EMILIA WICKSTEAD'S
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HIP TO BE BRUTON
How the Somerset town turned cool

AN UNLIKELY ECO WARRIOR
Tracy Worcester is a duchess on a mission

WILD ABOUT ADVENTURE
PETER OBORNE finds a warm welcome in Syria. LEVISON WOOD explores safe spaces in Afghanistan. PETER HUGHES sets sail in eastern Indonesia. DEVANSHI MODY discovers the posh side of Peru
SAFE STEPPES
The FCO advises against travel to Afghanistan but, far from the fighting, intrepid explorer *Levison Wood* discovers the hidden – and safe – wonders of the Wakhan Corridor, with its majestic trekking routes.

Wishing to the sound of scraggy goats bleating out for their morning feed, the half-light of a dim lantern garners across the camp, coming as a welcome relief to the freezing chill of the night. Opening my eyes, I squint across the valley, watching as long shadows retreat to reveal the towering peaks of the Pamir mountains. A man with skin like leather and draped in an old Soviet army overcoat coughs, indicating it's time to wake up. I smell the now familiar scent of baking yak dung on an open fire, and hope that tea is almost ready.

I'm in the middle of one of the most remote valleys in Central Asia, in the depths of the Wakhan Corridor – an area that's home to the wild tribes of Herges nomads and Wakhi shepherds.

As I look around at the scene, I'm transported back to the 19th century round yurts covered in felt, yaks, goats, camels and ponies grazing in the high meadows, and smoke billowing from the fire. The men are wizened and hard, the women aglow, looking haughty in their bright red robes, in stark contrast to the black open stomp that seems to go on forever. It's no wonder the locals call it Bamiyaan, the roof of the world. It has a stark, ancient feel and I wouldn't have been surprised to see Genghis Khan himself galloping over the plains. It's medieval in every way except one – many of the trekkers carry rifles as protection against wolves, more leopards and, of course, their militant neighbours. It's a testament to the fact that I'm in Afghanistan, one of the most dangerous countries in the world.

"We count each day we want to go there," quipped John, an old army pal, when I told him I was returning to the country in which we'd frequently been shot at before. Afghanistan. The mere mention of the word conjures up thoughts of the terror, turmoil and bloodshed that has defined its existence as a country for almost two decades. Even before the allied invasion to defeat the Taliban in October 2001, Afghanistan has had a historical timeline dominated by foreign conquerors and civil unrest, deeming it off limits to all but the most forlornly of trekkers. The FCO currently advises against all travel to the vast majority of the country, putting off most potential visitors.

And yet, emerging out like an arched door from the northeastern corner of the country separating Tajikistan from Pakistan, runs Central Asia's best kept secret: the Wakhan Corridor – a strip of land so far removed from the troubles and conflict concerning the rest of Afghanistan that it's now a safe, what's more, it's home to some of the most majestic trekking routes in the world.
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And now a steady stream of adventurers is ignoring the official maps and traveling this hidden wonder on foot and horseback, all arranged by a few select adventure travel operators that go to the extra mile to ensure modern-day Marco Polo an experience like no other.

Avoiding the more troublesome southern parts of Afghanistan, I fly to the capital of Tashkent, Dushanbe, where I meet my fellow trekkers, a mixed bunch of international trekkers—two of the best Appalachian and Turkish, a military doctor, and our local guide, Abdul. It will take a couple of days to drive from here to the border crossing on the Oxnor river at Kakhian, the gateway to Afghanistan. We follow the famous Pamir highway as it crosses through some of the most sublime highland landscapes I have seen anywhere. We stumble along in an old Russian off-road, slowly approaching the snow-capped Pamir Mountains, where we will spend the next fortight. I've been intrigued by this part of the world ever since reading tales of the Silk Road and the Great Game—this is where the rivalry between Russia and British empires played out in the mid-19th century. But it is equally keen to witness how local peoples live now. I've heard tales of centuries-old routines, some of which I've also seen firsthand in the market stalls and shopkeepers that are proudly seen. Anstafarm, yet also read that this is one of the poorest places in the world, with the highest infant mortality rate and an average lifespan of just 55. There are no hospitals and few water facilities.

Entering the Wakhan Corridor the road whizzes into a great track and after 250km reaches Sarhad, where it disappears altogether and the road adventure begins. Heavy rain, snow, and landslides make the valley impossible for half the year. The best time to visit the region is early autumn, before the snows close the high passes and the nomads move down to lower pastures. A ways off the beaten path, a world away from the business of life, the region provides a unique experience to discover a world that is different from the norm. The Wakhan are some of the highest and most rugged in the world, their overpowering presence makes the rest of Afghanistan seem manageable by comparison, and in their vastness their clarity is why this area of the country has left so much to its own devices.

The Taliban haven't been here so we are able to climb a further 1,000m to cross the Duke Pass. Simple snacks and hot tea are scattered along the trail, and we settle into the nearest house before the night sets in. The only light we have comes from the fire. Abdul builds inside, using wood gathered at the doorways. Our guides are greets food—vegetable sauce and rice—and boils tea, which keeps us warm until we wrap up in our sleeping bags and fall soundly asleep, exhausted by the day's trammels. The next morning, rejoicing the fast-flowing river, our team tracks its remains of villages and gorges on the noise of the river. The trail leads to the river's source for the next few days, and as we get further into the mountains, the steep-sided valleys open up to the wide plains of the Afghan Pamir, home to the feared Kyrgyz—descendants of the ancient Mongol hordes.

For two days our team lines among our new friends from the region, pictures of geography, now locked further into this land. Desclinical and borders, they live a life unshaped by modernity, just as we do.

They laugh at us, laugh at our words of greeting, and they teach us to be kind and make friends. They laugh at our stories, and share the stories of the world.

For these moments, unapologetic, living a life of hunting and tracking basic goods with the neighboring tribes, they are happy that tourism will bring new income and some relief to their struggles. As the chief у бе some cramp up again in an old Russian off-road, there's a shared thrill to finally be on our feet and in the expanse of the nature enclosing us. The mountains surrounding the Wakhan are some of the highest and most rugged in the world, their overpowering presence makes the rest of Afghanistan seem
I suddenly feel a wave of excitement at the prospect of some real exploration in a region only ever shown in a negative light.