

The Powder Tribe

by Brandon Sheaffer | illustration by Pat Kinsella

I first met Nurbek Kasym-Uulu and his wife, Aijarkin, at their home in the remote, mountain village of Ichke-Jergez, Kyrgyzstan. I was with Ryan Koupal, founder of 40 Tribes Backcountry Adventures, an outfit that guides the wild Tien Shan Mountains of the Far East.

"*A salaam aleikum,*" we said, shaking hands with Nurbek in the traditional way.

"*Aleikum a salaam,*" he replied.

We gathered around the table as Aijarkin bestowed hospitality on us serving hot tea, bread and homemade raspberry jam. Speaking in Kyrgyz, we enlisted Nurbek's help to transport a yurt up into the Terskey Ala-Too area. We were headed to a zone of north-facing chutes, couloirs and gades called Jalpak Tash.

Once the yurt was assembled, Nurbek and Aijarkin would host groups of tourists for one night at the beginning of a week of yurt-based backcountry skiing. It would be a fascinating home-stay experience on the other side of the world, and it would inject money into their community.

"But, will the tourists want to eat sheep?" Nurbek asked.

"Of course!" we assured him. "Sheep meat is delicious."

Aijarkin nodded in approval. We slipped our tea as their daughters curiously stole glances at us from behind an open door. One of them was wearing a red beanie that said "NY" on it.

Outside in the driveway, Nurbek and his *tuulgandar* ("relatives") began loading the yurt and all its accessories onto a Soviet GAZ-66 truck, an aging, four-wheel-drive troop carrier. We attached the truck's winch cable to the back of a tractor, and then tethered a second truck to the rear bumper of the GAZ-66 with an old, fraying, wire cable.

The daisy chain of heavy vehicles began groaning and lumbering up the snow-covered logging road toward the yurt site where a crescent-shaped ridge rose out of the forest.

A few kilometers into the trip, the road disappeared under the snowpack, the trail steepened, the frayed cable snapped, and we were stuck.

"Do you have any vodka?" Nurbek asked.

We opened a bottle of premium Russian vodka and toasted to strong health and success. We toasted to our

long and fruitful lives, to world peace, happiness, and to the hope that each of us will marry a Kyrgyz girl one day who will give us many sons.

Pleased, Nurbek tossed the empty bottle on the ground, told us he'd be back in the morning and headed down to the village, leaving me to gaze at the soft light disappearing from the peaks of the Kungoy Ala-Too across the valley.

The next morning, I awoke to the sound of an engine laboring and choking far below us. Hours later, Nurbek pulled into our camp, driving a tractor. It was towing only a wooden sled, instead of two trucks. Nurbek jumped out to greet us and then started working with the engine. I was impressed that an untrained mechanic using improvised parts could maintain a machine like that, and I watched him work as his *tuulgandar* huddled up inside the tractor, shivering and smoking cigarettes.

When we was finished, we helped Nurbek fasten the yurt, wooden platform, lion stove and insulation onto the tractor, and we skinned up to the yurt site.

It took a day, a team of workers and multiple bottles of cognac to assemble the yurt, but when it was done, far above a remote village in Kyrgyzstan, it looked like something out of a fairy tale. We mounted the hoses of an ibex above the door, and thin smoke drifted from the chimney into the cold, still air.

We gathered and split wood by hacking branches off dead and down trees, attaching the trees to horses, and smacking the horses to get them moving toward the yurt. It worked magnificently.

Taking a break, one of Nurbek's nephews, Azamat (which means awesome) looked up at the rocky faces and chutes above us and asked if we were actually going to ski them.

"Some of them," I said. "You want to try?"

I strapped him into my splitboard and fired him down a mellow powder field for his first turns, ever. He let out a hoot that bridged cultures, and then toppled over, to great applause. Grinning, Azamat shouldered my snowboard and hiked back up for another run.



Everybody has
a Backstory.

Look, we can't all ride the bottomless in Kyrgyzstan and toast vodka with the natives. But, you know that time your partners dared you to drink lukewarm bacon grease before heading out for that hike? How'd that work out? We want to hear about *your* backcountry experience.

Make us laugh, tell it like it is, keep it to 700 words and send it to sean@backcountrymagazine.com subject titled, "Backstory."

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