

# IN THE LAND OF THE TIAN SHAN MOUNTAINS

Muhammad Idrees



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**This book is dedicated to the beautiful  
and lovely country of Kyrgyzstan and the  
loving people who live there.**

# Reviews

“Muhammad Idrees wrote a wonderful book about his year and a half long journey in Kyrgyzstan from the perspective of a young, observant Afghan intellectual. His sharp eyes help illuminate rich impressions. His subjective journey offers an enjoyable read. He helps understand why those who travel to Central Asia or are fortunate to live there for a longer time, feel they belong there and when they leave feel to have left their hearts behind.”

*Pal Dunay, Former Director of the OSCE Academy, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan*

“Typically, most travel narratives in the English reading market are Americans or Brits wandering about. Here we have an Afghan studying in Kyrgyzstan, showing that ‘being a stranger in strange land’ is not a western phenomenon. With humor and insight, the reader joins the author in his journey to a new land. *In the Land of the Tian Shan Mountains* is an engaging book that will grab the reader’s attention and not let go”.

*Timothy May, University of North Georgia.*

“A riveting memoir that doubles as a travelogue, this culturally astute story follows one man's journey of Kyrgystan, evoking respect and love for the country.”

*Jennie Rosenblum - JennieReads*

# Acknowledgements

It is not easy to write a book in English when it is not your first language, and such was the case with me. I started writing “In the Land of the Tian Shan Mountains” for English readers, however, I did not know how much effort and hard work I needed to shape my idea practically. After I completed the manuscript followed by rounds of edits, I approached more than one hundred publishers and literary agents but none of them showed any interest except the one who wanted to charge me with money that I could not afford. It took me more than a year looking for someone to publish my book but my efforts did not bear any fruits. Next I decided to self-publish it and as a first step I needed to find an editor. I contacted two Indian editors (who worked together) but after paying in advance, they did not do their job and I could do nothing but to look for another option.

After that bitter experience, I was lucky enough to find Gina Casto and Jennie Rosenblum who did the editing task carefully and always advised me whenever I needed. Furthermore, Jennie also believed in me and introduced me to the owner of Indies United Publishing House, Lisa Orban who agreed to publish my book. But the series of thanks I owe to people does not stop here.

I would like to thank the OSCE Academy in Bishkek for providing me the opportunity of studying there. All professors, academy staff, directors and deputy directors and my classmates were very kind during all that time and I really appreciate their love and assistance. The former OSCE Academy director Dr. Pal Dunay has been very kind and helpful whenever I sought his help. Gregory Dunn supervised my dissertation and he guided and helped me successfully complete my dissertation. Jawed Nazari and Rustam were helpful in finding the accommodation when I first arrived. Abid Stanikzai and Masood had been very cooperative throughout my studies.

I think I would not have been able to gather so much information and visit different places without the help of my doctor friends that I made there. I thank Iqbal Hashmi (Baacha), Zahoor Khan, Hasan Khan, Noor Khan, Hanif, Younis and Abid Khan for their support and love during my stay in Kyrgyzstan.

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I also want to thank my friends from UNFPA-Kabul who always supported me and appreciated my writing. I did not name each person as the list will get longer. But would specifically add Ms. Bella Tristram who always allocated time for me despite her being very busy and helped me whenever I needed any assistance regarding the writing processes.

Thanks to Najibullah Zirak and Waseem Ahmad who believed in me and always encouraged me to write; I owe many thanks to the founder of Indies United Publishing House for providing me with a platform to publish my work.

Muhammad Idrees

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# Preface

THIS IS the story of the year and a half that I spent in Kyrgyzstan.

My journey started at the beginning of 2014 and continued until late 2015. The story begins with my acceptance of the OSCE Academy Scholarship. I remember that day vividly. It was a weekend in late October and the sun had already dipped low on the horizon, disappearing from the window of my room. Switching on my laptop, I began to check new emails, noticing one, I clicked on it. I was overjoyed when I opened my email and found the acceptance letter for my master's studies. However, my excitement was slowly replaced with fear and worry.

As I read it many times, allowing the words to sink in, the apprehension of leaving my job hovered in my mind. I was completely lost in thought when, after an hour, my mother made her usual visit to my room, calling me for dinner. I glanced around at my surroundings and found my books scattered on the carpet occupying more than half of the space. I got up to leave my room for the one where my mom and dad were waiting for me.

