

You're going where?!



BETWEEN THE PEAKS AND PLAINS

We're off to Kyrgyzstan, the 'Switzerland of Central Asia', for wild road trips, camping in a remote yurt and sniffing out lines in an old military helicopter – just another typically eccentric Fall-Line adventure

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When you undertake a trip to an unfamiliar place, you can be sure it'll be an adventure. "Do you guys have good insurance?" asks our host Ryan Koupal, as he greets us at the yurt, our base camp for the next three days. "We are in the middle of nowhere and there aren't any rescue helis in Kyrgyzstan. So if you hurt yourself skiing, it'll take us a good few hours before you're in a hospital. And if it's something serious, you definitely don't wanna stay in that hospital." At least he's honest.

We had noticed that we were in 'wild' Kyrgyzstan without any help from Ryan. Earlier today, me and my fellow ski mates, Felix Wiemers and Matthi Egger, and photographer Roman Lachner, had met our minibus driver, Isa, who'd taken us from the capital Bishkek in the north to the town of Karakol in the east – a six-hour journey via snaking roads peppered with huge potholes. Crash barriers? Not here. Police control? Yes. To uphold traffic rules? No. Let's just say it was an exciting journey...

From the road we saw dilapidated, Soviet-era apartment blocks and simple, self-built houses. Stalls lined the road selling home-made dumplings, buckthorn juice in recycled bottles, and cigarettes. Wild horses, dogs and sheep were everywhere. Then they were all gone – and all we were left with were vast plains framed by massive mountain ranges. More than 80% of Kyrgyzstan is mountainous – hence the country's nickname of 'the Switzerland of Central Asia'.

The yurt we're staying in, called Jalpak Tash,



A yurt with a view

lies at 2700m between one such plain and the 4-5000m-high peaks of the Terskey Alatau range. It's run by Ryan and his crew, and is accessed via a 6km skin-track that doubles as a hunting path for locals who track wolves in the spruce forests.

As we sit in a circle around the oven in the centre of the yurt, we're stoked to soon test out the Kyrgyzstani powder. 'Silky smooth' would best describe it, according to Ptor Spriceniaks, the mysterious Canadian who, through his radical first descents, can be counted among the world's best ski mountaineers – and who

Ryan presents to us as our 'lead guide'.

Over the next few days we find some big lines, which are do-able in semi-safe conditions and good weather, in the vicinity of the yurt. Most of them have never been touched by a freerider before; in fact Ryan and Ptor are probably the first to look for lines here, and therefore have several more first descents ticked off and named during our stay.

One afternoon, as we hike back to the yurt, we hear a dull 'woomph'. "That was interesting," comments Matthi. Just how unstable the snowpack is becomes clear the ►

following day, when Matthi triggers a small avalanche on an average-pitched face. Time to head for the woods... We find nice spots with mini-shreds, pillows and tree-bonks. And we're joined by Kas and Anarbeck, a pair of local boys from Karakol, who are our cooks and are living with us in the yurt. The boys earn their bragging rights together with their ancient equipment, backflips and spread eagles over mini-kickers, landing their tricks again and again – always with huge smiles.

Day four and we're heading back to Karakol. In the village of Ichke-Jergez, 1800m below the yurt – our minibus pick-up point – we get our first experience of the friendliness and curiosity of the Kyrgyz. Several families come out from their houses, greeting us with smiles and handshakes. "Salam!". We make small talk. If doesn't matter that they can't speak English – you can talk without understanding the language. We also get to show them our nonexistent horse-riding skills, which they all think is very amusing – especially when Felix involuntarily takes a long ride to the river (the horse is obviously thirsty).

Isa arrives and we head to Karakol. We're meeting Mathias Andrä, from Snowxplore, who was one of the first guys to offer heli-skiing in

Kyrgyzstan. Apparently there is an old military helicopter here, which you can rent for heli-skiing. And it's free for tomorrow. Why not? Though we can't expect the conditions to be any better than the places we've found on skins from the yurt, because many of the big vertical lines will likely be dangerous. But we're hopeful we'll get some nice 'soul runs'. And the helicopter flight alone will be an adventure.

