



# The TUQAY

ESSAYS FROM BEYOND THE WELL-PROTECTED DOMAINS.

## The Annotated Adventures of an Apparent Academic

by Jaimee Comstock-Skipp - 26.11.2012

Below are my SUUUPER LONG travelogues from this summer. Read them at your leisure, or not at all!

Take care, ladies and gentlemen!

Adventurously,  
Jaimee

### Dusty Desert

I look out my window at the dusty mesquite tree. There is no puff of wind in this desert to shake it. I hear the sound of voices. Some chatter in Uzbek, the long vowels of Farsi weave in and out, while the harsh “shch” and “zh” of overpowering Russian threaten to drown the others out. Where in this little world am I?

In a summer language course at Arizona State University, of course!

I’m here for another month to do my Tajiki language immersion studies then will head off to Tajikistan, Turkey, Egypt, England, and Germany. After having flown in and out of Istanbul so many times but never having left the airport, I finally get to do more than stuff myself full of free samples of Turkish Delight in Duty Free. I get to exit the transit hub and spend ten days in the city beside the Bosphorus. Then Cairo, then to present a paper on early Soviet propaganda posters depicting Muslims at a Cambridge conference (I will NOT be flying the risky and rickety Russian Aeroflot to do so), then over to Berlin (the travel agent said it would be the same price to have a 4 hour layover or to stay one week; it was as though he were offering me a second serving of ice cream), then back to California to await the unknown. And sleep.

In other news, I finally graduated! This semester I presented papers at conferences where I discussed ladies’ fashion turbans (“Sartorientalism”), as well as World’s Fair pavilions and the Indiana Jones temple (in Disneyland). Fellow speakers examined Emily Dickinson’s windows, the origins of the public bathroom (or, in 19th-century parlance, “comfort stations”), and the history of astroturf. The abstract, philosophical theorizing of art history makes my head hurt. Material Culture

is the path for me! In addition, I take refuge in the tangibility of language classes. Memorize a word, study a verb structure, and the world is open to you. I welcome this break from academia.

Off to class now; it is supposed to be 112 degrees (F) on Monday! I will write more when I am somewhere less exotic.

Love and adventure always,  
Jaimee  
14 June 2012

PS-if in the course of my travels you happen to receive one of those emails claiming that I have been kidnapped and am in need of money (a common internet scam), expect me to state that I have looked around for ransom grants and scholarships first!

### Ramadan with Ramazon

Assalom doost-hoye aziz [hello dear friends],

My time is nearly over in the lovely city of Dushanbe, where Lada cars abound in the streets of this former Soviet republic. I am already thinking of how I can return for a third time next year! Please pardon the jumbled travelogue below; it has been an eventful four weeks spanning the gamut of the holy month of Ramadan.

I have lived with a Tajik host family who feeds us heavy meals full of cottonseed oil and beef. I reckon I have consumed a small cow while being here. Bibi, the elderly matriarch, whacks flies while uttering gentle “Bakhsheesh”es (apologies) to atone for the winged lives lost. With her gold teeth flashing, she smiles benignly at us foreign students one minute, then promptly turns to hurl a string of insults, commands, and threats at the rest of the family. Once I helped her make “mantu” dumplings. We sat on the floor to prepare the fillings and she asked me about life in America. “Are there Muslims there?” Many, I answer. Chopping onions mid-swing: “Are they circumcised?” I wince.

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To escape these awkward living arrangements, my classmate Miriam and I jump at the chance to stay the night with other Tajik friends old and new. Our beloved yogurt ladies whom we met last year invited us to their apartment. Guljahon has a deep voice and hearty laugh; the elegant Gulnisso still has a most beautiful, full, and natural unibrow. We showed up at the bazaar at closing time and they hurried us through the throngs of people bargaining for dinner supplies to break their daily fast. That night it was girls' night in: we danced, applied foot cream, painted our unibrows, and slept in a row on the floor together.

The prayer beads swing from the driver's mirror and Iranian pop music blares as we zoom through the streets to get to 16th century madrasas, fortresses, and Sufi shrines. In the cotton fields beyond, women and children in their colorful kurtas gently bow and touch their hands to their hearts in expressions of greeting. Perched on an overlook with sketchbook in hand to render the madrasa, little boys ride their bikes below. Their only protection from the speeding cars and trucks with faulty brakes are the Islamic skullcaps on their heads.

Sitting and sketching in a garden, a dour looking man looks over my shoulder. Afterwards, he asks if I can do a portrait of him. I happily accept his offer to model. As I draw his sunken cheeks on the page he sneaks glances at the paper, catches me looking at him looking at the picture of him carried out while looking at him face-to-face, then he smiles at the absurdity of this process of representation!

In the bazaar Miriam and I peruse the T-shirts with their amusing English phrases ("Galvin Kline", "Abibas", "I am Muslim: Don't Panic", "Islam: Victorious"). Ramazon is the seller. 18 years old, he always has a smile on his face and eyes that light up when we walk by. We engage in reverse bargaining: he insists we take a T-shirt at cost price while we insist on paying more to give him a profit! He affectionately calls us "Apa Jon" (dear older sister) because we remind him of a sister he lost years ago. I later asked him about it and he explained that he never met this family member; she left the world before he came

into it, a casualty to the civil war that wracked the country in the aftermath of the Soviet Union breakup. No crossfire was to blame, but a congenital illness that went untreated due to the lack of medicine and supplies in the region at the time.

This Sunday was the first day celebrating the end of the Muslim month of Ramadan, and I spent much of it at Ramazon's family home. As I walk into the door of the hovel his mother and little sisters throw their arms around me and kiss me on both cheeks. My reputation precedes me! After being fed the equivalent of three dinners, his mother arranges not one but four stuffed quilts on which I sleep in a room accessible by a ladder with views of the sheet metal rooftops of the neighborhood and city lights in the distance. The smell of fresh bread baking in anticipation of Eid festivities mingles with that of scorched corn, and the stink of the wooden slabs of the squat toilet underneath.

I wake up at dawn and am led to a spread of little dishes arranged on the floor: it is a sea of fruits, nuts, cookies, dates, drinks, cakes. Ramazon dutifully peels hard-boiled eggs and hands them to me as his youngest sister similarly shucks pistachio after pistachio and pours them into my hand. They are vibrant magenta and green gems, having been collected weeks earlier by the family in the hills behind them. Later that day Ramazon takes me to see the grove and he bounds into the trees, fearlessly picking them so I have a collection to take home with me. Scratched and covered in twigs and dust, "baroye shuma" (for you) he says as he hands them to me from the branches above. The night before I fly out he gets a neighbor to drive me back to my host family and we say our goodbyes in the empty street. "We will be waiting for you!" he says, and his waving hand pokes out of the car window as the one tail-light winks at me in the quiet street's distance.

Onward to Istanbul.

двентяю злу,  
Jaimee  
20 August 2012

