

# The 2018 Zhetysu Expedition



***'In the footsteps of the Atkinsons through Eastern Kazakhstan'***

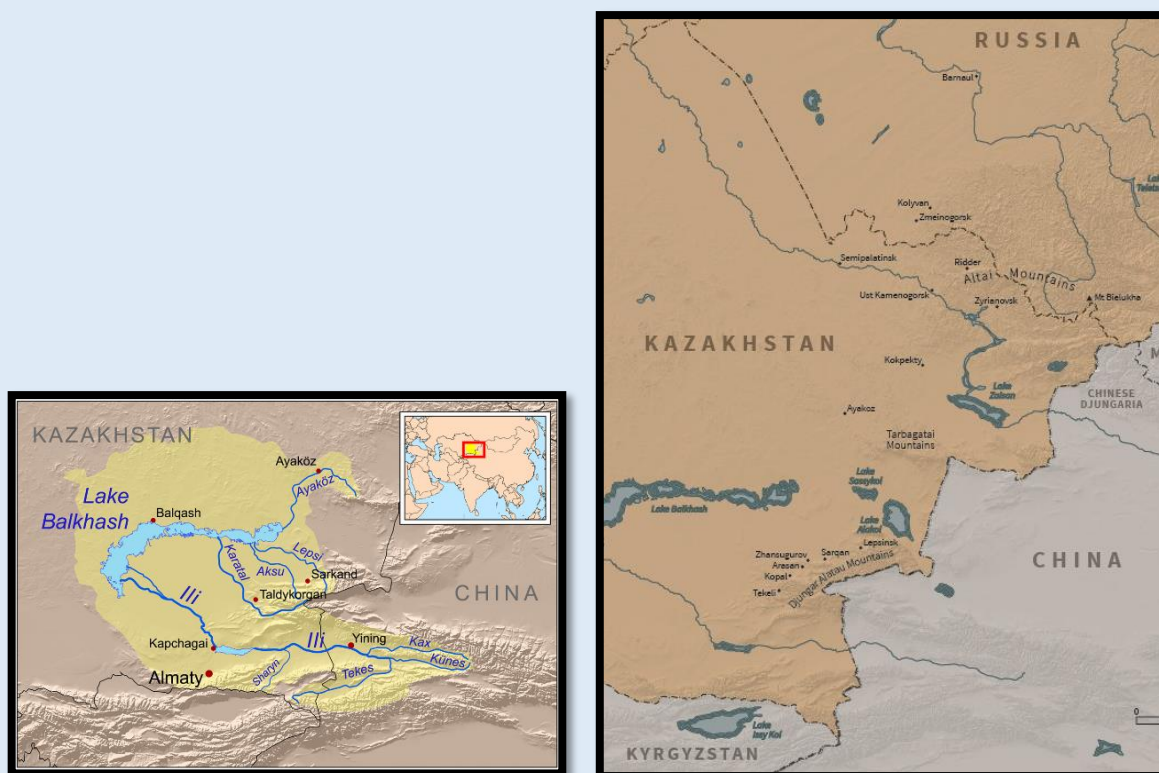
**28 July - 10 August 2018**

**By Nick Fielding FRGS**

## 1. Introduction

In September 1848, after an arduous crossing of the desert from the small Cossack outpost of Ayaguz on the Kazakh Steppe, Thomas and Lucy Atkinson arrived in the newly-established bastion of Kopal, at the foot of the Djungar Alatau Mountains in the Zhetysu region – in Russian, *Semirechye* - of what is now Eastern Kazakhstan. At that time, it was usually described as Chinese Tartary - although the precise boundary between the Chinese and Russian Empires was not clearly delineated.

The Djungar Alatau Mountains, some of which rise to over 5,000m, are merely outliers to the even higher peaks of the Tien Shan Mountains that today run along much of the official border between Kazakhstan and Western China.



The Zhetysu region of Eastern Kazakhstan

The Atkinsons had set off for this very remote region from the southern Siberian town of Barnaul in the spring of 1848, with the intention of visiting the Djungar Alatau Mountains and surrounding areas. They arrived at Kopal – 30km south-east of today's Taldykorgan - in the wake of an 800-strong contingent of Russian Cossack troops, brought in to help pacify the local nomads and to facilitate the arrival of Russian settlers.

Just six weeks after the Atkinsons arrived, Lucy Atkinson gave birth to a son, named Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson after the spring close to where he was born in Kopal. They were prevented from returning to Russian Siberia by the onset of winter and decided to stay at the outpost until the spring, when travel would be easier. More than 100 people died that winter in Kopal and newly-born Alatau was the only baby to survive the bitterly cold *burans* and snowstorms.





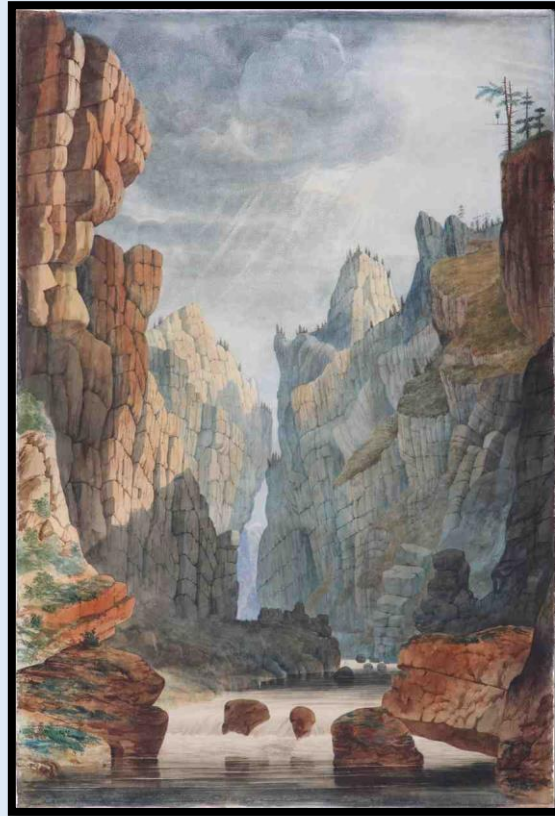
**The remains of the Cossack bastion at Kopal**

Eight months later – in early June 1849 - the Atkinsons, together with the eight-month old Alatau, their two Cossack guards and Kazakh guides, set off on the long journey back to Barnaul in Western Siberia, some 1200 kms to the north. Their intention was to spend the summer travelling, with the aim of arriving in Barnaul before winter set in again.

