

# Introduction

With the grille of the passenger van smashed in, and Uzbek passengers lying alongside the road, I hobbled over to tote water from a nearby irrigation canal to help cool off a trembling old woman.

“Drink no!” I commanded in broken Uzbek as she gulped the brackish water down. I turned to survey the accident scene and saw cars pulling to the shoulder to gawk at the wreckage. I was a forty one-year-old Peace Corps volunteer living in a land far, far from home: Central Asia. The shock of the collision had begun to wear off, and my shins started to throb. I attempted to gather my thoughts. Where was I, what was I doing here? Staring at the shattered glass, the crumpled metal, the idle spectators, I thought, “This is Uzbekistan!”

This was Uzbekistan. More precisely this was Fergana Valley, the most fundamentally conservative region of Central Asia. I was teaching about HIV prevention, condom use, and sex to Muslims. I was that rare specimen, a middle-aged Peace Corps volunteer, not quite the stereotype of the typical youthful volunteer, and not quite the older, retiree age demographic the Corps was trying to recruit in recent years. I went to Uzbekistan at forty, and departed that country feeling sixty. It was the longest two years of my life.

Uzbekistan was considered a hardship posting by the Peace Corps, but the Peace Corps administration never told us this. I was one of a hundred volunteers serving in this Central Asian nation located at what used to be the rump end of the USSR, this former Soviet republic, this Muslim culture, this police state parading as a democracy. We couldn't ignore the nightly power outages that followed the news broadcasts boasting of successful crop quotas. We couldn't avoid the scores of students, friends, and strangers who constantly needled us about getting visas to escape this wreck of a nation. And we couldn't ignore the scheming taxi drivers, who were the biggest targets for the bribe hungry police.

“There will be a war soon,” a driver warned me ominously, “between the poor and the rich people! It's going to happen!”

I often considered ending my service prematurely and returning home. However, worsening events in the country compelled me to stay. I wanted to see it through to the end. “How worse can it get?” I naively asked myself. I was like one of those Uzbek drivers who were now slowing down to gaze at the destroyed van, and at me, the white foreigner limping along this road.

And then there were the people. As with the majority of the volunteers, I was placed in a rural community where the majority of the population had rarely met an American, and as a result Peace Corps volunteers attained celebrity status. People wanted me to come over for dinner, to dance and make speeches.

“Where are you from?”

“Which is better – America or Uzbekistan?”

“Are you married?”

“How much do you make?”

It was as if Prince Charles, with all of his fame and notoriety had been dropped into a tiny, rural town in Alabama to live. Everyone wanted to meet him. He was outrageously wealthy and came from a rich, faraway land. Every hick for miles around would crack the same jokes to him about his mom or the late Princess Di. “Yeah, that’s the first time I ever heard that one,” he’d reply.

Despite this sense of alienation, I experienced a human aspect of this floundering nation through the Uzbeks I befriended. There was Timur, the barber whose dog would sing – or howl - along to Pink Floyd, and gold-toothed Murat, who lectured me about Islam while desiring to show the women of America his great whale. I met Ortika, a brilliant doctor who at the age of 27 was past her prime for being wed, and was being coerced by her family into an unwanted marriage. At times I felt as if I was living in an epic Dickens novel, rich with a cast of memorable characters.

Regardless of the wonderful friends I made, Uzbekistan at times was a brutal country. Terrorists detonated bombs, frustrated vendors rioted in the bazaars, and a few Uzbeks vented their anger by gunning down militsya officers. The shootings and the bombings gave the government more excuses to enforce its control over its citizenry in its so-called struggle against religious extremism. Suspects were rounded up and hauled off to prison where human rights organizations reported that political prisoners were boiled to death.

Where was all of this leading to, I often asked myself. I remained in Uzbekistan to take it all in. I had become one of those rubberneckers slowing down to gaze at the carnage of this international car wreck.

During my two years in Central Asia I kept an online diary for the benefit of curious friends and family back home. I discussed my daily observations of the people, events, and culture. I described the Muslim rituals and holidays, the clashing cultures of traditional Uzbeks and Westernized Russians living side by side. Most importantly I wrote about the friendships I developed with Murat and Muftuna and High-or-Low. I wasn’t able to post everything that I wrote. I knew it wasn’t wise to express my opinions about the Uzbek government or my dissatisfaction with the Peace Corps. I changed the names of locals who I wrote about, as well as the names of international organizations with which I worked. When I finished my service, the diary totaled over two hundred pages. *Taxi to Tashkent* revolves around the highlights of those two hundred pages.

Standing there in the hot afternoon sun by the destroyed passenger van, I knew I had to escape this scene of chaos. As I limped away, my mind was already formulating how to describe the crash on my on-line journal. I had already tackled subjects such as bouts of food poisoning, and the police who hit everyone up for bribes. I had two more years left of my service as a health teacher. “What the hell am I doing here?” I asked myself.