



IN SEARCH
OF POWDER

POWDER PANDEMONIUM

We've all heard stories of a faraway land of deep, cold, untracked powder, ripe for exploration... Welcome to Kyrgyzstan's wild Tien Shan range

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It was 5am, 12 below zero outside, and the airport was shrouded by an eerie freezing fog. They don't speak English. I don't speak Kyrgyz or Russian. They are shouting, pointing at and waving a book which, it appears, they're about to throw at me, literally, metaphorically, or both. As our gang collected ski bags and coffee, I'd stumbled outside, jet-lagged and disoriented, to take stock, wake up and get my bearings. A policeman tapped me on the shoulder, took my passport and here I was, in the bowels of Bishkek airport.

Over the course of 20 minutes I realised that the book in question was, notionally, the Rule Book, in which it said, I supposed, that smoking on the airport steps was illegal and carried, no doubt, a hefty 'fine'.

Kyrgyzstan is not the sort of place that has non-smoking areas, and yet I had made it precisely two metres into the country before being arrested, for smoking. Mercifully, our driver appeared, as if by magic. A knight in shining Armani tracksuit bottoms, he negotiated my release:

journalist – British – clueless – please let go – he's trying to give up – and so forth.

We had come to Kyrgyzstan having heard one too many stories to be ignored of a faraway land of deep, cold, untracked powder in the wild Tien Shan range, ripe for exploration. But had I bitten off more than I could chew?

Some 28 hours later the question would resurface. We were at Suus Lodge, an ethereal cat-skiing operation at 3000m in the startlingly desolate high-altitude valley, without so much as a bush for miles around. The lodge itself looked like Bond villain holiday house meets British Antarctic Survey. The flat valley floor was flanked on two sides by imperious peaks rising to 4000m, which we would explore by way of the lodge's twin snowcats. We'd spotted an amphitheatre of couloirs and spines beneath the area's crown jewel – the 3700m Korona Peak – began salivating immediately and set off on skins for a closer look. Then, **WHOOOMPH!**

As we traversed across a moderate pitch the whole

Tien Shan Mountains: so many lines, so little time





“ There were pillows and enormous, widely-spaced conifers in rolling terrain in every direction ”

snowpack subsided about two feet beneath our feet, triggering a sudden urge to urinate, and instantly extinguishing our ambition to tackle anything too complex in Suus.

Thankfully the area boasts plenty of low-angle terrain, perfect for a high-speed, low-risk team pow shred. The temperature – camped in the -10 to -25° range despite piercing sunshine – kept the powder cold and light. Two

Pillows and powder: Kyrgyz-style sled-skiing in Karakol

days’ cat-skiing on what felt like the surface of the moon were an excellent start, but it was time to push on.

SLED-SKIING, KYRGYZ-STYLE

After a 500km journey cross-country through labyrinthine gorges, arid desert and along the frigid shores of Lake Issyk Kul – after the Caspian Sea the world’s second largest saline lake – we spent a day blasting around Karakol Ski Base, a little ski resort above the town of the same name. While the town had a ramshackle Wild-West-way-in-the-east kind of vibe, the ski base was an unexpectedly neat and tidy affair, with well-groomed pistes flanked by some fun and powdery rat-runs through the trees. There we met Slava and Dan – two friendly Russians running a roving snowmobile-access backcountry ski outfit. We would join up with them the following day, in Karakol Gorge.

A ragged rope was looped around my ski poles, themselves wedged precariously behind my thighs. I was clinging on for dear life as I flew up a perilously bumpy trail at 30mph, behind a raging snowmobile, desperately trying not to crash into a second skier on an adjacent rope or fly off the path into the forest. If Mad Max was a skier, this would be his deranged T-bar of choice. The path had begun in a farmyard teeming with horses and yak and was now winding up through extremely realistic tree-skiing terrain, if only we could make it to the top in one piece.

Surviving the ‘first lift’ by the skin our teeth, we swiftly got the hang of the ‘sled’ part of sled-skiing Kyrgyz-style. As for the ‘ski’ part, there were pillows and enormous, widely-spaced conifers in rolling terrain in every direction. Light snow drifted down, adding a couple of centimetres throughout the day to an already ample snowpack. Besides



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us, the only other souls we'd seen since breakfast were the hardy beasts at the yard, looking like the cast of Animal Farm: central-Asian edition.

YURTS, STEPS AND CONSTANT POW

If Suus and Karakol had felt pretty far out, the 'Out There-ometer' would exit the dial entirely that evening. We re-packed our kit upon our return to Karakol before, in a cloud of black smoke, the first of our rides to Jalpak Tash arrived. We loaded our gear into a battered old-school VW Camper-looking bus called a UAZ, which looked like it might have been a hybrid, run on diesel and vodka.