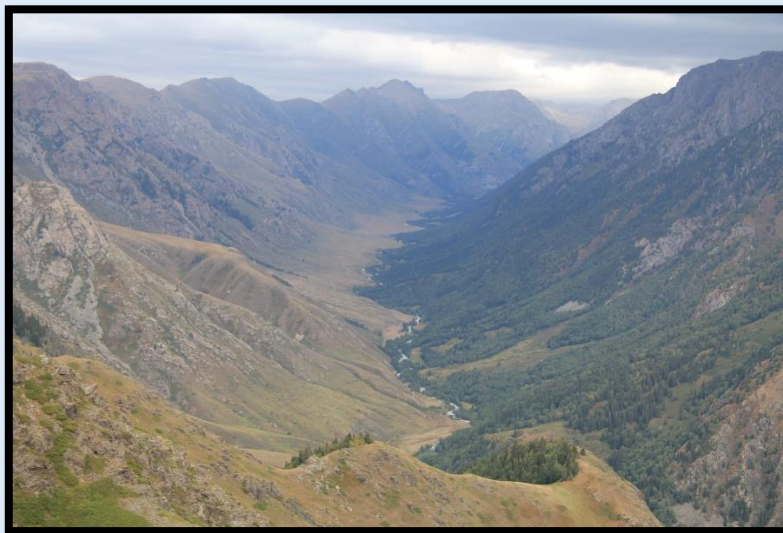
Rather than make their way back directly, the Atkinsons decided to explore the valleys of all the rivers that flowed from the mountain valleys of the Djungar Alatau Mountains into Lake Balkash, some 200 kms to the north. *Zhetysu* (Kazakh) or *Semirechye* (Russian) means Seven Rivers.

These rivers include the Karatal, the Kopal, the Acsou, the Bascan, the Sarcand, the Lepsou and the Terric Sou (Terecta). For good measure, Thomas Atkinson also explored and sketched the Tekeli River to the west and various other watercourses, including both Kora Rivers.

These mountain valleys had never previously been visited by Westerners and were known only to a few Cossacks and local Kazakhs. But they were by no means uninhabited. Until well into the twentieth century, thousands of nomads with their huge flocks of horses, camels, cattle, sheep and goats made the annual 200km journey from Lake Balkash into the high mountains pastures where they stayed for the summer, fattening their animals and living on *koumiss* (fermented horse milk) and meat. In the autumn, as the temperatures dropped, they would once again return to Lake Balkash for the winter.



Atkinson's painting of the Gorge of the Acsou River



The Kora River Valley in the Djungar Alatau Mountains

During the course of this journey Thomas Atkinson spent much time sketching and drawing the dramatic scenes he encountered, particularly this huge spring migration into the high summer pastures (known in Kazakh as *jailu*), as well as the breathtakingly beautiful scenes he came across in the mountains. In these remote and unexplored lands, Thomas was sure he would encounter pristine wilderness and unknown peoples. His small party travelled with horses, camels and sure-

footed oxen – the best animal for negotiating steep and rocky mountain pathways. Young Alatau would often be passed from Lucy to Thomas during particularly steep ascents and descents.



Atkinson's watercolour of the source of the Terric Sou in the Djungar Alatau (courtesy of RGS/IBG)

Lucy described this journey in her book, *Recollections of Tartar Steppes*:

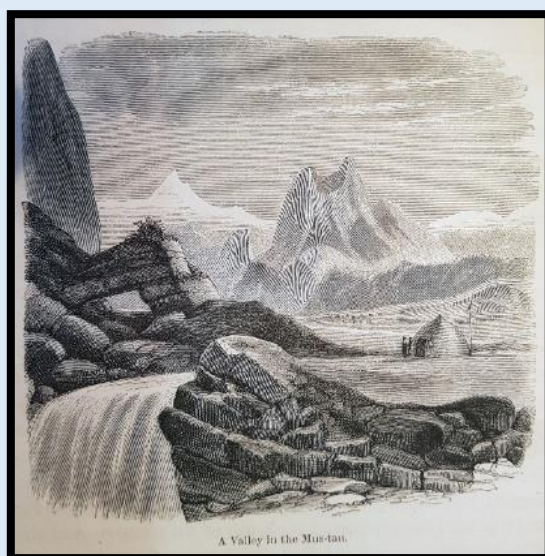
*"It would take much time to tell you of all the beautiful scenery we passed through, of the lovely sheltered valleys, of the magnificent waterfalls, of the ascents and descents, at times the tracks so slippery that our horses could not stand, but were obliged to be led down; of the narrow paths running along rocks almost perpendicular, with the boiling torrent more than a thousand feet below us; of the slopes of the mountains covered with shrubs and flowers, far more beautiful than in many gardens, Nature doing everything without the aid of man."*

This, it turns out, almost perfectly describes our experiences on the 2018 Zhetysu Expedition.

After almost three months travelling in this remote mountain range, with its deep river valleys, glaciers and racing mountain rivers, the Atkinsons turned north towards Barnaul in southern Siberia, which they reached in early October 1849.

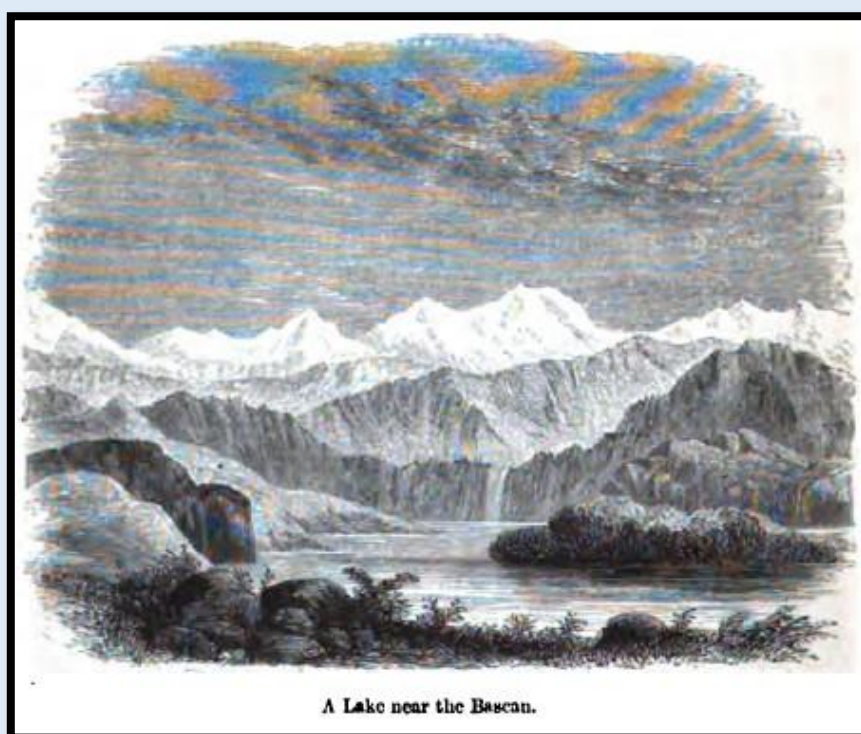
During this time, they ascended or descended most of the major rivers of Zhetysu, including the various branches of the Sarcand, the Big and the Little Bascan, tributaries of the Lepsy and the Terecta. In addition, they followed some of the rivers as far as Lake Ala Kool to the north, all the while with their young baby, Alatau, in their party. Often, they had to depend on the hospitality of the nomads they met in the Djungar Alatau Mountains, both for supplies and for guides.





This is the background to the 2018 Zhetysu Expedition. Having read the details of these travels in Thomas Atkinson's own contemporary diary, his books and Lucy's book, I began planning an expedition to retrace at least some of the routes they followed through these remote mountains.

