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The undiscovered, unspoilt and snow-laden landscapes of the West

Altai mountains in north-east Kazakhstan are a more than tempting prospect for most powder hunters. Throw in direct flights with Kazakhstan's flagship carrier Air Astana to the old capital Almaty, and visa-free travel, and who could possibly resist? I certainly couldn't.

Kazakhstan will take your breath away, spanning from the Caspian Sea in the west, across the vast arid steppes, to the snow-capped mountains of the Altai and Tian Shan in the east. The size of western Europe, it is rich in natural resources and a major player in the oil industry with rapid economic growth. It is ethnically diverse with a Russian minority and a cocktail of smaller minorities in the south and east.

A short domestic flight whisked us to Ust-Kamenogorsk, where we were met by our charming guide Andrey. A two-hour drive deposited us in the mining town of Ridder, surrounded by a playground of mountain ranges of 2,000m plus. Ridder delivers guaranteed snow from late November, with precipitation dumped in the region from the Siberian plains. »

ADVENTURE SPECIAL

KAZAKHISTAN CASTAWAYS

Isabelle Duncan, a long-standing Ski Club Member, former Rep and well-known cricket commentator and writer, enjoys the pow adventure of a lifetime

In deep..



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“Glory to Ukraine”. A bizarre state of affairs and one to be avoided! Almaty has its own small but sophisticated ski resort of Shymbulak (20km of piste with eight lifts), which is worth exploring for a day.

The real adventure lay ahead; a three-hour drive to a remote yurt perched at 1,750m in the heart of the Trans-Ili Alatau mountains. Ideal ski touring terrain with 700-900m of vertical drop and an array of lofty peaks to marvel at, the highest being Mount Talgar at 5,000m.

Here, we were met by guides Igor, Eugene and Julia, authentic mountain goats. They led us expertly and fed us typical Kazakh dishes such as Beshbarmak (meat and noodles), nourishing soups, manti (dumplings), pilaf (rice dish), all cooked on a wood-burning stove. It was a rustic yurt with an ethnic interior but wonderfully warm and comfortable. We had gloriously clear skies at night with dazzling stars and a Turkish crescent moon.

The steam sauna/banya was an absolute God-send for washing weary bodies and unwinding during the long evenings. Some of the boys took it a step further and flung their naked bodies in the snow for the full classic banya experience.

We were hit with unseasonably warm weather, making the snow heavy and forming a crust, so it was, at times, technically challenging. Our trusty guides, however, sniffed out some decent pitches in the morning on the right aspects. Nothing better than local knowledge.

A truly off-the-grid experience where we didn't encounter another soul on the mountain.

The only evidence of human life was a farm we stumbled across, breeding eagles for hunting on horseback. Eagle hunters, known as ‘Kusbergi’ or ‘Berkutchi’, are one of the unique traditions in Kazakh culture performed by nomadic people. Oh, and we discovered an old derelict soviet truck half way up the mountain!

Mammals to be found in the Tian Shan mountain range include deer, fox and wild boar, together with rare sightings of the Tian Shan brown bear, the central Asian lynx, red wolf, stone marten and the elusive snow leopard. The closest we came to any of the above was a fox print in the snow.

We may not have encountered much wildlife, but we discovered more than we could have possibly imagined during our 14-day Kazakhstan adventure – with memories that will last a lifetime. ■

As an animal lover, it was distressing to see so many packs of (mostly) sweet-natured stray dogs roaming the streets. God knows how they survive the plummeting winter temperatures. We also bumped into quite a few young Russian men who've fled conscription in Russia and the meaningless war, seeking a better life over the border. Some of them lost souls, having left their families behind.

We rounded off this leg of our trip with two more full days of cat-skiing before setting off on our next adventure...

