

# The 2019 Zhetysu Expedition

The Djungar Alatau Mountains, Eastern Kazakhstan.

Aug-Sept 2019



By Nick Fielding FRGS

And with support from





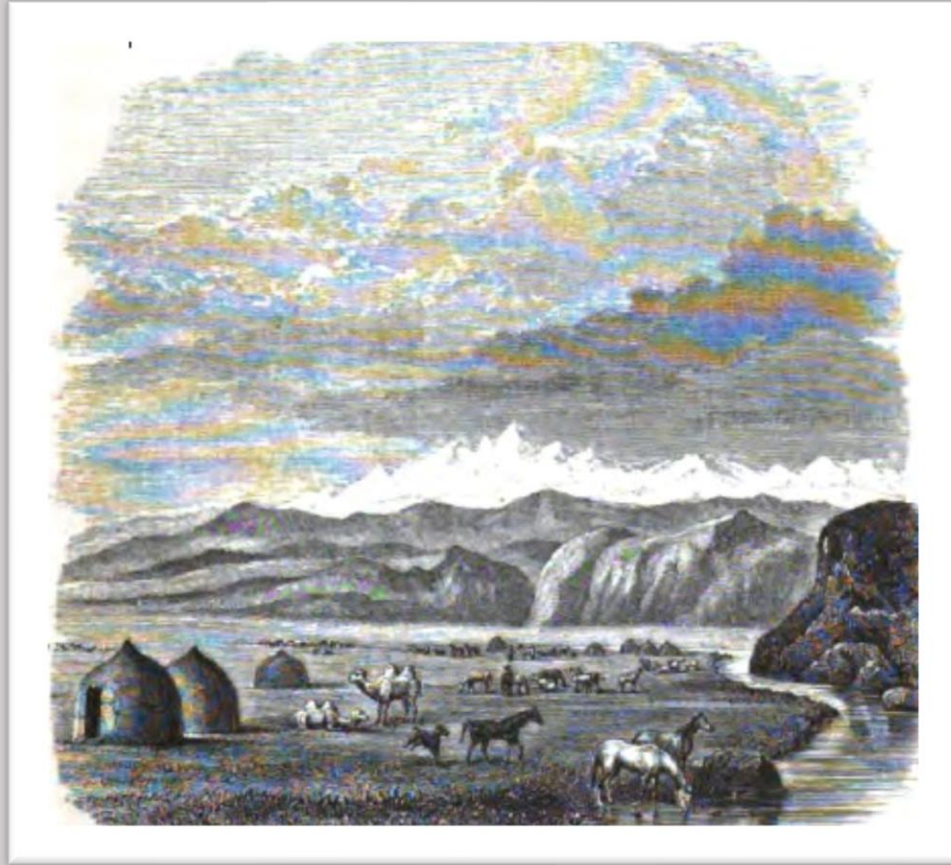
## 1. Introduction

In the spring of 1849 Thomas and Lucy Atkinson were living in the remote Russian outpost of Kopal, in the foothills of the Djungar Alatau Mountains in the Zhetysu region of Eastern Kazakhstan. They had arrived there in September the previous year after spending most of the summer travelling more than 1,200 kms, mostly on horseback, from Barnaul in Southern Siberia. The outward journey was particularly hard on Lucy Atkinson, who was pregnant and a novice rider. She was nearly swept away in a fierce torrent in the Altai Mountains and a few weeks later, as they crossed the vast expanse of open steppe between the Altai and the Djungar Alatau Mountains, she almost died of thirst and exposure. Only the quick thinking of her Cossack guides had saved her from the torrent; Thomas Atkinson saved his wife a second time when he heard the barking of dogs in the desert, indicating that there was a camp not far away where the couple were able to find food and warmth.

Kopal itself was little more than a Cossack bastion, founded the year before the Atkinsons arrived. At that time it was the most remote Russian fort anywhere in Central Asia and had been established as part of a much grander plan to encircle the nomadic tribes of the Great Steppe with Russian forts as a precursor to their eventual pacification and colonisation. This process had begun in the early eighteenth century when the Russians had built forts along their extensive southern border with the steppes in order to prevent raids by nomads into the border villages. At the same time a conscious effort was made to induce the major tribal groups to accept Russian rule. Faced with increasing attacks by Kalmyks and Djungars further to the east, the Kazakh tribal confederations had gradually succumbed to the Russian inducements and submitted to the authority of the Tsar.

By the mid-nineteenth century Russia was sending military expeditions from its main base at Orenburg to demarcate the border with Chinese territory to the south and east of the Altai Mountains. They reached Kopal in 1847 and established Verniye – later to become Almaty – within a decade. When the Atkinsons arrived, the Russians were busy settling disputes between the Kazakh hordes as well as preparing a military campaign against both the Kirghiz in their mountain strongholds and the once-powerful khanate of Khokand. Both campaigns would be successful, opening the way for extensive settlement of the steppelands by thousands of Russian peasants, who were offered substantial plots of land and tax breaks if they settled in these remote regions.

In the spring of 1849, as the Atkinsons prepared to return to Barnaul after spending a hard winter in Kopal, the great annual migration of the Kazakhs from their winter camps close to Lake Balkhash up into the rich alpine pastures of the Djungar Alatau Mountains was still a major event. Thomas Atkinson wanted to witness this migration for himself and so the couple, along with their nine-month-old son Alatau, decided to spend that summer exploring the Zhetysu region between the huge lake and the mountains to its south. In particular, they wanted to visit as many of the rivers valleys as they could – Zhetysu means Seven Rivers in Kazakh.

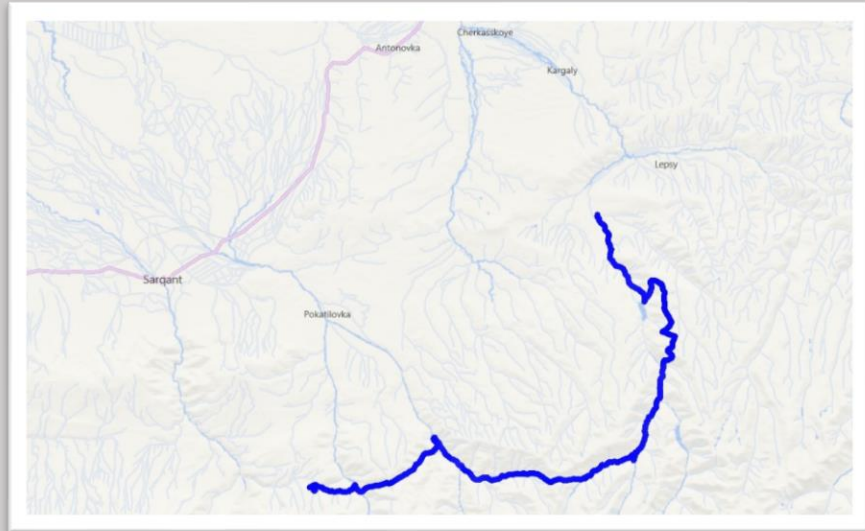


**Atkinson woodcut showing the Djungar Alatau Mountains**

These rivers include the Karatal, the Ili, the Kopal, the Acsou, the Bascan, the Sarcan, the Lepsou and the Terric Sou (Terecta) – although there is disagreement on which ones make up the Seven Rivers. For good measure, Thomas Atkinson also explored and sketched the Tekeli River to the west and various other watercourses, including both Kora Rivers. His intention was to spend the summer sketching this remote region and to meet some of the characters living there. The Atkinsons travelled with a couple of Cossack guards, plus two or three local Kazakh guides, depending on hunting for fresh food as well as buying or exchanging goods with the many nomads they met during their travels.