This summer, together with members of the Kazakh Geographic Society and several colleagues, I attempted to retrace parts of this journey, particularly along the two branches of the Bascan River and the Lepsy River, travelling on horseback and camping wherever possible. Our aim was to explore these little-known river valleys and mountains and match them as closely as possible to the descriptions provided by Thomas and Lucy Atkinson in their books and diaries.



Woodcuts of Atkinson's drawings of the Bascan River region

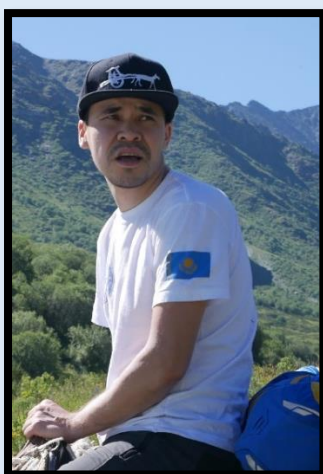
## 2. Into the Zhetysu

Together with fellow expedition members David O'Neill and Barbora Pekna, I arrived in Almaty in the south-east of Kazakhstan, on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> July.



Barbora Pekna, Nick Fielding, David O'Neill

That afternoon we had our first meeting with our hosts – and fellow expedition members – from KazGeo, the Kazakh Geographic Society. Led by team leader Magzhan Saginbayev, it also included Daniyar Armarkayev and Daulet Omarov. Magzhan is an experienced expedition leader who has climbed in South America, Antarctica and Central Asia and has also completed a year-long bicycle journey around the world.



Magzhan, Daniyar and Daulet from KazGeo

On our first afternoon in Almaty we met to discuss equipment, plans and routes and quickly decided to leave early the next morning for the Zhetysu region, more than 200 miles to the north-east.





**Making plans for the 2018 Zhetysu Expedition**

The KazGeo vehicles we used on this trip were both old friends; I had first come across ‘Big Blue’, the specially adapted vehicle prepared by Arctic Trucks of Warwick, on a previous expedition in 2014. And the smaller white truck had accompanied us when in 2016 we brought 10 descendants of the Atkinsons to Kazakhstan to visit Kopal and the surrounding area.



**The specially adapted Land Cruisers that conveyed much of our baggage to the Zhetysu region**

We left Almaty early in the morning of Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> July, following the newly-completed motorway north-east towards the city of Taldykorgan – a journey of around four hours. Our first port of call



was to be the former closed industrial town of Tekeli, nestled into the western foothills of the Djungar Alatau Mountains. Here we were to meet the seventh and final member of our team – and another old friend - Vladimir Gostievsky. Vladimir acted as official translator for the expedition, switching fluently between English, Kazakh and Russian.



Expedition member and translator Vladimir Gostievsky

### Rivers and Stupas in Tekeli

Just before he left Kopal with Lucy and Alatau in the spring of 1849, Thomas Atkinson made a final excursion to the west, in the company of Baron Wrangel, a Tsarist official responsible for relations with the nomadic tribes. The two men called on Sultan Suyuk, one of the leaders of the Large Horde of the Kazakhs and a man with a great – some would say disreputable - reputation. From here Thomas travelled on to the place where the town of Tekeli now stands - although at that time there was nothing there but a small collection of yurts. He noted the three rivers – the Kora, Tekeli and Tjadsha (now Chazha) – which unite here to form the Karatal, which flows into Lake Balkash.

The rivers are still there and we visited the spot where the milky green waters of the Kora meet the clear water of the Chazha:



In Tekeli the milky waters of the Kora River mix with the clear waters of the Chazha River.

We also visited the entrance to the Kora Valley, which extends east of here for almost 80kms, but there is no way through due to the steepness of the valley sides. As Thomas wrote in his 1849 diary: *"Its outlet into the plan in truly grand. It has cut through a high mountain chain, the rocks rising up several thousand feet. I determined to go up as far as I could before sketching and then make any views I thought good on my return. We left our horses at the mouth of the chasm as it is impossible to ride further. Track there is none. It is constant climbing over huge masses of rock that had fallen. Some we had to creep under; they were far too big to climb...A little more than a verst from the entrance was the farthest point I could reach."*

At the entrance to the Kora River gorge is a remarkable Buddhist stela dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE. Known as the Tekeli Stele, it is a reminder that Buddhism flourished in Kazakhstan well before the modern era. It is likely that this 3-metre-high stela was created after the invasion of this territory by Western Mongolian Oirats (Kalmyks), who built a number of Buddhist structures including the monastery at Ablakit near Ust-Kamenogorsk in the foothills of the Kalbinsky Range in north-east Kazakhstan and Kyzylkent, located in the mountains not far from Karkaralinsk.

The engraved images on the Tekeli Stele include: a Stupa representing the Buddha's Mind; a Snow Leopard holding the Stupa in his paws (the Snow Leopard is considered in Tibet to be the bravest and the most honest animal); and the symbol of Kalachakra and his mantra which is closely connected with the legend of the hidden kingdom of Shambhala (Shangri-La).

According to Kalachakra's prophecies the kings of Shambhala will intervene in world affairs when the forces of darkness, aggression and ignorance pose a threat to the existence of civilization. On the top of the rock can be found Kalachakra's seed syllable or monogram called "The Ten Mighty Letters", symbolizing the ten aspects of Kalachakra's mandala (universe). More prosaically, it is likely that the stela acted as some kind of signpost to Buddhist monks travelling between India and China. This was not to be the only Buddhist site we would visit during our journey.

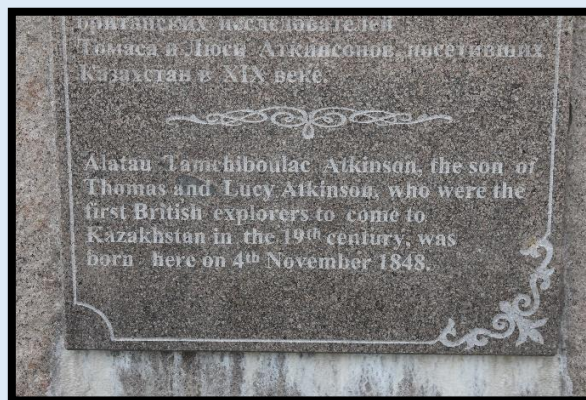


The Tekeli Stele, showing a snow leopard holding a Buddhist stupa in his paws



### Paying our respects to Kopal

After spending the night in Tekeli we set off the next morning to visit Kopal, the town where Thomas and Lucy spent almost nine months in 1848-49 and where their son Alatau had been born. This was my fourth visit to the town. My last visit, in August 2016, had been in the company of 10 descendants of the Atkinsons. A great celebration was laid on by the Kazakh authorities, who also erected a large memorial to commemorate the birth in the town of Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson.



The memorial to Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson in Kopal

The visit to Kopal was not complete until we had made a visit to the Tamchiboulac Spring, where we filled our bottles with its famous mineral water.



