

DOCUMENTARY

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4x52'



The Forgotten Empires

A focus on Central Asia

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4x52'

Directed by Karel Procop

Constance Films

Boyard Production

La Sept-ARTE

The Forgotten Empires

A focus on Central Asia

- 1** A visit of Central Asia's past starting in the ancient capital of the Tamburlaine Empire.
- 2** An evocation of Central Asia's environmental problems through a few examples of "ecological catastrophes " in Kazakhstan.
- 3** A look on the distribution of wealth in Kirgizstan, from a gigantic gold mine down to the North of Afghanistan, where Kirgiz nomads still live according to traditional customs.
- 4** An enquiry on the fundamentalist threat, from the Fergana Valley, down to Tajikistan.



1 A World of Oases

The Empire of Samarkand

The empires of Gengis Khan, of his successors and of Tamburlaine, which were among the largest Empires that history has ever known, were born and died in Central Asia.

Acting as a melting pot of civilisations and cultures, this fabulous past is at the outset of a cultural and artistic heritage still mysterious and unknown that has only just started to open itself to the rest of the world.

After being briefly explored at the turn of the century, Central Asia has remained unattainable



for decades. The collapse of the Soviet Union has erased the frontiers and the barriers, and the new independent republics are trying to get to grips with this non-Soviet past to ascertain their peculiarities and their own cultural past.

The Nomads of the Top of the World

3

The Empire of the Mountains

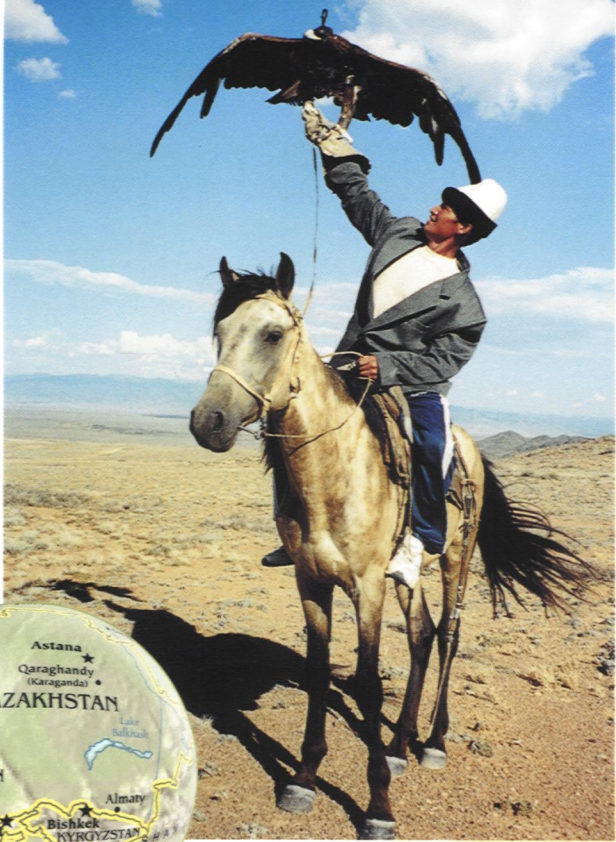
In the midst of snow covered mountains, huge machines slice a whole mountain to dig up several hundred tons of gold per year. Melted instantly, in a small but incredibly modern factory (a joint venture with a Canadian company), gold bars leave by night towards an unknown destination under heavy escort...

With a good job and a regular wage, the men that work there hardly complain. Just like in neighbouring Republics, the people living in the valleys do not always eat their fill.

The Kirgises have to adapt to unbelievably difficult conditions, after having survived in one of the most hostile environment in the world. What drives these men, women and children to live in a long-forgotten past?

Is it to ride their magnificent horses just like Kessel's "Horsemen", and to compete in boskatchis, an ancestral polo game during which the horsemen fiercely fight for a sheep's carcass ?

Or is it because this political no man's land, too high and too far to settle either a garrison or an administration, is the only place in Central Asia where one can truly live freely today?



The Soviet Union's Dump

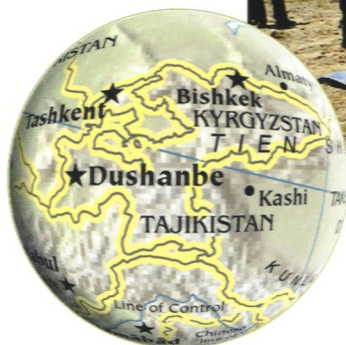
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The Empire of the Steppes

For decades, the Soviet Power has used the vast stretches of land in Central Asia for nuclear explosions, chemical and bacteriological weapons' experimentation fields, highly polluting industries, and the resettlement of undesirable populations.

Entire regions, especially in Northern Kazakhstan, have accumulated so much radiation and chemical pollution in the soil that the mortality rate, the illnesses, the genetic mutations, the physical deformations at birth, and the psychic deficiency have reached dramatic proportions unparalleled anywhere else in the world.

Newly independent Kazakhstan tries to deal with this heavy past by banking on the exploitation of its natural resources. But the ecological problems remaining, as the dramatic drying out of the Aral Sea point out, are still very worrying.



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4 The Stakes of Islam

The Perilous Valley

Populated by more than a hundred million inhabitants, the Fergana Valley, a fertile plain rich in gas deposits, is Central Asia's neuralgic centre. It is practically unknown to the western world even though a future regional conflict could arise there.

Though mostly Uzbek, its frontiers, imagined by the soviets to maintain the Union together, are winding and cross the neighbouring Republics of Kirgizstan and Tajikistan. A visit to the holy city of Och, in the Kirgiz end, used to replace the pilgrimage to Mecca in the Soviet days.

Even though Islam suffered a severe repression during the communist era, a spectacular rebirth is taking place, worrying neighbouring Russia and China, as the Imam of the Great Mosque of Kokand, the Great Mufti of Tachkent and the Uzbek vice minister of Religious Affairs told us.

Islamic fundamentalists, helped by foreign countries, mainly Afghanistan, have targeted the Fergana Valley for an "Islamic Republic" because of its wealth and its historical roots in Islam...



Credit photo: Karel Prokop

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