



The team on top of the world at Ala-Kul lake, north of Karakol (3560m)

IMPERIAL COLLEGE KYRGYZSTAN EXPEDITION

18th August - 16th September 2016

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EXPEDITION PLAN

Aims and Objectives

Our aim was to complete a fast, lightweight exploration of the Kyrgyzstan Tien Shan mountains, travelling through remote mountainous terrain through valleys and high mountain passes during the last week of August 2016 and the first 3 weeks in September 2016. The idea of the expedition was to make several 3-4 day excursions into the mountains around the 'Issyk Kul' lake, returning to the villages around the Lake each time to replenish stores and travel on to the next place. In this way we hoped to travel the whole way around the Lake, taking in a huge range of terrain and culture along the way.

Motivation: Why Kyrgyzstan/This Expedition?



Ala-Kul Lake (3560m)- the scenery was a definite motivation!

The team came together in a general wish to explore some remote, distant mountains with a similar ethos about how it should be done. All of the team know each other through various outdoor societies, and a number had competed with each other in mountain races.

After an initial meeting, Kyrgyzstan was suggested as a possible destination. The stunningly beautiful Tien Shan mountains represented a huge opportunity and challenge for the team whilst still not being ridiculously far from civilisation.

The area, although becoming more popular with Westerners, is still very rural, wild and traditional. Maps of the area are mainly Russian military maps from the Soviet era, and hiking trails are few and far between. The mountains are high and would give us a great introduction to high altitude walking, but travelling between the passes is completely achievable.

All in all, we decided Kyrgyzstan would provide a great mix of new and familiar, and a fantastic opportunity to extend and develop our skills.

Country Profile

Kyrgyzstan is a small, landlocked, mountainous country located in central Asia. The capital Bishkek is located in the north of the country. It has a rich cultural heritage, being part of the ancient Silk Road. There is a long history of nomadic culture in the country, however the traditional nomadic Kyrgyz life was significantly changed during the Soviet era. Until 1991, Kyrgyzstan was part of the former Soviet Union. Since its collapse, Kyrgyzstan has been struggling financially.

Both the British foreign travel advice and the German "Auswertiges Amt" (equivalent of foreign travel advice) advise general caution while travelling in Kyrgyzstan. Political demonstrations, which can occur in Bishkek, are to be avoided. The regions to the south-west, bordering Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have a risk of violence, but were far away from the planned routes. Generally roads are in poor condition and only trusted bus and taxi services are advised to be used.

Lake Issyk Kul is the second largest high altitude lake in the world and is located in the north east of the country, close the Kazakh border. In ancient times, it was a stopover on the Silk Road. It's name means 'hot lake' in Kyrgyz as it never freezes, due to its high salinity.

The Kyrgyz climate varies across the country but the Tien Shan mountains are temperate with hot summers in the valleys and freezing winters. However the 4000m passes are generally snow free towards the end of summer. For this reason we decided to organise our expedition in late August/early September when we would have the best chance of no snow on our routes.

Background

The aim of the expedition was to use 'fast packing' techniques to enable us to travel long distances over remote mountain terrain in a rapid fashion. These skills were extended and developed from those Ellie learnt in Iceland, and passed on and used by the rest of the group. We also incorporated everyone's own experience and skills of lightweight mountain travel, e.g in Mountain Marathons, which all of the team enjoy.

As discovered in Iceland, this was not to be a 'running' expedition- the approach was to aim to move swiftly and lightly through the mountains on foot, with complete self sufficiency during each of the separate mountain journeys.

The motivation behind the expedition was the ability to explore huge areas of remote mountain terrain without having to carry heavy bags and lots of cumbersome kit, but without compromising on safety. Not only would this make the experience much more enjoyable but it would also enable us to push into the much more remote mountain areas in shorter time, and get out faster, as we would be able to travel much further each day.

Details

We aimed to explore the mountains around the 'Issyk Kul' Lake in Kyrgyzstan through a series of 3-4 day mountain excursions that would allow us to travel deep into remote mountain territory for a short time before returning to the relative civilisation of the road and villages from the Lake. Whilst in the mountains, the team would be completely self sufficient, wild camping every night and carrying all food and kit including emergency food. Upon returning to the Lake we would travel to the next starting location by public transport and refill our food supplies, before heading off into the mountains again. This would allow us to only carry necessary food for each excursion, with the aim of keeping pack weight down.

The nature of the expedition meant that we would never be more than 1.5/2 days from civilisation. However, since we planned to move quite rapidly, this could represent quite a large distance. The middle day(s) were arguably the most dangerous since we would either have quite a heavy pack closer to the start or low food supplies closer to the end, and we would be furthest away from civilisation. Our contingency plan, detailed below, explored options if an incident were to occur in this scenario.

We planned to cover up to a 40km each day and around 110km over 4 days. We aimed to carry lightweight bags with a maximum weight of around 8kg.

Planned Itinerary

A day-to-day outline of the planned expedition is outlined in the table below. Detailed tour plans can be found in Appendix A. The contingency days included at the end allowed for travel complications, weather and other unforeseen events. Should these days not be required, the team aimed to use this time to travel around Bishkek area until flying back (e.g. Ala Archa national park south of Bishkek).

Day	Comments
1	Arrive in Bishkek Airport, transfer to Bishkek
2	Bishkek - organise last items essential for the expedition
3	Travel from Bishkek - Cholpon-Ata
4 - 6	Cholpon-Ata Tour
7	(Rest day) Travel from Cholpon-Ata to Karakol
8-11	Karakol Tour
12	(Rest day) Travel from Karakol to Barksoon
13 - 16	Torsor Pass Tour
17	(Rest day) Travel from Barksoon to Kong Sul Lake
18 - 20	Kong Sul Lake Tour
21	Travel from Kong Sul Lake to Bishkek
22 - 24	Contingency days (otherwise used to travel around Bishkek area)
25	Fly back to Europe

THE TEAM

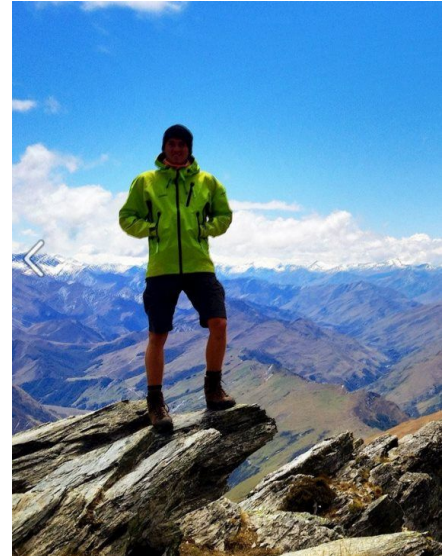
Andi (Team Leader)

Name: Andreas Fieber

Age at expedition: 23

Nationality: German

I just started my PhD after completing my MEng in Civil Engineering at Imperial. I have been involved with the Outdoor Club (Treasurer and Secretary) as well as the Melbourne University Mountaineering Club during my exchange year. I spend every spare minute climbing, Mountain Biking, trekking, trail running or doing any other outdoor related activity.



My experiences include:

- 2 Mountain Marathons (OMM 2013 and 2015)
- 2 Trail Marathons (Welsh Trail Marathon Series 2014, 2015) and one road marathon (3hrs 17min - Melbourne, 2014)
- Climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro (5895m) and Acatenango Volcano (3880m)
- 4 years trad and sport climbing experience
- Week-long solo-trek through Scottish highlands
- Numerous multi-day treks and hikes (e.g. West MacDonnell Ranges, Australia)
- Completed Welsh 3000 in 8hrs 30min.
- BMC Student Safety Seminar (2013, Plas-y-Brenin, Wales)
- Backpack travelling (e.g. Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Tanzania, Ghana)
- Organised 3 week trekking trip to New Zealand.
- Organised 2 Outdoor Club Easter Tours (Turkey and Greece)
- 2 weeks Mountainbiking in the Alps
- Munich to Barcelona cycling trip

Ellie (First Aid/Medical Officer and Logistics)

Name: Eleanor Johnstone

Age at expedition: 21

Nationality: British

I'm a third year maths student and current Fellwanderers president. I lead groups in the mountains every other week and on the other weekends normally go back to the mountains to go running/hiking etc. I have good experience of hiking/running in most national parks in the UK through all seasons/weather/terrain. I enjoy fell running, orienteering, scrambling, a bit of casual climbing and big long days out on the hill and am very excited about the prospect of exploring the mountains in Kyrgyzstan.



Experience includes:

- 3 weeks fastpacking in Iceland (supported by the Board, 2015)
- Mountain marathons (Highlander 2014, 15, 16, OMM 2014, RAB 2015, Peaks Mini 2016)
- AL (long and hilly!) fell races e.g. Yorkshire Three Peaks, Edale Skyline, Borrowdale
- 35 + mile races/runs in Lakes/Brecons/Peak District
- Trekking abroad includes Italy (Apuan Alps), Slovenia and the Pyrenees, hiking above 3000m
- Winter walking includes Cairngorms, Skye, Trossachs and Snowdonia and a winter mountaineering skills course in the Cairngorms (Jonathan Conville Trust, run by Plas-y-Brenin)
- Other orienteering experience includes a couple of SLOW events e.g. Surrey Hills and night orienteering
- Hiking regularly all over UK inc remote terrain e.g. Fisherfield horseshoe, Cairngorms and often leading groups of up to 30 people with university trips
- Outdoor and Expedition level first aid (Marlin)

Joss (Logistics)

Name: Jocelin Knight

Age at expedition: 21

Nationality: British/Australian

I have been a keen runner, hiker and orienteer for many years and I have more recently discovered the joys of longer mountain marathon style events. A passion for the outdoors and for exploring has driven me to travel independently to several countries to undertake outdoor pursuits from surfing to hiking and orienteering. This same enthusiasm led me to the field based discipline of geology, which I am in my third year of studying.



Experience:

Outdoors and Travel-

- I have good fitness through competitive mountain running, cross country running, orienteering and hockey.
- I competed in the OMM mountain marathons for 2014 and 2015, finishing 6th in the D course and 2nd in the medium score respectively.
- Regular hiking and climbing. Ten Tors 55 mile team hiking challenge on Dartmoor over two days in sixth form.
- Independently organised outdoor trips to Morocco and the Pyrenees including a multiday hike culminating in reaching an international orienteering event.
- I have undertaken 6 weeks of taught geological fieldwork in Britain and abroad and 6 weeks of independent fieldwork, geologically mapping a mountainous region south of Montgenevre in the French Alps. This involved walking up 400 - 700m of elevation with backpacks almost every morning for the six weeks before spending the day in the field. The terrain there covered elevations between 2000 and 3000 metres.
- Two days of fieldwork first aid for my course with Marlin Training (unaccredited).

Khoa (Treasurer)

Name: Khoa Dang Nguyen

Age at expedition: 23

Nationality: Vietnamese

I am a 4th year Computing student and a keen hiker and mountain engineering. After joining the Outdoor Club during his second year, I have been involved heavily in the club's activities and has taken the roles of Secretary and Webmaster for this academic year. Having started trail running last year, I have managed to finished 4 marathons in just over 4 months time in which I have developed his technical running and navigation skills.



Relevant experience:

- 2 Mountain Marathons (Rab + OMM 2015)
- 1 Trail Marathon (Welsh Trail Marathon Series 2015)
- London to Cambridge Challenge Marathon 2015
- Running Tour de MontBlanc track in 4 days (highest point around 2600m)
- Winter hiking, climbing in Norway
- Climbing in England, Greece, Vietnam
- BMC Student Safety Seminar (2014, Plas-y-Brenin, Wales).

PLANNING, PREPARATION AND TRAINING

Contingency Plan

In our day by day itinerary we detailed escape routes for each day, which were escape routes to the nearest point of shelter/civilisation where we could contact and wait for Mountain Rescue if needed (details about Mountain Rescue are below).

In addition, we planned to always be carrying emergency food and the nature of the expedition meant that we were not 'locked' into a long route, so if there were problems on one of the routes we could delay, or if necessary skip, the next 4 day 'stage'. We also gave ourselves a large buffer at the end of the trip before our return flights; not only did this give us security for an incident on the last stage, but it also would allow us time at the end of the expedition to really explore the unique culture of Bishkek and its surroundings.

We also needed to consider a contingency plan for getting out of the country in the event of political upheaval or civil unrest of a similar nature. Kyrgyzstan became independent following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and since then has undergone much political instability, revolts, protests, violence and poverty. However, since the election of the current president Almazbek Atambayev in 2011, the country has been much more peaceful- in particular the Issyk Kul area is a very popular tourist area in Kyrgyzstan, and is therefore more economically stable and peaceful.

The British Embassy for Kyrgyzstan is located in Bishkek and this is where we planned to go in event of a political situation. They provide a telephone number for emergencies which we would be able to call with our satellite phone. There is also a Vietnamese embassy (Khoa) and a German embassy (Andi) with similar information online.

Training

Cairngorms Trip

The team took the opportunity of Ellie's hiking club Spring Tour to the Cairngorms to organise a whole team training trip. The trip included running round the forest at Glenmore, battling 60mph winds and rain and a trip over to the Corrour Bothy before returning via the Devil's Point and following the munro ridge line along to Braeriach. It provided a great opportunity for the team to test out some of the kit they were planning to bring to Kyrgyzstan, and to spend some time together out on the hill. The weather certainly gave all our gear a thorough testing before the sun eventually came out!

Kilian's Classik

Andi and Khoa ran the Kilian's Classic trail race on the first Saturday of July, a testing 45km through the the Pyrenees Mountains between 1600m and 2600m altitude. Andi smashed it coming in joint 8th with fellow IC trail runner Simon and Khoa also put in a really strong performance. It was a solid preparation for the 2000m plus altitudes in Kyrgyzstan.

GR20

After Kilian's Classik, Khoa went to Corsica for the GR20. It is a 180 km long footpath that crosses the Mediterranean island from Calenzana to Conca. Khoa quickly realised Corsica was unlike any other trails he had done before; it consists of rocky terrain and big boulders which required good scrambling and navigation skills. After 10 days, he managed to finish the northern part at Vizzavona and enjoyed a day at the beach in Porto-Vecchio. The journey was not only a great experience for Khoa but also provided us with some insights about the food and kit for the expedition.

Highlander Mountain Marathon

Joss and Ellie competed as a team in the score class of the Highlander Mountain Marathon, in Glen Affric. This is a 2 day event in the Scottish Highlands combining orienteering, fell running and mountaineering, and involves pairs of runners navigating through the hills to find checkpoints scattered around the mountainside. The 'fast and light' approach to swift movement through the mountains matched the ethos that we hoped to employ in Kyrgyzstan so this was great training. We had a brilliant weekend, helped along by the perfect weather- blue skies and sunshine galore!



Enjoying beautiful weather and stunning inversions at the Highlander

Other training

Aside from team training events, the whole team also ran regularly both in London and in the hills, as well as lots and lots of long days hiking, with the aim of building up good fitness and

endurance in preparation for the expedition. Time on the legs was key. We also tried to carry kit wherever possible so lots of little wild camping trips were useful here.

Language

Kyrgyzstan's official language is Kyrgyz although Russian remains widely spoken. Before the expedition, we focused on trying to learn some Russian as this is the more easily accessible language in terms of learning materials, and learning. There are several mobile applications and textbooks available to learn Russian. Duolingo provided a great platform for studying keywords, common phrase and pronunciation. Textbooks such as Russian for Dummies were also helpful as we definitely felt like dummies trying to interpret the Cyrillic! We also made sure we got a Russian phrasebook ready for the inevitable situation when we would have to try to communicate in a mix of Kyrgyz/Russian/sign language and would be looking wildly around for anything that might help us.

Medical/First Aid

Before departing from the expedition, Andi, Joss and Khoa participated in a 16 hour Outdoor Fieldwork First Aid course, run by Marlin training. The course covered applying first aid in remote/outdoor situations, common outdoor injuries/illnesses, and an introduction to altitude mountain sickness. Ellie had completed the Outdoor Course last year, and in addition had completed the 16 hour Expedition First Aid course, which covered administering medicines on expeditions, dealing with incidents where help may be several weeks away and advanced skills such as injections and suturing. Ellie refreshed her skills from these courses before the expedition by re-reading the expedition manuals and reading various papers on expedition medicine and altitude mountain sickness.

The team had to prepare the medicine and first aid kit that they would take on the expedition. For the medicines, Ellie used the expedition first aid manuals and various papers on expedition medicine (the BMC was very useful here) to decide on taking a range of antibiotics, as well as some strong prescription painkillers and altitude sickness medicine. The first aid kit was designed to be fully comprehensive to cover all situations, and each group member also took their own small personal first aid kit. A full list of the items in the first aid kit can be found in Appendix B.

In addition, before the trip the team researched hospitals and medical facilities in Kyrgyzstan. These are also detailed in Appendix B.

