

Caravans to Tartary

Roland and Sabrina Michaud

with 81 illustrations, 76 in colour, and a map



Thames and Hudson

For our son Romain

Translated from the French
Caravanes de Tartarie
by Jane Brenton

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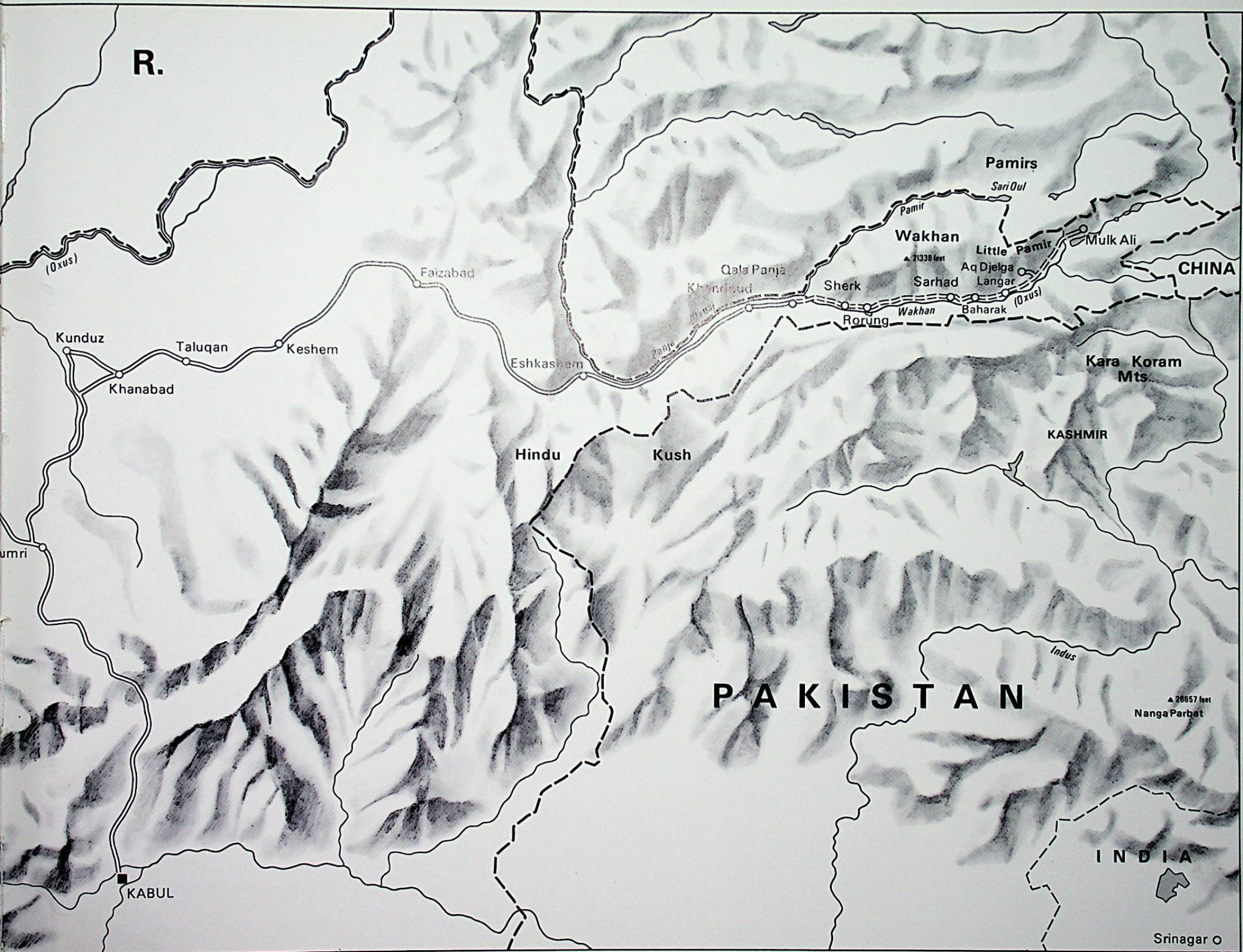
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Winter caravan on the roof of the world

The still valley lies like a carpet of felt between cold blue mountains. Near a group of dry-stone dwellings seventeen camels are grazing on sweet rush. Five Kirghiz camel-drivers kneel round a wood fire and enjoy bowls of salty tea.

