

So Was It.....

Was Kyrgyzstan a Big DO or DON'T

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More photos from Kirsten's trip to Kyrgyzstan are at www.kirstenkoza.com



A nomad helps Kirsten's bike across an icy mountain river

I want to clean my vomit off my bicycle shoes but I'm low on water. I'm low on oxygen too, nearing the peak of Chok-Tol (4770 metres). The altitude isn't making me sick. I've chosen to blame Kyrgyzstan's national beverage, fermented mare's milk, which was served to me by nomads in the Chong-Kemin valley. My up-chuck tastes exactly like the horse milk did going down. Okay, I'm exaggerating a little because I'm furious with my guide, Elena. Actually, she outdid Marcel Marceau when she mimed 'DON'T drink the kumis'. Regardless, I'm still mad. It's the first day of my three-week mountain bike trip and it's a disaster.

Almost everybody (including strangers) told me not to travel to Kyrgyzstan due to a revolution that started in April 2010. A man on a mountain bike forum drooled over my demise. Arizona-dude pounded his chest, said the Muslims would kill me, and it would serve me right. I argued with reason. The political unrest had occurred near government buildings and also in a city that I wouldn't be visiting. Here in the barren wilderness, far from cell phone service and civilization, I know that I'm right - the thought of an angry mob is preposterous. I gloat over how right I am to nobody.

Elena, my perky little bike guide (wearing an outfit reminiscent of a Cher aerobics video) has climbed over the fifteenth rock slide to see what will greet us around the next bend of the unstable trail. I encouraged her to continue so I can retch and have a little private time with my ever mounting frustration.

Elena is from Kyrgyzstan and is fluent in Russian and French. I'm Canadian and speak English and Spanglish. I'd understand Elena better if she spoke Klingon. I also have a support driver, Alexey, and a Kyrgyz cultural guide, Cholpon, who both speak excellent English, except they are a six-hour car ride away, on the other side of the mountain chain, probably checking into a lovely guest house pre-arranged by Sergey of Nomad's Dream.

Sergey Gluhoverov is an organizational dream weaver. The day before I was supposed to board my Transaero flight to Moscow (connecting to Kazakhstan, and then Kyrgyzstan) Russia's raging peat fires smothered Moscow in toxic smoke. Flights were cancelled or re-routed to Russian domestic airports and I didn't have a visa. Even Russia was trying to stop me from going to Kyrgyzstan. So I flew British Midlands a day later avoiding Moscow. Sergey met me at 4:00 AM in Bishkek, with the cash from my cancelled flight (completely unexpected), a breakfast buffet set up in the airport parking lot, a bottle of vodka, the warmest smile and he had re-arranged my trip as if it was nothing - I knew it wasn't nothing.

Now, the day is about to disappear with the sun behind the mountains and I wish we could reach Sergey by phone. We can't bike along a steep gorge in the dark. I'd suggested we turn back hours ago, but there was no way to contact our support team. The handheld transceivers are useless too.

Elena is careening back towards me, almost out of control. Her perk has been replaced by panic. "Kiss," she speaks and gestures, "we have to turn back, we cannot. Rockslide. Is too dangerous. We must hurry because the night it comes in half an hour."

Ten minutes later night cloaks the Celestial Mountains, only brightened by a meteor shower so close I don't enjoy it, fearful a shooting star will burn a hole clean through me. I can't see the rocks I'm trying to avoid. I can't see the edge of the precipice but I can hear the rapids, thousands of feet below. I'm terrified by the sudden icy bite of the air. I'm in shorts and a t-shirt. My warm clothes are in the support vehicle, with my flashlight, camping gear, food and vodka. It has taken us most of the day to struggle up to the snowline. It takes us half the night to descend, one foot in front of the other, leaning on our bikes, bruising our shins on jagged rocks, feeling our way off the mountain.

"Oh, no, Kiss!" Elena shines the light from her phone on my leg. I'm ankle deep in fresh cow crap. At least it's warm. We've left the track and are heading towards a light that we can see bouncing in the distance. It's probably a lantern swinging in the wind outside a yurt. The slope is steep and grassy and is riddled with invisible leg snapping marmot holes.

Something is moving around us. Many huge shapes. Then there's a roar. It's less than ten feet away. It pounds the earth. Elena aims the beam from her mobile in the direction of the beast. "Bull," I gasp. He bellows and then charges. Elena and I make a barricade out of our bicycles. I'm panting and whimpering - I sound like I'm in Blair Witch Project. The bull circles. Now we're on the wrong side of our fence.

Elena screams in Russian. She screams for unseen nomads to help. She screams at the bull. I'm going to be gored by a bull. This was not the death predicted on the mountain bike forum where Arizona-dude favoured Muslims shooting me in the head.

Then the Muslim nomads emerge from their yurt. We're invited inside and are seated near the cow-poop burning stove. It's midnight. The nomad kids are shoulder to shoulder under heavy blankets. I recognize them from the afternoon. I'm offered mare's milk again. I accept the tea. In the next-door tent the saddles and riding boots are moved and dogs are kicked into the below-freezing night. A quilt mountain is arranged for Elena and me. Hypothermia rattles my teeth. Elena spoons with me and wraps her arms around me and says, "Oh, Kiss, it was terrible. But now we sleep." I wouldn't want to be with anyone else in this moment. A dog slips back into the tent.

As we slept our support team did not. They'd made the six-hour return trip earlier when we didn't arrive at Lake Issyk-Kol. Unable to find us they then drove back to Issyk-Kol where they hired a nomad on a horse to take supplies up at first light. We finally connected with our team at the end of the next day of biking - after glacial river crossings and a generous feast of mutton and rice served to us by another friendly family of nomadic Kyrgyz people.

Sergey re-arranged my three-weeks once again, removing several mountain crossings due to the recent heavy rains and potential for landslides. Every ride from the Silk Road to badlands was glorious. Kyrgyzstan continued to provide adventure but the Muslim people only provided kindness. Kyrgyzstan was not Kar-bomb-a-stan. It was a big DO. Arizona-dude will be so disappointed.



Nomads' yurts are made of felt and are heated by cow-poo burning stoves

A friendly family of nomads

