

# KYRGYZSTAN CONNECTIONS

## Discovering Meaning, Mountains (and Epic Spines) in the Land of 40 Tribes

**Words & Photography :: Jesse Levine**

The goat decapitation takes much longer than expected.

We have just bounced up a dusty road above the small village of Bokombaevo, rolling to a stop in a lush pasture backdropped by the snow-capped peaks of the Tian Shan. The shepherds pull a hogtied goat from the trunk of their 1980s-era Toyota Corolla and go at it with what looks like a rusty butter knife. Little do we know, things are only going to get weirder.

“Headless goat polo,” as our guide Kas calls it, is known as Kok-boru or “Blue Wolf” in the local language. The game dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century when nomadic shepherds of central Asia played it to honour the constant struggle of defending their flocks from wolves. Tradition dies hard in Kyrgyzstan. Unlike goats...

Their job done, the shepherds crush out their cigarettes, mount their horses and race towards the goat carcass, now laid out in the centre of the pasture. Nurlan, the most athletic of the bunch, stretches his body to the ground and in one smooth motion swings the 70-pound, headless carcass onto his horse. With a crack of his whip, Nurlan lets out a howl and gallops towards a ring of rocks at the other end of the pasture. The other horses follow suit and crash into him while their riders clutch and grab for the bloody goat. Nurlan gracefully weaves through the chaos and loops around the rock ring before forcefully tossing the goat into its centre – point scored! We watch, speechless with awe. This was not what I was expecting when my friend Rafael asked me to come to Kyrgyzstan to help film a snowboard movie. ►





Rafael "Rafa" Pease riding one last line before the 10 kilometre journey back to camp.

Kyrgyzstan sits between Kazakhstan to the north and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China to the west, south, and east respectively. Almost 70 per cent of the country is covered in mountains and 90 per cent of the land is 1,500 metres above sea level. The mountains and rugged terrain seem to have preserved the ancient culture and ways of life for thousands of years and this is what attracted Rafael to lure us here for five weeks of climbing and snowboarding in the Tian Shan and Pamir mountain ranges.

Rafael "Rafa" Pease is known for overly ambitious ideas, but when he puts

his mind to it, he pulls them off. He first rode a snowboard five years ago, but learned quickly and is now a professional rider travelling the world over in search of remote mountains and wild cultures for his film *Connections*.

For Kyrgyzstan, Rafa's plan was to "figure it out when we get there" so after two full days of travel to the capital and largest city Bishkek, we finally touched down at the Manas International Airport. The airport is named after Kyrgyz national hero, Manas, who is said to have united the 40 tribes of the region to protect their homeland against the invading Chinese in

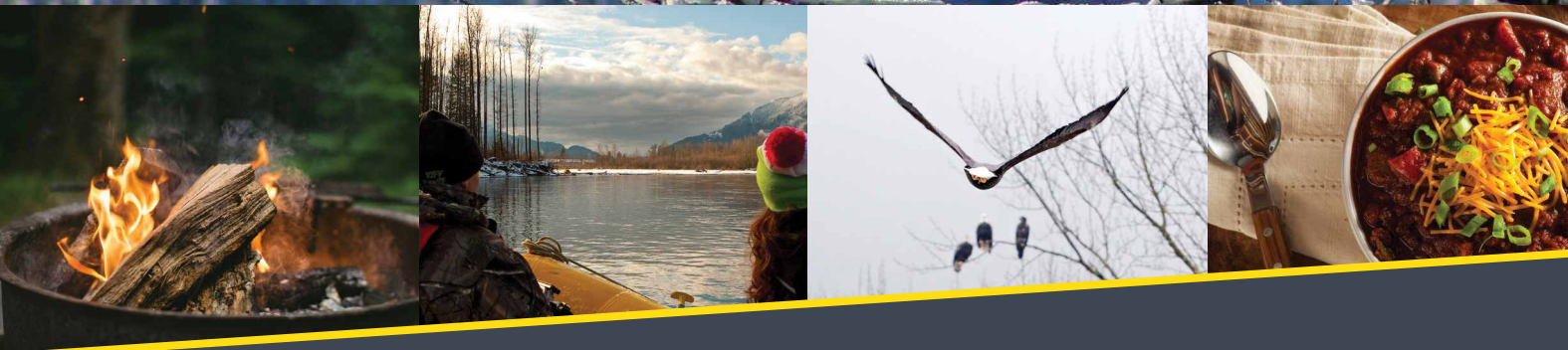
the 9th century. The word Kyrgyz translates to "40 Tribes," a reference to the country's fight for independence. The blocky monotone construction of the airport, a relic of soviet control of the country, felt like something straight out of a Russian Cold War spy movie.

"Kyrgyzstan Kas," our local contact, met us at the airport. Kas had the look of a Mongol warrior with the eyes of a gentle old soul. He greeted us with a huge grin and helped lift our oversized bags onto his already loaded vehicle. The road, cut into the Tian Shan mountains, seemed to slice open

time as well. Shepherds on horseback meandered the edge of the modern highway while young boys selling produce waved vegetables at our swiftly moving vehicle. As he drove, Kas recounted stories of his culture and explained that the Kyrgyz people are referred to as "people of the mountains." He speaks in what we dub "skier English," a result of hanging out with visiting skiers coming to ski with 40 Tribes, a backcountry ski outfitter Kas helps with in the winter. Kas would prove invaluable throughout our journey (and not just for his "headless goat polo" knowledge). ►



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At his home in Karakol, Kas welcomed us into two traditional yurts filled with relics of his great grandfather. The tunduk, an opening in the top of the roof, cast checkerboard shadows on the canvas wall of the yurt; representing the strength and unity of the Kyrgyz people. Snow leopard, wolf and bear furs hung from the walls and Ibex horns adorned the woodwork. A pile of sheep bones used for a children's game called chuko, laid on the floor. This would be our home for the next two weeks and Kas proved an excellent host, arranging the "goat polo" experience and an afternoon with some traditional falconers who hunt with golden eagles. He also fed us unusual parts of several animals and kept the stream of *Kurut*—a salty fermented milk—flowing.