This is the caravan with which we are to travel. Twice each winter it makes the journey from the encampment of Mulk Ali, near the Chinese border, to Khandoud, capital of the Wakhan, taking nine or ten days to cover about 125 miles. Its *raison d'être* is purely economic: dairy products form the basis of the Kirghiz diet and in winter these are in insufficient supply to meet their needs. They are obliged to go to barter their felts and sheep in exchange for grain from the Wakhi peasants living in the lower valleys.

The Kirghiz are of Turko-Mongolian descent and are also indigenous to Soviet and Chinese Asia. At different times in their past they have been herdsmen and warriors, or simply brigands, depending on the fortunes of their rulers and the accidents of history; since the seventeenth century, however, they and their herds have regularly migrated in summer to the Pamirs. Once the route of pilgrims and merchants, the high plateau has become their province.

In the nineteenth century, war between England and Russia led to the partition of the Pamirs between Russia, China and Afghanistan, but the Kirghiz continued to move freely throughout the area, citizens of no particular country. It was after the Bolshevik revolution that the political situation forced several thousands of them to cross from Russia to China, and later from China to the Afghan Pamirs. They became Afghan subjects and settled there more or less permanently, the rich grassland of the high plateaux providing an adequate supply of food for their flocks. The harshness of the terrain ensured that they were left in freedom, without threat of hostile action from the neighbouring peoples, and in addition they were granted exemption from taxes and from military service, on the understanding that they would continue in their role as vigilant watchdogs of the north-east frontier.

It was in the summer of 1967 that Roland and I had made our first expedition to this region. The Kirghiz chief Hadji Rahman Qul Khan had told us then of the existence of these caravans of two-humped camels which travelled in mid-winter, following the route of the frozen river-beds so as to avoid the high snowy passes. Three years of reading and research in Paris failed to confirm their

existence, but an exceptional conjunction of circumstances, together with royal permission to travel in the forbidden area, now made it possible for us to embark on our adventure.

Abdul Wakil, the eldest son of Rahman Qul, is waiting for us in Khandoud. He is a squat little man, dressed in black and wearing Russian boots and hat. An important *bey* ('landowner'), he is held in high respect by the peasants, who kiss his hand and address him as *qariadar* ('village chief').

His wealth is indicated by the livestock he owns: 10,000 goats and sheep, 100 yaks, 10 horses and 17 camels. We are to join up with the camels. We ride on horses hired from Wakhi peasants. It is the custom for them to accompany their animals, looking after them and walking alongside, leading them by a rope.

After seven hours in the saddle we reach our first stopping place, Sherk, at an altitude of 9,320 feet, and there we are greeted by a rich landowner. His lively young wife runs up to me, lifts my hand to her lips and kisses it. I kiss hers at the same time and, from her friendly smile, I realize that it is exactly the right thing to do. The next day she presents me with a kind of shortbread for the journey, on a tray covered with a cloth. Knowing that the tray must never be returned empty, I give it back with a packet of tea and a small bottle of perfume.

It is minus 20 degrees Centigrade during the night.

Today we cross the Wakhan River by the Sargaz Bridge, so narrow and lightly built that we have to go over one at a time. Further on, a still riverbed is dotted with giant rushes the colour of rust and honey, reflected in the ice – at times so thin that my horse breaks it with an impatient kick and satisfies his thirst.

Then comes the *jangal* ('jungle'), a word that evokes for us something quite different from these sparse little tufts of yellow grass and occasional thorn bushes. Abdul Wakil goes hunting for hares with his revolver and this evening we will eat *palao* with hare, this being the traditional Afghan dish made with rice and meat or chicken.

The next staging post is Rorung, at an altitude of 10,560 feet; here we stay overnight in a Wakhi house that juts out over the valley where the frozen Wakhan River winds through dark grey sands.

All the following day we spend riding over the peaceful and monotonous plain or splashing through flooded pastures, dotted with iridescent spikes of grass.

