

GATES OF HELL

WONDERS

THE LOCALS CALL IT THE GATES OF HELL. AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO GET TOO CLOSE TO SEE WHY.

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY CHRIS WRIGHT





Deep in the Karakum desert in Turkmenistan, hours away from the nearest town Ashgabat, is a flaming crater that has been burning for maybe half a century. At night you can see the glow for miles, and up close, it's truly, beautifully diabolical. Flames lick upwards from vents in the rock in a crater 300 metres around. It's like looking at burning barbecue coals on an epic scale, and when you get downwind of it and the shimmer of intense heated air comes your way, it is like being microwaved: a vast, consuming heat, a cooking stove bigger than a baseball diamond. It is the Gates of Hell.

Back when Turkmenistan was part of the Soviet Union, experimental drills

were conducted all over this desert, seeking to tap into the region's bountiful stores of natural gas.

Then one day - locals say it was May 19, 1959, but the exact date is a matter of some dispute - a drilling rig collapsed into a hidden chasm; its engineers had unknowingly set up their rig on the roof of a huge underground cavern. As the roof went in, taking the drill equipment with it, a massive crater was formed - and from it seeped the nose-wrinkling scent of methane. The astonished engineers and geologists reasoned it was better to burn off the gas rather than let it pour out unignited and risk an explosion. They decided to set it alight.

"They thought it would burn out in one or two days," says one local. "Then they would be able to drill some more or

just leave it." More than 50 years later, it's still burning.

The flames have outlasted the Soviet Union: Turkmenistan achieved independence in 1991. They outlasted the president Saparmurat Nyyazow, who renamed himself Turkmenbashi (Head of Turkmen) and stamped his image all over the nation in gold statues, towering monuments and a cult personality to rival Mao. He died in December 2006. The flames still burn on.

FAMOUS CRATERS

The flaming gas crater is one of three craters in the area: one is filled with salty water and another with bubbling, sulphurous mud, although they appear to be natural rather than man-made. They have all become curious tourist

attractions - there are few more exotic locations than camping under the stars next to leaping flames. It's tempting to dangle a lamb kebab over the side and let nature do the cooking.

But learning more about the crater and how it came about is difficult. Turkmenistan does not welcome journalists and my guide and driver declined to be named or photographed. Local people who have assisted foreign journalists have been imprisoned in the past. In fact, Turkmenistan is the only country in the world where the author of the local Lonely Planet guide has insisted on anonymity, to protect the locals who helped with the research. In addition, there is no point in looking for local townspeople who might remember anything about the early days of



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the inferno, because there is no longer a local town.

There used to be: it was called Darvaza, or “gateway”, named after the crater itself. A small town existed there, sustaining itself on the natural gas that poured from the ground in such quantities that it didn’t even need to be drilled for. There is so much gas under Turkmenistan that it is free to locals: their only cost is the matches to light it.

But in 2004, Turkmenbashi Nyязow saw Darvaza - some say he visited in person, others that he viewed it from the air - and didn’t like what he

saw. The town was tatty, ramshackle; it didn’t fit his vision of a golden age for the country.

“In 2004 there was a law that all families should leave this place,” says my guide. “The government said they wanted to close it. That is all.”

Why? “He thought there were no jobs for the people, and it will be better for them to get out from this township and move to the cities and try to find work there. Therefore he says it is not necessary to be here if there are no jobs.”

It’s an odd claim, as those who recall the town say it was self-sufficient.

“Families were traditional people, using natural gas; they cooked, they weaved their carpets,” says one. “I heard the president demolished it because he didn’t like the way it looked from the air.”

Nyязow ordered the town razed, and its mainly Uzbek citizens resettled elsewhere. Today, all that remains of the town of Darvaza is the steel skeleton of a drilling rig on a hillside. Unlike Turkmenistan’s marble-spattered cities, there is a sense of decay out here in the desert. A way down the road there is a town called Airport, but it doesn’t

have an airport. That closed after sulphur and agricultural production left the area. A village or two clings on in the desert. It’s a desolate place.

FIERY FUTURE

It’s clear that the drillers set fire to a massive seam of methane. How much gas has been wasted, and how much more might follow, is anybody’s guess. It might not last much longer. Locals say the government plans to put out the fire, either by sealing the crater, dousing it or drilling another bore to tap the flow. In mid-2010, Gurbanguly



With a name like Gates of Hell, you’d expect locals to avoid the crater like the plague and for it to be steeped in superstition and tales - but they don’t seem to have raised their interest levels enough for that. They just leave it alone to burn, only driving there if nutcase tourists insist.

Berdimuhamedow, Nyязow’s successor, was reported to have ordered the crater to be filled in.

If that happens, it will be something of a shame, for Turkmenistan excels in oddities. It is the home of a huge sulphurous underwater lake; of some of the world’s most outstanding dinosaur prints (the country wanted to name the culprit *Turkmenosaurus*); and of a leader so ostentatious he topped his city’s main monument with a gold statue of himself that revolved to follow the sun.

Locals find it odd that foreigners would get on a plane to see this gap-

ing inferno that rose from an accident so many years ago. But, in small numbers, they do, chartering guides to drive them three long hours into the desert from Ashgabat.

“It is one of the unique things of Turkmenistan,” says my guide reminiscently as we breakfast on bread dipped in lamb fat, boiled on a campfire quite possibly lit from the very Gates of Hell. “It will be sad if it goes.”

While the government ponders how to end it, the crater blazes still; jutting pieces of steel at one edge, severed and bent. It looks like the earth is on fire. ■