

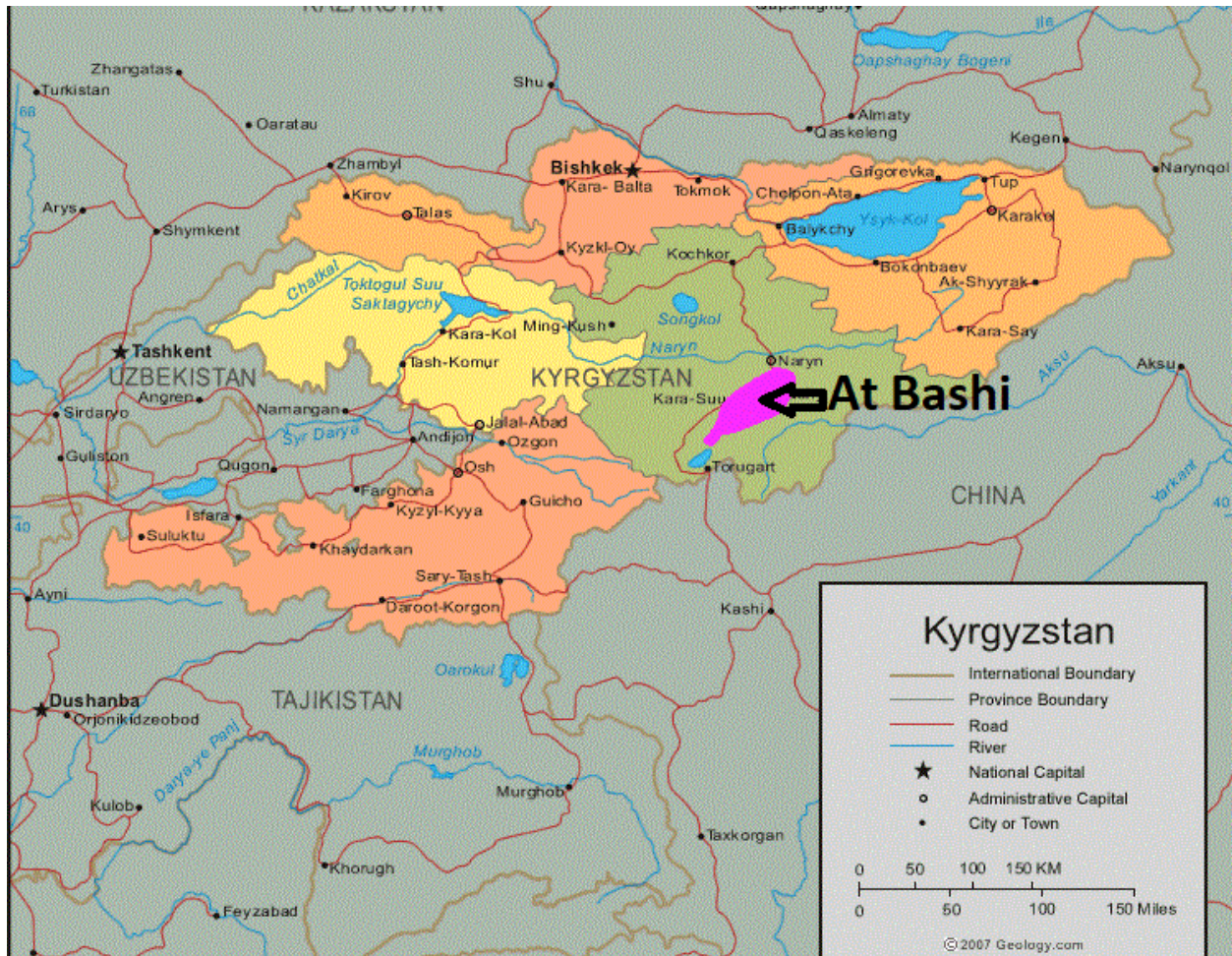
Ski Mountaineering Expedition to the
At-Bashi range of Kyrgyzstan
January 18th – February 2nd 2018

Team Members:

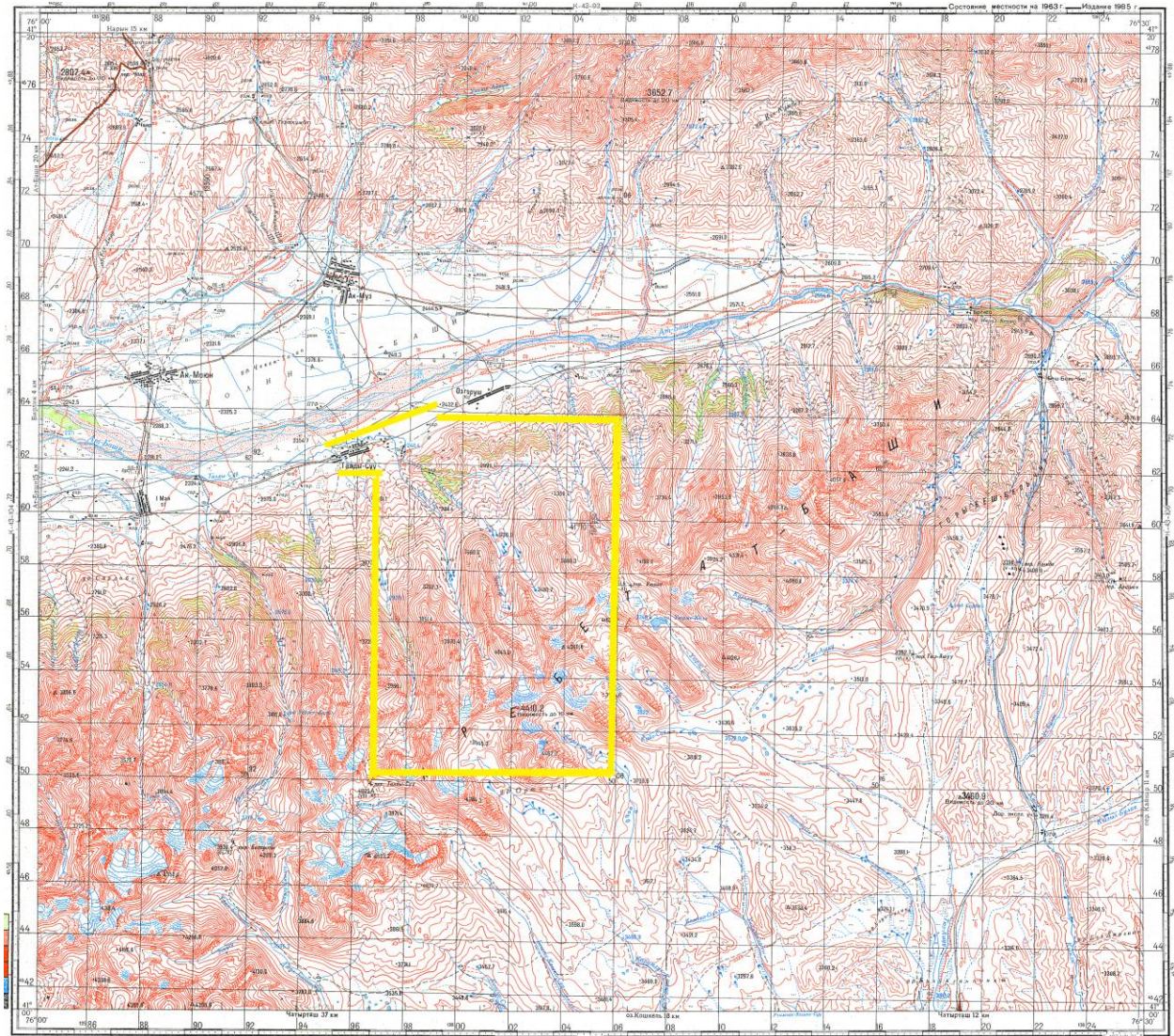
Marian Krogh (New Zealand), Nicole Mesman (New Zealand), Gabrielle Degagne (Canada)

