

### **CCPC visit to Kyrgyzstan.**

Sat 7 August, we were finally on our way. Our trip had been threatened twice, first of all by civil unrest when the government was forcibly removed by the opposition and later by ethnic violence in the south of the country resulting in over 1000 deaths. Made a change from the usual volcanic eruptions and earthquakes we had to face when we tried to head for Ecuador and China!

The flight went well but on arrival no sign of our escort, had we squandered around £7,000? I'd told Darren (who didn't believe me) that I could tell from the e mails that she would be tall, slim and blonde. After an anxious hour, sure enough, a tall slim blonde approached us, this was our contact Svetlana.

A couple of hours later we arrived at the border crossing between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. What a nightmare! It took ages for us to push and shove our way past the Kazakh guards only to face a similar epic getting past Kyrgyz border guards once we had crossed the river separating the two countries.

We arrived at Edelweiss HQ where Svetlana provided us with tea and biscuits (we had been provided with breakfast on route). We were asked to pack our gear for transportation by our porters and then to unpack and repack in plastic shopping bags! Not a good start but thankfully this proved to be the only hiccup in the entire 2 week trip. We also met our guide Sasha and cook Tanya, Darren was more interested in Lucy one of the Edelweiss staff who he considered to be even more attractive than Svetlana!

Next stop our hotel The Alpinist. This proved to be an excellent hotel with a fridge full of various beers. We found this to be rather surprising since Kyrgyzstan is a Muslim country and we were in Ramadan. One simply helped oneself then settled up later at reception. We managed to drink the vast majority of it as this was to be our last alcohol for two weeks, we thought!

Next morning a drive of around two hours ended at a health resort in the Issyk-Ata valley. We didn't find the thermal pool where, if one bathes in its waters, one becomes immune to wrinkles and ageing. However we did find a large rock bearing Buddhist inscriptions dating back over 1000 years.

An hour or so later we were off along a grassy path following the river. After 2 or 3 hours lunch appeared in a somewhat haphazard fashion as some of our porters were struggling with loads that appeared to be beyond their ability- several were still teenagers without the experience and physique of those found further east in the Himalaya.

Another 2 or 3 hours of trekking along the river we arrived at our camp site but it was at least a 3 hour wait before our porters arrived with our kit and tents. We had stopped short of our planned site by around 2 km. We pitched our tents in a boulder field and ate at dusk. Next morning Mark and Sharon found not more than 3 metres from their tent a large crater, evidence of the recent arrival of a boulder not much smaller than the tent!

We were up at around 6.30 and continued up the valley passing a camp occupied by some rather wild looking hunters with their rifles parked against the rock and the freshly killed carcase of a large animal, probably ibex, lying on the grass. I was glad to learn later that hunting, once a popular pastime, is becoming increasingly less popular.

After lunch we were initiated into river crossings. These proved to be fairly shallow (about knee deep) but the current was powerful, each one we crossed seemed worse than the last. The crossings were followed by a traverse across a fearsome scree slope. The route was unstable to say the least, fortunately a tumble in most places would have meant cuts and bruises but towards the end we traversed above cliffs where a fall would certainly have resulted in serious injury. Luckily we didn't know that worse was to follow the following day. Again our tents arrived late and dusk was approaching as we searched amongst the boulders for places to pitch. Once again Tanya produced an excellent meal to round off the day but as we were eating al fresco it was rather cold and we all hurried off to bed after once it was finished.

After an early rise we set off again up rather loose scree and rock arriving several hours later after some interesting rock climbing at the snowfield leading to the Pervomayskiy Pass (4200m). Our original itinerary was to camp below the pass at 3900m but Sasha had wisely advised against this as there was no suitable site and we had already "lost" a day by introducing an extra camp the day before at 3500 to reduce the chance of HAPE and HACE.

