Taliban who followed. From the

mountaintops, he and other mujahidin would fire Stinger missiles at Soviet bombers. Summiting was not a matter of conquest but of strategy.

Khan evaded capture, carried wounded comrades over the mountains, and could find food and water where none seemed apparent. Using nothing but three red bricks as a brazier, he said, he could have a fire for 12 hours, enough to cook food and boil tea, undetected.

Like all Afghans, he said, he loved the mountains.

“If we had the ability to hug the mountains, we would,” Kahn said. “If we had enough space in our house, we would bring the mountains and put them in the corner of our house. We love them that much.”

Afghanistan’s mountains have produced many men like Abdullah Mayar and Rahim Khan, and have sparked the imaginations of the next generation, including young girls like Saddiqa. Such guides-in-training are on a precipice no mountain skill can tackle, though, as Afghanistan struggles to stabilize.

Mayar, who works for the government’s National Environmental Protection Agency, is willing to continue his training. So is Saddiqa. Khan, who has been jobless for more than a year, except for selling goods from a small shop near his home or working as a construction laborer, has no intentions of continuing without steady employment.

None of them has a chance if Afghanistan’s flaring violence cannot be stamped out. “If there is not security,” said Saddiqa, “I don’t think I will be able to work as a mountain guide.”

Despite five years of Western intervention, pockets of Taliban, al Qaeda, and narco-trafficker resistance remain. The central government is weak, and in some places, the rule of law is the way of the gun. (Rahim Khan offered to take me to the base of the 20,000-



An armed guide with his packhorse, near the 20,000-foot Mir Samir, in the northern Panjshir Valley.

foot Mir Samir, in the Panjshir Valley, but said we’d need 10 armed guards to accompany us. I gracefully declined.)

“The risk that foreigners run when traveling in Afghanistan is that they have no way of accessing information of what places may be safe,” said Andre Mann, a representative of Great Game Travel, one of the few adventure-travel companies operating in Afghanistan. “The key to security in Afghanistan is not to think, ‘Is such and such place safe or not?’ Rather, you have to ask, ‘Is such and such place safe *today*?’”

A travel company like Mann’s can help guide climbers to the right place at a safe time, but climbers can also contact the Ministry of Tourism, whose responsibility it is to facilitate such things. Whether they get help from a guide company or the ministry, for now, teams will be guideless once they reach basecamp. Still, Afghanistan’s guide infrastructure continues to build, and the bottom line is that access to the country’s peaks is cracking open once again.

It isn’t always easy, “but, if you love adventure, such obstacles should not cause frustration,” Pinelli wrote. “To those who are not ready or flexible enough to do so, I would suggest to take a holiday in Switzerland.”

Brian Calvert is a writer raised in Wyoming’s Wind River Mountains. Now living in Washington, D.C., he skips town whenever he can.



A remnant of 1980s Soviet occupation.