Having spent some time visiting and exploring the beautiful and remote Zhetysu region, several years ago I decided to try and repeat the journeys made by the Atkinsons. I travelled to Kopal in 2014 and then the following year along the entire eastern border between Kazakhstan and China, making forays into the mountains. In 2016 I brought a group of Atkinson descendants to Kopal and the surrounding area. In the summer of 2018, I organised the first of three journeys along routes first traversed by the Atkinsons. With support from the Kazakh Geographic Society we travelled on horseback along the valleys of the Bascan and Lepsou Rivers, camping wherever possible.

The 2018 Zhetysu Expedition was a major success and showed the viability of the project. We visited parts of the Djungar Alatau Mountains that had not been seen by outsiders since the Atkinsons, as we explored this remarkable region that stretches for several hundred miles along Kazakhstan's eastern border with China.



**Route of the 2018 Zhetysu Expedition**

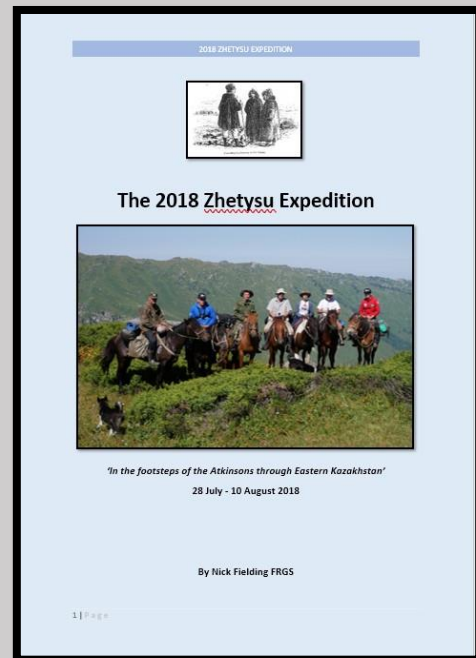
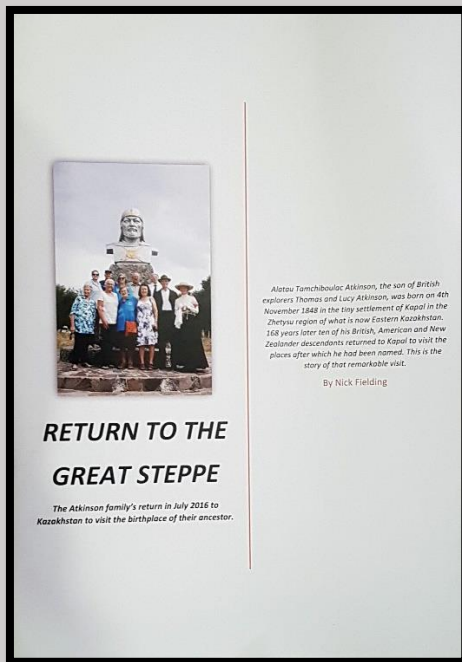


**Atkinson woodcut of a lake on the Bascan River**

Gradually the idea of an 'Atkinson Trail' took hold. We would scout out the routes into the mountains with the aim of offering them to hardy adventure travellers once we were able to organise the logistics.

## 2. Planning the 2019 Zhetysu Expedition

The 2019 Zhetysu Expedition, the second such expeditions to explore and refine the Atkinson Trail, aimed to continue on from where the previous expedition had left off. Working closely with Kazakh Geographic Society (KazGeo) we worked out a route and timings. Our original intention was to travel on horseback from Zhassyl Kul - the lake where our previous expedition had ended - on to Lake Ala Kol, more than 150kms to the north-east. The Atkinsons did a similar journey in the late summer of 1849. Once they reached the lake they were out of the mountains and it was the end of the most dramatic part of their journey, although it would be almost two months before they finally completed the long return journey to Barnaul in southern Siberia.



### Reports of previous expeditions to the Djungar Alatau region

However, once we arrived in Sarcand at the beginning of our journey in August 2019, we discovered that there were problems with our proposed route. Senior officials at the Djungar Alatau National Park now told us that their guides had never themselves made such a journey and were unsure if it could be completed. They cited the remoteness of the territory, the wild nature of the terrain and, particularly, the danger of forest fires. The chief guide told us that he did not believe it would be possible, as there are no paths and the ground is broken everywhere with ravines and canyons. A further problem was that there were not enough horses available, which someone would have to bring back to the starting point once we had completed our journey.

We were left with little option but to reconsider our plans. After extensive discussions with officials and local guides, instead of travelling to Lake Ala Kol we decided to ascend the valley of the Sarcand River up to a glacier at its head and then cross from there to reach the Shumsky Glacier at the base of Peak Tianshansky, the tallest mountain in the Djungar Alatau range. From here we would descend along the valley of the Big Bascan River. In all the journey was likely to be around 100km and would take just over a week. The proposed route was very similar to that followed by the Atkinsons, not long after they had

set off from Kopal in May 1849. We had originally considered this route for the 2018 expedition but had abandoned this idea as the water levels in the rivers were too high. In 2019 our route meant that we would finish our journey where our 2018 expedition began.

The officials of the Dujngar Alatau National Park agreed to provide us with three guides and a total of nine horses for this demanding and yet very rewarding expedition. Members of the expedition were: Nick Fielding, photographer David O'Neill, Harvey Fielding, Matthew Toms, Vladimir Gostyevsky and Daulat Omarov from KazGeo. The three guides were Ruslan Kakenovich Nurgozhanov, Nurlan Rakhatov and Munit Kulpeissov. (David O'Neill left the expedition after the first day due to injury).



**Wild mountain scenery on the trail up the Kara Syrnaq River**

I would also like to take the opportunity here to thank Mr Nurlan Abduov, chairman of the Presidium of the Kazakh Geographic Society for his organisation's continuing support over many years for these expeditions. KazGeo's Magzhan Sagimbayev has always been a great companion and I was delighted that even though he was unable to accompany us on this year's journey, we were able to share time with him.