That we are right about. The flight is from a military checkpoint in Karakol. There are derelict buildings with red stars everywhere, remnants from the Soviets. The crew consists of four Kyrgyzstani military: two control men, one sitting on a wooden bench pushing buttons and one who is a mechanic. To repair what? Oh well, at least our mission is peaceful, we think, as we clamber onboard. And the soul runs? Those we get. Endless long and 'silky-smooth' lines.

Back at the hotel we check the weather on the Internet. The outlook hasn't changed: another sunny day followed by a bad weather front coming from the west. The plan is to spend tomorrow at Karakol ski resort, and then take the minibus back west; the bad weather front that's heading here will have already passed

there, leaving behind plenty of fresh.

At the ski area there are beautiful peaks with great-looking north faces. There are several T-bars and rope lifts, but we opt for hiking instead. Before we've even reached the line we're aiming for there's a massive 'woomph' noise, and we spot partial cracks around 100m away from us. OK, back into the woods... We while away the afternoon hitting up a small kicker and sessioning a few cliffs.

The next morning we're heading west in the car with Isa. Our destination, Suusamyр Tal – a resort south-west of Bishkek. We've already contacted the owner of the lift and a local mountain guide, and they've told us that there are great lines to be had and that the snowpack is pretty deep. But they've also told us that the avalanche chances are pretty high. The snow isn't stable and there are massive wind fractures.

There's absolutely no snow before the tunnel to Suusamyр, leaving us doubting the weather report, but after travelling through the tunnel everything's good again: a huge plain with peaks rising up around it, and on the side of the road lies fresh Kyrgyzstan powder. Stoked!

The next morning we're out early. We head to the lines and small features that we'd spotted



Heli-skiing Soviet-style



“ The soul runs?
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long and ‘silky smooth’
lines... ”





directly from the mountain pass. Off we go! We eventually get used to the loud 'woomphs' as our motivation to hit up the great lines grows (we're sticking to the safe, low-pitched faces).

At one point I spot a nice cliff. I cut an OK line to the lower third, but as I take my second turn the slide from my first takes me everywhere but where I intended to go. F@*k, that's not right! I grab myself and my skis, which I ejected out of, and head round to the boys.

The spot where I landed is directly in front of the tunnel, where a jam has formed. The tunnel's blocked; no one has any idea why, or for how long, a local says. Perhaps some sheep are being herded through... Meanwhile 100

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Kyrgyz are on the street waiting, playing cards, smoking, drinking, chatting. Many of them saw our photo shoot, and my fall. "Nice," they say, "Where are you from...? How much are your skis...? How fast do you ski?"

Hmm, that last one is a good question... up to 100km/h sometimes; as fast as Isa drives later that day – past a speed camera. We're pulled over. Isa climbs out and gesticulates wildly for a few minutes, negotiating with the police officer, before climbing back in without having to pay a penalty.

