

In anticipation of another bad fire season, I made it a goal to get out of the country for the month of September. In late July, I texted four friends about the idea of heading to Kyrgyzstan for a climbing trip and within 48 hours, flights were booked. The team on this expedition included Adam Martos, Cedar Chistensen, Chris Farrah, Natalie Afonina, and myself, Tyler Karow. We planned absolutely nothing until ten days before departure, which turned out to be the minimum time to secure government permits to be in the Karavshin Valley near the border of Tajikistan. This is the same area Tommy Caldwell, Beth Rodden, and two others were kidnapped from their portaledge in 2001 but the war between Kyrgyzstan and radical Islamic Uzbeki rebels is over and the valley is now safe.

Our party of five linked up in San Francisco where we flew to Istanbul, Bishkek, and finally Osh. We scooped up an enormous amount of groceries and goodies from the Bazaar at this original Silk Road trading post city before spending the night and then hopping in a van and then two different SUVs for an eight hour journey on some wild mountain roads into the Karavshin. We spent the night camped next to a gold mining operation where we made friends with a cook who served us a bomb breakfast before hiking 22 km into the Ak-Su Valley that afternoon with a fleet of horses and donkeys. In under three days of being in this country literally halfway around the world, where basically no one speaks English, we managed to make it to our final destination with relative ease with our hundreds of kilos of gear and a total oversized baggage bill of a mere \$63. Our secret weapon on the trip was Natalie who speaks fluent Russian and has been to Kyrgyzstan twice before. She maneuvered us through this country of incredibly kind people while being asked her marital status at least once during the course of every conversation.

The trek in was beautiful and took us along a raging river that is the drainage of a series of glaciers just a few km up from our base camp. The trail was wild, containing plenty of sketchy bridges, sketchy cliff side walkways, and sketchy steep pathways located just above washed out sections that recently fell into the river. We made it to base camp tired and woke up the next morning to begin our first objective... ridding ourselves of the intestinal aliens that a few of us managed to pick up on our journey. Each of us felt some level of stomach misery but some certainly more than others.

On our third day in the Ak-Su, all five of us hiked up a massive, loose, and miserable talus field to the base of Peak Slesova aka the Russian Tower. This nearly 3000 foot big wall is reminiscent of El Cap and contains multiple first ascents by legends such as Conrad Anker and Alex Lowe. In 1995, Lynn Hill and Greg Child made the first free ascent of a line called Perestroika Crack which we thought would be a good first objective for the whole team. We set off on a three day mission in two parties that we switched up every day. On day one, Chris and I led the crew hauling our kit up to a bivy ledge half way up the wall. We encountered a low angle splitter crack that went on for 700 feet... by far the longest, most continuous splitter I've climbed in my life. The hauling on the route was a pain the first few pitches but rewarding as we were able to rig an improvised 150 foot zip line at one point for both the bags. Chris opted to take the free ride as well. On day two I joined Adam and Natalie as the angle of the route kicked up and the splitter cracks on perfect rock got steeper. I managed to onsight the route at 5.12- and topped out just below 14k feet in elevation with four amazing friends, unreal views, and a fat smile on my face. We descended back to the bivy ledge (which I want to officially name as Glasnost Ledge) in the dark and slept under one of the best night sky's I've seen for a second night. On day three we were delayed by some rope snagging issues but we eventually made it down to base camp in the early afternoon. We still had over ten days left in the valley and the expedition was already a success in our books.

Similar to my Alaska expedition earlier in the summer, the priority of this trip was gastronomy. We brought an abundance of wine, beer, vodka, fresh eggs (that shockingly mostly survived the way in), fresh vegetables and many other delicious foods and candy. The day after coming down from Peak Slesova, Natalie ventured across the river to negotiate the acquisition of a lamb from the local shepherd. For \$100

the entire animal was ours and the remaining four of us crossed the hip deep freezing cold water that rises high late in the day to observe/assist in the slaughtering, skinning, and partial butchering of our new lamb in a grassy field covered in fecal matter. We brought the cuts back across the river in a sack that was far from USDA Certified and started a fire to warm our completely numb feet and cook our racks of lamb. The next day, Chris and I were supposed to begin another multi day climb but fresh lamb was the priority so we opted to substitute in a day climb that resulted in a summit of formation called The Little Russian Tower via an eight pitch route with the whole crew. We came back to heaps of fresh bread baked by our new shepherd friends as they assisted us with the further butchering of our lamb. We ate kebab with bread and wine that night and Natalie made a stew with the remaining meat.

