



BREAKING INTO
HEAVEN

SPLITBOARDING KYRGYZSTAN'S
CELESTIAL MOUNTAINS

*It's a place that few can pronounce
and even fewer can find on a map. But
when Whitelines visited Kyrgyzstan, we
discovered a powdery paradise.*

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When ordering food in a café in rural Kyrgyzstan, there are a few things you need to know:

- If you're a vegetarian, don't bother. Even the salads here have meat in. If you speak enough of the language you can of course ask your server to take these out. But even this is not foolproof, as our veggie photographer Dan Milner found to his cost. Spitting out the chunks of processed chicken that had been left in his salad, he called the waitress over. "Chicken is not meat," she explained.
- The menu may look extensive, but there are only really a few basic dishes to choose from. Greasy soup with meat (solyanka or borsch) greasy noodles with meat (beshbarmek or lagman), greasy rice with meat (plov), or greasy meat with more meat (kotletti or shashlik). Everything else is a variation on these themes. You can see why veggies have it tough.
- Tea is good, beer is cheap and vodka is pretty much mandatory. But whatever you do, don't drink kymyz. As you might expect from a country that borders on China, the Kyrgyz make a big thing of tea. The booze is also easy to explain—they might be nominally Muslim, but 80 years of enforced atheism under the Soviet Union has left them with a taste for vodka. There are usually shot glasses on every table, and local beer is good. Kymyz on the other hand is not. A traditional drink made of fermented mare's milk, it tastes like a sweaty shoe gone sour.
- Don't expect the waitress to smile. If you're stupid and foreign enough to smile at her, the response

will be a look of withering contempt. In general, Kyrgyz are some of the friendliest people you could ever hope to meet, but this doesn't extend to anyone in a position of authority. So that's immigration officials, traffic police and yes, waitresses.

- What is written on your tatty, laminated menu card bears little or no relation to the food they will actually have. Firstly the English translations (when they exist) will be amusingly terrible. "Women's Whimsy" as a main course was a personal favourite. And secondly, chances are only about three dishes will be available at any given time. There will be no explanation for this, you will simply be told "plova nyeyu" or "shashlik nyeyu" ("Plov no. Shashlik no.") as you run through the menu asking for your second, third and fourth choices. Think Monty Python's cheese shop sketch, and you're half way there.

On our final day in Karakol, the small mountain town that had been our base, we find ourselves sharing this hard-earned wisdom with fellow foreigners. Having been through the non-familiar charade of asking for everything on the menu only to find they didn't have it, we've finally established that we can have a cheese omelette. But only if we give the waitress 50 soms (about 75p) to nip across the road and buy the cheese! Having actually rather enjoyed the resulting creation (if not the three-in-one saches of sugar, milk and Nescafé I've been served instead of coffee) we are surprised to overhear British voices as the group in the booth behind us struggle. It turns out they're the next crew following in our footsteps, staying in the yurt we've recently vacated up in the hills. We explain the rigmaroles of how and what to order like the seasoned pros we now feel ourselves to be, and then give them one final piece of advice: "Don't be put off by first appearances – this place is incredible."

It's true that at first glance, Kyrgyzstan is not an obvious destination for a snowboard trip. When something as simple as ordering food becomes that difficult, the cultural barriers can seem overwhelming. It's also not the easiest country to get to but (assuming you can find it on a map) the geography isn't really the problem. This small central Asian nation has mountains a-plenty – in an area about two-thirds the size of the UK, Kyrgyzstan packs in

Consolidating in Egypt states -
less crowded than the tube,
but what a ballache!





Ten hours later. Still not got to work yet!

"There are a handful of ski resorts but most of these mountains are populated by golden eagles in the summer, snow leopards in the winter, and little else"

Spain's new baggage handlers.



not one, but two major mountain ranges. The Tien Shan (meaning "celestial mountains") and the Pamirs both boast high peaks of over 7,000m. Which to put it in context is a cool 3,000m higher than Mont Blanc. A look at Kyrgyzstan on Google Earth reveals that these ranges essentially run into the Hindu Kush and then the Himalayas, making up one enormous central Asian mountain system. In fact, an incredible 90 per cent of the country sits above 1,500 metres, meaning most of Kyrgyzstan lives considerably higher than Avoriaz. The highest peak, Jengish Chokusu (meaning "Victory") at 7,439m, is just 1,000 or so metres shy of Everest. The scenery is absolutely perfect 100 – remote alpine lakes, steep powder fields, and the inland sea of Issyk-Kol have helped earn this country the nickname "the Central Asian Switzerland".