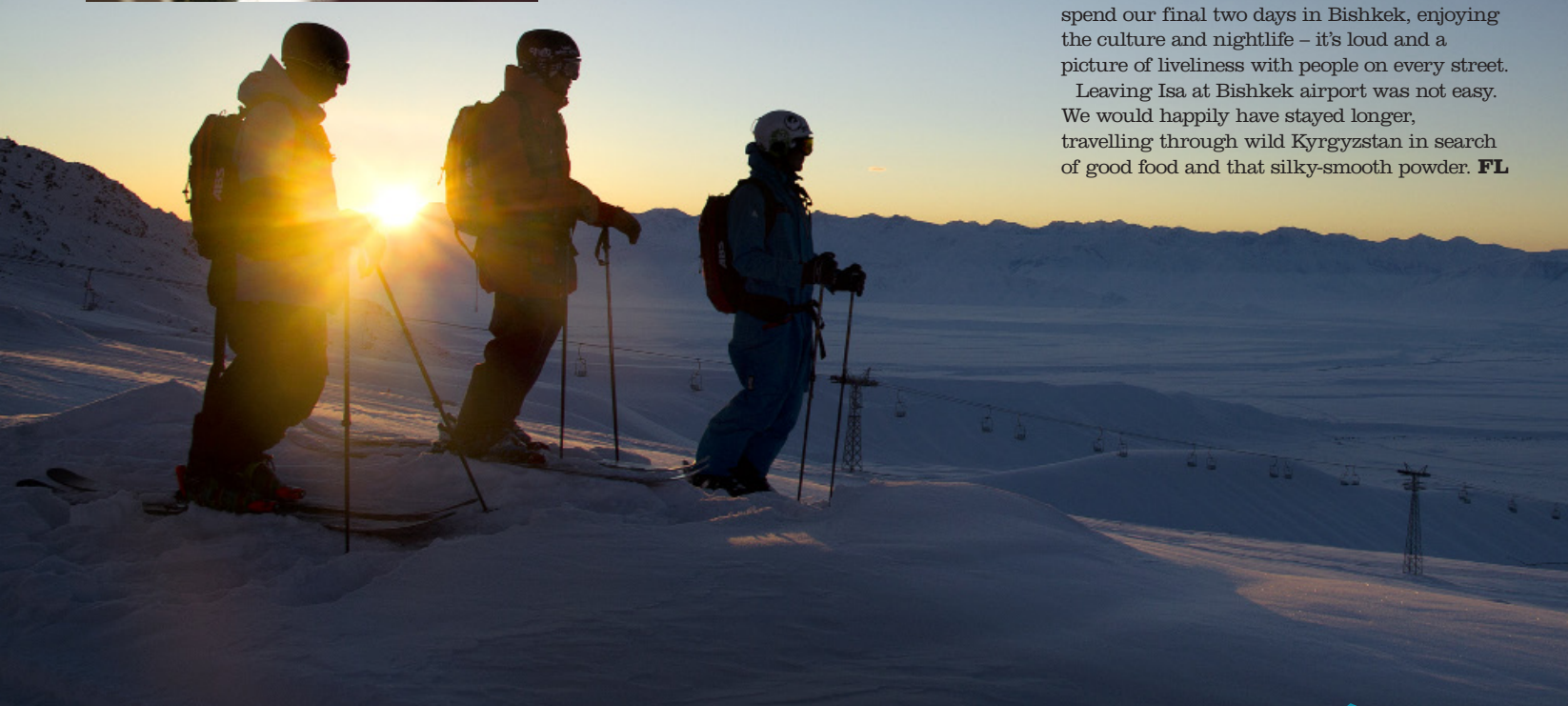
"What did you say Isa?" we ask.

"I said, 'I'm an old man and I'm very, very hungry, and wanted to get to the next restaurant quickly,'" he explains with a smile.

And soon we get to a restaurant and Isa gets his food! Isa always manages to find the tiniest villages with small eateries, where 500 Kyrgyzstan Som (about £6) will get you soup, salad, fresh bread, a main course (meat or meat), and either chai tea, beer or vodka.

The continuing bad weather meant we had to spend our final two days in Bishkek, enjoying the culture and nightlife – it's loud and a picture of liveliness with people on every street.

Leaving Isa at Bishkek airport was not easy. We would happily have stayed longer, travelling through wild Kyrgyzstan in search of good food and that silky-smooth powder. **FL**



ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO

Kyrgyzstan has a similar season to the Alps, beginning in November and lasting until April.

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to Bishkek international airport. There are no direct flights from the UK, but with a change in Istanbul you can get there in around nine hours. Visas are not required by British citizens.

WHERE TO STAY

The Jalpak Tash yurt, located in the Terskey Alatau mountain range, is run by Ryan Koupal and his company 40 Tribes. Four nights' full-board costs US\$1,500 per person, including private transfers between Bishkek and Karakol (where you'll meet your guides) and four days' guided skiing. The rest of our trip, including minibus transfers and hotel accommodation in Karakol, was

organised by Ak-Sai Travel.

- www.40tribesbackcountry.com
- www.ak-sai.com

SKIING

For heli-skiing trips contact Mathias Andrä at Snowxplore (prices for group/private tours on request). A one-day ski pass at Karakol costs 650 Kyrgyzstani Som (£6.50). For info on skiing at Suusamyrtal contact Snowxplore.

- www.snowxplore.de
- www.karakol-ski.kg
- www.cbtkyrgyzstan.kg
- www.kyrgyzstan.embassyhomepage.com



