

# Skiing the Silk Road

Words by Pete Sandston



Two years ago, four friends of ours returned from a successful ski trip through Iran and Kashmir. At the time the whole concept of it had seemed crazy. It had been too dangerous, too different, too overtly reckless to even go there, let alone ski there. However their safe return, the snow and the pure adventure of their trip changed it all for us. The media had assured us that these places were dangerous; otherworlds, best left alone. And yet our friends brought back only stories of kind strangers willing to take in hungry skiers with a smile.

Suddenly, an entire planet of skiable opportunities lay in front of us.

Add a dash of romanticism, a good helping of bravado and two years' salary and Skiing the Silk Road was born. Following in the footsteps of Marco Polo, we would begin our trip in Beijing. We would then travel overland to Venice, Italy, and ski in every country along the way. At the beginning it sounded like another good yarn, or just a fantasy – and it was. But it also inspired just the right emotions in ten of our closest friends to make it a reality. We had a yearning for adventure, and a desire to conquer our fear of the unknown.

From then on a monumental organisational effort ensued; work place internet limits were tested, emails piled up and long-term deposits became, well, shorter term. Icebreaker and Kingswood got behind us with skis and clothes, and finally, in mid-December, we found ourselves in Auckland Airport, nervous but ready to fly to the Land of the Dragon.

Our first ski destination was in the farthest reaches of North Western China, in a place we knew only as Altai. We didn't know how to get there or where we would stay. Basically we had seen a

YouTube video of some guys who had gone up to Altai to ski with the local villagers who, so the legend goes, were the first ever skiers. We were looking for the birthplace of skiing. A combination of language barriers and circumstance led the Chinese Government to think that we were some kind of NZ ski team – which we weren't. But playing along, we found ourselves with a VIP escort to some of the most remote parts of NW China to find the fabled first skiers.

What we found was an incredibly beautiful mountain culture that extends back thousands of years, to a time when skiing was in its purest form. Skiing began as a means of transport through deep snow, for hunting, commerce (and fun), in places where people were otherwise hard-pressed to survive. The skis themselves are truly awesome. A tree is cut by hand into a raw plank, the tip is bent upwards in a fire, holes are burnt for leather laces to create bindings and finally an animal skin is fixed to the base. Make two and there you have a pair of the world's first skis. Paintings of these have been dated back 10,000 years, possibly predating their European equivalents by up to 3,000 years. We also saw traditional games of goat-carcass polo, hilariously competitive cross-country races and rode on horse-drawn sleighs on Christmas day.

By early January, Altai had given us a cultural experience we scarcely could have dreamed of. We had found the birthplace of skiing and for a brief moment had been a part of it. We were there in the early season however, and the powder for which we searched was still to arrive. Skiing groomers at the local ski fields could only hold us for so long. It was time for the Stans.

Goliath Kazakhstan was first on our list. After setting up camp in ex-soviet apartment blocks, we set out for Chimbulak and Akbulak ski resorts. It soon became clear that we were going to have to keep looking for that powder though, with barely enough snow cover to keep Chimbulak open and



not much more at Akbulak. It was still early season. Then, thanks to a ski-patroller at Akbulak, we found some out-of-bounds tree runs that had smooth snow running to the valley floor and short pillow-lines curving through the trees. In true contradictory Soviet style, this was shortly after having been strictly ordered never to cross the boundary rope by the other patrollers. Such were the cultural extremes of Kazakhstan: one minute a drunken policeman wants your passport, the next you're being invited in for homemade jam by the kindly villagers.

Kyrgyzstan was to prove quite a different story. Booking and pre-paying activities for ten people on a four-month ski trip through thirteen countries is a risky business. However, the anticipation of staying in a Kyrgyz yurt and ski touring in their remote mountains was worth the gamble. The yurt operation is called 40-Tribes Backcountry and was setup by Ryan Koupal, an American who was taken in by the majesty of the Kyrgyz Mountains, the incredible snow and the awesome Kyrgyz people.

