

## A snapshot of a year and a half spent in a Tajik village:

### Pinion, a rural idyll by Christine Oriol

*Christine Oriol has spent over four years living in Central Asia. In this article she describes life in a village in the mountains of northern Tajikistan, Pinion. Renting a small house and living as the locals do, Oriol describes many of the highs and lows of life in rural Central Asia. Her evocative description brings a beautiful and resilient corner of Tajikistan to life.*

Born in France and a graduate in agricultural development, I became well acquainted with Central Asia having worked in both Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia. In Tajikistan I discovered the room for putting into practice my love for both mountains and smallholders agriculture. Overlooking terraces on a steep mountain slope makes me shiver, and Tajikistan, with its 93 per cent mountainous terrain and 70 per cent rural population, fitted my interests perfectly.

Staff members from a rural development project, we arrived in a village at the heart of the Tajik Fann mountains. New to the development world, we had spent the last four months living in the most rustic hotels of Dushanbe and Khujand, sometimes sleeping in our offices between two desks. Finally, we had decided that we needed a place to drop our backpacks and had chosen Pinion, a thirty-minute walk from our field office.

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The mountains of Pinion are red, stratified, rocky. You can see the paths created by all goats and sheep on their everyday quest for grass. Really high – where neither sheep nor men can reach – a few junipers remind us that they used to be everywhere.



*The rocky mountains of Pinion*



*credit Christine Oriol*

The village is at 1800m high, built along the main river Pasrud, and on both sides mountains up to 4000 meters tall soar above. The scale of the mountains, their angle and the shape that they give to the valley, all this inspire your soul.

My colleague seemed quite confident that the house we had found would be our new home. I had a little tingle of angst, but I liked the roomy volumes of our new place, the wooden floor and the large windows. It was the former administration office of the jamoat (community) and the only empty house in the whole area. It belonged to a man living in Dushanbe but his brother, the closest neighbour, was taking care of it.

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We spent one week-end in Dushanbe buying the necessary items for living without running water and electricity; electricity is only supplied at meal's time in winter. We purchased a lot of basins, a big plastic trashcan for storing the spring water, a gas burner, few plates and silverware. During the first days I was alone there and my presence finally persuaded the neighbour and his sons to dig up an outside toilet, allowing us to stop using theirs.

I loved Pinion, waking up early in the morning, early enough to match more or less the waking call of the neighbours; women were the first in the street releasing their cows, sheep and goats for the day, men emerged second to take the 7 am, and only, bus to the bazaar. I loved walking down to the village when I missed the bus (most of the time), chatting with the old ladies or

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children along the way, or passing the lethargic cows, looking at the sun rising up on the mountains to the east, listening to the river and taking note of its level and flow of the activities in the fields. And then, on my way back home in the evening, I would change path, take the one going up on the right bank of the river, the one almost never used, where I spotted one day two foxes going into the fields.

Slowly I started to know people and people started to know me.

I went to the summer pastures of the village with my neighbour's last daughter, a four-hour vertical walk to reach a place hanging in the sky. I spent the night there; sleeping half bent because the bed was too short. The next summer, I decided to visit another village's summer pastures. I walked for seven hours, following the map and the directions of a friend. On the path, I followed fresh bear tracks and sang as loud as I could to make sure it would hear me. At the stone houses of the summer pastures, girls under their twenties, one older woman and one man in his early thirties welcomed me with supper. They could not understand how I had managed to reach this place without having been accompanied by a villager. I spent two nights there, sharing poetry with the girls, taking pictures of them with their favourite cow, and eating dairy products.

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My neighbours fed me an incredible number of times, in the evening, when they knew I was alone, or just anytime I entered their house. We didn't speak much and I lost track of the names of all their daughters in law, as they had had a lot of sons, some of whom were in Russia. I saw the children turn from red faced babies covered in big bundles of blankets into brave little boys running around outside with a simple t-shirt in winter time. I made bread once with the ladies, the grandmother patiently repeating and demonstrating the way to spread the dough before baking the bread. When they bought an oven, I showed them the magic of the chocolate cake with very dark, very expensive chocolate cake I brought from Dushanbe.

“I made bread once with the ladies, the grandmother patiently repeating and demonstrating the way to spread the dough”

I chatted with both men and women, women in Tajik, men in Russian. I got to know the less timid persons of the village; Maxbuba, whose dad was the owner of the car repair shop down the valley, her brother, who dreamt of going to Russia, but was stuck in the village according to his dad's will.

When winter came, I bought a stove and heavy materials for makeshift curtains for the house in Pinion. In November, they installed the stove in the house, I gathered all the necessary items (kitchen, bath, sleeping mattresses, clothes, books) in the smallest room of the house and I tried to live there.



*Pinion women at work*

*credit Christine Oriol*

The stove didn't burn well. I used wood and coal, first lighting up the wood and when the fire was very hot, adding the coal. I had to open the window to get rid of the smoke in the room, and was always trying to find the best balance between not dying of carbon dioxide intoxication and being still warm. We celebrated New Year's Eve with a friend of mine, both wearing hats and eating covered with blankets, I woke up quite frequently in the night to check if the air was breathable. In the morning, the water stored in the other part of the house had frozen.

Wintertime is the wedding season in the villages. Men come back from Russia since construction is not possible there and with the money they saved, the single and young ones (below 24 year old) get married. I attended many weddings, danced at all of them, was sometimes pulled off the dance floor by my neighbour in an attempt to preserve my dignity. I gained the title of "citizen of Pinion".

*“wintertime is the wedding season in the villages as men come back from Russia”*

In the course of the winter, my colleague left and I became the sole resident of the house in the red mountains. I spent then one more spring and summer, and at the end of autumn, decided to give back the house to its owners. I hadn't had electricity in the house for an unknown reason for the last two months. I was also slowly understanding that what I wanted to experience in Pinion was a construction of my mind, an illusion.



*Wintertime in Pinion*

*credit Christine Oriol*

I wanted to see a village life and agriculture in the mountains with a balanced and happy society. The reality was a bit different: women were compensating the absence of men by both working in the fields, mostly to harvest fodder for the livestock, and taking care of the numerous children. They had no option to gain an education. Instead they were married between the ages of eighteen and twenty. They would have rather left the village and live in the city than carry on for their whole lives the usual village chores: fetching water, cooking, raising children and tending to livestock.

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I went back to live in the city, but the urban atmosphere didn't fit me so well. I would often remember the sweetest part of Pinion: walking in winter time up the road, the full moon already shining its light on the red slopes, and the sound of the river way down below echoing on the mountains sides.



*The sweetest part of Pinion*

*credit Christine Oriol*

Christine Oriol has worked as Rural Development Coordinator for the French NGO GERES in Tajikistan since 2011. Before moving to Tajikistan, Oriol worked in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and as a shepherd in the French Alps. These experiences consolidated her passion for nature, and especially life in the mountains. Her commitment and desire to engage with local life has led Christine to learn Russian and Tajik. She has studied at the Lyon Institute of Political Science (Science Po Lyon) and obtained two masters, one in Environmental Studies from the University of Oregon and the other in Economic Policies and Agricultural Development from the Institute of Economic and Social Development Studies in Paris.