



Riders at 40 Tribe's 2015 Splitfest get far out in front of the K ng y Ala-Too Range on the Kyrgyz border with Kazakhstan. **Ryan Koupal**

The Edges of Earth

Ryan Koupal's 40 Tribes offers Asia's most exotic yurt trips

by Eliza Lockhart

Wake up, drink coffee, eat breakfast, climb outside to ski—it's a classic yurt-trip experience. But instead of emerging into Colorado's snow-covered aspens or British Columbia's blanketed conifers, you awake in a high-mountain pasture where 12,000-foot peaks surround the yurt's traditional woolen-felt cover. It is the farthest out, most exotic yurt-based ski setting imaginable—and that is exactly what Ryan Koupal set out to create in Kyrgyzstan seven years ago.

Koupal—who lives outside of Boulder, Colorado—first visited Central Asia in 1999, staying along the Karakoram Highway near the China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border. The wild, untouched region immediately intrigued him, but it wasn't until 2004 that he began guiding

high-school and college students in that part of the world for the cultural education program Where There Be Dragons. As he led trips in China and Tibet and later organized tours as a program director, Koupal became hooked on Central Asia.

By the time he visited Kyrgyzstan in 2008, he had decided to build his own operation. So he mixed his previous work at Where There Be Dragons with his longtime passion for splitboarding and founded 40 Tribes in 2010.

That name comes from a Kyrgyz epic poem that recounts the story of Manas, a national hero who united the area's original 40 tribes to defend the land against invading Chinese. Eventually, those tribes became the Kyrgyz people. And today, people of the region have

We planned to go to Tavan Bogd (14,350 ft.) in the Altai Mountains. Initially we thought we could do self-supported trips, but you can't. You can't just rent a horse; the horses come with Mongolians. You are always a part of their program. And you always feel sheepish because you are traveling with more gear than most people own. —Ralph Kristopher



big impact on Koupal's operation. "From the beginning it has been a goal of ours to highlight Kyrgyz culture and the hospitality that is associated with it," he says. "One thing I've learned about the Kyrgyz people—in particular, the guys that we're working with—is that they will never give up. If something needs to get done, they will figure out a way to do it."

That mindset helped Koupal through his first year in business, as he dealt with issues like a political coup and hauling a yurt into the Kyrgyz Mountains using Soviet-era trucks, horses, sledges and manpower.

It's not just the mountain yurts that are remote; the whole experience is. Clients fly to Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, and drive six and a half hours to the village of Ichke-Jergez, located in northeastern Kyrgyzstan. There, they stay with a village family before skinning four miles to the yurts. "We have a lot of clients who say that they have never felt so off the map," Koupal says. "You have Kazakhstan to your north and huge, 20,000-plus-foot peaks to your east. You feel like you're at the edge of the earth."

Being the world's farthest country from an ocean, Kyrgyzstan has an extreme continental snowpack. Luckily for Koupal, the 40 Tribes base camp sits above Lake Issyk-Kul, the world's second largest alpine lake, which offers plentiful lake-effect snowfall. "It's very interesting to ski; that's part of the lure of skiing there," explains Ptor Spriceniaks, a lead ski guide with 40 Tribes. "I've skied everywhere,

but this is the closest you can get to skiing on liquid, because it's so bottomless."

Koupal employs two families during the season, as well as their primary local partner, Kasidin Munaev, who currently works at the yurt camp. Koupal plans to someday promote Munaev to tail guide. "He's a super strong skier and comes out touring with us every day," he says. "We are hoping he will be able to fill a tail-guide [and], through further education, a lead-guide role. He has the potential to become Kyrgyzstan's best back-country ski guide."

Koupal is also looking to help the village on a larger level. "We're potentially working with a U.S. development agency...to get a snow-culture center established," he says. "It would provide avalanche and mountain weather-related forecasting in our zone to benefit the different operations that are over there."

In addition to weather forecasting, Koupal is busy growing 40 Tribes beyond Kyrgyzstan. He began taking clients to Svalbard, Norway two years ago and, last winter, to Georgia on the Europe-Asia border. This upcoming season, he'll expand into Kamchatka in far-eastern Russia.

But even as Koupal develops 40 Tribes in new areas, Kyrgyzstan has left its mark since his first trip to the region. And between the bottomless powder and wild, untrammelled peaks, he plans to continue returning to the Kyrgyz highlands. ■

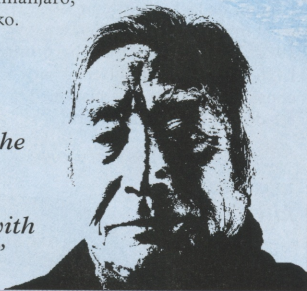
Legend

YUICHIRO MIURA

The Man Who Skied Down Everest

In May 1970, Yuichiro Miura slid, skied and tumbled 4,200 feet down Mt. Everest's Lhotse Face, becoming the first person to ski on Everest and the first to ever carve turns above 26,000 feet. His Asia-focused and global feats extend beyond his Everest descent captured in an Oscar-winning film, too—he claimed the first descent of Japan's Mt. Fuji (12,388 ft.) in 1966 and Antarctica's Vinson Massif (16,050 ft.) in 1983, plus descents of Seven Summits Elbrus, Kilimanjaro, Denali and Kosciuszko.

"Greater than the satisfaction of winning in competition is the joy of forgetting yourself and becoming one with the mountains."



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SEVEN SUMMITS

Mt. Everest's Lhotse Face

Indian Himalaya

Davo Karničar is the first and only person to have skied from Everest's summit to base camp. The most skiable part of the route? The sometimes-repeated Lhotse Face, a 40- to 50-degree, 3,700-foot headwall between Camps IV and II.

GO BIG

Five Holy Peaks

Altai Mountains, Mongolia

In 2002, an all-female, U.S.-based team skied the Five Holy Peaks—Huiten, Naran, Ulgii, Burget and Nairamdal—in a region where hunters first strapped on skis more than 5,000 years ago.

OUT THERE

Valleys of Gulmarg

Indian Himalaya

India's best-known resort boasts Asia's highest and longest gondola, which offers speedy access to Gulmarg's plentiful 12,000-foot alpine peaks and exotic forested and monkey-filled valleys. adventureconsultants.com

TOUR ON

Ganalsky Range

Kamchatka, Russia

The far-eastern Kamchatka Peninsula remained inaccessible to foreign visitors until 1991 and offers some of Russia's most remote mountainous terrain, with a string of snow-slated, active volcanoes topping 15,000 feet. 40tribesbackcountry.com