

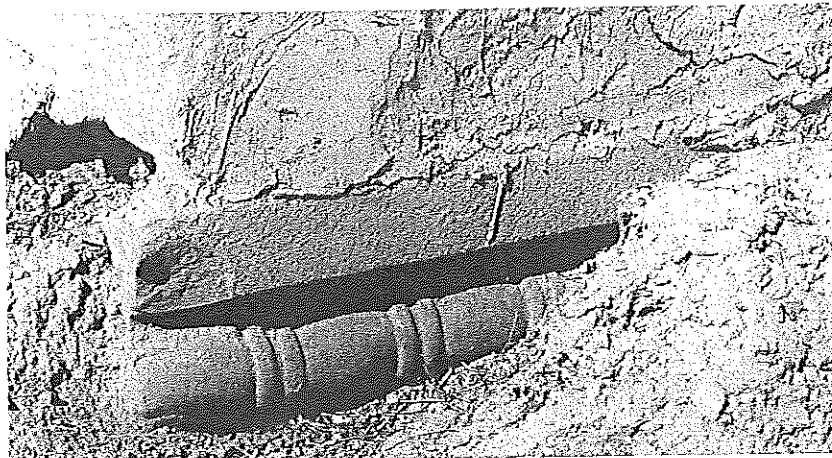
CENTRAL ASIA

Although the area of the ex-Soviet republics of central Asia hardly impinged upon the Byzantine consciousness apart from containing some routes of the Silk Road and giving birth to Timur the Lame, who probably delayed the Ottoman capture of Constantinople for about fifty years through his invasion of Anatolia and, in 1402, capture of the Ottoman Bayezid II, members may be interested in some recent information on travel there (my information dates from a trip made with a friend in the summer of 2009). One delight was the almost complete absence of western tourists apart from in Bokhara and Samarqand (and, to a much lesser extent, in Khiva): one was seen in Tajikistan, one (and some Chinese mountaineers) in Kyrgyzstan, a few (mainly Russians) in a brief visit to Almaty in Kazakhstan, and none in Turkmenistan.

Enquiries to embassies suggest that visas must be obtained in advance, but this is true only for Turkmenistan (and since the civil war in Kyrgyzstan probably there too), in which country a “minder/guide” must be arranged and paid for before the embassy will issue a visa. When crossing borders by land be aware that some posts close for a long meal at mid-day, that some officials may be fascinated by foreign bank-notes and want all the pictures on them explained at length and that it is wise when entering a country to ensure that all documents that you are given have their full complement of stamps to avoid possible complications upon departure. Uzbekistan is fairly well served by trains and ‘buses, but travel is often