The snow slope approaching the col was reasonably level and Sasha had advised us against carrying crampons, however we did rope up. Mark J and I had carried our crampons so were able to climb the steeper frozen snow up to the summit whereas the others struggled up yet another band of very loose scree. We dined on the ridge in glorious sunshine with the most amazing views imaginable. (90% of Kyrgyzstan is above 1500. and 71% above 2000m). Photos were taken for Terramar our sponsors and we were on our way.

What a nightmare! We set off in one large group down over 1000' of VERY loose scree. The party gradually ended up in two distinct groups and the upper group had to stop and wait for the lower group to clear the slope as they were in danger of being hit by rocks that the upper group couldn't avoid sending cascading down. I was in the upper group and our biggest concern was the possibility of the porters setting off behind us, we would be in the direct line of fire and there was no means of communicating with them in order to delay their departure.

We finally ended up on very soft snow as it was past mid day and the sun was blazing. Having struggled across the snow I for one was exhausted but worse was to follow. We must have spent at least 2 to 3 hours descending a very unstable mountain. Several took minor tumbles on this section but everyone escaped serious injury. The route was little used and it was about 8 or 9 years since Sasha had crossed this pass. Tanya was over the moon as, like us, it was her visit to this part of Kyrgyzstan. Eventually we could see the lakes where we proposed to camp but it seemed to take for ever to get there.

Situated on the bank of a raging river the site was idyllic if somewhat noisy. Most folk took the opportunity for a decent wash or to do some laundry. However the water

temperature was barely above freezing so lingering too long was avoided. After a brief meeting we decided to take a rest day- our porters were obviously ecstatic!

This was supposed to be a rest day but the majority of us went on a walk lasting 3 or 4 hours although some of this time was spent on a “climbing competition” on a suitable large boulder we discovered while walking. When we arrived back we discussed our plans and thanks to satellite technology arranged to be collected 2 days later to be driven to Ala Archa park our planned destination (thus avoiding yet another “beasting”) and for the delivery of 5 litre bottles of vodka to replace that of Sasha’s that he had kindly provided us with and the surplus to get us through the next week or so! Amazingly Edelweiss did not charge us for the additional transport or vodka! The day was rounded off with another superb meal which began with hors d’oeuvres, chopped salad with cottage cheese on raw aubergine.

Next day began with an exciting river crossing that we had all studied with considerable intrepidation the previous evening! Personally I didn’t think we had a “snowball in hell’s chance” of getting across but once committed to the initial leap it wasn’t too bad. Next came a pleasant walk past several glacial lakes followed by a couple of fairly rapid descents, one to our lunch spot and another that crossed an area of ground devastated by a massive rock avalanche- and I mean massive, the boulders were HUGE. We didn’t linger. Eventually we reached yet another river with the inevitable “crossing” Here the river was about 500m wide which meant the water was shallower and less ferocious but we would be in it for a lot longer. None of us anticipated the depth as we approached the far bank. As we were short of shoes we crossed as usual in two groups with the wet shoes being ferried back for the second group. I was in the second group and we crossed the last (deep) stretch somewhat nervously with arms linked, all that was missing was an orchestra playing the theme tune from the film “The Sound of Music”. We really were getting dab hands at this river crossing! What we didn’t know was that the worst was to come!

We camped on a beautiful flat, level site occupied by dozens of semi-wild horses far enough from the river to deaden the sound- heaven!

A relatively late start as today was a short day. The day began with an easy stroll until we entered dense jungle. It began to rain and the sides of the gorge above the river steepened. We then had to cross areas where rocks had cascaded down from the cliffs above so we now had a mixture of wet slippery rocks, many unstable, at a steep angle hidden from view by the dense undergrowth. I found it a nightmare and didn’t manage to get even a few seconds of film footage. I’m assuming by the lack of photographs taken on this stretch of the journey that others felt the same. Gradually the sound of a river increased until it became an almost deafening roar. We burst out of the jungle and were confronted with a raging torrent.