“I have been accepted to a scholarship program for the master’s studies in Kyrgyzstan. I need to reply to them within a week to let them know whether I am interested or not.”

First, there was a long pause, and then both of them asked for information about the country, program, stipend, and duration. Although I was free to make my own decisions, I felt a sense of panic listening to them talk about the risks I was taking in preferring higher studies over a job and income, and their words still come to my mind today.

Later, when I consulted my friends and colleagues, they expressed more or less the same concerns, but as they had neither heard of the opportunity nor the country, it was difficult to accept their advice.

I decided it was I who should make the final decision. Two days before the deadline for the offer, I made up my mind. I felt confident in my decision and became determined to take advantage of the offer in hand and pursue my studies. I resigned from my job and got ready for the rich and memorable cultural experience that I believed I was sure to gain.

During all that time in Kyrgyzstan, I tried to immerse myself in the country, to get as much information as I could about its culture, society, and history, as well as the overall atmosphere. I made new friends and acquaintances and traveled through nearly the entire country. During my visits to different parts of Kyrgyzstan, I closely watched the lifestyles of people and studied their cultures and traditions. This book is an attempt to share those varied experiences, the highs and lows, as well as the weird and wonderful stories with readers.

I had no intention of writing this book when I began this journey, but whenever I discussed my interesting experiences with my friends or sometimes when I would post on social media, I always received positive feedback. Upon posting new and interesting information and stories about the lifestyle and culture of the people of Kyrgyzstan, my friends and colleagues in different parts of the world showed interest. At the same time, I discovered that most of my friends and colleagues had little or no knowledge of that undiscovered gem in the world. A country about which not enough has been written, even though it possesses beautiful snowy mountains with fantastic green pastures, and fabulous waterfalls, as well as a unique culture and tradition of hospitality.

Kyrgyzstan is an attraction for travelers who seek peace of mind in nature, those who love hiking and skiing, and those who dare to face the real adventure that life has to offer. Moreover, it occupies an important geostrategic position in the region. Being the only democracy in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is the focus of big powers and regional players. The idea and motivation behind writing this book were to write something from an Afghan point of view. This book contains my experiences, and I have tried my utmost to write it with complete honesty.

Before leaving my home for Kyrgyzstan, a Google search on the internet provided me with some brief information about the country. Mostly I read about the ethnic violence and revolutions which painted the country as one experiencing political upheavals. At the same time, my parents had trouble pronouncing the name. They called it *Kurdistan*, *Turkistan*, etc.

I had applied for the OSCE Academy Master's Studies Scholarship in April 2013. In September 2013, I got an email from the Academy about the written test, which was to take place in late September. The Academy had also sent the format of the test along with the venue: Gawharshad Institute of Higher Studies on Darulaman Road, Kabul. The test was scheduled at nine in the morning, and on the same day, an interview was to take place. At

that time, I was working for UNFPA, and I was assigned some new responsibilities for our SDES project, which was a challenge in itself. The workload was so demanding and heavy, requiring me to work even during my off days.

It was a hot day, as I recall, and I got permission from my supervisor to sit for the exam. The written test consisted of English grammar and economics-related multiple-choice questions with a long essay testing both knowledge of the English language and economics. I had three hours to finish the test.

While solving the questions, I did not find them difficult, and so, I was done in less than two hours. I went back to my office to finish the urgent work waiting for me and was to check again after 1 p.m. to see if I was selected for an interview.

At 1:30 p.m., when I arrived at the Institute, I found candidates checking their names on the notice board. Sweating profusely, I made space for myself to try to see my name on the list. I was thrilled to find that indeed, my name was third from the top.

After following the directions given on the notice board, I found that the venue for the interview was on the second floor, where nine other candidates were also waiting. The waiting lounge was a wide room with enough sofas and chairs for the candidates, but without air-conditioning, it was very hot. I found a vacant seat in the corner where two other candidates were busy discussing the possible interview questions. The remaining candidates did not seem familiar with each other and appeared to be looking to establish new friendships. After a while, a man with a list in his hands entered the room and announced a name, and one of the two guys sitting near me stood up and went with him. While I waited my turn, the other gentleman struck up a conversation with me. After we exchanged some information regarding our work, studies, and future plans, my name was announced, and I followed the person to the interview room.