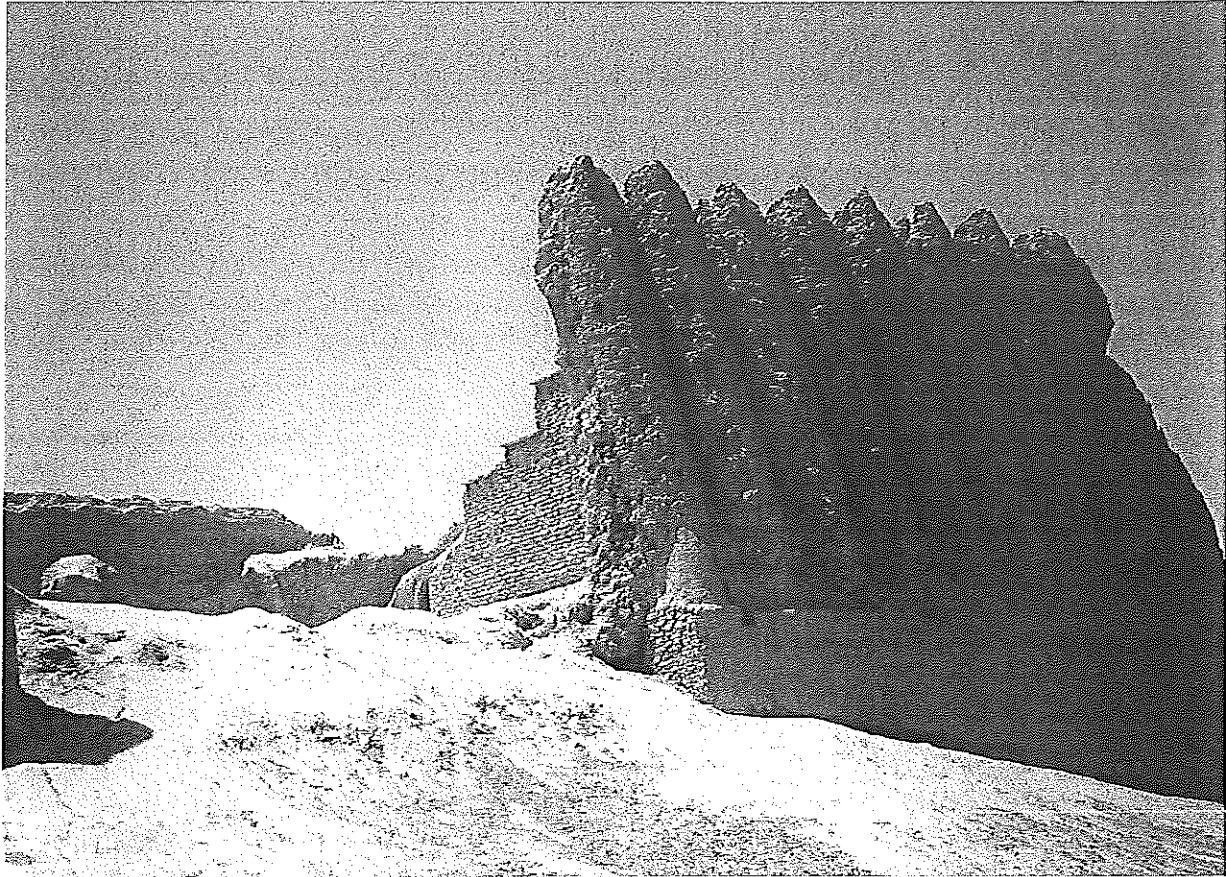
difficult elsewhere and roads may be closed for months or even years for reconstruction. In most Central Asian countries the word for train station is Woksal (or similar spelling), i.e. Vauxhall. Trekking may be done alone, but guides are required in the Pamirs.

My friend and I met in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan and a city with the most striking modern architecture including a huge golden heliotropic statue of President Saparmyrat Niyarzov. Outside lies the ancient Parthian capital of Nissa, dating from the third century B.C. Despite its razing by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, there are still substantial remains of its walls with 43 towers, the royal palace and buildings with narrow streets which are currently under Italian-directed excavation. Easily reached in an eight-hour



Decorative moulding at Nissa (photograph A. R. Littlewood)

train journey from Ashgabat is Mary, the country's third-largest city, whose museum contains artefacts from Gonur sixty miles to the north, which has claims to be the fifth great ancient centre of civilization with Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India, although I understand that, at least as yet, there is little very substantial to see at the site. More accessible are the nature reserve of Repetek and the huge site of Merv (Margiana when Alexander II of Macedon was here) on the edge of the Karakum Desert. The earliest city at Merv (Erk Kala) is Achaemenid, now within the walls of the Sassanian Giaur Kala which contains also the remains of a Buddhist stupa and monastery marking the westernmost penetration of Buddhism before modern times. Even larger than the Giaur Kala is the Sultan Kala, the Seljuq capital in the eleventh and twelfth century when it was known as Marv-i-shah-jahan (Merv, Queen of the World) and of which there are still substantial remains, including those of the citadel, despite its destruction by the Mongols. In its centre is the spectacular mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar (built after the destruction of the city), around which lie innumerable fragments of turquoise tiles and a ruined Zoroastrian library. Among the many sites outside the walls of the Sultan Kala are, set amid saxaul trees, the restored mausoleum of the twelfth-century sufi Mohammed ibn Zeid, the tomb of the contemporaneous dervish Yusuf Hamadani (now augmented with a recent mosque as a pilgrimage site), ice-houses and, most interesting, two seventh-century koshks (forts) of a style not found elsewhere.