A visit to the famous Tamchiboulac Spring in Kopal

We had planned to visit Arasan, about 20kms from Kopal, to try to find the original hot springs described by Thomas Atkinson. He noted in his diary that on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1849, accompanied by most of the officers and their wives from Kopal, they had visited the spring for the last time: *"Here we bathed and remained the night, spending our last evening with our Kopal friends, having a dance on the grass"*. What a wonderful night it must have been!

However, from a chance meeting with the former director of the Kapal-Arasan Therapeutic Springs, famous for its radon treatments, we found that, much to his disappointment, the institution has recently been closed and that the original baths had long since disappeared.

### Kurgans on the Hasford Pass

Instead, keeping the Ghilder Karaghai Valley to our south, we headed up over the Hasford Pass from Arasan towards Zhansugurov and Sarcand. This is a remarkable road – in reality more of a track – which was created by the first Russian officer to lead Cossack troops into the Zhetysu region in the mid-1840s. It allows a shortcut that saves 40-50 kms of hard marching on the margins of the steppe.

As we ascended the pass, we stopped to take in the magnificent scene, with the snowy peaks of the Djungar Alatau to our south and the fields on either side of us sloping away to towards Arasan. Close to where we stopped were a number of ancient burial mounds – *kurgans* – possibly the one's mentioned in Thomas' diary, where he writes: *"Passed some ancient tombs or barrows about a verst from the river, one of which about 120 feet across and 17 feet high with two circles of stones, the inner one 100 feet from the base of the barrow, the other 10 feet from it. To the east is an entrance 12 feet wide."*

Indeed, one of the kurgans we saw was surrounded by two circles of stone, only visible when filmed from the air using the drone that Daniyar had brought along with him.



Some of the kurgans near the Hasford Pass. The one that is left of centre is surrounded by two circles of stone.

There are dozens of kurgans in this location, where a sign warns that they are protected by the Kazakh government.

Another two hours brought us to our modest hotel in Sarcand, where we made our final preparations and checked our gear and provisions for the journey ahead.

We also made our first visit to the headquarters of the Djungar Alatau National Park, where we negotiated the terms and conditions under which we would be allowed entry into this remote border region, in the process becoming the first outsiders since the time of the Atkinsons to gain access. Until recently this was a restricted border zone. The park authorities told us that our guides and horses would be ready on Wednesday 1 August.

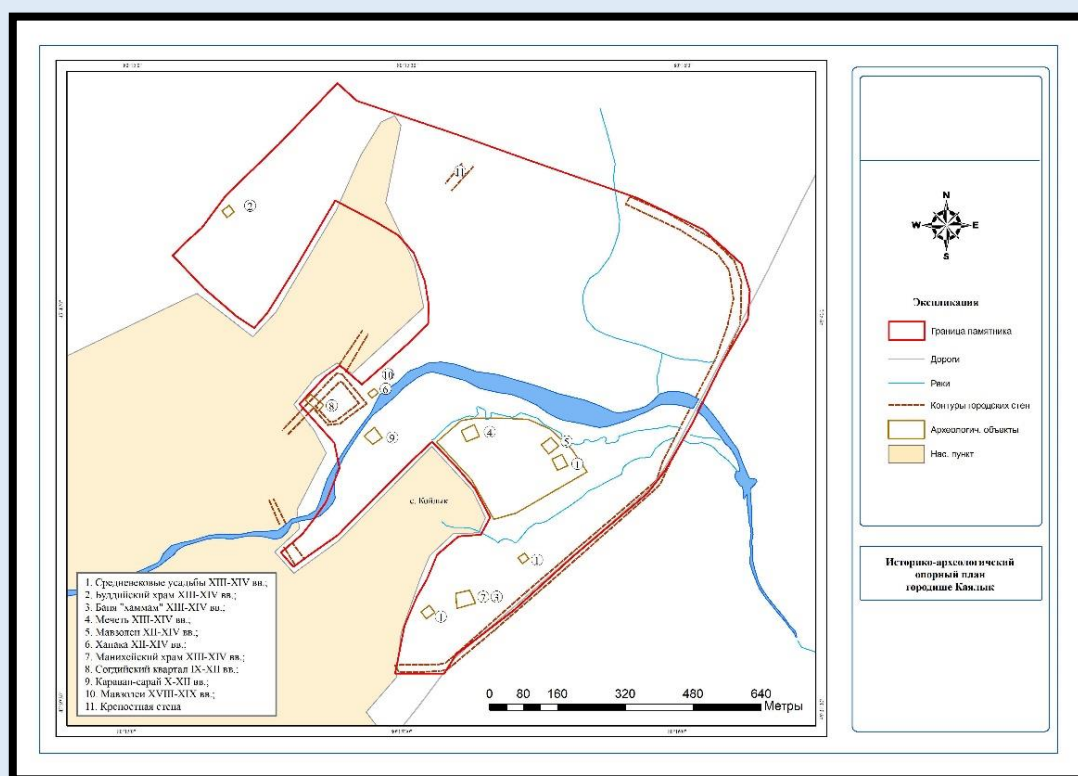




Magzhan and Barbora make a final check on provisions – including Konina (horsemeat)

### A visit to the ancient city of Koilyk

On Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> July we had arranged with archaeologist Dmitry Voyakin to visit the ruins of Koilyk, an ancient city on the banks of the Lepsy River in the foothills of the Djungar Alatau. Dmitry could not be there himself but sent plans of the site and background material on his excavations.



Plan of the ancient city of Koilyk (in Russian), visited by the Atkinsons in the spring of 1849

This ancient city, once known as Kaylak, has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2014. Its origin goes back at least 1500 years, but by the 12<sup>th</sup> Century it was the capital of the Karlyk khans and later a political, academic and cultural centre for the people of Shagatay. Its ruins include a

Buddhist temple, a mosque, a Manichean temple and a Nestorian Christian church, showing that a wide variety of beliefs were tolerated by its rulers.



**Exploring the ruins of an ancient Buddhist temple in Koilyk**

Lucy mentions visiting “an old Kalmuck fortress on the Lepsou” in her book and it seems certain this was the place. Thomas adds to the picture in his diary entry for 15<sup>th</sup> July 1849: *“From the top of the pass we had a view of an old Kalmuck fortress on the opposite side of the river, one end of which had been washed away by the stream. It is an earth embankment, about 8 feet high. Its other dimensions are about 100 yards wide and 300 yards long, without any entrance gateway. About three versts distant there is a large barrow, but none near the fortress.”* They were terribly tormented by mosquitoes and the intense heat and quickly headed back up into the mountains to gain some respite.



**Aerial view of the site at Koilyk**



On our return to Sarcand we made our final preparations for our journey and for the first time met the two national park guides who would accompany us. Maksut Shamsutdinov and Sergei Baranov were to prove excellent and knowledgeable guides for this difficult horse trek through the mountains.