Mountain Rescue

Before leaving, we made contact with the Kyrgyz mountain rescue team to let them know about our trip and to find out about their rescue services in the Kyrgyz mountains.

The Mountain Rescue Service is based in Bishkek and is specialised in mountain rescues. This service has no permanent staff, but has agreements with experienced climbers and mountaineers that will perform the rescue. Helicopter rescue is available. However, rescue will only be provided with a written payment guarantee, including an insurance that covers mountain activities in Kyrgyzstan. This was covered by the team's BMC insurance. The Mountain Rescue Service needed to be contacted around 2 weeks prior to the expedition's arrival in Kyrgyzstan to provide details of the expedition, with itinerary, dates and group details. Upon arrival in Bishkek, the original medical insurance documents had to be passed to the Mountain Rescue Service (via the Kyrgyz Alpine Club). After the trip ended, the service had to be informed about the team's safe return.

In case of emergency, a satellite phone would allow the team to contact the Mountain Rescue Service from all planned routes.

Logistical Planning

Kit planning/checks

Before leaving for the expedition we made sure to test all our kit and get used to carrying it. We made a database of all the kit we were each going to take, to make sure there were no gaps (especially useful with four people), and before we left we did a full pack and kit check to make sure everything was present and that everything fit in our bags!

Food

In terms of food, we bought all the food for the hiking beforehand and imported it into Kyrgyzstan. This was because we wanted to take lightweight freeze dried food and Clif Bars which aren't available to buy in Kyrgyzstan. We researched food importation laws and also created a sign that we could leave with our drop bag of food we weren't carrying, to make sure it stayed safe.

Accommodation

Finally we researched accommodation options beforehand but the only accommodation that we pre-booked was the hostel in Bishkek, so that we could go straight there from the airport. This was helpful as we had somewhere to go straight away in an unfamiliar country.

Risk Assessment

We prepared a full risk assessment for our expedition proposal and interview with the expedition board. This covered all potential incidents that might occur, and outlined an action plan for dealing with them. The full risk assessment can be found in Appendix C.

Maps

The only cartographic maps of the area are Soviet military maps made before 1991, which have the disadvantage of being slightly dated but the advantage of being freely available online. A limited selection of edited and laminated versions of these Soviet maps are sold by Stanfords in London. These only cover the main tourist routes and not in any greater detail than 1:200000 though. As such, we could only use these for the Karakol and Ala-Archa national park routes as well as larger scale planning of the whole trip. For the rest of the proposed routes we used a free app available on android, Soviet Military Maps, to download 1:50000 map images and stitched them together, using the vector graphics programme Inkscape, to produce a series of relatively detailed maps. We had these printed on tough waterproof paper and laminated by BML Print, who specialise in printing orienteering maps. They worked extremely well, withstanding folding and water with no need for a map case.

Once in Kyrgyzstan we decided to change our itinerary in response to local advice. Luckily we were able to buy maps from a shop in Bishkek. These were relatively large scale versions of the soviet maps but contained enough detail for the simple navigation required in the mountains north of Song Kul. They had been edited with some basic updates to tracks and yurt camp locations.

For planning, the most useful tool was undoubtedly Google Earth. It allowed us to draw planned routes and calculate the elevation gain, altitudes and distances. The high resolution satellite imagery available in most, but not all, of the areas we planned to go to was incredibly useful for getting an idea of the terrain, checking for snow and ice cover in summer images and checking the feasibility of different proposed routes.

It should be noted that despite using various sources, we still encountered some errors in the maps. For example, the path we wanted to take to cross a pass to Lake Ala-Kul during the Karakol route was drawn in a wrong valley and hence caused confusion among us. Luckily we had enough contingency plans and alternative routes so that this did not cause any major problems.

THE EXPEDITION



After much planning and preparation, we were ready to go!

Changes to Original Itinerary

Following the advice of local guides, we quickly established that we would change our itinerary slightly. The details of this are listed below:

- Skip the Cholpon-Ata tour. We had been told that the mountains behind Cholpon-Ata were not as beautiful compared to the south shore mountains of Issyk Kul. Furthermore, with the international nomad games in Cholpon-Ata, finding accommodation would have

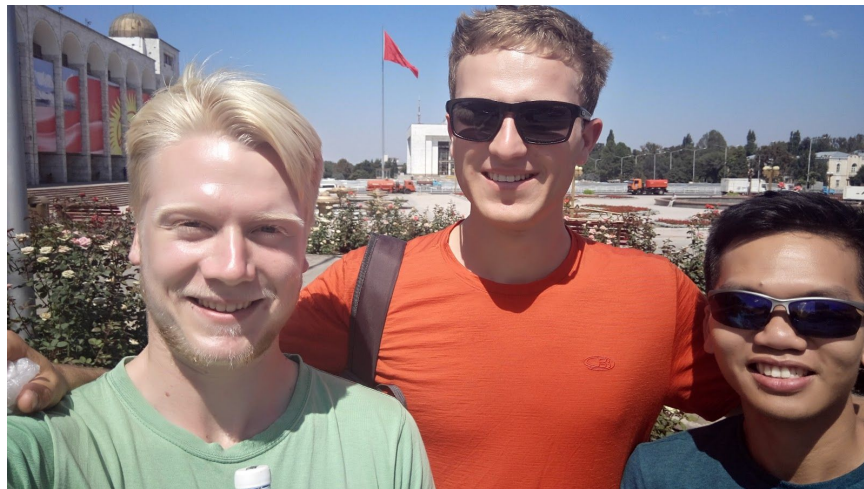
been difficult. To compensate the now spare days in our itinerary, we increased the duration of the Song Kul and Karakol tours (see below).

- Song-Kul tour became the first of our mini trips as there is a direct marshrutka from Bishkek to Kochkor. Furthermore there was a good weather window for 5 days there. Finally, we thought that circumnavigating the lake would be great acclimatisation for the more challenging routes that would follow.
- The Song Kul tour was lengthened by two days to include an additional 1.5 days to start from Kyzart pass towards the north of Song Kul and a contingency day to use for horse trekking at the lake.
- The Karakol tour was changed into a A-to-B tour (as compared to a closed loop), finishing at thermal hot springs in Altyn Arashan, the parallel valley to the east of Karakol valley.
- We added 3 days of trekking in Ala-Archa national park south of Bishkek since we did not need the planned contingency days.

Expedition logbook

Day 1 - Friday, 19th August

Joss, Khoa and Andi departed from London Gatwick on Thursday evening and, after a short stopover in Istanbul, arrived early in Bishkek Friday morning. With all of us not needing a visa to enter Kyrgyzstan, immigration was fast and straightforward. It was reassuring that the luggage also made the journey with us. A taxi ride with a young crazy driver eventually got us to Boorsok hostel - our “basecamp” for the next 4 weeks. Even though we were all quite tired, we didn't stay long in the hostel and started exploring the city. The first stop was the CBT office. *Community Based Tourism* offices are the tourist information centres in all major cities in Kyrgyzstan and provide useful information regarding hiking, horse trekking and accommodation and after talking to the locals we realised that we should change our plans. Quickly we scrapped the Cholpon-Ata tour and extended the Song Kul hike. Given the good weather forecast for Song Kul, we also reversed the order of our walks. We also found out about hot springs in Karakol, leading to a slight change in plan for the tour there. The day ended with our first taste of Kyrgyz food by randomly ordering dishes from the Russian menu.



The team in Bishkek at the start of the expedition

Day 2 - Saturday, 20th August

Today's only mission was to obtain camping gas in Bishkek. Sounds like a simple mission, but with our limited Russian and the yet new marshrutka (fixed taxi minibus) system in Bishkek it became a day's mission. It started by us taking the right bus, in the wrong direction. This was actually a good detour as the bazaar we ended up at had brilliant peaches and was one of the more exciting sites in Bishkek. Next we took a random marshrutka in, sort of, the right direction. We got off at the train station. After some walking, we found *Alex*, a skiing and camping shop in south Bishkek. Stocked up with gas, we headed back into the city centre and eventually found the mountain rescue office after the second attempt. Afterwards we headed to the famous Osh Bazaar, a large market that is best described as organised chaos.



Exploring Bishkek

Day 3 - Sunday, 21st August

Ellie arrived with the same flight that the guys took just 3 days later. The guys went to pick her up from the airport, managing to find the correct marshrutka from the city, asking around in broken Russian - a thorough success we thought. After having let Ellie rest and settle in a bit, we went for another exploration tour of Osh Bazaar. This time we tried (not so yummy) salty yogurt balls, nuts and dried fruit. With Ellie falling asleep due to jetlag and Khoa being taken out by a bad stomach, Joss and Andi went to try the trendy restaurant recommended by the hostel.



Osh Bazaar in Bishkek.

Day 4 - Monday, 22nd August

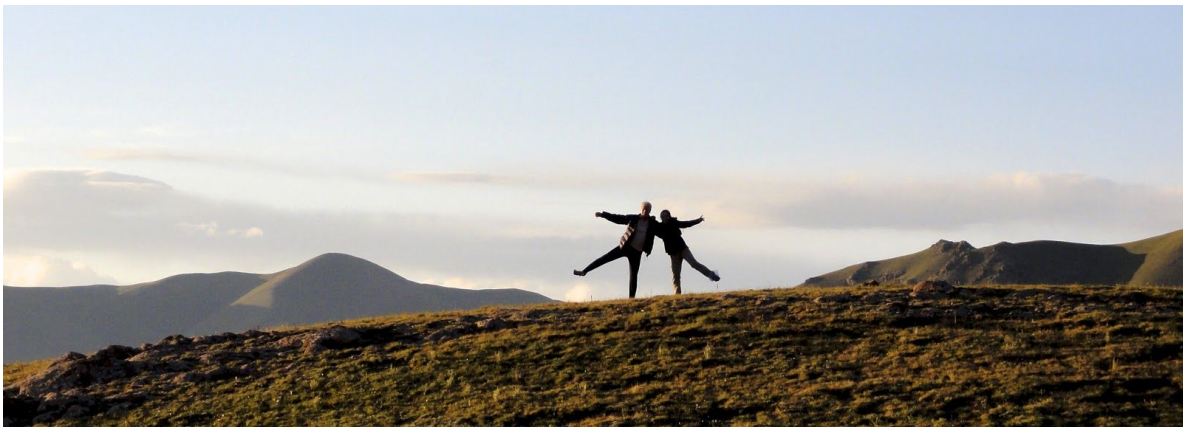
After having spent enough days in Bishkek which, quite frankly, isn't a very exciting city, the expedition really began and we headed out to our first tour - Song Kul. A three hour marshrutka ride took us from the western bus station in Bishkek to Kochkor. Khoa was not enjoying the ride with his stomach still causing troubles, but other than that it was a beautiful drive through incredible landscape. Again, the Kyrgyz driving style did not exactly make us feel comfortable and safe, especially when a minibus was overtaking a BMW X5 around the outer bend (fair play to him though!). Eventually we got dropped in the middle of a lively town and instantly taxi drivers were offering to drive us to "Song Kul, Song Kul" or "Kyzart, Kyzart". However, first on our to-do list was to deposit our bags. We quickly found the CBT office and with no problem managed to safely store our bags. A friendly guide, Anantur, approached us (in English!) and we agreed upon the price for a ride to Kyzart pass. The one hour drive took us deeper into the mountains. Kyzart pass is the starting point for a 2-3 day horse trek to Song Kul and consists of a small trailer restaurant in the middle of nowhere. We gladly accepted the guide's invitation to some fried fish, since we knew the next few days would consist of freeze-dried food and energy bars. However, chatting to Anantur over the meal, it seemed that all the fish from Song-Kul is now being caught with huge trail nets and the population of fish in the lake is depleting rapidly, which was worrying. A beautiful camp spot in a small saddle point was the perfect start to the upcoming expedition. Andi went for a short trail run up the mountains we were heading for the next day. A local farmer on a donkey passed our camp site and Ellie took the opportunity to ride the donkey.



First camp spot and Ellie is already making local friends.

Day 5 - Tuesday, 23rd August

The first day of walking started at a moderate time. Ellie was still slightly jetlagged and fell asleep again. We awoke to fresh powder snow surrounding the tent and the gas canister was struggling slightly. After a good breakfast we finally started walking and it felt great. We headed up the first steep pass and met a group of horse trekkers. Khoa was still not at 100% and we redistributed some of the weight from his bag. The day continued with beautiful views of snow covered peaks, lush river valleys, occasional yurts and many wild horses. The landscape was very classically central-Asian with wide, rolling hills in browns and greens, and huge views. Lunch at a river provided a welcome refreshment in the heat of the day. When we tried to fill up the water from the river using the filtration pump, we quickly realised we had a major problem - silt. The pump would instantly clog up and become difficult to operate. It was good that we had chlorine tablets with us as well. During the afternoon we passed another small yurt camp and continued up the next valley. We knew that behind the next pass we should be able to see Song Kul already, yet decided to camp before the pass to give Khoa time to recover fully. As we set up the tents, it started to rain and dark clouds were pulling over us, but luckily the proper storm just missed us and within no time the sun was shining again. We had dinner on a perfect view spot over the whole valley, enjoying the evening sun until the last moment.



Best restaurant around, Mountain House dinner in the mountains. Sunset selfie and poses.

Day 6 - Wednesday, 24th August

We had been really lucky with the weather so far and the sunshine continued. By 7:30am the sun had warmed up the tents and it was shorts and t-shirt weather. We quickly climbed the last 500 vertical metres to the pass and there it was - Song Kul lake. The view was stunning. Unfortunately we had to share it with a group of horse trekkers and so we decided to not follow the path, but the natural ridge line to a better view point before heading down to the shore. On our way down, we met the guide that had driven us to Kyzart pass. After being happy to recognise us again, he mentioned something about lunch in a yurt, which was exactly what we needed to hear to complete the last hour of walking to the shore with no problem. As the valley opened out, we saw the yurts from far away and it was exactly how we imagined this area of Kyrgyzstan to be. The nomadic lifestyle was still present, even if the majority of yurts are now only used for tourism purposes. The yurts village was very busy, with tourist horse trekkers from all over the world as well as nomadic families. What the guide forgot to mention was that the so called lunch was actually a banquet. Bread, different jams, cheese, salad, potatoes with ragout, sweets - we ate it all. It was by far the best meal we had during our trip. We also tried Kymis, the infamous fermented mare's milk, Kyrgyzstan's national drink. Like the cheeseballs from Osh bazar, we tried it and kindly declined the second round. During the afternoon, we walked another 20km along the shoreline to reach a beautiful camp spot on top of a headland overlooking the whole lake- our first camp above 3000m. The lake was shimmering below us, sparkling blue and endless. While making dinner, we had come to the conclusion that the pocket rocket stoves we brought need to be screwed on extremely tight to function properly, as we were already worried that the first gas canister was coming to an end after a mere 2 days of walking. A quick dip in the lake completed a perfect day.



Our first view of Song Kul was definitely not the worst view we had.

Day 7 - Thursday, 25th August

Today was a long day of walking around the shores of Song Kul. Orientation was easy, water on the left, mountains in the far distance on the right, and the bags felt a lot lighter now that half the food was gone. In one way the days of walking in such vast countryside become quite monotonous and tiring, yet at the same time they showed us the typical scenery that makes the high region around Song Kul so special. Parts of the day we followed the road, and for as far as we could see the dirt road led our way. However, we also had a few unfriendly encounters with yurt dogs that felt like they had to protect their home by all means. This is when Andi was happy that the others all took trekking poles to keep the dogs at distance. It also proved more difficult than expected to gather water from the lake: on this side, the edges of the lake were like a swamp, so the water seemed very stagnant which was worrying. We eventually found a clearer part, but still used the pump and filtration tablets. Other than that, the day came to a peaceful end with a camp spot in the wide open prairie. A little stream allowed us to freshen up and for sunset we were joined by a group of horses.



Long straight roads around Song Kul were compensated by beautiful wild camp spots.

Day 8 - Friday, 26th August

A similar day as yesterday with long stretches of flat road, tracks and grass around the remaining shore of Song Kul. At the river crossing (thankfully over a bridge) we filled up water and found some small rock outcrops that looked like promising bouldering problems. However, the rock was of such poor quality that we didn't risk any injuries and decided to continue. We also saw lots of nomadic shepherds going about their work on the shores of the lake. It was interesting that in the herds of horses that we saw, there were often one or two that were hobbled (front legs tied together). It turns out that these are the mares that are giving milk (Kymis), and they are hobbled to stop them walking too far away. We saw large rain clouds over the lake but luckily the worst missed us. You could see the weather forming from miles away because the lake was so vast, so i was quite ominous walking along with huge dark bands of cloud sweeping across the water on our left! Strong winds made us practice our streamline formation walking- it turns out that Ellie is a useless windshield. Towards the end of the day, we were hoping to see the yurt camp behind each bend and eventually we finished our first tour! We found a friendly camp somewhere in the middle of this little "town" where we organised a horse trekking tour for the following day. The evening settled to a quiet end as we set up our tents a couple of hundred metres away from the yurts. However, the night was anything but quiet, with a donkey (or cow, or horse) making loud noises that kept us awake for a while.