Sasha wandered upstream and downstream looking for a suitable place to cross. Some of the porters arrived and did likewise. I dreaded the thought of having to turn back and face the jungle but the alternative, crossing the river, seemed just as bad. Eventually Sasha went for it and miraculously managed to cross without getting swept away into the main river a short distance downstream where chances of survival were nil!

One by one we crossed the lead ones throwing their trainers or sandals back for others to follow. Amazingly we all crossed without mishap, strange how concepts change, we were actually beginning to enjoy the excitement of these crossings and this was the best/worst yet! The going got easier, we crossed another river where only the first leap of faith caused concern, easy-peasy. A short break for lunch and we were off. The rain stopped, the sun came out to dry our wet clothes and the jungle had given way to woodland. In no time at all we were at our camp site.

The following day was amazingly short, maybe two hours but there was a sting in the tail. I've crossed some "bridges" in my time but "Heath-Robinson" was nothing on this one. It was about 15" wide and consisted of two rusty 6" pipes with mesh resting on top. There was a single length of equally rusty wire about 3' above the bridge on one side only that served as a handrail, sadly in places the mesh was missing leaving gaps for the unwary. The river was a boiling cauldron and over 15m wide. The only description one can use is "exciting" (maybe that should "terrifying"!).

We all survived and having passed two or three yurts, large circular tents common in Mongolia, giving an indication as to the ancestry of at least some of the locals, we met our transport. An hour later we were at the gates to Ala Archa National Park, our home for the next part of our "holiday".

Edelweiss had laid on a banquet, what we didn't eat was going up to our base camp. Sasha and Tanya tried to force large quantities of the heavier produce such as large water melons on to us and I'm sure some must have got ditched. Amongst our picnic goodies we found five bottles of Russian vodka that proved later to be of an excellent vintage (if vodka has a vintage!). These we stashed in our bags well out of the way of our porters!

The ascent (1200m) to our base camp was arduous but eventually we met our porters, who were wet through and cold as we had passed through heavy rain. It had been gloriously sunny when we set off and I guess they "took a flier"! It was time for them to leave us. We gave them a choice, their tip off me and a kiss of Natalie or vice-versa. You can guess which they chose, in fact one tried to go round for a second (kiss not tip). The photographs showed that Nat really enjoyed this part of the ceremony, rather too much in my opinion!

The site was rocky but level with a beautiful 30m waterfall as a backdrop. Beautiful but noisy, however we were getting used to falling asleep to the sound of rushing water! There was a rather large almost palatial building that included a sauna that as far as we could see rarely got used (although we did party in it one night with some Russian climbers, more of that later) plus several ramshackle shacks that some of the local guides favoured instead of tenting. Gaining the toilet involved a steep climb up glacial terrain with an even steeper descent down precipitous scree where two "long drops" could be seen. The older one stood at a crazy angle and was in a state of collapse, the more recent aluminium one was "not too bad" and few users had missed their aim. It was obvious that many climbers suffering from Delhi-belly had failed to make the descent as they had left messages to this effect on either side of the steep path. Replete with yet another excellent meal and with the contents of at least one bottle of vodka inside we retreated for a good nights sleep.

The following morning a few of us opted for some serious sunbathing (very serious in the case of Tanya who went topless!) while the younger and more athletic members took a 4 hour stroll onto the Uchitel glacier above our camp but hidden from view. The Russians arrived but in true English fashion we ignored them until they came across towards the end of our evening equipped with the inevitable vodka. Several of them spoke excellent English and we taught them some English folk dancing including the Okey Kokey plus some English folk songs such as “On Ilkley More Bar T’at”(well Yorkshire which is close). As it grew colder (and wetter) we retired to the deserted palatial building where the Russians education of the English way of life was extended even further by a display of bar diving by Natalie, a lecture on international relations by Ralph (that went down really well) and yet more folk songs and dances. One of the Russians was an excellent guitarist and their knowledge of Beetle’s songs far outstripped ours so the evening (well early morning) was an excellent one! On my arrival back in UK Stepan (their self-appointed leader) e mailed me to say that his English teacher was well impressed with the way his English had improved over the summer and that his knowledge of obscenities outstripped hers!