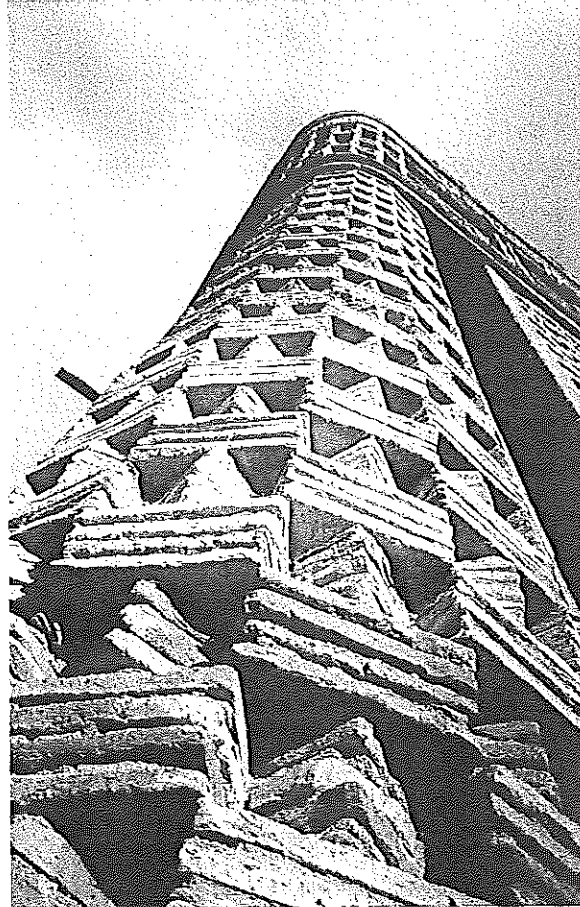


Great Kiz Kale (koshk) at Merv (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

A little to the south lies the huge Karakum Canal, which carries three and a half cubic miles of water per annum from the Amu Darya (Oxus) 680 miles westwards to serve the country's agriculture and the capital's extravagant fountains. Travellers cross into the ancient Transoxiana east of Turkmenabat just before reaching Uzbekistan. The Amu Darya (photography officially forbidden) is here still a mighty river, but further north depredations, begun in the 1920s, of its water (and that of the Syr Darya [Jaxartes]) for the Uzbek cotton industry have resulted in the almost complete devastation of the Aral Sea.

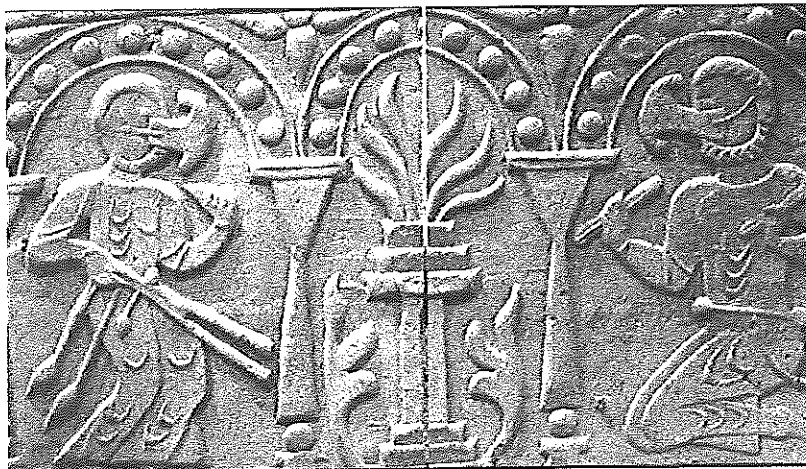
The *shakhristan* (old town) of Bukhara on the Zaravshan River has a wealth of mosques, madrasas, bazaars and other monuments, including the exquisite early tenth-century Samanid mausoleum with highly elaborate brick-work, the twelfth-century Karakhanid Kalon minaret (at 155 feet the highest building of its time in Central Asia) with its splendid largely sixteenth-century mosque and, opposite, the Mir-i-Arab madrasa of similar date. The Ark, the royal town originally built in the fifth century but largely destroyed by the Red Army in 1920, is remarkable for its restored wall, but it also contains various small museums and a somewhat dilapidated but still very interesting seventeenth-century throne-room. Seventy per

