# Skiing in Afghanistan

by Neil Silverwood

***"Want to go skiing in Afghanistan?" my friend Heidi asked.***

"Afghanistan?" I said. Wasn't it one of the most dangerous countries in the world? The stories in the news weren't good – frequent attacks against locals and foreigners, violence a fact of daily life … Did I really want to go there?

I said I would think about it.

## Sandbag City

Heidi had been offered work as a ski instructor in Bamyan province, 180 kilometres from Kabul. She'd been asked to train young Afghan ski guides so they could take tourists into the snow-covered mountains the province is famous for.

Winter in Afghanistan starts in February, the same month Heidi and I arrived. In the end, I'd decided I would take the risk. Our host, Gul, picked us up from the airport in a beat-up Toyota Corolla, the vehicle of choice for locals. As we crammed our packs and skis into the car, I noticed two westerners from our flight putting on bulletproof vests before climbing into the back of an SUV. Gul saw my look and explained that, in his opinion, the best security came from keeping a low profile. I hoped he was right.

Afghanistan's capital has grown rapidly over the last fifteen years. With an estimated population of up to 5 million, Kabul is bursting at the seams. After the defeat of the **Taliban** in 2001, a flood of people – uprooted by years of fighting – arrived in the city in search of work and a new life. Around three-quarters of the population lives in sub-standard housing. Many are unemployed. Life expectancy in Afghanistan is forty-five years.

Everywhere I looked, I saw signs that life in Kabul is lived on the edge: buildings protected by barbed wire and sandbags; ex-police officers with missing limbs; soldiers on the streets with large-calibre machine guns; UN vehicles and SUVs filled with heavily guarded foreign officials on business. Conflict has blighted this nation for decades, and against this surreal backdrop, the locals do their best to go about their daily lives.

## A RECENT HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN

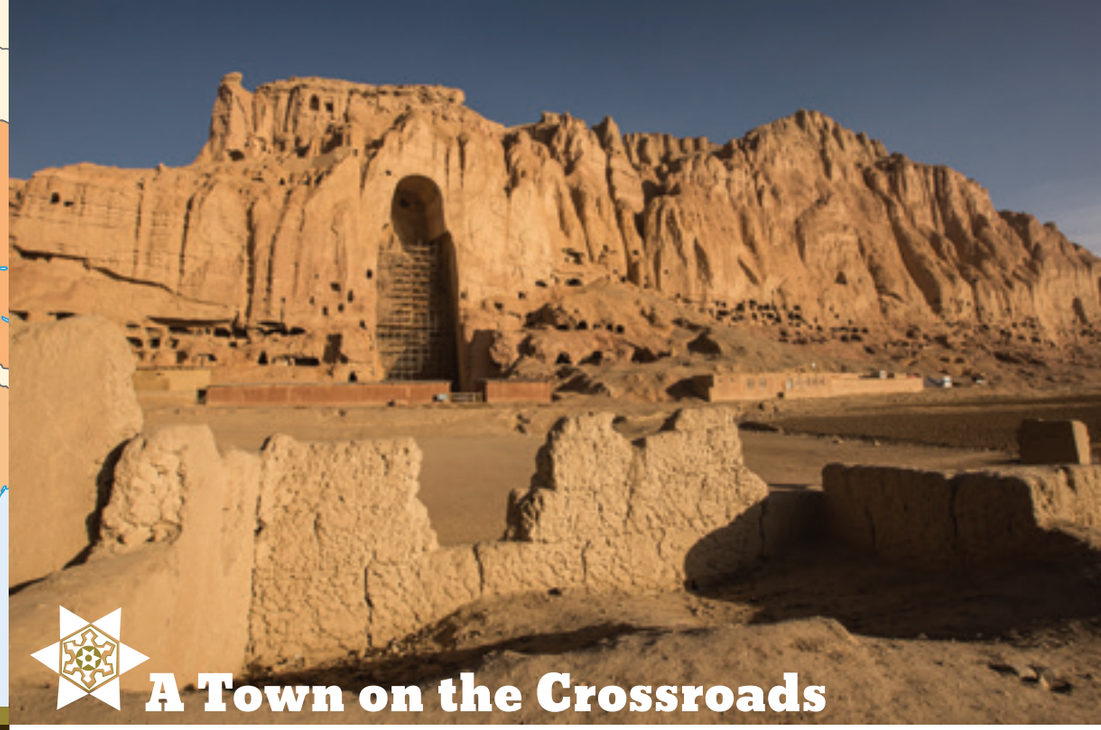
Afghanistan has a long history of unrest. In recent times, the country has been at war for almost forty years. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded, and the Soviet government appointed a **communist** leader. Local rebels formed a resistance movement called the mujahedin. Over the next ten years, around a million civilians, 100,000 Afghan fighters, and 15,000 Soviet soldiers died during what became a civil war. The Soviet Union finally withdrew in 1989, but the violence continued.

