

Tom Colville

Date of travel from September 1978 to November 1978

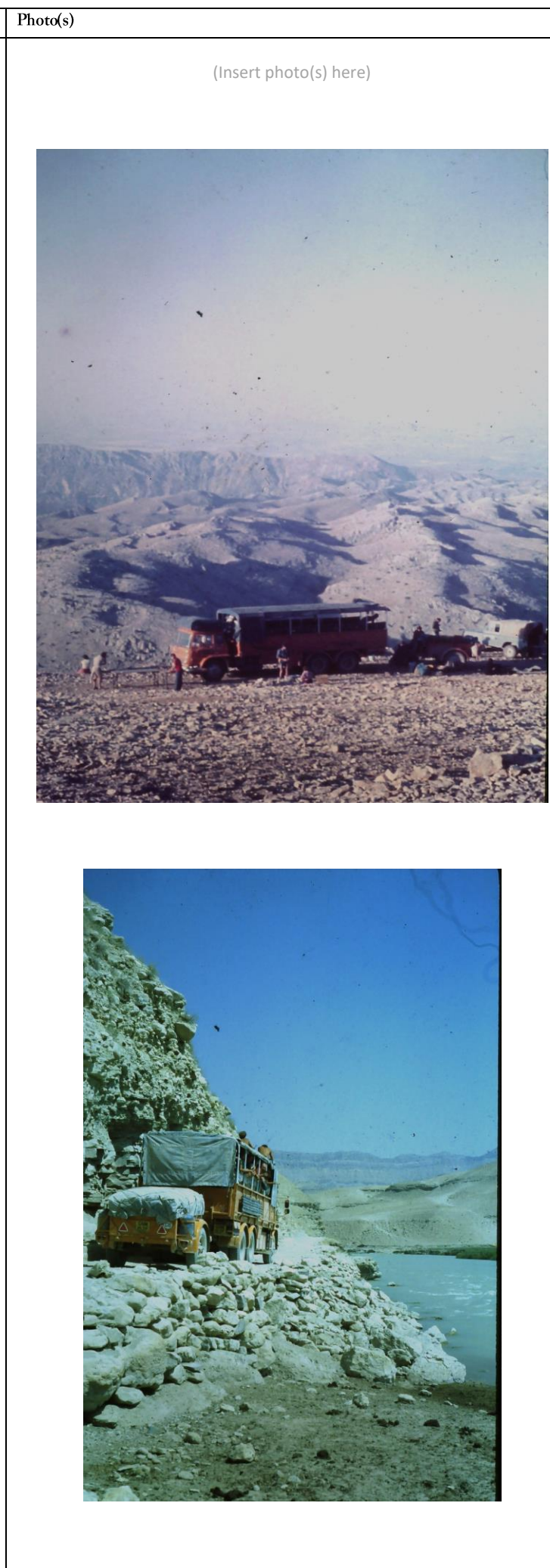
Age at the time 26

Continent / country / name of your trip Asia

Location details where your story is set North Afghanistan

Your connection with EO Leader driver

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False trail ?

Trails through the North of Afghanistan have been used for millennia by travellers, traders, war parties and emigrants. In EO years many roads had evolved from a 'braidwork' of footpaths and camel tracks, some of which had widened over time or changed course to allow vehicles to pass. There were, of course, few signposts - a compass and sense of direction might help, along with use of shadows and the sun . When a trail divided it was not always obvious which way would then lead on towards the intended destination.

Along the dirt or gravel tracks across this temperate steppe , a semi desert, speed in a truck seldom exceeded 15 mph. Often progress was cloaked in a huge cloud of "bulldust". This fine powder choked the mouth and nose. All sorts of strange head gear was employed, quite essential simply to be able to breath and not endure mouthfuls of reconstituted mud.

Heading back west, along a route I had followed going east some 10 weeks earlier, we reached a place where the trail to the west divided. One fork veered northwest. A new better trail led away obliquely west -to the left. That morning when viewed through the windscreen caked with dust of progress, and towards bright sunshine, this left fork did appear to be the one now in greater use. So choice was made, on we went.

It was certainly a much better road, recently regraded. To judge by the number of sets of fresh wheel marks in the dust it must lead somewhere important.

