

# "STAN" SANDWICH

YURTS, YAK MILK AND PROGRESS IN KYRGYZSTAN

"Ryan's main driver, Schumacher, is a character that one could write a book about." Headed up to the ski hill in Karakol in Schumacher's UAZ World War II rig.





"At the end of the first day of touring, we got this view of golden evening light dancing across parallel ridges to the west. At that moment, I decided I had to capture a skier in that frame on a future day. I waited until the last day for us to finally have good light again, and the result is exactly what I'd hoped for." Izzy Lynch cruises her way down to the yurt where hot drinks and snacks await.



"The easily accessible terrain from the yurt is vast. The story of the whole week was sun, snow, clouds, avalanches and endless crystalline powder."

Words: Anthony Bonello Photo: Nicolas Teichrob

The skin track up to the high ridge of Alpay Tur—a rugged 11,000-foot peak in the middle of the Tien Shan Mountains of Eastern Kyrgyzstan—is checkered with fresh slides that have peeled off convex rolls to both the left and right. Looking farther south, the peaks continue to climb, topping out at 17,000 feet. To the north, the Kungey Ala-Too Range, delineating the edge of the arable land in the valley, is a sea of summits. Guided by an unseen horseman, a pony silently drags a pile of straw across a white field, muted by the frigid cold that holds the land and people in a brace. Reaching a slight col we are presented with a goliath north face wracked with numerous unskied lines. To the east, a broad spine catches a slivered shard of sunlight beckoning to be skied, and as Izzy Lynch drops in, her contrails billow behind, basking indifferently in the sun. It is a first descent—and feeble progress in terms of the region's potential. But it is progress nonetheless.

Right page, top row, left to right:  
 "Kyrgyz culture is an eclectic mix of traditions and foods from China, Mongolia, Russia, Turkey and the neighboring 'stans'.  
 "An unknown spice."  
 "This woman sold fresh fish along the shores of Lake Issyk Kul. It was one of the safer moments of the journey, due to the fact that we were out of the vehicle."

Middle row, left to right:  
 Another normal day at the market.  
 "Beans and peppers ready for sale at the market in Bishkek—notice the 'eco-friendly' packaging."  
 "Just about every animal part conceivable was sold at the market in Bishkek. Lamb's head, even when smiling, is a Kyrgyz delicacy."

Bottom row, left to right:  
 "Kyrgyzstan is home to the second-largest saline lake in the world, Lake Issyk Kul (the Caspian Sea is the largest). At 115 miles long, the lake hosts a large number of endemic fish species, many of which are endangered due to over-fishing. These fish will soon make their way to dinner plates across the region."  
 "Garlic is a staple in many dishes throughout the world, and Kyrgyzstan is no different." Fresh garlic in Bishkek.

It is day one of our seven-day trip to a yurt run by Ryan Koupal, a Colorado native with a master's degree in Chinese Moshui Hua, or "ink water painting." Koupal spent three winters exploring Central Asia before realizing the potential to develop winter-based ecotourism in Kyrgyzstan. Landlocked by China to the east and other "stans" everywhere else—Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west and separated from Afghanistan by Tajikistan to the south—the former Soviet country's total area is over 90 percent mountainous, with only 7 percent cultivated. It also recently experienced a bloody revolution. But despite its recent turmoil and Communist past, Kyrgyzstan is also home to one of the most successful—and locally beneficial—ecotourism programs in the world. Known as Community Based Tourism (CBT), the industry supports a wide network of rural families through simple homestays and ecotours. Its operating season, however, extends for only four summer months. By applying the same strategy through the winter, Koupal and his company 40 Tribes Backcountry are expanding opportunities for local people to generate income year-round.

Upon landing in the capital Bishkek, our group—Rossland's Mike Hopkins, photographer Nicolas Teichrob, Revelstoke *femmes fortes* Leah Evans and Izzy Lynch, and our intrepid mountain guide and bard of exotic ski adventures Ptor Spriceniaks—are greeted by temperatures reaching -13 Fahrenheit, making regular stops for a bowl of Russian borscht a necessity. Colloquially referred to as the Paris of Central Asia, the city lives up to the moniker with grand architecture, albeit of the Soviet variety, moated by large squares and public thoroughfares. Mercedes and BMWs crouch low beneath a perma-fog that traps the city under an icy inversion. Wandering the streets we stand out, not because of our bright Gore-Tex colors, but because we are devoid of fur, unlike the chic parade of tall leather boots, fitted woolen overcoats, silk scarves and big fur hats.