However, although the landscape couldn't be better for snowboarding, the infrastructure is almost non-existent. While its wealthy European namesake is the 7th richest country in the world, Kyrgyzstan sits down in 139th place. It used to be part of the world's second super-power, the USSR. But while aspects of Soviet culture persist, the money largely disappeared with the Berlin Wall, leaving roads potholed and power cables crumbling. You certainly won't be finding Swiss-style heated gondolas or ski-in/ski-out chalets on the slopes here. There are a handful of ski resorts but most of these mountains are wild, rugged and empty, without any roads beyond the occasional forestry track. They're populated by goatherds and golden eagles in the summer, snow leopards in the winter, and very little else.

This of course, is exactly what attracts our crew to the country in the first place. Having previously visited these mountains in the summer and seen their potential, I've long been searching for a way to return to ride them. Finding out about 40 Tribes Backcountry, a splitboarding operation run by an American that bases itself out of a remote yurt, settles it. Now all I need is a crew crazy enough to come along for the ride. My first port of call is Dan Milner. A



Stent lets rip. Outside the yurt, obviously.

hugely experienced backcountry photographer, Dan has not only accompanied Jeremy Jones on most of his recent splitting missions, but also has a taste for bizarre, out-there destinations – essential if you're going to propose a trip to a country no-one's heard of. With Dan's help I recruit James Stentford, also an experienced backcountry practitioner, whose name will be familiar to regular *Whitelines* readers. At the last minute, we're joined by Tania Desomas, an Italian rider who combines a love of adventure with a hippyish outlook. At one stage she takes a break from splitting to, quote: "consider a tree". But her supremely zen attitude proves useful when Aeroflot decide to lose her bags on arrival.

Having sorted that out and made our way to Karakol, our motley band of tired travellers is greeted by Ryan, the founder of 40 Tribes. Born and brought up in Boulder, Colorado, Ryan caught the snowboarding bug at an early age. "Travelling a bunch in China" and a job talking school kids on adventure holidays in the West of the country gave him a taste for Central Asian travel. He first visited Kyrgyzstan on a whim in 2008. "A buddy and I just flew in with our splitboards and went exploring". Karakol seemed a natural base. As well as boasting a couple of small ski resorts nearby, the town is something of a hub for climbers and mountaineers. Since the days of the Russian empire, bearded explorers with names like Przevalsky and Kozlov have been



Otto had really let himself go since leaving the Steppes.

"The driver wears a grubby oilskin coat, a permanent gap-toothed smile and has rather worryingly acquired the nickname 'Schumacher'"

using it as a jumping off point for inerepid expeditions into the surrounding peaks. And while it's not exactly Chamonix, a steady stream of (mostly Russian) climbing enthusiasts passes through each year. While the seed of 40 Tribes had been planted by their first visit, two things made it happen. The first was meeting Kasadin, a young Kyrgyzman with excellent English who (with the help of his sister) runs the Isyly-Kul Guides and Porters Association. The second was less fortuitous. Ryan's house back in Colorado burned down in a bush fire, leaving him with a fat cheque from the insurance company and no home to return to.

Apart from the yurt up in the hills, Ryan's base for this, the company's first full winter in operation, is a hostel called Yak Tours in Karakol. The building is an old wooden house in the Russian style that could have come straight off the pages of War and Peace. It comes complete with an elderly Russian caretaker named Sergey, a hot water system that probably hasn't been updated since Tolstoy's time and a yard full of rusting machinery. It's here that we spend our first evening, sipping bottles of beer and getting to know our host. It turns out Dan and Stent have friends in common with one of Ryan's guides and soon everyone is getting along well – helped by a couple of obligatory vodka shots over dinner. Which is just as well, because we'll be spending the next six days almost literally living on top of each other.

Our ride from Karakol to the base of the mountain is an interesting one. The first we hear of it is an engine clattering to a halt and a seal-like honk from outside the gate. It's hard to work out which looks more battered, the car or its driver. The vehicle is an Uazik – a Soviet-era VW-style van that thanks to its four wheel drive and ability to take a punishing, is standard issue in this part of the world. This one looks like it's taken more of a punishing than most – the windows are tied shut with string and you can see the road whizzing by through the holes in the floor. The driver wears a grubby oilskin coat, a permanent gap-toothed smile and has rather worryingly acquired the nickname "Schumacher". But to our relief, once we've loaded the bags and he's touched two wires together to start the engine, Schumacher turns out to be a careful and even cautious driver. Apparently he's earned the name for his skill rather than his speed.