Evening atmosphere in camp at Song Kul.

Day 9 - Saturday, 27th August

Ellie's big horse riding day! We packed up the tents, headed back down to yurt camp and got welcomed by a small second breakfast. It took a while until all the horses were ready, so long that one of the horses also had enough of waiting and managed to unleash itself from the pole. No problem for horse whisperer Ellie who brought the horse back. Eventually we all had our horses and we headed up into the mountains behind the lake. The guys were struggling at first, with the horses taking us for a ride as compared to Ellie and the guide who took the horses for a ride. A small, but important difference. We passed by isolated yurts until we reached the end of the valley and walked the last few metres to reach a small trickling waterfall. The refreshment was welcome before we started to head back the way we came. Being more confident on the horses, we even started small races on the way back, galloping native-style across the wild open prairie shouting "choo, choo!" as the horses raced back. Back in the yurt camp we enjoyed a small rest and the last moments at Song Kul before starting an unforgettable drive back to Kochkor. The dirt road started off as tracks in the grass next to the shore but eventually turned into a full mountain pass climbing higher and higher - which was worrying, as we knew Kochkor was well below Song Kul. The 3000m descent followed promptly and the views did not disappoint. We just hoped that the brakes were in good condition and enjoyed the scenery. On our way we stopped to see an incredible eagle take off, with a wingspan of what must have been over 2.5 metres. In Kochkor, our driver (who also guided us on the horse trek) brought us into a small local hostel and we thanked him for an incredible day. The hot shower in the hostel and the Boso Lagman (fried noodles and vegetables) later that day completed the perfect day.



Horse riding through beautiful high plateau valleys close to Song Kul.

Day 10 - Sunday, 28th August

This travel and regeneration day started with a 10/10 breakfast in the hostel. We had everything from rice pudding with jams (have we mentioned the jams in Kyrgyzstan were incredible?), bread, eggs and more. Exactly what we needed for a long day of “walking*” *Travelling in a marshrutka. Our journey to Karakol began with a 1.5 hour taxi ride to Balykchy on the shores of lake Issyk Kul. There was a noticeable change in scenery from dry arid mountains to the green and lush shores of Issyk Kul. At the chaotic bus stop in Balykchy we quickly found our marshrutka to Karakol (half of the buses went to Bishkek, the other half to Karakol or Cholpon-Ata, so not exactly difficult). While waiting for the minivan to fill up all the seats, Andi and Joss tried their Russian skills by talking to a drunk local. Turns out we had improved a bit. It was a surprise that the drunk man was not the driver, because the ride to Karakol was basically a suicide drive. Overtaking everyone at 120km/h on poor quality roads was an experience none of us needed again. In Karakol, we found EcoTours, a friendly tourist agency specialised in outdoor activities where we could easily store our base camp bags for the next trip. After a quick dinner in Karakol, we took a taxi to Jeti Oguz, which translates to seven cows in Kyrgyz – the name is based on an interesting rock formation formed of seven bumps. We walked up the track into the valley to get a good head start for tomorrow’s hike. We noticed that the scenery was vastly different to Song-Kul- much more alpine and rocky. A small grassy bank next to the river was not the best camp of the trip but we were tired enough to not care. It also turned out that Khoa forgot his toothbrush, so finger-toothbrush it was for him for the next 5 days.



Travelling in a 'marshrutka'

Day 11 - Monday, 29th August

An early start in the cold valley was brightened by a great warm breakfast. It could have been this morning, or another one, when we experimented by adding oats the Mountain House custard and fruits – a great combination full of energy. We headed up the main Jety Oguz valley, past the Telety valley where we planned to head up the following day, and aimed to get to the base of the Ajlanysh glacier below several 4800m peaks. A deep, rutted logging track soon gave way to a nice trail through pine forest, with the valley walls up above very rocky and steep. The last few kilometres proved to be more tricky and at a river crossing we decided to leave our bags behind. Ellie decided to stay with the bags as the glacial river was very strong and fast flowing and she is by far the shortest/lightest of the group. After a good 40 minutes, we reached an open valley with a stunning view of the ice walls behind and forests along the valley sides. As we backtracked our way down the valley, it started to rain slightly. We met some Dutch backpackers who wanted to get some drone footage of the valley, but given the change in weather they decided to take shelter under trees. In the evening, we headed up a couple of hundred metres into the valley that brought us to the bottom of tomorrow's Telety pass. We shared an idyllic camp spot next to the river with a Polish couple and enjoyed the evening next to the fire. The only incident was that Andi melted one of his flip-flops next to the fire.



Switzerland or Kyrgyzstan?

Day 12 - Tuesday, 30th August

The first high pass of the expedition was Telety pass at 3759m. We set off early to ensure that we had enough time to cross the pass before the daily afternoon thunderstorms. This meant that the tents were still soaking wet from condensation, so they were packed wet which wasn't ideal. At the same time we managed to stay ahead of the crowd, as there were a few other hikers that had planned the same crossing for today. The climb was gentle until we turned north east up from the main valley towards the pass. Distance wise, a mere 2.5km separated us from the valley floor to the pass. Unfortunately this also included almost 800m of ascent and with the rucksacks, the climb was brutally steep. The result: by lunch the daily ration of Clif Bars had already been consumed by some of us – luckily we took some extra rations. Khoa's bag was also causing him quite a lot of pain in his shoulder. The top of the pass rewarded us however with stunning views to the valleys on either side, with huge snow-capped mountains behind. The top of the pass was covered in schist rock which we all became very knowledgeable about thanks to Geologist Joss. At the pass, we attempted to reach one of the neighbouring 4000m peaks, but the path soon finished in a scree field and we turned around. The way down into Karakol valley started along a river bed with rock hopping and constant route finding. Lower down, the path turned into a nice pine forest and the last couple of vertical metres were brutally steep again. We met some farmers that were herding their cows up the steep path. At the same time we also realised that we had lost the rubbish bag. Given that we didn't see it and that it could have been anywhere along the path, we didn't waste much time looking for it, but for sure felt guilty. We found a great campsite next to the (ice cold) river and a round of Spaghetti Bolognese followed by a game of Hearts in the tent rounded up a strenuous but beautiful day.



Telety Pass at 3759m.

Day 13 - Wednesday, 31st August

The day started with an entertaining highlight. We had set up our tent in what was clearly the favoured eating ground of a particular female cow with crooked horns. Hence, to compensate, she thought she had the right to be nosy and try some of our breakfast. Several attempts of chasing it away simply made her more curious! We headed up the main Karakol valley aiming to reach the foot of the glacier. Joss and Andi were both feeling slightly tired and fatigued but the views kept us going. The pace was slow up the valley as the ground was very bouldery and rocky, but eventually we saw the 5100m high Karakol peak and its glacier: a huge mass of snow, ice and black rock stretching upwards, with streaks of avalanche/cornice debris on its slopes. An obligatory photo session was made more fun when we found some goat horns. Walking down the valley, the weather started to pull in again and we just missed the worst of it again. We knew there were two ways to get to Ala Kul the next day and hoped that the southern path, further away from Karakol, was less popular. Hence we decided to walk up the steep base of the valley to have an advantage for tomorrow's long climb to the mountain lake, whose photo we saw online beforehand inspired this whole expedition. When we reached camp, Khoa and Andi jumped into the freezing river to refresh while Ellie went for a run. A chilled afternoon ended with an early night ready to get up early.



The Karakol Peak with its glacier.

Day 14 - Thursday, 1st September

Our journey to Ala Kul turned out to be longer than anticipated. We started early, but the side valley we slept in got no sunlight until fairly late in the day, hence we started to walk with many layers racing towards the sun. Focused only on getting warm in the sun, we blindly walked past the valley where our path was marked on the map. Only after a while did we realise that something was wrong and got confirmation when checking on the GPS. So, with no other option but to turn around we looked for the path again. However, even at the location marked on the map, we couldn't find a path that looked promising and we weren't keen scrambling up the steep valley sides with thick undergrowth below, and loose boulders higher up. After spending a fair amount of time looking and searching with map, GPS and common sense we gave up and decided to go down to the start of the alternative path up to Ala Kul. (Back in Karakol, it had turned out that the path marked on the map actually does not exist and should be in the parallel valley. We were very disappointed in hindsight, especially since Ellie had seen another path but we decided to not take this due to the map). This had obviously cost us a lot of time and it was already 12:00 when we started the climb to Ala Kul.

The climb started easily through woodland paths before becoming steeper and steeper, occasionally passing through open glades with stunning views of the mountains behind and the valley below. After some time the boulders gave way to boulders following a gushing river, before a final hot, hard climb up a scree slope. After a long 2.5 hours of nonstop ascent, we finally reached Ala Kul. The lake has an intense turquoise colour and the name "striped lake" became obvious when the clouds above us formed a pattern of sun and shadow on the lake. After a short lunch stop (beautiful apart from a lot of litter surrounding us) we continued on, first traversing the length of the lake and then heading up the pass on the other side to head into the next valley. Even though this part of the walk was relatively short compared to what we had done, everyone was beginning to get tired. Ellie was suffering from the altitude and not feeling at all well (reaching 4000m). Since we couldn't find our initially planned path and had to go down the valley first, it did mean that we had climbed roughly 2000m that day - clearly not a good idea with the sun shining down as well. However, the views were stunning and gave the area an Himalayan feel with snow covered 5000m peaks and glaciers in the background. After a steep descent down scree and a small incident involving Joss slicing his hand open (which was quickly patched up with iodine and steri strips), we reached a little stream, which was necessary as we were all low on water. We continued walking until late and ended up having dinner under the stars. For sure a highlight day of the expedition.



A panorama from 4000m of Ala-Kul Lake

Day 15 - Friday, 2nd September

After one false start down the wrong (North) side of the river, costing around 20 minutes and some annoyance as it was a steep climb back up, we found the best path and hiked down to the large north-south trending Aksu valley. We reached the hot springs after an hour's walk north down the valley. For a small fee, these were every bit as good as our fellow backpackers had made them out to be. Set in a clean tiled pool in a wooden shed the water was hot and constantly refreshed. Apparently heated by underground radium, the water didn't smell at all sulphurous. After an hour or so we dragged ourselves on, conscious of the need to get back to Karakol in time to pick up our kit from the EcoTrek offices. The day's walk from this point was a straight route following the valley bottom all the way down to Aksu. This was well and truly back in civilisation on a 4WD track for the whole way along which a steady stream of backpackers, locals on horseback and the occasional old Soviet truck or four-by-four would pass by, defying all western ideas of what should be driveable in 10 tonne truck on the bouldery, steep inclines. We were very glad to reach the town of Aksu at the bottom as the walk had become incredibly monotonous. We were prompted to accept a ride in a Lada taxi back along the road to Karakol by the first roll of thunder from the mountains. After retrieving our bags from EcoTrek we found our way to Duet Hostel, a small but very well kept European style backpackers hostel. Joss and Andi were suffering from loss of appetite for the third day running and both were feeling lethargic still. Deciding to order double helpings of dinner to try to make up for a considerable calorie deficit only resulted in both feeling even worse in the evening, stricken with stomach problems.



Back in Karakol

Day 16 - Saturday, 3rd September

Today the team travelled from Karakol to Tamga, the starting point for our next route through Tosor Pass. We ate a very European style breakfast, over which we met an Imperial alumni who was travelling solo to Mongolia. Having packed we found a direct marshrutka to Tamga. During the two and a half hour journey, Andy and Joss felt progressively worse with stomach pains (not helped by the lack of suspension in the minibus) and by the time we were dropped off directly outside a guesthouse in Tamga, there was no doubt that they were both suffering from a diarrhea causing stomach bug. As both Andi and Joss were both showing symptoms in complete synchrony, it seems likely that the illness was contracted from contaminated water which both had drunk sometime on day 12, highlighting the need to be careful with water sources, even high in the mountains. The guesthouse we arrived at was probably the nicest accommodation of the whole trip, combining a friendly host family, who cooked us simple but delicious meals for breakfast and dinner, with a characterful and beautifully kept house and garden. It was relatively cheap as well - 700 som (~£7) each for bed, breakfast and dinner. A trip to the beach on the Issyk Kul shore, 20 minutes walk away, was a nice idea but Andi and Joss had to head back to the guesthouse before too long, in order to be close to the clean but basic squat toilets.



The beautiful rose gardens of the guesthouse in Tamga.

Day 17 - Sunday, 4th September

(Beginning of Tosor Pass Tour)

This morning was spent allowing Joss and Andi time to recover in Tamga and at the beach. Thankfully the stomach bug had calmed down, although still very much present. As such we decided that we would take a taxi up the first section of the next route, avoiding a long section of the monotonous and potentially dangerous walk up the road from Barskoon towards Kumtor Gold Mine. This road is large, with no footpath alongside it and is frequented by big mining trucks. Combined with Joss and Andi still feeling quite weak, this was the sensible decision. We managed to communicate to our host, who understood no English, to call us a taxi for 13:00 and to keep our hold luggage safely in one of her unused rooms for the duration of the route. The taxi driver, when he came, spoke no English and, in a fine example of Kyrgyz ingenuity, drove us around the town calling on people he knew, until he found someone who had studied at St Andrew's University and spoke perfect English to act as translator. This was needed as our requested route was clearly not a common one and, like most other Kyrgyz people we met, he had clearly never seen a map of the area and had difficulty linking the places on the map with the places he knew. We had to accept a fairly inflated price for the journey as our driver knew that, not speaking adequate Russian or Kyrgyz, we would have no way to argue and we had no alternative drivers to turn to. We didn't come across this kind of exploitation often, but it served as a reminder that not being able to communicate makes you vulnerable. We drove up Barskoon Valley to a point a few km north with a set of switchbacks marking the point where we would turn west off the mining road. A couple of hours of walking later, a friendly herder sparked up conversation and showed us to a lovely riverside spot near his house where we could safely camp for the night. Both Joss and Andi were feeling progressively better throughout the day, and a fire in the evening with the luxuries of bread and chocolate put us all in a good mood.



The road to the Kumtor Mine.

Day 18 - Monday, 5th September

Today's hiking took us from the Barskoon Valley, south and west up to the huge and very boggy plateau (3600m) just South of Tosor Pass. After an hour or so we were turning westwards leaving the road and the mine traffic quickly behind. We initially passed a single yurt camp, but from that point on we saw no more human beings for the entire day, with no signs of habitation from a couple of solitary yurts on the high plateau. Throughout the day the weather worsened, with cloud closing in and frequent showers. Around 15:00 it started raining hard, which turned to hail then sleet and snow. This was the first definitive test of our gear, which worked very well, once we had put it on. Khoa found out however that once your hands become very cold and lose some sensitivity it can be difficult to put on gloves and some swapping to looser ones was required. It was also a reminder to keep waterproofs accessible and not buried in case the weather turns quickly. The snow stopped after about an hour and a half though, giving way to spectacular sun shining through mist and bands of cloud. It was as though we were in the middle of an inversion, and could see the top and bottom of the layer of cloud! We walked on, to a point around 5km from the pass and set up camp on a patch of ground raised above the bog. The whole plateau felt like a vast Scottish glen. At this altitude the temperature dropped rapidly at night and all of the team were wearing as many layers as we had brought. All of us, except Andi, had opted for lightweight three season sleeping bags which, while warm enough to avoid dangerous cold, did not exactly keep us comfortable at what we estimated to be around -5 to -7 degrees C that night.



The vast Scottish-like plateau at 3600m was stunning. Above: the weather worsens...

Day 19 - Tuesday, 6th September

After a freezing cold night we woke up to a beautiful, almost wintery, morning on the high plateau. The condensation from the tents had turned to mini icicles over night. There was not a single cloud in the sky and the sun was slowly working its way towards our camp while we were boiling water for breakfast. By the time we could eat our food, we had moved into the sun and it was the warmth we needed. Eventually we set off down the valley and, having learned from yesterday, stuck to the valley sides to avoid the worst of the bog. As we were heading up to Tosor pass it started to hail. But, what can you do apart from put the rain jacket on and march on. At the pass, we stopped for a little lunch and then started the long descent on a 4x4 dirt road. In terms of navigation, it was probably the most tricky moment of the expedition to find the best route to cut across the hills to Tamga again- we had a choice of several valleys. We knew nothing much could go wrong though and so continued along a valley, passing by several yurts (again protected by not welcoming dogs) and the rain made us feel like we were back in Scotland. The route we had chosen followed a faint sheep trod crossing some spurs up to a ridge, then traversed over it before following a faint track towards a high saddle point that would take us to the valley we needed to be in. The last climb up to the saddle was very Dartmoor-ish with tussocky grass, big rolling hills and rain! The rain did not stop pummelling our backs until we reached our camp spot and hence we could practice pitching tents in the rain. On the bright side (or annoying side!), once the tents were pitched it stopped raining so we could sort out our stuff and cook dinner. It turned out the long and cold walk in the rain was more tiring than we thought and hence everyone enjoyed their warm meal in the tent.



