

Harvard Mountaineering Number 26

Kyrgyzstan the Hard Way

Lucas Laursen '06

Before I became an expeditionary mountaineer I had a certain disdain for difficult climbing objectives. They have their place, of course, and I nodded approvingly whenever I read of some thirteen-day spin-drifted, single-cramponed ascent of an untouched Alaskan face accomplished on a week's food and fuel. I was glad they did it, and not me.

Instead, I announce to the readership of Harvard Mountaineering, which is to say most of its editors, my part in an expedition of a different sort. Oh sure, the expedition claims the first recorded ascents of nine peaks in the Borkoldoy range of the Kyrgyz Tien Shan.¹ But I write to share my subversive strategy of making the expedition laborious and complicated enough to merit the title without undue resort to the risks and discomforts of hard climbing. A sneakier path to glory.

Climbing Training, Lack Thereof

I spent the first two years of my membership in our esteemed Club learning just enough about vertical engagements on rock and ice to get myself into trouble. There I stopped, having accomplished my carefully calibrated training program and been promoted to an administrative position within the Club.

¹ A technical summary is available at www.borkoldoy.harvardmountaineering.org and a report is also published in *The American Alpine Journal* 2006. Consider this my personal story.

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Eschewing the Challenges of the Previous Generation...

In my third year lecturers came to speak at the Club, and I paid close attention in order to choose a suitable objective. John Graham and Pete Carman lectured on their team's unrepeatable ascent of the 14,000' Wickersham Wall, the north face of the highest mountain in North America, Denali. Tempting, of course, but I think I had exams or a haircut or something scheduled during the Alaskan season. Nasuh Mahruki, the first Turk on K2 and Everest, presented a lecture on his exploits. Inspiring, but really what's the point of going all the way to K2 if it's too late to be the first American? You might say I was at an impasse.

...in Favor of Overlooked Mountains

Finally, Bjarne Moon Holmes, then an instructor at the Medical School, arrived in December 2004 with inspiring photographs of his party's attempt on Mount Ketil, in the Tasermuit Fjord, Greenland. Note the word, attempt. He had failed. He was human. And he had found something downright beautiful to climb. I concede that I was not the first member of the Club to flock to his side after the lecture. In fact, his talk aroused enough interest in an exploratory expedition that he took it upon himself to propose one to the Club not one fortnight later.

Objective: the Borkoldoy range. According to cartographer Martin Gamache, it was around one hundred kilometers from the nearest real town, with some sort of military outpost closer to hand. The military presence, in fact, was an important element of the plan. During the Cold War, the Soviet government militarized their border with China along the high crest of the Tien Shan. They also evicted nomadic shepherds, hunters, and marmot trappers. This move was designed to deny the Chinese aggressor access to

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depots of much-needed marmot skins and became known in diplomatic circles as the “scorched marmot” defensive strategy. The result was immediate: neither the Army of the People’s Republic of China nor foreign mountain climbers were to be found in the forbidden Soviet Tien Shan. Untold generations of marmots roamed free.

Artificial Navigational Obfuscation

It is a sad fact that hundreds of years of cartography have reduced the Earth to a collection of maps. I spit the word out, maps, because even though our mountains were only a hundred kilometers from the nearest town, we would have wished them a hundred further. In fact, on October 10, 2005, the Anchorage Daily News kindly reported that we were 350 miles off the beaten track, no less. That’s more like it. Wishful reporting at its best!

Figuring I had a real stumper for our librarians, I bounced down the stairs to the Harvard Map Collection.

“Yes, you see, my team and I,” (We are a team now!), “are looking for maps that include the Borkoldoy Range, in eastern Kyrgyzstan. That’s K-Y-R...”

“That drawer right there,” yawned the librarian, without lifting her eyes from her computer. Frankly, I was feeling not a little cheated. I had been prepared to give her coordinates, a spelling lesson, and possibly even explain to her the Harvard Mountaineering Club’s historical pre-eminence in putting up first ascents around the world. Minya Konka. New routes on Denali. But it was not to be.

The drawer disgorged a 1970s American Tactical Pilotage Chart. The format I recognized from when I took flying lessons, but this one seemed to have certain landmarks of possible industrial or military value circled in red. I was a

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little thrown off by the labels: “Primary Objective (pre-approved)” or “Tertiary Objective (consult Wing Commander).” Maybe a little dated, but hey, it gave us the big picture.