Looking up the valley of the Sarcen River into the Djungar Alatau



### 3. The Route

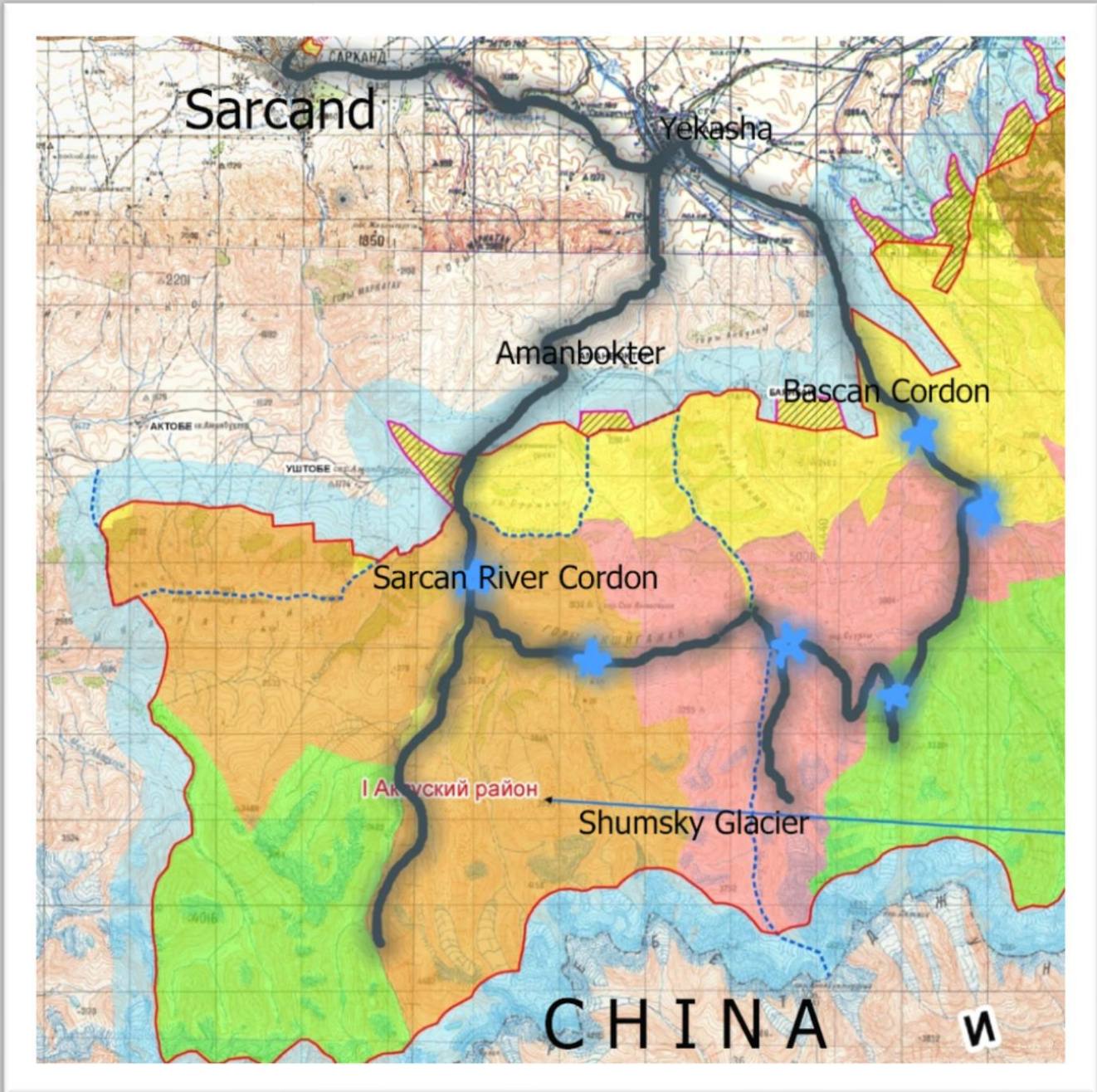
Having had to modify our original route, we had only limited information on the terrain and levels of difficulty of the new route. This was our itinerary:

<i>Wednesday 21 Aug</i>	Drive from Almaty to Sarcand in the Zhetysu region.
<i>Thursday 22 Aug</i>	Meetings in Sarcand with National Park officials.
<i>Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> Aug</i>	Sarcand to Sarcan River Cordon (ranger base) by vehicle.
<i>Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> Aug</i>	Sarcan River Cordon to Kara Syryq glacier and return to Sarcan River Cordon.
<i>Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> Aug</i>	Sarcan River Cordon to Ak Shunaq River camp.
<i>Monday 26<sup>th</sup> Aug</i>	Ak Shunaq River to Little Bascan River.
<i>Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> Aug</i>	Little Bascan camp to Shumsky Glacier on Mt Tianshansky and return.
<i>Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> Aug</i>	Little Bascan to Little Suyrly River camp.
<i>Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> Aug</i>	Little Suyrly River camp to Big Suyrly River camp and then to Ozero Bolshaya Suyrly and return.
<i>Friday 30<sup>th</sup> Aug</i>	Big Suyrly River camp to Big Bascan barracks.
<i>Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> Aug</i>	Big Bascan barracks to Big Bascan Cordon.
<i>Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> Sept</i>	Pick-up from Big Bascan Cordon and return to Almaty.

Our journey therefore involved exploring three of the major rivers of the Djungar Alatau – the Sarcan, the Little Bascan and the Big Bascan – as well as two glaciers, an alpine lake and several connecting smaller rivers. In total the distance covered was around 120 kms. We took with us all food provisions necessary for the journey, including for the guides. We used four tents.