Our experience so far stands in contrast to what we might have anticipated from a predominantly Muslim country that recently saw a violent revolution. In the spring of 2010, protests over increased heating costs and media censorship ousted the president and left 88 dead and another thousand injured.

More aligned with our expectations of open markets, traditional head scarves and worn utilitarian jackets, a visit to the Osh Bazaar offers an agrarian vantage to the city where sheep heads, braided intestines and any number of other offals are available. Before long, we are offered a steaming cup of salty yak-milk tea by a group of rotund women, each sporting a rack of gold teeth. Despite the promise of warming our bellies amidst the still-freezing temperatures, the tea proves too rank for anyone to finish. What does offer warmth, though, are the wide smiles and laughter as we falter, and the pride people have when we declare we are enjoying their country so far.

A Marshrutka—or large Russian minibus—arrives early the third day with a hulk of a fellow behind the wheel to deliver us to Karakol where we will join Koupal and make our way into the mountains. The driver's name is supposed to be Sergei, but he doesn't respond to it. Nor does he respond to our requests to slow down. Only the week before, a group of Americans—clients of 40 Tribes—traveling the same route were in a serious accident where one person sustained spinal injuries and had to be duct-taped to a splitboard. It took all the logistic skills Koupal gained managing Where There Be Dragon tours—youth trips to developing nations he led during his 20s—to evacuate the group to appropriate health care in Dubai.

As the sun rises, we barrel along open roads, clearing the mist and damp cold of the city before the landscape gives way to stark, brown foothills and an azure sky. After a truck-stop meal of dumplings filled with shards of bone, we navigate a pass that feeds us onto the northern bank of Lake Issyk Kul, the second-largest alpine lake in the world and a former stopover for traders from the Far East and Europe traveling the Silk Road. During Medieval times the lake level was some 25 feet lower, and archeological evidence has suggested the existence of a thriving ancient metropolis that now lies submerged. Issyk Kul also has a darker legacy: It's thought to be the point of origin for the Black Death that plagued Europe and Asia in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Intermittently we pass through windswept villages demarcated by decrepit Soviet factories, atrophied by the elements and neglect—a hangover from the Soviet Union collapse of the late '80s that also effectively collapsed the Kyrgyz economy. Once a popular destination whose numerous hot spring resorts scattered around the lakeshore attracted Soviet tourists, many communities are yet to recover and hold little opportunity for work.

Karakol, the fourth-largest city in Kyrgyzstan, reveals itself as more of a large rural town, with wide streets and—gratefully—a milder climate. A pastel palette of Russian Lada automobiles replace European models, but the fashion of fur remains intact. Shortly after arriving at our hostel, we meet our latest driver, Schumacher, a grease-stained bundle of carnage who proudly shows us his two left ski boots. He arrives in a khaki green UAZ—a former Soviet military bus dripping both texture and character—and agrees to escort us the 15 miles up to the Karakol Ski Resort.

The highest ski resort in Central Asia, with what may also be the longest double chair in the world that ferries skiers up to 10,000 feet, affords sublime views of the lake. We pass the day skiing powder and conversing with various Russian and Kazakh skiers between laps. Ranging a long way from home, a supremely stoked Muscovite named Michael justifies his trip in a thick Russian accent: "This is my third time to Karakol. The freeriding is perfect and it's very cheap." I toast the sentiment with a sip from a flask of potent vodka that materializes from another's pocket.



"On our first full day ski touring in Kyrgyzstan we passed many recent natural avalanches along the way. This slope was one of the first bigger slopes we stepped onto, and we treaded lightly. Izzy Lynch made effortless turns with massive mountains extending as far as the eye could see."





This page, top to bottom, left to right:  
 "Wise man and counsellor, Bakai was an advisor to the hero of the Manas, a legendary epic tale. Behind him is a residential building, one of Bishkek's distinct remnants from the communist era of the USSR."  
 "En route to Karakol, these kids were having a blast riding their steeds down the road. Smiles for miles."  
 "This woman was selling fresh apples, and like many, she wasn't fazed by our cameras and entourage. Just another day at the market."  
 "While cruising one of the markets in Karakol, Izzy Lynch stumbled across this music room. Floor to ceiling, wall to wall, DVDs and CDs filled it with awesome symmetry, and induced a solo dance party for Izzy."

Right page, top to bottom:  
 "Our hosts in Ichke-Jergez had three wonderful daughters, each with warm smiles and curious minds. The youngest takes her turn trying out some skis on the slippery snow."  
 "The night before heading to the yurt, we stayed with a family in the tiny village of Ichke-Jergez. Their hospitality was second to none, and the young girls were keen to see us off in the morning with all our foreign equipment."  
 Graffiti in the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek.  
 "Our arrival to Bishkek was timed with one of the coldest times in years (-13 Fahrenheit) and the city was blanketed in a cleansing cover of snow."