After about 5 miles or so, probably half an hour of steady progress, on cresting one of the undulating green grass sand dune -like hummocks which are spread all across this semi desert, something looking like the top of an electricity pylon appeared in silhouette ahead for a brief moment. Was I seeing things? But full attention then switched back to the route. The dirt track descended into a hollow, before eventually it began climbing round through a depression towards the next hummock. By then the wheel marks we were following appeared far more recent. We were sure to be on the correct route.

Summitting yet again, a vague cloud of dust could be seen wheeling against the blue sky ahead. No mistake this time. The cloudless sky was pierced by the silhouette of a metal pylon thing. Again, this brief glimpse was denied, down we went into yet another hollow.

Rumbling up the next slope, wrapped in our own cloud of dust, we reached the much clearer winds of a higher summit. Looking ahead down the slope, in the middle distance - maybe ½ mile away - lay a most extraordinary scene.

Laid out below us, barely moving but cloaked in billows of fine dust, was a large convoy of tracked and wheeled vehicles. Some 4x4 trucks loaded with oil barrels, were towing multiple trailers. These included several mobile accommodation or command centre caravans of the type the military might use. Leading this procession were a pair of very large bulldozers. They were dragging a 30 mtr high oil - or maybe water - prospecting derrick, mounted on a heavy tracked platform. This procession had been entirely responsible for the creation of the freshly 'graded' trail we were on. Further ahead lay unspoilt green hummocks, empty virgin prairie, totally unmolested and unmarked by any wheel through millennia.

By then it was a bit late to retreat. We had been spotted. A small UAZ jeep turned and headed back towards us. Those aboard, thankfully, were not actually armed. They wore rough overalls, grime coated turbans, and were of central Asian appearance. Obviously they were most curious about us. Our three axle bright orange truck, with a small group of young 'westerners', must have seemed like some alien spaceship? Despite our various types of improvised headgear, casual clothing coated with bulldust, it did not take long for them to notice some of us were not actually male!

Their eyes lit up, and very soon the bulldozers were halted - any further mission for that day clearly no longer significant. The trains of accommodation caravans circled upwind, as if in a wild-west movie, to create shelter from the cool autumnal wind. With a strange sort of inevitability it was clear we were no longer at liberty to turn around. Any attempt to retrace our route back, to regain safety, would prove futile. Freedom to leave was over...we had instead become 'valued' as guests.

This was a very formative leader driver moment. In that EO group were just 5 blokes and if I recall correctly 9 females. Dread filled me. If dusk fell, a very long night loomed ahead. We were, perhaps, 30 miles from any settlement. (Shibargan) This wholly isolated drilling team were totally intrigued by us and they held all the best cards. We were possibly the first people from outside the region they had ever seen. None of us knew exactly where we were and....clearly we were not Soviets. In those far off days overlanders like us carried no communication method with which to explain our daily situation to anyone else at all. But from the look of all the equipment they had, this drilling team probably did.

Soon a traditional festive "Steppe" party was up and running. Despite language barriers, gifts were exchanged. Potential for friendships were explored, common ground and cultures mingled. The taped Music was loud. A feast appeared from the cookhouse trailer, to which we added products from our small stocks - luxuries they might only dream of. Dancing might have ensued. Of course the girls in our group were centre of much polite attention, but so very far from home... and doubtless Muslim themselves ...almost unbidden these men were themselves reminded of their own other world domestic values: honour, homes, daughters and families – sentiments all will share.

From what we could understand, through a smattering of German spoken by one of the team of around 15, they had been "on the move", just a few miles each day, for over 3 months...dragging this derrick across open country to where it was required. Our own 'illicit' stock of alcohol was superfluous...they had plenty, and were keen to share. A long night lay ahead?

Then, almost as suddenly as it had commenced the party ended. The 'disciplined' drilling team set about preparing their machinery for their fresh afternoon advance ...casually we did manage to turn the truck around, and climbed back aboard. Then slowly, with great salutations and cheerful waves, we calmly resumed our battle with dust and hummocks, retracing our wheelmarks, back to the point at which our own journey westwards had taken such a significant detour.

(Approx. 3 months after that memorable meeting a whole Russian Army invaded. They quickly set about efforts to subdue that region...and to over 40 years of still unresolved, very sorrowful, repercussions.) We experienced special privilege that day. -the timeless sharing of traditional Asian traveller desert hospitality. No hint ever pointed towards what happened later, unless somehow the need for water for an invading army to deploy across a dusty desert region can be viewed as a part of a very weird premonition.)