40-Tribes is set up in cooperation with the people of Ichke-Jergez, the small village at the base of the mountains. The villagers keep the operation running by bringing horse-drawn sleighs of firewood, food and supplies up to the yurt, and in return they earn a much needed income through the winter months. Ryan does what he loves, and we, the skiers, are obliged to find and ski as much untracked powder as we possibly can. This time we struck gold. Although the snow was on the slower, heavier side, it was deep and smooth. For the whole week we found ourselves with blue-skies, beautiful mountains and endless expanses of consistent, picture perfect backcountry skiing.

For some of us it was our first true backcountry touring experience, and it added a whole new dimension to our skiing. What you lose in chairlifts, you gain three-fold in the pure adventure and independence of ski-touring. The self-sufficiency, the blank canvas, the adrenaline of fear, the exhilaration of standing at the top; these are the things that make touring worth it.

Our next stop was a smaller ski-touring operation, in a small alpine village called Arslanbob in remote southern Kyrgyzstan. The setup is run by a local guy, Hayat, who is one of those truly remarkable people that you may only meet a handful of times in your life. In a village that suffers from poverty and 85% unemployment in winter, Hayat saw an opportunity to bring income to the village through skiing. With help from a development initiative called Community-Based Tourism (CBT), he created a ski-touring organisation. He organised donations of rudimentary ski-gear from afar and taught himself to ski without having ever ridden a chairlift.

Above: Altai China – Traditional game of Ulak Tartysh PHOTO: CHARLIE NORTH  
 Opposite page top: Altai China – Old vs New PHOTO: MADELEINE MARTIN  
 Opposite page left: Nick Beggs, powder day PHOTO: BLAIR SMITH  
 Opposite page right: Waiting out the storm PHOTO: NICK BEGG



Arslanbob is home to the world's largest walnut forest, and the spacing and structure of these trees makes for an almost endless playground for skiers. There are cliff-drops and ladder-like pillow-lines, steep narrow runs and gentle slopes all rolling through the trees. The snow we found was deep, soft and forgiving enough to try whatever we wanted. Higher up, ski-touring into the alpine bowls above the village opened up magical terrain, with chutes and cliffs leading out onto steep, wide open faces. This brilliant skiing was made even more satisfying when set against Hayat's deeply moving background, in this village that so keenly needs a success story. When we came to leave, a week in Arslanbob had not been enough.

Across the border to Uzbekistan, life was different again. Its rigorous police checkpoints were in stark contrast to the impromptu authority of Kyrgyzstan, and we quickly learnt that filming policemen was not allowed. The big names here are Chimgan and Beldersay resorts, although the word 'resort' is a little misleading as they are tiny. For the locals, skiing in Uzbekistan is more a backdrop for boozy mountain mayhem than a serious outdoor pursuit. Chimgan was a mish-mash of homebuilt snowmobiles, Chinese quad-bikes, horses and Ladas in the hands of drunken Uzbek sightseers, with us skiing through the middle. You carry your skis on the rickety chairlift, and you're best not to inspect the quality of the welds. However, once you drop away from the local hilarity the mountain is all yours, along with the snow. Oh; the snow. We got lucky, with two feet of light and dry coming down all around us, and for three days we put track after track down untouched slopes with snow exploding out from under our skis.

Then as we approached late February, our time in the Stans came to an end. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were each unforgettable experiences in their own different way, but the Silk Road still beckoned. We were headed West; some to Iran, some to Georgia.

We entered Iran under headlines of threatened Israeli airstrikes, the EU announcing full scale oil embargos and the US Navy steaming through the Strait of Hormuz. However from the moment we arrived to the moment we left, we found ourselves amongst some of the nicest, most open-minded

*"the Chinese Government decided that we were in fact the NZ ski team (we're not)"*

Above left: Kanas China – A young skier on Kazakh skis PHOTO: BLAIR SMITH  
 Above right: Arslanbob Kyrgyzstan – Alternative transport through the village PHOTO: TYRONE LOW  
 Opposite page top: On mountain accommodation in Kyrgyzstan PHOTO: TYRONE LOW  
 Opposite page left: Kazbegi Georgia – Skinning to Tsinda Sameba Church PHOTO: TYRONE LOW  
 Opposite page right: Urumqi China – Starting the journey PHOTO: ELEANOR MOSEMAN



*"One minute a drunken policeman wants your passport, the next you're being invited in for homemade jam by the kindly villagers."*

and educated people we were to meet on the entire trip. Throughout our journey we found that most people approaching us out of the crowd were aiming for our wallets, one way or another. But here people truly just wanted to shake our hands and say "Welcome to Iran". The average Iranian that you meet on a bus in Tehran has no-more religious fanaticism in them than your average New Zealander. They are remarkable people who struggle against an extreme political situation that few of them ever wanted.