cent of the site (badly ruined) is out of bounds, but it is not hard to find someone to open the gate to let you through for a small tip. Less visited but not to be missed sites just outside the city are the spectacular complex of the mausoleum of the sufi Bakhautin Naqshband from the sixteenth-century at Kasri Orifon, the contemporaneous Shaybanid necropolis of Chor-Bakr at Sumitan, and the nineteenth-century Russian-built Sitora Mokhi Hosa (Palace of Moon-like Stars), the summer palace of the last emir, Alim Khan, who is reputed to have thrown an apple to his chosen damsel for the night from among those disporting themselves in the pool outside a pavilion (a museum here now has many good examples of suzani embroidery).



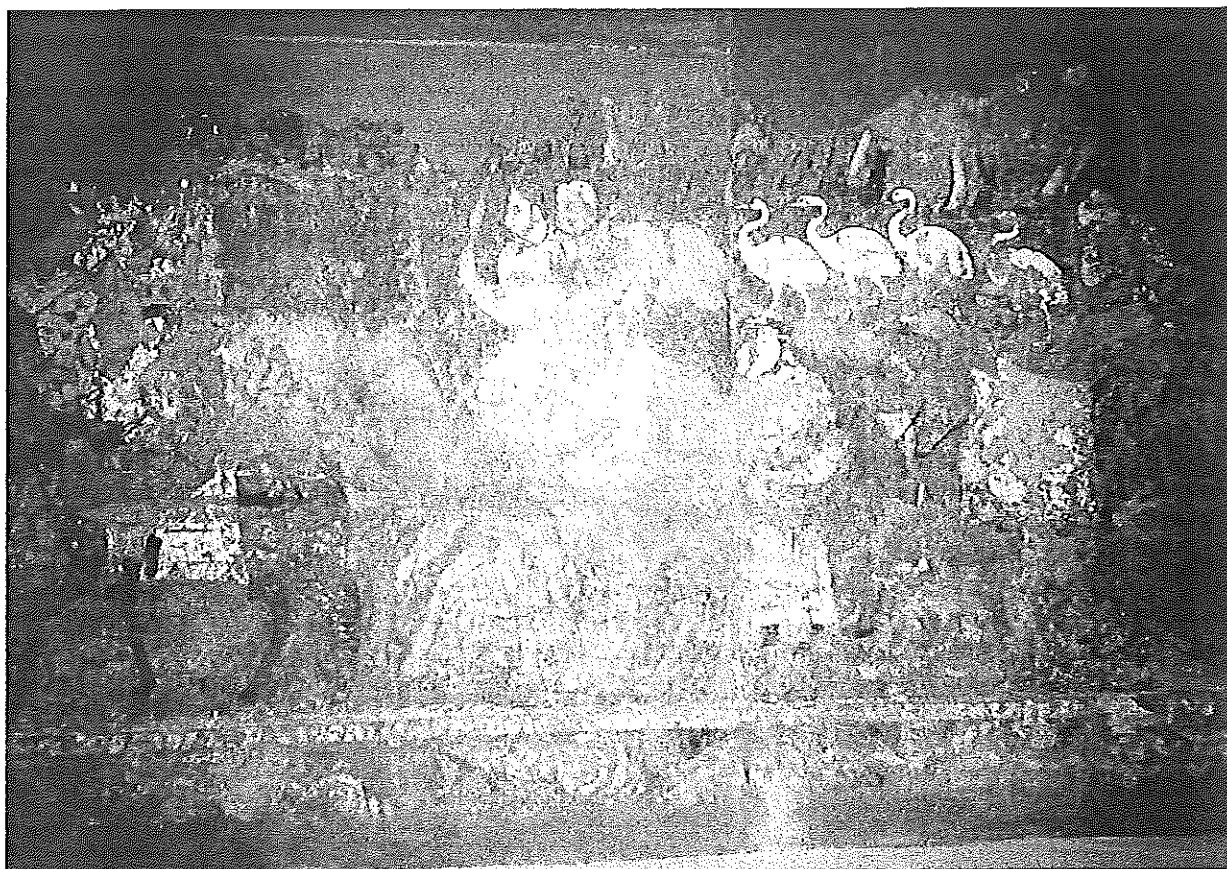
Detail of Ismail Samani Mausoleum in Bukhara (photograph A.R. Littlewood)