Dr. Maxim, then Director of the OSCE Academy, Elham, Afghan Alumni and then Director of Gawharshad Institute, were sitting behind a table with bundles of exam papers and students' applications. Dr. Maxim asked questions, which were fairly simple: *"What is your plan for the next five years?" "Why are you interested in this scholarship?" "How will you contribute to the development of Afghanistan after you return and...?"* After Dr. Maxim finished his questions, he looked to Elham and asked if he had any questions. Thankfully, he did not.

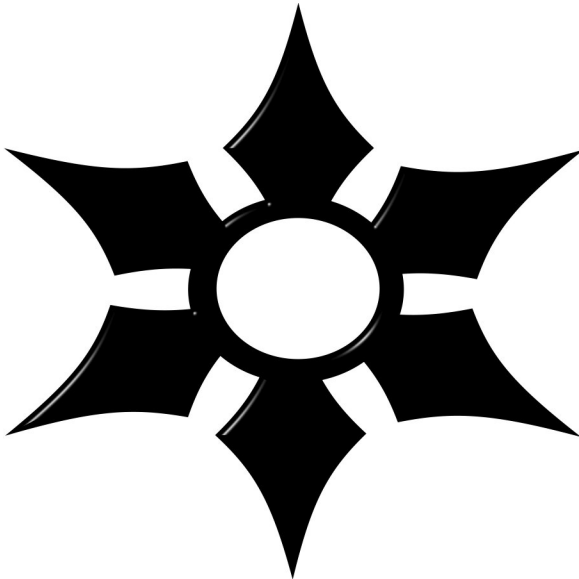
After receiving the acceptance letter for the program in late October, I learned that the two young men I was sitting near in the

waiting lounge were also among the successful candidates. However, they canceled the offer in its final stage and thus out of four scholarships, only two Afghans got the chance to study there.

The scholarship offer to study Economic Governance and Development at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek included round trip travel costs, 180 Euros stipend per month, 100 Euros housing allowance, and basic medical insurance. The Academy started processing my visa and sent me the schedule for my studies. After the two candidates canceled the offer, I learned from the Academy that the other candidate who accepted the scholarship offer was Iqbal.

A couple of days later, our office arranged a farewell party for me. After that, I was officially done with the UNFPA after three years of dedicated service, and I started preparing for Kyrgyzstan. Before leaving for Bishkek, our Academy sent us the email of our senior fellow, Masood in case we needed to ask any questions or help. He had finished his course-work and was leaving for Kabul to complete his dissertation and internship. A few days before my departure, I met Masood and another graduate of the Academy Abid Stanikzai. After meeting them in Kabul, I was more confident in my decision.

# Chapter 1



## From Kabul to Bishkek

It was my first time traveling out of the country, and therefore I was nervous. A weird and unexplainable kind of fear began mounting over me, and I worried about how I would handle all the challenges ahead. The Academy had already completed the processing of my visa, and my flight from Kabul to Bishkek was scheduled on January 9, 2014, through Dubai. There were no direct flights from Kabul to Bishkek, and almost all of the flights were scheduled through Dubai. My flight was at 6 p.m. from Kabul to Dubai by FlyDubai Airline and then from Dubai to Bishkek with the same airline after a four-hour layover.

Students going to Bishkek do not usually get their visas on their passports; it was the same in my case. My visa was issued upon arrival, and I was provided a reference letter by the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan along with the invitation letter from the OSCE Academy.

The Kabul International Airport (KIA), sometimes often referred to by foreigners as the “Killed in Action (KIA)” airport, has been renamed as Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA). Passengers have to pass through five to six checkpoints before boarding the plane. After crossing the roundabout on the main airport road, there is a checkpoint at the start of the small road that goes to the airport. All passengers get out of the vehicle and take a walking route where they are searched by police. The driver stays by his car, and other group of policemen search him along with his vehicle. From there onward, the car moves forward, and the passengers get back in the car until it turns right where there is another checkpoint. The luggage is unloaded there and passed through the baggage scanner. Passengers also pass through a body scanner followed by a body search. From there, after crossing the carpark and the main waiting hall, you show your ticket to another police officer before proceeding to the terminal area either by walking or on a bus. Before entering the terminal, you must go through another round of baggage and body scanners along with

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security guards who again check you and your luggage, and sometimes you may also confront a German shepherd or Belgian Malinois checking your luggage. After that, you finally queue up, weigh your luggage, and get your boarding pass.