The Zhetysu region of Eastern Kazakhstan



Routemap for 2019 Zhetysu Expedition. Route marked in black. Campsites in blue

## 4. Day-by-day diary

### Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> August

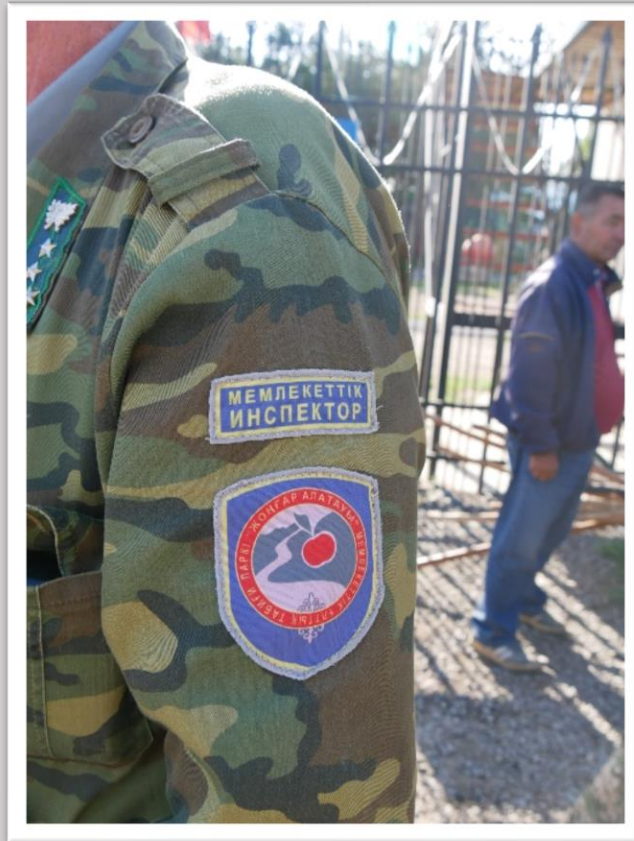
“We finally started our journey yesterday, leaving Almaty at 0800. We took the new motorway towards the Zhetysu region in two vehicles. Dave, myself and Magzhan in one vehicle and Matt, Harvey, Daulet and Sasha in the other. Two things struck me about his journey, which I have done many times before: first, the motorway has now been completed as far as Taldykorgan. The first time I drove it five years ago it only ran for about 50 miles outside Almaty. Now work has started to extend it from Taldykorgan to Sarcand and then on towards Oskemen near the Russian border 1,000 kms to the north. Much of this work is being done by Chinese companies. The completion of the road will transform this region, allowing easy access to Ala Kol lake; Kazakhs who presently travel to Issyk Kul lake in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan will find it just as easy to reach the Ala Kol, although water temperatures are much colder. At present, due to deformation of the road and potholes, cars are at risk from serious damage. Taldykorgan was previously a six-hour journey. Now it is only three hours.

The second thing I noticed was the dereliction of Kapchagai, the town that tried to turn itself into the Las Vegas of Central Asia. It was once thought that Chinese gamblers from across the border in the nearby Ili Valley would flock in their thousands to the dozens of newly built casinos that line the main street through the town. Five years ago, they were all open and new ones were being built. Today only a handful are still open. The rest stand surrounded by chainlink fences, with weeds growing through the asphalt car parks and ornamental gardens. It is finished as a gambling venue. I was told that there had been a number of well-publicised suicides and bankruptcies caused by people gambling and losing everything they owned at the casinos and that public opinion had turned against them.

In Taldykorgan we picked up Vladimir Gostyevsky, who has travelled with me every year since 2014. It was great to see him again. He had been working for a large copper mining company at Atyrau. It is fascinating to note that there were British mining companies in Atyrau in the same business at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the onset of the Russian Revolution.

Arriving in Sarcand, we went straight to the Djungar Alatau National Park headquarters to meet the director. Our initial intention had been to travel from Zhassyl Kul lake to Ala Kol lake on horseback. But the director soon scotched that idea. It would take at least two weeks and the route was very dangerous. There was also worries about forest fires, of which there have been several this summer.

So we tried to work out a modified route along the Lepsou River, but even this was likely to be very difficult. The Park’s area manager for the Lepsou region told us that he had 40 park rangers, but only 12 horses were presently available, and some would have to be kept back in case of new forest fires. If we wanted to travel on in this region we would be limited to a maximum of five riders and we would have to take four guides because of the dangerous terrain.



**Old friends at the Djungar Alatau National Park headquarters**

Instead we settled on a route further to the west, connected to our previous expedition in 2018. We would ascend the Sarcan and Little Bascan rivers and follow on up to the Shumsky Glacier at the base of Peak Tianshansky, at a height of around 4,000m. We would then descend along the valley of the Big Bascan.

We had hoped to do some of this route last year but were prevented by the fact that the Little Bascan River was too high to be forded on horseback.

That is how we ended up driving out from Sarcand, via the village of Amanbokter, to the Cordon (control point and ranger base) on the Sarcan River. Here two of our friends from Kazgeo left us to return to Almaty. We ate our lunch at the Cordon and waited for our guides to arrive with our horses, which they did at around 2030 that evening.

### **Saturday 24 August**

We were up early on Saturday to eat breakfast and prepare for our first journey. Our goal was to ride up to a remote valley at the head of the Sarcan River. The party was myself, David, Harvey, Matt, Vladimir, plus two of the guides – Ruslan and Nurlan. I had met Ruslan the previous year, but Nurlan is a young man who has only been in the park service for about 18 months. Daulet volunteered to stay behind at camp.



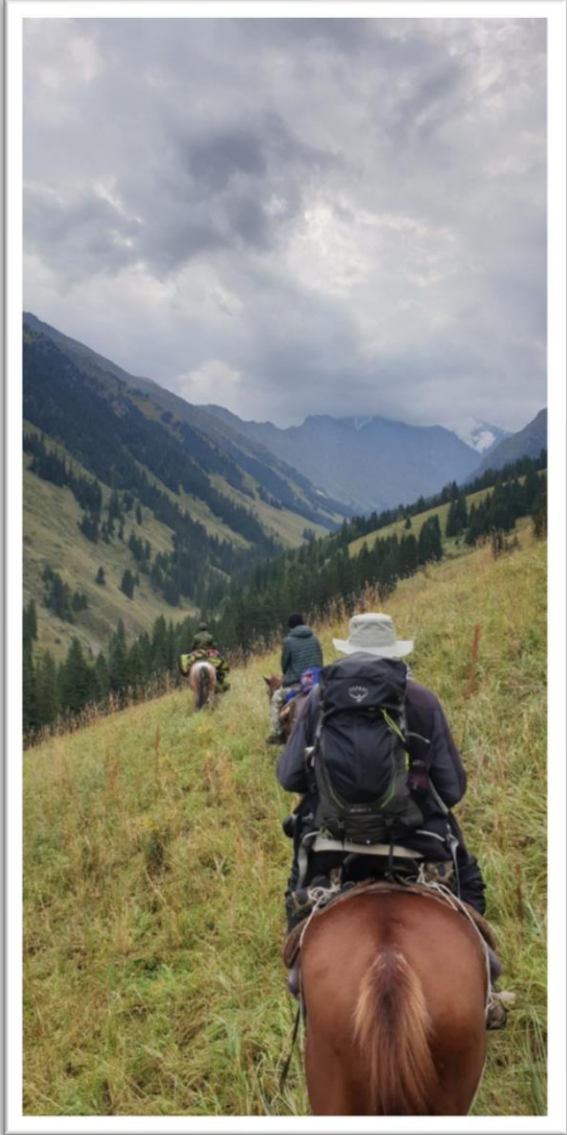
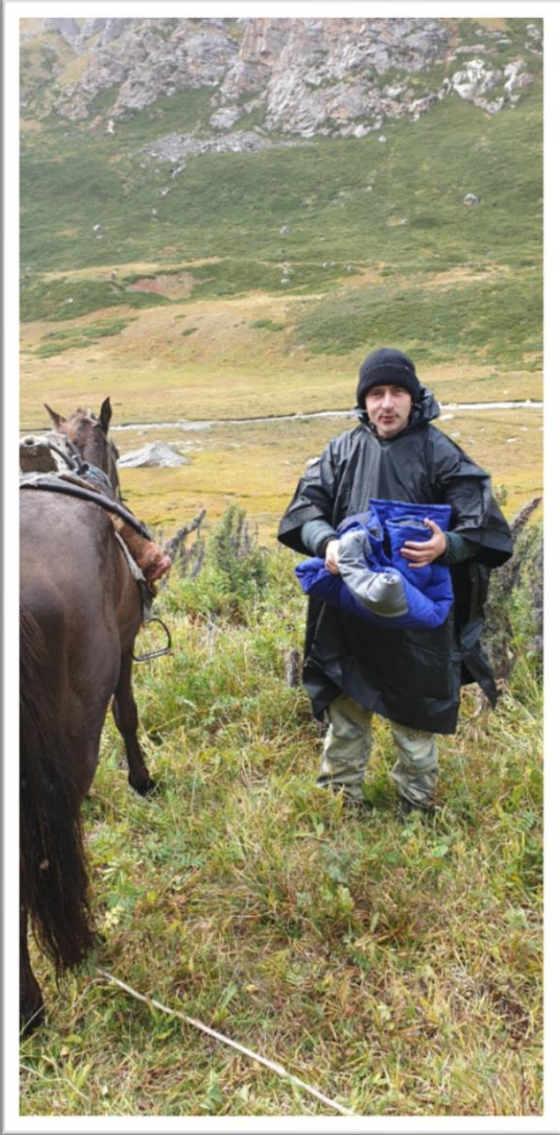
#### **Our starting point at the Sarcan Cordon**

