

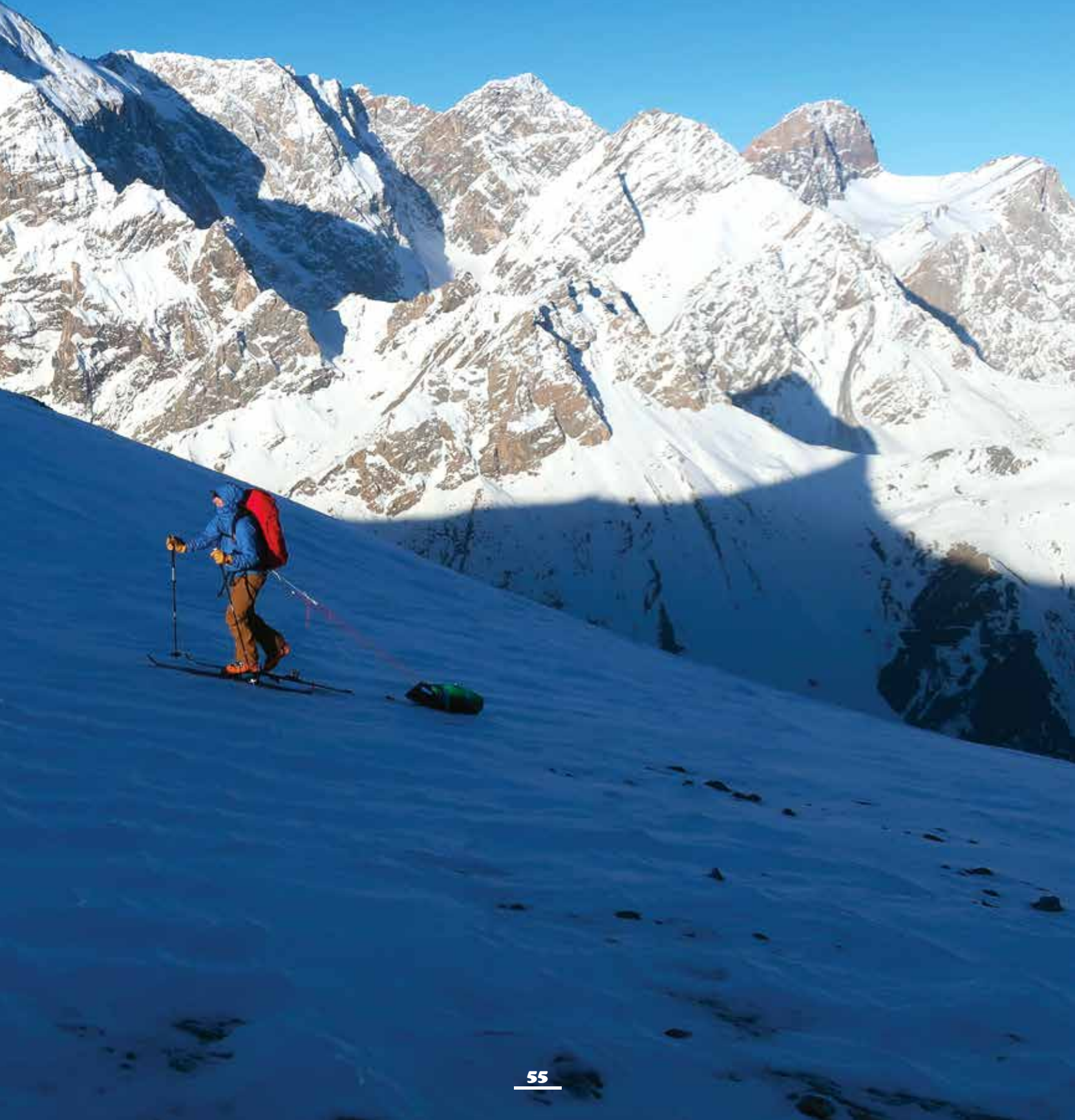


Tajik MAGIC

Huw Kingston skis across the Fann Mountains of Tajikistan, encountering insane slopes, bottomless snow, and an unexpected hangover in jaw-dropping surrounds.