The Soviets left behind a divided nation, with **warlords** ruling much of the country. In 1996, the Taliban gained power across many areas and introduced **sharia law**. Women and girls couldn't leave their houses unless they were with a male relative, and girls were forbidden to attend school. Men were also denied basic human rights. The punishments for defying the Taliban were brutal, and many people were executed.

In 2001, after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, American soldiers invaded Afghanistan. They were searching for Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda – a militant Islamic group responsible for the attacks. The group had a close relationship with the Taliban. Many other countries supported America's invasion, and their soldiers – along with Afghanistan's **Northern Alliance** – worked to dismantle both Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011.

Most international troops pulled out of Afghanistan at the end of 2014. Since then, the Taliban has begun to regain power. The militant Islamic group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is also active in the region.

After three days in Kabul, we were told the old Russian planes that usually fly into Bamyan had broken down. We had no choice but to take the Kabul–Behsud Highway – nicknamed “Death Road” by local journalists. The Taliban regularly attacks vehicles on this route, and along with the minority Hazara people, foreigners are prime targets. Understandably anxious, Heidi and I sat in the middle of the back seat – me wearing the traditional salwar kameez (loose trousers and a tunic worn by most Afghan men) in the hope of blending in. It was a huge relief when our four-hour trip was over and we crossed the border into Bamyan.

# A Town on the Crossroads

Bamyan is on the Silk Road, an ancient route that linked China with the Middle East. People first traded here over two thousand years ago, making the province a kind of cultural crossroads. Most of the population are Hazara, a peaceful people who avoid conflict, even though the area saw intense fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance from 1998 to 2001. There are many challenges that come from living here. The area is ringed by mountains, making the winters long and extremely cold, and the region is very poor.

Our small guest house was built among the ruins of an ancient fortress. Above loomed a sandstone cliff, pitted with caves that Buddhist monks dug as meditation retreats many centuries ago. That same cliff was dominated by two enormous cavities. These once housed the world’s tallest Buddhas, which drew visitors from all over the world. This changed when the Taliban took control of the area in 1999. The Taliban considered the Buddhas to be an insult to Islam and forced local villagers to plant dynamite and blow them to pieces. Over 1,500 years of Buddhist history – gone forever.

Life in Bamyan moved at a slow pace. In fact, it seemed to have barely changed in centuries. Old men still rode donkeys down the main street; people burnt horse dung to cook food and warm their homes. Once there, I was reluctant to go skiing. Most days I preferred to hang around, taking photos. The locals were very open to me and my camera – even more so after I tracked down some of my subjects to give them copies of the photographs I'd taken. I became very popular.

## NEW ZEALAND SOLDIERS IN AFGHANISTAN

In 2003, the New Zealand government was part of an international effort to help rebuild Bamyan after the Taliban fled. Soldiers in New Zealand's Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) worked to provide better security for people living in the area. They built roads, schools, and health clinics. However, in 2010, insurgents (rebels) living along Bamyan's border began to carry out more frequent attacks against soldiers. This made it difficult for the reconstruction team to do its work. In April 2013, New Zealand's PRT was withdrawn. Ten New Zealand soldiers lost their lives serving in Afghanistan.

# Snow

After two weeks in Bamyan, the late February snow came. It fell lazily at first, and then steadily, the flakes enormous. It was without question the lightest, driest snow I'd ever seen. Heidi was pleased. She'd been coaching locals for the annual Afghan ski races, and one day, I finally tagged along. Mountain peaks stretched as far as the eye could see – the snow fresh and untouched. The skiing possibilities seemed infinite.

Our last two days in Afghanistan were spent at the ski competition – a highlight of the trip for Heidi. The first day was the men's race, and on impulse, I decided to enter. The event was brutal. Competitors raced down a bumpy, narrow gully, then put "skins" on their skis to help climb a 400-metre ridge before skiing down through deep powder and over a jump at the finish. It was a colossal, lung-burning effort.

The next day, I watched women race in their own competition. I talked with some of the skiers before the event. Several were fearful of letting their families down and planned on giving the race everything they had. In a country where women are often treated as second-class citizens, there are few opportunities like this. Bamyan has had a women's ski programme for the last five years. Each season, Henriette Bjorge travels from Norway to work as a ski instructor. The programme is close to her heart. "The young women here are incredibly welcoming," Henriette says, "and they're very keen to learn new skills. While the focus is on skiing, the programme is really about empowering women."