Before leaving the Wakhan, the tongue of land that thrusts into Chinese territory, we are able to see in operation the system of barter

used between the Wakhi peasants and the Kirghiz caravaneers. First they agree – not without difficulty – a precise rate of exchange: one sheep to 150 pounds of grain (the sheep to be delivered later). Then a large kilim rug is spread on the mud floor so that not a single grain is lost, and a sample of the last harvest is brought. The Kirghiz examine it very carefully, rubbing it between their fingers before accepting it. Abdul Wakil fills a tea bowl, the accepted measure in the Pamirs and the Wakhan, and begins to transfer the grain, bowl by bowl, into the bag held ready by two Kirghiz. Two bowls count as one pound. When the bag is filled it is sewn up with thread plaited by the Kirghiz women and a large needle of the type every caravaneer wears pinned inside his coat. At last the twelve bags are ready. They represent 3,840 tea bowls of grain, and it has taken two hours of reckoning to complete the task.

The caravan is organized on the basis of one camel-driver to three camels, and one horse to each camel-driver. The camels belonging to Rahman Qul are the so-called Bactrian camels, the species also native to the semi-desert regions of China, Sinkiang, Mongolia and Tibet. They are powerful and robust animals, over six feet in height and up to nearly half a ton in weight. They move slowly but surely, often with a characteristic nodding motion of the front hump. The two enormous humps are the camel's reserves and can contain over 200 pounds of fat. Whether they are firm or flabby is the barometer of the animal's state of health. If a camel is tired or ill its humps may diminish and atrophy to the point where they disappear altogether. The camel is the most valuable of all the animals, one camel being worth 8 yaks, 9 horses or 45 sheep – not surprising when one considers that it can carry as much as 600 pounds of merchandise and is also a source of milk, meat and wool.

Well adapted to the severe cold of the high plateaux of Central Asia, the camel has a thick woollen fleece, varying in fineness and softness from one animal to another, a veritable mane running all along the underside of the neck, and thick tufts of hair on the dome of the head and parts of the feet. This wool is both beautiful and valuable, 'so valuable', we learn from one of the camel-drivers, 'that my camels have to be guarded at night to prevent the Wakhis coming and stealing tufts of wool'.

Leaving Sarhad, we enter the valley of the Wakhan River. Initially about 500 yards across, it narrows rapidly until it is little more than a gorge. We ride over the frozen riverbed. The Kirghiz have a very highly developed instinct for choosing the best path, and sprinkle ashes or sand to make the going less slippery. Men, camels and horses

follow the path cautiously, in single file. At regular intervals Abdul Wakil bends down to test the river, listening with his head on one side, like a doctor recording a heartbeat. He edges his way past crevasses where the boiling waters are exposed to view. We advance over a crust of ice more than a yard thick. In spite of all the precautions occasional cracks are heard and great fissures split the perfect surface of the ice like streaks of lightning. The walls of the gorge rise up sheer from this icy corridor and are so high that the sun penetrates only when it is directly overhead.

In the early afternoon we are forced to leave the rapidly narrowing riverbed and negotiate a high pass. Ai Bash opens a bag of sand and sprinkles it over a spit of ice so slippery that the camels could not possibly venture on to it. It is a steep climb. The animals hang back and the camel-drivers have to coax them forward. Every fifty yards the caravan halts so that we can get our breath back. Without warning, the last camel collapses right by the edge of the precipice and, driven by blind instinct, crawls, literally crawls, a distance of several yards: risking their own lives the camel-drivers remove its load so that it can get back on its feet.

As dusk falls the mountains loom larger than ever; we wilt at the prospect. 'They are so high', someone says, 'that even the birds cannot cross the summit except on their feet.' Men and beasts set their backs to the side of the mountain.

The summit is reached at last. For an instant these so-called 'sons of the clouds' are silhouetted, black and solid but leaning towards the ground, against the backdrop of the leaden sky.

When I stop for a moment to catch my breath it is the silence, a silence which is total, that makes me giddy. We spend the night in a cave infested with rats. There are many such caves in the valley: firewood or a few branches are stacked against the outer wall for any travellers who may arrive, reassuring evidence of the tacit co-operation that exists among the nomads of the Pamirs. Fire is vital; before matches made their appearance the camel-driver's most precious possession was his *chaqmaq* or flint-lighter, which was worth a horse in exchange.

The route over the next pass, which we cross in the afternoon, is barely wide enough for a horse and skirts the edge of dizzy precipices. I am frightened, but fear is relegated to second place in the struggle to reach the end of the day's journey.

When we arrive, a Kirghiz man emerges from the wealthiest of the yurts (circular felt tents of the Turko-Mongolian peoples), followed by his family. He kisses Abdul Wakil's hand and Roland's.

