

Seeking Balance Finding Adventure
Ski Mountaineering Expedition to the
At-Bashi range of Kyrgyzstan
January 18th – February 3rd 2018

Team Members:

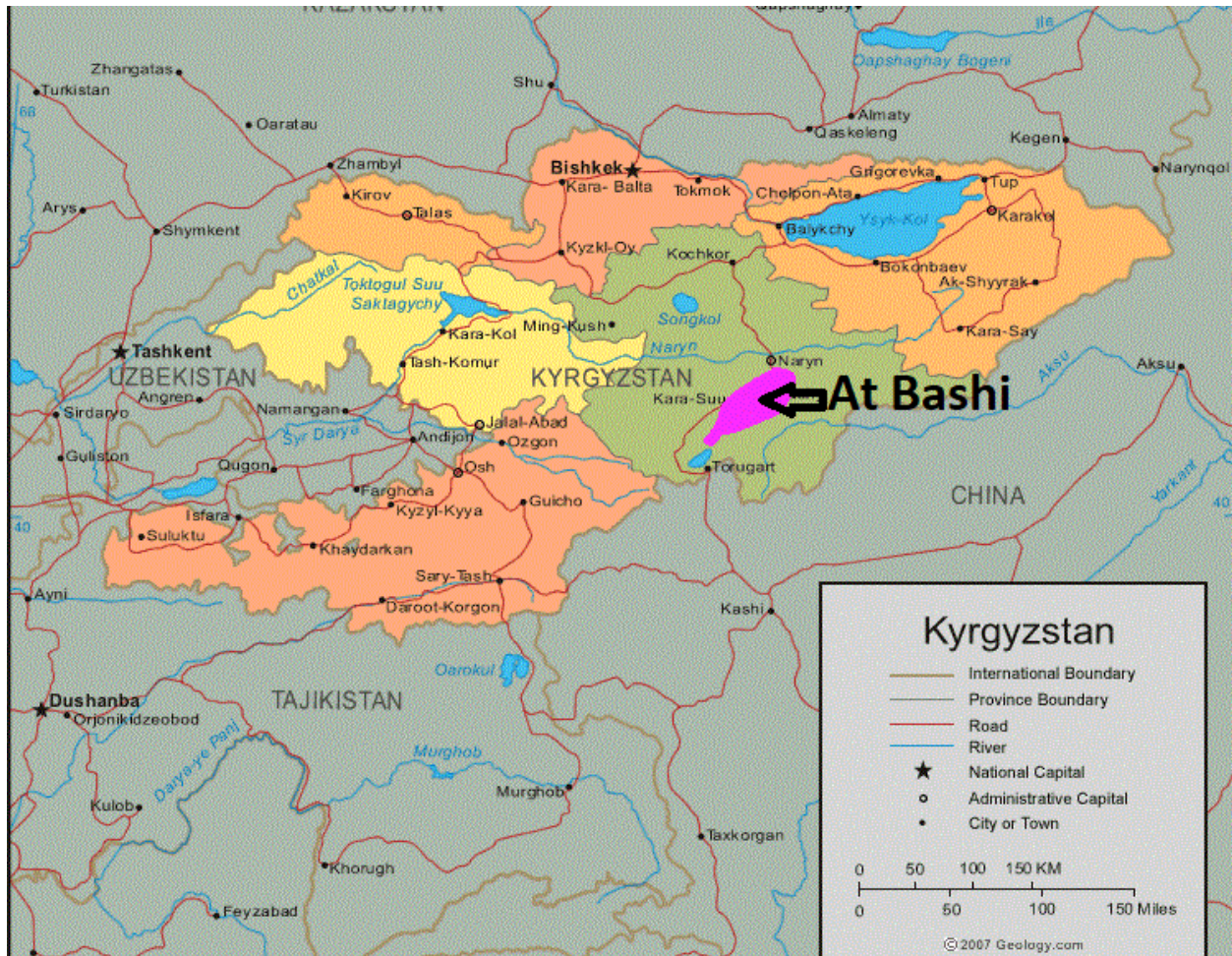
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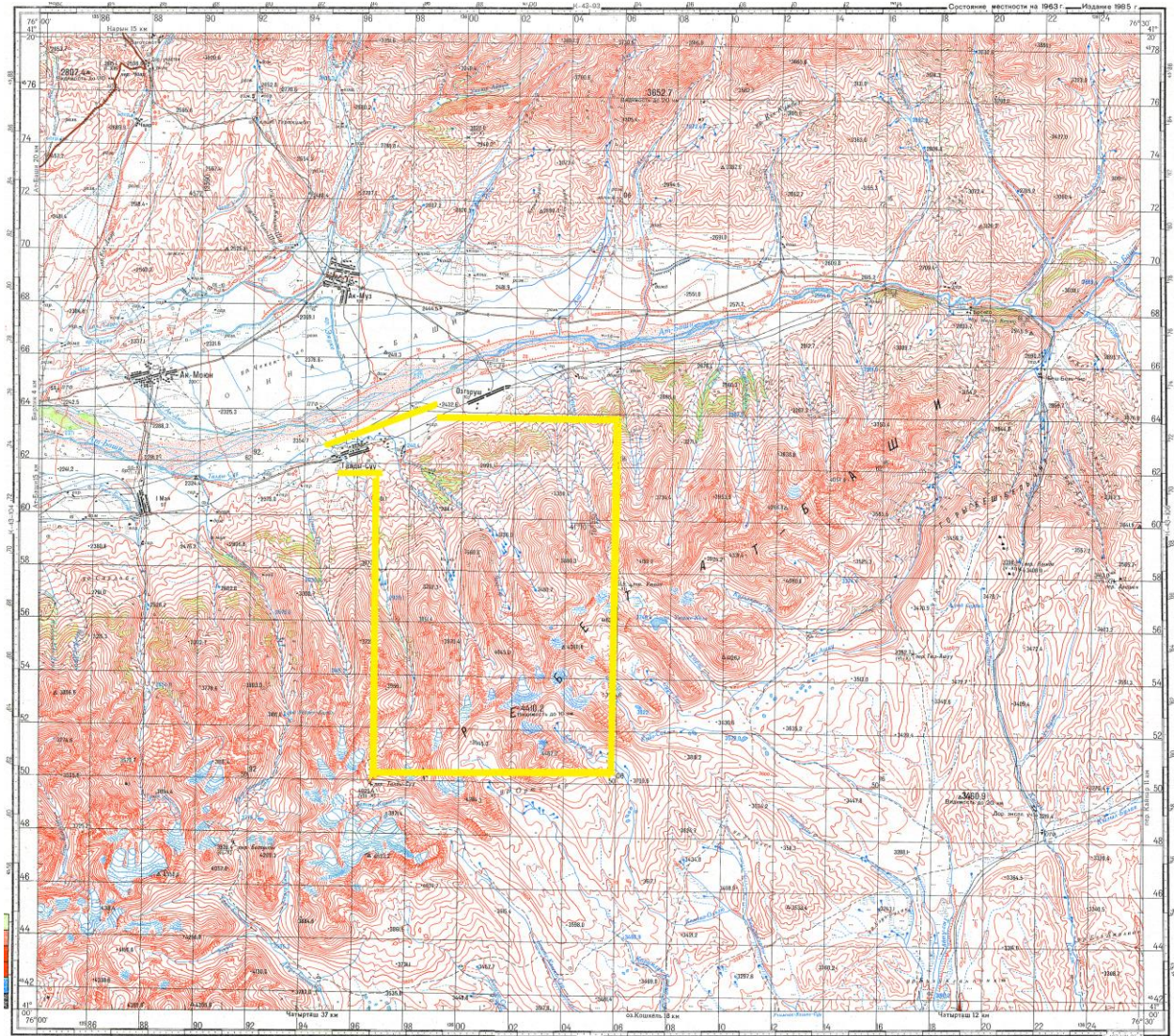
MEF reference: 18-01-Kyrgyzstan

