

# 'We stood where no one had been before'

Cooped up in a one-bed flat, Charlie Walker set himself a goal: climb an unclimbed mountain in Kyrgyzstan with a total stranger. What could go wrong?

The aged shepherd cradled his tea in gnarled hands and grinned back at me. We were sitting on the ground among some hills in north-east Kyrgyzstan. Upon our chance encounter he had produced a flask and a bag of past-its-prime bread. I was on a four-day hike to kill time until Marc arrived for our expedition.

"Where will you go next?" Tolkoï asked in Russian. "To the high mountains in Sarychat Ertash," I said.

His crinkly eyes gleamed. "Beautiful! Beautiful!" He gushed. "Many animals! Snow leopards and wolves and bears! And giant wild sheep with horns as long as your body!" "You've been?" I asked. "No." "But you know people who have?" "No."

Delight and ignorance: it was the same response as everyone I'd asked. Even Google was vague in its offerings on Sarychat Ertash; a remote fortress of towering peaks and hidden glaciers. The only maps were Soviet relics. I hardly even knew my expedition partner, Marc, whom I'd contacted via Instagram and only met for a quick dinner before departure. The expedition was planned over the phone. Our goal was simple: find an unclimbed mountain and reach the summit.

As I left Tolkoï and marched onwards, the expedition remained riddled with unknowns. How cold would it be? How far could we travel in a day? Would there be crevasses? What about avalanche risk?

So many questions with so few answers, but that was exactly what I wanted. As a professional adventurer living in a one-bed flat, I found myself craving wilderness, physical hardship and the thrill of the unknown. Marc arrived and we hurriedly sorted our gear. We needed everything to survive



a wintry fortnight in the Tien Shan mountains: ice axes, snowshoes, crampons, rope, stoves, polar sleeping bags and a grotesque supply of Kyrgyz salami (which I suspected to be horse). The next obstacle was finding a ride into the mountains. There was an off-limits road to a gold mine and after some heated bartering, a bullish man with a jeep – and no neck to speak of – drove us a clattering 60 miles up dizzying switchbacks.

He dropped us shortly before a security post and sped away. We were suddenly alone at 12,400ft altitude in a gaping white valley. The sky was a deep, crisp blue with cartoonish puffs of cloud. It was exactly the sort of vista I had been yearning for. We had under two weeks to find and summit a suitable peak, somehow cross a high mountain ridge and hike down to civilization. We loaded the sled, strapped on snowshoes and plodded into the unknown.

Nothing happens fast with a 7½s sled dragging behind you, but progress is slower still when each footstep falls through a rotten snow crust and sinks 12in. We took turns breaking trail and hauling the sled, but covered just two miles before the sinking sun and the plunging temperature forced us to pitch camp. While we stamped down a tent-sized area of snow into a firm platform, I wondered what Marc might be like as a tent companion. Would he snore or fart or get up thrice-nightly to pee?

After a dinner of mac and cheese with strips of suspect salami, we lay in our sleeping bags and discussed the plan. An enquiry to the Kyrgyz Alpine Club had informed us that pretty much all the peaks in the area were unclimbed and so we decided to head for the first promising one. Our slow progress wouldn't allow for dithering.

The flatulence-free -20C night gave way to a still, clear morning with a 360-degree prospect of jagged, jutting peaks. One particular mountain looked both appealing and achievable. Some careful pinpointing on a phone app placed it at 10 miles distance and a height of 15,750ft.

We trudged towards our target for seven hours and made base camp on a rare island of grass amid the snow. A

closer survey produced one potential approach: a ridge rose from nearby and ramped towards the snow-capped summit via a tricky spine of rock pinnacles.

We set off in the morning on a recce. The place was thoroughly criss-crossed with animal tracks. Most frequent were circling wolf prints and the nervously darting trails of their prey. But we also spotted huge feline paw prints. Sarychat Ertash is a nature reserve renowned for its wildlife. The Tien Shan mountains serve as a safe corridor between northern snow leopard populations in Russia, Mongolia and Kazakhstan, and southerly groups in the Karakoram and Hindu Kush. The rocky outcrops we were navigating could very well have housed one of nature's most evasive beasts.

Twenty-four hours later we had climbed to 14,500ft and hacked out a ledge for the tent on a steep snow slope. From this closer vantage point a vast serac loomed below the peak. We would have to work our way across this 330ft cliff of unstable ice. Daunted, we set an early alarm and slept with avalanche-haunted dreams.

By dawn more snow had fallen and the serac looked even more dangerously loaded. We held a discussion and agreed that proceeding would be foolhardy. The temptation was strong, but our primary



▲ 'We strapped on snowshoes and plodded into the unknown': the wilderness of Kyrgyzstan

▶ New dawn: this is the kind of vista Charlie had craved

▼ Fit for purpose: heavy equipment and the hard slog of climbing meant Charlie and Marc burned up to 5,000 calories per day



purpose was to have an adventure, not to reach a summit at any cost. For mountaineers, choosing to be sensible is often the harder course, but always the right one. The conversation was the first true test of our working relationship and I gladly deferred to Marc's greater experience. However, with time slipping away I did wonder if we had set an unrealistic goal for ourselves.