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Our first snowboarding objective was Palatka Peak, a 5,000 metre mountain just outside Karakol, but our journey – on horseback – was foiled by huge, frozen blocks of avalanche debris blocking the trail. The next two weeks of trying to snowboard would end in similar scenarios with wet slides ripping to the ground on every aspect. We seemed to have missed our window of stable snow by a few weeks. Discouraged, we bailed on our northern mountain aspirations and headed south in search of higher peaks and more stable snow. We would have to do so without Kas however, as his car was impounded because it matched the description of a hit and run and the investigative ▶



TOP RIGHT Kyrgyz shepherds vie for control of a headless goat during a Kok-boru match.  
ABOVE Suban, one of our many taxi drivers, in front of his Soviet era 4x4 Uaz van.  
BELOW Children in the village of Sary-Mogol catch one last game before the sun sets behind the Pamirs.







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ABOVE Cinematographer Seth Gillis finds glory on the other side of the lens.  
RIGHT The always ambitious Rafael "Rafa" Pease.

process in Karakol was notoriously primitive and slow. Rather than leave us with no guide or translator, Kas managed to recruit one of his friends, Marat, to drive our crew three days South and join us on our expedition into the Pamirs. Marat spoke Russian and very little English or Kyrgyz, which would cause some confusion in the predominantly Kyrgyz-speaking southern part of the country.

In the small village of Saray Mogul, our final stop before hiking into the Pamirs, we enjoyed the traditional architecture (clay structures, open hole toilets) mixed with contemporary culture (the younger children accentuate their traditional clothing with Chicago Bulls hats and/or FBI hoodies). Our main focus however, was a beautiful spine wall across the plateau. Guarded by giant peaks with huge hanging seracs in the distance, it looked like it belonged more in Alaska than Kyrgyzstan. But here it was, hooking us in, and we needed to figure out how to get to the top of that ridge and ride those lines. ►







Rafa's end of the day routine - chasing the sun as we glide our way back to camp at the edge of snow line.



The "People of the Mountains", including Kas's father Akylbek (LOWER LEFT), dressed in a snow leopard fur for his own father harvested decades ago in a traditional hunt (a practice that has since ceased).



That night we drank black tea and packed for exploration while sitting on thick blankets adorned in beautiful embroidery representing the mountains and animals of the area. Our conversation drifted from "what do you think those spines will look like up close?" to "are we bringing too many cans of sardines for 15 days?"

Via very jumbled three-language translations (Kyrgyz /Russian/English), we instructed three shepherds on where we wanted our gear stashed, then watched their horses slowly turn into specks as they crossed the plateau. Hiking past wandering cattle and stray dogs, the scale of these mountains became more palpable with each step, as the reality of our remoteness set in. After seven hours we reached camp (placed exactly where we'd asked,

on dry ground, on the edge of a ravine with a pristine stream providing fresh water). This would be our home for the next two weeks.

We spent a week exploring access to the massive peaks surrounding camp and assessing the snowpack, slowly working on bigger and bigger lines and moving towards the spine wall that had captured our attention. We fell into a rhythm—rising with the sun, oatmeal and instant coffee for breakfast, slow skin up the creek shore, stripping layers, applying sunscreen, bootpacking steep spines and ridges to gain a peak, shredding a line, shooting a line, high fives, smiles, one last line at sunset before poling our way back down the creek. Most evenings we were greeted by herds of yak, golden eagles flying overhead and enormous marmots. ►






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Who would have thought we'd find spine walls at 4,500 M in the middle of nowhere Kyrgyzstan? Rafael Pease, that's who.

Guarded by giant peaks with huge hanging seracs in the distance, it looked like it belonged more in Alaska than Kyrgyzstan.

By the end of our 15 days in the Pamirs, we had walked/toured over 170 kilometres and climbed/rode 14,500 metres of vert. We eventually did top out and spent two days riding those beautiful lines of our main objective, the spine wall. Filming and ripping big, sick, totally isolated lines in the middle of a country I knew nothing about two months ago helped drive everything home for me. We had pushed ourselves beyond exhaustion every day, working together and fully committing to the process of putting ourselves in the right position at the right time to capture fleeting moments; and it was amazing. Hiking back across the plateau toward Saray Mogul, we laughed at how Rafa's overly ambitious plan had come together into a successful trip that really did help us connect to a culture and landscape we'd barely even known existed.

Driving back to Bishkek, I reflected on Kas's early comment that the Kyr-

gyz were the "people of the mountains." The meaning was lost on me at first; aren't we all people of the mountains? Now, just five weeks later, I understood. The Kyrgyz people don't just live in the mountains, they have an energy that radiates the mountains. Centuries of nomadic roaming of the landscape has made them a part of the land itself—their skin wrinkled from the sun and wind, hands calloused from working the soil, smiles large from true joy, and eyes sparkling with a sense of independence. Each interaction opened my eyes and heart to the beauty of the Kyrgyz people. For Rafa's film about connections, perhaps it is best to end with words from Kas's father Akylbek, a lifelong mountaineer—"We all come from the same roots, and we welcome you to these mountains." 🍷

Check out a Connections: *Kryrgyzstan* webside and learn more about the film at [Mountainlifemedia.ca/connections](http://Mountainlifemedia.ca/connections)