The original plan for the trip was for Cedar and I to attempt a free route on Peak Slesova called The American Way. Cedar is without a doubt the most naturally talented climber I've ever climbed with. The last day he climbed before this trip was way back in May when he linked up El Cap and Half Dome in a 27 hour push with Imanol Amundarian on a freshly broken heel but I wasn't worried as Cedar's head game is unreal and he can pretty much climb 5.13 off the couch. Unfortunately his knee and bowels were not doing too hot so we decided to reschedule for another year. Luckily, Chris had been eyeing a route on the other side of the valley with a tantalizing appeal. The route ascends the incredibly aesthetic southwest ridge of Kyrchchilta aka the peak of 1000 years of Russian Christianity, named so since it was first summited 1000 years to the day after the baptism of Russia.

We knew the route contained over 4000 feet of climbing and topped out at an elevation just below 15k feet but we had no idea how sustained it would be or how long it would take as our only information was a picture of the mountain with two lines overlaid (we assumed one was the rappel line). We packed bivy gear, eight liters of water total, food for 3 days (Chris will claim two), and plenty of nuts and cord to bail. We crossed the river at first light, waking the Shepards up as their incredibly well trained dogs barked at us passing their herd a bit too close for comfort. We roped up and began climbing many pitches of moderate alpine rock, the second carrying a heavy pack, occasionally jugging when the climbing got steep or difficult. It mostly didn't on day one and after 18 rope stretching pitches and 3000 feet of climbing (that Chris kindly let me lead the bulk of), we made it to a seriously bitchin bivy ledge. We awoke on day two and started up a steep buttress checking our phones excessively while zooming into our blurry photo to ensure we were on route. We encountered multiple pitches of quality and fun climbing up to 5.11- at a steep angle which allowed us to haul the heavy pack. After 14 more pitches, we made the summit in the late afternoon. We had climbed over 5000 feet with no fixed anchors which made this by far the longest and most committing route either of us had done. To our great relief, we managed to find the start of the rappels and then unloaded our packs at another bitchin bivy just below the summit for a high elevation attempt at sleep. Across the valley, we saw the headlamps of Adam, Cedar and Natalie on their own bivy ledge on Peak 3850 and gave them some headlamp flashes back just before we watched the full moon rise above them. The sun woke us the next morning and unfroze our water bottles as we began a series of 30 or so high anxiety inducing rappels into unknown alpine terrain. Rappelling in this style is incredibly stressful and is by far the worst part of climbing. Luckily, our ropes only got caught three times and we made it down by the mid afternoon for lamb stew.

After three summits and over 8000 feet of roped climbing in the Ak-Su Valley, my energy level and desire to harness up again went to near zero. I spent the remaining five days of our expedition in chill mode... staying in base camp mostly reading and eating. Highlights of chill mode include building an operable sauna, blowing up isobutane canisters and drinking vodka after shooting guns with some local kids who wandered into our camp looking for their cows. Eventually, our packers and their contingent of horses and donkeys rolled into the valley to kill the remainder of our vodka before leading us on the trek back into civilization the next morning. By the end of that night, we were back in a fancy hotel in Osh and then back

in Bishkek the next morning. We spent a couple days in Bishkek appreciating the purchasing power of the US dollar while living like kings and queens before dividing up and traveling to our respective next destinations.

#### Expedition Members:

Chris Farrah: Chris is an electrical engineer who hasn't worked in four years and has been my main big wall partner for the past two. We've climbed walls together from the deserts of Jordan to our familiar stomping ground in Yosemite valley. Chris is the muscle of the crew and has an insatiable appetite for wide climbing and sugar.

Adam Martos: Adam is another unemployed engineer, this time of the biomedical sort. Handsome and kind as can be, Adam is one of those people who you can never spend too much time with. In fact we ended up spending everyday together for two straight months last spring after both being forced to fly back from Spain due to covid.

Natalie Afonina: Natalie is; you guessed it, another unemployed engineer and general badass at literally anything she puts her mind to. Natalie has been to Kyrgyzstan twice before and speaks Russian. We met five years ago while looking for a random climbing partner in the gym in San Francisco. She was managing a robotics team for a self driving car company while living in her minivan behind the climbing gym. Like I said, badass.

Cedar Christensen: Cedar is the only non engineer on the trip and in fact has had zero formal education in his life, but he does claim to have a GED. Yet, Cedar is wise beyond his age and still manages to beat us all at chess consistently. Cedar and I have climbed extensively and he is without a doubt the most naturally talented climber I've come across. The dude climbs 5.13 off the couch and never complains about anything, often to his detriment.

Tyler Karow: Tyler is a civil engineer who has been living on the road, climbing and traveling full time for the past two years.