

RUNNING IN FORGOTTEN LANDS

A world away from the Pacific Northwest

by Tracey Goldner

Bayramaly, Turkmenistan is a sleepy town on the outskirts of a bleak and formidable desert. The Garagum, whose name means “black sand,” covers more than 80 percent of the country’s total area. A Turkmen proverb says that “when a bird crosses the Garagum, it loses its feathers, but when a man crosses the Garagum, he loses his legs.” This country has been my home for the past two years. It is here that I work as a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV), live with a Turkmen family—and run.

The 50,000 people who live in Bayramaly today make a modest living working as teachers, doctors, taxi drivers and shopkeepers. But, on the outskirts of their town is a reminder of the past. A four kilometer fortress wall made from packed clay lies just east of the city.

The region around Bayramaly is an ancient place with a long and impressive history. Merv was one of the largest and most cosmopolitan civilizations in the world around the turn of the last millennium. Sultans constructed libraries and laid out a Greek-style city complete with hamams (communal baths) and ceramic water systems. Omar Khayyam is thought to have written his famous poems here.

The Mongols ravaged the great city in 1221. As the centuries passed, the Silk Road faded from the Western psyche and other empires forced their way into power.

During the 1920s, the Soviets pushed the Turkic peoples away from their nomadic traditions and into their communist mold. Tribal people found themselves herded onto collective cotton farms; their

nomadic lifestyle deemed uncivilized and unproductive. In the 1980s, Turkmen people began living in bloc-style apartments. Soon enough, communism’s ideals took hold and Turkmen adapted to their new way of life.

Today, Turkmenistan remains one of the most closed countries in the world. Despite billions in gas wealth, most of the country’s population lives a meager existence. The average family does not have indoor plumbing or a washing machine and corruption runs rampant in most sectors of society.

I moved to Bayramaly in the summer of 2010, fresh off of two months of intensive language and cultural training. After working for five years with an international NGO in the U.S., I was ready for life abroad.

Turkmenistan Peace Corps Volunteer Tracey Goldner stands atop an ancient icehouse among the ruins of Merv, an ancient oasis city on the Silk Road.



Tracey Goldner



Tracy Golner

Turkmenistan Peace Corps Volunteers exploring the ruins.

One of my biggest concerns when I decided to become a PCV was: Would I be able to run? “You might have to run in your hut,” my placement specialist told me. I grimaced. Two years of hut-running was pretty difficult to fathom after growing up two miles from the Nike world headquarters and spending my youth in Portland’s Forest Park, one of our country’s largest urban parks.

But, I persevered with my Peace Corps dream and hoped for the best. I arrived in Turkmenistan in the spring, just in time to witness a breathtaking poppy season.

I’m now in my second year of service as a community health volunteer and I’ve experienced some of my favorite moments in this country while out on my runs.

Turkmenistan’s terrain is rocky and dry. Camels roam the desert eating a prickly plant called *yangdak* (camel thorn) and salty groundwater colors the earth in a swirl of white.

I used to set out fully clad in rain gear prepared for damp Oregon weather. Here, the only “must haves” are sunscreen and a cap. The temperature exceeds 80 degrees Fahrenheit before 7 a.m. many months out of the year.

Although running is a rare sport among the general population, many people understand its value. I am often met with Russian greetings of encouragement on the trail. Most strangers assume I’m Russian. I wear my hair short and opt for Western-style clothing so that I can ride my bike to work.

Running in public would be difficult for most traditional Turkmen women. They are expected to wear long cotton dresses and silk scarves and they must carry out all the housework for their husband’s family.

“Running is a luxury,” my friend Bahar told me once. “After we finish our house chores, we don’t have the energy to exercise. Housework is

our exercise.” I remember my own grandmother saying this to me when I was growing up. She never had the chance to join a sports team like her daughters or I did. Perhaps in two generations my friend Bahar will say the same words to her exercising grandchildren.

Turkmenistan now faces the same health problems many other countries face: heart disease, high blood pressure and obesity. On average, Turkmen people die 20 years younger than they do in the U.S. When a Turkmen asks me why, I usually start by talking about the lack of exercise and move slowly into the high-fat, high-sodium diet. Long ago, Turkmen lived in yurts in the hot desert and needed a lot of fat and salt to survive such rugged conditions. But now, American Toyotas imported via Dubai fill the streets and the average Turkmen need not travel miles in search of water. The sedentary lifestyle is just as standard here as it is in



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The majestic Sultan Sanjar mausoleum dates to the mid-12th century.

America. Our world has changed.

I like to tell the students who attend my weekly health clubs that exercising is more than just a weight-loss method. It is a lifestyle and a

way of seeing the world. It's a stress-reliever and a chemical reaction. It's also a fun way to socialize with friends and break up the daily routine.



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Camels graze along the author's running route.

When I first arrived, I missed my running buddy. Wednesdays weren't the same without her and I always felt a tinge of jealousy when I imagined her out on our runs back home. She'd never have to deal with kids throwing rocks or village dogs the size of wolves jumping at her. Then again, she'd never get to race a kid driving a donkey cart or see a field of Turkmen sunflowers against the deep blue Central Asian sky.

New running buddies eventually emerged. But here, they took the forms of another PCV and a Turkmen teen. We often meet to spend an hour running through the ancient city near our homes. Merv looks like a child's sandcastle would after a few large waves attack it. The fortress walls are slowly melting back into the Turkmen sands.

Mud homes built into the riverbed remind me of the Laura Ingalls Wilder books I read as a kid. I used to yearn for a life that simple: a house carved into the riverbed and kept cool by the mud. Now, I'm running past the scenes I could only imagine



Tracey Goldner

The author (right) and her new running buddy, Bahar.

in my childhood. Yet, this time they don't look quite as romantic as I once imagined them. I wash my clothes and body using buckets of water and can now appreciate the convenience of last century's inventions.

In many ways, living in Turkmenistan is like going back in time. Here, drinking tea late into the night is common practice. The Internet has been kept at arm's length and has not yet dominated or altered life. Sometimes, I bemoan the fact that this suspicious government blocks my right to access Facebook. Other times, I am so grateful to see what life feels like without constant connection to the Internet. Here, human connection dominates. Life is slower. And, there is always time for a run.

Tracey Goldner is a Community Health Volunteer in Turkmenistan. When not running, she enjoys perusing Turkmen bazaars, learning about local customs and throwing theme parties with her students.



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