Pic Utichel (Teachers Peak) was the target for the day with seven of the group reaching the summit, a round trip of about 8 hours involving 1000m+ of ascent on the inevitable loose scree. In the afternoon we did some climbing on the easy angled rock behind camp- no easy task in winter boots. Rain brought an end to our frivolity.

Next day we had planned a session on another nearby glacier Ak-Sai where we practiced several crevasse rescue techniques until we got rained off. Needless to say it immediately brightened up but nevertheless we had achieved our objective. There were some impressive stone falls from the cliffs above the glacial moraine that rushed down the stone chute we had to cross to gain camp. We were to find out the following day that we had to ascend this moraine to gain the upper section of the Ak-Sai Glacier, above the ominous seracs, on the route to climb Pic Box).

Thursday, our last day before heading for civilisation. Eight members set off for Pic Box 4612m, about 1500 m above our camp. All succeeded despite finding the route strenuous, demanding and precipitous in places. The evening was spent with the Russians, consuming a copious quantity of vodka, with yet more folk dancing and singing. The night ended with a Russia versus UK arm wrestling competition with Ralph ending up as overall champion which had nothing at all to do with him being the self-appointed referee. The Russians claimed the decision was a result of subterfuge since one of their participants had been disqualified by the referee for wearing inappropriate dress for such an auspicious occasion, namely flowery beach shorts, but the referee upheld the original result. A return match next summer is a possibility since the Russians still smarting from their defeat threatened us with a visit to do some climbing and caving.

Friday and we headed down, which we found a darn site easier than going up! Our coach awaited us and once our porters arrived we set off for Bishkek. That evening the carnivores and omnivores set off to a local restaurant while the “veggies” remained behind only to find they couldn’t get a meal in the hotel as they only buy in food as required. They consoled themselves with the contents of the fridge.

Saturday morning we were introduced to our escort for the next part of our journey, yet another “Tanya”. Tanya proved to be an excellent tour guide with an incredible knowledge of just about everything including history, politics and just about everything else. All our searching questions were answered in immaculate English. As we changed our Kyrgyz *som* into Kazakh *tenge* Tanya looked on and checked each transaction meticulously, the guy in the booth scowled as she did so.. Having toured Bishkek we headed for Almaty in Kazakhstan, en route we encountered a minor problem. The Kazakh border guards said we could drive through with no formalities for 100 US\$. Tanya told them where to stick their offer, one look at her would have sent most guards running as she was of imposing assize and appearance. However these guards were not the least bit cowed, they said they were going to search all our luggage which would obviously take ages. To avoid this delay she paid them 20\$ so they searched the empty bus instead, a task that took about 1 ½ hours!

Our hotel in Almaty was amazing, certainly 5\*. Following a guided tour of the city with Tanya we returned to the hotel to learn the restaurant had finished serving. The hotel soon learned that Tanya would not be dissuaded by such trivialities so a meal was booked for 8pm, some went for a lie down, and others propped up the bar.

At 8 pm we met Tanya then moved on to the ENORMOUS restaurant modelled on a gigantic yurt, needless to say we were the sole occupants. The meal was excellent and was washed down with some excellent beer. We adjourned to the bar to find it closed! Tanya had retired what could we do? We hastily returned to the restaurant where we managed several rounds of drinks tipping the waitress with each round- the local currency was useless to us so she got all our remaining *tenge*.

Tanya met us in the lobby at about 4 am and escorted us to the airport. We thanked her profusely and said our goodbyes, she had made our last few ours in Central Asia as enjoyable and memorable as the rest of our trip.

A truly remarkable experience.  
Ralph