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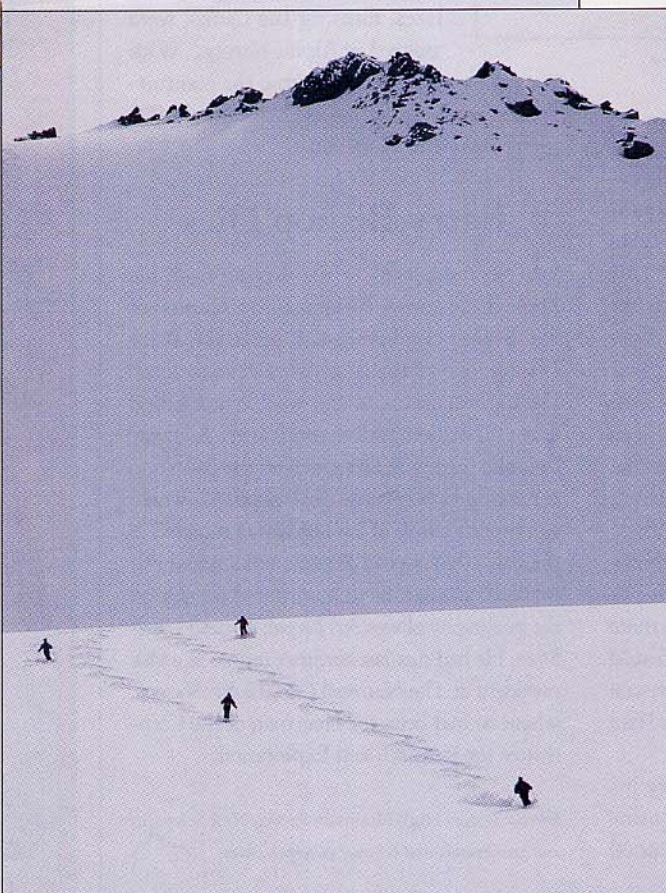
A modern ski adventure

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ROBERT JUTSON



His gold tooth gleaming in the late-afternoon sun, our chief pilot Alexi, resplendent in his brass-buttoned dress blues, deftly maneuvered his five-bladed beast of a helicopter between the 20,000-foot peaks that rose around us. "Strange," he chuckled, "how those crazy Afghanistan days are finally paying off."

We were headed due east from the old Soviet resort on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul toward the Chinese border. To the west lay Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara, fabled caravan stops on the great Silk Road that once carried trade across Asia from the Jade Gate to imperial Rome. A few miles further east and south, along the former



Soviet border with China, rose the Tien Shan—the legendary "Mountains of Heaven" and the world's northernmost 7,000-meter peaks. Immediately to the south, blizzard-laden clouds were pouring over the daunting north face of the 25,340-foot massif of Pik Pobedy. The gathering *buran*, a violent Central Asian blizzard, would soon envelop the vast glacier valley below and force our retreat from this primordial frozen wasteland.

This day, our fifth of heli-skiing the Tien Shan, had been spent scouting landing sites and laying down first tracks in gossamer powder above remote mountain valleys, many never-before seen by Western eyes. Now we were rushing against both the oncoming dusk and the threatening storm with the hope of sneaking in a coveted run down the unforgiving 20,990-foot peak Khan Tengri. "Give it some more power Alexi!" I shouted into the headset. Alexi didn't object; he never did. True-to-form, he just nodded, his ever-broadening smile revealing some more of that gleaming gold tooth.

Our ski adventure had been organized by Ueli Frei, a renowned Swiss mountain guide and president of the Grindelwald Mountaineering Centre. I had first met Ueli during a business trip to Turkey. We were both staying at Istanbul's Ciraghan Palace Hotel. Over drinks on the hotel's terrace, overlooking the Bosphorous Strait, we exchanged

Running on methane [top]: it's not easy to find dependable fuel supplies on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul. Above: Going where none have tracked before. Come to think of it, no Westerner had ever seen this snow, let alone skied it.

tales of cowboy skiers lured by the Pamir and Caucasus mountains' virgin powder despite occasional gunplay in the streets of Kashmir and Tbilisi. With the right guide, Ueli pitched, the Tien Shan back-country was a skier's paradise.

The Tien Shan are located north of Afghanistan between the ceaseless Siberian steppe and the crucible of China's Tarim Depression, the second lowest place on earth and home to the Taklamakan Desert, a Chinese name meaning "you go in, but you don't come out." The mountains erupt from colliding plates in the earth's crust. They capture scarce moisture from the upper atmosphere and draw it back to the earth where, over millennia, the frozen water has collected into vast snowfields and glaciers. In the spring and summer, torrential mountain streams nourish verdant alpine pastures and provide hydroelectric power to the former Soviet Republics as well as to China. The Tien Shan cover an area as big as the U.S. Rockies. Lying along the former Soviet Union's frontier with China, its wildest valleys were out-of-bounds to civilians until recently.

The towering ramparts of the Tien Shan shimmer above the pristine, mist-enshrouded 2,230-square-mile Lake Issyk-Kul, one of the world's largest bodies of fresh water. Fed by eighty mountain streams and, according to locals, warmed by volcanic action, Issyk-Kul's 2,000-foot-deep lake never freezes over. Turkish and Mongol nomadic armies once wintered on Issyk-Kul's shores. In the late twelfth century, the great Tartar conqueror Tamerlane, whose empire stretched from the borders of China and the Bay of Bengal to the Mediterranean Sea, is said to have built a fort on an Issyk-Kul island to which he banished Tartars captured in Asia Minor. The story is difficult to prove because the island has since vanished beneath the lake, perhaps in one of the area's frequent earthquakes.