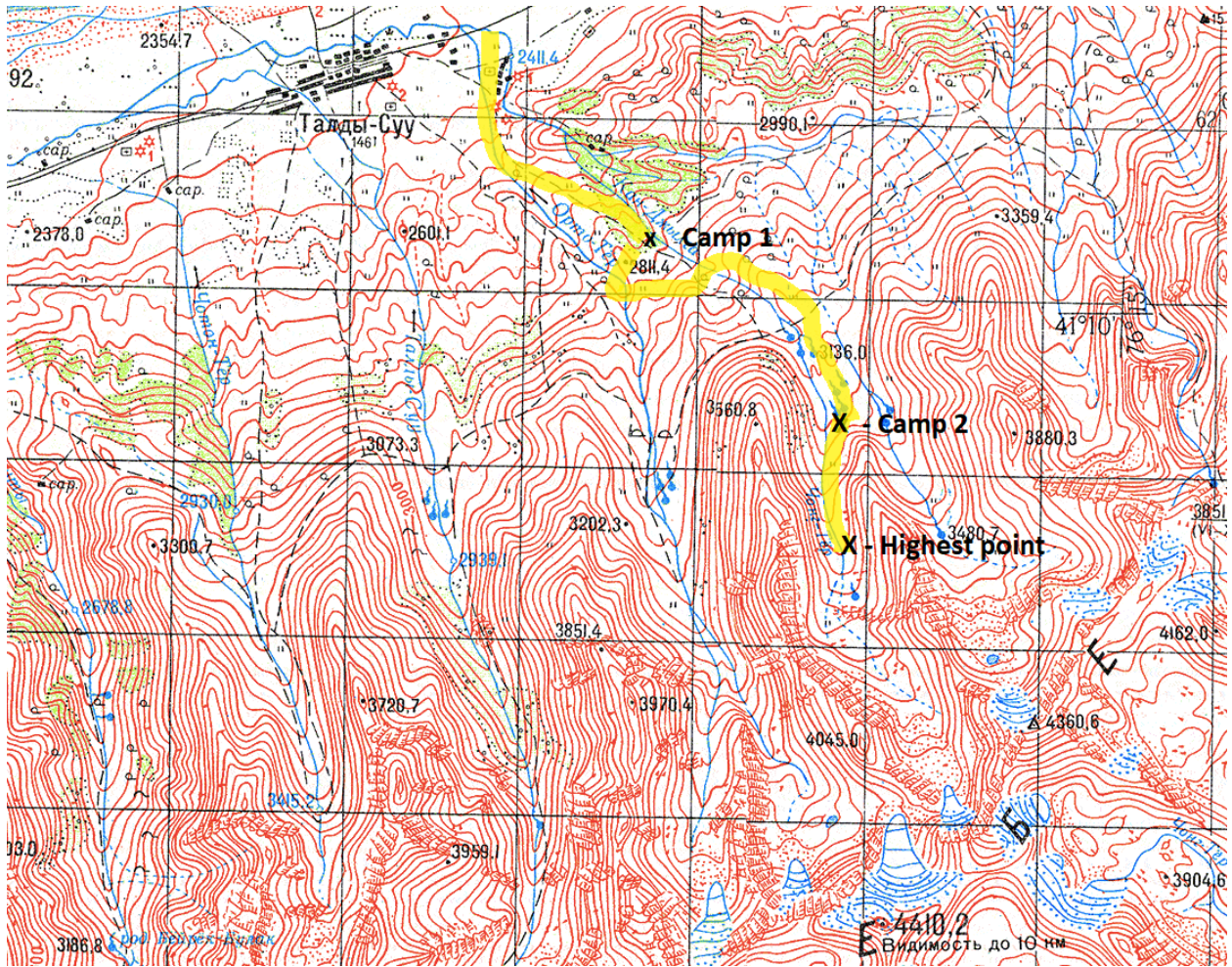
Where:

