

DISAPPEARING KYRGYZ VILLAGES IN THE PAMIRS

Three years after COVID-19, what has changed?

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As I walked through the village looking for someone to talk to, all I found were empty streets, boarded-up windows, and padlocked doors. After having tea and bread with one villager, 45 minutes passed before I found another person with whom to speak.

Many of the Kyrgyz villages in the Pamir¹ region of Tajikistan shared these depictions. Studying reports and written commentary from trips taken pre-COVID-19 in 2017 and 2019, I expected more hustle and bustle. True, many nomadic families travel to the *jailoo*, or high summer meadows, to graze their herds, but I had read of regular village life continuing despite the summer travel.

Moving to Central Asia in 2021, I came with a dream of being involved in God's story in this nomadic region. I waited patiently for borders that had been closed due to COVID-19 to reopen. That didn't happen. Then in September 2022, ethnic fighting broke out between the Kyrgyz and Tajik, which kept the border firmly closed. Finally, by summer 2023, I decided to take the long way around and travel by car from Kyrgyzstan

through Uzbekistan into Tajikistan and cross nearly the entire country to arrive at the Pamirs.

To reach Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, took 14 hours of travel, and from Dushanbe up to Murghab, the largest Kyrgyz village in this region, was almost a three-day journey due to dilapidated roads and countless landslides that needed to be cleared. Construction to upgrade the only road to this area is currently underway, but it is slow-going as the threat of more landslides is constant.

Traveling from Dushanbe east to Khorog, Tajik ethnicity fades and Pamiri people appear on the scene. Entering Alichur, however, a distinct change to predominantly Kyrgyz ethnicity is explicitly noticed. Pamiri people still inhabit many of the Kyrgyz villages in Tajikistan, but the only Tajiks are those placed in government roles (that not too long ago were held by Kyrgyz). Starting in Alichur, I traveled up to Murghab, Karakul, Rangkul, Tokhtamysh and back. In each village, I sought out locals, asking about population, employment, cost of living. Answers were eerily similar.

“No work.”

“They've all left to Kyrgyzstan.”

¹ A mountain range between Pakistan and Central Asia. Kyrgyz villages in this section of the Pamir Range are situated in Gorno-Badashkan Province.



“My family moved to Bishkek.” (*city in Kyrgyzstan*)

“With the border closed, everything comes from Dushanbe and is more expensive.”

“No more horses—they eat too much grass.”

With the exception of Rangkul, where people roamed the streets conversing with one another and conducting business related to their camels, many villagers shared the same laments. Since the border remained closed for three years, many had left to find work in Kyrgyzstan. Those who remained complained of price increases in everything from food to coal because products that had once come from Osh—the largest city in Southern Kyrgyzstan—now come from Dushanbe. Even products coming from the Chinese/Tajik border cost more because they must first travel to Dushanbe before being shipped back out to the villages in the Pamirs. The increase in time on the slow, deteriorating road causes massive increases in prices. Many villagers were also upset about the expense for poorer quality coal. Prior to the pandemic, they imported coal from the Alai mountains in Kyrgyzstan, a region known for high-quality coal. Now, they’re forced to pay higher prices for inferior product from elsewhere in country, so many resort to burning yak or cow dung. Yak products produced by Kyrgyz in the Pamirs have no profitable market as they aren’t desired by Tajik people.


Sitting by the shore of Karakul Lake, a destination once dotted by boats and tourists, a woman watched her three children splash in the water. “My parents moved to Osh, but I have a store here so I have to stay. There aren’t tourists anymore, and most people moved away, so I really don’t have any business,” she bemoaned.

After speaking with locals on both sides of the border, the consensus is that about 50% of the Kyrgyz population has left the Tajik side for the Kyrgyz side. This used to be an easy, half-day venture, but now it is a costly, arduous journey that goes through Uzbekistan. Villagers endure the trip for the hope of something better, but many Kyrgyz from Tajikistan are now learning the grass isn’t always greener on the other side. While food

prices are similar, those who moved to cities like Osh, Bishkek, and Jalal-Abad weren’t prepared for the cost increase in housing. They also can’t find comparable work due to their Tajik passports. They must wait three years before being able to apply for jobs for which they currently qualify.

For the Kyrgyz person, this is a deeply personal, grievous issue. Superficially, everything seems the same, but under the surface, it is anything but. An ethnically-Kyrgyz person who, for example, moves from Murghab to Osh, leaves home for a place where the language and culture are the same, but he can no longer be employed in the same way. A change in citizenship is possible, but due to instability in border situations, people must choose between opportunity and family. Once the change is made, he will lose access to attend weddings and funerals for an indeterminate period of time. To a Westerner, the choice might be simple, but for the Kyrgyz, these choices are agonizing. Family is of utmost importance to their culture.

Based on observations from my travel to the region, it seems both the Pamiri and Kyrgyz populations are facing increasing obstacles to the survival of their villages. The decline in the once-steady stream of tourism during the summer months has heavily impacted the economy of the area. One man, who spoke fluent English, had resorted to working the pumps at a gas station because he could no longer lead tours in the area.

Without a continued, open border available to both tourists and locals, the outlook for this region seems bleak. Shrinking villages coupled with an already challenging environment for foreign workers makes for a complex situation in reaching those who have yet to hear. Pray for God to work in creative ways to reach those who remain in this region and ask for more workers to be active in the areas to which these villagers are scattering. 

Author's Note: Travel to the region took place in mid-to late-July. Soon after, the Kyrgyz-Tajik border opened to foreign travelers only. Local passport holders must still travel through Uzbekistan.