The main skiing in Iran is just north of Tehran, at the resorts Dizin and Shemshak which are both surprisingly normal – except for the 80s-era plastic egg shaped gondolas. There were DJs and hamburgers at lunchtime and a junior ski-racing tournament with teams from all over Asia carving through the gates. Dizin is a big field with great lifts and very few people ski the off-piste, so we lapped untracked, slightly sun-affected powder all day. Leaving Iran, on the train to Turkey, we all felt a great sympathy and affection for the people we had met there and can only hope that their situation improves.

The other team headed across Azerbaijan to Georgia and the small town of Kazbegi, set in an alpine valley of the Caucasus Mountains. The town sits on the Georgian Military Highway, and is only 7km from the closely controlled border with Russia. All along the highway the rugged mountains offer up great potential for ski-touring and mountaineering missions, including an enticing adventure tour up to a 14th-century church complete with resident monks. Also nestled amongst these mountains is the modern Gudauri resort, which gave the team a couple of fresh stormy pow turns before they were back on the road, this time for Turkey.

Turkey marks a major turning point on the modern Silk Road with the instant return of modern facilities, other tourists, good road signs and, sadly, the end of gloriously low prices. It is also officially the final country in Asia and the first time we had seen the ocean in three months. With cash-strapped budgets and whispers of the end we set our sights for the Balkans, and then Venice.

The traverse from Istanbul to Venice is only a fraction of the total distance from Beijing, and we found ourselves moving quickly from country to country. The huge resorts of Bansko in Bulgaria and Kopaonik in Serbia are reminiscent of the big resorts in Europe, but amazing value at about \$15NZ for a day pass. Spring was pressing us though and the late March conditions left a lot of the mountains wet and running low on snow. Skiing the Silk Road was coming to an end. With flights from Venice only a week away, we began to say our goodbyes in Sarajevo. Those of the guys with deeper pockets were headed for the Alps, the rest of us were about to see whether our old bosses still wanted us back.

From conception to completion, Skiing the Silk Road was the dream we had always wanted it to be. We had become a family of friends, enduring sickness and the draining unknown one day, while riding the elated highs of powder days and chance encounters the next. For four months we had been aliens who couldn't read the menu, lost on street corners with 300kg of luggage. We had survived on the kindness of strangers in the most unlikely of places, and learned more about the world than we could have from any classroom. We had met champions like Ryan and Hayat, and fluked our way to some of the best skiing we had ever had. We found an incredible world out there. So plan your next trip. Live the dream.

To contact Ryan and ski from a Kyrgyz yurt: [www.fortytribesbackcountry.com](http://www.fortytribesbackcountry.com)  
To stay with Hayat or for info on the CBT: [arslanbob2009@gmail.com](mailto:arslanbob2009@gmail.com)  
For more info or advice on our trip: [www.skiingthesilkroad.com](http://www.skiingthesilkroad.com) or email [info@skiingthesilkroad.com](mailto:info@skiingthesilkroad.com)  
Also a huge thank you to our sponsors: Kingswood and Icebreaker

Top left: Ichke Jergez Kyrgyzstan – Skinning high above the yurt PHOTO: NICK BEGG  
Top right: Ichke Jergez Kyrgyzstan – The team with one of our homestay families PHOTO: RYAN KROUPAL  
Middle left: Ichke Jergez Kyrgyzstan – Back to the Yurt after a hard day skinning PHOTO: TYRONE LOW  
Middle right: Chimgan Uzbekistan – Home made sleds PHOTO: TYRONE LOW  
Bottom: Madeleine Martin getting deep PHOTO: BLAIR SMITH