01 • Photo: Dave Waag

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AN ENCOUNTER WITH AN ANCIENT SKI CULTURE IN CHINA REOPENS THE DEBATE: WHERE DID SKIING ORIGINATE?

THE ROAD TO SHAMBHALA


02

01 • Apparently the road to Shambhala isn't plowed during winter, leaving the hauling of food and supplies to the horses—the way it's been in Tubek for centuries. Photo: Dave Waag

02-03 • A Tubek youth takes modern skis for a test run, but among locals it's unanimous: long boards rule. Photos: Dave Waag

04 • Shelter—check. Bedding—check. Skis—check. Proof that ski bumming is an ancient pursuit. Photo: Nils Larsen


03 • Photo: Dave Waag


04 • Photo: Nils Larsen

Words: Lisa Richardson

In the corner of Naheed Henderson's home in Pemberton, British Columbia stands a pair of unusual-looking wooden skis. Roughly eight feet long (or an eyebrow-raising 250 centimeters for the metric-minded), they were hewn from a Siberian spruce log, chopped in half with an axe, and hand-planed to precision. The tips are bent exaggeratedly upward. The attached skins, which were fashioned from six horse legs, are worn away in spots, and there are markings along the skis where someone performed the odd repair job until finally the skis were considered too worn out to be of use, and tossed away.

They were crafted by an old man who doesn't remember any male in his family who didn't ski, a man who would use these boards to chase *boghur* (similar to a North American elk) down each winter in the Altai Mountains. Salvaged by Naheed from a burn pile in a remote village in China's Xinjiang province, the skis are the ultimate prize from a 2005 expedition that took her deep into one of the most inaccessible regions on earth. An expedition whose discoveries challenge what we know of ancient ski history and that gave rise to Nils Larsen's award-winning 2007 film, *Skiing in the Shadow of Genghis Khan: Timeless Skiers of the Altai.*

On the opposite wall of Naheed's living room hangs a splat of green goop that looks like a modernist sculpture. It's the result of an early attempt at making a pair of bindings at the G3 factory in Vancouver, where she breaks trail as one of the few women in the world directly involved in ski development and manufacturing.

"Home" and a real job are not necessarily where Naheed thought she'd be at 33 years old. After a decade as a professional skier near Jackson, Wyo., guiding and ski mountaineering around the world, including a recent ski descent of Denali, the Vermont native realized she wanted her world to evolve. "I wanted to come home at night, have a garden, have a beer, maybe have kids sometime. I needed to force myself to slow down. My previous world didn't allow for that."

Naheed has always been an explorer, and her new, relatively settled-down life is no different. She says it's been a big transition over the last three years, but it's the uncharted places that are most alluring to an adventurer. As a wise person somewhere once said, Shambhala—the mythical Buddhist kingdom of tranquility and happiness—isn't out there, it's inside of us. That's something Naheed is discovering, even though several years ago she literally went to the end of the Earth looking for it.

05 • Photo: Dave Waag Location: Altai range

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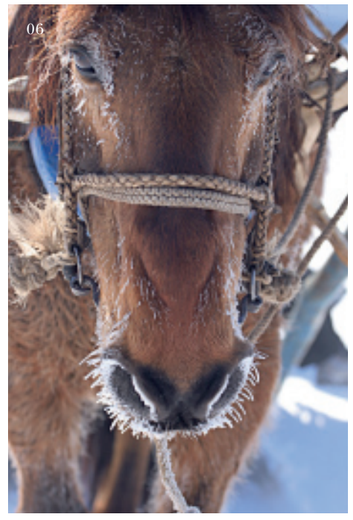

06

Naheed traveled to the Altai for the first time in 2003 with five friends, hoping to bag first ski descents in a land where no skiers had gone before—or so they thought. The Altai are located near the Continental Pole of Inaccessibility, defined as the place on Earth farthest from any ocean. Naheed's husband at the time, Eric Henderson, had never been to China though his father had owned a wine importing business there since 1979 and occasionally sent them pictures of the mountains in northwestern China to lure them over. They assembled a group of Jackson Hole friends for an expedition to ski Friendship Peak in the Xinjiang region. Upon arrival, they were surprised by what they found.

