

(Expedition) Life is a Rollercoaster

The Highs and Lows of a Not-so-Remote Expedition to Kyrgyzstan

In August 2022 our team, The Monstrous Regiment, packed seven holdalls of kit and after miraculously navigating through two airports without losing any bags we landed in Osh in the West of the Kyrgyz Republic. Our plan was simple, a transfer to Daroot Korgon with an overnight stay and then onward to the Kashka Suu valley from where we would haul our kit into the remote end of the valley and attempt to climb some of our target 5000m peaks. It had been five years in the making and with a brief interlude for the pandemic we were so happy to finally be on Kyrgyz soil.

As we settled into the guesthouse in Daroot Korgon we chatted to two of the other guests who introduced themselves as Gabriel, a mountain guide from Argentina, and Henri, his client from France. The conversation took a worrying turn when these gents told us they were heading to the same valley as us. We gave each other silent side glances, realising what it could mean, and clambered over bags and searched through our kit to find the laminated maps we had brought with us, asking them to show us where they were heading. There is nothing you want to hear less on an expedition to complete first ascents than the fact you may have company, and even worse, that this company may be aiming for the same peaks. Our hearts sank, but there was nothing we could do so we accepted the bad luck.

As conversation progressed, we found out that they had not arranged border permits as their logistics company had told them they were not necessary, but they had urgently sent a driver back to Osh to try and arrange the paperwork as, it turned out, the permits were essential. The next morning they set off before we had eaten breakfast, it felt like a race and they had a head start. Eager to catch up we eventually set off with our driver but were stopped at the military post just outside the town.

What happened next was three hours of watching a random collection of men smoke, spit, shake their heads, and make phone calls. Despite our signed and stamped permits from Bishkek, these local soldiers weren't happy. The soldiers that came out wore an interesting collection of uniforms, none the same, one was even just in tracksuit bottoms and sliders. After what felt like an eternity, we were eventually given permission to enter the valley, but we could not go within 5km of the border with Tajikistan. I tried to highlight our valley was within 5km of the border but this was dismissed and as long as we respected the environment we were clear to proceed.

As we drove past the military post feeling conflicted about where we were being allowed to go, we saw Gabriel and Henri, with their vehicle and driver who had clearly tried to get through on a different route and had been stopped. We smiled and waved as we drove off wondering if they would make it through, but we never saw them again on our expedition, so we assumed not. The feeling of conflict shifted to relief.

So, we made it to our valley, allowed ourselves to relax, and set up camp. If we couldn't go within 5km of the border, that meant three of our target peaks were definitely no longer an option and the other two were dubious. However, we now faced a new problem – the river. Due to record high temperatures over summer the valley's main feature was a huge, crashing mess and crossing was impossible due to the flow and the steep valley sides. One of our plans involved trying to cross a scree field high up on the side of the steep valley, but on our test run it was so loose that we decided that one wrong step with fully laden packs would not be a successful outcome as the loose scree tumbled directly down into the torrent below. So, we waited. We walked up and down the bank

every day silently begging the water level would drop and trying to find a way over. Each time we would return to our base camp and make ourselves a cup of silty tea. Despite our best efforts to filter it, there was always a pink tinge to the water.

So, it was a waiting game and we made the most of it. Each morning we would smile and wave at the cowherders who would wander past, encouraging the heifers to head up the valley. The cows didn't need a chaperone in the evening, they knew the way, and we gave them names as they wandered past on their way home. We bumped into the local hunters and their donkey, swapping food and selfies, but by far our most memorable encounters were with the border guards. Initially they were stressful, guns and stern faces wanting to see our border permits and passports. However, once they were satisfied, the tension would subside and the culture of giving gifts to new friends was always at the top of the agenda. They would provide bread, sweets, unidentified tinned meat or sausage and we would offer protein bars and selfies, which in hindsight might not have been such a great trade for them.

After a couple of days of cooler weather, the river subsided enough that we could wade across in the early morning light with bags towering on our backs. Our breakfast on the opposite bank was a celebration as we tried to rub away the goosebumps caused by the freezing water. We could now look forward, and up, to the summits ahead of us in our new valley, the Min Teke. Our advanced camp (this time grassy rather than dusty) was regularly surrounded by yaks and horses which would move up and down our new valley home. The rain enforced a rest day, in which Julie and Fran, ever diligent, completed recces further up the valley, accompanied by cautious ginger-coloured marmots and the occasional eagle. After cross-referencing their explorations with our maps we picked out two potential routes.

The rock was so friable that you couldn't place any gear, so we stuck to the easier summits and plodded upwards on predominantly scree, there's nothing like a bit of wading at altitude to really tire you out. In particular, the aftermath of the Covid-like illness that had stricken us when we first entered the valley had lingered a little too much and I really struggled to breathe. It is tough to watch videos from our time there because of the soundtrack of wheezing and panting that accompanies them. Not to mention the constant need to spit up green phlegm. Delightful. In the end, our high points weren't necessarily summits, they were just the highest points we reached along ridges, but the views were something that will stay with us for a lifetime and worth the wheezing.

The notion of 'exploring' is interesting. Our idea of stepping where nobody else had ever stepped wasn't quite the same in reality. Our friendly border guards were happy to tell us that they had been up most of the mountains in the area. Everywhere we walked we found litter - broken bottles, cigarette packets, plastic bottles, the occasional horseshoe. Even after we had crossed the river into the more remote Min Teke valley the rubbish persisted, usually stuffed under rocks. We couldn't prove nobody else had been up these peaks and eventually we gave up on the idea of being 'the first' and settled for a very unique holiday in an incredible location.

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