WORDS AND PICS Huw Kingston

Rich pulls onto Alaudin
Pass in early morning sun
PICTURE CREDIT: Dave Cowell





It was too late. Rich had already arranged the deal with the driver, so we loaded our ski-bags and packs into the two tiny, beat-up cars, which were neither Ubers nor taxis.

It's times like these, arriving at an airport in a new country at an ungodly hour, that you are perhaps at your most vulnerable. Here we were in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, amidst the belt of former Soviet Republics in the vastness of Central Asia, fighting to stay awake as the day dawned, with the drivers giving free reign to their boy racer desires – when all we really wanted was to arrive at the Hotel Tajikistan and collapse into our pillows, recuperating for our upcoming attempt to ski the Fann Mountains from north to south.



Youngsters in Artuch Valley



Locals celebrating Navruz Festival in Pasrud Village



A donkey taking the load for a day from Artuch



EN ROUTE

24 hours later, after a day of sleep and exploring the modern and clean city, our lift to the Fann Mountains met us at the hotel. His name was Eraj, and what a stark contrast he was to our previous rides, with his gleaming white Lexus Landcruiser.

At every turn or roundabout, billboards of President Rahmon smiled down upon us. As we climbed into the mountains beyond Dushanbe's outskirts, we passed the turn-off to Safed Dara, Tajikistan's sole ski resort; here, the omnipresent president looked smart in ski jacket and sunnies. We would come to understand that, thanks to his provision of food, education, healthcare and housing to most of the population, President Rahmon stood as a man of much power, perhaps even a benevolent dictator.

We cut through the mountains inside the 4km Anzob Tunnel, which was once better known as the Tunnel of Death, due to being dark, massively potholed, and choked with exhaust emissions that claimed many lives each year. However, recently, lights have been installed and the road surface much improved.

"Perhaps you are the only vegetarian in Tajikistan," smiled Eraj, as he, along with Dave, Ant and Rich, licked the fat from their lips at a roadside shashlik stall. Soon, though, I was tucking into kurutob, a vegetarian delight of flatbread in a warm sauce of yoghurt, onions, tomato and herbs.

At Pasrud, one of the last mountain villages along a bumpy dirt track, we enjoyed the spectacle and colour of the local villagers celebrating the festival of Navruz, involving sparkling and colourful clothing, along with endless food, smiles and welcomes.



"We marvelled at it all: the huge bowl we were in, the pyramid peaks all around, and the view down the valley to where the snow ended."

A big pack and a little sled for Huw
PICTURE CREDIT: Rich Emerson



Rich pulling the sled into the gloom



Hurried pack up during a blizzard
PICTURE CREDIT: Rich Emerson



Trapped in a snowy abyss
PICTURE CREDIT: Ant Schnabel

Heading up toward
Chimtarga Pass
PICTURE CREDIT:
Dave Cowell



FIRST FORAY

Eraj took us as far as he could in the now filthy 4WD. We were about to undertake a week-long foray into the eastern side, to explore and acclimatise for our major expedition. As it turned out, the snowline was further than we had hoped and ridiculously heavy packs weighed us down on our trek up to it.

Fortunately, we were able to take some of the weight off our backs on the uphill using the 'Devil's Sled', an invention of thin plastic sheeting created by Dave and Rich. Over the course of many dark UK winter nights, they'd managed to refine it down to a mere 666 grams – hence its name.

Truly though, the lowest snows were slush of the worst order. We'd dreamed of endless powder from the beginning and this was a rude awakening.

A throbbing in my right foot didn't help matters; some days later, I discovered the culprit was a half centimetre sliver of glass, which Ant, wielding a needle, triumphantly removed. My screams surely woke any sleeping marmots in the area.

Things turned ugly when a metre of fresh snow forced us out, burying both our tents and our plans to attempt a few 5,000m peaks. It's times like these when you question, what's all this chaos for? But then, this initial trip had definitely shown the potential of the range. And it was my excitement about this potential that drove me forward so keenly.