At the top of the Tosor Pass (4000m)

Day 20 - Wednesday, 7th September

We woke up to a clear blue sky and warm sun, realising that the valley we had pitched our tents in was actually very beautiful. More importantly, it gave us a chance to dry all of our gear after yesterday's rain. Eventually we headed down the valley. At some point the path in the valley floor moved towards the steep valley sides as there was a gorge forming below. Once the path had just vanished in nowhere, we reconsidered our location and realised that the path we technically aimed for was on top of the ridge on the other side of the valley and we had dropped down a little too early. With little motivation to backtrack our way we decided to head to the ridge above us on our left and follow this down to the river confluence. The next 45 minutes we ended up bush bashing along a small cow track down the ridge. A few dead ends later, marked with several scratches we reached the bottom of the valley and joined a track that we knew took us back to Tamga. However, the walk back to Tamga was longer than we anticipated. In the heat of the day we followed the dirt road for a good 2.5 hours. The end to this tour was celebrated with a swim in Issyk Kul as well as a cold beer, watermelon, apricot pastries and baklava at the beach. Back in the homestay where we had deposited our bags, we sorted our gear and enjoyed another great dinner. A French backpacker had joined us for dinner and after a few rounds of cards, everyone was happy to fall into a cosy bed for a change.



Watermelons and swimming were welcome after the long march on the dirt road back to Tamga.

Day 21 - Thursday, 8th September

Today was a proper rest day. After a proper lie in, we enjoyed the spaghetti omelette for breakfast again. Eventually we packed our bags and headed down to the main road to catch a marshrutka to Bishkek. Luckily, the first one that passed after 5 minutes headed straight to the capital (we had anticipated to have to change marshrutka in Balykchy). Even more noteworthy is the fact that the driver was, for once, sane and drove at a safe and acceptable speed. We knew the ride would be long and had packed some of the great pastries for on the way. Once in Bishkek, we easily found our way “home” to the hostel. The team headed straight to Osh bazaar to pick up supplies for the last couple of days in Ala Archa. We stocked up on lagman noodles, dried fruits and nuts.

Day 22 - Friday, 9th September

We packed up in our beloved Boorsok hostel once more and headed down to Osh bazaar where the marshrutka should take us to Ala Archa. After some small difficulties finding the right stop around Osh bazaar, the marshrutka ride to Ala Archa took around one hour and passed through the southern suburbs. The ride finished at the *Schlagbaum* gate at the national park entrance. We paid the small fee and right behind the gate a taxi was waiting that took us up the last 10km to the Ala Archa alpine camp / hotel. We arrived just in time for a lunch snack. Knowing that tomorrow's weather would be good, we decided to change planes spontaneously by hiking up to Ratzek hut to attempt the summit of Peak Uchitel. We had heard that the climb to Ratzek was steep and cruel, with some saying that the 6km walk takes over 3 hours. After a steep initial climb to a high valley, the path followed the beautiful glacial valley up for around 3km. Then the climb really began, with a merciless incline. A small section was equipped with static metal chains for help and the incoming weather from behind us added an element of adventure. In an icy wind and with a good amount of rain we eventually saw Ratzek hut as the weather was starting to improve again. As we approached the hut, Andi saw an old friend from Melbourne University Mountaineering Club, who had a small team of mountaineers exploring the area. After a nice catch up, exchanging experiences from the trips so far and further plans, we eventually used a good weather window to pitch our tents in the dry. With tomorrow's summit attempt, it was an early night at Ratzek camp. Ellie had decided that she did not feel comfortable to climb to the peak due to the steep, corniced snow banks above scree not being ideal conditions for lightweight fell shoes, and we had no ice axe/crampons (i.e. no ability to kick steps or arrest a fall). The decision was made by everyone that the guys would climb the peak early and return by lunch the following day.



The Ratzek hut: a mecca for Russian mountaineers

Day 23 - Saturday, 10th September

Summit day! With the alarm set at 5:25am, the guys were up early to climb Peak Uchitel – at 4640m the highest point of the expedition. Getting dressed in the tent we felt the cold of the night already, but soon after a porridge and some bread with chocolate spread (the luxuries you decide to carry up the mountain when plans change...) warmed us up and fuelled us for the day. The other group camping next to us set off with their head torches as we were finishing breakfast. We would see them again at the peak. After yesterday's meeting with the Melbourne guys we were surprised to find them leaving Ratzek hut as we passed it, since they wanted a "proper early" start. Clearly the combination of sauna and beers was not ideal. We continued our own path and started climbing slowly. We made sure to ascend slowly as we knew it wasn't a sprint to the top. The views of the first sunrises on the snow covered peaks around us were incredible. The climb itself was relatively easy and the path was marked well with cairns. Only a few times did the fresh snow create a slippery layer on the rocks. Close to the summit ridge, we finally had the first sunshine in our face and the last couple of hundred metres along the snow covered ridge were a joy, despite the large cornice on one side. Finally, the summit was reached. The view was breathtaking. We enjoyed some snacks, took enough photos to remember this moment and then slowly started the loooooong descent. Slightly before anticipated we were back at Ratzek camp and enjoyed lunch with Ellie. After a short rest in the sun, we slowly packed up our camp to continue the descent to the valley. We were surprised by the number of people coming up the valley heading for Ratzek hut (it was a Saturday) and were definitely glad to not be camping up there for another night. We found a nice camp spot with a table near the river in the main Ala-Archa valley. By the end of the day, we had descended almost 2500 vertical metres and the legs were definitely feeling the descent with heavy rucksacks. Sadly, the great day ended with a *not so great* dinner of Kyrgyz 'spaghetti' soup.



Spectacular scenery from the top of Utichel Peak (4640m).

Day 24 - Sunday, 11th September

A shortened day today due to a lack of crossing points over the treacherous glacial rivers. The initial plan was to hike south to the head of the Ala Archa Valley and get a view of the glacier, which would have been a relatively long day, given the distance and elevation. We made our way south for the morning, carefully crossing a small tributary to the main river, which we kept to our right. It was apparent that major flooding must have occurred in the recent past, washing away bridges (if there were any) and altering the main river course such that the fording points, which the main path had followed, were now unusable beneath deep and fast flowing water. Luckily a smaller path had been beaten which didn't cross the main river so we followed this until the main path crossed back over the river. This improvised path, however, crossed a steep scree slope with some none-too-stable sections and, while it was crossable, we were slightly concerned at the prospect of crossing back over it late in the day. Not too long afterwards our fears were allayed as we reached a second tributary stream, flowing from a glacial valley joining ours from the east. This stream, measured with a walking pole, would have reached up to Ellie's hip and was steep, rocky and with fast undercurrents. Crossing would have been dangerous and the reward seemed ever diminishing, with thunder clouds closing in further up the valley which would cover up the views we had been hoping for and carry the risk of lightning. The decision was made to turn back following a break for lunch. As we began to walk back down, the first rolls of thunder behind us confirmed that our decision was the correct one. Although we were still quite fresh, the rain had soaked the scree on our path back, and we picked our way back across the slope, taking care that we were never directly above or below anyone else. We arrived back at the hotel/tourist centre around 15:30 with plenty of time to plan for the next day. Despite the hotel and surroundings being so popular and tourist focussed, we saw just one other person further than around one km from it. We decided to head around 20 minutes walk back up the valley to camp on a sandy and treed spot on the edge of an alluvial fan which we had decided earlier would be an idyllic campsite. All except Ellie made the decision to eat the emergency Mountain House food tonight as we felt that a slight tiredness among the group today might have been partially the result of a very inadequate dinner the night before.



An idyllic final camp

Day 25 - Monday, 12th September

We woke up to thick fog, masking the fact that our beach campsite was, in fact, in the high mountains. Breakfast was good, using up all the porridge oats, jam and chocolate powder. Our aim was to explore a relatively short but steep valley which branched from the main Ala Archa valley a few kilometres south of the hotel before catching a taxi down to the national park entrance by 15:00 in order to be in good time for the marshrutka back to Bishkek. This was decided on, as opposed to climbing one of two peaks further south of Uchitel Peak. The peaks in question would not have been as spectacular as Uchitel and, although a relatively short horizontal distance away, would have involved around 2000m of ascent in one morning. We would have had to allow a whole day, delaying our return to Bishkek for a day and potentially meaning missing out on the famous markets. Our day didn't get off to a great start, we had difficulty finding a bridge across the main glacial river to get to the valley as the original had been badly damaged and was not crossable. Thankfully we were able to cross another slightly downstream. Our troubles didn't end here, though, as just a few km into the route the small path we were following abruptly ended in a steep collapsed river bank. The valley sides were steep and the river disappeared into a gorge just upstream, meaning that once again, we were forced to turn back as there was no way we could continue up. We were all feeling somewhat tired, possibly from expedition fatigue and the calorie deficit kicking in, so we went straight back to the hotel and haggled for a taxi to take us back to the park entrance. We hitched a lift with a kind marshrutka driver to Kashkasu, the nearest town, and from there took a paid marshrutka to Bishkek, arriving early afternoon. On arriving we noticed that the streets were fairly quiet. There were almost no restaurants open in the evening either, forcing us to settle for a fairly mediocre dinner in a cafe. We realised, on asking, that it was the Islamic festival of Eid ul-Adha and everyone was taking a holiday.

A highlight of today was that upon arriving at the hostel we were 'politely' asked to wash our feet and legs before entering- we took this as the mark of a successful expedition!!



Celebratory Pivo in the Bishkek sunshine at the end of the expedition

Day 26 - Tuesday, 13th September

We awoke at the hostel at ~8.30am. Our anticipated blissful night's sleep in the luxurious hostel was ruined by the presence of two mosquitoes that buzzed around for the entire night, in and around our ears and faces. Needless to say we all had lots of bites as a memento in the morning! After breakfast (toasted schelp (flatbread) and Tamga honey) we packed our stuff and set off for the Dordoi Bazaar, which turned out to be incredible. It was a huge network, at least a kilometre square, consisting of a huge grid system of container ships filled with imported goods, mostly from China. There were rows upon rows of Nike trainers (we were unable to tell if they were a knock off or the real thing), scarves, clothing, food and other goods. The sheer size of it was absolutely mind-boggling. After walking for about half an hour purely through shoes, we had worked up an appetite so bought some manty (dumplings filled with flavoured meat) from a cafe and samsy (meat filled puff pastry triangles) from a street vendor which were rapidly consumed and were absolutely delicious. We then all walked around, doing various bits of personal shopping including scarves, honey, jam and Kyrgyzstan cultural gifts such as hats, t-shirts and miniature yurts. While we were at the bazaar it started raining quite heavily and with the noise of that on the corrugated roof and the shouts and sounds of the market, it certainly was quite an experience!

We arrived back at the hostel and after a quick photoshoot in our snazzy red, flag-emblazoned Kyrgyzstan t-shirts, it was time for the guys to depart for their trip to Tokmok, where they planned to do a short 2 day trip to see the sights. For Ellie it was goodbye as she took a taxi to the airport for her flight back to the UK.

Khoa, Andi and Joss navigated their way by marshrutka, via the old Eastern Bus Station, to Tokmok, a town about 2 hours east of Bishkek. A largish town by Kyrgyz standards, and organized in the classic Soviet grid pattern with a soviet warplane on a plinth greeting drivers on the road in, Tokmok was clearly not used to tourists. The guys found a Hotel with the aid of a taxi driver (a three person room being cheaper than the equivalent beds in any guesthouse we'd been to) and were soon settled and eating a delicious and incredibly cheap dinner in a local restaurant.

Day 27 - Wednesday, 14th September

After a breakfast of Lepeshker (Kyrgyz flatbread) jam and tea Joss, Andi and Khoa took a taxi to the first tourist attraction, the Burana Tower a short drive south of Tokmok. This is an 11th to 15th century minaret extensively reconstructed by soviet archaeologists in the 1960s. For a very modest fee we climbed the claustrophobic stairway to the top of the tower and caught some brilliant views of the valley, filled with farmland and framed by mountains on both sides. A field of medieval petroglyphs and a small shop and museum surround the base of the tower. Speculatively we asked if the shopkeeper could call us a taxi to Issyk Ata, an ancient site of hot springs, now covered by a Soviet era sanitorium complex. The price for the longish taxi ride was ok (1000 Som) and we took them up on the offer, with the intention of taking the timetabled marshrutka back to Bishkek from the sanitorium, popular with Bishkek daytrippers.

When we got there we found a bizarre place trapped in a time loop sometime before 1991. It appeared that the sanitarium had been built as a rather classy Soviet health resort with all the trimmings; nicely painted benches, sculptures, rows of wooden bathing huts and the odd Lenin statue on a 10m pillar to remind punters of the great USSR. All of this, however, looked like it had been left totally untouched, gently crumbling, since 1991 giving the whole place the slightly creepy air of disaster movie set. Despite this it was still busy with kyrgyz tourists, there to visit the 'doctors surgeries' set up at regular intervals as the hot waters there are still believed to have healing properties. After exploring this and locating the hot springs - a totally unsignposted swimming pool behind a local's house (100 Som for an hour) we relaxed in the hot water and enjoyed our last close up views of the Kyrgyz mountains. We took the 16:00 marshrutka no.316 back to Bishkek and our Boorsok Hostel.



Burana Tower and hot spring swimming pool.

Day 28 - Thursday, 15th September

A fairly chilled start to the day was had as sleep was interrupted by almighty snoring from a fellow guest, forcing Andi to abandon our dorm for another. The plan for today was to visit both Osh Bazaar and Dordoi Bazaar, as we all felt that we could have spent a whole extra day just exploring either. Fueled by buckets of fresh raspberries, it being fruit season in Kyrgyzstan, we successfully circumnavigated Osh Bazaar, stocking up on spices, dried fruit and nuts. In Dordoi Bazaar we bought more silk road souvenirs including hats, rugs, honey and jam. After a long but satisfying day of haggling we made our way back to the hostel on marshrutka 286 for beers (Piva) and honeydew melon from the bazaar. We ate dinner at the nearby popular restaurant, carefully pooling our remaining Som in order to have just enough left for the taxi to the airport the next day, while having as lavish a dinner as possible - plov and manti were the order of the day. The evening and some way into the night was spent chatting and drinking with our host Verana and two German men, both frequent visitors to Kyrgyzstan and Boorsok Hostel. Verana made a Kyrgyz chicken broth and we discussed the possibility of Kyrgyzstan becoming a major ski destination for those who can't afford Swiss pass fees.

Day 29 - Friday, 16th September

Do svidaniya Kyrgyzstan! The final morning for Khoa, Andi and Joss. We had a brief breakfast of Lepeshka, jam and tea (it will be missed) at Boorsok. Verana had called us a taxi for 07:45 and, with everything packed, we said goodbye and set off for the airport. The drive was remarkably safe as the new highway connecting the airport and the city was lined with police, preemptively stopping the normal habit of crazy driving from becoming the norm on that road. We boarded the Turkish Airlines flight with no problem and left Kyrgyz soil at 10:25 Kyrgyz time. One very quick transfer at Istanbul Airport interrupted the flight back and we arrived at Heathrow around 17:00 British time (22:00 Kyrgyz time). Khoa had to endure the ordeal that is the non European visa holder's queue at Heathrow. Joss and Andi had a quick nap while waiting. Eventually though, we were on the tube back to London, tired but with minds still full of the sites and sounds of Kyrgyzstan.

Finances

We had 4 main areas of spending before our expedition:

- Flights
- Expedition food
- Kit
- Training

Then we also had money spent in Kyrgyzstan (travel, extra equipment, hostel).

Below is a summary of what we spent in each area, both before and after the expedition. A full breakdown of our finances can be found in Appendix E.

Expense	Total cost
Travel (flights)	£2,303.83
Food	£668.80
Kit	£1,449.46
Cairngorms team training weekend	£54.00
Sum	£4,476.09

We also have a detailed breakdown of our expenditure whilst in Kyrgyzstan, again split into food, accommodation, kit and travel. We roughly converted 1 GBP to 89 som:

Expense	Total cost
Travel	£141.57
Food	£200
Kit (gas, extra maps)	£20.22
Accommodation	£163.60
Other (horse riding, hot springs etc)	£62.92
Sum	£588.31

Total cost of expedition

The total cost of the expedition was roughly **£5000** altogether.

We received £2000 from the expedition board, bringing total personal expenses to **£3000**.