"It's feels a lot more like arriving in Pakistan," Naheed says. "That chaotic, developing-world kind of energy. Goat kebabs cooking, loud language. Most are Muslim. They speak Uyghur and don't look Chinese."

The team picked up its supplies and a liaison officer and translator and, armed with the only map of the area they'd been able to find, procured from the Russian military, they drove out to Kashgar. "All we knew was that the locals could get us across Kanas Lake, which would be a long journey."

Long turned out to be three days by horseback and sleigh, during which two horses fell through the lake's thin shore-ice and narrowly escaped drowning. "The locals dropped us off and they really thought they were saying goodbye to us for good. They thought we'd get eaten by the Yeti," Naheed says.

Fifty kilometers from the nearest village, and days from any open roads, they clipped into their skis and slogged 60-pound packs and 100-pound sleds through thigh-deep facets of rotten sugar snow for four long days, before taking "the left turn to Kazakhstan" and setting up camp in a valley that thundered with nonstop avalanches. There, they picked out a steep line they dubbed the Chopstick Couloir to climb and ski. While the ascent was satisfying and technical, the ski descent proved heinous, with snow so wet and faceted that they were causing deep fractures on slopes as low as 21 degrees.

By the time they met their pickup at the end of the lake, they were out of food and dragging their sleds across dirt. The ice on the lake had melted. They had to walk out because the horses couldn't navigate the lakeshore. "We walked all day. We were exhausted," Naheed syas. "All of a sudden we looked up into a beautiful meadow and there were six little log homes there."

They had stumbled upon Tubek, a tiny village of 20 Mongol-Tuwa people, who winter by Kanas Lake, surviving on hunting and haying for their livestock before moving on to greener pastures at the end of winter. The Tubek villagers saw the strangers appear, lurching beneath their ski-laden packs, and came running out to meet them with their own skis, which looked very different from the high-tech ones the group was using. They briefly exchanged stories. Hard, dense bread was traded for some wrapped candies. A few photographs were snapped.

One of the Tuwa popped his entire strawberry candy is his mouth, wrapper and all, perplexed by the whole concept.

"It didn't really sink in to us—the significance of meeting those skiers. They rented us some horses so we could get around Kanas Lake, and when we got home we were basically like, wow, that was really shitty snow, and what a wild place, and really, there's no reason to ever go back and ski there," she says.

"We have to go back. This is the oldest living type of ski culture in the world, this is a total gem."


07

An expedition isn't truly over until the slideshow has done the rounds. A year later, while on tour, Naheed ran into fellow skier and filmmaker Nils Larsen. Nils saw one shot of the skiers of Tubek and promptly fell through the rabbit hole.

"Nils is very interested in what makes life tick," Naheed says. "In hindsight, we knew it was a cool thing to have met those folks, but when Nils saw it, his immediate reaction was, 'We have to go back. This is the oldest living type of ski culture in the world; this is a total gem.'"

Nils' research had led him to conclude that skiing may have originated, not in Scandinavia, but in the Altai. There were clues, many of which are colorfully illustrated in his film: ski-related petroglyphs in the Baikal Altai region; a 19th century map tracing the root words for skiing, like veins, from the heart of central Asia; humanity's oldest written record of skiing dating to 211 BC, which refers to the Altai. To Nils, Naheed's photos of nomadic villagers with their spruce-carved skis suggested an unbroken ski lineage of thousands of years.