At Bashi range, Naryn Oblast, Kyrgyzstan



Sketch Maps of the area: Northwestern portion of the range:





Photographs of our route:



Skinning from the road



Local farmer happy to help us cross the river to start



Curious shepherds wondering where we are going and happy to point us in the right direction



Route heading up the true left of the creek to camp #1 (True right was much too steep) This was not apparent with google earth images.



View from our first campsite

Skinning up on day 2 – very tough conditions, punching through all layers



Ideal route to approach the saddle at 3100m



Second/base camp site



Skinning up from basecamp



Image of size 2 avalanche on northern side of valley



Hanging out in the tent



Finally a clear day and we enjoy the views further up the valley



Meeting up with Vladimir Komissarov, president of the Kyrgyz Alpine club in Bishkek to go over potential routes



The team in Bishkek from right: Gabby Degagne, Vladimir Komissarov, Marian Krogh, Nicole Mesmen, Cholpon Aiylichieva

Original Objectives:

Our primary ski mountaineering objective was to be a traverse of the central At Bashi range originating near the village of Bash-Kaindy, ascending and skiing three unnamed 4000m peaks, hoping for some first ascents. These objectives were all subject to weather and snow stability.

Generally our google earth route observations were that pitches were steeper in person and often not covered with snow. Some slopes that were indicated to be 45° on google earth were actually closer to 65°. Snow levels were significantly lower than average. Many areas that were expected to be covered in snow were bare rock.

Because of this we were forced to head further north-west to where there had been more snowfall and mountains were accessible via ski.



One of the original areas we hoped to explore by ski. The road to this area is generally closed from December to March but we were able to drive in easily in mid-January.

Why?

What attracted us to the At Bashi range of Kyrgyzstan was how little it had been explored and how suitable it appeared to be for ski mountaineering. From our research it looked as though the range had only been explored by skiers twice before (in 2016 and 2017 by Paolo Vitali, and Ruggero Vaia respectively). From our studies of Google Earth before arrival we had picked a route approximately 8 days long, in the central part of the range, that would have allowed us to climb and ski three peaks over 4000 m. These would have been first ascents/descents.

The winter of 2017/18 was extremely dry with very little snow falling in November and December in the central and western parts of the range. We investigated areas close to our

original route and found there was little to no snow coverage. Therefore we changed plans and decided to head to the north-eastern part of the range which had received about 50 cm of snow to date. Our aim was to set up a base camp at an appropriate location and search for possible peaks to climb and ski deeper into the mountains. Our available time was cut short significantly because of a delayed ski bag, we ended up with only 6 possible days to spend in the mountains.

Overall dates of expedition

The overall length of the trip was shortened for two reasons. We departed later because one bag with essential equipment was delayed by 8 days due to its misplacement by the airline. We finished earlier because of one team member's frostbite.

January 26th 2018 – January 31st 2018

January 26th – Approach from valley to first camp at 2850m (GPS coordinates

January 27th – Approach to base camp at 3250m (GPS coordinates

January 28th – Reconnaissance to explore upper valley to investigate potential peaks and ski lines. Snow stability tests (highest point reached 3450m)

January 29th – Further reconnaissance for safe exit route and future ski mountaineering options

January 30th – Exit via Kon Iylga river valley

Friday, January 26th

We departed the roadside at approximately 2200m and skinned through pastures up towards the Kon Iylga river valley. The steep cliffs on the true right of the river meant we had to cross the river and stay on the true left for the remainder of our ascent. We were able to mainly follow shepherds trails to a base camp close to the creek in the trees at approximately 2850 m (N 41.17126, E 76.18905) 3.5 km up the valley. Weather was obscured but the trees helped with visibility. Taldy-suu was the closest village to our start point and our local translator was staying in the village and we were in contact with her via our InReach for assistance if necessary.

Saturday, January 27th

We continued up along the true left of the river gully. At about 2950 m the gully becomes very steep and it was necessary to traverse the slope in a Westerly direction to avoid this steep portion. Breaking trail was very challenging on this section as we were often sinking through the entire snowpack. As we traversed this steeper area we noted many whoomphs and shooting cracks in the snow, on terrain of all pitches. Our small pits revealed significant amounts of depth hoar on most north and west facing slopes. We reached a saddle appeared at about 3100 m and this served as a landmark between the upper and lower valley. Unlike further south in this range we did not encounter a technical "jump" in at this elevation. We continued in the middle of the valley, sheltered between two banks until it became too windy and the visibility deteriorated too much to continue further. We set up camp in a location safe from avalanches close to where the valley forked at 3200 m (N 41.15598, E 76.20985).

Sunday January 28th

We decided that our current location would be suitable for an extended base camp. We left with light packs to explore further up the SW fork of the valley known as Chon Tör looking for suitable peaks and lines to ski. We were able to see many possibilities despite relatively poor lighting. We were excited to see so many options but nervous about the snow stability. We looked for potential safe ridges to climb and ski and decided to investigate the snow pack on a SW facing spur with vegetation showing (indicating light snow cover) at about 3450 m (N 41.14783, E 76.21164). On our way to the spur we remotely triggered a size two avalanche which partially buried two members (no injuries at all, but one member required assistance to be dug out). We debriefed and decided that now all available aspects were not safe to ski. We returned to the tent to play cards and wait for the weather to clear.

Sunday January 29th

A beautiful clear day in the mountains, the first so far. Our objective this day was to return to our previous high point and continue further on in the safe central portion of the valley, to continue investigating future ski locations. It was incredibly cold however (-30C) and we were only able to reach our previous high point before it was simply too cold to continue safely. We retreated once more to the tent to warm up and play cards. It was too late however as one team member suffered frostbite on her toes.

