



Grim road: The highway that leads to the Tunnel of Death, in western Tajikistan.

It's called the tunnel of death, although those of a more optimistic nature have downgraded the Anzob to merely the tunnel of fear. Neither epithet seemed to conjure up a vision of a gleaming tile-lined road tunnel buzzing with extractor fans, emergency phones and escape routes, which was just as well, because there weren't any of these things in this tunnel in the Fan Mountains of western Tajikistan.

The tunnel links Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, with its northernmost region, a bent finger of territory that curls into neighbouring Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Before this tunnel was blasted through the mountains, the only way into the isolated outpost was via the perilous 3372-metre Anzob Pass which was closed by snow for most of the year, or by driving in and out of Uzbekistan. When both countries were part of the Soviet Union, this was not a major problem. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the two countries has been uneasy, with the Uzbeks sometimes closing the border with little notice. Although the Soviets apparently conceived the idea of the tunnel, it was the Iranians who began work on it in 2003. In theory, the \$110 million tunnel was completed in 2009, but it's perhaps more correct to say that is the year it opened. There is little that feels finished about the Anzob Tunnel.

The Iranian connection is not a new one. Tajikistan was once part of the Persian (Iranian) Empire and even today most Tajiks have Persian ancestry and speak Persian.

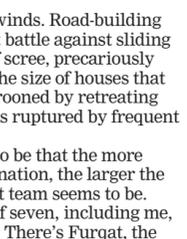
Apparently, the Iranians hope that one day the tunnel will be a link in a new-era Silk Road between Iran and China via Afghanistan and Tajikistan. On current evidence, this Silk Highway won't be completed any time soon.

We were heading for Uzbekistan, but en route were planning a 24-kilometre detour on the other side of the tunnel to stay overnight at Iskander Kul, (Alexander Lake), an alpine lake ringed by jagged snow-clad peaks. The beauty of the region was not the only incentive. A party, Tajik-style had been organised for that evening. The Tajik national dish, plov, would be on the menu, there would be vodka to drink and music would be played. There was just the matter of negotiating the Tunnel of Death first.

The road from Dushanbe began almost immediately to wind up into the mountains. There were orchards of apricots and almonds, tea houses perched beside a tumultuous river, walnut trees in new leaf towering over village houses of adobe, and old men in black jackets and embroidered skull caps sitting on benches in the sun watching the passing traffic.

The road climbed higher into the mountains, which are the easternmost far-flung branch of the greater Himalayan mountain system. The Fan range is itself a spur of the Pamirs that flow south into Afghanistan, which in turn are linked to the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush. This is a geological collision zone like no other. The mountains are steep and raw, as they are still being thrust up by the clash of the Indian and Eurasian continental plates, but at the same time they are being worn down by the elements – snow,

Jill Worrall



ice and howling winds. Road-building means a constant battle against sliding mountainsides of scree, precariously poised boulders the size of houses that have become marooned by retreating glaciers and faults ruptured by frequent earthquakes.

It often seems to be that the more obscure the destination, the larger the tour management team seems to be. I have a team of seven, including me, for just 16 people. There's Furqat, the Uzbek who shares the overall responsibility with me for the group throughout our Central Asian tour, a spectacularly good-looking trainee local guide who has been nicknamed the Toy Boy by some of the Kiwis (more in hope than in reality) and three Tajik drivers, Zarf, Noor and Amir.

In overall charge is Dilshod, a Tajik who looks as if he has stepped out of the history books. Like many people in Central Asia, he is a living example of the region's ethnic complexities.

He tells me his ancestry includes Persian, Tajiks (who claim a direct link to Alexander the Great, who conquered the region in the 4th century BC), Uzbek, Russian and some Italian.

Dilshod and his drivers know this road and the Tunnel of Death well. If anyone was going to get us through this, literally, it would be them.

Dilshod has pointed out the alternate route over the mountain. It looked like a goat track, zigzagging up a wasteland of gravel, ephemeral in the shifting splashes of sunlight.

"I love these mountains," he said. "The skiing is wonderful. Of course, it is even better in the Pamirs."

Part of Dilshod's mission apparently was to convince me that next time I brought a group back we should travel the Pamir Highway in eastern Tajikistan (along the border with Afghanistan and



Dramatic setting: Iskander Kul is named after Alexander the Great, who passed close by with his army in the 4th century BC.

high into the Pamirs – the Roof of the World). He didn't know that I had already added that journey to my wishlist several days earlier and I didn't plan to tell him until he had finished cooking dinner that night.

Dilshod had family back in Dushanbe, the youngest, a daughter he called "My Princess". He would be just as keen as we were to negotiate the tunnel safely.