WITH SCHUMACHER CHANTING "left, left," while grinning like a carnie at an amusement park ride, we drive farther east, away from the lake. We make a right turn and bounce up the road toward Ichke-Jergez, a rural village a one-hour UAZ ride from Karakol. We pass clusters of women wearing head scarves, long knitted shawls and thin shoes padding along the snowy shoulder. Farther along, Schumacher parts a herd of horses occupying the road as we near the village, and a group of children waylay us as they toboggan down the icy ruts in the road in front of the UAZ. We halt, and the snow-covered youngsters laugh hysterically when Hopkins takes a run and flings himself along the makeshift luge track. Wet and covered in snow, we continue on. Besides these brief encounters, the village is quiet; the lack of commerce eerily obvious.

Koupal had arranged for our group to spend the night with a Kyrgyz family. Such homestays are part of Koupal's commitment to seeing profits reach the communities to which he takes his clients. A quaint compound with haystacks litters the field behind the house. Crunching through the snow each morning, our host Nurbek feeds a few woolly horses and a handful of sheep and goats while his wife Aijarkyn milks a cow into a bucket. Inside, warm by the stove and with copious amounts of tea and pilaf for dinner, Nurbek expresses how the few foreigners that visit their home are a welcome supplement to their summer farming subsistence. In the back room their three young daughters play with Evans and Lynch, laughing as they have a disco party with our headlamps. A withering grandmother wrapped in blankets and a head scarf presides over the scene before everyone retires to sleep under the heavy weight of felted blankets. In a country where the average monthly salary in 2008 was approximately \$120 US per month, Koupal's contribution to the community is very tangible. While Kazakhstan to the north has a thriving economy thanks to rich deposits of oil and gas, Kyrgyzstan is reliant upon hydropower, agriculture, wool and the occasional gold mine. Rural villagers see little return on exports—mostly controlled by large companies—and thus often rely on farming and increasingly the return of tourism to scrape out a living.

Horses arrive first thing the next morning and are soon laden with duffel bags. We tour from the farm up a snowy road, navigating frozen manure and a deep trench gouged by horses dragging logs from the forest. The road snakes through low angled fields, before branching off to climb another 1,500 feet into a wide but subtle valley forested with Shrenks spruce and Serbian fir. Given away by a lazy plume of woodsmoke rising from its summit, the yurt sits at a hair over 9,000 feet, hidden among a stand of trees on a slight ridge.

Moving into Koupal's world, he seems anxious in the same way one hopes a new boyfriend or girlfriend might approve of a special picnic in the woods, and he is obviously relieved when we are more than impressed. His yurt is situated in the heart of the Terskey Ala-Too Range and the potential is boundless. In Kyrgyz "terskey" means "dark" or "shaded," but to us it translates to north-facing powder, and this is what Koupal is especially keen to share.



"The snow in Kyrgyzstan was blower powder nearly everywhere we went. Here, at one of our highest destinations, Mike Hopkins lays into a turn while hoping the whole slope doesn't fracture under his feet."



"Stoked to have made it to the yurt after a few hours of touring up from the home-stay, Mike, Izzy and Leah get settled into their new home."



Eighteen feet in diameter and made from felted sheep's wool hung over a pointed wooden frame, Koupal's yurt is a backcountry oasis. A wood fire, its chimney piercing the roof's apex, greets us upon entering. To the left is a simple kitchen with two gas burners, some pots and a spice rack. A chest sits behind the fire and acts as the table where dried fruits, nuts, chocolate, blueberry tea and an assortment of other meals are eaten. Nearly as important, it also doubles as a Yahtzee board in the evenings. Mattresses and more blankets wrap 270 degrees around the back wall, and we sleep with our feet toward the fire like the spokes of a wheel. Skins and boot liners hang like stalactites from the ribs of the yurt. Inside is dark to the point you can't see your own hand—ideal for deep, refreshing sleep.

While it is the first traditional yurt that we have been inside, it isn't the first yurt we have encountered. Typically only used in the summer or for special occasions such as weddings or funerals, wandering the village below we come across a funeral procession marching toward a tan-colored yurt, erected near the gate of another farmhouse for the somber occasion. Two adolescent boys stand by the door, admitting men wrapped in sheepskin jackets and traditional felted hats that stand high and proud above their largely Mongolian complexions. Approaching, they shuffle along the frozen road hunched by their loads, but also by the cold and bodies worn from the rigors of working the land in the summer.