Another drawer revealed a set of larger-scale Soviet topographic maps. One corner was labeled something like “секретно.” Could that mean, “top secret” by any chance? The hairs on the back of my neck tingled just above my bowtie. The librarian sashayed over with a vodka martini, shaken, of course, not stirred.

After the expedition, we discovered that even Google Earth showed the old geologist’s track we drove to reach the Borkoldoy range. But in our expedition’s amniotic sac, we beat on, minds against the future, borne ceaselessly into the past...²

Funding, the Hard Way

In choosing Kyrgyzstan as our destination we had not counted on a coup.

Dr. Akayev, President of the Kyrgyz Republic since its formation in 1990, had sniffily left office during the Tulip Revolution in Bishkek, where our ground transport, and thus our plans, were based. We opted instead to fly into Almaty, in neighboring Kazakhstan, where we could stay in expedition member Adilet Imambekov’s place before driving into geographically wild but politically quiet eastern Kyrgyzstan.

Our safety thus reasonably assured, we considered funding. The Club’s generous benefactors in years past, coupled

² F. Scott Fitzgerald used to ask me for literary advice from time to time. Never did give me proper credit.

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with the Club's blissful ignorance in years more recent, had resulted in the discovery of an overflowing but University-controlled mountaineering fund. When we indicated to the dean our desire to tap the fund for the expedition, he informed us that Kyrgyzstan was on the State Department travel warning list. We cheerfully explained our clever plan to bypass Bishkek, the scene of the unpleasantness, but Harvard piggybacked on the State Department recommendations. No money.

But keep in mind that I was intent on doing things the hard way, so I wouldn't have leftover energy for climbing. We proceeded to draft sponsorship letters. This entailed sponsorship biographies of team members. A sponsorship map of our proposed route. A sponsorship website. Sponsorship mailings lists were drawn up, and a large sponsorship packet mailed by devoted team members, intent, you might say, on securing sponsorship.

David Krause, the wilderness medicine instructor we had invited, deviated slightly from our methodology and scored three medical kits and a solar panel on the power of a few emails casually sent to likely manufacturers. We forgave him his poor style, but I would not recommend his course of action. Much too easy.

Luckily, no cash was forthcoming. We did acquire plastic boots, but I feel our sponsorship efforts are roughly on par, complication-wise, with a day or two's climbing with haul bags and porta-ledges. This way we saved on weight.

Following Page: HMC Kyrgyzstan Expedition 2005 at Base Camp
Laura Fox

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In-Country

We carefully selected our base camp position directly downstream of a point where the expedition's truck had gotten stuck in the river. There is simply no way my words will ever match Corey Rennell's footage of the truck nearly falling over in the river, available in the Club library. Our heroic driver Vitaly and cook Na-il eventually got the truck out by moving stones around underneath its oversized wheels.

The next morning we hauled heavy packs with tents, climbing gear, food, and fuel up the loose moraine to the snout of the Ayutor Glacier, and called that Advanced Base Camp. My own lungs were heaving in the thin air, and we all returned to Base Camp at 11,500' to sleep, acclimatize, and eat sheep. Yes, sheep. There's not much else to say about the sheep, except that somehow Corey contracted anthrax from it in the four days before its demise and conversion into a food product. He probably made some bored clinician's day when he got back to University Health Services.

Peak Fox: The Setup

The peak nearest base camp was a squarely built shale fin riding on a wide base of very consistent tan scree. We chose it as our acclimatization peak, and split into a team of five (Adilet, Bjarne, George Brewster, Kelly Faughnan, and Laura Fox) and a team of three (Corey, Dave, and me). The five followed a ridge to a straightforward crest of crumbly rock, chirpily reporting their smooth progress over the radio to the more embattled direttissima team. After Dave managed to send a sea-turtle-sized rock over Corey and me, we decided to back off from the rock ramparts and follow the path forged by our teammates. When we arrived at the summit, we discovered a sizeable cairn and note

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announcing their first ascent, and giving the GPS coordinates and altitude. They named it Peak Fox, in honor of Laura's father, who passed away while we were still planning the trip in May.

"Woohoooo!! We got a second ascent!!!" shouted Corey.