Monday January 30th

With poor snow conditions, more poor visibility and concerns over the severity of frostbite we decided to leave the mountains early. We were obviously disappointed with the lack of skiing but left excited to return in the future. We exited via an easier and safer route on the true right of the upper stream and then crossed in the middle valley over to the true left. We then followed our entrance route down to the road again. Once back in town we headed eagerly to the town's Banya (Sauna).

Details for each route climbed or attempted:

At Bashi Range, the SW fork of the valley known as Chon Tör , unnamed peaks. Achieved route length 8km, 1200m vertical

Dates: January 18th-Feb 3rd 2018.

Grade: N/A

Style: Ski mountaineering – ascending and descending on skis as much as possible, using ropes only for short pitches if required to access a ski descent.

First Ascent: First winter ascent to the high point we reached, unfortunately no peaks were ascended due to the unstable snow conditions and therefore very high avalanche risk. Achieved high point: approx. 3450m

Weather – Obscured daily except day 4 afternoon. Very cold, temperatures ranging from approximately -15c to -30c. Winds typically increasing the afternoons to 3ms.

Reasons for change in original route: 8 day delay in baggage (skis, rope, tent etc) arriving leaving us with only 5 days remaining for any objective. Significant lack of snow in original section of range, resulting in unskiable slopes and possible exposed crevasses.

Reasons for retreat: High avalanche danger with significant amounts of depth hoar covering most aspects. Trigger of a small avalanche (see photo). Frost bite affecting one party member's left foot.

Suggestions for future exploration in this area:

We feel there is huge potential for ski mountaineering in this particular valley and the entire At-Bashi range. The valley we explored



Poor visibility but lots of potential ski options on the southern side of the valley

Notes on access, porters, or other issues of interest to future visitors.

The access to this particular valley was very easy. We were able to skin directly from the road. With our original plans further along the range we were looking at using horses to access the valleys. This would have been very difficult without our local translator Cholpon. She knew the exact people to contact to arrange horses. She also was able to arrange a local driver with a four-wheel drive. There were only a few of these suitable vehicles in the area. We would highly recommend a local translator to help with these logistics. We did not use porters and so did not investigate the possibility. We suspect there would have been not available given there were no locals who skied. If we'd required gear to be transported it would have been via horse.

The weather has been varying from extremes the past few years. From a very very hot winter in 2016 to an extremely snowy winter in 2017 to a very dry winter in 2018. Expect snowpack to be variable too at all times of the year.

Details of any injury or illness to expedition members and/or porters.

It was very very cold the week we headed out (-40c approx.) One team member (Marian Krogh) was injured with some frostbite. This caused us to leave early in order to seek medical treatment. The frost bite affected both feet but mostly the left. There was no physical disability that resulted from this. The other two team member were not affected. As we had no porters no porters were injured.



Details of waste disposal

At any base camp location we had a designated toilet hole on a small ridge. This was filled in upon our departure. All food waste was carried out with us. Packaging that was recyclable was taken home with us as there were no recycling facilities in Kyrgyzstan. We did not leave any climbing gear behind.

Summary of Expedition accounts – in USD

Expenses per person		Income	
Gear, group and personal	\$4400	MEF	\$526
Transport including flights	\$2300	NZAC	\$107
Accommodation	\$470	Mountain tactical	\$500
Food	\$410	TNF Gear	\$2000
Insurance	\$580		
Translator	\$583		
Total	\$8743	Total	\$3133
		Difference -\$5610 USD per person	

Overall our translator, accommodation, food and transport costs in Kyrgyzstan were more than anticipated. Guest houses were approximately \$10-20USD per night, meals in the guest houses were approximately \$8USD each. Our translator was \$50USD/day and we also paid for her transport, accommodation and meals.

Other relevant comments

We received border zone permits for the At-Bashi range from the local authorities in At Bashi. We registered with the MCHS (ministry of emergency situations) in case of a necessary rescue. On our third day as we were investigating potential peaks to climb and ski we were about to dig a pit to know the detailed snow profile and on our way to our chosen location remotely triggered an avalanche:

Size 2 at elevation 3400, 1230h, human remote triggered, wind slab, on incline 30-35degrees, Westerly aspect, 20-30cm in depth (full depth in areas), 30m x 80m in size, failing on depth hoar. 2 partial burials occurred, one was able to self-rescue, the other required assistance