

Bernard Repond

Pamir's Bridges

PAMIR'S BRIDGES, a Swiss NGO, was established in 2001. All six members of the committee work on a voluntary basis. Today, PAMIR'S BRIDGES counts 125 members and over 300 friends and donators. It was founded by three people who went together in 2000 for a riding trek of 21 days in the Tien Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan. PAMIR'S BRIDGES is Member of Fribourg-Solidaire (assoc. of NGO of Canton of Fribourg, Switzerland).

1 My links with the Pamirs

Since my teenage years, I was interested in the mountains of Pamir, Karakorum and Himalaya. History, geography, culture, ethnology, sports were my hobbies and passions. In 1976, I had the chance to travel alone in a VW bus for three months in Afghanistan and my main goal was to reach the Wakhan Corridor and Little Pamir. I went up to Jurm and Baharak and was turned down by police. No permit.

January 1979: together with my wife, by chance we met Rahman Kul in Gilgit/Pakistan and stayed one week with his family up in Imit, greeted by Muzaffar-Ud Din, son of a former Raja, and Malik and Aref, sons of Rahman Kul.

September 1992: first travel to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Since then, every year I have spent between one and three months in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan.

September 2010: four weeks expedition to Wakhan Corridor & Little Pamir.

2 PAMIR'S BRIDGES & development

Development for us means changes, moving forwards, adaptation to different life styles, project implementation, access to education and autonomy for all and without forgetting the history... This is a real challenge.

When you do development projects in former Soviet Republics, take into consideration that you are facing an educated population in every single corner of the countryside, many of them being bi-lingual, or even tri-lingual, a population that went to school from the age of seven to sixteen and more. This aspect is very important and it makes the approach not easier than in a really under-developed society.

Don't forget the endemic corruption in the whole region: it's a harsh reality. Just one example for illustration: In November 2016, I was talking to a university student in Bishkek and he said to me very openly: "It's very difficult for us to avoid corruption because we are living daily in a wild corrupted society".

The beneficiaries of our programs are shepherd's families and villagers of mountain settlements of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Besides building bridges, our aim is to establish a cultural exchange between the Alps and the Pamir regions. Another activity is the adviser help we offer to young entrepreneurs to set up eco-tourism agencies in order to create jobs in the mountains to avoid a bigger exodus.

Local reliable partners are a crucial point: We are working with CAMP Alatoo since 2001. We are glad to say that we have achieved quite a good number of projects:

Sixty-four bridges were rehabilitated in Kyrgyzstan, and one in Paktur Village, Gunt Valley, Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan. Locals do all the preparation work including civil engineering and presentation of a bridge project. There is no expat. The bridges are built completely by villagers and shepherds of the same valley who are going to use this bridge after rehabilitation. It gives them the sense of responsibility to maintain their bridge afterwards. This is a very important factor to develop the sense of responsibility. Our national partner CAMP Alatoo and members of our committee inspect, every year, the progress of the projects what gives credits to the villagers.

From 2001 to 2015, PAMIR'S BRIDGES has financed the rehabilitation of 65 bridges for a total amount of CHF 166,650. The average cost of a bridge was CHF 2,564.

Our organisation conducted various other activities since its establishment in 2001. In 2005, there was the realisation of the promotion film "Bridge 53". Five years later, we financed the translation of Ella Maillart's book "Turkestan Solo" into Kyrgyz (following her 1932 expedition) and the free distribution of 3,000 books in Kyrgyzstan. We sponsored an exhibition of 120 photos of Ella Maillart along with 40 drawings of late Malik Kutlu (brother of Ekber Kutlu, son of late R. Kul) in the Fine Arts Museum in Bishkek in 2012. 6,000 people visited this exhibition. In terms of promoting economic capacities we offered six training courses for mountain cheese-makers. Due to our support four eco-tourism agencies could be established:

- Shepherd's Way Trekking in Barskoon (Kyrgyzstan): exclusive horseback riding agency. Director: Ishen Obolbekov, www.kyrgyztrek.com
- MCT in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan): hiking, mountain biking, ski tour: Director: Talant Kirseev, www.montscelestes.com
- Pamir Guides in Murghab (Tajikistan): hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, culture: Director: Saidali Gaibuldaev, www.pamirguides.com

- EcoNomad in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan): hiking & culture tours. Director: Nuraly Turganbaiev, www.eco-nomad.com

The economic support and cultural impacts of eco-tourism activities for the mountain populations of the Pamir and Tien-Shan are very important in terms to reducing the exodus towards towns, cities and abroad.

Finally, also everyday life-connected activities have to be mentioned. We helped to construct new toilets in Savnop Village, Bartang Valley, and to rehabilitate the boarding school of Shaymak Village, located in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan. Finally, Pamir's Bridges is supporting the extension of the Karakol Regional Museum. A hall dedicated to Ella Maillart will hold a permanent exhibition of her photos taken in 1932. This exhibition is a very important historical account and testimony for the Kyrgyz people.

3 How do we collect funds?

We organise so called "Pamir events" including films, slideshows, a mini *yurta*, bazaars and talks every winter in Switzerland, Europe, and even the USA. Additionally, we try to raise funds through our website and media support, but that is a very difficult task.

4 Present & future challenges

To be always in phase with the local realities and to be very careful of the links with the administration to avoid being "used" are very tricky challenges for us. We want to give our local partners large but controlled autonomy, but we should organise the control and inspection of each project by our people or reliable partners. This gives them the sense of responsibility and ownership. To have local / national reliable members in our NGO committee helps to foresee better what the needs of the local population are, and it helps and teaches our partners to learn how a democratic association works.

This circumstance leads to human rights and obligations. Both points are extremely important to avoid "assisted people" who just are sitting, drinking *tchai*, and waiting to receive money.

We have to continue the implementation of every single mission, not keeping successfully finished projects as trophy in our bookshelves. Our hope is to see a serious and devoted organisation taking really care of the forgotten population of Little and Big Pamir. Up there it is SURVIVAL, not life. For being in twenty-first century, it's a scandal and a shame.

THIS IS OUR CHALLENGE

PAMIR'S BRIDGES



*Pasu women are frequently crossing the bridge across the Hunza River to maintain their agricultural fields in Kharamabad
Photograph © Hermann Kreuzmann 30 June 1985*