Inside the venerable Soviet troop transporter, we bumped and growled eastwards towards the Kazakh border, lofty peaks omnipresent to our right, a vast plain to our left. Only 30km and an hour by road, it seemed we'd travelled back in time to another, simpler era, the UAZ our bumpy Soviet DeLorean. We stopped at the tiny farming village of Ichke Jergez, where we would eat and overnight in a villager's simple but immaculate farmhouse.

At dawn we set off on skins towards our home for the next four days: a yurt set at 2700m in the Tien Shan. Our equipment would follow – on horseback. The literal translation of Tien Shan is 'Mountain of Heaven' and when we first clapped eyes on the yurt camp, slightly delirious, two-hours and 900 vertical meters of skinning later, we agreed that the translation was accurate.

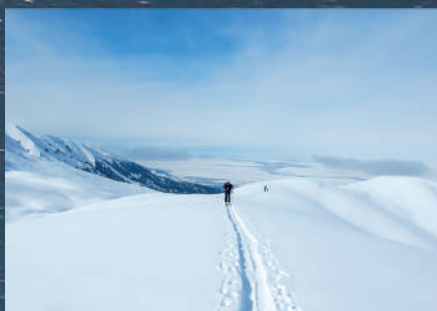
Three traditional Kyrgyz yurts (guest sleeping yurt,

dining/cooking yurt, guides/staff yurt) tucked into the tree-line were linked by immaculately-excavated paths and surrounded on three sides by a smorgasbord of powder-plastered-peaks. A wisp of smoke infused with the rich aroma of manti (spiced meat dumplings) escaped from the central chimney of the dining yurt. The serenity was almost surreal. In such a far-flung corner of the world, the existence of such a powder paradise barely seemed possible.

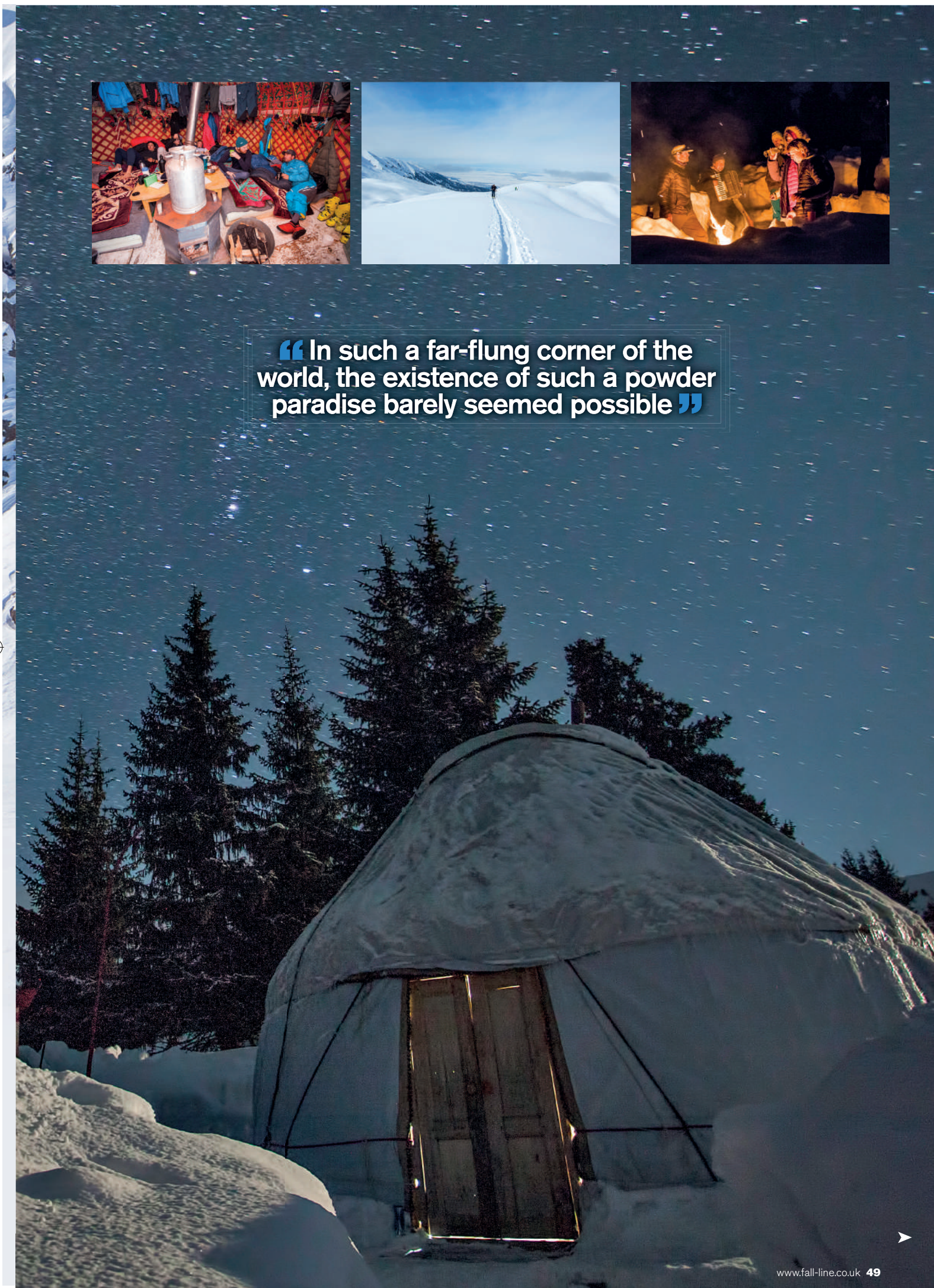
But exist it did, and it does. Having checked in to our yurt – surprisingly spacious and constantly cosy thanks to the ubiquitous central stove – we gorged ourselves on the first of many masterpieces cooked by camp chef Nurbek.