"Word, dude. Word. You got some paper? Maybe a pen?" I answered, intent on recording our every act. We managed to scrape some unpaid Cambridge parking tickets out of Corey's pack, but not one of us had a pen. I sat down to chip our mark into a piece of slate with my ice axe, and placed the stone and the tickets into the zip-lock bag the others had left in the cairn with their note.

Corey snapped photos of all the surrounding peaks, aiming to use his digital camera's screen to select routes over the next weeks. The late Brad Washburn, I am sad to say, might have been a little disappointed at our poor man's version of his magnificent large-format aerial mountain photos.

Anyway, Corey pointed at one of the peaks: "That's the one George saw on the way to ABC and wanted to try. And that's the one right above ABC that we should do as a whole team. Dave, you should do that one to the left, and name it after your fiancée!"

That hyper-enthused idiot. He didn't even have to suffer the consequences of his offhand remark.

Following Page: The Harvard Circus, Borkoldoy, Kyrgyzstan
Corey M. Rennell

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Peak Fox: The Debate

The scene is the breakfast table under our purple mess tent. Dried meat hangs at one end, above stacks of plastic bottled water and the hand-operated meat grinder Na-il used to make sheep hamburger. The table is covered in a checked cloth, trays of delicious thin breakfast pancakes, and Doc Dave's unappetizing pink stomach-coating tabs. He repeats his travel medicine mantra: "Don't eat poop. Not even once. Not even a little bit." We must have all broken the rule, because we all ended up with stomach ailments.

Over breakfast, someone shared a hand-drawn sketch of the ridges and peaks surrounding our valley. Someone else jokingly commented that maybe we'd each get to be first on a peak, since there were only eight of us. In fact, that soon became an issue.

It came up in a circuitous way, though. Everyone was still talking about the climb the day before. I can't remember exactly how it started, but someone must have said something like, "Well, we've already accomplished the expedition goal of a first ascent!" This would have drawn a sharp look from Dave, a quizzical one from me, and sent Corey diving for his video camera.

Because for Dave, Corey and me, the expedition had achieved a first ascent, but *we* had not. Bjarne and Dave were thankfully on opposite sides of the table, since they fired the most earnest rounds in the bitter conversation that followed.

Adilet tried to defuse things by pointing out that nobody would care if these were hills we'd walked up in our backyards at home. After all, he lived within driving distance. But we were too absorbed in the trappings of the exotic, two days by air and three days by truck from home,

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to agree that it didn't matter. We were all there because being first to the top of some exotic peak mattered to us.

Bjarne tried a different tack: "There's a simple way of doing this. No names on peaks."³ As in, we wouldn't report who went up which peaks.

But that didn't really address Dave's concern: it felt intrinsically different to arrive at a cairn-marked peak. Things got heated and references to free will, stupidity, and two hundred years of alpine history flew across the table before Laura got to the point.

"So what's important to you to accomplish by the end of this trip? Is it that you want to climb some cool mountains, or is it you want to be part of a first ascent party of a particular mountain, or whatever? Determine for yourself what's going to satisfy you, and then we can kind of have a discussion where everyone says what they need to have happen to be happy." Despite going to a rather disreputable law school in New Haven, I do think she'll make a fine lawyer.

Basically, Dave wanted other people to hold off on the peak Corey had more or less chosen for him so that he could be part of the first ascent party. Not entirely unfair, since George and Bjarne had already expressed a similar interest in other peaks. It even gave me something to do instead of all that hard climbing I was so afraid of.

A Safe Epic

While other members of the trip pushed routes up the highest peak in the valley or scouted and summited other

³ Bjarne is quoted directly from Corey's film. Laura's following words are edited slightly to make her sound less like, you know, a valley girl.

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peaks surrounding the glacier, Dave and I devoted ourselves to the business of being first. I was the first member of the expedition to forget my ice tools in camp. Together, we were first to be benighted in fog. We were first to leave five ice screws behind in a panicky night-time retreat. But first up the enticing north face of what had been pre-emptively named Peak Schullinger-Krause? Nope.

Instead, we were first to fail on the same route three times. These repeated attempts, failures, and subsequent rest days diverted us from attempting difficult or dangerous climbing, and thus may be considered a success.