His wife and daughter run to help me dismount. They lead me inside the yurt, take off my coat, hat, gloves and boots and sit me down by the fire. They smile indulgently when, contrary to the custom, I lie down flat with a sigh of contentment. They busy themselves about the fire, stirring up the embers and putting them to one side, ready to set out the *chogun*, or kettles.

We are in Shakh Dida. It is our first night in a yurt. Our bodies forming a star, feet towards the fire in the centre, we enjoy a good night's sleep in the company of the six members of the Kirghiz family. The thick felt of the yurt is an excellent insulator against cold. The fire is kept going with slow-burning *argol*, or yak dung. Stacked against the willow-wood framework are the possessions of the Kirghiz – materials, bedding and provisions – in bags, cases and trunks. Tea, sugar and salt are the most highly prized of these. Tea is worth so much that each camel-driver carries it about his person in a beautifully embroidered little bag, which is cautiously produced to put tea in the *chogun*. Sugar is so precious that tea is drunk with salt, not sugar, and salt is so scarce that it is used only in tea.

Outside again, the wind bites more cruelly than ever.

We strike north-east, leaving the Wakhan. Only the camels seem unconcerned. They advance silently, scooping up vast mouthfuls of snow with their tongues. The camel-drivers pull their hats down over their ears and foreheads and bury their faces in their fur collars. They do not talk, as though saving all their energy for the battle against the cold.

The altitude is 12,800 feet. It is an extraordinary sensation to feel that we are arriving on the Bam-i-Dunya, the Roof of the World.

By the time we reach the encampment of Aq Djelga I am worn out. The mistress of the house takes off my boots and massages my feet, then takes a wad of wool from a bag and wraps it round each of my toes individually.

In the morning it is snowing. It has snowed all the previous night. Sky is indistinguishable from land and it is hard to be sure if the swaying camels are on the ground or in the clouds. There is nothing to see, no tree, no shelter. Even the faintest sound is muffled. Occasionally we pass an encampment of sleeping yurts guarded by dogs who howl and leap up at our horses. The wind is blowing a tempest, visibility is down to 200 yards, but the Kirghiz move slowly on, knowing instinctively which way to go, while I imagine precipices all around me.

When we reach the end of this leg of the journey we are all exhausted: even Ai Bash, his eyelashes tipped with white frost,

admits he is tired as he ties the camels in pairs, head to tail. Tied up like this they have to bend their forelegs under them in order to lie down, the point of the exercise being to prevent them catching cold from collapsing on the ground as soon as they reach their destination. It is only after two hours in this standing position, called *chapar*, that they are untied and can settle themselves as they wish.

Rather more slowly than usual the caravan moves on towards its final destination. We let the camels and horses crop the grass they instinctively know where to find under the snow. 'One blade of grass from the Pamir is as good as a bale of hay.'

Mulk Ali, the winter camp, looks like a cross between an oasis and a toy building kit. In its three yurts and two mud huts about thirty people live together at close quarters. The nearest neighbour is several hours away on horseback, and the favourite form of entertainment is to exchange visits.

We are to stay in the guesthouse, a huge room, made warm by felt carpets, fur-lined covers and brightly coloured pillows – and most of all by the *bukhari*, the traditional Afghan stove, which has been transported all this way on the back of a camel.

I decide to go and visit the women, starting, as is customary, with Abdul Wakil's first wife, Bibi Orun. My path is blocked by a fierce sheepdog, whose ears have been cut off and who wears a studded collar to defend himself against wolves. Similar dogs belong to each yurt and have to be driven off with stones. Abdul Wakil's yurt houses three women but no children. If in a year's time his third wife, aged only fifteen, also fails to give him a child, then like any averagely wealthy Muslim he will take a fourth wife. I am amazed at the good relations that exist between these women and the way the two younger wives defer to Bibi Orun, who is forty and treats them like a mother. There is no trace of jealousy between them. I ask Bibi Orun, 'Three women with just one husband, doesn't that cause a lot of arguments?' She laughs and replies that it is no problem at all when the man is just and good, and master of the yurt. 'And of course it means less work for each of us.'

With each day I am increasingly conscious of the monotonous regularity of the various tasks performed by the Kirghiz women. All the morning is spent making bread which, together with the salted milky tea, is the basis of their diet at this season of the year. When the midday meal is over, the afternoon is devoted either to melting ice to provide a supply of water, or to sewing, or very occasionally to their own pursuits. Then once the evening meal has been prepared and eaten they go almost immediately to bed.