We estimated that the expedition would cost £4000. The extra spending came from more kit being bought than originally intended (for example Joss bought his own tent, where initially he was going to borrow one) and higher accommodation costs in Kyrgyzstan due to changes of plans. We also hadn't factored in our team training weekend in the Cairngorms into our original expenditure estimation.

Media

We believe that media is a really important part of modern expeditions. It can really inspire people if they can keep track of the cool things you are doing, and also adds an important safety aspect for keeping in contact with people.

Before the expedition we set up a Facebook page, where we posted updates of our training and preparation. During the expedition, we sent a satellite phone message back to the UK everyday which was then uploaded onto our Facebook page, along with a location from the Satellite phone, so people could track our progress. This was great in enabling people to keep up with what we were doing whilst in Kyrgyzstan.

We now have the report, which will be available on the expedition board website and on our Facebook page, and lots and lots of photos. We also aim to create 4 video clips (one for each tour) to showcase what we did. Hopefully lots of people will see these and be inspired to apply again next year!

Logistics and Transport

Visas

In terms of visas, Kyrgyzstan is a great country to visit as we didn't need any. Kyrgyzstan has visa exemptions for indefinite stays for Vietnamese nationals. For UK and German citizens, no visa is required for stays up to 60 days. In December 2015, the prime minister has agreed to keep this visa-free regime for the time being.

Transport

We flew to Bishkek which is the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, via a stopover in Istanbul. The carrier was Turkish Airlines. We were all very impressed with their service; the flights were very good value and were on time and comfortable. Other options explored before the trip included flying to Almaty in Kazakhstan, or going via Moscow or driving to Frankfurt then flying from there.

These options all turned out to be more expensive or ridiculously long. Khoa would have also needed a visa to be in Kazakhstan, so our route was definitely the best option for us.

Within Kyrgyzstan, we travelled mainly by *marshrutka* which are 'fixed taxi' minibuses. They all operate along fixed routes, both within cities and cross country, and are identified by a number. There are few bus stops so the main way to board a marshrutka is to stand somewhere along the route on the edge of the road and flag it down. They can also drop you off anywhere on the route. The driver will normally collect money once you have boarded along the way for city routes, or at the start for cross country routes. They are a very cheap and popular form of transport in Kyrgyzstan and are so often crowded with people standing, especially on the city routes. Few marshrutkas have seatbelts and driving standards vary. Marshrutkas are by far the cheapest form of transport. Intercity rides cost anything between 50-300 Som depending on the distance and within Bishkek, every ride costs 10 Som.

We also occasionally used private drivers and taxis. There were normally arranged through a tourist agency, rather than flagging down a taxi from the side of the road which is considered relatively unsafe. Private cars were much more expensive than marshrutkas but were still very cheap compared to prices in Europe.

A full list of all our travel for the trip including costs and approximate journey times can be found in Appendix D.

Accommodation

Up in the hills, we used two tents (Alpkit Ordos 2 and MSR Hubba Hubba) and wild camped. Wild camping seemed to be common in the popular hiking areas of Kyrgyzstan but was not so common on the Tosor tour, which is not a traditional hiking area for tourists. However, all nomads seemed unfazed by our tents and the only issue we had was some curious cows stepping round the guylines at Song Kul! We tried not to pitch our tents too near yurts as this would be considered rude.

Whilst not wild camping, we stayed in a mixture of hostels and homestays. Kyrgyz people are very hospitable and all the accommodation was clean, welcoming and cheap. All major cities and towns have numerous backpacker style hostels, home stays or even basic hotels. Prices range from around 500 - 700 Som per person per night, depending if we had breakfast or not.

A full list of all our accommodation for the whole trip including costs and descriptions can also be found in Appendix D.

Food

Whilst in the hills we ate porridge, Clif Bars and Mountain House Freeze dried food, which we exported from the UK as lightweight food is not readily available to buy in Kyrgyzstan. We carried extra Mountain House as emergency food. Importing the food didn't cost anything. The

food was repetitive but nutritious, tasty and easy to make, although we were operating on a calorie-deficit principle so were all pretty hungry a lot of the time and lost a bit of weight. We tried to eat as much as we could when we got back down to the towns. Our hill food was:

Breakfast	2 x Sainsbury's express porridge sachets OR Mountain House Custard and one porridge sachet OR Mountain House Scrambled Egg, Ham and Potato (Big Pack)
Day Food	Individual: 4 x Clif Bars, varying flavours Group: 1 x salami, 1 x packet of nuts
Dinner	1 x Mountain House Dinner (Big Pack), varying flavours

All our food could be made by just boiling hot water.

We stored our spare food in a hold bag that we left at homestays/hostels/tourist information centres. We never had to pay to leave our hold bag. We created a sign in English, Russian and Kyrgyz that we attached to the bag, which explained what it was and asked people to keep it safe. While it was basically necessary to have freeze-dry food to be able to fit five days worth of food into our bags, the logistics with the additional *base camp* bags was quite a big hassle.

When we were in the main cities and towns, we ate out at restaurants and cafes for dinner, as well as buying food from street vendors at the markets. The food in Kyrgyzstan can be described as simple, but hearty and filling with Russian, Turkish and Asian influences. The dishes mainly consist of potato, rice or noodles with vegetables and some meat. Lagman is a noodle soup with vegetables. Boso Lagman is the stir fry version of the same ingredients. Plov is a Russian style risotto, usually served with meat. Manty are large dumplings filled with mutton and sometimes come fried as well. Tea and bread are usually served as compliments to every meal.

We also bought food regularly from supermarkets. There were supermarkets in all the towns we visited, even in remote Tamga (there were actually 2!). The supermarkets were useful for buying snacks such as bread, jam, watermelons, baklava and 'pivo' (beer) at 50 som (~50p) per bottle! They were all well stocked and you could usually find what you were looking for.

We kindly received a discount from Mountain House for their freeze dried food, in return for reviews and photos. The reviews can be found in Appendix D.

Accidents and Incidents

We only had one accident on the expedition. Whilst descending from the pass after Ala-Kul lake on Day 14, Joss slipped on some loose rock and fell, and managed to slice open his hand just

below his thumb. Although it was bleeding fairly heavily, the wound was not too deep or serious, so we just cleaned it out with iodine then held it together with steri strips and a tight bandage over the top. The wound healed nicely without infection. The only other medical incidents of note were Khoa's food poisoning, and Andi and Joss' stomach bugs. Neither illness required medicine and cleared up after a couple of rough days.

Expedition Equipment

The team all took slightly different kit but with the same general aim of taking lightweight but sturdy kit that would be reliable and useful in the hugely varying conditions we would face in Kyrgyzstan. Ellie took the most minimal kit, so we have shown her individual kit here as a baseline:

Item	Details
Clothing	Tshirt, powerstretch, fleece, Alpkit synthetic jacket, Alpkit down jacket, shorts+trousers (zip off), ankle socks
Sleeping	2 OMM mats, Rab Neutrino 750 down sleeping bag in Event compression drybag, Alpkit silk sleeping bag liner.
Food	Food for each day of hiking plus 24 hours worth of emergency food
Cooking	Alpkit MyTi Mug 750, plastic spork
Water	2x750ml bottles, 1x 3l Camelbak
Waterproofs	Mountain Warehouse goretex jacket, Rab lightweight waterproof trousers
Other clothing	Powerstretch gloves, outdoor heavy duty rubber gloves (marigolds), Buffalo mitts, balaclava, buff
Misc	SOL bivvy bag, Alpkit Viper headtorch+batteries, first aid kit, miniature Swiss Army Knife, diary and pen, whistle (on bag)
Other	Toothbrush and toothpaste, suncream, documents (passport etc), Alpkit twin walking poles

Our group kit is also listed below:

Item	Details
Sleeping	Alpkit Ordos 2 Tent, MSR Hubba-Hubba Tent with footprints + spare pegs and pole fixers
Safety	Iridium satellite phone+SIM card, group first aid kit and medicine (see appendix)
Cooking	2x MSR Pocket Rocket Stove and repair kit, 2 x windshield, 2x C500 propane/butane gas for each trip, flint sparker + spare lighter
Other	Russian pocket phrasebook, toilet paper, rubbish bag
Navigation	Maps of the route (hiking maps and Russian military maps), GPS device
Water	Water filtration pump, purification tablets

A review of the pros/cons of specific aspects of our kit is detailed later in the report.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Below is a summary of the major learning outcomes we gained from this expedition.

General travelling in Kyrgyzstan

To note in advance, our travelling was confined to the northern regions of the country ranging from Bishkek to Karakol and as far south as Kochkor. Hence, all points mentioned below are based on our experiences from this area.

Travelling in Kyrgyzstan is fairly easy and safe. However, while we were fortunate to not be involved or see any road accidents, the driving style in Kyrgyzstan, especially by marshrutka drivers, is nothing for the faint hearted as road rules are generally neglected. If we were to do the expedition again though, we're not sure how we could make this more safe- a hire car was suggested but this seemed like an even worse idea! Trains were not possibility as they didn't cover where we wanted to go. Marshrutkas can also be very hot and crowded on long journeys. Travelling is exceptionally cheap though, which we were grateful for on our expedition as we had to travel large distances across the country.

Finding accommodation is very easy in Kyrgyzstan and there are plenty of homestays and hostels for tourists. Most serve food as well.

Regarding communication and language see the separate point below.

Language

In the proposal for the expedition we emphasized that the team would learn basic Russian and some Kyrgyz (the latter more as a gesture of respect and sensitivity as it was clear that most people in Kyrgyzstan would speak some Russian). We had noted that one of the greatest challenges we would face would be communication, as both the Russian language and Cyrillic script were totally new to all of the team. Despite our efforts with Duolingo, we found it very difficult to really get to grips with any useable Russian without any interaction with Russian speakers. This really hit home as, on our first afternoon in Bishkek, we were fortunate enough to meet some English speaking Czech backpackers, one of whom spoke Russian. They met our revelation that not one of us spoke more than a few words of Russian with a sceptical "good luck". We were saved by the incredible Kyrgyz hospitality. On multiple occasions we approached Kyrgyz people on the street for help, who as often as not would speak no English. They were, however, invariably prepared to lend an internet connected smartphone, call a friend who did speak some English or even go in search of an English speaking friend or relative who would physically come to our aid. This, combined with lots of gesturing, got us through the early stages of the expedition.

Our Language skills rapidly increased in the first week as, through a combination of listening and consulting the phrase book, we learned a set of words and phrases, most Russian and a few Kyrgyz, with which we could communicate essential requests and understand the basics of the world around us. Being in Kyrgyzstan for four weeks allowed us to move beyond the most basic level to which many travellers are restricted to, for example, we learned to read the Cyrillic alphabet, which allowed us to read signs, in particular the destinations written on Marshrutka windscreens. Our recommendation to future travellers to Kyrgyzstan would be to ensure that at least one member of the team has a working knowledge of Russian before going. If this needs to be learned, a good option would be to meet and speak with Russian speakers in Imperial's Russian Speaking Society, an idea we considered but didn't follow through. They could provide some useful cultural tips as well.

Gear and Equipment

Firstly, it is fair to say that all of gear performed very well and that overall, we were very satisfied with what we brought on the expedition. The interesting part is that we had fairly different approaches to what we took, despite being on the same expedition. One extreme was probably Ellie following the lightweight and minimalist line all the way through, and the other extreme being Andi and Khoa: while still focusing on lightweight and not taking unnecessary items, they carried extra weight for the gained resistance, toughness of the gear and comfort. Below is a detailed review of how our gear performed.

Backpacks

Given that we went on the same expedition, we had a large variety of backpacks ranging from a 35l almost day pack to a 75l trekking pack. It should be noted that the 75l pack was nowhere near full while walking, but it provided the possibility of reshuffling and redistributing gear, which proved itself useful when a member of the team was struggling. Most bags had frames and the gained comfort was greatly appreciated, as before the trip the option of unframed OMM bags was a possibility. Side attachments for bottles and snacks proved very useful.

Khoa's Jack Wolfskin 65l proved to be pretty uncomfortable and hard to adjust, which caused him quite a few shoulder problems at the start of the trip. Joss and Ellie both took Osprey bags- a 38l Mutant with an expanding top and a 36l Kestrel respectively. Both bags were thoroughly worn in and comfortable so there were no issues there. The expanding top on Joss' bag was really useful but it had no outer pockets, although some were improvised. Ellie's bag was great although efficient packing was required as it was a little on the small side. Probably a 45l of the same style would have been ideal for the expedition. Andi's 75l was comfortable and useful for reshuffling gear.

A controversial topic within the team was the issue of raincovers. Some say it was unnecessary weight, since it was not an alternative to packing everything into dry bags anyways. Others appreciated the extra layer of protection that would prevent the bags from getting soaked (and potentially being so for a while).

Shoes

Again, we had a wide variety of shoes ranging from light fell-running shoes (Ellie and Joss) to high topped walking/running boots (Khoa) to sturdy stiff-soled trekking boots (Andi). The boots and fell shoes performed very well throughout the whole trip, and we were especially impressed with the Invo-8 RocLite that showed no signs at all of falling apart! Khoa's Salomon Goretex boots blew out on the inside.

Points to consider include the following:

- River crossings: fell shoes are designed to be fast drying and can easily be soaked, and river crossings were significantly faster and safer as the shoes could be kept on. Waterproof trekking boots however were tried to be kept dry at all costs and hence were taken off for river crossings, which took longer and in most cases made the (barefoot) crossing less safe.
- Warmth: the trekking boots provided significantly more protection for the feet from the cold. Waterproof socks however made the fell shoes perform very well during all conditions encountered during the expedition.
- Stability: clearly trekking boots provided more ankle stability, however even with the backpack, we did not have any problems in fell shoes over the whole trip.
- Multi-use: the fell shoes had the definite advantage here, since a trail run without the bags was no problem. However, in the snowy conditions at the top of peak Uchitel, the boots were useful for kicking steps. Fell shoes were not really suitable here.

Roll-mats

We had two air cushioned roll mats with us and one thermal 'Multimat' foam mat and Ellie decided to bring two 5mm thick OMM mats. Without a question, the air-filled mats were significantly warmer and more comfortable although the multimat also performed well. The OMM mats were very cold but extremely lightweight. It all comes down to a question of weight and durability. While some air filled mats can be quite heavy, the new versions weigh less than 200g making them competitive in terms of weight to some foam based ones. However, these mats are fragile to punctures, and would in the worst case provide no insulation then. When used carefully, inside a tent, we had no problem though and would generally recommend these mats to ensure better sleep and recovery. However for a robust expedition mat, the thermal foam 'Multimat' mats are probably the best way to go. OMM mats are not recommended for cold winter camping at 3600m...

Clothes

We all had fairly similar clothes with us. While modern functional outdoor clothes all perform very well, a few points we would like to highlight are:

- Investing into a good hardshell rain jacket is worth every penny. This outer layer keeps you dry, yet with ventilation zips allows for faster movements.
- Merino shirts do smell less.
- Marigold gloves and waterproof socks are also useful.

Walking Poles

- Joss, Khoa and Ellie took poles, but Andi did not
- Although useful for hiking, the poles proved most useful in river crossings, where they provided stability and safety for fast flowing rivers
- The poles also came in very useful for trying to ward off unfriendly yurt dogs!

Fastpacking in Kyrgyzstan

It is safe to say that we did not really meet our expedition aim of fastpacking in the Kyrgyzstan mountains- we would describe what we were doing as much more trekking, albeit with probably slightly more stripped down kit than the typical backpackers we saw. This is not a bad thing as in the end it was what worked best and what was safe for the expedition. Below are a number of reasons for the change to the more 'backpacking' approach:

- More 'comfort' items were taken which made the bags quite heavy. This included 'non-essential' items such as books, spare shoes, change of tshirt etc. This was a matter of small contention between team members- comfort and weight vs suffering and light? A month is quite a long time to go on bare essentials.
- The way we planned the trips was not suited to fastpacking- we added in days on each trip where we would not move linearly but would explore the area such as a walk up a valley to see a glacier. This meant that we needed to take even more food which again added weight to the bags. However it gave us the opportunity to see amazing views we would never have a chance to see again. We were able to see a lot more by taking a backpacking approach.
- The planned distances for each trip were fairly short, but were challenging because the bags were heavy. A more pure fastpacking approach would have been to make the days longer and do them in less time, thereby also making the bags lighter with less food. However, then we would have had to 'rush' everything rather than explore the country. In addition, high altitude makes short days a lot harder!
- It is quite hard to plan good routes for moving very quickly. The hiking trails, especially around Karakol, are often touristy and don't go deep into the mountains due to the huge barrier of glaciers blocking further progress. Therefore, if you were moving fast, you

would run out of trail in one particular 'area' fairly quickly, but we didn't want to spend all our time travelling between areas.