At the boarding counter, the person responsible checked my passport and reference visa but was not satisfied. I showed him the invitation letter, but the creases on his forehead were not giving me a green signal. I explained to him that the Kyrgyz Embassy did not issue visas for students, that they get their visa upon arrival. He looked at me, but instead of issuing the boarding pass, he referred me to the border police officer standing a short distance away from him. The border police officer asked me about the purpose of my visit but was also not satisfied when I answered that I was going for studies. He shook his head in disappointment and told me to follow him.

While walking a few steps, I noticed a tall, muscular man with a big mustache coming down the stairs from the second floor. The officer greeted this man and quickly told him my story. When I replied to his question that I was going to study, he told the officer to allow me through. Later, I came to know that the big man was the airport police chief. I also realized if the airport staff teases you, pointing out problems in your legal documents, it means they want to be paid some money. The officer had no excuse then.

We went back to the authorized person, and the officer told him to issue me the boarding pass. After getting the pass, I moved to the second floor and queued to get my passport stamped with "Exit." Within a few minutes, the immigration officer stamped my passport and I moved to yet another spot for yet another body and hand-luggage search. I took off my shoes and put them, along with my coat, belt, mobile, and wallet in the tray, which passed through the scanner, and after a few minutes, I was in the lounge waiting for my flight.

At that point, I was relieved because I had been through an extensive body search and interrogation, but I had to face another worry - acrophobia. That was the main reason why traveling by plane was always scary for me. The flight was delayed by thirty minutes and after a while, I saw Iqbal, who I had seen during the interview, and then befriended through emails and social media while waiting for this time to arrive. He also had passed through

the same messy interrogation and body searches.

After getting on the plane, the flight attendant did not welcome me with a smile; instead, she checked my boarding pass and showed me my seat in a quite bizarre way. Later, I discovered the reason why.

The flight from Kabul to Dubai was full of Afghan laborers going to Dubai. Their rough physical appearance, hardened hands, and worn clothes revealed the degree of the hard lives they had been living. Because of the language barrier, these workers often have problems with flight attendants. The plane was half-full, and as I watched some of the passengers board, I noticed most had problems finding their seats, and then with the assistance of the flight attendant, the dispute would get resolved.

The plane had a total of six rows of seats, three to each side. Following the instructions of the flight attendant and after putting my hand luggage in the cabin, I sat in the left row between two bearded men discussing their bosses, referring to them as the kindest and they being the most trusted employees. This discussion continued throughout the journey.

While sandwiched between the two and unwillingly listening to their stories, and still waiting for the flight to fully board, a group of five people attempted to attract my attention. Confused and lost, they could not find their seats. The problem got bigger when the flight attendant found them their seats, but they did not want to leave each other because they were one family, and their seats were not together. With the interference of other passengers the group finally agreed to sit separately, but during the entire flight, they were exchanging conversations.

After all passengers were finally seated, the flight attendant began showing passengers one by one how to knot their seat belts, and some passengers enjoyed that demonstration with mischievous smiles. After the doors of the plane were closed, the flight attendant started announcing the precautionary measures in both Arabic and English, but no one was listening. Her colleague reminded each passenger to switch off their phones but with no result at all.

Overall, the atmosphere on the plane was similar to a noisy classroom full of naughty students, and for a while I forgot that I was on an airplane. After a few minutes, the plane was ready to



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take off, and it started moving slowly on the runway. The passenger to my left was on a call to his family. The flight attendant warned him several times to switch off his phone, but he talked one by one to each member of his family whom he just left. After a little while, when the plane gained momentum, my right hand held the armrest of the seat firmly while my left fist was clenched with my eyes closed as we left the ground. I recited the verses from the Holy Quran and tried to go back to my childhood memories to keep myself calm and relaxed.

As the plane left the ground, the man on the call proudly conveyed the message to his family that he was talking to them from the air. With each upward move, my heart sank until the plane attained a maximum height, and then straightened out. After the plane's movement became straight and still, the passengers untied their seat belts. Some passengers preferred to rest, some talked amongst themselves, while others stared down at the wild landscapes as the plane was still in the Afghan territory. The neighbor to my right put his feet on his seat and had put a small piece of cloth on his face for a short nap; while the one to my left was checking his mobile signal to see if he could once again connect with his family. I preferred to take a short nap, however, not long after, the angry shouting of a passenger pulled me awake.

A thin, older passenger, who stood up from his seat, was screaming and complaining against discriminatory behavior by the crew. "What is going on in this plane?" "I have also paid for the ticket." "Why am I not served food and beverages the way others are served?" "This is discrimination..."