TOAST TO A GREAT JOURNEY

Eraj was there to meet us when we came out, exactly on time as arranged. He drove us the five hours to Artuch. During the trip, I found myself gazing out the window and watching the fast flowing Zeravshan River parallel to the road, as I daydreamed about the expedition ahead.

Eraj's voice shook me from my reverie: "Check out their noses," he said, as we drove through a village. "We call this the village of the big noses." It was true; a large proportion of the people on the streets had olfactory organs well above average size.



Artuch was an ex-Russian mountaineering camp that Eraj now owned and which he had staffed to open early, especially for our visit. It sits in a deep valley on the northern edge of the Fann Mountains and was where we were beginning our attempt to traverse from north to south.

On our last night, we assembled in the huge dining room for dinner. Along with us was Eraj and his father, the chief magistrate in Dushanbe. On the table in front of us, the obligatory vodka sat ominously.

"We are Tajiks first and Muslims second," Eraj told us as we discussed the potential for Islamic fundamentalism in this overwhelmingly Muslim nation. They told us the constitution stated Tajikistan was a secular state and that there were laws in place banning the veil and long beards, in order to temper any fundamentalist motives.

Throughout the night, our hosts held toast after toast. A toast to our travels, a toast to the politics of our nations, a toast to our families, and toasts to much else besides.

In the morning over breakfast, Dave, Rich and I held our aching heads in our hands. We'd known that, at some point, vodka would chase us down – but we didn't know it would do so with such ferocity. Ant, the fourth member of the team, was arguably lucky, having been laid low with a stomach bug the night before. But, of course, he faced his own traumas.

Just before we headed back up into the mountains, Eraj took us into a large shed. In it was box upon box of brand new ice axes, crampons, titanium ice screws, helmets, ropes and the like – exactly as they'd been a quarter of a century beforehand, in the last days of the Soviet Union. We were glad of our somewhat lighter gear and gladder still, considering our fragile state, to have the services of two donkeys to carry our still substantial loads close to the snowline.



Dave and Rich zig-zagging down Chimtarga Pass

MAKING IT TO THE MIDDLE

The donkeys and Saed, their handler, left us to camp on a damp and misty afternoon, near the frozen Kulikalon Lakes at 2,900 metres. Ever active, Dave gathered up some timber for a small but warming fire.

After a couple of days skiing the nearby slopes and peaks, we packed down our camp to skin up towards the 3,800m Alaudin Pass. The others set off before me, as I struggled to fix a problem with my skins. I was having more gear problems on this one trip than I'd ever had before. I'd already broken a ski pole and both arms off my prescription sunnies.

When I did set out after the others, I faced some of the worst snow conditions I'd encountered in a long while. The near 30kg load and the seemingly bottomless slush made the experience hellish. Bent over my poles, I glanced across the valley and saw our morning tracks down the flank of Fluorite Peak now swept by a fresh avalanche. I was more than relieved to catch the others at camp.

The ski up to and then off Alaudin Pass the following morning was steep and firm to start, but 1,000 metres lower and we were back in the slop. Skis smashed into unsewn rocks and a fall meant spending up to half an hour getting back on your feet, disentangling from packs and pushing down against no resistance. I had to ask: why am I here, enduring all this discomfort?

Conditions improved as we skied deeper and higher into the range. In the clearer skies, we could properly make out the staggering rock spires, big walls and glaciated peaks. A long, blue sky day up the Kaznok Valley put us into the very heart of the Fann, where we set up a spectacular camp. Above us, Chimtarga, the highest peak at 5,489 metres, stared down on our tiny tents. Ah. This is why I was here.

UPS AND DOWNS

We spent a couple of days exploring a magnificent side valley and being rebuffed in an attempt on Zamok Peak. Heavy snowfall returned that night and provided some superlative ski conditions in poor visibility for the run down.

Usually, on the downhill, we loaded the contents of the Devil's Sled into and onto our packs, as well as the sled itself. But on this occasion, in a mood of whimsicality, I let rip with the sled still attached and loaded. It was hilarious; like a crazed puppy, it slid past me, cut across my path as I turned and, on one occasion, even managed to slide through my legs.

