



Afghan rebel

Cycling home from Siberia **Rob Liwall** took a short ride in the Hindu Kush, crossing a country described even by Lonely Planet as 'extremely dangerous': Afghanistan



(Left to right) A horse and cart – but check out the axle; The kids who saw Rob crash at the roadside; Getting worried; Reaching Mazar-e-Sharif, in the footsteps of Alexander the Great; An old tank; The Afghan valley. Below: Afghan police



Mountains lay ahead of me, bare, arid and menacing. I had crossed the Indus River and arrived in the city of Peshawar in the north-west frontier province of Pakistan. Over the border – both physical and political – waited my next country. Its name alone made me feel nervous: Afghanistan. By now I had been on the road for over two-and-a-half years. My expedition had begun in north-east Russia in a Siberian winter. But I knew that just because I had survived in a few risky places, it didn't guarantee that I would be immune from harm.

On the one hand I had heard the reports of the Taliban's resurgence. As an Englishman travelling on the world's slowest getaway vehicle, I would be something of a target. On the other hand, I knew not to base my decision for or against going through Afghanistan solely upon a few scary news reports. So I did some first-hand research. I emailed some friends of friends in Kabul who told me that while the west, south and east of Afghanistan were indeed pretty risky (even if travelling in a convoy), the north was relatively stable.

Before I could cycle through the north, I would first have to make my way to Kabul via 200 miles of dangerous tribal territory on the eastern border. With a willful effort to remember my parents and thus my responsibility to stay alive, I decided that for this initial, short stretch into Afghanistan, for the first time on my whole expedition, I would catch the bus. Once in Kabul, I would climb back onto the bike and ride northwards through the Hindu Kush mountains and up to the Oxus River where I could cross into Uzbekistan.

The Khyber Pass to Kabul

So, with my bike strapped to the roof and the compulsory Pakistani policeman with his rifle in the passenger seat, a taxi carried me up to the Khyber Pass where a bearded border guard stamped me into 'the land of the Afghans'. Men in loosely wound turbans and women covered from head to toe in sky-blue burkhas jostled to and fro in both directions across the border.

I wheeled my bike into a chaotic bus station and haggled my way onto a minibus. For the next six hours we wound our way up and down through gullies and valleys and then finally over a brown rocky ridge to the capital, Kabul.

As I cycled from the bus station to my friend's house, I immediately noticed that the atmosphere in Kabul was tense. NATO troops stared down on me from their fortified watchtowers, while convoys of shiny, white Land Cruisers and motorcycles roared past me at high speed.

I was sporting a haggard beard, wearing the local clothes and riding a bicycle overloaded with suspicious bags, so perhaps when I stopped to ask a soldier by the roadside for directions, I should not have been surprised when he

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raised his gun at me and yelled for me to move on. I think he must have thought that I was a strange new type of suicide bomber.

The majority of the people in the bustling streets and markets, however, after 30 years of near continuous war, seemed keen just to get on with their lives in peace. As I cycled past, I saw local people chatting into their mobile phones, buying snacks from the roadside stalls, or sipping soft drinks with friends in restaurants. I stayed for several nights in Kabul with some NGO friends, gleaned as much advice as I could from everyone I met, before packing my bags and setting off on the bike.



Kalashnikovs at the door

Kabul is nestled amidst a great enclosure of high peaks, and so with blue skies and a warm sun above me, I crested a small pass and descended into a wide, open valley that was lined on both sides by rugged, snow-dusted mountains. The road was smooth and fast, and the villages poor but busy. As I rode past, the local people seemed surprised to see me but usually returned my greetings as I waved at them.

On day one out of Kabul, I stopped after just 40 miles, because the day after I would have to cross a big pass in the Hindu Kush mountains and I did not want to get stuck half way up it at night. Taking the advice of everyone I met, I had decided not to camp at all in Afghanistan. The year before, I was told, two Germans who had been driving across the country had made the mistake of putting their tent up outside a village without asking permission. During the night they were murdered.

For my first night, I arranged to meet a local man I had been put in touch with. He had a bald head, a big moustache, a huge grin, and he spoke barely a word of English. But he was determined to look after me and so took me around the town to meet various important people, including the police chief, the hotel boss, and a couple of mafia-type characters. They eventually agreed that I could have a bed in the amazingly shabby hotel, which was guarded by several men with Kalashnikovs!

Once I had left the bike inside, my local friend drove me up the side of a mountain to a mulberry orchard where we shook berries from the trees into a rug. Munching away happily we watched dusk settle quietly over the mountains, and our peace was only disturbed by the occasional sky-shaking jet taking off on a mission from the NATO airbase on the valley floor. I went to bed early that night. Tomorrow would be a big climb.

Hitting the dirt

Setting off at dawn the next day, within an hour the sun was already scorching my back through the dry air. I followed the Hindu Kush highway as it wound up into the peaks, where mud brick villages cascaded down the mountain sides and glacial streams spilled down through the narrow valleys. Occasionally I passed the remains of an old destroyed tank, presumably left over from the war with the Russians. It was easy to see how, with the rocky crags towering around me, it would be nearly impossible to prevent ambushes.

I climbed higher and higher, sweating in the heat



In the desert near the Uzbek border. The locals were overwhelmingly friendly, yet Rob never camped in Afghanistan

and gasping as the air grew thin and my body cried out continually for more oxygen. At just over 3,000 metres I caught sight of the Salang tunnel, which tore through the final crest of peaks and out onto the north side of Afghanistan.

