



TREK INTO THE TIAN SHAN

BY AARON SIMSER

The awe-inspiring Tian Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan have been captivating my dreams ever since a few of my buddies went on a Mid-Asian ibex hunt well over five years ago. Their pictures of the rugged landscape and breathtaking scenery quickly made this high alpine hunt number one on my list of “to-do’s”.

As the years passed by without this hunt materializing, I made up my mind that the Fall of 2015 was my year to head east, far east. I was lucky enough to have my brother Paul and a few close friends decide to come along on the journey-of-a-lifetime this past October. When the hunt

first started coming together, the primary animal was supposed to be the ibex only, but as the time drew closer I was able to put enough cash together to go after the monarch: Marco Polo (Hume) argali. Argali had always seemed a bit beyond my reach, but the more I thought about the hunt and the legendary destination, I made up my

mind that hell or high water I would make it happen.

In mid-October our crew of five buddies (myself, Paul, Mike, Joe and Dave) flew from JFK to Bishkek via Istanbul. The trip was not bad at all and we all arrived safe and sound with all of our luggage in Bishkek. After a hour or so in the VIP customs





section, we all decided (with the help of our guides) that three of us should go north to hunt while my brother Paul and I headed south for Marco and ibex. Hugs and handshakes went around as our two crews left on their 10-hour treks into base camps.

After eight hours in the truck, my brother and I ended up in the city of Naryn (elevation 7000 ft) for an overnight acclimatization.

The next morning we set off on the Silk Road for the nine-hour drive into base camp. The nerves and excitement were like a never-ending jolt of electricity as the long years of dreaming about this hunt were quickly turning into a reality.

After a long night trying to sleep we awoke to a perfect weather morning for a eight-hour horseback ride into spike camp (13,000 ft). The ride in was everything you could possibly want in an remote hunt: The mountains were never ending and indescribably beautiful. During

the ride in we saw a few pods of ibex and a small gathering of Marco Polo females, but as we got near spike camp, the animals seemed to come out of every crag in each mountain. As we unpacked all our gear in the small underground "bunker" that we would call home for the next seven days, we looked across the vast landscape to see 100-plus ibex and 40-plus argalis all within a day's hike

of the mountains and the ibex like the jagged cliffs, we would be traveling to different sections on the mountain. But when I peeked my head out of my sleeping bag a few hours later, I knew something was wrong. Getting out of our bunker confirmed my suspicions, a storm had crept in during the night and now there was zero visibility at spike camp – and much less on the peaks

My lungs and muscles screamed for oxygen as we pushed ourselves up the mountain.

or so from spike camp. Spirits were high as we rested that night for the morning of hunting to come.

Early the following morning, we decided that Paul would climb early for the closest herd of ibex and I would wait for sunlight to ride to a distant area for argali. Because Marcos like the high-altitude bowls

that my brother had left for three hours prior. At first my guide and I joked about our situation, but as the early dawn turned into lunch and then lunch turned into late afternoon with absolutely no change in the weather, my concern from my brother's safety grew.

It was a very long and stressful day

until my brother finally returned to camp an hour after dark with a beard full of ice and snow without having seen further than a 100 yards the entire day. It was a day that I will never forget.

The next morning the hunting gods were on our side as we awoke to perfect weather. We mounted our horses and set off for the adventures that awaited.

Over the next three days my



brother and I saw hundreds of both argalis and ibex, but none that were approachable. A few final stalks turned into busted attempts with animals either winding or spotting us as we approached. Because our hunting altitude was at 14,000+ feet there was absolutely no habitat to

hide behind, only boulders and spines for us to sneak behind as we made our approach. Although we were not successful for the first three days of the hunt it was

amazing seeing the animals in this unbelievably beautiful setting. Argali's basking in the rays as we were treated with amazing 50-degree, late October weather will always be filed away in one of the special places in my mind. Those first few days I had probably





seen 30 to 50 Marcos a day, an unbelievable presence of animals in a land that seems almost inhabitable.

On morning number six of our hunt, my brother gave each other a quick hug and wished one another a safe and successful hunt as we separated for our specific species. The three hour horseback ride into the peaks for argali was much like the mornings before; beautiful and inspiring with many animals sighted.

