

# KYRGYZSTAN

WORDS Anthony Bonello IMAGES Nicolas Teichrob



**T**HE SKIN TRACK up to the high ridge of Alpay Tur – a rugged 3,400 metre peak in the middle of the Tien Shan Mountains of eastern Kyrgyzstan – is checkered with fresh avalanches that have peeled off convex rolls to both the left and right. Looking further south the peaks continue to climb, topping out at 5,000 metres. To the north the Kungey Ala-Too Range that delineates the edge of the arable land in the valley is a sea of summits. In the valley below a pony guided by an unseen horseman silently drags a pile of straw across a field, muted white by a frigid cold. As we continue climbing, we reach a slight col that presents a goliath north face wracked with numerous unskied lines. To the east, a broad spine catches a sliver of sunlight, almost beckoning us over to ski. As Izzy Lynch drops in, her contrails billow behind, floating gently in the sun before

settling. It's a first descent – feeble progress in terms of the obvious potential, but progress nonetheless.

Joined by photographer Nicolas Teichrob along with Izzy Lynch, Leah Evans and Mike Hopkins from British Columbia's powder choked Kooteney region, we've been lured here by the opportunity to spend a week in a backcountry yurt – a traditional Kyrgyz nomadic tent – and ski in a country that is 80 percent mountains, many of them unseen let alone skied on by foreigners like us.

When I invited Leah a few months prior, she paused and said she'd call me back. Five minutes after that, the phone rang to confirm she'd indeed like to go skiing. "I just had to look at the map," she explained. The topography must have made an impression. Landlocked by China to the east, Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west and separated from Afghanistan by Tajikistan in the south, Kyrgyzstan represents a part of the world – Central Asia

– that none of us had any idea about, much less the country itself.

Landing in the capital Bishkek, the minus 25 degrees Celsius temperature immediately makes regular stops for a bowl of delicious Russian borscht part of our routine. Mercedes and BMWs crouch low beneath a perma-fog, trapping the city under an icy pallor. Colloquially referred to as the Paris of Central Asia, the city lives up to the moniker with grand architecture – albeit of the Soviet variety – replete with large squares and crisscrossed with wide public thoroughfares. Wandering the streets we stand out – not because of our bright Gore-Tex colors, but because unlike the chic population parading along the sidewalks dressed in tall leather boots, fitted woolen overcoats, silk scarves and big fur hats, we are completely devoid of animal skin haberdashery.

Our immediate impression is in contrast to our notions of what a predominantly



From left to right: Leah Evans, Ryan Koupal, Izzy Lynch, Mike Hopkins and Ptor Spricnicks

violent revolution, were. In the spring of 2010, protests over increased heating costs and media censorship ousted the president and left 88 dead and more than 1,000 injured. A visit to the Osh Bazaar offers the agrarian aspect to the city we expected. Sheep heads, braided intestines and a range of other unsavory looking by-products are available to shoppers. We're offered a steaming cup of salty yak milk tea by a group of rotund women each sporting a rack of gold teeth. Despite its belly warming promise, the tea

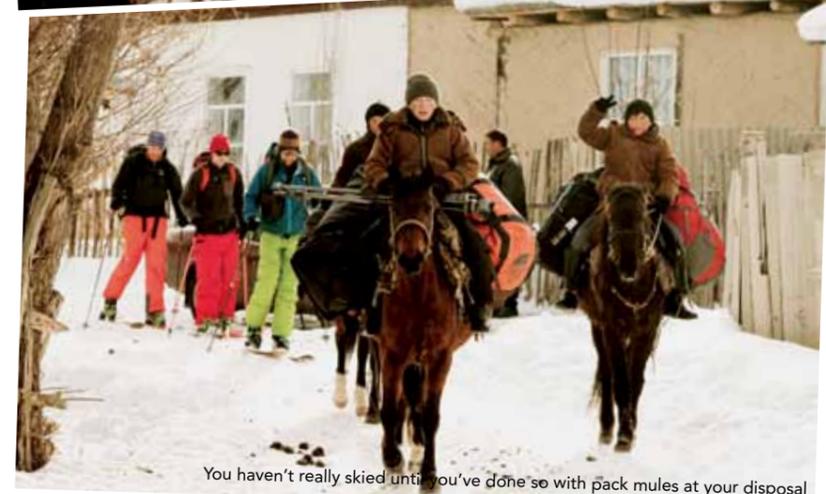
proves too rank for anyone to finish.

A large Marshrutka van arrives early on the third day to deliver us to Karakol where we will join Ryan Koupal, a Colorado native with a master's degree in Chinese Moshui Hua, or "ink water painting", who spent three winters exploring Central Asia before realising the potential to develop winter based tourism in Kyrgyzstan. A hulk of a fellow, our 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 travelling the same route was in a serious road accident, with one person's injuries requiring he be duct-taped to a snowboard, for lack of a proper spinal board.