We unload an hour down the road at the house of another of Ryan's local partners,



Get in the back you fuckin' cow!



You're doing it all wrong mate, that kicker needs more working.

Nurbek, where we'll be staying for the night. If Karakol felt far out, it's nothing on kchke-gerge. The roads here are dirt tracks, made worse by the thick snow on the ground. The houses are simple affairs with corrugated iron roofs and thatched barns holding horses, goats and cows. As well as keeping his own livestock, Nurbek makes a living by operating a 'homestay' – throwing open his front rooms to visitors, most of whom arrive via Ryan. "Honestly, there's no way this operation could have happened without Nurbek," Ryan tells us. "He did so much when we were setting up the yurts at the end of summer. And it's great for people to stay here, because you get to see how Kyrgyz people live." Nurbek may not have running water, but his family could not be friendlier or more welcoming. His house is warm, his three young kids are adorable and the plov his wife cooks us is neither greasy nor served with a frown. The only thing that stops anyone getting a good night's sleep is my snoring, which Stenti in particular loves.



Sleepy and closed for.





Slasher pans. Tashi's into that sort of thing.

"It's sliding, it's sliding!" shouts Ryan. "Oh sh*t, keep eyes on her, keep eyes on her!"



Drifting rock-ward.

The next morning we're up and re-packing our bags early. From here, we'll split up to the Jalpak Tash yurt, but our empty board bags, our food and the majority of our kit will be taken up by horses. Horses play a big role in Kyrgyz daily life and culture – as well as

providing a source of fermented milk you'll see horses used to pull carts, sleds or even just tree-trunks for firewood. "It's incredible what these guys can shift using horses," says Ryan. At one stage we even watch a smooth-talking young Kyrgyz dude kerb-crawling a girl he fancies, charting her up from his horse like a boy racer leaning out his window. Good horses, like good cars, change hands for large sums of money. On a later visit to Karakol's weekly animal market, we see young lads taking them out for a 'test drive', putting them through their paces while people haggle over the price of sheep around them. As the horses set off up the snowy forestry track in front of us, it's easy to see why they're so prized – it only takes us about two-and-a-half hours to split up to the yurt, but the horses are way ahead of us. By the

time we get there Asimat, one of the riders, has already got the tea on.

While Nurbek heads back down to the village and his family, Asimat and Kasadin, or Kas, will be our constant companions for the week. Kas' excellent English, welcoming manner and easy, high-pitched laugh make him excellent company. He could ski a bit before and under Ryan's tutelage is improving rapidly. He's also developed a love for the music of The XX. Asimat doesn't speak much English, but a combination of my basic Russian, sign language and playing the travel guitar I've brought with me means we actually communicate pretty well. However, outside of the mournful Kyrgyz songs he plays for us, his music taste is slightly more questionable – when he's on washing-up duty the radio is tuned to a Russian station that blares out the very best (or should that be worst!) in Euro-dance. But over the course of the next six days, we develop a fondness for many of the tunes on the Europa Plus playlist, as we settle into a kind of routine.

The temperature in the yurt is usually below zero in the mornings, but by the time we wake up, Kas or Asimat is stoking the stove and getting the tea on. Ryan, being an American, also makes sure he has



Get off yer high horse mate!

"Kymyz is a traditional drink made of fermented mare's milk. It tastes like a sweaty shoe gone sour"

proper coffee to hand. Stemi grumbles about the earliness of the hour and how little he's slept because of my snoring, but it's usually 9.00 before we've all breakfasted and got ourselves ready to go. A visit to the impressively comfortable long-drop also becomes a regular feature of the mornings. With its proper toilet seat (so you don't have to squat) and spectacular views over the valley below, it's something Ryan's particularly proud of. We are blessed with bright sunshine for the majority of our time at Jalpak Tash, meaning that we can pretty much have our pick of zones to ride. We usually start the day with a long split up to one of the nearest peaks around 3,000 metres above sea level. While Ryan's previous skin tracks are visible in places, a dusting of snow means that all the descents are pristine. Having reached our chosen face, we shred and shoot our way back down to the yurt, whooping with exhilaration as we throw up massive rooster tails. Although I haven't split-boarded much previously, I quickly fall in love with the notion of "earning my turns"

Stemi does his best to take a perfectly good landscape shot.