The most visited areas of Timurid Samarqand are the Registan with its three great madrasas from the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the oldest of which, Ulugh Beg's (1420), now contains some good museums; and the marvellously decorative complex of mausolea of Shah-i-Zindah on the site where, according to tradition, Muhammad's cousin Kussam ibn Abbas was beheaded by fire-worshippers in 676 after converting Zoroastrian Sogdiana to Islam. The vast congregational mosque of Bibi-Khanym, finished shortly after Timur's death, is now in a very precarious state, but the Gur Ami mausoleum, which houses his tomb, has a magnificent interior (well restored) indubitably worth the price of admission. Two other sites also are not to be missed. One is the



Detail of Sogdian Zoroastrian ceramic ossuary in Afrasiab Museum

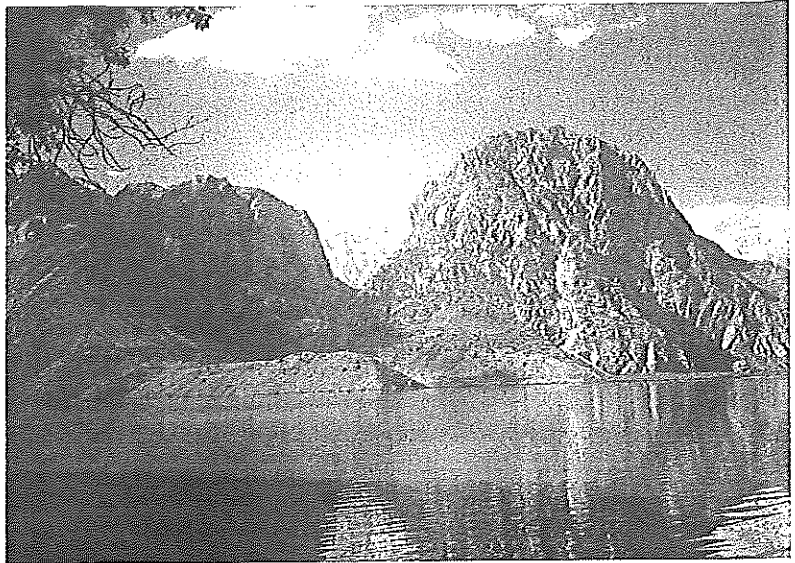
observatory of Timur's grandson Ulugh Beg with its quadrant 36 feet long carved deep into the rock (there is a museum here also). The other is Afrasiab, or Marakanda as the Greeks called it, founded in the fifth century B.C. and the Sogdian capital at the time of its destruction by Alexander in 329. Although there is little to see here, except for a trained archaeologist (while our compulsory "guide" was interested only in picking up coins and pieces of ancient pottery to sell), the attached museum contains Zoroastrian ossuaries and other artefacts from the Kushan period and fascinating Sogdian frescoes of the late seventh century A.D. depicting foreign envoys bringing gifts to King Varkhuman and what may be a New Year's procession to the mausoleum of his parents.