"All of the struggle had been worth it. I'd endure a whole lot worse to do what I love in the midst of a beautiful and exciting landscape."



A warming fire near the snowline at Hulisbek Lake



Chimtarga looming over the crew
PICTURE CREDIT: Rich Emerson



Up the Kaznok Valley



Camping at 4,100m, below Chimtarga Pass
PICTURE CREDIT: Rich Emerson



Amped for 1,000m of powder descent
PICTURE CREDIT: Rich Emerson

Snowfall burying our tents in Zindon Valley
PICTURE CREDIT: Rich Emerson



"Although I will forevermore be wary of toasts, I was happy to raise my glass to exploratory ski touring at its finest."

In the snowfall, we skied up toward Chimtarga Pass, camping at around 4,100 metres. Dawn was finger-snapping cold, but a break in the weather revealed another stunning panorama of peaks and the steep climb we would take to the pass. As we came onto this desolate climb, scoured almost clear of snow by the howling winds, the weather closed in again.

This trip was forming a clear pattern, alternating between immensely challenging moments and moments so glorious you could never forget them. And indeed, as if in confirmation of this, we dropped off the pass into the most glorious of ski runs. A thousand metres of vertical took us first down a powder-filled gully with glacier ice to our left and vertical rock to our right. Beyond the glacier snout, our exclusive piste widened into a valley. Visibility came and went; we'd stop to catch breath and wait for a clearing, so as to best enjoy a Fanntastic run.

Snow continued to bucket down that night and beyond, as we continued down the Zindon Valley. Somehow, we made it through a tortuous, slippery boulder field, reaching the frozen Big Allo Lake without twisted ankles or worse.

From here, our old Russian map indicated a possible route south, but I judged the avalanche risk too great, particularly given the poor visibility. Ant was with me on that, but Rich and Dave were keen to push on, and they did so while we camped by the lake.

It was an uncomfortable night of diarrhoea for me, although I had to laugh when, with my bum exposed to the elements for the sixth time, Ant shouted from the tent: "Seems like the shit has really hit the Fann now."



Dave looking for the best route through a snowy boulder field en route to Dvoinoi Pass
PICTURE CREDIT: Rich Emerson

THE LAST LEG

Fortunately, the morning dawned clear and cold to presage a glorious, long and utterly knackered day. A spectacular valley led steadily up, beneath ice-falls and snowy peaks.

Rich and Dave's tracks made our ski in the deep, fresh snow much easier. A few hours in, we passed a site where they'd camped. The valley turned east, and up ahead we could see tiny dots moving up a steep headwall and over the pass. It was a very steep, soft snow pull onto the 4,300 metre Dvoynoi Pass.

Despite the tracks, now blown in in places, it was slow going trying to pull the sleds up 30 degree slopes with ever shortening traverses and kick turns.

By the time Ant and I reached the pass it was snowing again, and the near zero visibility was making for an interesting descent. Completely wasted, we camped below the pass, happy to warm up in our sleeping bags, but wondering where Dave and Rich had stopped.

The final wake up on the snow was perhaps the best of all. Dawn revealed a clear sky. By chance, we'd camped in a spot the sun could reach early; it poured through the tent door at 6:30 and within half an hour the temperature went from -25°C to -5°C.

We marvelled at it all: the huge bowl we were in, the pyramid peaks all around, and the view down the valley to where the snow ended. When we reached that point, we'd be back to convenient life on solid ground – no obstacles obscured by snow, no looming threat of an avalanche, and no overburdened traipses up sludgy slopes.

But, of course, all of the struggle had been worth it. I'd endure a whole lot worse to do what I love in the midst of a beautiful and exciting landscape.

Within 15 minutes of leaving our camp, we came upon the others. Together, on our twelfth day, we popped out at the village of Sarytag. Sure enough, Eray was there waiting. He drove us back to Dushanbe via a car wash (the President does not allow dirty cars in the city) to a celebration dinner in our honour.

Although I will forevermore be wary of toasts, I was happy to raise my glass to exploratory ski touring at its finest. **0**

How would like to thank Osprey Packs and MSR for their support.