- Food drops are also much harder to organise because of trying to explain what you want in Russian/Kyrgyz. Having been to the country, seeing where everything is and gaining some local knowledge, we feel that now we could have a go at organising some, but certainly not on first arrival!
- The mountains were very remote, especially around the Barskoon area where we did not see any yurts for long periods of time and no other hikers. This meant we needed to take a fair amount of safety equipment, which added to the weight of the bags.

A note on waste/rubbish in the Kyrgyzstan mountains

It is sad that that we have to include this section in our expedition report. Rubbish was a big and unexpected problem in the Kyrgyz mountains. The shores of Lake Song Kul were littered with empty vodka bottles and all opportune camping spots close to Karakol were scattered with bottles and plastic wrappers surrounding charred fireplaces. The path up to Lake Ala Kul and the southern shore of the lake was particularly bad. There were remnants of campsites scattered around where people had just dumped plastic bags of rubbish, and there were lots of plastic bottles to be seen in the rivers. Cigarette packets were everywhere all over the ground.

We have several theories for this. International tourism is increasing in Kyrgyzstan, and is probably a contributing factor, especially on the most popular hiking trails, such as that up to Lake Ala Kul. The total number of foreign tourists, however, is still relatively low and the type of tourists, who we met at least, were in general outdoors enthusiasts, not likely to leave rubbish. We came to the conclusion that the majority of the rubbish problem is in fact caused by local people. In Kyrgyzstan there is a culture of day tripping into the mountains. Around Karakol people would drive up some way into the mountains of an evening (much further than you would think possible in a lada) with a picnic and several bottles of vodka and drive out again, leaving a lot of waste. Around Song Kul, although we didn't witness this, the ubiquitous vodka bottles are almost certainly left by the herders who live there. This is a result of a culture of seeming indifference to rubbish, at least among the people we saw, and a lack of funds to clean up.

We did see examples of efforts to reduce the rubbish problem. In Ala Archa national park there was a clear environment management scheme in place, with a honeypot zone full full of picnic benches and good paths close to the car park, within which nearly all the Kyrgyz tourists stayed. This area was well provisioned with bins and signs warning of the environmental damage caused by rubbish. These appeared to have a good effect as there was next to no rubbish outside the area. Our Tosor Pass tour was also relatively free of rubbish as it was remote enough and far enough from driveable tracks to be out of the way of day trippers. EcoTrek, in Karakol, had signs up all around its main office encouraging people to take their waste out of the mountains.

Although it would be easy to criticize the Kyrgyz people for their attitude to rubbish, and complain about how much this takes away from the natural beauty of the landscapes, it is not our place to do so. To come expecting pristine and natural landscapes in places, such as Song Kul, which are the home and daily workplaces for a relatively large number of people is

unreasonable. We, as international tourists, are guests in the country given the privilege of using the mountains and we are secondary users behind those who live in them. We cannot demand that they keep them clean for our viewing pleasure. There are, of course, environmental issues related to waste. These do need to be addressed but, considering the environmental hazards posed by mismanagement of Kumtor Mine (the country's largest individual source of GDP) by its Canadian parent company (two tonnes of sodium cyanide were spilled into the Barskoon river in 1998), it is easy to see why rubbish may not be an immediate priority.

Team Dynamics/Size of Expedition Team

- Our expedition team was well matched in terms of ability and experience. Between us we had a wide variety of skills in hiking, wild camping and orienteering
- 4 was a very good number to take on the expedition. We could all easily fit in a taxi when travelling and had no difficulties finding accommodation. It was also safe on the hill as we would always have one person to stay with a casualty whilst 2 others went together to get help
- On the expedition, we all felt that we worked very well as a team, with no big disagreements or arguments.

Food

- We decided to import all of our freeze dried food into Kyrgyzstan, and just take what we needed on each trip. This meant that at the start of the expedition and in between each trip, we had to travel with a large hold bag containing the rest of our food. This caused problems with getting all our gear into the marshrutkas to travel between trips, and also added another element of organisation with trying to find somewhere to store the hold bag safely between trips. Without doubt, we would have been more flexible without it. However, we all felt that if we were to do the expedition again, we would bring the hold bag with the freeze dried food in it, as any negatives of having to cart a heavy bag round were completely outweighed by how great the freeze dried food was, for its light weight, ease of preparation and excellent nutritional value. After trying to make our own meals with food we bought at Osh Bazaar, we only appreciated it more!
- During the hiking parts of the expedition, we operated on a 'calorie-deficit' principle. This essentially meant that we were eating fewer calories than we were expending each day. We chose to do this because it meant we would be carrying less weight in our bags, and the trips were short so we would be able to eat lots of calories on rest/travelling days during trips. For the most part this worked well, although Joss and Andi struggled a lot more with hunger as their calorie intake is normally higher anyway, being bigger people (although we did distribute the Clif Bars by weight). If we were to do the expedition again, Ellie and Khoa would probably take the same amount of food, but Andi and Joss would take slightly more.

- We chose to eat a fairly repetitive diet of porridge, freeze dried meals, Clif Bars and nuts/salami on the trips. After a couple of weeks there were varying opinions within the group about the wisdom of this decision! Some of the group found the different flavours of food variety enough while others definitely didn't. One thing was in agreement though: after 6 days fresh food tastes better than ever!
- Whilst eating out in Kyrgyzstan, on the whole we found the food to be safe and tasty, and didn't get food poisoning. The exception to this was at the very beginning of the trip, when Khoa got food poisoning which was suspected to be from a kebab at a cafe at Osh Bazaar. We hadn't realised that they had been cooked outside on an open grill, with lots of insects flying round that had probably already landed on all the open raw meat on display at the market. We stayed away from kebab after that and had no more problems with food for the rest of the trip.

Overall

Our learning experiences on this expedition were huge. We all achieved the aim of planning, organizing and executing a challenging adventure in a remote, beautiful location and we all thoroughly enjoyed it. We would all now feel much more confident in organising a similar trip in the future, and trips closer to home will seem much easier now in comparison!

We think the main take-away from this trip in terms of something to do differently next time would be to have a lot more discussion beforehand about what the nature of the hiking would be (fast/slow, light/heavy, long days/short days) so that we could streamline the team and all take appropriate kit.

Overall though, the expedition was an amazing adventure, and one that we would repeat again any day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Lorraine Craig, Philip Power and the Imperial College Expedition Board for their brilliant support and advice throughout both the planning and the duration of our expedition. Their help was invaluable and we would not have been able to undertake the expedition without it. We would also like to thank them for the financial support that made the expedition possible.

We would also like to thank Mountain House for their support of the expedition by providing us with a discount on their products. We enjoyed their food (except for Scrambled egg, Ham and Potatoes flavour) and were really happy with the weight and package size which were major factors for the success of this expedition.

Finally we would like to thank Jack Redvers Harris for being our contact in England during our expedition. He did a fantastic job updating our expedition page every day with sat phone messages and location updates.

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<http://www.rescue.centralasia.kg/index.php>
- Picture from Jakub Rybicki-
<https://500px.com/photo/95803969/ala-kul-lake-by-jakub-rybicki>) Visa information
<http://www.eng.24.kg/community/178450-news24.html>
- Bishkek B&B -
<http://www.bedandbreakfast.com/kazakhstan-bishkek-bishkek-b-b.html>
- Maps downloaded using
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.atlogis.sovietmaps.free&hl=en>

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Detailed hiking plans

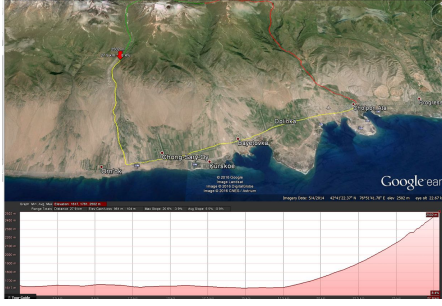
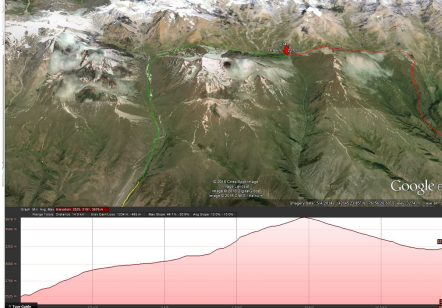
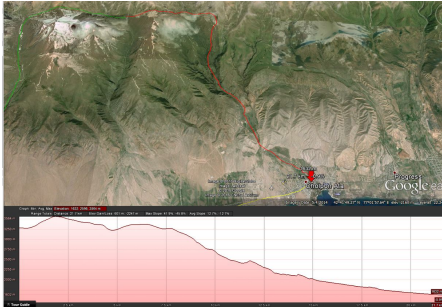
Cholpon-Ata Tour



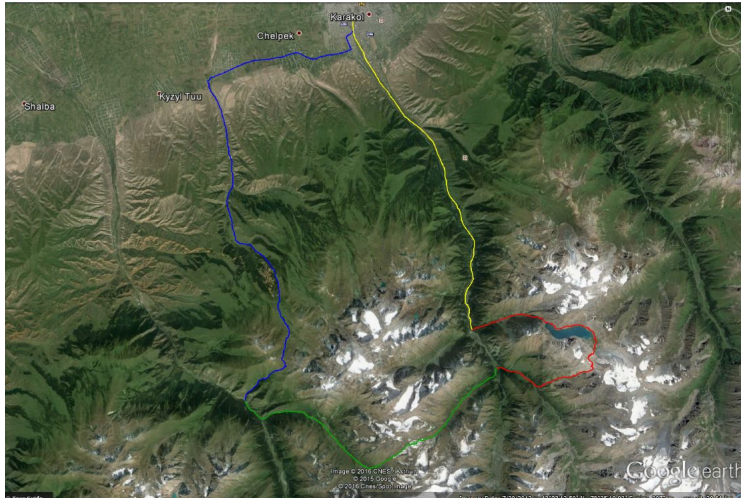
- Total distance: 67km
- Total elevation gain 3000m, loss 3000m
- Average elevation 2830m

Tour Considerations:

- **Tour specific risks:** This is the first tour of the trip so members of the team will have to take time to get used to high altitude (>3000m) and mountain terrain in Kyrgyzstan. Camp is set up in high mountain which means cold nights (around 10°C in August). There are 2 river crossings which are possible using the herder's tracks.
- **Escape routes and evacuation:** We will have to go south via either the west or the east valley on the track (whichever is closest) and to the nearest city along the road to get help.
- **Water:** Water can be taken from the rivers along the valleys or ice melting from the top.

<p>Day 1: From Cholpon-Ata, follow the road to Chon-Sary-Oy. Go up north, follow valley for 10km. Camp in valley floor</p>		<p>Risk: Long distance but mostly flat on the first day. Escape routes: Follow the track back down Chon-Sary-Oy. Alternative options / shortcuts: None Water supply: Water on the river along the valley</p>
<p>Day 2: Continue north up the valley. As valley opens up to east after 6.6km, follow the east path. Follow path up east over saddle and down to the head of valley on the other side around 8.5km. Make camp.</p>		<p>Risk: Camp at high altitude. Escape routes: Follow the west track back down to the valley and go to Chon-Sary-Oy. Alternative options / shortcuts: None Water supply: Ice melting from top or small lake near camp.</p>
<p>Day 3: Ascent east path through saddle. Option to cross over the next valley and complete circuit around 3446m peak before descending back to the same valley. Follow path south through valley taking the east wood fork at the bottom and continue to cross flat plain to Cholpon-Ata.</p>		<p>Risks: Steep descent. Escape routes: Descending the south valley before going up the peak. Alternative options: Go down to the south valley directly. Water supply: Many streams run down the valley.</p>

Karakol Tour



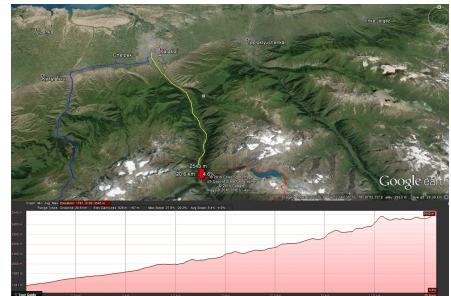
- Total Distance: 93.5 km
- Total Elevation gain: 5230m
- Total Elevation Loss: 5110m

Tour considerations:

- **Tour specific risks:**
 - Remoteness: Day 3 will be at least a days walk away from the nearest main infrastructure.
 - Altitude: passes of 3759m will have to be crossed, optional summits of 4400m are possible.
 - River crossings
 - Potential snow fields
- **Evacuation and Escape Routes**
 - For days 1 and 2, follow the valley we walked in until we reach Karakol again. Tourist camp is on way for urgent help.
 - For days 3 (after crossing pass) and 4, follow main valley north instead of crossing additional pass as proposed by route.
 - There is some existing infrastructure along the route, such as Yurts located half way in valley on day 1, Tourist camp near camp 1, Yurts and Djety Oguz resort located downstream from Camp 3 and Dyishin village at $\frac{3}{4}$ of route on day 4.
- **Water**
 - Proposed track follows river valleys for most of the 4 days. Exceptions include the high passes and short traverse on day 4.
 - Lake ala-kul.
 - All camps located at rivers.

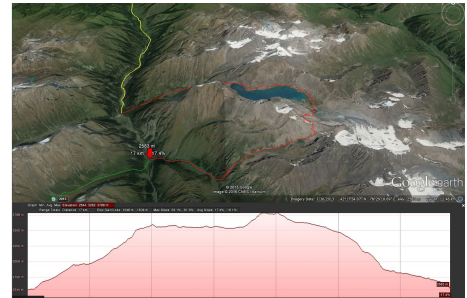
Day 1:

Start in Karakol (1780m), follow Karakol river valley up to River junction (rivers kkarakol and ala-kul lake valley). Camp at river confluence (2540 m). Water available, flat grassy area, potentially existing camp and yurts near by.



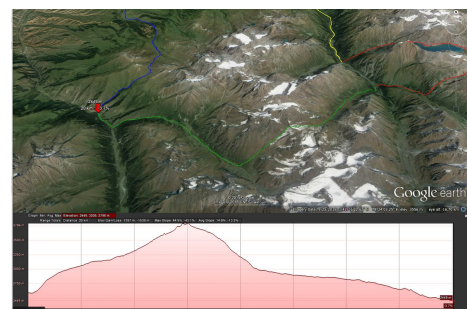
Day 2:

Travel up valley to lake ala-kul. Traverse northern end of lake ala-kul. Follow existing path overpass at south-east end of lake ala-kul. Possibility of following ridge towards south-east and summit 4184m peak (would be dependent on conditions on the day) and descend steeply into keltor river valley. Follow this valley for an easy finish to junction with juntor river. Camp at junction on grassy area. water available (throughout day).



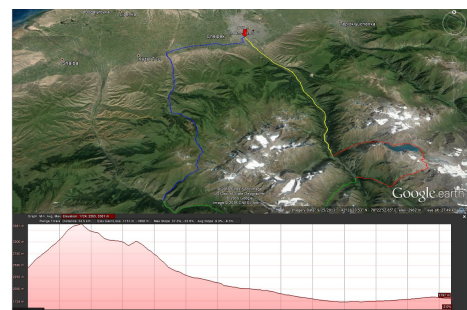
Day 3:

Follow Ujuntor valley south-south-east for 500m and then head south-west up telety river valley. Head over Telety Pass (3759m) with possible summit to the south (3966m) - depending on conditions. Alpine conditions at pass, but no glaciers. follow valley towards south-west until meeting major valley. follow flatter terrain into Ajlanysh valley. Camp below valley heading up kumbel pass.



Day 4:

Head up Kumbel pass valley from camp towards north east along small farm track. Descend into suuktor valley and follow towards north. Eventually join dirt road that leads toward Dyishin. Follow flat roads back towards Karakol. Sleep in hostel in Karakol.



Barksoon-Torsor Pass Tour



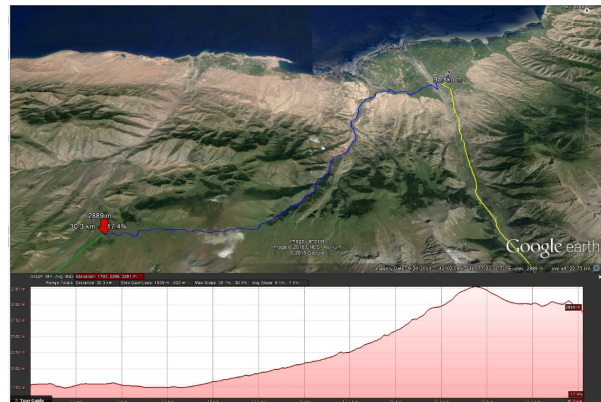
- Total Distance: 107km
- Total Elevation gain: 4200m
- Total Elevation Loss: 4220m

Tour considerations:

- **Route specific risks**
 - Remoteness - This route passes through isolated land, especially after descending from Torsor pass until the main road is reached again.
- **Emergency and evacuation routes**
 - Before crossing Torsor pass, the evacuation route is towards the north, following the valley down to reach the shores of lake Issyk Kul. The dirt track that reaches Torsor pass and lies on our route on day 2 has been completed by 4x4 WD expeditions and would be the fastest evacuation route.
 - After crossing the Torsor pass, the evacuation route would be to reach the road back to Barksoon and then follow this road as planned. There is a potential shortcut to the road on day 3.
 - Existing Infrastructure includes isolated farms along route on first day and major road following valley back to Lake Issyk Kul on 4th day.
- **Water**
 - Rivers and streams flow towards Issyk Kul on route of first day and stream in Torsor pass valley.
 - Lake in main valley after descending from Torsor pass.
 - River flowing parallel to main road to return to Lake Issyk Kul on final day.

