

Bridge Over the Amu Darya

In the disconnect with reality that characterises Turkmenistan, it seemed almost normal that our departure should entail an enforced jog across a brand-new flagship bridge during a mass celebration of its opening. The previous four days had already laid on for us a surreal smorgasbord of flaming gas craters, record-breaking indoor Ferris wheels, bat dropping-streaked subterranean swimming caves and blingy white marble and gold monuments. We were now on the final leg of our journey to the eastern border.

Relations with Kurban*, our guide, a diminutive and anxious apparatchik, had been a little strained since our insistence earlier in the day on an un-timetabled return visit to the ruined Silk Road city of Merv. However, the subsequent discovery of a splendidly empty new expressway to bypass the city of Turkmenabat had boosted spirits. Not even the phalanx of camels gossiping in the overtaking lane could dent the journey time we were making up. The featureless cat litter of the Karakum Desert blurred into the bleached-out sky and dust swirled in lazy pirouettes across the tarmac. The driver played “Havana” on a loop on his phone.

And then it happened. The driver slammed on the brakes. In the middle distance rose the towers of the new Turkmenabat-Farap bridge over the Amu Darya River, but immediately ahead lay a stationary convoy of Iranian trucks, dozens of policemen – and a barrier.

“This is not good,” reported the driver. “The bridge is closed for ceremony until six p.m.”

It was now shortly after two. The Uzbek border was due to close at five and was a further fifteen kilometres from the far bank of the river. There was no alternative crossing point for at least eighty kilometres in either direction and our Turkmen visas expired that day. Hundreds and hundreds of pedestrians, identically kitted-out in green and white tracksuits, carrying furled Turkmen flags and white plastic roses, were streaming from every direction and funnelling up the bridge approach road.

Several minutes of fraught negotiations with the police in the usual vernacular hybrid of Turkmen and Russian ensued. Suddenly, the driver opened the passenger door and thrust our bags at us.

“You must go now. You walk very quick. Not much time!”

It was clear that the President of the Republic, the self-appointed “Arkadag”, or Protector, was due to arrive imminently. Torn between professional duty and fear, Kurban was already sprinting towards the bridge.

“Run!” he urged. “Hurry!”

My rucksack weighed seventeen kilos. Kurban scurried ahead, periodically barking at us over his shoulder to go faster. It was nearly thirty degrees and he was running in a fake Givenchy down jacket. At best, my companion and I managed a dogged plod. The incline seemed endless and there was no shade. We dreaded the screech of tyres from an official vehicle ordering us – at best – to go back.

Far below, the Amu Darya, sluggish and twisting in wide meanders in its over-sized bed, was a study in sullen beige. Yet on the top section of Central Asia’s largest metal span bridge, thousands of green-and-white citizens were in relaxed mood, chatting and taking selfies as they waited in the roadway for the choreographed set-piece flag-waving to begin. We tried to sidle past on the footway behind, channelling our inner Mr Beans in the utter inappropriateness of our presence: beetroot-faced, middle-aged Western backpackers panting along gracelessly in the background to the nattily attired Turkmen. Our ungainly progress began to cause a ripple, a Mexican wave of track-suited flag-bearers turning smilingly to greet us with a perfect canon of “Hello! Where you from?”. By now, Kurban was almost apoplectic with stress.

Finally, we reached the start of the descent and half-ran, half-slid down the far abutment to the village below. We'd made it! Now all we needed was a taxi to the border. A saloon car was skewed across the unsealed track, two suited men in sunglasses leaning against it, arms folded. From way back, I watched incredulously as Kurban approached them. The irritation in their body language as they dismissed him was palpable.

"This is very bad situation," he panted. "These men are not taxi drivers. They are security!"

The security services are much feared in Turkmenistan, and we had just brazenly crossed a bridge which was officially closed for the afternoon. However, we had been neither arrested nor admonished, so I could not help but feel that he might be over-reacting slightly. Further into the village, we found a driver willing to off-load his market-going passengers and to take us to the border post instead. As our pulse rates started to return to normal, Kurban swivelled round in his seat, still purplish in his thermal coat. "I am wet!" he announced. "I will NEVER forget!"

**not his real name*