I understood the reason behind his anger, but he did not know that FlyDubai Airline did not serve passengers food or drinks unless they buy it. Being seated in front of me, I explained to him that the airline did not provide food or beverages for free during the flight; therefore, one has to buy their meal and pay on the spot. After hearing my explanation, he calmed down but still did not like the way the airline was dealing with their passengers.

I checked the screen in front of me, and less than an hour was left before our arrival. When I glanced at the other passengers, I found many of them busy talking while a few enjoyed being engaged with the flight attendants. Their faces were fresh, and they seemed happy and excited. I discovered, however, that these brief

happy and relaxing moments would soon be over after they get back to their work. In fact, behind each worker or laborer, there was a story.

They go for the hardest kind of jobs in the burning heat of Dubai. They stay there for years to earn money to pay off debts or feed extended families. Among them, a few looked very young and excited, but soon they would start missing their families and loved ones. They quickly realize the reality of Dubai, which is work, work, and more work. The delusive, tall, and fancy buildings were not for them because they have to sleep in a room shared with ten to twelve others. Sometimes, people living in the same room do not meet for months because of their varying shifts. Although all these facts had already been told to them by their senior fellows, their young minds did not accept them as facts until they see and face them. But those who had already experienced the hard life of years of working in Dubai had wrinkles and creases dominating their faces and foreheads looking much older than their real ages. Whether young or old, experienced or immature, their purpose for this journey was to work and send money back home from the day they arrive.

After approximately two and a half hours of flying, the plane started hovering over the city of Dubai. Lights indicated that the colorful nightlife seemed to be in full swing. Before we touched the ground when the flight attendant was about to give safety instructions to passengers, I saw some young men with their faces stuck to the window, eagerly looking through it. When the plane landed but not yet at a complete stop, most of the passengers stood up from their seats and started taking down their luggage from overhead. The flight attendant, who was stuck in the back, but wanted to go to the front area, was shouting and asking them to remain seated and allow her to pass. By then, I completely understood why she did not greet passengers with a smile. It was very difficult to smile under such circumstances.

After getting off the plane, most of the passengers entered Dubai while a few had transit flights. My next flight was scheduled to depart from Terminal 2, so Iqbal and I headed toward the terminal from where we would fly to Bishkek.

Before entering the terminal, the immigration officer checked our passports, reference visas, and tickets. The tall busy man who

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appeared to be Indian or Pakistani from his hard accent and physical features, told us to wait while he called somewhere and informed someone about our reference visas, passports, and ticket numbers. After about fifteen minutes, he received a call and allowed us to enter the waiting lounge.

For the first time, I saw a huge crowd of people belonging to different parts of the world. People there belonged to different ethnicities, religions, cultures, and countries. They were eating, drinking, shopping, talking, and walking around in the terminal. Some were tense, some excited, some updating their Facebook statuses, while others continuously checked the time for their flight and waited for their flight announcements.

Opposite of the large waiting lounge at one end of the terminal, I saw shops selling perfumes, chocolates, and dates, souvenirs, gifts, etc. These shops were crowded with people, a few of them buyers, many just hanging around killing time. On the other end of the terminal was a chain of fast-food restaurants selling sandwiches, burgers, pizzas, and Pakistani and Indian food. I chose to walk around the terminal and explore while Iqbal preferred to get some rest. I passed through the souvenir shops and peeked in for a quick look before going to the part where the fast-food cafes sat. People queued to get food from those cafes representing the big names in the fast-food world. I bought a burger from one and sat on a chair with a small table. I ate my burger in a hurry, not wanting to miss my connecting flight, and when I checked the time, I saw I still had an hour and a half left before it would be time to board again.

Before going back to the spot where Iqbal waited, I visited the most important place one should always look for anywhere. The toilets of the terminal were neat and clean, and despite being so crowded, the cleaners were continuously busy doing their job. Inside, I did not find any kind of abusive language, dirty poetry, porn-cartoons, or telephone numbers offering sex on the walls like in the public toilets in Kabul. After getting out from there, I noticed the same crowd of people moving like bees. Before going to the part of the terminal where we would get into the bus for the plane going to Bishkek, I decided to get some water from the refrigerators at the corner.

After approaching, a little man with a Charlie Chaplin-style

mustache and South Asian physical features was cleaning the floor and I talked to him in Urdu.

“How can I get some water out of the refrigerator?” I asked.