We are delighted by the close relationship that develops between us Westerners and these nomads of the steppe. Never for one moment do our hosts fail in their kindness, good spirits and sense of humour. Sometimes Roland goes with them to fetch ice. On the vast frozen expanse of a glittering lake they look like ridiculous dwarfs as they attack the thick ice-pack with repeated blows of an iron bar and fill their bags with the lumps.

The meals offer little variety: mostly meat balls made with minced yak meat, meat soup made from tough leathery mutton, and above all *ash* – freshly made noodles lightly cooked in stock, very difficult to swallow.

The caravaneers have to put up with a very restricted diet while they are travelling, with only two meals a day, morning and evening, so that they do not interrupt the slow progress of the camels. Once back in camp they spend much time simmering their favourite dish, the *qurut*. This is a cheese made of curdled milk, hard as stone, which they slowly stir into water to make a thick paste, adding fat and pieces of bread. At this time of the year it is their only milk-based food, as the yaks do not yield much in winter. We appreciate that the bowl of milk we are offered each day is a generous gesture of hospitality.

One of the women's duties is to milk the yaks, beasts that are a sort of compromise between goat and mammoth, and wear an expression of permanent bad temper. They are however extremely sure-footed animals, not frightened of rivers or fast currents, and capable of great endurance. The acrobats of the mountains, they are less affected than horses by altitude, and are used to crossing high passes of 15,000 feet and over. A yak has only one eighth the value of a camel, and can carry only half as much in weight; but its dung is the best fuel available in the high plateaux of Central Asia, its hair can be used to make stout ropes, its milk is nourishing and its hide tough.

The second and last camel caravan of the year is to leave for Khandoud in two days' time. We shall go back with it.

An air of excitement reigns over the camp: the men shoe the horses, test the strength of the loading ropes, check the felt camel trappings and give the women the provision bags to repair. They are already busy cooking the special bread for the journey.

'It keeps for over a month,' Bibi Orun tells me.

The secret is to work fat into the dough so as to make a kind of shortbread, not unlike ship's biscuit.

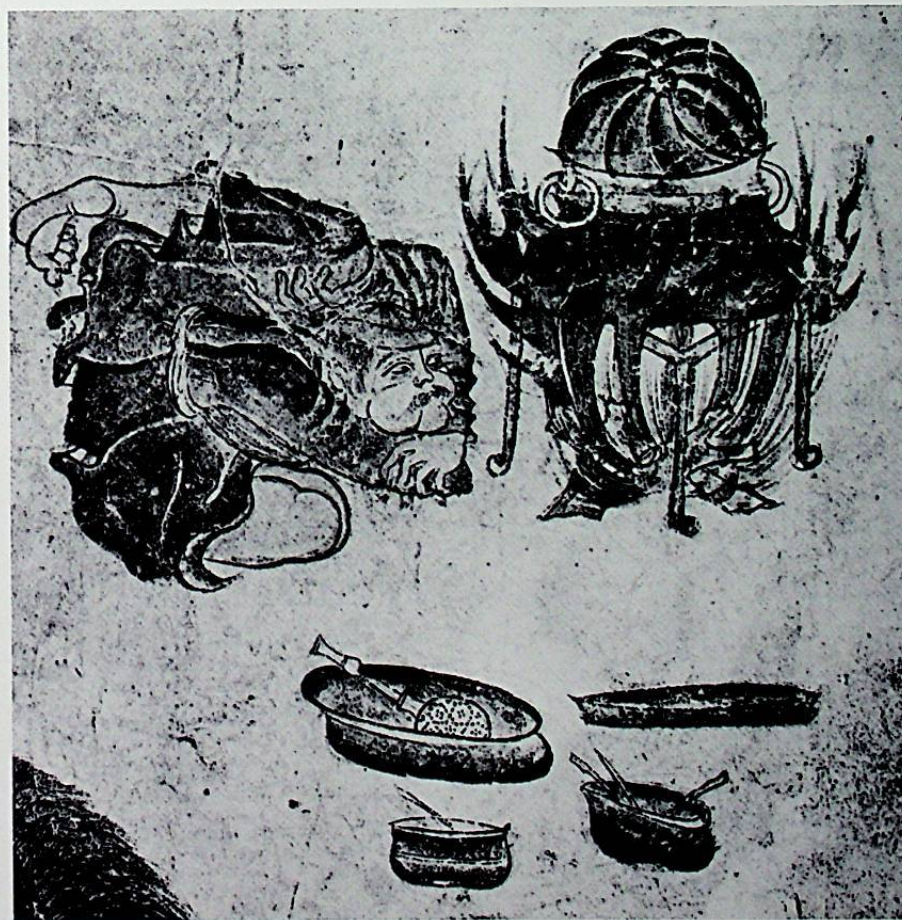
Abdul Wakil, an attentive host, notices the deficiencies in our equipment, and supplies us with headgear, felt socks and boots.

