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Fry Pan Cooking in the Pamirs

Okay. I confess. This is about as good as it gets for a meal in my two-room apartment in Khorog, heart of the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan. Not so long ago, I was a typical stay-at-home homeschooling mom, never realizing how easy life was for my first 55 years. Having entered the world of disaster response on the wings of a divorce, my first trip outside North America was to post-quake Haiti (what Haitians can do with goat!). Now Tajikistan.

But I've only been cooking out here for two months . . . and it is a major challenge on a bitty budget. Cooking appliances feature a plug-in electric burner (which doesn't like to work up much of a heat) and a hot pot. My pots & pans collection consists of one frying pan, one soup pot, and (of course) two tea pots – one for tea and the other for *sher choi* (pronounced “sheer choy”). This salted milk-tea is the mainstay of the Pamiri diet. Not of mine, but I can survive on it in a pinch (without the yak-butter, please!)

Water is a challenge. Collected in assorted containers daily, it flows weakly through two faucets over a two-hour period starting around 5:30am. The evening flow usually doesn't produce enough to count. On a good day 5-10 gallons. Sometimes several days with no water. You learn to gather every precious drop, using and reusing as much as possible. The first drop of the morning, hitting the dregs in the container, served as my most dependable alarm clock. But my favorite kitchen improvisation is my hatchet can opener. What a stress buster! And it works faster, better, and almost safer than anything else I've tried out here. Forget safe. It's not in the Pamiri vocabulary.

A typical meal starts with *salat* which is usually sliced tomatoes and cucumbers topped with fresh herbs. Next course is soup, hopefully followed by meat, cheese, more spectacular fresh veggies, and *non*. This iconic Tajik bread worms its way into every meal and is often baked by the women of the house every day. I baked one once in my frying pan. The photo shows a chocolate cake baking in the same pan. It's amazing what you can make in a frying pan when you have no other options. Tajiks have quite a sweet tooth. Desert is usually a platter of candy & cookies. I usually devise an escape at that point.

The whole meal is served in a steady stream of courses on the *dasturhon* spread on the floor and surrounded by cushions for comfort. Nope. Delete "comfort". These 62-year-old knees refuse to be comforted while grazing the floor. But, on the bright side, I'm usually the one sprinting between kitchen and *dasturhon* all meal long. Tradition to my rescue!

I think there's good news in there somewhere . . .

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