Detail of fresco of ? New Year's Procession in Afrasiab Museum (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

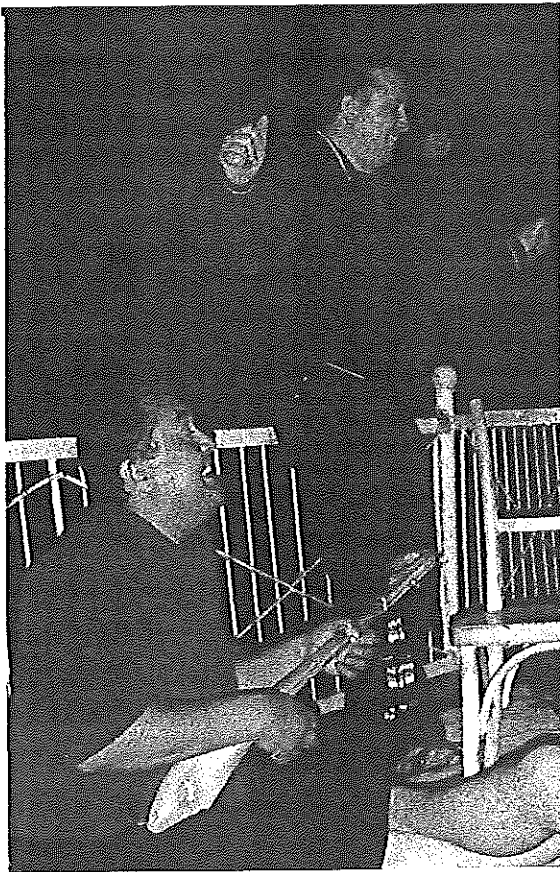
Across the border in Tajikistan lies Penjikent, another important Sogdian centre until it was abandoned in the eighth century when the Arabs conquered the area. Very poorly preserved remains of houses and Zoroastrian temples are to be found, while the nearby museum has little to offer, most frescos, sculpture, manuscripts and pottery having been taken away mainly to St Petersburg. The gorge of the Zaravshan becomes increasingly dramatic further east in territory traversed by Alexander. We eventually turned south into the often spectacularly rugged Fan mountains for a little mild trekking near the snow-fed Iskander-Kul

(Lake Alexander at 7,218 feet), which made for a somewhat chilly swim. Here, at an old *turbaza* (Soviet holiday camp), an orator addressed us as compatriots of the Macedonian and a professional bard on holiday made up songs about us and Alexander at an out-door party. The best



Iskander-Kul (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

museum in the capital Dushanbe further south over the Anzob Pass at 11,063 feet



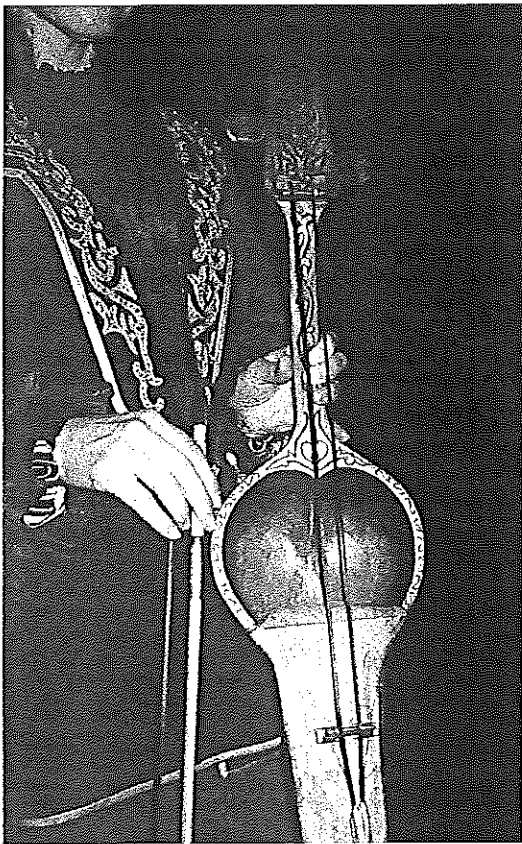
Bard and dancer by Iskander-Kul (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

