

# STIGMA ASIDE

## RYAN KOUPAL'S KYRGYZSTAN APPROACH

Words Trevor Husted

IN THE TERSKEY ALA-TOO MOUNTAINS of Kyrgyzstan, the clatter of society is found only in small villages below massive glaciated peaks. Above these rural agrarian villages, the mountains loom as a constant reminder that where there are large mountains, there is the potential for adventure. Enter Ryan Koupal. He's the founder and director of 40 Tribes, a US-based backcountry operator who works in these mountains. Koupal and his team of local and international guides provide authentic tours through these rarely traveled peaks in northeastern Kyrgyzstan—authentic, as in horses lugging the gear, rough-but-friendly locals and human-powered touring ending at a warm yurt. Neighboring Lake Issyk-Kul, the second-largest alpine lake in the world, creates a microclimate and the necessary moisture for powder riding.

Koupal, a 35-year-old hailing from the foot of the Indian Peaks Wilderness just outside of Boulder, CO, studied Mandarin at Middlebury College, VT. He first encountered the broader Tien Shan range while near the Chinese border with Kyrgyzstan during an international exchange program in 1999. An avid splitboarder since 2003, he didn't consider leading backcountry tours in the area until 2008, when he ventured to the region on a splitboarding/telemarking expedition to film a segment for *The Kyrgyzstan Plan*. The film didn't achieve the success for which Koupal was hoping, but it did further his personal interest in the range. The following year, he returned with a group of friends from Colorado with the intention of developing a manually operated ski- and snowboard-touring program using local resources. Koupal, who had no formal guide training, enlisted the help of skilled

mountain guides Ptor Spriceniaks and Greg Johnson to build a six-day program that intertwines local culture with mountaineering and avalanche safety training.

Kyrgyzstan, a country that gained independence from the USSR in 1991, still shows its Soviet influence in its architecture, cars, vodka, food and Lenin statues. Even its mountains were used to train Soviet Olympic skiers. Today, the country's economy is based in gold mining and a rising tourism industry. Wealth can be measured by what one owns (typically in terms of livestock), and agriculture thrives on staples of carrots, onions and potatoes. The people there are predominantly Muslim and nearly 65 percent of them live in rural areas in a mountainous landscape. "There is this stigma placed on the 'stans,' with a lot of preconceived notions of them being seen as dangerous and unapproachable," Koupal says. "What we have discovered is a rather stable country from a political perspective, with a tourism industry that plays a massive role. The people are very hospitable and open to welcoming foreigners into their culture and homes, and this helps to offer up a legitimate taste of Kyrgyz culture. Clients have the opportunity to really get a feel for how these people live."

While 40 Tribes tours aim to engage and educate people about local culture, ultimately, they exist for the mountains—craggy ridges rise past 16,000 feet, and a continental climate brings reliable snow from late January through early March.

"The mountain range is endless," Koupal says. "We came here because it was such an unknown, untapped zone. There's still so much to explore." ▲

It's safe to say these folks are laying the only tracks for many, many miles.  
Photo: Ryan Koupal

