

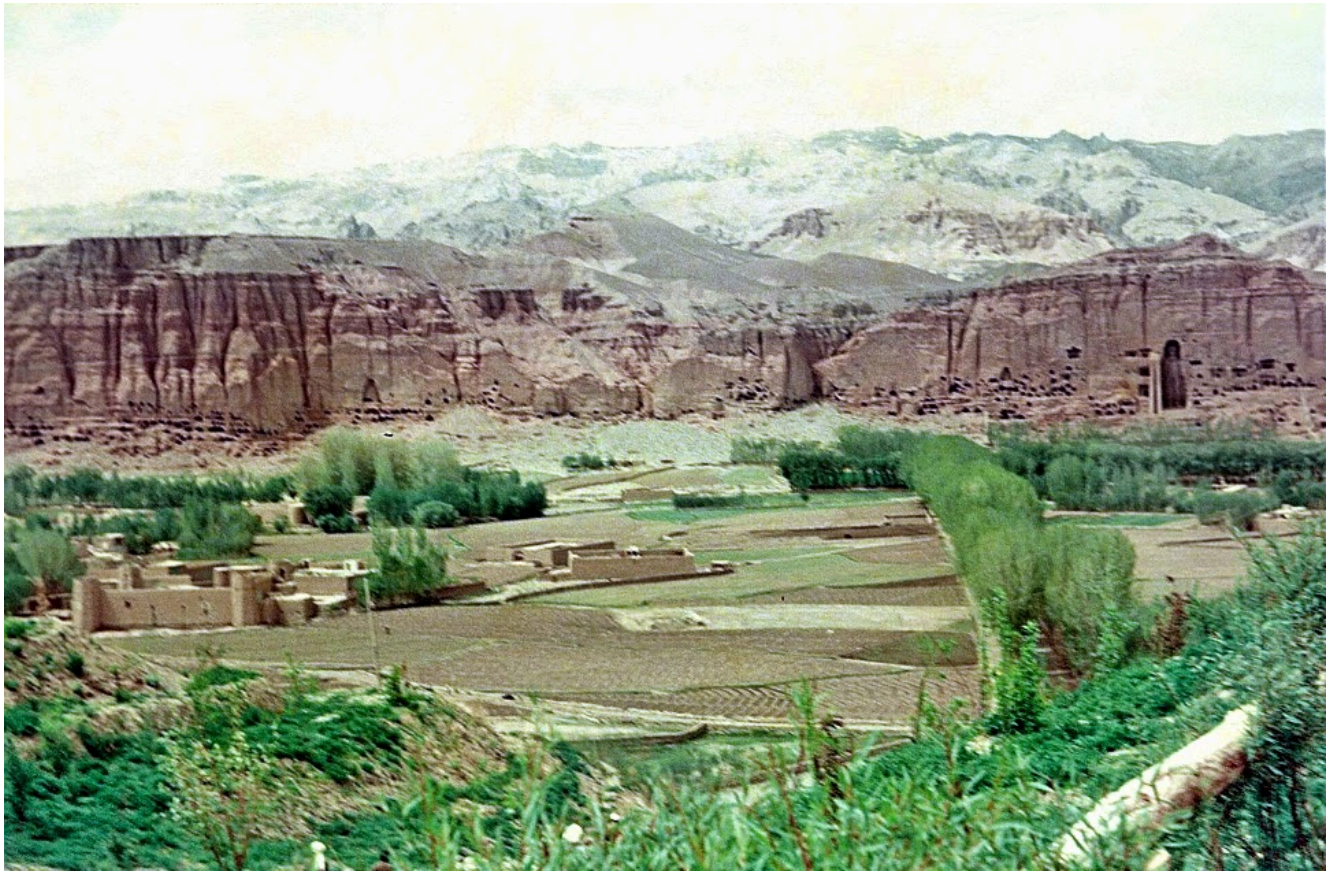
Bamiyan and Band-E-Amir

My traveling companions and I decided to take a side trip from Kabul before heading over the Kyber Pass to Pakistan and India. We arose early one morning and staggered to the bus to Bamiyan, which was supposed to leave at 3am. The bus was already packed full with Afghans, so we decided to ride with the luggage on the roof. We finally left at 4:30am for the 100 mile ride over a rugged mountain range.



The ride was incredibly beautiful as the road followed small, green river valleys past high, craggy cliffs on either side. The road steadily climbed from Kabul (a little over a mile above sea level) to Bamiyan at over 8,000 feet above sea level. We arrived at 3:30pm after several stops for tea, etc. Bamiyan, with a population of only 200 at the time, sits in a

green valley with mountains rising all around, some to 18,000 feet.



In the valley there were two spectacular images of Buddha carved into two niches in a cliff face—one 100 feet tall, the other 175 feet tall—built in AD 507 and AD 554. There were still remains of the frescos that once covered the niches of the Buddhas and some of the meditation cells. We walked out on top of the head of the larger Buddha; the view of the valley was spectacular. All that is left today of the two statues of Buddha are the niches that once housed them. Both statues were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 in a fit of religious fervor. In the same valley we also saw the ruins of an entire city in which Genghis Khan killed every living thing to avenge the death of his brother-in-law.



Our stay in Bamiyan was surreal. We found accommodations in the back room of a chai (tea) house. In the evenings, we drank chai and smoked hashish with the people of the village. The owner of the shop played a dambura (a two-stringed fretless instrument) very proficiently while someone else played tabla (a drum) and sang. One evening, all the Westerners in turn

were summoned to get up and dance with a lieutenant in the local police force.

Before heading back to Kabul, we hired a vehicle to drive us out to the lakes of Band-E-Amir. We climbed further into the mountains to an altitude of about 10,000 feet. The lakes range from smaller to quite large with the bluest of water and rugged mountains soaring still higher in the background.



We reluctantly left this spectacular part of Afghanistan for the long bus ride back to Kabul and the journey further east to India.