Venturing forth from our happier and higher yurt with Ptor in the lead, the first two days are challenging. The thin continental snowpack we had been told to expect is thinner—and sketchier—than we might have imagined. Avalanche debris litters the runouts of every aspect, and we break through the top layer on every turn. We pick off some lower-angle lines that offer fewer hazards, such as "Have Some Tea," a 1,500-foot, northwest-facing alpine shot. It is one of Koupal's favorite runs and offers a view of the imposing northeast face of the Alpay Tur, with the Yahtzee Couloir running from top to bottom. It is high on his list for us to try.

Avalanche conditions worsen with warming temperatures, and after a loud "whumpf" that triggers three baseball-diamond-sized slides on three different aspects, we find ourselves boxed in at the bottom of a cirque. It is not an ideal situation, and Ptor guides us via skin track and bootpack to the rocky spine where we dropped in. We decide to tuck our tails between our legs and retire to the yurt to evaluate our options.

For Kasidin and Anarbek—Koupal's two local staff—who cook, chop wood, melt snow and manage the yurt in Koupal's absence, 40 Tribes Backcountry is a rare opportunity to work during the winter. In the summer they both have benefited from the growing tourism industry, working with the Issyk Kul Guides and Porters Association leading trekking and climbing trips, and in the past Kasidin worked as an instructor at the Karakol Ski Resort. But this, he says, is a better job. "Ryan is a really cool guy, and I get to powder ski." Most mornings they join us for the first run of the day with their hoots cut short only by the tumbles they take as they ski back to the yurt.

The trees close to the yurt offer low-angle turns for the next days as we leave the higher terrain to settle. It is mellow, but the cadence of our days is bliss. Koupal and Ptor are cut from the

same cloth and abide by the mantra "eat, ski, sleep." Kasidin and Anarbek rise early to start the fire and prepare tea and breakfast while we snooze. Touring during the day we average 3,500 feet, finding short, steep shots in ideally spaced trees that protect yet more powder. In the evenings we collapse inside the yurt, stuffed full with a dinner of *laghman*, Central Asian spaghetti, or *kuurdak*, chicken and potatoes. As the week wears on, the creases around Koupal's piercing blue eyes continue to deepen from grinning. He is in his element and progressively we join him there—despite the difficult avalanche conditions.

While we may sleep easily under the yurt's leather roof, challenges to making this concept a reality came with the territory. "Trying to explain that we wanted to live in a yurt, in winter, and ski was something the local authorities just couldn't understand," Koupal says. "It is something that isn't structured into their law. After three years, we have finally arranged a proper permit with the forestry department."

Even the annual task of building the yurt is a saga in its own right. With a population of approximately 5,000 people, Koupal admits he still doesn't know everybody in Ichke Jergez. Many Kyrgyz graze animals in the mountains during the summer and cut firewood throughout the winter, making it potentially unsafe to leave the yurt unattended. "We have had to be super creative about getting set up," Koupal informs us. "We can't build the yurt in fall and let it sit until the snow. Instead we have to do it in December. The first year we used a caravan of horses over a few days. This year we hired a tractor from Kazakhstan. It was a total junk show, but we got it all up here in the end."

BY THE FINAL MORNING, the snow is still cold and light and conditions have settled. As the horses return to collect our gear, we turn our attention to the northeast face of the Alpay Tur and Yahtzee Couloir. The light is in and out and Evans and Lynch drop in, capitalizing on the short window that closes before they reach the valley bottom. Hopkins picks off a long, broad finger to skier's right that reaches down, clutching at the valley below and skis much longer than its 2,000 feet of relief. It concludes our week of exploring the Tien Shan in much the same way we began it—with a first descent. We christen the run "Zero on One," in tribute to the Yahtzee Couloir and the games we shared in the yurt. Begrudgingly, we turn our backs on innumerable more lines we would dearly like to ski but no longer have time to reach.

Sliding away from the yurt along the road towards the village, the mountains that dominate in every direction turn pastel pink in the waning sunlight. The week's ambient sounds of shuffling skis or the crackling of the woodstove are replaced by children playing and sputtering cars. Behind us, our tracks are still visible and link our experience in the mountains to the generous hospitality and warm smiles that we encountered in the villages and city. Since arriving, we have come to understand how the local people endure the cold winter and make the most of limited opportunity. But with the area's abounding potential and Koupal's dream, progress—both for the people and for the skiing—comes with each new descent. ¶