The atmosphere is that of an oriental bazaar as the caravan is loaded. We go to say goodbye to the women, whom I kiss affectionately on both cheeks. They return my kisses Kirghiz fashion, on the lips. We end up at Bibi Orun's yurt and are not allowed to leave until we have swallowed every last drop of the bowl of hot sweet milk she has prepared for us. 'It's very good against the cold,' she assures us.

Bibi Orun accompanies me to my horse, helps me mount, and then leads it by the bridle through the camp. As we leave she hands me the reins and says, *Bamone Khoda* ('May God go with you').

We both feel more upset than we would care to admit; but already we are met by the wind's icy blast.

*Nomad preparing a meal (detail).
Conqueror Album, Siyah Kalem,
fifteenth century. Topkapi Museum, Istanbul.*



Illustrations

- 1 Two-humped Bactrian camels. These powerful and robust animals inhabit the semi-desert regions of China, Sinkiang, Mongolia and Tibet.
- 2 Abdul Wakil leads the caravan along a sandy track in the Wakhan. His horse is protected from the cold by felt trappings.
- 3 The Kirghiz caravan moves through a valley swept by a sandstorm.
- 4 Crossing a pass: men and beasts toil up the mountainside.
- 5 The resourceful Süleyman leads the caravan over a pass.
- 6 Leaving Sarhad, where the Pamirs begin, the caravan advances into the steep valley of the frozen Wakhan River.
- 7 The shadows of the caravan of camels are cast on the ice, as sharp in outline as those of shadow-puppets on a screen.
- 8 A camel has slipped and fallen to its knees, while a camel-driver is straining to help it up.
- 9 The Kirghiz caravan zig-zags over the frozen river.
- 10 Sometimes crevasses open up and the boiling waters are exposed to view.
- 11 The Kirghiz have a very highly developed instinct for choosing the best path for the caravan over the frozen river.
- 12 The skin round his eyes swollen with cold, Ai Bash arrives exhausted at Shakh Dida.
- 13 The caravan moves relentlessly on through the white universe of the endless steppe, dotted here and there with spikes of brown grass and black boulders.
- 14 Evening at the encampment of Aq Djelga. The Kirghiz drive their goats and sheep into a stone enclosure as a protection against cold and wolves.
- 15 The Bactrian camel can carry as much as 600 pounds of merchandise, and is also a source of meat, wool and milk.
- 16 The Kirghiz place a particular kind of plant between their lips to prevent chapping.
- 17 At dusk, the caravan begins the descent of a pass down to the Wakhan River below.
- 18 In a scene that might be from a Chinese print, the caravan passes across a floodplain where rushes grow in profusion.
- 19 The cold does not stop Kirghiz children playing out of doors.
- 20 At the end of one leg of the journey the camels are tied in pairs, head to tail, so that they cannot kneel down; the point of the exercise is to prevent them from collapsing on the frozen ground while still sweating and catching cold.
- 21 Camels being loaded before the caravan departs.
- 22 As the last rays of the sun catch the mountain peaks, the camels are untied and settle themselves for the night.
- 23 The thick felt of the Kirghiz yurt or tent is an excellent insulator against the cold.
- 24 Over a fire made of yak dung, a caravaneer cooks his favourite meal: a fondue of cooked cheese with pieces of fat and bread.
- 25 Caravaneers relaxing by the fire in a yurt.
- 26 The Kirghiz women spend their mornings making bread, the main food in winter.
- 27 A child born in winter almost never survives; Bibi Jamal lost her child recently.
- 28 The caravan on the move, at an altitude of 13,100 feet, on the Roof of the World.
- 29 Shakir's eyes express all the poetry of Tartary.