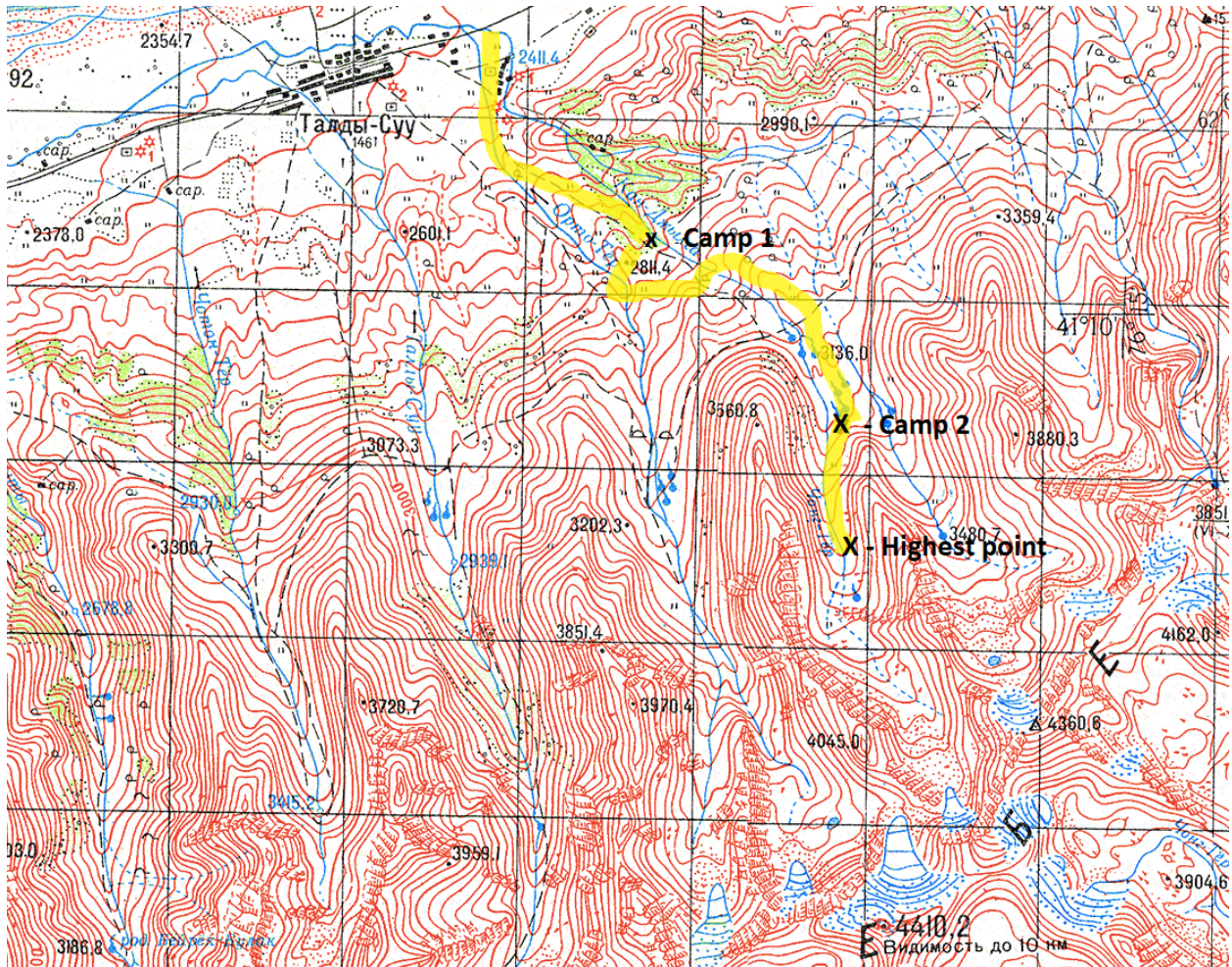
Where:

At Bashi range, Naryn Oblast, Kyrgyzstan



Northwestern portion of the range:





Why?

What attracted us to the At Bashi range of Kyrgyzstan was how little it had been explored and how suitable it appeared to be for ski mountaineering. From our research it looked as though the range had only been explored by skiers twice before (in 2016 and 2017 by Paolo Vitali, and Ruggero Vaia respectively). From our studies of Google Earth before arrival we had picked a route approximately 8 days long, in the central part of the range, that would have allowed us to climb and ski three peaks over 4000 m. These would have been first ascents/descents.