His vehicle took the lead as we sloshed through a puddle thick with silt in front of the portal of the 5km-long Anzob Tunnel. At first, the rock-hewn walls were reminiscent of the Homer Tunnel. "Not that bad," I said to myself. No-one was talking, though. Everyone had read about the tunnel's reputation.

About one-third of the way in, there was no light apart from the golden orbs of headlights coming toward us and the red glow of tail lights in front of us.

The approaching headlights were a mixed blessing, for the tunnel is only 1½ lanes wide.

I could now see and hear the water cascading down the walls. In places, it poured directly through fissures in the roof, clattering on the roof of our four-wheel-drive, before creating deep lakes on the road.

Then we come to the stop, in the dark. The tunnel boomed with the sound of a large engine and the murky visibility became further reduced by what I suspected was a growing fog of exhaust fumes. There appeared to be no working extractor fans or supply of fresh air. Vehicles were trying to negotiate a way around a giant piece of tunnel machinery. Figures in hard hats and jackets gleaming with water in the half light yelled and gesticulated.

We manoeuvred past the traffic jam and to my left I spotted a dark, dripping opening – the link to the twin tunnel, the ventilation shaft.

"It's not finished," Zarf, our driver, said. If a Balrog (one of JRR Tolkien's Middle-earth

demonic beings) had emerged from the opening, I would not have been surprised. If anywhere could awaken nightmares of subterranean monsters and visions of hell, the Anzob Tunnel was the closest I had encountered.

For several more kilometres there was just the splash of the four-wheel-drive pushing on through the mire on the tunnel floor and the flare of oncoming lights. The vehicle lurched violently from side to side as Zarf had no way to avoid the enormous potholes. Some seemed large enough to swallow up the battered, overloaded Ladas that were in the tunnel with us.

Then finally, more than 15 minutes after we had entered the tunnel, there was the sense of darkness lifting, a suffusion of grey light, and we shot out among piles of gravel, rusting tunnelling equipment and belching trucks.

We stopped, the drivers for a smoke and the passengers to have what in most cases was a nervous wee hidden among the tunnel tailings.

"You know why it is called the Tunnel of Death?" Dilshod asked. "They opened



So far, so good: Several well-made smaller tunnels lure travellers into a false sense of security on the ascent to the Anzob Tunnel.



Out and about: A local enjoys early spring sunshine in the Fan Mountains.

TUNNEL vision

the tunnel one day and the next five drivers suffocated to death in it. It was not the only time. But it is much quicker for us than the pass."

An hour or so later, we were again toiling uphill, the mountainsides awash with the terracottas of the iron oxides trapped in giant geological folds. Boulders, embedded in glacial moraine, teetered over the road. Black holes announced the presence of tungsten mines. A Communist-era smelter lay rusting in the Central Asian sun. Raglike curtains fluttered in empty windows of the abandoned concrete apartment blocks nearby.

Then came the green flush of leaves among the trees that fringed Iskander Kul, a deep turquoise blue lake ringed by jagged mountain peaks. Our camp was a cluster of unheated wooden cottages, Spartan leftovers from the days of Soviet-era summer holidays.

The clouds that had partially obscured the mountains lifted in the late afternoon. The lake glittered in the sun, the surrounding peaks mirrored almost perfectly in its surface.

Beside one of the huts, Dilshod had

donned an apron and was browning onions in a cast-iron pot over a fire. On a table nearby was a floral teapot full of vodka, cartons of cherry juice and bottles of Russian beer. It was party time.

Dilshod was preparing plov. Other Central Asian countries also boast of their plovs, so cooking a good one is a matter of national honour.

Dilshod, knowing this would be the first plov of our journey through Central Asia, was pulling out the stops. Carrots, carefully cut into sticks the night before using a handcrafted Tajik knife created especially for the purpose, were added to the onion, along with chunks of beef.

They were followed by cumin, coriander, peeled bulbs of garlic, whole lemons, raisins, and, thanks to Dilshod's wife sitting up all hours the night before, stuffed grape leaves as well. Washed, soaked rice was added last.

Cooking plov is a man's business in Tajikistan. Dilshod stirred with one hand, while conducting a loud conversation on his cellphone clutched in the other. He simultaneously had the tired drivers running back and forth to the camp kitchen for extra ingredients.

Then he poured me "white tea" from the teapot and clinked glasses.

An hour later, we sat down to eat in front of plates piled high with plov, now adorned with quails' eggs and slivered almonds. This was the plov to end all plovs. There was another toast or two.

"You think this is beautiful?" he asked me, waving at the mountains silhouetted in the fading light of the day. "You should see the Pamir Highway."

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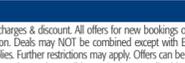
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Real meal: Plov, the signature dish of Central Asia, bubbles away at 2195 metres in the Fan Mountains.



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