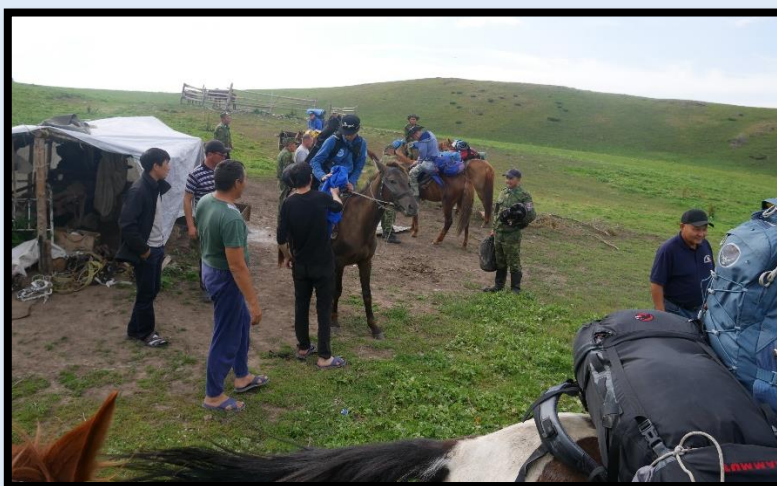
**Our guides, Sergei and Maksut**

### 3. On horseback into the Djungar Alatau Mountains

Our starting point for our journey was an *aoul* (yurt camp) in a place called Birmoyen (One Neck), a *jailu* (alpine pasture) up above the old Cossack village of Amanbocter. On our way we met up with a group of park officials, eager to see these unusual 'foreigners' travelling through the mountains.



Soon after we arrived at the yurt the horses began to appear. Our party was now made up of the seven expedition members, plus our two guides. Besides our own mounts, we also took with us two pack horses, making a total of 11.



Saddling up



### Setting out for the Little the the Big Bascan

There was to be no easy introduction to our journey into the mountains. Our first destination was the Little Bascan River – a difficult five-hour journey with a treacherous descent into the river gorge at the end. We arrived at 1930, exhausted but at the same time exhilarated by the stunning scenery through which we had passed. The final descent of several thousand feet down the trackless side of a mountain was particularly challenging and several times we had to dismount and lead our horses.

The next morning (2 August) we were up at 0600. As the sun rose above the sides of the valley and illuminated our campsite, we saw the most remarkable sight. Thousands of dragonflies, of all shapes and hues, rose into the air and whizzed around us. Squadrons of them chased flies through the trees and soared into the sky. I have never seen anything like it before. All around us were large stands of delphiniums and vast thickets of ripe raspberries.

Soon we were ascending steep slopes to cross the pass that leads to the valley of the Big Bascan River. This was not my first visit to the valley of the Big Bascan. Three years ago, together with translator Vladimir, I had visited the valley with a park ranger. We stayed in an old mountain hut for the night. The next day we travelled a little further up the valley, but were required to stop as soon as we came in sight of a border control post. Beyond that we could not pass.

I soon realised that we were now close to the same spot and sure enough, the border post came into view about an hour after we left our first camp. This time there was no restriction. We now had our first challenge: a crossing on horseback of the western-most branch of the Big Bascan. We were to make many such crossings during the course of this journey, but the first one is always particularly exciting.



Crossing the Big Bascan River

Our guides told us that we were the first Europeans – since the Atkinsons – to travel over the pass from the Little Bascan to the Big Bascan River. Once we had crossed to the other side of the river we quickly arrived at the border control post, where a sign in Russian on the door asked visitors to “Observe the Taiga Code – Clean up, leave food and leave firewood”. As good a set of instructions as you will find anywhere.

It was now 1730, but we decided to ride on to make as much progress as we could along and up the valley of the Big Bascan. Our eventual stopping place two hours later was an old *aoul* high in the *jailu*, surrounded by herds of cattle and horses.



Our camp on the Big Bascan

Mahsud told me that the annual migration up into the *jailu* still takes place, with family groups bringing horses and cattle – no longer camels – from about 100kms away on the steppe. The numbers are smaller than in the past, but the tradition continues.

We were up at 0700 the next day to be greeted by a fine morning, although it had rained in the night. A ‘tourist breakfast’ of boiled meat set us up for the day. Our route was now on up the Big Bascan towards The Pass with No Name, at around 3,200m (10,500 feet). We cannot be absolutely sure that this is the same pass crossed by the Atkinsons, but if it was not this one it was another close by. However, it was not to be an easy ascent.



Up towards the Pass with No Name



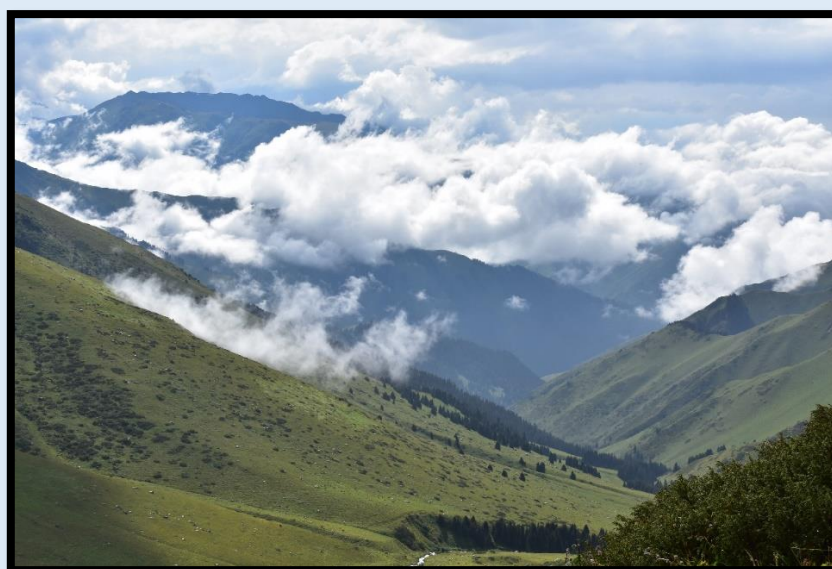
### The Pass with No Name

We reached a ridge at about 2,600m when suddenly the weather began to change. The wind picked up and rain soon followed. It was only 1300hrs, but our guides told us to dismount and put up our tents. We were bemused to begin with, but very soon we realised why they wanted us to halt. In our very exposed position, almost at the top of the valley, we could see as the clouds swept in, followed by torrential rain and then, without warning, lightning strikes that were immediately followed by thunder. The lightning was all around us and the thunderclaps were deafening. The rain soon turned into large hailstones – later, once the cloud and mist had lifted, we could see that snow had fallen just a few hundred metres above us.

It was a good lesson in mountain weather. Thomas Atkinson noted that even in June it could snow. Mahsud told me there had been snow on 26<sup>th</sup> June this year. Although this was the worst weather incident we experienced, we were now much more attentive to the signs of changing weather.



In the clouds



Once the clouds had cleared away

With little prospect of the weather clearing, we settled into our makeshift campsite for the night. By the evening the clouds had disappeared and we witnessed a glorious sunset over the mountains looking towards the steppe far in the distance.

The next morning (4<sup>th</sup> August) we rose at 0600 to find a cloudless sky. After a basic breakfast we headed up towards the Pass with No Name. We could ride only part of the way, owing to the steepness. For the final part of the ascent we had to lead our horses. This is a tough climb, made even more difficult by riding boots that provide little grip on the slippery rocks. Towards the top I found it hard to breathe, such was the exertion required. As we approached the top of the pass, the track disappeared into the shale and we had to find our own way.