After the race, I interviewed one of the competitors. Marsia is nineteen years old and lives in Bamyan. "I really enjoy skiing," she said. "It's important to both men and women. Many people here don't have jobs, but they do have lots of time. Skiing gives them a focus, a meaning."

Marsia had just completed college. Her family is considering sending her to university, even though many women her age would be married by now. I asked Marsia if she would rather get married. "No, I want to study. I want to become a doctor," she replied.




# The Future

The local government in Bamyan is ambitious. The province is the first in Afghanistan to establish a tourist board, and it wants to build an international airport so visitors can bypass Kabul and its troubles. The people of Bamyan hope to make the area a tourist destination once more, especially for skiers.

In the meantime, as I write, violence in Afghanistan is escalating. The Afghan government controls just over half the country. For now, Bamyan remains untouched by the unrest, and the Hazara people continue to lead peaceful lives. But the rise of the Taliban – yet again – and the presence of ISIS is deeply worrying.

My month in Afghanistan went by so fast – I could have easily stayed longer, and despite my initial fears, the trip turned out to be one of the richest experiences of my life. Every day there was an adventure. I still think about the man I met one day while I was out biking in the countryside. He gave me some bread, despite the fact he was obviously very poor. He refused payment for the food, so when I left, I snuck some money to his son. The father found out and chased me down the street, insisting I take it back. That gesture is what I always remember when I think about Afghanistan.

## GLOSSARY

**communist:** a person who believes that wealth should be controlled by the government and shared equally among all people

**Northern Alliance:** an army made up of Afghan soldiers originally formed to fight the Taliban

**sharia law:** the set of religious principles and ideas associated with Islam (in Arabic, "sharia" means "way" or "path")

**Taliban:** an Islamic movement that uses force to impose its extreme interpretation of sharia law

**warlord:** a leader of an area who maintains power by using force

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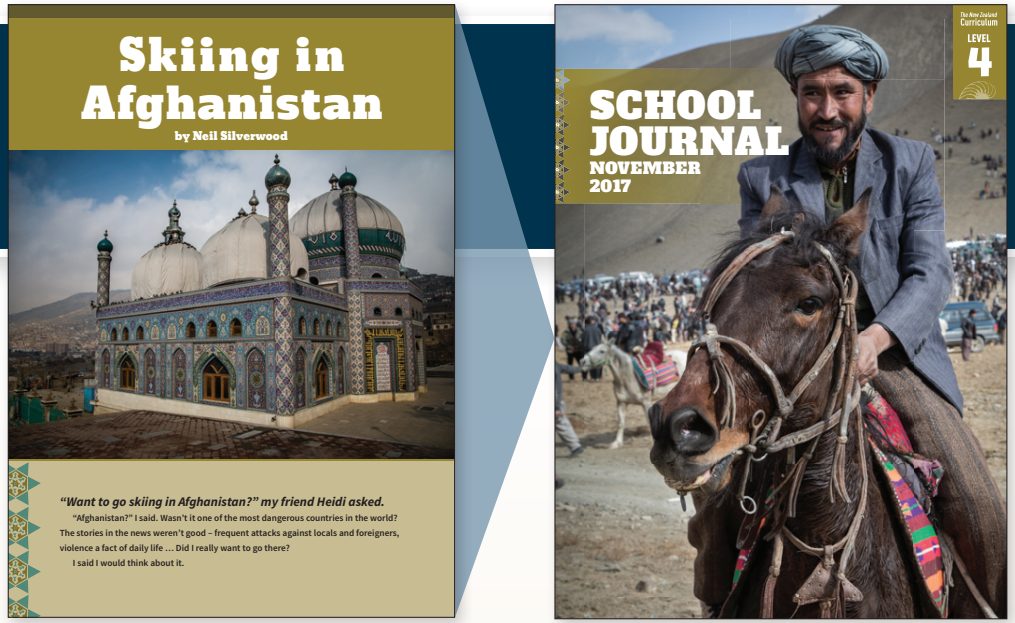
Published 2017 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz



ISBN 978 1 77669 169 2 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Liz Tui Morris
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione




**SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4 NOVEMBER 2017**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Curriculum learning areas** | English<br>Social Sciences |
| **Reading year level** | Year 8 |
| **Keywords** | adventure, Afghanistan, Al Qaeda, Bamyan, civil war, insurgents, ISIS, Islam, Kabul, New Zealand soldiers, Northern Alliance, photography, Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), sharia law, skiing, Soviet Union, Taliban, terrorism, tourism, travel, war, women's rights |

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