Given the social and political changes in modern China, Larsen felt an urgent call to document this culture. In March 2005, Naheed joined Nils and *Off Piste* publisher Dave Waag on her second trip into the Altai (Nils would eventually make two more), a trip that formed the basis of *Skiing in the Shadow of Genghis Khan*. They hoped to encounter an ancient culture—and to ask the people of Tubek to make them a pair of skis.

Once there, it took a couple of days of gentle negotiating, with the visitors wrestling with the appropriateness of their request and whether, in visiting and drawing attention to the village, they were actually endangering the lifestyle they sought to understand.

Like many older cultures, the Tuwa way of life is threatened by modern realities. Urban tourists now flock to the Altai. Tuwa children are strongly pushed to go to primary school, and if they want schooling beyond that, they must leave the region. The government has banned hunting and the cutting of trees. (Though forbidden, the hunt is still practiced with discretion.) A pair of skis indicates the flouting of both laws. The villagers were very concerned about how their guests would get the skis—the new ones and the ones Naheed pulled from the burn pile—out of Kanas Lake without being seen.

A Tuwa elder agreed to make the skis for $100 during their weeklong visit, and the entire process is beautifully documented in the film, along with humorous attempts by both parties to ski on each other's equipment.

Naheed spent the week juggling roles. She helped the women do chores, drawing on her rural Vermont childhood. Three times a day, they hauled water from a source two kilometers away. They birthed calves, made felt, prepared food. "Having a farming background, I was aware of how valuable that role was, so I didn't feel devalued, and it was so obvious that the women were keeping these people alive," she says. "But they didn't realize that the ski world is my life. Women there don't ski. I was getting into ski design, and I really wanted to be involved in the ski-making experience."


08 • Photo: Dave Waag


09 • Photo: Dave Waag


10 • Photo: Dave Waag

11 • Photo: Dave Waag

12 • Photo: Dave Waag

05 • Crossing Kanas Lake, with the Altai Mountains in the background.
Photo: Dave Waag

06 • Those Budweiser Clydesdales are wussies.
Photo: Dave Waag

07 • Size matters.
Photo: Dave Waag

08-10 • How to make skis, Altai style.
Photo: Dave Waag

11 • One of these things is not like the other.
Photo: Dave Waag

12 • Horse, meet your future.
Photo: Dave Waag

13 • Fire and ice.
Photo: Dave Waag

13

Naheed refers to her visit as a "finessing" role—juggling cultural diplomacy with satisfying her own passions and interest. It took two days to make the skis (with some spacing in between for curing), cutting the spruce in the early dawn and splitting it with an axe and a wood planer, and then bending the ski tips with the heat of a wood fire and a rustic crutch-like lever. The boards were left to dry for a few days, and then the rawhide bindings and the horseskins were secured tightly to the base.

"Their ski design—wide underfoot, narrower at the top and tail, and really carved up—was just ideal for the snow there," Naheed says. "The width allows the ski to stay on top of that wet, faceted snow and float. You could see they'd thought about their designs. They could point out what was wrong with our skis, that they were too light, too narrow for the conditions."

Much like Western skiers, the Tuwa are proud of their sticks. "You knew who had the best pair of skis in the village. When one person was showing off his skis, someone else would slowly come over with his pair, and everyone would turn and take a look."

The visitors said goodbye to their new friends, wrapped up their precious cargo, and smuggled it out, remnants of what may be the longest unbroken ski culture in the world, shared on the cusp of possibly disappearing forever. "When I think about it," Naheed says, "I feel so lucky to have seen a glimpse of skis that are made that way, the mother of all skis."

Sometimes it's the sound of an axe in the cold Altai morning chopping a fissure into a green spruce that echoes around her office at G3 as she sits at her desk and sketches out designs, with the production house whirring to life out back. "That trip was inspiring for me," she says. "It taught me that skiing is about more than just the descent. Especially now, as I've been skiing less and doing more development work."

Glancing at the skis in her living room, she adds with a knowing smile, "I am still in it, just in a different way." It seems Shambhala is working its magic. ⁋