Finally, we made it and were rewarded with magnificent views of the Mustau Glacier (mentioned by Atkinson) and the big snow-capped mountains on the border with China only a few kilometres away. Thousands of feet below us was Solnechnaia Dalina - the 'Sunny Valley' – a beautiful U-shaped valley through which runs the Kora River – not the same one that emerges near Tekeli.



**At the summit of the Pass with No Name**



**The descent into Solnechnaia Dalina – the Sunny Valley**



### Into the Solnechnaia Dalina

Once again we faced a difficult and steep descent into the valley below the pass. It looked like no distance at all, but we took the best part of four hours to reach the river.



Setting off down the mountain

There we had another river crossing, through the milky waters of the Kora River.



Crossing the Kora River

We now faced a long ride through this wonderful Solnechnaia Dalina valley. It stretches for miles, with high peaks on either side and the valley sweeping away into the distance. The trail was almost non-existent and it is clear that few humans, other than the odd frontier guard, ever visit this region. Our guides told us that it had previously been a hunting ground, but that the once-large herds of maral deer had been decimated and now very few remained. Those that do are protected. From time-to-time we came across the almost white scat of wolves, indicating that there is still plenty of prey for these voracious predators.

We saw very little wildlife on this expedition, although we were assured that wolf, lynx, bears, deer and other animals are still to be found. Some parts of the park are now off-limits to all humans in an effort to conserve the remaining wildlife. We did see marmots, a viper and a wide variety of birds, including large eagles. But the closest we came to large mammals was the set of bear tracks we saw below Zhassyl Kul lake.



**Fresh bear tracks**

Our camp for the night was on a bluff above the Kora River. Here we met with more bad weather, although not as severe as previously.

We were up early the next day to find that we had been joined by two new park rangers. They had joined us to guide us down as we were now in a region that our original guides were less familiar with. The new guides explained that they would take us to the junction of the Kora River and the Kenuzen River, which unite to form the Aganakata. This in turn feeds into the Lepsy River many miles downstream.

At this junction we faced a decision. There are two Zhassyl Kul lakes – an upper one along the Kenuzen River and a lower, better-known lake into which runs the Aganakata. The upper lake is seldom visited and very hard to access. The guides told us that it would be impossible to reach it on horseback as the path had collapsed. Instead, it would require a 5-hour trek in each direction through boulder fields and along unstable shale slopes. With most of us wearing riding boots, it was



not difficult to decide not to make this potentially treacherous excursion. On looking at Thomas Atkinson's diary I found that he had avoided the problem by approaching the upper lake from above, along a mountain ridge. With hindsight, I could see how he had done it – although it was scarcely credible that he had made the journey with both Lucy and Alatau. However, there can be little doubt that they managed it, as Lucy also writes about it in her book. As she notes: "At length we reached the brink of the gorge. Immediately below us lay a lake, the colour of which I compared to verdigris; we were so high above it that we could not perceive the slightest motion in the water."

So on this occasion we had to pass on the chance to visit the Upper Zhassyl Kul lake. We will have to wait for another opportunity.

Instead, after lunch at the junction of the two rivers, we rode on, continuing down the Solnechnaia Dalina valley, until we reached a point where our guides said we would have to make a long ascent. In the meantime, we had made three river crossings, all of which required concentration and nerve. At one point Daulet's horse threw him off and bolted, delaying us for some time while the guides retraced our steps to find it.

Riding down this remote valley was certainly one of the most beautiful journeys I have ever made. There are not many places like this in the world.



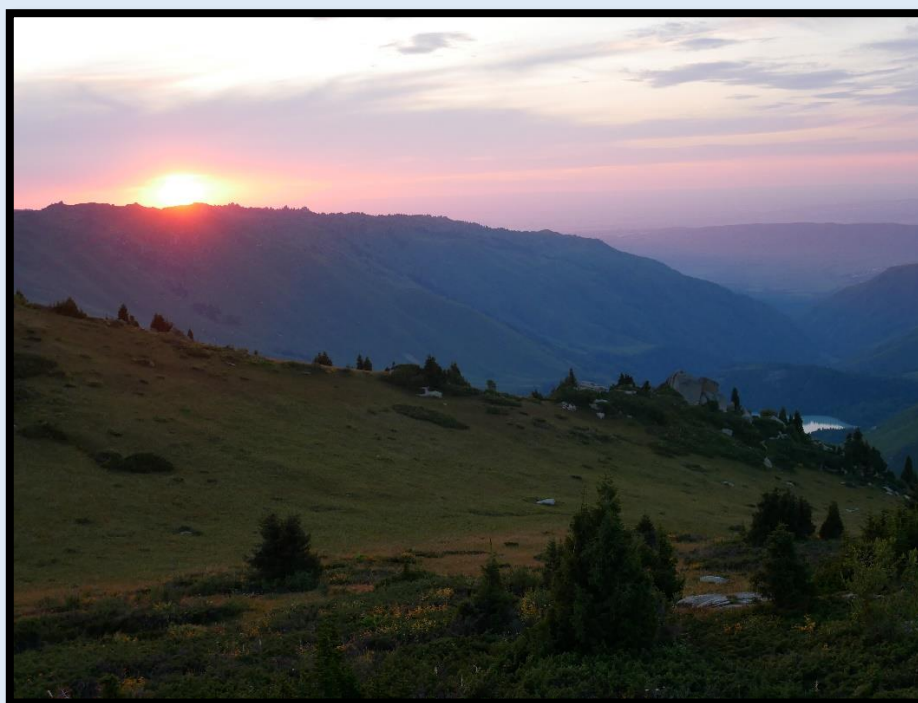
A view up the Solnechnaia Dalina valley

### The Suyk Plateau and Zhassyl Kul Lake

At 1600 we started to ascend a large mountain slope. It was a very tough ride; my horse collapsed under me at one point and made it up to the top only with difficulty, having been led much of the way. And Magzhan received a kick in the face from a horse in front of him. Fortunately, it was nothing worse than a black eye. After two hours we finally reached the Suyk ('cold') Plateau, where we were all struck by the unusual rock formations that had been carved by the wind.

Our two new guides wanted us to press on and ride to a camp at a much lower level, but Mahsud insisted on staying up high on the plateau. It was a good decision. This was the place described by both Thomas and Lucy, above Zhassyl Kul lake, where he was set upon by a group of nomads. "It was a most enchanting spot," writes Lucy. "— a perfect little Paradise. I was in ecstasies and taking the child, seated myself on the brink of the precipice. It was a fearful sight to cast the eyes below. The head seemed to grow giddy and the heart throbbed quickly at the frightful depth; where I was sitting it was as near as possible perpendicular down to the lake."

We selected a campsite that matched as closely as possible the place described by the Atkinsons and settled in for the night, watching a glorious sunset fill the sky with burnished yellow and red spears. Far below us we could see the tip of the turquoise-coloured lake.



