

# Snapshots from Kyrgyzstan

## Avalanche Perceptions in Central Asia

Story & Photos by Ann Piersall

Feelings of foreignness are evoked in many situations. Some of us feel out of place standing in a lift line; others feel alien walking through a busy city. Regardless of the situation, the qualities of being foreign – utter bafflement, disorientation, incongruity – remain the same. For those of us who thrive on the learning that comes with uncertainty, the most satisfying experience is spending extended periods of complete immersion in a world other than our own. It was these experiences I sought when I moved for a year to Kyrgyzstan, a small rugged mountainous country in Central Asia.

### THE BEGINNING

Located thousands of miles from the nearest ocean, the huge relief of the Tien Shan Mountains draws snow and rain on what would otherwise be a vast desert. With peaks cresting 23,000', the complicated terrain creates immense cultural, political, and economic challenges for locals. However the physical landscape has sculpted the cultural landscape. The high mountains serve as a source of Kyrgyz ethnic identity, and natural resources are the basis of all livelihoods. For skiers and alpinists the mountains provide unlimited opportunities.

I knew the terrain in Kyrgyzstan would provide ample opportunities for skiing and climbing, but arriving alone, I was unsure with whom I could pursue these opportunities. During my first weeks, as I figured out transportation, customs, and the language (Russian and Kyrgyz), bitter cold set in, and the first layers of snow blanketed the country. By December I was overeager to get out.

In the capital city of Bishkek, I met a Russian man who skied. In a mix of broken English and a few Russian words our first conversation revealed that he owned no safety equipment, only touring gear and skins. I lent him my extra beacon, shovel, and probe, and we headed to the towering Kyrgyz Ala-Too Range just south of the city. As he furiously smoked a cigarette, I was able to hold his attention just long enough to demonstrate how to put on the beacon. It ended up in his backpack. On our ascent, as he casually began putting in a skin track on an exposed wind-loaded slope, I had the fleeting feeling I might be better off touring alone. I called out, asking if we should ascend the ridge instead. He paused, if only for a second, and turned to face me. As if taking a page from the stereotype of the

steely, stoic Russian mountaineer, he replied simply, "I always make ascent. No problem."

A week later I was invited on an overnight ski tour to an abandoned Soviet hut with two Europeans. They promised a "quick and easy" ascent despite their "limited backcountry experience." Walking in, the snowpack was deeper than I had anticipated. Digging revealed an impressive layer cake of facets that would lose its shock value as the season wore on. After a full day of travel, darkness was falling, and an argument ensued between my two companions about our location. We finally came to the consensus that instead of relying on their fuzzy memory of the route, we should resort to navigating off an old Soviet map. Moving at a snail's pace across huge moraines, their skins failed within an hour. As they shuffled through the deep snow, I shuttled their enormously heavy packs wondering with what they could possibly be stuffed? At midnight we finally reached the hut. We had traveled just two kilometers over the past six hours since nightfall. The following day I watched them unpack a dozen loaves of bread, four kilos of cheese, 20 chocolate bars, endless sausages, and bags and bags of dried fruit. We didn't get much skiing in, but at least we ate well.



The Uzbek children were thrilled to get out on skis.



left: Even with tenuous conditions, there was good skiing to be found in lower-angle terrain.

right: The Kyrgyz locals take advantage of the tree-felling power of large avalanches to harvest firewood.

## THE LOCALS

As the season wore on, a common language and a shared interest in safety were my highest priorities in selecting ski partners. Word of mouth presented me with an invitation to a small Uzbek village in southern Kyrgyzstan to teach basic avalanche safety and ski lessons to village children. I had recently found two savvy friends: a traveling NOLS employee and a wise ex-pat Alaskan climber married to a Kyrgyz woman. Together, we traveled to the village of Arslanbob. A typical day touring with the Uzbeks consisted of elaborate morning greetings, complicated logistics regarding the allocation of skis, a lengthy lunch, and optional stops five times daily for the more conservative Muslim guides to stop and pray.

Speaking with the guides it was revealed to me that the winter climate had changed within their lifetimes. An increased occurrence of avalanches correlated with more frequent winter rain events. Most of the men were unable to travel in complex terrain due to their beginner skiing skills. However, many also voiced religious and personal fears of snow, stating that “the big snow slide” was only controlled by Allah. A few years prior, a local had been killed by an avalanche just above the village while hunting. One guide confided in me that this hunter was killed for his sins: drinking too much vodka and not attending the mosque.

