Memorable missives
Traversing cultures in contemporary Central Asia

“Change is the new norm,” you write, in Central Asia. Are these countries reinventing themselves?
It’s more like re-reinvention. Before the Soviet era, there were no national borders. Your identity was defined by religion, family, clan, and place. The Soviets feared such muddled loyalties could breed Islamic, social, or political movements. In the 1920s, they sliced and diced the region into Soviet Socialist Republics. Essentially, they constructed nationalities, giving each a defined territory, along with a ready-made history, language, culture, and ethnic profile. These artificial borders remain today. People woke up in 1991 to learn that they now lived in an independent country. Since then, these countries have struggled to create a national identity separate from the Soviet past.

What culture shock did you undergo in Stanland?
The most profound was the attitudes of people who had lived most of their lives in the Soviet era. The ideology and institutions that had held them together for 75 years suddenly disappeared, and there was nothing to replace them. There was a huge brain drain as skilled people—engineers, doctors, teachers, artists—left for Russia or Germany. I write about the desperation of the mid-1990s when the economy was in freefall and people cursed a future that seemed to offer nothing.

You also write about working with journalists in Central Asia.
Official censorship is gone, and government-owned media have a diminishing audience share. The private media sector is growing. But it would be a mistake to label these newspapers, radio, and TV stations and online news sites as “independent.” Few can support themselves through advertising, and many are financed by corporations with close ties to political interests. Network TV licenses are awarded to the family or business associates of government figures. Media that criticize the powers that be face indirect pressures to drop or tone down a story. Journalists have been attacked and their families threatened, and they find no recourse from an often corrupt judiciary. The result is widespread self-censorship.

You taught as a Fulbright scholar in 1996-97 at Kyrgyz National University in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and at Eurasian National University in Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2011. What did you notice?
Academic achievement at state universities is usually measured by the number of hours students spend in class, not by what they learn—“long hours in cold classrooms,” as one colleague put it. Teachers are paid by the classroom hour, so have little incentive to change the system. Many teach the way they were taught in the Soviet era—from behind the lectern, delivering material to be regurgitated on exams. If students ask questions, it is to clarify something the teacher has said; the material itself is rarely under discussion. There have been technical changes, such as the adoption of a credit-hour system, but overall change comes slowly. At some universities, corruption—the buying of admission, grades, and diplomas—and systemic cheating have devalued education. It’s hard to blame teachers for taking bribes because their pay is pitifully low.

You revel in writing details. Osh, the second largest city in Kyrgyzstan, has no telephone directory. People cannot buy milk at bazaars without bringing containers. At a nightclub without heat, patrons danced in overcoats, boots, and fur hats. You’re still a reporter, huh?
Yes, that’s what I love doing best, and that’s how I began my career in the UK in the 1970s.