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 chards of bone, we navigate a pass onto the northern bank of Lake Issyk Kul, the second largest alpine lake in the world and a stopover for traders from the Far East and Europe traveling the Silk Route. During Medieval times, the lake level was seven-and-a-half metres lower and archeological evidence suggests the existence of a once-thriving ancient metropolis now lies submerged beneath it. Issyk Kul is also thought to be the origin of the Black Death that plagued Europe and Asia during the 14th 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 in the late 80s, which effectively sent the Kyrgyz economy into a tailspin. Once a popular destination with numerous hot spring resorts scattered around the lake's shore that attracted Soviet tourists, many communities now hold little opportunity for work let alone commerce.



You haven't really skied until you've done so with pack mules at your disposal

“WE MAKE OUR WAY UP A SNOWY ROAD NAVIGATING FROZEN MANURE AND A DEEP TRENCH GOUGED BY HORSES DRAGGING LOGS FROM THE FOREST.”



Leah catches some afternoon sun

Karakol, the fourth largest centre in Kyrgyzstan, reveals itself as a large rural town with wide streets and gratefully, a milder climate. A pastel palette of Russian Lada automobiles replaces European models, but the fashion for fur remains intact. Shortly after arriving at our hostel we encounter Schumacher for the first time, 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 in texture and character – and agrees to collect us first thing the next morning and escort us the 20 kilometres up to the Karakol Ski Resort.

The resort is the highest in Central Asia with what may also be the longest double chair in the world. It ferries skiers up to 3,050 metres and affords a sublime view 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 Moscow skier named Alex justifies his trip, commenting 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 materialises from the pocket of a Kazakh standing nearby.

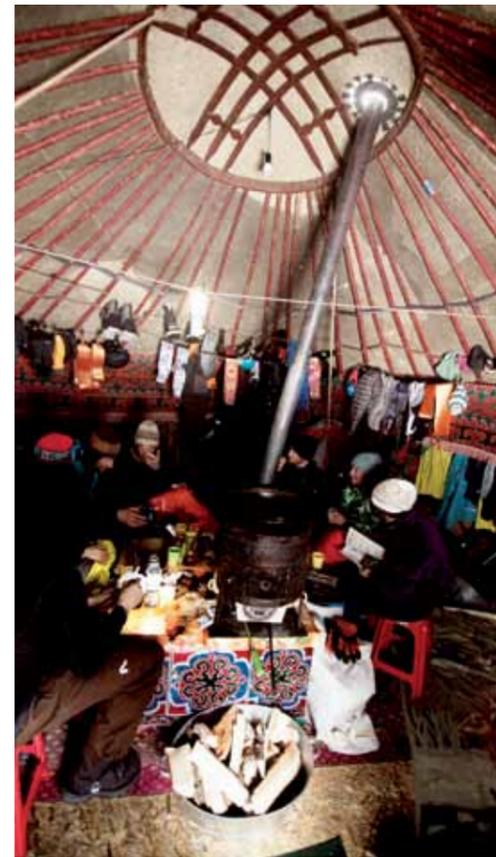
We depart for Ichke-Jergez, a rural village a one-hour UAZ ride with Schumacher behind the wheel chanting, "Left, left," while grinning maniacally. Koupal has arranged for us to spend the night with a Kyrgyz family complete with the ubiquitous chickens, cows and, in a novel twist to the of-the-beaten-track routine, a dark

outhouse way down a chilly garden track. The homestay is part of Koupal's commitment to seeing profits reach the communities he takes groups through. Our hosts Nurbek and his wife Aijarkyn serve copious amounts of tea and pilaf for dinner while their three young girls play with Leah and Izzy. A withered grandmother wrapped in blankets and a headscarf presides over the scene until everyone retires to sleep under utterly delightful handmade traditional felted blankets.

Horses arrive first thing next morning and are loaded up with our duffel bags. We make our way 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 500 metres into a wide valley forested with Shrenks Spruce and Serbian Fir. Our destination, a yurt sitting a hair over 2,700 metres is hidden amongst a stand of trees on a slight ridge, a lazy plume of smoke rising from its tyunduk.

Moving into Ryan's world, he seems anxious as a boy taking his new girlfriend for a special picnic in the woods. The sense of relief is obvious on his face when we express our supreme delight in being there. Situated in the heart of the Terskey Ala-Too Range, the potential for adventure is instantly recognised as being seemingly boundless. In Kyrgyz, *terskey* means dark or shaded, but to us it translates as 'north facing powder' and this is what Koupal is especially keen for us to understand.

Venturing forth with our guide Ptor





Mike finds his own way

Spriceniaks in the lead, the first two days are challenging. The thin continental snowpack we've been told to expect is thinner than we imagined. It's a foot of fine, preserved powder suspended on two feet of sugary, faceted crystals. Avalanche debris litters the runoff of every aspect and the skiing itself is difficult whenever we break through the top layer – which is frequent. We pick off some lower angle lines that offer fewer hazards such as "Have Some Tea", a 500-metre northwest facing alpine shot. It's one of Koupal's favourite runs and offers a view of the imposing northeast face of the Alpay Tur, with the Yahtzee Couloir running from top to bottom. It's high on his list for us to try.