We were all saddled up before 0900, carrying just daybags and bringing with us a light lunch. Our route was almost directly south towards the Chinese border. It was mostly a slow, even ascent up the valley, which occasionally opened up into small pastures, surrounded by pine forest. Ruslan told us there were maral deer in the valley, but we saw none, although we saw a salt lick put in place by the park rangers. The rut is about to start and Ruslan said stags were beginning to claim their territories.

As we ascended, the valley opened up. The hills were now bare of trees and the snow peaks towered above and in front of us. The weather also began to close in in front of us, first light rain and then a downpour. I stopped to put on my waterproofs, without which I would have been drenched.

At 1330, after riding for over four hours, we stopped for lunch beneath a huge rock shaped like a gorilla's head. Harvey and Matt found a sheltered spot to cut the bread and sausage and tinned fish. I was impressed by the boys, as this was their first serious ride. After lunch the rain died down and we continued on up the valley until we were at the foot of the glacier that provides the source of the Kara Sryq (Black Pine) River, which in turn flows into the Sarcan.

Here, at a small mound at around 3,000m, we took a few pictures and then turned about, ready to return. Ruslan led the way, setting off at a brisk pace. He told us that when he was a child the older folk would still ride up this valley and cross the border into China. On the other side is Xinjiang's Kazakh Autonomous Region, where many of the locals had relatives. Eventually the authorities took action, using explosives to create large rockfalls that blocked the trails. Ruslan said that as far as he knew, no-one else from Europe had ever been up this valley before. At least, not since the Atkinsons.





**Headwaters of the Kara Syryq River**

On our descent it became clear that David was in difficulties. Several times he had to get off and walk. We eventually got back to the Cordon at about 1930. It was a very long day, during which we had covered around 30kms over harsh terrain. David felt he had no alternative but to leave the expedition, as he had injured his lower back and it was too painful to keep riding.

### **Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> August**

Up at 0730 this morning. The boys were already up making breakfast. We used our emergency satphone to make calls and eventually arranged for someone from the park authority to pick up David. They would not permit him to leave on his own. Nor would they allow us to start off until he had been picked up. While we were waiting a military vehicle arrived carrying four border guards, including a colonel. They were very friendly and after a brief discussion they drove on into the mountains. By late morning a vehicle had arrived to collect David and we said our goodbyes.

Soon after we began to pack our gear onto the horses. By 1500 we were ready to move off – myself, Harvey, Matt, Vlad, Daulet, Ruslan, Nurlan and Muhit. Our route took us up the Ak Shunaq river, that breaks away to the south-east of the Sarcan. The name literally means a white horse with a cut ear. The guides say that there was once a herd of wild horses here that answered to this description. It was a beautiful ride, much of it through birch and pine forest. We crossed the river five or six times – the first time for Matt and Harvey and they enjoyed it immensely. Matt has named his horse Cochyn ('red-head' in Welsh). The horse itself was both young and timid and had only recently been broken in.



#### First river crossings

After three hours of riding, mostly uphill, we stopped at an excellent spot, high in the mountains, to make camp. It had been a much easier ride, at a slower pace, than the day before and we were now almost above the treeline.

An hour later, as we set up camp, I heard a shout and went to join the guides who were looking into the bottom of the valley. Through my binoculars I could see four figures on horseback moving rapidly towards us. Gradually it became clear that they were in uniform and were border guards. They spotted us and fired a shot, presumably to warn us not to move off. Very soon they had reached us.

The captain told us that he had been informed that we were in the mountains – presumably by the colonel we had seen earlier – but that they did not know it was us until they got close. They were on patrol looking for people crossing the border from China. They had seen motorcycle tracks and were on the lookout. Many ethnic Kazakhs, fleeing the Chinese crackdown on Islam in Xinjiang, were trying to get into Kazakhstan.





It was immediately apparent that the soldiers had excellent horses and kit. Their saddles, reins, bridles and baggage were all in superb condition. They were armed with AK47s and pistols and were prepared for camping out. The captain gave us a set of Kazakh MREs and in exchange we gave them energy bars, Toblerone and Haribos. He asked me how old I was and soon there was lots of jolly banter.



**One of the many beautiful plants we spotted en route**

The fourth soldier arrived after the others and it soon became apparent why; he was carrying the huge skull and antlers of a maral deer that they had found nearby. It had 12 tines and was probably killed a few weeks previously by a bear. After a bit of banter and exchange of compliments, they moved off at impressive speed and soon disappeared.