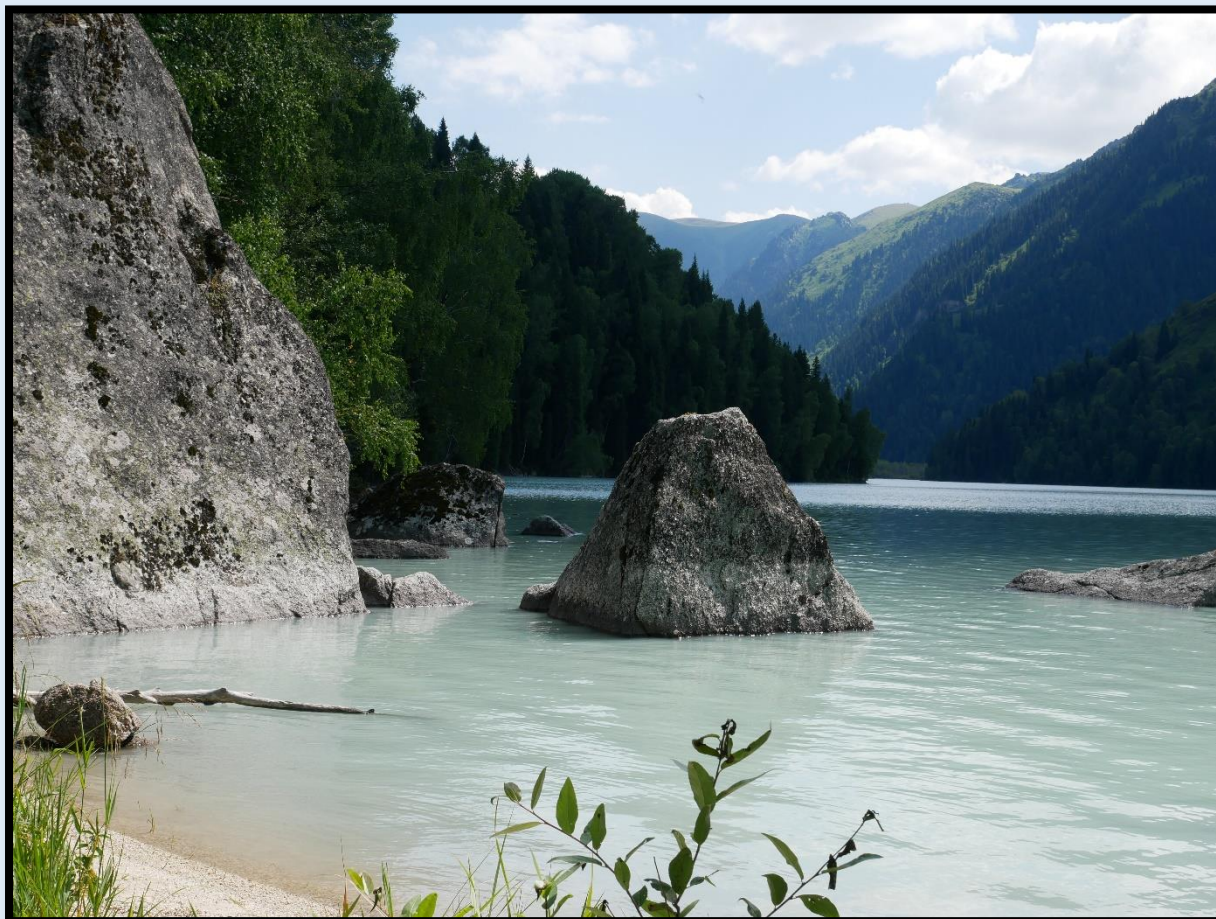
Sunset from the Suyk Plateau, with Zhassyl Kul to the right

The following morning, Andrei, one of the new guides, arrived to escort us down the mountain to a campsite at Zhassyl Kul. Once again, this was a very steep and difficult descent, on which we spent more time off the horses than on. There was no path and we all slipped several times on the crushed foliage on which we had to walk. Having set off downhill at 0900, we finally reached our camp site next to the lake at 1500.

Zhassyl Kul is famous for its remarkable colour. It appears to have been formed by a massive rockfall that blocked the end of the valley. There are only one or two spots at which one can reach its shore, due to the thick undergrowth and the steep rocks that surround it. But the campsite, with its famous



pyramid rock, is wonderful. Several of our party braved the freezing water for a swim, but nothing would induce me to do so. It was my second visit here, having ridden up on horseback three years previously. Nothing has changed. It is still as charming as ever.



**Zhassyl Kul**

After our long, hard day it was a great pleasure to be able to relax in such a wonderful spot. We sat around the fire, prepared our evening meal and talked into the night, aware that we were now approaching the end of a very special journey. In the whole of our travels we had seen only two other humans and had travelled in areas that no outsider had visited for more than 170 years. A close comparison of our journey with that of the Atkinsons shows that the diaries and books are remarkably accurate in their descriptions.

It is clear that we have not replicated all of the Atkinsons' journeys in these mountains. We know that Thomas penetrated a considerable distance into the mountains, as he describes one lake that is now in China. But where we have followed a similar path, his and Lucy's accounts of their travels are fully vindicated by our expedition.

Our last day in the mountains was 7<sup>th</sup> August. We rode down towards the Zhalanashski outpost, stopping briefly at an apiary, where several of us bought wonderful mountain flower honey and where I met an old friend, Gaffour, a Tatar who had guided me up to Zhassyl Kul on my previous visit. Our ride took us through the apple forests that cover this area, but I was sad to see that the trees looked to be in very poor condition. There were no apples and many of the branches were

either dead or dying. One of the guides told me that it was due to a moth, and that the trees had been sprayed from the air earlier this year. It is a tragedy, all-the-more-so because these are thought to be the last remaining wild apple forests in the world.

Finally, after a four-hour ride, we reached the outpost. All the staff turned out to greet us. Our driver, Sasha, was there too, along with the vehicles.

As we were getting ready to leave, our guide Mahsud came over to speak to us. He told me that we had done extremely well to complete what was a very arduous trip. "I never expected any of you to complete it," he said. Don't worry," I said, "I'll be back."



**Our team members with our guides at the end of our journey**



## 4. Conclusions and acknowledgements

This expedition was several years in the making. I first visited the Djungar Alatau Mountains four years ago and was able to visit Kapal, the Kora Valley and the Acsou River gorge. In 2015 I made a second visit and rode up to Zhassyl Kul lake and made a short trip into the gorge of the Big Bascan.

On my third trip in 2016 I was accompanied by 10 descendants of the Atkinsons. Some of the party were elderly and this required us to limit ourselves to places that were approachable by vehicle only. Nonetheless, several of us still managed a short horse trek along the valley of the Terecta River.

It was after that trip that I began to plan the present expedition. Having already decided to travel on horseback in Western Buryatia in 2017, it was not until this year that I was able to begin planning in earnest. Thanks are due to Nurlan Abduov and all his colleagues at the Kazakh Geographic Society for agreeing to participate and for providing transport and provisions.



