

From eerie Soviet ghost towns to incredible hospitality, exploring "the Stans"

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(CNN) — What comes to mind when you think of Afghanistan? War, famine, deprivation?

What about Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan? Could you even locate these countries on the map?

Dutch traveler [Thijs Broekkamp](#) is on a mission to change the Western perception of the Stans, one photograph at a time.

Broekkamp spent three months last year traveling through Central Asia -- crisscrossing Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan -- documenting sights and experiences with his camera.

"I thought, 'I'm going to go to the corner on the world map that really fascinates me, but I don't know anything about -- which were the Stans,'" Broekkamp tells [CNN Travel](#).

From wandering eerie Soviet ghost towns to experiencing incredible hospitality from total strangers, Broekkamp's trip gave him an insight into this region of the world -- and he took social media users on the journey with him, via [The Stans Project](#).

Unknown realms



Broekkamp made friends in Bulunkul, one of the most remote and coldest villages in Tajikistan.

In the tradition of many a travel photographer before him, about a year ago Broekkamp packed in his 9-to-5 job and decided to pursue photography full time.

He wanted to do something different with his images, not just visit the top Instagram location tags.

Broekkamp researched and prepared his trip for almost a year.



Workers in Inylchek mined for minerals.

"[The region] used to be quite notoriously difficult to travel to, because there was a lack of information," he says.

Broekkamp scoured internet sites and books to map out his route, while also leaving plenty of time for spontaneity. He was joined by two friends on two separate legs of the trip.

Some of his most striking images are of two "ghost towns" in Kyrgyzstan: Min Kush and Inylchek.

Broekkamp was fascinated by the history behind these former Soviet industrial hotspots, now neglected leftovers of another era.



Factories in Min Kush were abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"It's a very tangible remain of the Soviet time, which I thought was really cool to incorporate in the project," he says. "I want to tell people also a little bit about about that, because it's very important part of history for those countries. It has a very big influence on how life developed there."

Broekkamp read about both towns prior to the visit, although the information available is scarce.

Min Kush was home to factories that produced uranium for nuclear weapons. Workers in Inylchek mined for minerals.

Both towns were apparently prosperous until the Soviet Union dissolved. People still live in both places, but buildings are dilapidated and industry has ground to a halt.



Broekkamp shot pictures of the abandoned remains of daily living in Inylchek.

Located inland in the mountains, Min Kush is pretty isolated, and there are still high radiation levels.

About 30 people still live in Inylchek, where there's a school and a doctor.

"It's pretty grim and kind of eerie maybe -- and you see these remains -- we found notebooks lying around and just cups and plates and cooking utensils," says Broekkamp.

"It just looks like everybody disappeared at once and then just left all these things and just went away," reflects the photographer.

"So that's a bit weird, and also very hard to imagine the places were once crowded with people, just working and being busy. And now it's just completely deserted."

Importance of communication



Broekkamp visited this old Soviet town in Incylchek, Kyrgyzstan.

Broekkamp says that the unanticipated moments proved to be some of the most memorable, particularly the surprise encounters with people he met along the way.

"The first thing you start to notice is just the hospitality of the people, which is really unbelievable," says the photographer.

Just two days into the trip after landing in Tajikistan, his party met a local man who insisted on hosting them for dinner, taking them to a nearby hot springs and putting the group up for the night.



A member of the Munduz tribe in Kyrgyzstan, this man invited Broekkamp and his group to stay the night in his yurt.

"He just wanted to show us around and took care of us," recalls Broekkamp.

"That person actually really became a friend of ours and we're still speaking to him as well. It's a good example of the special people you meet along the way."

As well as photographing landscapes and landmarks, Broekkamp also snapped portraits of some of the people he met.



A group of women Broekkamp met in Khiva, Uzbekistan.

"When I want to take a picture, I always approach them and ask if they would be okay with it," he says. "Everybody said yes. They didn't mind and they were taking pictures with us as well."

He says taking portraits helped establish a rapport with people, chatting about work, home and family. Even when language barriers came up, he still says the interactions were positive, and connection was still possible.

Crossing cultural borders



The Blue mosque in Mazar i Sharif seemed to show life as usual in Afghanistan, says Broekkamp.

For Broekkamp, crossing cultural borders and meeting amazing people was the best part of the trip, and he's pleased if his photographs help challenge expectations and assumptions of this part of the world.

"Everybody [at home] would say to me: "Oh, isn't it really dangerous there? Isn't it unsafe, and aren't the people unfriendly? And I would think 'Why would people assume that? They don't even know anything about those countries.'"



A member of the Munduz tribe in Kyrgyzstan, performing on the accordion.

"In this day and age, as polarization and xenophobia and stuff like that seems to be prevalent," he says. "So I feel it's quite important now that we should be open to other cultures that are not the same as ours -- and we should learn from them and respect them -- and not be afraid of strangers or 'strange' people or 'strange' places."