He looked at me and then demonstrated the entire process of how to get any cold drink out of it. Thus, I put two Dirham coins in the refrigerator that offered different types of soft drinks and pressed the code of the drink I wanted, I received a half liter of water. When I returned to Iqbal, he was holding the same half liter of water, which he bought for seven Dirhams from a nearby shop. I realized to my delight that my language skills helped me save money.

After the airport officials announced our flight, Iqbal and I queued up, and once again, the officials checked our documents and allowed us to board a big bus, which took us to the plane headed for Bishkek. We spent more than four hours in the air, and finally landed at Manas International Airport to much cheering and clapping of the Kyrgyz passengers.

The atmosphere at Manas airport was completely different from Dubai. When landing in Dubai, one can feel its liveliness and colorful life some hundreds of feet above the ground. But at Manas Airport, there was complete silence, darkness and severe cold with a temperature of  $-6^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

We did not line up with the other passengers, but instead we moved to the Consular Department’s window toward the left, where we needed to get our visas. The seat was empty, and I waited by the window. I saw in the queue where the last person disappeared after the customs officer stamped his passport. After some minutes of silence, the visa officer appeared. He looked rather harassed like I was solely responsible for disturbing him. He sat on his chair, and I slowly forwarded him our passports. He did not say anything, just took our reference visas, stamped our passports with a one month visa, and said “seventy dollars” in English. I paid the money, and we moved toward the customs officer, who comparatively was in a good mood because he pronounced the word “*student*” for us and let us in after I nodded my head. He stamped our passports with “*Entry*.” We got our luggage without any problem from the carousel and got out of the terminal, where we were surrounded by a number of persistent taxi drivers pulling our luggage. We did not understand a single word

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they were speaking.

Iqbal had already got the mobile number of Jawed—an Afghan colleague studying in the Politics and Security Group—whom he had already communicated with about our arrival. One of the taxi drivers who had taken hold of one of our bags handed over his mobile phone when Iqbal gestured that he needed a mobile to make a call. Jawed gave Iqbal the address of his apartment and warned him not to pay more than 700 som. The taxi driver was hopeful that we would ride in his taxi as we had called from his mobile. When Iqbal told the address to the taxi driver, he said “1000” in English while in reply Iqbal wrote “700” on his mobile and showed it to him. The taxi driver shook his head in a negative gesture and wrote back “1000.” After some minutes of negotiation through the mobile, the driver finally agreed on a sum of 800 som, and we set off in his car for Jawed’s apartment.

It was almost dawn when our car started moving toward Bishkek City. Although the snow had covered both sides of the road, the land looked agricultural. It was very cold, but inside the car, the heater was on. I was sleepy, and my eyes kept closing. Everything appeared no different than if we had been passing through a village in Afghanistan. So at that moment, I did not feel that I was out of my country. After forty minutes, the driver again called Jawed because we were already in that area. The driver found his building, it was a tall building probably six stories high, and Jawed, along with his friends, lived on the fifth floor. When we arrived it was very early in the morning, and all the others were sleeping except him. Jawed had a semester break and was doing his assignments. He told us to get some rest and went into the other room, saying we would talk at lunch.

After he left the room, his study table drew my attention. Books and notes were scattered on the table, revealing that he had been very busy with his studies. There were colorful sticky notes on the cupboard indicating various deadlines and reminders, which had me wondering that I should be ready for the Academy’s adventure.

We slept for a few hours, waking around noon. Besides Jawed, the other guys living in the apartment were Waheed, and Hashmi (Afghanistan), Rustam (Tajikistan), and Ruslan (Turkmenistan). Another resident, Azad had left for Kabul during his semester

## MUHAMMAD IDREES

break. In the Politics and Security class, there were five Afghans in total—four males and one female, Fatima. Hashmi prepared a delicious lunch for us, including *chay* and eggs together with tomatoes. The classes at the Academy were scheduled to begin in three days, so within that time we needed to find a place to live.

After eating, Jawed, Rustam, Iqbal, and I went out. Our first sights of the city were beautiful. The city was green, clean, and people of every variety were moving in a rush. Children and youth were prominent, and that picture is still preserved in my memory. Rustam helped us buy Kyrgyz sim cards. From there, we went to two real estate agencies to find an apartment for us. As a temporary solution, there was an apartment on a daily basis at 1500 som/night. It was located in the center of the city in a tall building away from the Academy. It was a modern apartment at a far distance from the Academy, with every facility. Until we could find a proper place, it served as a temporary solution.