Two days later we had turned up an adjoining valley and been funnelled onto a 10-mile glacier with the tell-tale dimples of crevasses. Donning crampons and roping ourselves together, we began creeping up the ancient slug of ice. Should one of us plunge into an abyss, the other would jam an ice axe into the surface and try to arrest the fall. On several occasions I began to drop and braced for the worst, heart in mouth, only to stop after a metre having simply broken through a crust. As an experienced alpinist, Marc knew his glaciers but I was quietly terrified.

The jarring crash of rockfall punctuated otherwise silent days as we threaded a route through the crevasses. Our new base camp at the head of the glacier was the most sublime spot I've known. A lofty enclosure of virgin peaks was broken only by the pass to the north through which we could see 60 miles to the mountains marking Kazakhstan's border. By morning, 20in of fresh snow had settled and our alpine amphitheatre sparkled yet more majestically.

We explored a nearby mountain with a shark's tooth peak, probing high enough to deem the summit attemptable. We set another alarm and by first light were carving a trench through the snow under a clear, paling sky. The wind stiffened to a gale as we helped one

## Essentials

### ▶ Getting there

Flights to Kyrgyzstan are available through Pegasus Airlines, Aeroflot and Turkish Airlines. Prices start at £227 return

### ▶ Entry requirements

Kyrgyzstan is not on the red list, meaning fully vaccinated Britons can travel home without needing to enter quarantine; only one PCR test is required within 72 hours of landing in the UK. Kyrgyzstan accepts the NHS vaccination certificate for entry and imposes no quarantine or tests on vaccinated arrivals. UK citizens can travel to Kyrgyzstan visa-free for 60 days

another up a knife-edge ridge with an 2,600ft plummet to one side.

The climb culminated with a short bout of axe work before we stepped onto the summit together. The altimeter clocked 15,528ft and we shook hands before grabbing each other in a bear hug. It's an odd feeling standing where none have been before: invigorating yet somehow wholly unsurprising. I'll wager there are more places on earth where humans haven't set foot than where they have. It's said that Kyrgyzstan alone has over 6,000 unclimbed peaks. But with the wind chill threatening our long-numbed feet, we had little time for reflection.

Having bagged our mountain, it was time to get out of there and we continued to the pass in high spirits. But as we got closer we found a sheer cliff with no way down. We scouted two more potential passes and discovered two more lethal cliffs. It was a dead end. The realisation hit us hard: we had to retrace our 10-day outward route to the road but with just three days to catch our flight. To make matters worse, it was snowing heavily. Grim-faced, we roped up and marched back into the crevasse fields in a close whiteout.

When we finally pitched camp it was 15 hours since we set out to climb the mountain. We were now camped 3,280ft lower with Marc's smartwatch logging over 5,000 calories burned. But the dawn view made the slog worthwhile: a frozen river reflected the rising sun, shimmering silver-gold as it awaited passage to either the Indian or the Arctic ocean. It's always hard to tell which side of the continent water falls from the high heart of Asia.

With no time to spare we reached the road and turned ourselves in at the mine's security post. The bemused guards bundled us onto the next available vehicle. Eating our final scraps of food on the drive down, we felt satisfied.

With the vaguest of plans, we had charged into the unknown and reminded ourselves that while our outlooks shrivelled in our home offices, the world's wild places were still there, waiting to be explored.

## MORE ADVENTURES FOR (ALMOST) EVERYONE

**KYRGYZSTAN**  
It's for good reason that Kyrgyzstan's Tien Shan range translates literally as "the heavenly mountains". The country boasts some of the most dramatic and rugged landscapes on Earth where an intact nomadic culture thrives among turquoise lakes, sweeping steppes and primal forests. On the Wild Frontiers' tour you'll explore smoky

bazaars in Bishkek, ride horses across high alpine plains at Son Kul, sample the traditional delicacy of fermented horse milk and test yourself by trekking over a 13,500ft mountain pass. *Wild Frontiers* (020 8741 7390; [wildfrontierstravel.com](http://wildfrontierstravel.com)) offers a 15-day *Kyrgyzstan Explorer tour* for £1,935 pp, excluding flights. Trips depart in July and August 2022



▲ Mountain biking in the Atlas Mountains

**MOROCCO**  
Mountains, desert and a bicycle: these three ingredients combined are guaranteed to create an adventure to remember. The itchy-footed folks at Explore have created an itinerary that enables padded shorts enthusiasts to rattle down High Atlas roads, browse spice-scented souks and sleep under the stars. *Explore* (01252 884298; [explore.co.uk](http://explore.co.uk)) offers an



▲ New pal: hang out with lemurs in Madagascar

*eight-day Cycle Morocco tour* for £925pp, excluding flights. Trips depart on various dates through 2022

**MADAGASCAR**  
All too often overlooked, Madagascar lays claim to some of the most biodiverse environments on earth. And what better way to probe its canyons, waterfalls and renowned national parks than by foot? On Exodus Travels' itinerary, hikers can

drink in the unique landscapes, visit lemurs and climb the island's second highest peak before recovering on the beach. *Exodus* (020 3553 5015; [exodus.co.uk](http://exodus.co.uk)) offers the 10-day *Trekking in Madagascar tour* for £2,599pp, excluding flights. Departs August and September 2022. Overseas holidays are currently subject to restrictions. See Page 5