– a feeling no doubt helped by the stick I'm riding, a huge floaty Venture Johan Olofsson pro-model. Watching its massive nose plane across the powder like a powerboat would be pleasurable enough anywhere, but there's something extra special about knowing that very few – if any – people have ridden these lines before.

When we return to the yurt there is usually sea, biscuits and a hearty evening meal cooked over the central stove. Kas and Asimat do an amazing job of catering for Dan's vegetarian tendencies, and for those of us who do eat animals, their traditional Kyrgyz meals are a delight – after a day of exercise in sub-zero temperatures it's amazing how good a bit of grease tastes! Dan spends the evenings reading by head torchlight, while Ryan, Stemi, Kas and I play yahtzee – a game that acquires an extra competitive dimension once we decide that





MEET THE 'STANS

The dysfunctional family of former Soviet states.

WHERE? Kazakhstan

WHAT? You know, the one that Borat claimed to have come from. Oil, gas and a stable government have made it the richest and most westernized of the lot.

FUN FACT? The aging President for Life, Nursultan Nazarbayev, recently asked Kazakh scientists to look for the 'elixir of life'. It'll be a while before he steps down then.

CAN I SHRED THERE? Most of the country is completely flat, but the Tien Shan in the south eastern corner offers spectacular riding. There are sophisticated, modern resorts around the commercial capital Almaty.

WHERE? Tajikistan

WHAT? The poor relative of the family. Blighted in the nineties by a bloody civil war, it has started to find its feet in recent years.

FUN FACT? Thanks to its border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan is a hotbed for heroin smuggling. Despite its small population, it's third in the world for heroin and opium confiscations. And that's obviously not counting the ones that get away...

CAN I SHRED THERE? There are some knockered old resorts and Tajikistan's majestic Pamir mountains could provide incredible splitboarding, but access, infrastructure and left-over landmines are a problem.

WHERE? Uzbekistan

WHAT? Home to the historic cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Held back by one of the nastiest dictatorships in the region.

FUN FACT? Despite his habit of boiling opponents alive, President Karimov is a friend of the freedom-lovin' USA: He let them use his air bases to invade Afghanistan.

CAN I SHRED THERE? There are a couple of resorts around the capital, Tashkent. Whiteknives' very own Matt Barr visited back in 2006 (see WL7).

WHERE? Turkmenistan

WHAT? The craggiest country in a crazy region. Its massive natural gas reserves have given successive dictators the cash to pursue seriously crackpot schemes.

FUN FACT? The first post-independence president-for-life wrote his own version of the Bible and erected a gold statue of himself that turns to face the sun. He was succeeded by his equally crazy *derisot*.

CAN I SHRED THERE? Although there are some mountains, they've not had more than 2.4 inches of snow for the last 20 years. Underated, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov (*the derisot*) announced plans for a ski resort in January 2012, saying: "Visitors should be able to enjoy a cultural pastime, enjoying the beautiful scenery".



Oh, just snow. There's nothin' in there.

every yahuco scored equals a shot of vodka. Tania, ever the hippy, zones out completely – spending her time meditating in a corner. Not that there are really any corners in our circular home.

If all this sounds pretty cosy for an 'extreme' trip in an 'extreme' destination, that's because it is. Rather than running out of rations or wondering if our tents will blow away, we eat well and sleep soundly every night. That's not to say that there aren't some scary moments. The continental climate in Kyrgyzstan makes for a very dry snow pack, which doesn't compact or bond into layers in the usual way. Take a step off your splits skis, and the chances are you'll sink to your waist. This makes for some comedy moments, but it also means that avalanches are easy to trigger. "I don't think I've ever seen so



We wanted to make a joke about a cock with a rooster tail, but Stenst's alright actually.

"Still half-cut, I manage two thirds of the descent before misjudging a turn and collapsing into a powdery heap. Best run ever? Quite possibly"



My, that's a massive muff!

many naturally occurring slides in one area before," worries Dan.