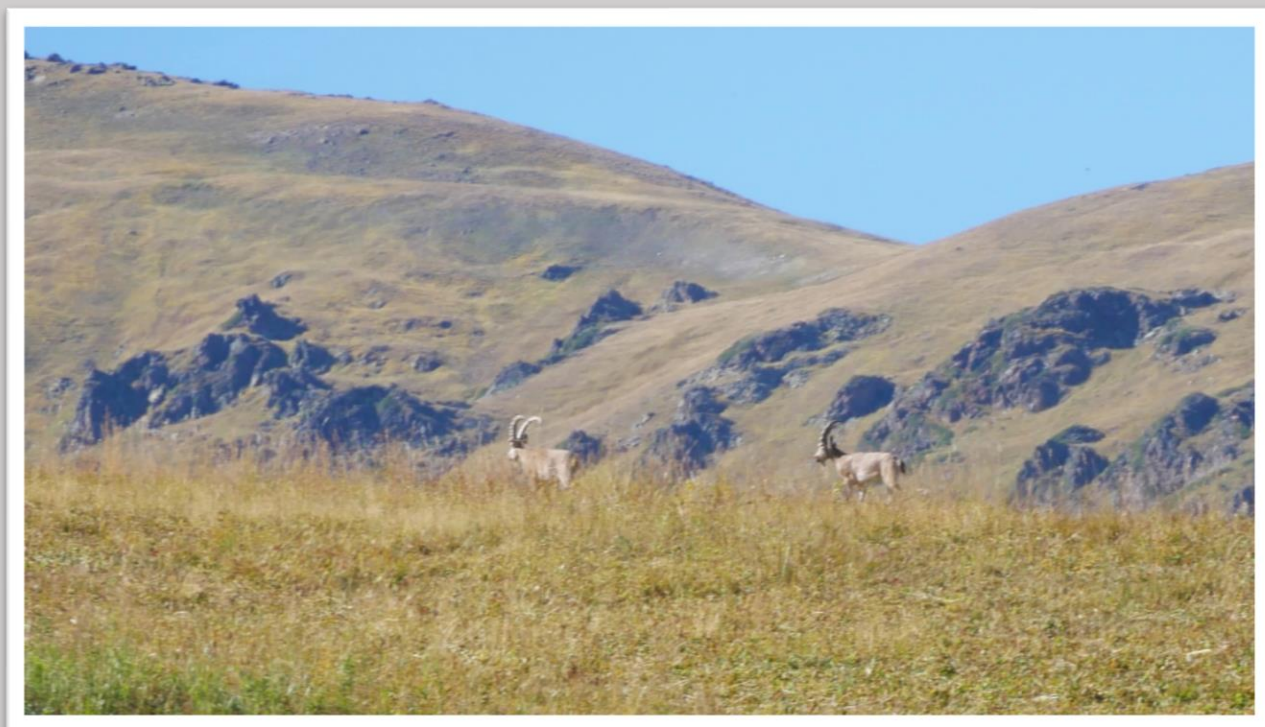
**Around the fire**

We settled down to prepare the evening meal of curry and rice, which was delicious. Afterwards we built a fire and soon were all singing. The Kazakhs sang some lovely songs and Vladimir also regaled us with his beautiful voice. I sang '*On Ilkley Moor bar t'at*' and '*Among the leaves so green-o*'. Off to bed at around 2200. Harvey said it was the kind of day he had imagined before he came here and I must say it was one of the most beautiful rides I have ever done.

### **Monday 26<sup>th</sup> August**

Up today at 0800, although I was awake much earlier. Matt had got up at 0630 in order to see if he could see any deer, but no luck. We had our usual breakfast of porridge with jam – and in my case, salt. There was a bit of a drama to start today when the boys spotted one of the horses on a nearby ridgeline. Nurlan and Muhit were despatched to bring him back and were away for about half an hour before returning with the wanderer.

Soon after I hear a shout from Ruslan asking for my binoculars. He had spotted two animals on the same ridgeline. Through the binos they could be clearly identified as ibex, with their sabre-like horns. They were walking slowly, which allowed us to get a few long-distance photos. Suddenly they must have seen (or smelt) us, as they headed off up the ridge at speed. It was the first time I have seen such large animals in the wild in Kazakhstan, despite the assurances of the rangers that there were plenty of bears and marals.



#### **Ibex in the Djungar Alatau**

We began to pack our bags and load the horses and were ready to move off at 1100. Our route was now up to cross a ridge into the valley of the Little Bascan River. It was a long ascent across open pasture rising to crags above us. In the distance we got the occasional glimpse of Peak Tianshansky. The descent from the ridge was equally slow and majestic, although somewhat tough on the knees.

By 1330 we had reached the river, which we forded successfully, before finding a campsite alongside a torrent that poured into the Little Bascan. We had lunch, which we finished by 1445. By now it was too late to ascend to the Shumnsky Glacier on Peak Tianshansky. We decided we would delay until tomorrow, as it is 2-3 hours in each direction. Then the following day (28<sup>th</sup>) we would cross to the valley of the Big Baskan. So the rest of the day was spent relaxing. The skies were clear, but there was a cool breeze blowing up the valley. Vladimir spent his time collecting raspberries, the boys had a kip and the guards and Daulet spent their time playing cards.

#### **Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> August**

Up at about 0800 for a breakfast of porridge, jam and honey. I had developed a severe case of diarrhoea during the evening before, with unpleasant stomach cramps. I had taken some carbon tablets and mint tea, but nothing much improved. Only a small meal last night and the same with breakfast.

Our ride today was up to the Shumsky Glacier at the base of Peak Tianshansky. We eventually left at just before 1100. The ride was straight up the valley of the Little Bascan, a beautiful experience. From the top of the valley you could see the steppe 20 miles away in the distance. We reached the glacier at about 1330 and had lunch. Then there was a walk up to another ridge to get a better view. The top of

the mountain was almost entirely covered by snow, but the glacier was showing signs of stress, with large fissures and some collapses. Faced with a decision on whether or not to walk another 2-3kms up to the glacier itself, I declined and left the rest to get on with it.



**A view of the Shumsky Glacier**

They returned after 90 mins, as the weather was turning and the first few drops of rain fell. We saddled up and set off back to camp at around 1600. Ruslan said no-one had been up there for at least three years and this was clear from the lack of a trail. There was a complete alpine hut on the glacier in kit form, dropped by the Soviets in 1983, but still in pieces on its palettes.

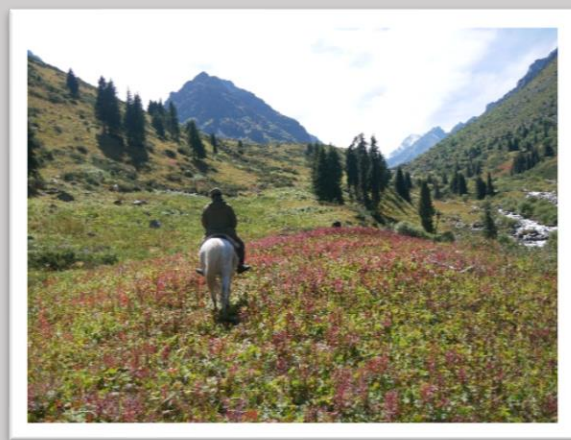


**Just below the Shumsky Glacier with the Kazgeo flag**

The descent was much quicker than the ascent, taking only 90 minutes. So we arrived back at 1730 to find that Muhit and Daulet had prepared dinner for us. I thought I should eat as I had not really had much all day. It proved to be a mistake! My stomach was still upset. Tomorrow we cross to the valley of the Big Bascan.

