

Background Information

9 hours drive from Kabul, at the heart of the Hindu Kush, lies the valley of Bamiyan. It is surely one of the most beautiful of all Afghanistan. Moreover, its position and fertility led to the establishment of a trading post on the Silk Road almost 2000 years ago. It subsequently grew to become an important Buddhist centre with many monasteries and hundreds of monks. Around the 1st Century AD, a Central Asian nomadic tribe, the Kushans, established themselves in Afghanistan. Around the end of the 1st century AD their king was a man called Kanishka who adopted Mahayana Buddhism – which revered the Buddha as a man as much as a God. Previously Buddha had only been represented symbolically but under Kanishka the first images of Buddha the man appeared. The fusing of an Indian artistic style with that of the Greek-Bactrians led to the so-called ‘Graeco-Buddhic’ art – and the two great Buddhas of Bamiyan were examples of this.

On completion, the two tallest were 55metres (9m taller than the Statue of Liberty) and 38m high – an accomplishment that may have taken two hundred years to achieve. By the time of their first record in 400 AD by a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim they were covered in a mud and straw mixture to model the face, hands and robes. The large Buddha was painted red, the smaller blue. Both had hands and a face of gold. Alongside the Buddhas were excavated dozens of caves, in which lived monks and other devotees.

Islam had arrived in Bamiyan by the 10th Century but the Buddhas remained relatively unscathed, even after Genghis Khan in 1222 stormed the valley and, in response to the killing of his grandson, killed every living thing in the valley. This destruction marked the end of Bamiyan as a key trade point for centuries but when the area slowly repopulated it did so with an increasing mix of Mongol blood – and simultaneously added Shia Islam to the region’s religions.

The people of the area became known as Hazara – and the area (known as Hazarajat) remained independent of the Afghan state until 1893. It revolted against the Afghan communist government in 1978 but then came under Soviet control until struggling free in 1981. The area was stricken with internal division until the 1990 creation of the Hizb-e Wadhat party initially led by Abdul Ali Mazari and then, after his mysterious death at the hands of the Taliban, by Karim Khalili.

During the Taliban period, Bamiyan changed hands several times resulting in great destruction and civilian casualties. Worse, the Taliban blockaded the Shia Hazaras adding to the woes of the terrible drought. International attention turned back to Bamiyan and the Hazara when, in March 2001, Mullah Omah declared the Buddhas idolatrous and ordered them destroyed once and for all. Only rubble remains.