## AVALANCHES ONLY HAPPEN WHEN...

In February, I was joined by an educated Colorado couple doing reconnaissance for a backcountry yurt operation in the eastern part of Kyrgyzstan ([www.fortytribesbackcountry.com](http://www.fortytribesbackcountry.com)). During multiple week-long backcountry tours with them, the greatest logistical challenges were simply getting to the mountains. Locals could not fathom our interest in spending a week in the mountains in a tent, and many were skeptical of our ability to care for ourselves. We took humor in the experience, yet our explorations revealed incredible potential in previously unskied areas. However, persistent weak layers kept us cautious. On ascents, shooting cracks and collapsing became a daily occurrence.

Recovering from a particularly cold trip, we were convinced to visit a local hot spring owned by an eccentric white-mustachioed Russian, heavily involved in summer tourism. Turning off the main road in a blizzard, our 4x4 van was blocked from traveling further by recent avalanche debris. We still had 25km to travel with the snowfall escalating in intensity and temperatures warming. Though we were ready to turn around, our Russian host would not permit it. He responded to our warnings about increasing avalanche danger by opening a bottle of cheap cognac and passing shots around the car. “Avalanches only happen after 8pm,” he assured us. With a buzz and no visible alternative, we skinned in, crossing numerous avalanche paths en route. A few had released and locals were busy chopping trees out of debris for firewood.

The following day, after a morning of soaking, we retraced our tracks to find that every single avalanche path we had crossed had run full track. Only after several days would we learn the full magnitude of the storm and of its regional ramifications. After an extended dry period, the

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Careful planning put camp out of the runout of this large avalanche slope, but there are always a few frightening moments when theory is tested.

# Caught with My Pants Down

*Three women on an exploratory ski expedition to Kyrgyzstan*

Story by Jaime Musnicki

We had just moved camp on our seventh of nine days exploring and skiing in the Jetim-Bel range of central Kyrgyzstan. Having finished digging out a beautiful snow kitchen, I skinned about 20 feet away from where my partners, Molly Loomis and Ann Piersall, were setting up our tent, pulled my pants down around my knees, and squatted to pee. I was midstream when I heard and felt the initial huge collapse. I glanced quickly over my shoulder at the slope looming above our camp. We had diligently taken alpha angles in selecting our new campsite at the mouth of the mile-wide drainage, but that slope still looked pretty close. As I looked back toward Molly and Ann, still peeing, I heard the collapse propagate further across and up the valley. I glanced again over my shoulder and this time watched the slope behind me shatter. As the snow started sliding, it triggered more and more of the slope. Though I wasn't quite finished peeing, I quickly stood up, yelled some expletives, and started skiing away from the slide as I pulled my pants back up. The dense, hard-slab debris came to a stop about 150' from our camp.

Triggering and watching this avalanche (HS-ASr-D3.5-R4-O) from our camp was one of many great learning experiences for all three of us on our expedition to Kyrgyzstan. We were humbled by the immense power of the snow coming down the slope directly toward us. Throughout the previous seven days we had been making rather conservative terrain decisions in our ski explorations due to the consistently weak and scary snowpack we were finding on a variety of aspects. Snow depths were in the 75-85cm range on average, with the lower half of that depth generally being advanced facets and depth hoar (crystals of 10+mm). Poor structure, moderate to high energy, and variable strength had us sticking to moderate terrain. As a team, we were very aware of and communicated clearly about not wanting to get caught in any avalanches. On a number of occasions our decision-making process touched on wanting to make sound decisions and not just “get away” with skiing a particular slope. We had a high level of awareness of being in an extremely continental snowpack and of being in a relatively remote area of a Central Asian country that did not have the support systems we were accustomed to in the States.

I admit to feeling myriad human factors, wanting to ski steeper lines and push the boundaries a bit more, on a number of occasions. We had come so far to explore this area. The possible lines in this small slice of Kyrgyzstan were seemingly infinite and beautiful. Our expedition was being supported by generous funding from the Hans Saari Memorial Fund, and I wanted to accomplish

as much as possible to justify their support. We had already encountered so many hitches in our plans that limited our actual time in the mountains and changed the objectives we pursued; I wanted to make the most of the time we did have.

I credit our diligent data collection, observations, and analysis – as well as our clear, honest communication as a team – with keeping our numerous human factors adequately in check. As the snow was sliding down toward us that day, I was awed, yet also confident that we were in a good position. All of my questions about whether we were being too conservative were clearly answered with that one event. The hazard was real, and we had been making sound decisions.