### **Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> August**

Today's journey was a long ascent uphill from the Little Bascan, keeping a small stream, Su Suyrly (the Little Marmot place), on our right. Our aim was to camp at a lake at the top of the pass, Ozero Male Suyrly. But due to a misunderstanding amongst the guides, we decided to descend to the valley of the Big Suyrly. This river runs into the Big Bascan. At the top of the valley is the Ozero Bolshaya Suyrly, which is the source of the river. The peaks above rise up to about 3,900m, covered in snow.



#### **Spectacular scenery in the Djungar Alatau**

We found a good campsite and the weather closed in with some drizzle for 30 minutes, but by 1800 the sky was clear again. The boys made a tasty stir-fry – I only had a small bowl, as I was still unsure of my stomach. I had taken two Cyprofloxin tablets, which stopped the cramps, although I was still not fully fit.

In the evening we made a fire and had a good conversation about the possibilities arising out of the creation of an Atkinson Trail in the Djungar Alatau. The guides told us that already a tourist lodge is being built close to Amanbokter in anticipation of more tourists coming to experience these mountains.

### **Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> August**

Up at 0830. I felt better this morning. No cramps. Had some porridge and honey for breakfast, with tinned pineapple – a real treat. The aim this morning was to reach the lake at the top of the valley, the Ozero Boshoye Suyrly. We set off at 11,00. Daulet stayed in camp and by 1200 we had reached a point where we had to leave the horses. There was another couple of kms to reach the lake, clambering up and over a rock field. This was too much for me after 48 hours with a bad stomach, so I turned back. The others carried on.

By 1530 we were back in camp and spent the rest of the day relaxing. It began to rain in the early evening and was on and off from then on. Harvey and Vladimir joined me and Daulet in the tent for a good chat and we eventually broke up at 2130. Matt had succumbed to stomach problems. During the night there was intense thunder and lightning, much of it directly overhead. The rolls of thunder kept me awake for several hours.



### Friday 30<sup>th</sup> August

I had asked that we leave by 1000 and was up at 0730 to find the sun shining, but the prospect of rain. Our journey to the deserted barracks on the Big Bascan was scheduled for about four hours. We left at 0930, wearing rain gear. We crossed the Suryly River and made the long, slow descent down the valley.

At one point Munit and Nurlan became separated from the rest of the group. When Ruslan looked over a ridge to see if he could see them, he spotted a young bear grazing on raspberries. He quickly motioned for us to come and see the bear, which was golden in colour and less than two years old. It barely gave us a second glance. We all got good pics as it sat munching on the fruit.



A young bear feeding on raspberries

After two hours we made it down into a river gorge – the Karunger. We now faced a series of river crossings, none of which were easy due to the rainstorms the night before which had swelled the river. On the first one Matt came off his horse and got a soaking. The second crossing over the river was in a very fast current. Ruslan went in first and nearly went over, with the water reaching up to his saddle flaps. I went in next and almost immediately was in trouble. I felt the horse begin to slide and before I knew it, the horse had been swept off its feet. I went into the water backwards, wearing a large backpack. My left foot, however, which was out of the stirrups, got caught in the reins. I was now in difficulties – on my back, with a backpack underneath me and my left foot caught in a rein. For a moment or two I bobbed under the water until eventually I was able to get my foot free and began to float off down the river. The horse had by this time regained his footing and made it to the bank.



**Into the river**

Ruslan saw what was happening and ran down the riverbank before plunging into the water and grabbing me around the neck and shoulder. I then got my right arm over a rock and was able to get out of the water. I was completely soaked. My camera and binoculars were also drenched. Just then it began to rain heavily, so there was no point in changing into dry gear. Everyone else got across safely, having chosen a slightly safer crossing place.

We now reached the Big Bascan itself. Again, Ruslan headed across the very strong stream. I followed and again my horse was swept off its feet and I landed in the river, striking my lower right side on a large rock. It was my second swim of the day. I waded out, again completely soaked and walked along the right bank as the others crossed to the left bank using a different line. They all got across, rode another 50m and then had to cross back. Although I was drenched – and it was still raining – I did not feel

particularly cold. I did not shiver. My concern was to find out if I had broken any bones. Thankfully that was not the case. It was just an impact injury that will probably result in little more than a bruise.

We continued riding down the gorge of the Big Bascan, which is stunning – tall cliffs on either side, with just a sliver of land wide enough for a trail. There were at least three more river crossings before we finally arrived at the abandoned barracks at about 1400. I immediately stripped off my wet clothes and changed. Soon after the heavens opened. But we were safe. It had been a truly exhilarating experience, one that I shall never forget. Nor will the boys. They were whooping with joy when we arrived at the barracks.

Nurlan immediately started preparing the *banya* that was at the back of the barracks, and after we had had a lunch of rice and fish, myself, Harvey and Matt went into the small steam room, threw water onto the hot stones and began to sweat. After 15 minutes or so we all ran out to the river where there was a place to take a dip. The contrast could not have been greater. Then back in the *banya* for a wash and scrubdown, before a final dip in the river. Afterwards I felt completely revived.



**The *banya* in the hills**

I picked some purple vetch for my horse. I noticed he had been eating it on the journey. He munched it and then nuzzled me, so I gave him more, with the same reaction. It seems that our bond is getting stronger, despite the river dip today. It was, in fact, the same horse I had ridden last year. Ruslan later told me that the horse had thrown four riders in the past, but that he had clearly taken to me, as he was obedient and calm. We will sleep in the barracks tonight and go to the Cordon tomorrow afternoon. Tonight it's chips and then stew for dinner.

After a shower of large hailstones, the weather cleared and we were able to look back on a memorable day.