Off-the-grid spectacular

Having made it as far as Kazakhstan, four of us Brits decided to extend our trip and make a beeline south to the mighty Tian Shan mountains, via the cosmopolitan city of Almaty. We found ourselves in a beyond seedy brothel house in town (an innocent mistake) where hearty Russians sang all night in the corridor and shouted

From ski tours to saunas

After a day exploring the local peaks via snowcat, it was time to embrace the joys of leg-power and to get even more up close and personal with nature with three days' ski touring. The plan was two to three runs per day with an elevation gain of 800-1,200m.

With vast expanses of untracked powder to explore, there is no need to share your grazing areas with others if you wish to avoid the heli or cat-skiers and growling Ski-Doo's.

The most spectacular route of the trip was on the Kholodny ('cold') sub-range, with a long steep gully with dazzling views. As a special treat for all the sweat and toil, we ended that remarkable day at a ski-in traditional timber steam sauna (banya) above Ridder to soothe our achy muscles.

In fact, for skiers keen to take their R&R a step further, there was even a massage service at our hotel. Yes, we certainly weren't slumming it in our delightful timber-framed chalet-style hotel in Ridder. Well equipped with ensuite bedrooms and decent drying facilities for soggy kit, plus a sauna and that aforementioned massage service for worn-out bodies. The restaurant offered a knock-out breakfast and an international menu to suit most tastes. For the more adventurous, you could venture into Ridder town and savour some of the more authentic cuisine, such as borsch and even bear dumplings!

For some history, head to the modest Ridder museum where you'll follow a timeline from the Old Believers of the 17th century and the spiritual dimension of the mountains, to the Soviet Rule and then the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. An unusual local ritual, still practised, is the harvesting of stag antlers in order to bathe in their broth, believed by some to enhance strength and sexual potency.

Time to explore

Day one and we were keen to go exploring. We warmed up our legs by jumping in a snowcat with door-to-door access from our hotel to be deposited at the top of the summits that surround Ridder for sensational exotic skiing. The vast Altai straddle Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China and Russia and are smothered in forests of birch and aspen, and mountain taiga with cedar, larch and silver fir. Higher up you encounter mountain meadows and tundra.

It was a heavenly and exhilarating experience to glide effortlessly through the dry and feathery powder on predominantly north-facing slopes of 20-35 degrees and 400-800m vertical drops. We kept a sharp eye out for an abundant wildlife of bear, maral deer, elk, sable and red wolf, although most were thankfully hibernating. And temperatures were not too chilling by Siberian standards, at a mere -5 to -25°C.

Surprisingly comfortable, the cat allows for five to seven runs, with a total vertical drop of 3,000-5,000m, per day. It may be seen as the poor relation to heliskiing, but in my book it's a darned sight more reliable and a lot more affordable. Of course, heliskiing is available here too, if

this is your bag, in a modern Airbus H125 with room for four paying punters plus the guide and a generous 5,000-6,000m vertical drop. Another optional and thrilling

extra is to take a Ski-Doo for the day with your own kamikaze driver and shred up the mountain for multiple drops and maximum ski time.



Time to refuel after a day's adventuring

Take a Ski-Doo for the day with your own kamikaze driver and shred up the mountain for multiple drops and maximum ski time

Ski Kazakhstan with Mountain Tracks

Mountain Tracks is running a cat skiing and ski touring trip to Kazakhstan, led by Andrey. Opt for a private trip, or join the group trip departing 2 February 2024. From £2,425, including seven nights' half-board on a twin-share basis, three days' guided ski touring, three days' cat skiing, and local transfers. Find out more at mountaintracks.co.uk.

factfile

All of this was lovingly put together by an aspiring IFMGA mountain guide Andrey Golovachev, originally from St Petersburg. Andrey offers skiing/boarding, trekking and climbing tours all over Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Take a look at primalscapes.com

The Kazakhstan trip is for 4-10 people and costs £1,780 for nine days, including accommodation, food and guiding, but excluding flights. This does not include our tag-on trip to the Tian Shan mountains – book this through Andrey.