(on the main road from Tashkent which was being rebuilt by the Chinese and therefore closed during the day) is that of National Antiquities, which contains Graeco-Bactrian material and a reclining Buddha, huge but not as large as some Burmese examples. West of the city at Hissar are the remains of an eighteenth-century fort (now with reconstructed towered gatehouse) and a *basmachi* base until it was destroyed by the Bolsheviks. Its interior is still used for *buzkashi*, a game akin to polo in which the "ball" is the carcase of a goat. If you wish to trek in the Pamirs allot plenty of time for this: the road from Dushanbe to Khorog is not always open, and the journey is a very long one; tickets on the daily flight are not available until the morning of the flight, and the small aeroplane is often full. The spectacular road across the eastern side of the Pamirs north into Kyrgyzstan is usually closed. Because of

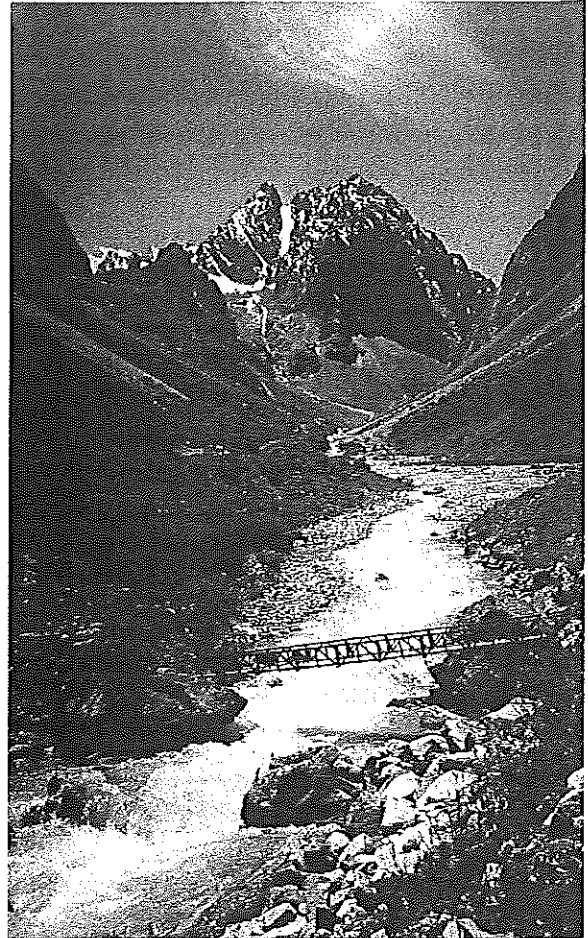
the constraint of time we merely explored a little of the Almasi-Shamal Valley in the southern Fan Mountains before reluctantly leaving the country to fly to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan (having marvellous views to the south of the edge of the Pamirs) where we did a little trekking in the Ala-Archa canyon in the Kyrgyz

Alatau mountains of the Tien Shan chain (Celestial Mountains), saw the petroglyphs (many of ibex) dating from c. 1500 B.C. to the tenth century A.D. at Cholpon-Ata, and swam in Issyk-Kul, at over 100 miles long and over 2,000 feet deep the second-largest “alpine” lake after Titicaca (in which I had swum in 1961). Our trip concluded with a day’s trekking in the Almaya-Almatinka canyon just south of Almaty, the old capital (Alma-Ata, i.e. Father Apple) of Kazakhstan, where on the previous day the curators of the splendid museum of indigenous musical instruments had been persuaded to give us an hour-long private concert.

Antony Littlewood



Kazakh musician with *kyrkobuz* (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)



Bridge in Ala-Archa Canyon, Kyrgyzstan
(photograph: A.R. Littlewood)

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Monk in transit at Skete of Saint Anne, Mount
Athos (photograph: A.R. Littlewood)