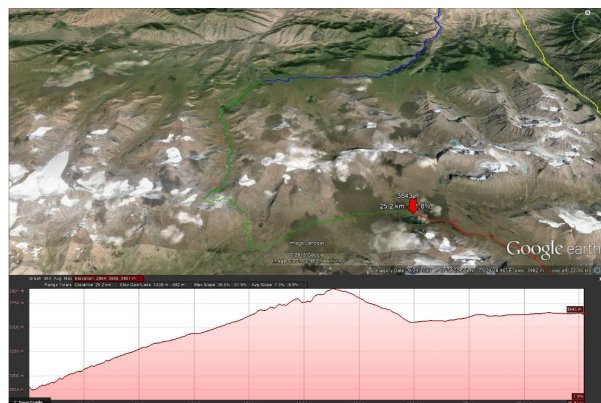
Day 1:

Start in Barsköön and follow a small dirt track towards south-west, past the Tamga Airfield. Follow track over pass (3300m). Camp in wide flat valley.



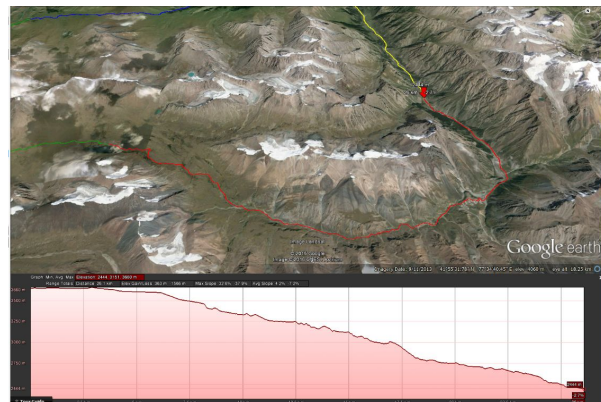
Day 2:

Follow wide flat valley down to Torsor pass track. Continue track towards south until Torsor Pass (3865m). Descend steeply along track until Jyluu-Suu river valley. Turn east and follow valley upstream. Camp at lake where water available.

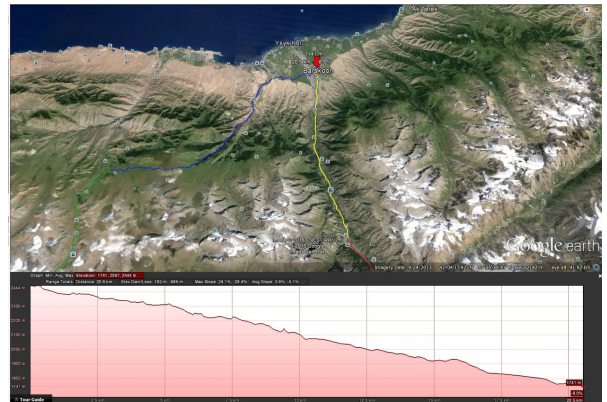


Day 3:

Follow southern valley towards east until reaching Barsköön pass road. descend pass into valley and camp.



Day 4:
Walk out Barsköön Pass valley towards north
until reaching Issyk Kul. Hostel in Barsköön.



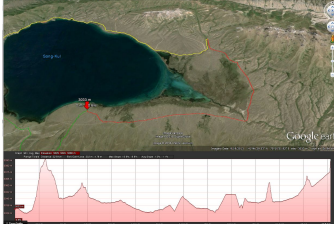
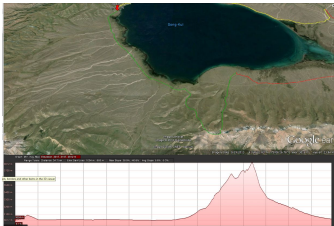
Song-Kul Lake Tour



- Total distance: 105km
- Total elevation gained: 1680m, Total elevation lost: 1680m
- Average elevation: 3105m

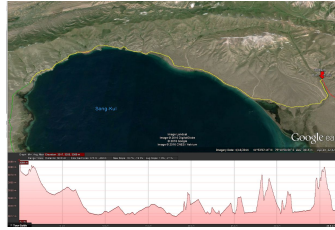
Tour Considerations:

- **Route specific risks:** The whole lake is at high altitude (>3000m) and the weather is changeable. It can snow at any time of year and the average temperature is around 10°C in August. There are a declining number of wolves native to the area so it is best to camp close to herder's camps. There are four rivers which feed the lake and one which drains it. These are all crossable by bridges on the herder's tracks.
- **Escape routes and evacuation:** The first step will be to return to the lake shore, where herder's tracks circumnavigate the lake. The lake is relatively isolated – around 1.5 hours' drive from a settlement of any size. Herders registered with the community based tourism project are known to set up communities on the shores of the lake. In an emergency they are likely to have supplies, medical supplies and some vehicles which can take us down from the lake.
- **Water:** Available from streams running into Song Kul lake or, if need be, Song Kul lake itself.

<p>Day 1: Start at the junction on the access track to the north-east of Lake Song-Kul which we will have been driven to the previous day. Follow the track southwards for through pastureland at the foot of hills to the East of Song-Kul Lake. Cross the bridge over the Song-Kul River after around 16km and veer west still with a clear herders track. After around 14km travelling parallel to the lake veer north-west towards the lake for around 3km before making camp close to the lake shore.</p>	 <p>The image shows a satellite map of the area around Lake Song-Kul. A red line indicates the route starting from the junction north-east of the lake, heading south, crossing the river, and then heading west and north-west towards the lake shore. Below the map is an elevation profile showing the terrain's height along the route, with a red shaded area under the profile line.</p>	<p>Risks: Mild risk of AMS due to ascending from Issyk-Kul lake level (1800m) to Song-Kul lake level (3016m) relatively rapidly by car. Spending a night at the lake before starting the tour should compensate for this. Escape routes: Follow lake shore tracks to nearest yurt. Alternative options / shortcuts: No shortcuts. Could detour south through mountain foothills. Water supply: Many streams run into the lake, also Song-Kul River – will need filtering.</p>
<p>Day 2: From camp travel south-south-west entering a low valley and following the left hand fork after around 4km. keep following the valley south before ascending a broad ridge up to a 3800m summit around 9km into the route. Enjoy the spectacular views over Song-Kul Lake and more southern mountains. Follow the ridge top east for 1km before heading north-west across a saddle and starting the 6km descent south-westwards traversing across two valleys. Back on pasture, follow herder's tracks along the lake shore for 18km before reaching the start of slightly hillier terrain. Make camp next the lake at 3022m.</p>	 <p>The image shows a satellite map of the area around Lake Song-Kul. A red line indicates the route starting from the camp near the lake, heading south-south-west into a valley, ascending a ridge to a summit, and then descending and following the lake shore. Below the map is an elevation profile showing the terrain's height along the route, with a red shaded area under the profile line.</p>	<p>Risks: High altitude Escape routes: Bear north to lake and follow lake shore tracks to nearest yurt. Alternative options / shortcuts: Shortcut straight west along shore rather than foraging south into mountains. Can do longer ridge segment to extend route. Water supply: Many streams run into the lake – will need filtering.</p>

Day 3:

From camp follow herder's tracks clockwise round and parallel to the lake through hillier terrain for 14 km. Travel through pasture land, following lakeshore for 13km. Veer east and then north for 10km, following tracks and a river until return to the junction at the start of day 1 to make camp and be picked up the following morning by a driver.



Risks: None particular.

Escape routes: Follow lake shore tracks to nearest yurt.

Alternative options / shortcuts: No shortcuts. Can detour into hills and to ridge north-east of lake.

Water supply: Many streams run into the lake – will need filtering.

Appendix B: Medicine and First Aid

List of medicines taken

Painkillers	Ibuprofen	Can reduce swelling, small pains etc
	Paracetamol	Headaches, small pains etc
	Co-Codamol	More debilitating pain
	Codeine Phosphate	For extreme situations only
Antibiotics	Flucloxacillin	Skin infections
	Amoxicillin	Chest/ear infections
	Ciprofloxacin	Diharrea, kidney infections
AMS	Acetazolamide	To treat the symptoms of AMS until you can get the person down- not to be used to ignore the symptoms and continue ascending
Other	Diarrhea Relief	Useful for travelling, or when toilets are not readily available
	Cold and Flu sachets	Joss had a cold before we left, useful if someone is feeling a bit rubbish with a cold on a long day

List of items in first aid kit

Medicated dressing bandages	2 x extra large
	4 x large
	4 x medium
	4 x small
Conforming bandage	2 x 2 inch
Triangular bandage	2 x
Tape	1 roll Strappal
Gloves	4 x pair
Steri Strips	Lots x varying sizes
Celox	1 x pack
Plasters	1 pack, varying sizes
Wound dressings/gauze	Lots, varying sizes
Sam Splint	2 x
Accident record form	2 x
Foil blanket	1 x
Antiseptic cleaning wipes	Lots
Iodine	1 bottle

Hospitals/medical provision in Kyrgyzstan

Bishkek:

Ambulance services:

Bishkek City Ambulance

- Free of charge calls on 103

This company has told the British Embassy the following things:

- They don't have English speaking staff
- It's a public facility
- They are affiliated to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health
- Specialisations are in first aid
- They have experience of representing British nationals
- You will need to pay for treatment in cash
- EHIC Cards are not accepted; repayment plans aren't available
- Staff speak {Russian; Kyrgyz languages}
- 24 hours service

Ambulance (private) under the Health Centre of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic

- Tel: +996550707121 or +996312621575
- Address: 110 Kievskaya (corner Logvinenko), Bishkek

This company has told the British Embassy the following things:

- They have English speaking staff (very basic English)
- It's a private facility
- They are affiliated to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health
- Specialisations are in first aid
- They have experience of representing British nationals
- You will need to pay for treatment in cash
- EHIC Cards are not accepted; repayment plans aren't available
- Staff speak {Russian; Kyrgyz languages, very basic English}
- 24 hours service

Hospital facilities:

Health Centre of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic.

- Address: 110 Kievskaya (corner Logvinenko), Bishkek
- Head's office tel. number: +996312663549
- Registration Chief - Tel: +996132612969
- E-mail: loodkr@mail.ru

This company has told the British Embassy the following things:

- They have some English speaking staff
- It's a public facility with a provision for a private facility

- They are affiliated to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health
- Specialisations are in: There are a daily treatment and diagnostic departments. Also there is a hospital (Intensive Care Department, surgery - 5 places; Cardio - 6 places; Therapeutical -10, Neurological - 10, children - 4). All wards are comfortable, max for 2 people; also there are VIP wards - 2 rooms per a patient). A laboratory and dentist services are available. Diagnostic is rather developed: modern ultrasound machines, Electrocardiography etc. If there is a specific issue, a doctor from the clinic will also monitor his patient if he/she hospitalised to another specialised (Trauma etc) clinic. In case of med evacuation a doctor accompanies a patient to the airport.
- They have experience of representing British nationals
- You will need to pay for treatment in cash, by credit card or via insurance companies
- EHIC Cards are not accepted; repayment plans aren't available
- Staff speak {Russian; Kyrgyz and English (some) languages}
- 24 hour service

Infectious Disease Hospital

- Address: 70, Tolstoy street, Bishkek ICU department.
- Tel. +996(312) 590018
- Admitting office.Tel. +996 (312) 590154.

This company has told the British Embassy the following things:

- They do not have English speaking staff
- It's a public facility
- They are affiliated to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health
- Specialisations: This hospital accepts patients with infectious conditions, if one has a fever this is the hospital that accepts that patient, other hospitals usually do not accept a patient with a fever. There is a limited ICU. For foreigners a private room on a regular ward is provided. There is lab that can do cultures
- They have experience of representing British nationals
- You will need to pay for treatment in cash
- EHIC Cards are not accepted; repayment plans are not available
- Staff speak {Russian and Kyrgyz languages}

District Hospitals:

Balykchi (Closest for Cholpon-Ata tour):

Issyk-Kul city hospital

- Address: Issyk-Kul oblast, Balykchi town, 94 Issyk-Kulskaya Street
- Tel: +996 (3944) 21454

Karakol (closest for incidents occurring on the Karakol or Barskoon tours):

Issyk-Kul oblast hospital

- Address: Issyk-Kul oblast, Ak Su district, Karakol town, 2 Orozova Street.
- Tel: +996 (3922) 20380

Naryn (for Song-Kul Lake if evacuation to Bishkek not possible):

Naryn oblast hospital

- Address: Naryn oblast, Naryn town, 5 Kachkynova street
- Tel: + 996 (3522) 50411

These district hospitals have told the British Embassy the following things:

- They don't have English speaking staff
- It's a public facility
- They are affiliated to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health
- Specialisations are in all types of internal diseases and traumas. Surgery, laboratory tests and diagnostic facilities are limited. They have an emergency department.
- They do not have experience of representing British nationals
- You will need to pay for treatment in cash
- EHIC Cards are not accepted; repayment plans aren't available
- Staff speak {Russian; Kyrgyz languages}
- Family and friends can visit the hospital during from 17.00-19.00

Medical Evacuation:

International SOS Assistance

- Web: www.internationalsos.com
- Moscow Tel 007 495 9376477
- Almaty tel: 007 7272 581911
- Dr. on Call (007) 701 744 1111

This company has told the British Embassy the following things:

- They have English speaking staff
- It's a private facility
- They have experience of representing British nationals
- You will need to pay for Diagnostics in cash or by a credit card
- EHIC Cards are not accepted; repayment plans are available
- Staff speak {Russian and English languages}

Appendix C: Risk Assessment

Risk/Hazard	Consequence	Who might be harmed	Control measures	Likelihood	Seriousness	Risk Factor
Biological Health Risk:						
Dirty water	sickness and diarrhoea	All members of expedition	Most water is clean but may be contaminated by livestock. Check water sources upstream for any obvious contaminants. Always filter and sterilise water. Avoid eating fruit and vegetables washed in water.	6	2	12
Dehydration	Serious injury or death	All members of expedition	Carry enough water for conditions. Research water supplies along the route on internet and through locals. Carry spare water for emergencies. Check weather forecast, long term and short term to assess for periods of drought. Know the symptoms of dehydration.	2	4	8
Food poisoning	sickness and diarrhoea	All members of expedition	Avoid uncooked and non-fresh food. Use hand gel/soap.	4	4	16
Appendicitis	increasing pain in center of abdomen leading to sickness and eventually bursting of the appendix. Life threatening	All members of expedition. Prevalent in young men and women. Most affects men and those aged 10 -20.	If any abdominal pain is felt immediately inform other members of the group. When pain increases and other symptoms are noticed such as coughing, pain over the appendix area, sickness and loss of appetite do not travel any further and call for	2	8	16

	condition.		help.			
Sunburn	Irritation of skin, can lead to serious blistering.	All members of expedition	Cover up skin, wear a hat, use Sun cream.	4	3	12
Heat stroke	Major injury	All members of expedition	Replenish water perspired. Stop regularly. Avoid midday sun and cover up skin with loose clothing to stay cool. Look out for symptoms	2	6	12
Altitude Sickness	Serious illness or death	All members of expedition	Ascend slowly when above 2500m, never more than 1000m in a day. Sleep at lower elevation if possible. Be prepared to lose altitude rapidly if a team member becomes ill.	3	7	21
Disease:						
Malaria	Fever, headache, muscle ache, loss of appetite	All members of expedition	IF in an area with risk, keep skin covered and use insect repellent. No risk in areas of Kyrgyzstan we intend to visit.	1	7	7
Hepatitis A	Flu like symptoms and diarrhoea. Delaying and possible abandonment of expedition.	All members of expedition	Ensure all of team are vaccinated, avoid contaminated food and water and keep good personal hygiene.	2	6	12
Rabies	Serious illness and death	All members of expedition	Ensure team members are vaccinated if possible although this doesn't eliminate need for treatment. Avoid animals which may bite or scratch.	2	8	16
Tetanus	Serious illness and	All members of the	Ensure all of team are vaccinated and clean all	2	7	14

	possible death	expedition	wounds thoroughly.			
Typhoid	Serious illness	All members of the expedition	Ensure team members are vaccinated if possible, although the risk is lessened as we will be mostly in remote unpopulated areas. Keep good hygiene	2	7	14
Equipment Failure:						
Stove malfunction	Inability to cook/sterilise food	All members of expedition	Take a spare miniature stove. Much of the area is covered by forest. In an emergency this could be used to cook	4	2	8
Environmental Risks:						
Road traffic accidents	Injury or death	All members of expedition	Use trusted bus and taxi services only during daytime when travelling to and from Bishkek and between towns as drunkenness is common. Avoid roads when fastpacking.	3	8	24
Theft	loss of possessions	All members of expedition	Unlikely to occur outside of big towns/cities. Keep equipment, especially documents and money, on person at all times.	4	2	8
Earthquakes	Possible injury or death	All members of expedition	Familiarise with safety procedures. Most risk in very rural areas is from landslides and avalanches triggered by earthquakes.	2	6	12
Landslides and Avalanches	Possible serious injury and death. Also barrier to travel.	All members of expedition	Check for risky areas beforehand - e.g. steep hillsides. Do not walk on or beneath steep unstable slopes, especially after rain or in event of earthquake (see above)	2	6	12