Overall, I would deem our expedition a success. We spent nine days living in and exploring a previously un-skied area in Kyrgyzstan. We skied from the top of two different peaks in the area, explored and skied a number of ridges, and completed a few longer tour days traversing back and forth across the range. We stuck our heads into the snow frequently, made good decisions, worked well as a team of three, and had tons of fun in the mountains together. We handled a number of unanticipated events – a revolution, no access to money, a non-functioning satellite phone that spoke to us in Russian, the late-breaking discovery that our main “historic second descent” ski objective was now being mined for gold, and the list goes on – with positive attitudes and the understanding that it was all part of the adventure for us. The lessons and stories from our adventures are copious. Flexibility and a willingness to deal with whatever obstacles were thrown our way were keys to our success and enjoyment of the expedition. Who knew a ski expedition to Kyrgyzstan would ever result in so much more than just skiing?

*Jaime, Molly, and Ann are incredibly grateful to the Hans Saari Memorial Fund for their generous support of this all-women's expedition. The Hans Fund is based in Bozeman, MT, and supports ski exploration and youth avalanche education. To learn more about the Hans Fund and how you can contribute support or apply for a grant for ski exploration, visit [www.hansfund.org](http://www.hansfund.org).*

*Jaime Musnicki resides in Teton Valley, Idaho, when she is not out and about teaching backcountry skiing, glacier mountaineering, or rock climbing courses for NOLS. She loves snow, cold weather, and skiing. This trip to Kyrgyzstan was her first foray into international ski exploration. She is now solidly hooked on the craziness of combining skiing with international travel. If you are interested in hearing more stories from Kyrgyzstan, contact Jaime at [jmusnicki@gmail.com](mailto:jmusnicki@gmail.com).*



# A Trip to the Revelations

Story by Courtney Phillips



Old and new encounter one another; Kyrgyzstan slowly enters the twenty-first century.

## KRIGYZSTAN

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storm had dumped upwards of a meter of snow at high elevations across Central Asia. A widespread avalanche cycle ensued. The greatest effects were felt in Afghanistan, where over a dozen avalanches released onto the Salang Pass highway killing over 160 people and trapping several thousand more.

### THE PROFESSIONALS

Another avalanche cycle occurred in March, closing all major roads for almost a week and trapping over 20,000 villagers along the Chinese border with Kyrgyzstan. During that time I was able to go into the field with the staff from the Kyrgyz National Hydro-Meteorological Office. Reaching our first avalanche slope I was informed that during the previous year one of the staff had been caught and partially buried in that exact spot. As they told me the story, everyone retrieved a long red string from their pack which they tied to themselves. I was reassured that this new safety technique worked “very, very well.” If a person was buried, the string would float to the top, and you could simply follow the string to locate and extract the victim.

### THE CLINCHER

In April, I was joined by two friends from Idaho for an exploratory ski-mountaineering expedition (*see “Caught with my Pants Down” on next page*). Our trip was delayed by the violent overthrow of Kyrgyzstan’s government immediately upon their arrival. A few days later we were safely in the mountains...that were blanketed by one of the most frightening snowpacks any of us had ever seen. Our hesitations about the snowpack were confirmed on one of our final days when we remotely triggered the slope above our camp. Horror – and the roar of snow that only stopped

within an arm’s throw of our tent – immediately vanquished any doubts I felt about the caution I exercised all winter.