Once through it, I began a 30-mile descent into the desert below. Speeding downwards, I weaved around the hairpins and swept past villages and truck stops where bemused children stood and watched me rushing past. The downhill went on for so long that in a moment of carelessness, I took my eyes off the road to scan the extraordinary landscape for photo opportunities...

My heavy bike skidded off the road and onto the loosely gravelled shoulder. I was moving at 30mph and in a panic I braked too hard. I flew over my handlebars and bounced and sprawled into a heap on the path. Getting to my feet with a groan, I realised I was fortunate to have torn only my trousers

Touring Safety

The security situation in unstable countries can change rapidly, so it is definitely worth doing your own research, ideally by making contacts with people who actually live in the country you want to go through. Get lots of advice from as many people as possible. Do not just listen to the

optimists, but also do not just listen to the pessimists! Official websites such as the British FCO site tend to be very cautious, but probably for good reason!

I heard someone say once, that just because a place 'feels' safe, it does not mean it is, and of course vice versa. In fact, I think that by far the most dangerous aspect of cycling

anywhere in the world is the traffic.

Two obvious precautions I took in Afghanistan for basic safety were always to travel by day (ideally finishing the day's ride by mid afternoon), and to make sure I had a very safe place to sleep at night (either with an NGO or in a hotel with armed guards - I never camped in Afghanistan).

“I had a ragged beard, wore the local clothes and had a bike loaded with suspicious bags. The soldier raised his gun at me”

and sustained a couple of cuts. As I looked up I saw a group of local children had gathered to stare at me. I cannot imagine what they must have thought, seeing a European on an odd-looking bicycle zooming at high speed down through their village, before careering off the road and crashing acrobatically to the ground!

Out of the desert

I continued out of the mountains and through a string of valleys, gorges and plains. The landscape seemed to change almost hourly. Sometimes I would ride past lush, irrigated paddy fields; other times, past a pastureland of camels, donkeys, sheep and cows; and sometimes I was just surrounded by a barren desert where sinister signs warned of landmines.

For the next few nights I managed to stay in NGO compounds where I could rest and stop worrying for a few hours. It was not that the people I encountered were perceptibly threatening, it was just that I was feeling so very paranoid. Any gesture of unfriendliness I took to be a sign of violent intentions.

Virtually everyone I had met so far had actually been very friendly, though a few times I had been shouted at aggressively. The only time I had been really worried was when an angry middle-aged man in a crowd had scowled at me and asked me confrontational-sounding questions I did not understand, whilst also rudely refusing to shake my hand as I held it out to him in a gesture of peace. Feeling uneasy, I had jumped back on my bike and cycled off, hoping that he would not try to chase me. Thankfully, he didn't.

Riding onwards, I was roughly following in the footsteps of Alexander and his great army who had passed this way 24 centuries earlier. I reached the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, and went to visit the ancient ruins of Balkh, which was the hometown of the founder of Zoroastrianism, as well as the city where Alexander had married Roxana.

Creeping down into an archaeological dig site, a local guide showed me evidence of the changing civilisations that had set themselves up here: Islamic styles near the surface; and then Buddhist influences lower down; and then Greek columns at the bottom – still well preserved ten metres below the ground.

Finally I turned off the main highway and pedalled through a parched desert for 40 miles where sand dunes encroached onto this smaller road. Passing through a last series of roadblocks and immigration offices, I crossed a bridge over the Oxus and arrived, gratefully, in Uzbekistan.

The contrast was amazing and instant. Instead of the deserts, minefields, and heavily-armed soldiers that I had encountered so often over the past week, I was now in a land of unending green fields and unveiled (and un-bearded) faces. The land felt at peace. Home, still six months away, felt close.



The only cyclists Rob met in Afghanistan were locals



Fact File AFGHANISTAN

DISTANCE: From the Khyber Pass to Kabul is just over 200 miles. From Kabul to the Uzbek border is just over 300 miles.

CONDITIONS: In summer it is hot, up to about 40 degrees in the desert. In winter it can be as low as minus 20. The road quality for my route was excellent. The landscape is very varied, but mostly rugged mountains and valleys.

TRAFFIC: As in much of Asia the driving can be unpredictable, and is probably much more of a threat than the Taliban.

MAPS USED: Landal map with 3 sheets for the country.

GETTING THERE: By bus from Peshawar or by regular light to Kabul.

BIKES USED: Specialised Rockhopper with Blackburn racks and Karrimor/Ortlieb panniers. The same bike frame lasted for my entire 30,000 mile ride, with minor repairs and replacements along the way.

FURTHER INFORMATION: More practical tips on my website: www.cyclinghomefromsiberia.com. My book will be published by Hodder & Stoughton in 2009. An English guy who cycled the same route as me in winter 2007: www.koreatocapetown.co.uk. The Lonely Planet website has an excellent discussion forum where people can share first hand knowledge: www.lonelyplanet.com/thornree. A new Lonely Planet guide to Afghanistan came out in 2007.

FOOD AND ACCOMODATION: Local restaurants are very cheap – the equivalent of one or two pounds for a meal. Dilapidated hotels with armed guards are about US \$30 a night outside Kabul. You can use either local currency or US dollars throughout the country. Camping is dangerous.

BOOKS TO READ: *An Unexpected Light*, Jason Elliott; *The Places in Between*, Rory Stewart; *The Great Game*, Peter Hopkirk.

LOGISTICS: I picked up my visa in Peshawar, though as rules about visas can change so fast, I'd recommend you do your own research. If you are heading overland to another country, it makes sense to have this next visa before you get to Kabul.