Climbing Everywhere Else

During the week of the Schullinger-Krause debacle, I had plenty of entertainment over the radio. Bjarne and Corey ran up the back side of the dominant peak over ABC, and named it Peak Harvard. George and Adilet announced their bivy on the highest peak in the cirque. The next day they tagged it in perfect weather. Every day I went back up that damn scree gully on Schullinger-Krause, Corey came back with recon reports of easy, aesthetic peaks higher up the glacier.

It became a bit of a running joke that “Meester Pre-sident,” as Adilet called me, was the only one on the trip who hadn’t taken part in a first ascent. Nothing against being the butt of a joke, but it didn’t look like things were going to work out for me and Dave. So I finally took up Corey’s offer to head high up the glacier and tag an easy peak. Given the choice between the Easy Peak on the left and the Even Easier Peak on the right, I hung my head and slouched off towards the Even Easier Peak. Enough with failure already.

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The only technical aspect of that climb was a one-meter-wide crevasse halfway up the glacier and faint hints of more, higher up. It caused us to throw on half-ropes while we jaunted up the elegant snowy ridge to the summit. We reached it under a blue sky and perfect conditions. Half an hour later, George and Laura tagged the harder peak next to ours, and Dave made a solo ascent of Schullinger-Krause on the dry south side. Climax. Resolution.

Subvert the Rule of Law

Of course, we almost dodged climbing altogether on the way in when guards at the Kyrgyz military checkpoint at Karasai pointed out that we had a border zone permit for one Alexander Cole (who had dropped out of our team in April) but not Corey Rennell (who stayed on). But on Vitaly's advice we had brought some extra cigarettes, beers, and a watermelon for the guards. They affably told us their commander was still asleep and we could pass.

On the way out, the guards pointed out that Corey had arranged his flight and transit visa through Kazakhstan for the day after the rest of us. They invited us to wait in no-man's-land between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan until midnight, when his visa became valid. Go Corey.

This aroused a remarkable fury amongst the American contingent, with multiple envoys simultaneously trying to negotiate in English, and Adilet pressed into unwilling service to interpret offers of bribes. We were out of watermelons, but more than one of us would have happily parted with a few twenties, just to arrive in Almaty a few hours earlier.

I think we considered bribes a kind of rite of passage for "exotic" travel and felt excluded by the upright Kazakh guard's refusal. Adilet finally quit translating after a couple

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rounds, pointing out that we would never try such a thing in the States. And he was right. It was an arrogant and impertinent side of the expedition that I am not particularly proud of. Besides, with the threat of hard climbing past, I was perfectly comfortable napping until we could leave.

Last Gasp Drama

I did feel one last jab of duty while we cooked dinner on the unclaimed ground between borders. Corey and Adilet were snapping at each other for some reason, I forget what, and Adilet finally raised his voice and started cursing at Corey. I was tired from the afternoon's arguing and snapped at Adilet that he didn't have to curse over such a silly thing. As if snapping at someone ever did any good. Laura sent an invective my way, questioning the need for my self-appointed leadership.

It stung. I had read expedition reports and anticipated we'd get tired of each other. And really, our difficulties were trivial. But I had thought that everyone would recognize it was in the team's interest to de-escalate arguments, rather than jump into the fray. I hadn't counted on my own snappiness, or that the others would finally voice their understandable irritation with my continual interference. The sense of membership I had felt until then collapsed with Laura's dispiriting words.

I collected my share of the pasta and wandered in a bit of a huff across the road. I couldn't exactly go far without attracting attention from Kazakh and Kyrgyz Kalashnikovs, but I went just far enough away to get out of earshot and sat on crossed legs to watch the sun set and sulk.

The truth is, it was a spectacular place. The two little border posts sat in the middle of a long straight road that didn't even kink or bend to acknowledge their presence.

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The horizon was ringed by low hills in the distance. They gave the plain a sense of grandeur and aloofness from the rest of the world. It was hard to nurse my misery, despite the watery pasta. Bjarne came over with a mug of hot chocolate and a few consoling words. As the other self-appointed leader on the trip, he probably had a decent idea of what I was going through. I appreciated his gesture, and I rejoined the others once the sun had completed its fiery purple disappearing act.