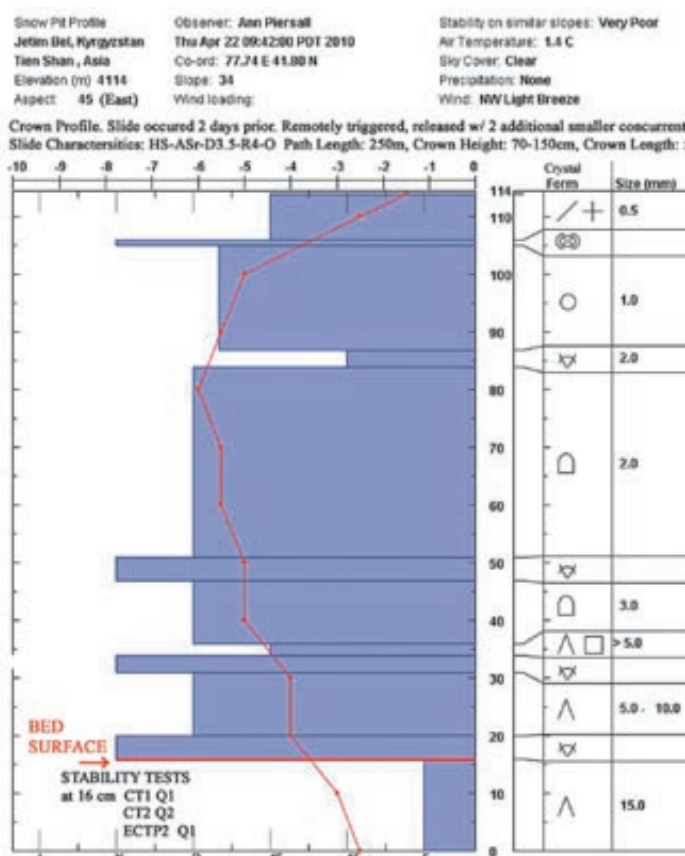
### BRINGING IT TO THE OTHER SIDE

By the end of my year in Kyrgyzstan, being foreign wasn’t so foreign. I grew familiar with the uncertainty of a new place and new partners. Although my backcountry exploits often resulted in less than ideal situations, the collective experiences allowed me to construct an enhanced safety framework in addition to a wonderfully enhanced sense of humor. Navigation of a new physical and cultural landscape offered me great learning opportunities and an increased sense of self sufficiency.

My own stories aside, this reflection is not intended to generate unfair stereotypes. But the vast differences underlying avalanche-risk constructs and responses between Central Asia and the West cannot be ignored. In Kyrgyzstan, where the wildly continental climate results in persistent weak layers and high avalanche danger throughout the winter, personal and religious myths regarding the causes and timing of avalanches are widespread. Almost no avalanche education is available, and the idea of winter recreation is incomprehensible to most people. Avalanche deaths in North America are primarily limited to recreationists and avalanche professionals, the majority of whom are traveling in the backcountry. In Central Asia, most avalanche fatalities are civilians on roads and in villages. These deaths are in addition to extensive infrastructure damage incurred because vulnerable mountain villages and major transport routes cannot be easily relocated.

Obvious differences in socioeconomic circumstances are the most apparent reason that avalanche risk has not been widely addressed in developing countries such as Kyrgyzstan. While the Kyrgyz military does operate a basic blasting program on the country’s main highway, closures and control work typically take place only after an avalanche cycle. With tight economic constraints, avalanche education and the development of preventative measures are hardly a national priority. However, with increasing worldwide interest and funding in risk reduction, the Western community may have future opportunities to assist with initiating snow-safety programs in developing mountain countries. Because the global avalanche community is dominated by Western practitioners and academics, implementing education and mitigation under different religious, cultural, and economic circumstances will require refining and reinventing tactics. While many people think of the future in terms of advances in the Western world, the future of snow safety may include diverse communities and will always be focused on returning to the basics.

*Ann Piersall is from Kalispell, Montana, but home is wherever her skis are. From November 2009 through September 2010, Ann lived in Kyrgyzstan as a US Fulbright Student Scholar studying glacial retreat in the Tien Shan in addition to learning Kyrgyz and becoming a connoisseur of kymys, the traditional Kyrgyz drink of fermented mare’s milk. This winter she will be a ski patroller at Alyeska Resort in Girdwood, Alaska.* ❄️



A crown profile from the avalanche that came disconcertingly close to camp (*see photo, previous page*).

**Editor’s Note:** Thanks to Drew Seessel of the Hans Saari Fund, who asked these grant recipients to contribute articles to *The Avalanche Review*: Ann Piersall and Courtney Phillips, at right.

It can be hilarious what months of careful planning and weeks of meticulous packing inevitably lead to: four ski mountaineers standing next to a 600lb pile of the bare essentials and the lightest gear that technology has ever offered. And it’s astonishing how that pile of gear, those four skiers, and one very large pilot can disappear into a small airplane. In reality, the deHaviland Beaver is not a small aircraft amongst the fleet of Alaskan bush planes, but compared to the commercial airliners that brought us to Alaska and the mountains that we’d soon fly between, it seemed tiny. Next to our 600lb pile of gear, it seemed downright diminutive. Nevertheless, we were soon airborne – headed for the very end of the Alaska Range and an obscure range called the Revelation Mountains.

The Revelations are incredibly remote and have hosted very few explorers since the first party ventured into them in 1967. The first traverse of the exterior of the range had been accomplished a few years earlier by Joe Stock and company; we would be the first skiers to explore the interior of the range. Our team was Andrew McLean, Noah Howell, Jim Harris, and Courtney Phillips.