Wolves and bears	Serious Injury/Death	All members of expedition	Take advice from locals to avoid known bear habitats. Keep food in a separate tent. Tian Shan bears are small and generally docile. Stay together as a group, although wolves are generally scared of humans and little threat.	1	8	8
Livestock and farm dogs	minor injury and possible animal transmitted disease	All members of expedition	Take care when approaching farm buildings and when around livestock.	2	6	12
Flash floods	Person(s) being swept away by flood	All members of expedition	Check the route and land topography for areas of danger. Check the weather forecasts as often as possible. Most snow should already have melted so the main threat of glacial meltwater will be less.	1	8	8
River crossings	Risk of person(s) being swept away by current	All members of expedition	Plan route to avoid river crossings. Carry out training exercises practising crossing rivers.	3	8	24
Getting lost	Time delay, lack of supplies	All members of expedition	Take mobile/satellite phones for emergencies. Use GPS along with map and compass. Training to ensure everyone is a proficient navigator. Confer with locals. Stay together.	6	2	12
Political unrest	Stranded in Kyrgyzstan, may lead to civil unrest. May lead to detainment, serious injury or death.	All members of expedition	Research the political situation. Keep a close eye on the situation whilst in the country.	2	4	8

Fire	Fire at camp may cause serious injury or death. Will destroy equipment and supplies	All members of expedition	Keep fires away from the camp and equipment. Put fires out before bed and keep fuel out of the sun and in a safe fuel container	2	6	12
Permits	Fines or arrest	All members of expedition	Research on the internet and ask locals of any permits required to enter certain areas.	2	2	4
Lack of fuel	Inability to cook/sterilise food	All members of expedition	Find fuel supplies along the route and take enough fuel to last for the route. Fire wood can be used in emergency	2	3	6
Lack of physical fitness	Inability to travel. Increased chance of physical injury	All members of expedition	Ensure each member trains in the period before the trip and organise a strict training regime. Carry out a fitness test before the expedition	3	5	15
Temperature conditions	Hypothermia, Hyperthermia	All members of expedition	Ensure each member has adequate clothing and spare layers.	4	6	24
General Risks:						
Strain/knee injury	Less efficient travel, delays	All members of expedition	Train well and perfect running technique to reduce likelihood of injury. Also distribute weight carefully.	5	4	20
Sprained/broken bones	Inability to travel, delays	All members of expedition	Do not take unnecessary risks on rough terrain	3	8	24
Minor injuries	delays, slower progress	All members of expedition	All team members will be first aid trained	6	2	12
Major injuries	Large delays, death or permanent harm.	All members of expedition	Some team members will have advanced first aid training. Satellite phone will be on hand for evacuation	2	8	16

			and spare supplies and clothing will be accessible in the event of major delay.			
Exhaustion	delays, increased chance of physical injury and illness	All members of expedition	Carry spare supplies incase of delays, build in rest days to the fastpacking schedule, run/walk at the slowest members pace.	6	2	12
Group separation	delays, increased chance of physical injury	All members of expedition	Ensure each member is aware of the route and key place names. Ensure each member has ample supplies on their person. Run/walk as a group at the pace of the slowest team member.	1	6	6

Appendix D: Logistics and Transport in detail

Travel log

Transport	Journey	Details	Time (aprx)	Cost pp
Flight	London Gatwick-Bishkek	Turkish Airlines, stopover in Istanbul	13 hours	£300- £374
Mashrutka	Airport-Bishkek-Airport	Drops off in the centre	30 mins	40 som
	Hostel-Osh Bazaar-Hostel	Number 161	10 mins	10 som
	Anywhere within Bishkek		n/a	10 som
	Bishkek -Kochkor	Number 513, leaves from the bus station	2.5 hours	375 som
	Balykchy-Karakol	From the main bus stop in Balykchy	5 hours	500 som
	Karakol-Tamga	From the bus station at the western end of Karakol	2.5 hours	150 som
	Tamga-Bishkek	From the small bus stop on the road at Issyk Kul	6 hours	300 som
	Bishkek-Ala Archa-Bishkek	Number 265	1 hour	40 som
	Bishkek-Dordoï Bazaar	Number 286	45 mins	40 som
Private car/taxi	Hostel-Bishkek Bus Station	Telephoned from the hostel	5 mins	60 som
	Kochkor- Kyzart	Arranged through Shepherd's Life in Kochkor	1 hour	300 som
	Song Kul- Kochkor	Arranged at the main yurt camp at Song Kul Lake	2 hours	750 som
	Kochkor-Balykchy	Arranged through Shepherd's Life	1.5 hours	200 som

		Kochkor who found us a taxi		
	Karakol- Jeti Oguz	Arranged through EcoTrek Karakol	30 mins	150 som
	Aksu-Karakol	Picked up on the way down to Karakol	30 mins	100 som
	Tamga- Kumtor road	Telephoned from the homestay	30 mins	350 som

Accommodation log

Type	Location	# Nights	Details	Cost pppn
Hostel	Bishkek	5	Boorsok hostel, booked online beforhand. Breakfast on request. A quiet location but walking into the centre is fine. Lots of restaurants/supermarkets nearby. Wifi, showers.	550 som without breakfast
	Kochkor	1	A small hostel on the main street in Kochkor. Clean and near the supermarket/cafe. Breakfast was excellent. Wifi, showers.	500 som with breakfast
	Karakol	1	Duet Hostel, very European style and lots of backpackers. It was very busy so there might not always be room in high season. Wifi, showers, kitchen, lockers.	640 with breakfast
Homestay	Tamga	2	A beautiful homestay at the back of the village with private rooms and set in rose gardens. Dinner and breakfast home cooked and delicious. Cold shower.	700 with breakfast and dinner

Mountain House Food Reviews

Overall comments:	<p>Joss: Having only used freeze dried meals once before, in training for this trip, I was pleasantly surprised. The meals were generally tasty and hydrated well, much more like normal food than I expected. Their small weight and convenient preparation made them a real asset to the expedition. Their only major problem is the waste they produce from packaging, which all had to be taken off the mountainside by hand.</p> <p>Andi: This was my first experience with freeze dried food (apart from the training weekend in the Cairngorms) and I will gladly use Mountain House food for these kind of expeditions again. I would say overall the taste is good, some dishes could use some more spice and flavouring though. I was glad we took the “large” portions for dinner.</p> <p>Khoa: I had used other brand’s freeze dried meal for other trips before this expedition. Although Mountain House’s is a bit more expensive, the taste and lightweight factor are certainly one of the tops. The food is packaged well and really easy to prepare with specific hot water line (thanks Ellie).</p> <p>Ellie: I used the freeze dried meals before on my Iceland expedition last year and loved them so was more than happy to eat them again for another month! I found the foods to be tasty and filling, and what I liked most about them was how easy they were to prepare- after a long day hiking, there was no faff with cooking and we could be eating a hot dinner within 15 mins of pitching the tent.</p>
Packaging:	<p>Joss: Nice and easy to eat from as long as you have a long enough fork/spoon. Makes a good hot water bottle while waiting as well. The filling volume markings on the inside of the packets were useful.</p> <p>Andi: Quite big for some of the meals. You need a fairly long spoon to reach the bottom of the package. The inside water markings are very useful.</p> <p>Khoa: Waterproof package is a plus as we could leave them in the outer bag or use it to make another serving after. I really like the water line showing how much hot water is needed. The nutrition information printed outside the bag was really useful to ensure we have enough energy for the whole trip.</p> <p>Ellie: The packaging was very sturdy and performed well with being squashed round in my bag. The only thing to mention would be that I found a couple of slits in some of the packaging after having been at 4000m- I’m not sure whether something in my bag ripped the packaging (I’ve never had this before) or whether the change in pressure caused a small rip in the bag. However this was very easily fixed with duct tape.</p>

	<p>A nice improvement to the packaging was the water line markings on the inside of the bag which were exceptionally useful!</p> <p>The colour coded packaging between dinners and breakfasts was also pretty useful when digging around in your bag for a meal.</p>
<p>Nutritional Value:</p>	<p>Joss: The Mountain House meals were a good way of making sure we had a good enough balance of nutrition in our main meals without having to be really careful to buy the right ingredients. The big pack meals were just about sufficient to fill us up in the evening which was impressive considering the energy we used. The only thing lacking was fibre...</p> <p>Andi: Given the dry weight you carried, I think it is difficult to find better weight to nutritional value. There was a variety of ingredients and the large portions were just about sufficient to fill you up after a long day.</p> <p>Khoa: We got to use the 'Big Pack' which was very fulfilling even after a long day. I would love to have more vegetarian option to ensure we have a balance diet on a long trip.</p> <p>Ellie: The meals provide a pretty balanced diet with lots of vegetables, meat and carbs. We used the 'Big Pack' meals as we were burning quite a lot of calories on our trip, and they filled us up adequately.</p>
<p>Dinners:</p>	<p>Joss:</p> <p>Mediterranean vegetables: Tasty and good for when you're really missing vegetables (especially olives).</p> <p>Potato Salmon and Dill: This was good and peppery and the salmon hydrated surprisingly well.</p> <p>Spaghetti bolognese: Good, tasty and filling.</p> <p>Chicken Korma: Really good – almost comparable to a fresh curry! Probably my favourite for the trip.</p> <p>Andi: Generally all dinners were great! The potato salmon and dill is a bit different and not my favourite (others really like this, hence try it before!) as it turned out more of a soup and despite having high calories, left me unsatisfied. The curries are great and the chili con carne has a decent spiciness. Spaghetti bolognese is basically a must.</p> <p>Khoa: Dinners were really tasty and filling. I haven't got a chance to try Mediterranean vegetable yet but Mountain House does seem to be quite limited in the vegetarian section. Spaghetti bolognese was great and gave me a warm and comforting feeling after a day walking in the cold. I really like Potato Salmon and Dill although a bit more salmon in the pack would help. My favourites are the curries which come with the well cooked rice (only after 10mins) and well balanced flavour.</p> <p>Ellie: The dinners were all delicious and it was great to have a variety of flavours to provide some variety to mealtimes. Spaghetti bolognese was</p>

	<p>definitely my favourite- it was incredibly filling and delicious, and very comforting after a particularly long day! It does have the largest dry weight however. I loved the curries and the chilli as well. My least favourite meal was probably the Mediterranean vegetable pasta- the shells folded over and so didn't really rehydrate properly and I preferred the stronger flavours of the other meals.</p>
<p>Breakfasts:</p>	<p>Joss: Scrambled eggs, ham and potato: I was not the greatest fan of this before the trip but thought it would be a good source of breakfast energy. Unfortunately grew to dislike this flavour more and more throughout the trip – too salty and really bland – until at one point, when I had little appetite admittedly, I was unable to eat it at all without feeling sick. Custard: Both flavours (with apple and with red fruit) are tasty and make good breakfasts when added to porridge. Stir well to get rid of lumps.</p> <hr/> <p>Andi: Scrambled eggs, ham and potato in a large portion is definitely too much for breakfast. The egg hydrates in a funny way as there is a lot of powder left as a soup in the bottom - not very yummy. The ham and potatoes also don't hydrate as well as some of the other meals. Mixing oats into the desert packages (custard with fruits) is a great way to bulk up the very tasty desserts. Definitely a highlight.</p> <hr/> <p>Khoa: We tried some of the scrambled eggs, ham and potatoes for breakfast. I really dislike the salty flavour of them. They also had a bit a leftover water after cooking which become quite unappetising for me. In the other hand, the custard with added sachet of porridge was lovely. Rice pudding was also good but needed longer time to cook.</p> <hr/> <p>Ellie: I'd never eaten the breakfasts before, usually opting for the standard grim oats and water so this was a lovely change- the small extra weight was definitely worth it! I'm not a fan of cooked breakfast so decided to use the custard as a breakfast, by adding a sachet of Sainsbury's original express porridge oats. This created a lovely fruity porridge-y breakfast that was hot and filling. You had to add more water than was stated on the back of the packet to compensate for the added oats absorbing water. I preferred the fruits to the apple as the bitter berries with the sweet custard were absolutely delicious.</p>
<p>Any other comments:</p>	<p>Joss: It's important to remember to boil or purify water adequately before putting it in the meals. It is easy to forget to boil for long enough to kill microbes as you're not boiling pasta ect. Andi and I got ill, possibly from using the same stream water in our meals.</p> <hr/> <p>Andi: Overall good first experience with freeze dry food. It is not as bad as the reputation it has. Then again, after a long day out, almost anything tastes good.</p> <hr/> <p>Khoa: Definitely would use them again for other trips!</p>

Ellie: Mountain House meals have never failed me yet, and I would definitely recommend them for future expeditions!

Appendix E: Complete finances

Pre-Expedition Finances

Kit	Item	Purchaser	Individual price (in £)	Quantity	Est. Total (in £)
Accommodation	Glenmore lodge SYHA one night and membership	Joss	£54.00	1	£54.00
Food	Mountain House Meals	Andi	£567.00	1	£567.00
Food	Lunch Snacks (salami + nuts) + porridge	Andi	£46.30	1	£46.30
Food	Trial Mountain House food	Joss	£55.50	1	£55.50
Kit	Kyrgystan Map	Andi	£14.99	1	£14.99
Kit	Rucksack rain cover	Andi	£22.99	1	£22.99
Kit	Travel accessories	Andi	£42.50	1	£42.50
Kit	Sleeping bag	Andi	£250.00	1	£250.00
Kit	Waterproof jacket	Joss	£210.00	1	£210.00
Kit	MSR Hubba Hubba Tent and tent footprint	Joss	£320.00	1	£320.00
Kit	Inov8 roclite shoes	Joss	£64.98	1	£64.98
Kit	Fizan compact poles	Joss	£61.96	1	£61.96
Kit	Alpkit MyTi mug	Joss	£22.50	1	£22.50
Kit	Map Printing	Joss	£89.00	1	£89.00
Kit	International Sim Card	Khoa	£10.00	1	£10.00
Kit	Sleeping bag	Khoa	£134.99	1	£134.99
Kit	Alpkit MyTi mug	Khoa	£22.50	1	£22.50
Kit	Iridium pre-paid SIM card	Khoa	£98.40	1	£98.40
Kit	Salomon XA Pro Mid GTX	Khoa	£84.65	1	£84.65
Travel	Flights London - Bishkek (Joss, Khoa, Andi)	Andi	£298.32	3	£894.96

Travel	Flights London - Bishkek (Ellie)	Ellie	£374.32	1	£374.32
Travel	Trains Scotland	Andi	£92.05	1	£92.05
Travel	Trains Aviemore	Joss	£71.25	1	£71.25
Travel	Trains Scotland	Khoa	£71.25	1	£71.25
Travel	Travel money + gift for local	All	£200.00	4	£800.00
Total:					£4,476.09

Finances in Kyrgyzstan

We roughly converted 1 GBP to 89 som:

Item	Price (Kyrgyz Som)
Taxi from airport to Bishkek hostel	700
Gas	1800
Taxi to Kyzart pass	1200
Marshrutka from Bishkek to Kochkor	1500
Yurt camp lunch	1200
Horse riding	4800
Taxi from Song-kul to Kochkor	3000
Hostel in Kochkor	2000
Marshrutka to Karakol	2000
Taxi to the start of Karakol tour	600
Hot spring	800
Taxi back to Karakol	400
Hostel in Karakol	2560
Marshrutka from Karakol to Tamga	600
Hostel in Tamga	2800
Taxi to the start of Torsor pass tour	1400
Hostel in Tamga	2800

Hostel in Bishkek	2200
Marshrutka to Kashkasu	200
Taxi to Ala-acha	1000
Hostel in Bishkek	2200
Total (som)	35760
Total (gbp)	401.80