A land where you work hard for your turns





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Tentatively at first mouthful and with great gusto thereafter. This was top-drawer mountain food, prepared in a tent almost 3km above sea level, in Kyrgyzstan – not exactly a world cuisine superpower in reputation. Nurbek, we agreed, was a Kyrgyz culinary wizard.

The operation was set up by American outfit 40 Tribes in 2010 in partnership with a handful of locals and North American mountain guides, as one of a number of community-based tourism initiatives in Kyrgyzstan. Their unofficial slogan ‘Never Not Powder Skiing’ was, we would learn, spot on. Surrounding the camp there were wide faces pleading to be tagged, streaked with steeper gullies, all feeding into gradually mellowing tree runs back to camp.

Whatever the terrain, or the weather for that matter, the constant was powder. As with all good things, these treats were hard-earned. No lifts, ski-doo or snowcats here. Just lungs, thighs, touring skis and skins. These, allied to the expertise and enthusiasm of head guide Canadian Ty Mills and founder Ryan Koupal, along with the promise of perfect powder on the way down, were more than enough to propel us to a couple of summits and lengthy descents per day, each punctuated by much hooting, hollering and high-fiving.

A stand-out run was Zero-On-Ones. A gradually steepening series of switchbacks on the way up gained a lofty shoulder with staggering views down to the yurts and across the plain some 1000m below. Dropping off the back, the descent began with some billy-goating along a wind-lip to a rounded knuckle, before plunging onto a massive open face, ripe for the pillaging. And pillaged it was, each of us plundering super-G turns aplenty to the bottom.

Après-ski revolved mostly around rolling steadily-more frenetic games of Yahtzee – at which chef Nurbek was also a fiend. On our final evening we were joined around the camp fire by a local musician playing raucous Kyrgyz songs on his accordion, a fitting finale to an experience none of us wanted to end. *Fall-Line*

“ Dropping off the back, we plunged onto a massive open face, ripe for the pillaging ”

Surrounding the 40 Tribes camp are wide faces pleading to be tagged, streaked with steeper gullies

ESSENTIALS

KYRGYZSTAN

Once the centre of the world at the heart of the Silk Road, and later part of the mighty Soviet bloc, Kyrgyzstan is a relative oasis of calm and the only parliamentary democracy in Central Asia. It is bordered by China to the east and a trifecta of fellow ‘Stans – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – to the north, south and west. The vast peaks of the Tien Shan and Pamir ranges dominate three-quarters of the country. The Kyrgyz are a rugged, rural and friendly people. English is not widely spoken, so booking with an established operation is advisable.

TRAVEL

We flew with Pegasus Airlines (flypgs.com/en), who offer the best value flights from Gatwick, Stansted and Manchester to Bishkek (via Istanbul) from £122 each way. Turkish Airlines and Aeroflot also operate flights to

Bishkek via Istanbul and Moscow respectively. British citizens can visit Kyrgyzstan for up to 60 days without obtaining a visa.

SKI

40 Tribes (40tribesbackcountry.com) offer a seven-night package at Jalpak Tash, including full-board yurt accommodation and guided ski touring, from £1,725pp. Visit Karakol (visitkarakol.com) offer excellent advice in English and logistical support for all Karakol-related skiing. Travel Kyrgyzstan (travel-kyrgyzstan.com) operate snowmobile-accessed skiing in Karakol gorge and Jergalan from £45 per day. Suus Lodge (suus.kg) offer a range of cat-skiing options in Suusamyr from £50 per day. We hired Kyrgyz mountain guide Andrey Shevtsov for the Karakol and Suus elements (mountainskytravel.com), from £80 per day.

