



# Illegal Alien

Sometimes it's just better to be direct about things, as John Oates finds out when faced with an immigration issue in Turkmenistan.

**J**ust what is the correct etiquette for bribing a police officer in Turkmenistan? Wary of adding further to my list of crimes I felt that subtlety was the key, so I wondered out loud whether the fine might be lower if it was paid 'out here' rather than in the police station. The officer just looked at me blankly.

Travel in Turkmenistan has never been particularly easy, but in recent years entry regulations have been tightened up further and it has become even more difficult to get into the country. To get the necessary paperwork, tourists are now allowed to stay only in expensive approved hotels, and are also required to fork out for a guide, car and driver. Naturally, as a backpacker on a limited budget, I wanted to see how far I could stretch the new rules. So after some investigation, I found a tourist agency willing to provide a letter of invitation as long as I booked accommodation for two nights through them. At first, this approach seemed to have worked. A representative of the travel agency met me at the border and helped me to negotiate the rather complex entry formalities. Once left to my own devices, I started hitch-hiking my way south. Whenever I was stopped at a checkpoint, I would explain that as I spoke some Russian I didn't need a guide. The guards, while suspicious, would eventually let me through.

I left the capital Ashgabat - which boasts the ultimate in Presidential egotism, a huge concrete tripod topped by a 12m

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tall golden statue that revolves so that it is always facing the sun - on the road to Merv, but had been warned that as it had more traffic than the desert routes, its checkpoints were also more efficient. I had laughed these concerns off in my best 'seasoned traveller' manner. What could they do to me now that I had a Turkmen visa stuck into my passport?

## Famous last words

What could they do? They could keep me for an hour in a hut beside the road, complete with what appeared to be a fresh bloodstain on the floor - rather a theatrical touch, I felt. They could deny having a telephone, even though one was on the desk in front of me. Then they could put me in a police car and headed back to Ashgabat. I was still treating the situation as mildly amusing at this point, unlike the poor Iranian man next to me in the car, who spoke neither Russian nor Turkmen and was baffled as to why he was being detained. It appeared that he did have the necessary registration stamp, but it was on his passport rather than on his visa.

As an officer led me from the car, he told me that I faced a fine of \$1000 - and if I didn't pay up I would be deported. My budget would be severely dented by the fine, and I was not entirely convinced that the money would make it into the state coffers. So I did something I had sworn never to do; for the first time in my life I tried to bribe someone. Unfortunately my attempt to do so subtly was a little too successful, and the officer appeared not to understand me at all.

The office in which I found myself was sparsely furnished - one large desk, a couple of filing cabinets and a 1970s-style orange telephone. Two uniformed men sat at the desk, and I soon realised that Turkmen bureaucrats had learnt a lot from their years under Soviet rule. Yes, of course I was allowed to use the telephone in their office. Unfortunately it could only make internal calls. There was a phone in another office which had an external line, but - sorry - they couldn't possibly permit me to use that one.

## In detention

I completed innumerable forms. I waited. It was mid-afternoon on a Saturday and I began to worry. I asked (in my dodgy Russian) to speak to the British consul. The officials understood me, but my request was turned down. I waited. In the end I was reduced to standing in the middle of the room and repeating my request over and over in a loud voice. Irritated, they threatened to throw me into a cell until Monday.

When I was finally allowed to make a call, I didn't call the consul - after all, I had broken Turkmen law and imagined that I would get short shrift. Instead, I called the travel agency who had arranged my letter of invitation. Although it was the weekend, the staff showed up en masse. I felt like a naughty schoolboy whose parents had been called in to see the headmaster, but the staff actually seemed to enjoy the challenge.

There was a lot of arguing and waving around of paper, with passages of Turkmen law quoted to back up each side's position. Much to my relief (not to mention surprise) we emerged victorious. I was free to go, with my wallet unharassed. I even got a grudging apology from the senior official, although I'm sure I detected a cackle as he delivered his parting shot: 'If we catch you without a guide again, we will deport you. And you will not be allowed to return to Turkmenistan...for three years!'