Our helicopter touched down east of the spa town of Cholpon-Ata (Father of Shepherds), 100 yards from the entrance to the monstrous Sanitorium Issyk-Kul, formerly the exclusive winter playground of the

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Politburo elite. It is hardly Montreux. A rambling concrete carbuncle by the lake, the hotel is known to locals as "The Boat" because of its ship's-prow-profile and wave-like balconies. Cvetlana Pechenujk, a former student of the "Five-Year Plan" school of management and now the hotel's newly titled "Director of Marketing," proudly pointed out the penthouse suite where Brezhnev was regularly entertained by certain unnamed locals. No felt-clad yurt hut this, the 250-room "Mussolini Modern" facility boasts three restaurants, its own bakery, a livestock and vegetable farm, a discotheque, and an indoor swimming pool and sauna. Its garish white marble lobby is dominated by a grossly oversized chess set whose pieces were counted, prior to our departure, along with the towels and cups in our rooms.

We unloaded our gear from the helicopter and headed to our rooms, which faced south toward Lake Issyk-Kul and the Tien Shan. After unpacking, we reported to Ueli who organized the group for safety instruction. This included a general equipment check and field demonstrations in the use of the ABS (Avalanche Balloon Secure system) backpacks and avalanche radio transceivers that he distributed to each skier in our group.

A buried skier's location is identified by triangulation and he is dug out by the rescue party. Locating the signal is not as easy as it sounds, so Ueli had us play a game of hide-and-seek with the sending transceiver hidden beneath the rocks, in haystacks, and among the trees. A nearby pasture was used for grazing horses and cows, whose manure provided the final resting place for our "buried skier."

Ueli had arranged for Alexi of the golden tooth and his two-man crew to fly us in their MI-8 Afghanistan-vintage turbine-driven chopper over the thousands of square miles of the Tien Shan along the Chinese border. On finding good skiing, they would maneuver the helicopter from location to location, selecting a suitable landing spot from the air with Ueli's guidance.

Each day had a remarkably similar pattern: Alexi would twice circle promis-

ing landing sites on yet another cascading ridgeline. Once Alexi had put his machine on the ground, Ueli would step out first to make a snow test, after which he would wave us out onto the landing spot. Alexi remained in radio contact. After Alexi's departure, the vast distances and the billowing snow quickly silenced the scream of the MI-8. Except for a few bears, whose fresh tracks we obliterated, and a solitary soaring eagle, we were utterly alone in the stark windswept wilderness of mountains.

The first half of each day took in three or four runs from premier drops, after which we would share a midday snack. We had previously met members of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers working on a hospital in Kirghistan who had given us a dozen MREs ("Meals Ready to Eat"), which broke the monotony. We would then reboard the MI-8 for another

*Fearless, she surfed
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onto the glacier
basin below.*

two to four runs, after which we would return exhausted to our hotel by mid-afternoon. We reconvened each day at twilight for a huge dinner with Alexi and his crew where we would review the next day's flight itinerary. In the evenings we might mingle in the raucous discotheque with members of the gymnastics team of some new republic. We even happened upon a few stray Brits reliving the nineteenth century Great Game, when Victorian England

and Czarist Russia competed for dominance in Central Asia. A nightcap of vodka-cum-kerosene at the hotel's lakeside bar wrapped up more than one evening.

During the last few days, we shared an extraordinary variety of virgin skiing terrain. Once, Kristen, the only female member of our group, had the dubious honor of kicking off an avalanche while following Ueli down a long, narrow forty-degree chute. Fearless, she surfed around rocks and away from slabs of fractured snow just before the slide folded over itself to tumble onto the glacier basin below. Another day, because shortages of aviation fuel plague all transportation in the former Soviet Union, we spent two hours scrounging for fuel. We finally found it in remote Narin at a former military airstrip.

With the dusk of our fifth-and-final day approaching, and the turbulent *buran* imposing from the south, we sped toward the eastern head of the two-mile-wide Inyl'chektau glacier, hard by the Chinese border. Its twin turbines howling, the MI-8 crept round the buttress of a vast unnamed peak on the northern edge of the snow and ice-clotted glacier valley. Suddenly, a massive vertical wall of blue ice and gnarled ancient snowpack rushed to fill the cockpit wind-screen. And there it was: Khan Tengri, "Ruler of the Sky," its 7,000-meter chiseled granite spire puncturing the azure heavens immediately above us. A thousand feet below, weather-beaten wooden sheds, huddled together in miserable homage to Khan Tengri, provid-



Khan Tengri looms high as a Soviet MI-8 lifts its peacetime cargo of skiers off to new adventures.

ed pitiful refuge to mountaineers who attempt its beveled peak.

Some sixty years earlier, in her 1935 travelogue *Turkestan Solo*, Swiss adventuress Ella Maillart described her solo ski-mountaineering ascent of the Tien Shan's Sari Tor, "an immense surface powdered with fresh snow which the wind sweeps up in wild confusion round the ridge . . . A last effort: a few more steps [and] I am on top, in the lee of an inaccessible cornice: an immense frozen wave whose crest curls in the clouds. I gaze at . . . a sea of motionless peaks sheathed in ice. To the east, a compact pile of black clouds surrounds Khan Tengri, that giant mountain the whole of whose southeasterly slope is still 'unexplored territory'."

With the onrushing spring blizzard at our backs, we had to forgo the run down Khan Tengri. Alexi beat a hasty retreat to the warmth of our lodge some 160 miles west. And so Khan Tengri remained for us too, unexplored territory.