Our plan to explore the Revelations was simple; ski as much as possible and eat as much as possible. The weather in the range is notorious for making it hard for human beings to live, much less skiers to thrive, so we tried to keep our expectations low. Rob Jones, a hunting outfitter who operates a lodge near the range, indicated that snow levels were about 60% of normal. We expected this to limit our climbing/skiing options, and we also expected that it would present risks beyond those we are normally accustomed to managing.

Our ride spent little more than 10 minutes on the snow; we began digging our first camp into the shallow snow before the engine noise had completely faded down the glacier. As it turns out, the shallow snowpack became a critical factor in establishing our two base camps. Snow depth on the main glacier ranged from 6” to 36”, where there was snow. The Revelation Glacier is old and fading, with large areas of exposed ice. Above us on all sides, couloirs split 6000’ rock walls in the most dramatic fashion. Low snow or not, the Revelation Mountains present truly incredible ski-mountaineering terrain, easily measuring up to their name.

The risks of climbing and skiing in a range like the Revs are different from the ranges more commonly skied – different even from most of the Alaska Range. The most attractive lines ranged from 3000’ to 5000’ in relief, and all require direct ascent. Because of the variability in snowpack over that much relief, climbing up the couloirs of the Revelations can feel a bit like crawling into the barrel of the Missouri’s 16” guns and hoping they’re not loaded. Because the range had received so little snow during the winter, we could expect a thin pack over rocks to provide ample opportunities to trigger old slabs, and the difficult terrain management further compounded this. Granting some

confidence was the obvious fact that the area had received very little snow in the past couple weeks, granting time for instabilities to settle out.

Among the risks of being flushed out of a chute 4000' long and 40' wide, other risks were present. Most of the team's travel occurred on the main glacier that had very little crevassing, but nearly every day we were required to navigate fractured icefalls. Liberating even small amounts of snow on a 40-degree slope in these areas could launch a skier into inky dark crevasses below. Also, adding comedy and amazement to every day were the seracs that capped the walls of the gorge. One in particular, a well-loaded serac overhanging an El Cap-sized vertical wall, regularly launched tons of ice and rock that fell almost entirely freely to the glacier below. The event occurred every 12 hours or so, and shook the glacier impressively at our second basecamp over a mile away. Finally, the wild card in play was snow over water and alpine ice. At times we encountered faceted snow as much as 18" deep, laying in wait over ice that wouldn't need too much polishing to be fit for an NHL game.

At times, managing these risks was paramount, and at other times, unconsidered. Dodging the devastation under the seracs was relatively simple; don't go there, and don't camp there. The other risks were not so easily mitigated and in the end were eventually accepted. The team adopted the standard protocols of spacing out in the danger zones, skiing one at a time from safe spot to safe spot, and skiing through deposition zones as quickly as possible. Daytime heating encouraged us to avoid slopes that received prolonged direct sunlight – both to avoid being caught in frequent wet slides, and because the skiing in those areas wasn't terribly compelling. Frequently, within 50' of the tops of couloirs, hard snowdrifts were easily observed and avoided. Only once did I observe cracking while approaching these features. We received about 12" of snow in the only storm of the expedition. Other than a significant slide that cleaned out a chute we'd skied two days earlier, we observed very little natural activity after that.

In all, we found the terrain to require every attention we could give it, but the snow turned out to be relatively benign. We moved camp once; an all-day, four-mile epic of downhill trail breaking with skins on in heavy snow deposited by our only storm. We skied absolutely incredible lines, and we gave them names such as The Alpha Couloir, The Boot of All Evil, The Shroud of Turnin', Jesus Crust Super Gnar, and The Immaculate Deception. The walk out to meet our flight back to civilization included snow-covered glacier, bare glacier, moraine, frozen-river skiing, river bedrock, braided streams swelling with early spring melt water, and a shoe-sucking swamp. I recall that it was about 15 miles, but when you're having that much fun, who's counting?

*Building on more than 15 years of climbing, cycling, and running, Courtney Phillips began skiing in 2006 and has since logged significant first descents in Utah and Alaska. He religiously avoids ski lifts, helicopters, and baggy pants, and he has never worn a shred napkin. Courtney was generously supported by an Exploration Grant from the Hans Saari Memorial Fund, for which he encourages all ambitious ski mountaineers to apply for early and often.* ❄️



The Revelations revealed. Between each sharp spire was a thin couloir like the barrel of a long, deadly gun.

Photo by Jim Harris



Noah Howell and Andrew McLean climb high above second base camp.

Photo by Jim Harris



Courtney Phillips and Andrew McLean managing vertigo.

Photo by Jim Harris