The Self-Conscious Climber

Now I have enough distance from our adventure to laugh at all the things we did to make our expedition conform to the stereotypes we had somehow accumulated. It would not have been the same for most of us had we just flown to my house in California, piled into a truck, and driven to the Sierra Nevada for a couple weeks of peak-bagging. Yet seen from Adilet's perspective, that's just about exactly what we did.

The Borkoldoy range is largely unknown to climbers. But the range's touted virginity doesn't hold up under scrutiny. I can't speak to pre-historic times, but Russian imperial cartographers certainly knew about the range. We even found a heavy iron tent stake in a grotto above our advanced base camp, which probably dated to the geologists who explored the range in early Soviet times. Finally, for all our desire to "escape," we ran into a couple of marmot trappers a short walk from our base camp. In embarrassingly broken Russian, I extracted an admission from the grizzled old man: he'd seen British alpinists here in 2003. I think that was the sub-conscious reason we didn't bother to cross the river to his little summer shack until after the climbing was done. We were there for the mystery, even if it was imagined.

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In the end, we all ate a little poop, we all climbed a few peaks, and we all came back, happier for the experience. Next time, though, I think I'll go somewhere I can focus on hard climbing. It should be easier.

Climbing summary:

8/10/05 - George Brewster, Kelly Faughnan, Laura Fox, Bjarne Holmes, Adilet Imambekov ascend Peak Fox (GPS: 4446m, N 41 25' 49.2" E 77 37' 31.4") by its northeast ridge; David Krause, Lucas Laursen, Corey Rennell ascend Peak Fox by "Treadmill Gully" on its north face, joining the north ridge.

8/11/05 - AI, LL, CR attempt Peak of Theoretical Physics (GPS: 4856m, N 41 24' 30.2" E 77 36' 16.0") but turn back at approximately 4200m due to High-Altitude Flatulory Edema...

8/13/05 - GB, KF, AI, DK, CR attempt Peak Schullinger-Krause (GPS: 4727m, N 41 24' 57.5" E 77 78' 23.2") but instead ascend Mount Powell (GPS: 4555m, N 41 25' 42.1" E 77 38' 3.8") by "17 Year Gully" on Powell's southwest face.

8/14/05 - KF, LF, DK, LL, CR attempt Peak Schullinger-Krause by its west face but turn back at very approximately 4200m. GB, BH, and AI attempt Peak of Theoretical Physics by its east ridge but turn back at 4625m.

8/15/05 - DK, LL attempt Peak Schullinger-Krause by its north face but turn back at approximately 4550m.

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8/18/05 - BH, CR ascend Peak Harvard via "80 Years of Harvard Mountaineering" by its south face. GB, KF, LF, AI attempt an unnamed and unclimbed peak southwest of Base Camp and northwest of Advanced Base Camp, but turn back due to avalanche conditions on the north face.

8/19/05 - DK, LL attempt Peak Schullinger-Krause by its north face but turn back at approximately 4200m due to slow pace. BH, KF, LF, CR attempt Peak Omingmak but turn back at 4625m. GB, AI bivy at very approximately 4400m on Peak of Theoretical Physics. DK, LL return to bivy at approximately 4200m on Peak Schullinger-Krause.

8/20/05 - GB, AI complete the ascent of Peak of Theoretical Physics by its east ridge. DK, LL attempt Peak Schullinger-Krause by its north face but turn back at approximately 4300m due to slow pace and lack of stove fuel.

8/21/05 - BH, KF, LL, CR ascend Peak Adventure (GPS: 4636m, N 41 23.06' E 77 37.01') by its west ridge. GB, LF ascend Peak Omingmak (Altimeter and map: 4746m, N 41 23' 6" +/-3" E 77 37' 23" +/-2") by its west face. DK ascends Peak Schullinger-Krause by its south face.

8/23/05 - GB, LF, LL attempt the same unnamed and unclimbed peak as GB, KF, LF, AI did on 8/18 but turn back due to avalanche conditions on the north face.

8/24/05 - BH, AI ascend Peak Mary Ainsworth (GPS: 4612m N 41 24' 43.0" E 77 33' 24.5") by its north ridge and bivy on the connecting ridge towards Peak John Bowlby (GPS: 4846m (15,899') N 41 24' 17.0" E 77 33' 24.8").

Following Page: Mt. Fairweather from the Gulf of Alaska
Ross D. McFarland