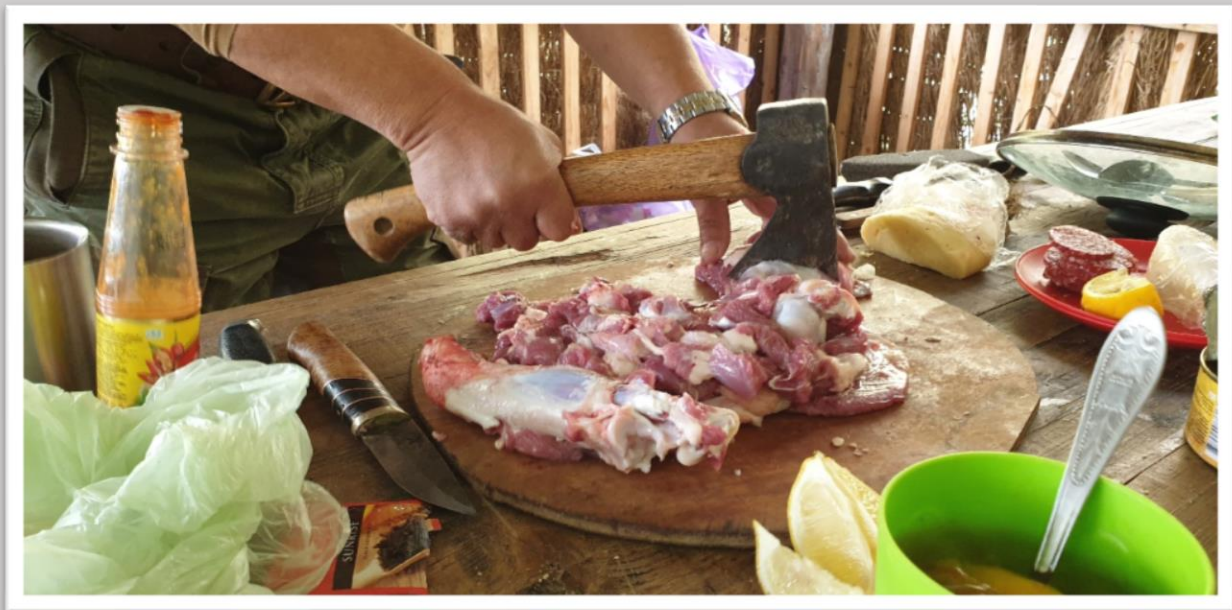
## Saturday 31 August

Ruslan and Muhit left our camp mid-morning to buy a sheep. They returned at 1300 with Munit carrying a live sheep across his saddle, with all four feet bound together. Soon after, I was asked to say a '*bata*', which is a kind of secular blessing. I reminded our group that we had come to the end of our journey safely and that the animal was to celebrate our success. I asked Muhit to make a good quick job of cutting the animal's throat. As we sat there, we all held our hands in front of us, before rubbing our facing and saying *Amen* at the end. Muhit hung up the carcass and expertly butchered it in a process that took less than 30 minutes.

As there were no women in the camp to clean the intestines, as required by tradition, they were left aside. The rest was cut into pieces – although the liver was discarded when white liver flukes were noticed. Then Ruslan made *kurydak*, a stew made over the stove. It was fried meat, water and potatoes. The meal included the internal organs. It was delicious.

We finished packing and by 1530 were heading down the Bascan Valley towards the Cordon. It was a slow, pleasant journey. We had covered part of this journey – in the reverse direction – with our guide Mahsud last year. And four years ago myself and Vladimir had stayed at this particular Cordon house with Nikolai, one of the national park rangers.

We arrived at 1730 and immediately Ruslan began preparing the evening meal, with all the remaining meat from the sheep. He used a large cooking bowl and stove, set in the garden of the Cordon. The meal he prepared was *Syrne* – which is cooked in a closed bowl, like Persian rice.



Preparing dinner

Vladimir had prepared the sheep's head, using a blowtorch. When it came to dinner time it was my honour, as the oldest person present, to taste the ears and then to serve parts of the head – especially the tongue – to those present. This I did after saying another *bata* of thanks. Muhit and Nurlan left during the early evening to ride on horseback the 20 or so miles to their village to get some provisions.

By 2130 they had still not returned, so we started the meal without them. It was a gastronomic wonder. After we had finished we were all tired, so not long after 2200 we all went to bed. However, at 2330 there was a commotion. The two horsemen had arrived back with drinks and snacks. I declined to rise, but Harvey and Matt, plus Daulet, joined the two horsemen and stayed up until the early hours.

The garden of the Cordon is full of fruit trees, including a beautiful small blushed plum. I put 8 stones in my bag in the hope of cultivating this wild tree on my return to England.

We found two beautiful kittens at the Cordon who kept us entertained all evening. They were in excellent condition and about three months old. No sign of the mother. We had also picked up a white *tazza* dog at the barracks. She was starving and followed us to the Cordon. Very timid and friendly at the same time.

### **Sunday 1 September 2019**

Magzhan and Sasha arrived at about 1215 and we set off almost immediately for Almaty, arriving at 1915. We booked into the Hotel Kazakhstan and went out for dinner. A couple of days later and we were on our way back to London.”



**Our guides Ruslan, Muhit and Nurlan**

## 5. Summary

We had arrived in Kazakhstan expecting to follow a route that we had planned and discussed in the months preceding our arrival. However, we had not anticipated the fact that the Djungar Alatau National Park would have to reallocate scarce resources to deal with the threat from forest fires. (The forests here are particularly important; they include thousands of acres of protected apple tree forest, with dozens of varieties. Scientists believe this region is the place where the wild apple tree originated.)

Despite this setback, we were able quickly to agree another route that was both unknown to outsiders and also connected with the journeys taken by the Atkinsons in 1849. This route was along tracks that had not been used for many years and at times the going was hard. One of our party was injured during a long ride on our first day in the mountains. In part this was due to the poor quality of some of the saddles and horse trappings we were offered. I have been assured that this problem will not occur in future.

We were able to meet all our objectives on the expedition, at times reaching above 3,500m altitude. On this journey compared to others I have participated in, there was a lot more wildlife on show. We saw ibex, a bear, an eagle, antelope and many varieties of rodents, not to mention dragonflies. We saw a profusion of wildflowers and generally the land appeared to be in good condition, although we saw strong evidence of global warming in the form of retreating glaciers.

Our horses were generally very good, although riders – myself included - fell into fast mountain rivers on three occasions. We had not anticipated the rivers being so high, but heavy thunderstorms over two nights had led to this. Where possible, dangerous river crossings should be avoided, but if necessary, then there should be a safety procedure in place and guides may have to ensure they carry mountain ropes in future.

The 2019 Zhetysu Expedition demonstrated yet again the remarkable feat of the Atkinsons in travelling in these remote river valleys 170 years ago. It also showed that a modern-day route based on their travels is increasingly looking like a viable proposition. Our next expedition, scheduled for the summer of 2020, should prove that conclusively.

### **Nick Fielding**

February 2020

For more information on this Expedition  
– and more information on the Atkinsons –  
read my blog  
***Siberian Steppes***  
<https://siberiansteppes.com>

*Thanks to Vladimir Gostyevsky, Harvey Fielding and Matt Toms for their photographs which appear in this report.*