The winter of 2017/18 was extremely dry with very little snow falling in November and December in the central and western parts of the range. We investigated areas close to our original route and found there was little to no snow coverage. Therefore we changed plans and decided to head to the north-eastern part of the range which had received about 50 cm of snow to date. Our aim was to set up a base camp at an appropriate location and search for possible peaks to climb and ski deeper into the mountains. Our available time was cut short significantly because of a delayed ski bag, we ended up with only 6 possible days to spend in the mountains.

What?

Friday, January 26th

We departed the roadside at approximately 2200m and skinned through pastures up towards the Kon Iylga river valley. The steep cliffs on the true right of the river meant we had to cross the river and stay on the true left for the remainder of our ascent. We were able to mainly follow shepherds trails to a base camp close to the creek in the trees at approximately 2850 m (N 41.17126, E 76.18905) 3.5 km up the valley. Weather was obscured but the trees helped with visibility. Taldy-suu was the closest village to our start point and our local translator was staying in the village and we were in contact with her via our InReach for assistance if necessary.

Saturday, January 27th

We continued up along the true left of the river gully. At about 2950 m the gully becomes very steep and it was necessary to traverse the slope in a Westerly direction to avoid this steep portion. Breaking trail was very challenging on this section as we were often sinking through the entire snowpack. As we traversed this steeper area we noted many whoomphs and shooting cracks in the snow, on terrain of all pitches. Our small pits revealed significant amounts of depth hoar on most north and west facing slopes. We reached a saddle appeared at about 3100 m and this served as a landmark between the upper and lower valley. Unlike further south in this range we did not encounter a technical "jump" in at this elevation. We continued in the middle of the valley, sheltered between two banks until it became too windy and the visibility deteriorated too much to continue further. We set up camp in a location safe from avalanches close to where the valley forked at 3200 m (N 41.15598, E 76.20985).

Sunday January 28th

We decided that our current location would be suitable for an extended base camp. We left with light packs to explore further up the SW fork of the valley known as Chon Tör looking for suitable peaks and lines to ski. We were able to see many possibilities despite relatively poor lighting. We were excited to see so many options but nervous about the snow stability. We looked for potential safe ridges to climb and ski and decided to investigate the snow pack on a SW facing spur with vegetation showing (indicating light snow cover) at about 3450 m (N 41.14783, E 76.21164). On our way to the spur we remotely triggered a size two avalanche which partially buried two members (no injuries at all, but one member required assistance to be dug out). We debriefed and decided that now all available aspects were not safe to ski. We returned to the tent to play cards and wait for the weather to clear.

Sunday January 29th

A beautiful clear day in the mountains, the first so far. Our objective this day was to return to our previous high point and continue further on in the safe central portion of the valley, to continue investigating future ski locations. It was incredibly cold however (-30C) and we were only able to reach our previous high point before it was simply too cold to continue safely. We retreated once more to the tent to warm up and play cards. It was too late however as one team member suffered frostbite on her toes.

Monday January 30th

With poor snow conditions, more poor visibility and concerns over the severity of frostbite we decided to leave the mountains early. We were obviously disappointed with the lack of skiing but left excited to return in the future. We exited via an easier and safer route on the true right of the upper stream and then crossed in the middle valley over to the true left. We then followed our entrance route down to the road again. Once back in town we headed eagerly to the town's Banya (Sauna).

Photos:



Skinning from the road



Local farmer happy to help us cross the river to start



Curious shepherds wondering where we are going and happy to point us in the right direction



Route heading up the true left of the creek to camp #1 (True right was much too steep)



View from our first campsite

Skinning up on day 2 – very tough conditions, punching through all layers



Ideal route to approach the saddle at 3100m



Second/base camp site



Skinning up from basecamp



Poor visibility but lots of potential ski options on the southern side of the valley



Image of size 2 avalanche on northern side of valley



Hanging out in the tent



Finally a clear day and we enjoy the views further up the valley



Meeting up with Vladimir Komissarov, president of the Kyrgyz Alpine club in Bishkek to go over potential routes



The team in Bishkek from right: Gabby Degagne, Vladimir Komissarov, Marian Krogh, Nicole Mesmen, Cholpon Aiylichieva