On our second full day up the hill, Tania hikes up to a peak 10 or so metres to the right of the rest of the group, planning to drop down in front of our waiting lenses. Standing on the summit, she puts her hand up, points her nose downwards and disappears behind a rocky outcrop when almost immediately we hear her shrieking "Oh, oh, oh!"

"It's sliding, it's sliding!" shouts Ryan. "Oh shit, keep eyes on her, keep eyes on her!"

Looking below the rock where we'd expected her to emerge, all we can see is a torrent of tumbling snow. "Tania?" cries Stenst, running up the summit to get a better vantage point. Two nerve-wracking seconds pass.

"I'm okay" we eventually hear her say. "I managed to dig my board in and hold onto a rock." She's shaken but in one piece. As Stenst talks her around the bottom of the rock and back towards us, we laugh out loud in relief. Tania being Tania, she's fairly philosophical about the whole experience, but it's a rude reminder of just how isolated we are. Three hours out from the yurt, which is three hours out from the village, and even then you'd still be miles away from

any decent hospital. An avalanche burial, or indeed any injury, out here would be no joke.

It's amazing how quickly such thoughts are banished by a few vodkas round a warm fire though. After a few particularly competitive games of *yahtzee* on our final evening, Stenst, Ryan, Kas and I decide to go for a moonlight shred. Skinning up with only a head-torch to guide you is enervating enough, but it pales in comparison to the thrill of blazing through virgin pow, weaving between the moon-shadows of pine trees. Still half-cut, I manage about two thirds of the descent before misjudging a turn and collapsing into an inevitable powdery heap, giggling uncontrollably. Best run ever? Quite possibly.

I'm certainly sorry to pack up and leave what has become our home the following day. We've been there a week and yet there's still so much to explore, so many lines unriden. The potential in the Kyrgyz mountains is huge – we've barely scratched the surface of even this one zone, and after his full season of exploring, Ryan is still pointing out lines that he wants to ride. "Eventually," he explains, "the idea is to have a whole network of yurts so you can skin between them."

Listening to Ryan talk about developing splitboarding here, his excitement is infectious. It makes sense. Kyrgyzstan hasn't had the easiest time of it since the collapse of the USSR, but after a couple of revolutions, it now has a stable democratic government with a western-looking president. It may not be the richest nation on earth but tourism is a big source of its income and government is taking active steps to encourage foreign visitors. Since our visit they've changed the rules so westerners no longer need to go through the hassle and expense of getting a visa. You can even see the beginnings of a winter sports tourism industry developing. At one stage we take a day trip up to Krakol's ski resorts and are pleasantly surprised to find, if not a modern super resort, a hill with well-groomed trails, a new-looking snow cat, and even one or two boxes scattered around. We're even more surprised when we reach the top and meet a snowboarder with a *Whitelines* sticker on his board! It turns out Sergey and his friends are tourists from neighbouring Kazakhstan, a country where many of the new oil-enriched middle class are taking up snowboarding. "We come here because the resorts are bigger, the mountains are better and it's so much cheaper than riding over in Kazakhstan," he explains. Down in town that night we notice several other groups of conspicuously wealthy Kazakhs, a sight that is apparently increasingly common.

That said, some of the locals are still coming to terms with the idea of skiing as a sport. Just before we fly out of Bishkek, the capital city I have the slightly bizarre experience of being interviewed by a local TV news crew about our trip. Like all the Kyrgyz people we've met, they are super-friendly, extremely welcoming and very interested in us. But when the report airs that evening, both the anchorman and the journalist seemed bemused as to why anyone would come all the way from Europe to ride the Kyrgyz mountains. To us though, having been there a week, it's no mystery. As Ryan puts it "the potential is all here you know. The terrain, the snow, it's all incredible. And the people are so friendly. People already came from Russia to shred here, and since we started we've had people from the US, from Germany, from Sweden, all over. I feel like once more people know how good it can be a lot will come from further afield." It may not be an obvious destination, and certainly not an easy one, but if you're prepared to push through the initial difficulties then Kyrgyzstan is a little slice of heaven. ☺



Just over yart.



Whitelines. Big in Kazakhstan. P.S.O. Brian



DO OUR TRIP

Buy a Venture Splitboard from Snow & Rock (snowandrock.com)

Fly to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (around £400 return) with Aeroflot (aeroflot.com) or Turkish Airlines (turkishairlines.com)

Stay with Ryan and Kas from 40 Tribes Backcountry (fortytribesbackcountry.com)