Conditions worsen with warming temperatures and after loud "whumpfs" that announce three football field-sized pockets to avalanche on three different aspects, we find ourselves boxed in at the bottom of a cirque. It is not an ideal situation. Ptor offers a voice of reason and threads a short skin track to the ridge before bootpacking the rocky spine arcing us around to where we dropped in. We decide to tuck our tails between our legs and retire to the yurt to evaluate our options.

The yurt is 18 feet in diameter and made from felted sheep's wool hung over a wooden frame that converges to a point. A wood-fire chimney that pierces the roof's apex greets us when entering and to the left is a utilitarian kitchen; 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. It also doubles as a Yahtzee board later in the evenings. Mattresses and more blankets wrap 270 degrees around the back wall, and we sleep

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Mike and Izzy charm a local



with our feet towards 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. Its homely comfort rewards us with six nights of deep, refreshing sleep.

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 – Koupal's local staff – rise early to start the fire and prepare tea and breakfast while we snooze. Ski touring during the day, we average 1,200 metres, 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, a sort of Central Asian spaghetti, or kuurdak, a dish of chicken and potatoes. Meanwhile, the creases around Koupal's piercing blue eyes continue to deepen as he grins with pride at our total enjoyment of this backcountry nirvana. He's in his element and progressively we join him there despite our uneasiness about avalanches.

The snow is still cold and light at the end of our week and things have finally started to settle. We turn our attention to the northeast face of the Alpay Tur, hoping to ski the Yahtzee Couloir. The light is in and out so Leah and Izzy drop in, capitalising on the short windows that invariably close in before they reach the valley bottom. It seems to ski much longer than its 600 metres. Mike skis a broad long finger that reaches towards the valley below. It's a first descent and a fitting grand finale.

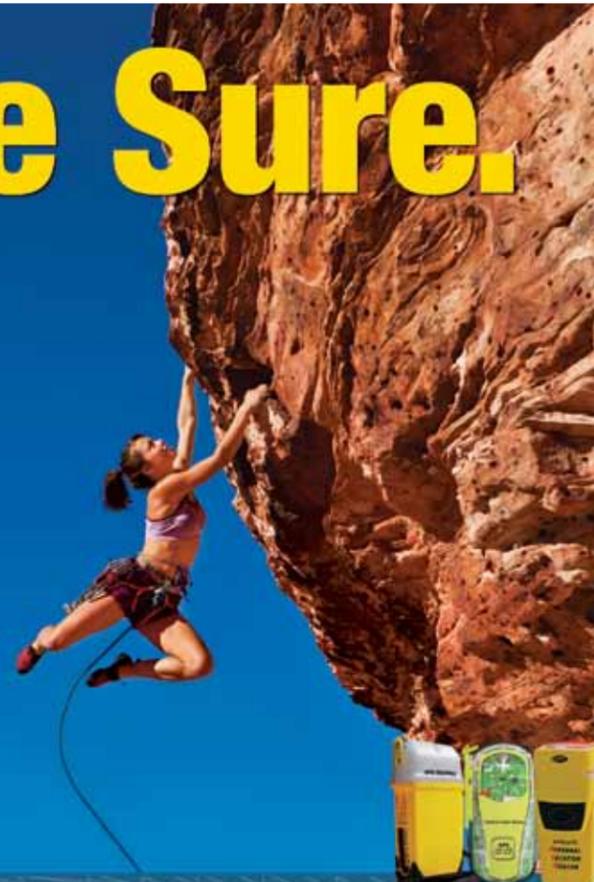
Sliding out the road towards the village, the mountains that dominate the vista in every direction turn pastel pink in the waning sunlight. The week's ambient sounds of shuffling skis or the crackling of the wood-stove are replaced by children playing and spluttering cars. Behind us, our ski tracks are still visible and link our experience skiing in the mountains to the generous hospitality and warm smiles we encountered in the villages and city. Since arriving we have come to understand how to face the cold winter and make the most of a beautiful destination despite challenging access. The answer has been in front of us the whole journey... smile warmly.

# Be Safe, Be Sure.

Carry a registered **406 MHz Distress Beacon** if you are venturing into remote areas.

**Remember the following points:**

- ▶ Leave details of your trek with family and friends.
- ▶ A registered 406 MHz GPS equipped distress beacon enables a faster response in an emergency.
- ▶ Distress beacons should only be used in life-threatening situations.
- ▶ In the event of an emergency, you should first signal other people in your area using radios or other methods of attracting attention.
- ▶ Mobile phones can be used but don't rely on them, they may be out of range, have limited battery power, or become water-damaged.



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