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The scariest plane ride in the world

Brian Schofield was so desperate to fly through the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan that he bought out the entire plane**Brian Schofield**

I'd had enough of driving through Tajikistan.

The two-day dirt-road rumble from the capital, Dushanbe, to the mountain town of Khorog had been enlivened by my sleep-deprived driver, Ergash, lolling dozily over the wheel while his decrepit van careened along a crumbling scratch in the cliffs high above the raging Panj River.

Then, as dusk fell on the second evening, he had stopped to pick up a couple of heavily painted ladies. "Get in, girls. Brian, these are my special friends. Tonight we stop at hotel in the hills, we drink vodka, we party together. You like to party, don't you?"

The next morning, Ergash had stared at me with furious red eyes. "I'm not speaking to you. I can't believe you went to bed early — I had to look after both women on my own."

So, when Ergash dropped me off, I paid him and, silently, fired him. At the end of the trip, I'd be flying back to Dushanbe.

A decision of little import, you might think, but only if you've never heard of the Khorog-Dushanbe hop — by reputation, the scariest scheduled flight in the world.

In Soviet days, it was the only route for which Aeroflot paid its pilots danger money: a 45-minute rollercoaster through — not over, through — the fearsome Hindu Kush mountains.

Its safety record isn't bad: one flight went down in the 1980s, and that was hit by a rocket from neighbouring Afghanistan — but tales abound of wild turbulence, snow-scraping near misses and rubber-shredding landings.

For more than half the year, the flight doesn't even try. But it was, for good or ill, a perfect morning when I wandered into Khorog airport. While Tajik Air's facilities weren't special — a ticket office and two benches in the scalding sun — it emerged that the ticketing system was cutting-edge.

Ryanair, take note. You could reserve a space only one day in advance — and not a space on a plane, but at the airport. Then, if enough people were milling around, they'd start selling tickets for a flight, which would leave when full. Genius.

It didn't look good when I arrived — not many millers. "We've just filled a plane, it's leaving now," explained the tired, nicotine-stained boss. "Stick around, though. If there are enough people at Dushanbe, the plane will come back."

I stuck, and stuck. The sun rose and roared. My connecting flights home drifted into the distance. The phone rang — news from Dushanbe.

"They have enough passengers to come back."

"Fantastic!"

"But... There aren't enough people waiting here. We've cancelled the flight."

Don't get me wrong, Tajikistan is a lovely country, but I wanted to go home. I begged, I pleaded, I waved a picture of my baby boy. And finally, I cracked.

"Okay. How many tickets do I have to buy to get that plane in the sky?"

"Nine."

"That's pretty much the plane."

"Yes."

"Sold."

It was now a blustery late afternoon, and irony was surely about to pour from the skies: "Man dies in plane he paid £450 to take off." As BrianAir's maiden flight powered up at the end of the flaky runway, I tried to remember Ergash's driving, gripped my flimsy picnic chair of a seat, and said a little prayer.

The result was something like heavenly. After a screaming climb from the valley floor, we entered the Hindu Kush, weaving between the ragged mountains, often less than 50yd from snow and rock. The tiny plane strained over high passes, then plummeted through air pockets, as 23,000ft peaks stretched away towards the sun. It was breathtaking, stomach-flipping, occasionally heart-stopping and, on touchdown, all the passengers (me and another guy) warmly shook hands.

So, if you're in the area, I can heartily recommend the scariest flight in the world. It's worth every seat.

*Brian Schofield's first book, **Selling Your Father's Bones**, is out now in paperback (HarperPress £9.99)*

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