When I initially booked this hunt I had talked to my outfitter about my desire to hunt hard for a true trophy of a ram. When the question of size had arisen I had stressed my desire for a old, mature war horse that was at least 50 inches in length. Little did I know that on that specific day on the mountain I would be astonished at the size of the rams we encountered.

As we crested the peak of the tallest mountain in sight, my guide noticed a large formation of rams crossing the river basin below us. A large herd of rams, over 60 in number, had many

huge males in the 50-plus range. The only problem was their relative location to ours; in this area of the range they were in the wide open, and only a very dangerous pass would allow us to even dream of getting closer to the rams. It was at this point that we decided to break our hunting group in half. The chief hunter Milek and I would approach by ourselves without the assistant guide or our hunt representative Alexey.

It was an absolutely crazy couple of hours as we sidehilled and climbed around the ridgeline to try for a closer approach to the Marcos. I have been on a few hunts in my day with elevations of 8, 9 and even 10 thousand feet, but the difference between that and 14,000 feet was a world apart. My lungs and muscles screamed for oxygen as we pushed ourselves up the mountain.

When we crested the backside of the peak a few hours later, I faintly heard the sound of a gunshot miles away in the distance. I could only

hope that my brother connected with his ibex. Quickly forcing that to the back of my brain I concentrated on the task at hand. Climbing carefully onto a jagged outcrop we looked down onto a small batch of argali rams approximately 500 yards under us. The first three rams were of average size, but the fourth was a very large bodied ram compared to the others. We positioned ourselves to a decent vantage point for the fourth ram, but couldn't really see his entire set of horns because he was facing completely right to left of us sideways. Through the spotting scope we were confused why his left horn looked short but his mass was out of this world.

It wasn't until an hour-and-a-half later when this old monster finally stood up and looked in our general direction that we finally realized that his left horn had been broken off by almost eight inches and his right horn was completely intact and huge. He was by far the oldest

OWN

and most mature ram we had seen on our hunt. Quickly changing from an observational setup to a shooting position, we ranged, wind calculated and set up for the shot. It was a 480-yard shot after computing the angle (extreme downhill line of sight was 670 yards) and my guide and I both prepared ourselves for the ram to give us a broadside or quartering away shot. Seconds turned into minutes, then finally, the old warhorse turned to his right and gave us a quartering away shot. As the gun recoiled into my shoulder my vision was impaired until the gun came back to rest on my pack. The ram had been hit hard, but still had enough strength to run with his fellow rams across the wide



open mountainside. Milek whispered "shoot again" in my ear as I reloaded and acquired another quality sight picture. As the old ram struggled up the adjacent ridgeline my second round anchored him and brought my hunt to a successful and climactic end. Hugs and handshakes went around as we tediously climbed down the ridge to the ram.

Just as the sun was setting we arrived to the fallen giant and I got to lay my hands on this absolutely amazing animal. Words cannot describe how humbled and honored I felt as Milek gave me a few minutes alone with my ram before coming down for another round of congratulations. This mountain monarch was everything I had ever wanted in a ram. With an approximate age of 14, a broken left side of 45 inches and a fully intact right side just short of 53 inches, he was truly a impressive specimen.

Just before dark we were able to get a few pictures before completing the long and arduous job of skinning and quartering the meat as well as packing everything for the long ride home. It was a surreal horseback ride back to spike camp with crystal clear skies backlit by a million stars. As we approached spike camp the celebration was on there as well; my brother had connected with an absolute monster of an ibex and we had completed our hunt safe and successfully.

Over the next few days we had a long ride back to base camp, packing up all our gear and another long trip back to Bishkek to meet up with the rest of our group. Upon arriving to the "Golden Dragon" in downtown Bishkek we had found out that everyone had tagged out with great ibex rams and one of our guys even got a hammer of a Roe deer. Beers and stories were shared, and before we knew it we were back home to JFK airport for one last set of handshakes prior to returning to our everyday normal lives. Although each one of us comes from different walks and ways of life I doubt any of us will ever forget the trip that we shared last October. Kyrgyzstan was everything I could have ever asked for in a hunting trip; beauty, adventure, challenge and success. I strongly recommend anyone who hasn't yet accepted the challenge of the Tian Shan Mountains to do so, you will not be disappointed. WS