Thanks also to our guides Mahsud and Sergei for looking after us and bringing us all through this adventure safely. We are also indebted to the Djungar Alatau National Park officials for allowing us into this beautiful haven.

My particular thanks go to David O'Neill for many of the photographs in this report. Thanks also to Daniyar and his drone. I also wish to express my gratitude to the librarians of the Royal Geographical Society for assisting me so ably in my efforts to transcribe Thomas Atkinson's diaries.

We have been able to show, beyond doubt, that the Atkinsons achieved a remarkable feat by travelling for so long in the Djungar Alatau Mountains. Even for seasoned riders this is very tough terrain. The weather is unpredictable in all seasons and without good guides it is easy to wander off track and get lost.

Our guides assured us that in the 170 years since the Atkinsons were in Zhetysu, no other outsiders have ever visited these regions, not least because they run along the sensitive border with China. In future years I look forward to completing those parts of the Atkinsons' journey that we could not complete on this occasion.

Now that we have begun the process of rediscovering ancient paths through these beautiful mountains, I hope that it will continue. And that this place will retain its appeal. Even now we can be thankful that in an age where everyone has been everywhere, there remains at least one quiet place on the planet that can humble us and make us marvel.

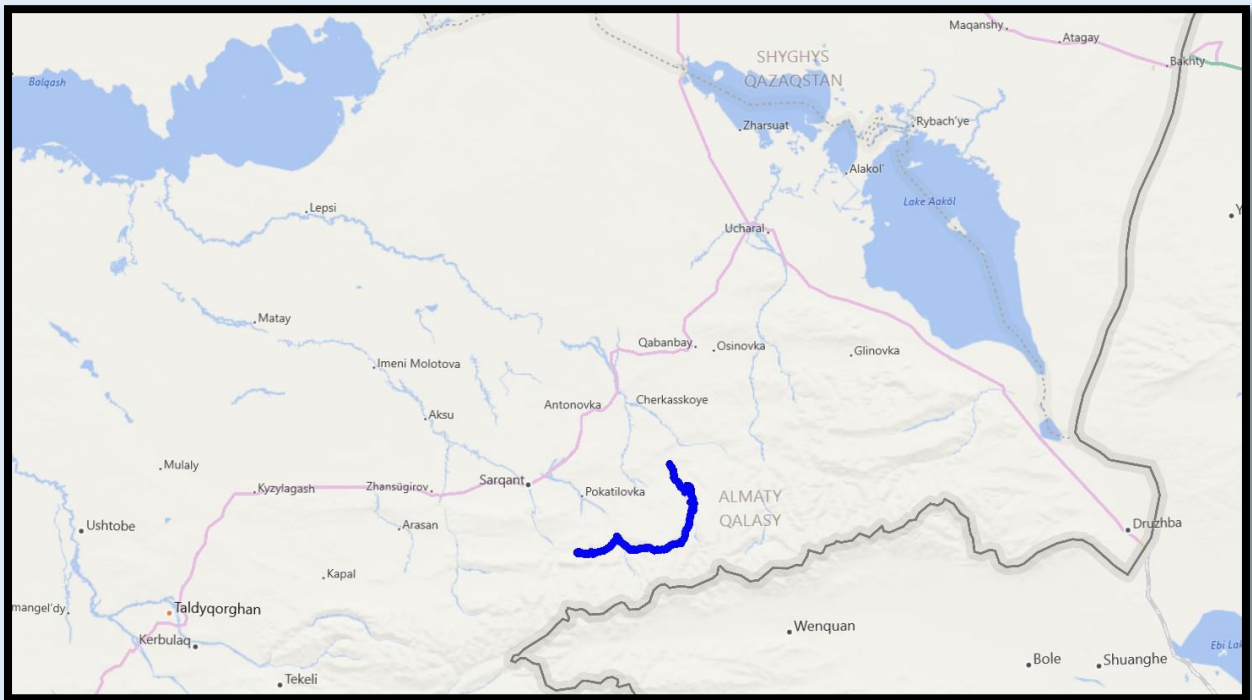
**Nick Fielding**

Oxford, 16 August 2018.

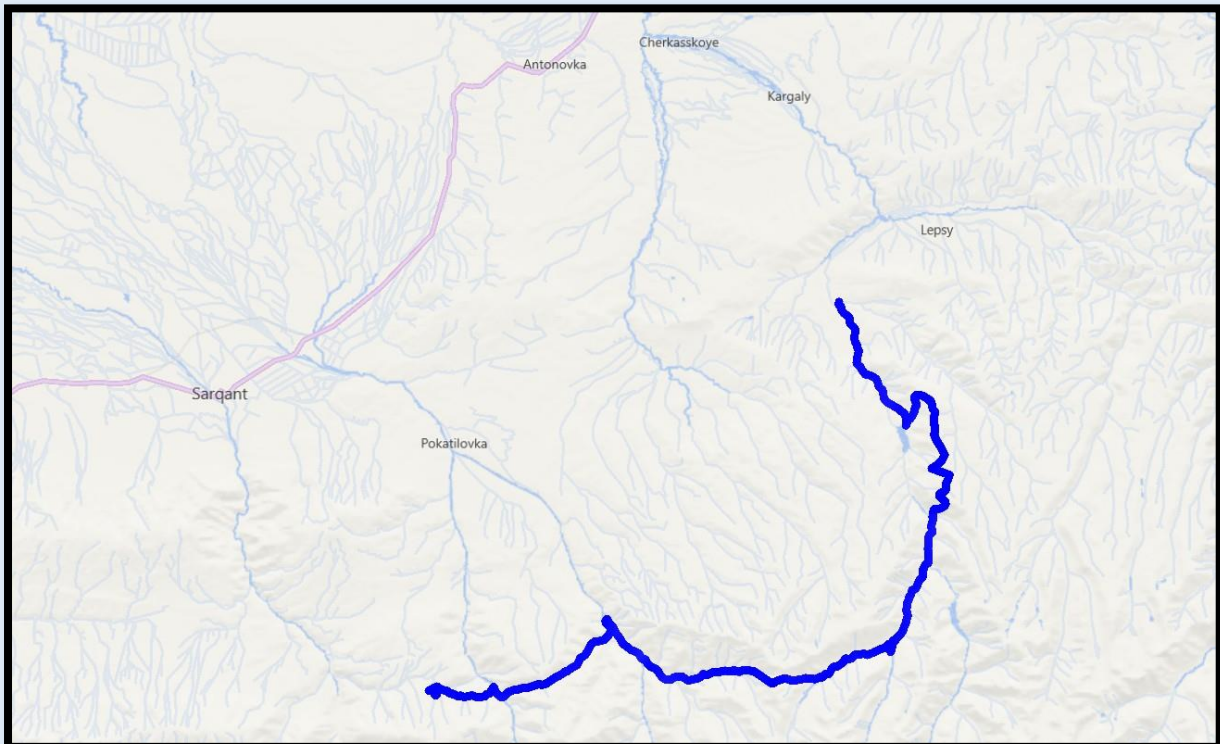




## MAPS



**Our route through the Djungar Alatau marked in blue. In total around 90kms.**



**A closer view**