



Russia: Tur Охота в России

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Photos: Tweed Media

Two years ago, Steve Hornady and I booked to hunt mid-Caucasian tur in Russia. It had long been an ambition to hunt with Steve. I've known him for some eight years, he has inspired many of my high-altitude adventures, and this would be my first trip with him. We postponed. As Steve blithely put it: "I bought a new hip and had my orthopaedist fit it for me." So, Steve was keen to give his new hip a mountain workout – remarkable given that he would be turning sixty-nine in a few short weeks.

Our guides lead the pack
horses to our first camp.



Tackling the green and relatively gentle
lower slopes on horseback, before the
steeper slopes were above the tree line.



We were eager to get going once we arrived at Mineralnye Vody, just north of Georgia. No fewer than six checks had been performed on my rifle since I left home, with endless scrutiny and stamping of documents. Hoping to get some rest before what was sure to be a tough journey to camp, it was a relief to hear that we'd be spending a night in the town. We breathed a sigh of relief, and waited to be shown to our beds, only for a sudden change in plans to shatter our hopes. Herded into a vehicle, it wasn't entirely clear what was going on. We trundled away through the dark streets of the town, stopping once in a back alley to hand over our passports to a figure shrouded in darkness. It didn't fill us with confidence, but Steve reassured me that this was completely normal, he having

hunted in Russia many times before. What choice did I have?

Through the night and the darkness we drove south towards the Caucasus, finally stopping at five a.m. The light was just beginning to show us what we'd be up against, and it looked promising. Verdant hills surrounded us, and distant, more interesting peaks could be glimpsed through the early morning cloud. Finally, we were granted a few short hours of sleep, before zeroing rifles, sorting gear, and stripping our luggage to the minimum for the steep climb ahead. Next, we sat with the guides, Omar and Sasha, pouring over maps of the region, looking at promising areas and deciding where we'd set camp for the week. Steve and I agreed to hunt together despite being told we would have more chances if we split up. An experience shared is an experience doubled and all that.

Under cover of darkness the following morning, we hoisted ourselves on to horses and headed out. The soft curves of the hills that had seemed benevolent the previous day soon turned steep, and the sheep's wool that covered our saddles soon failed to soften the hard iron framework. As we made our way through the green pastures, passing a herd of yak, trees grew ever more scarce, and it wasn't long before we were above the treeline, the misty morning thankfully hiding what lay before us. All day we rode, covering some nine miles and gaining 5,000 feet in elevation. The only respite from the hard saddle came at points too steep for the horses, when we'd get off and lead them. Finally, towards the end of the afternoon, we stopped, pitched out tents amid the clouds at 9,500 feet and collapsed. It was becoming clear that our guides weren't the sympathetic type – tough



The hunting team consisted of 'salt of the earth' type people.

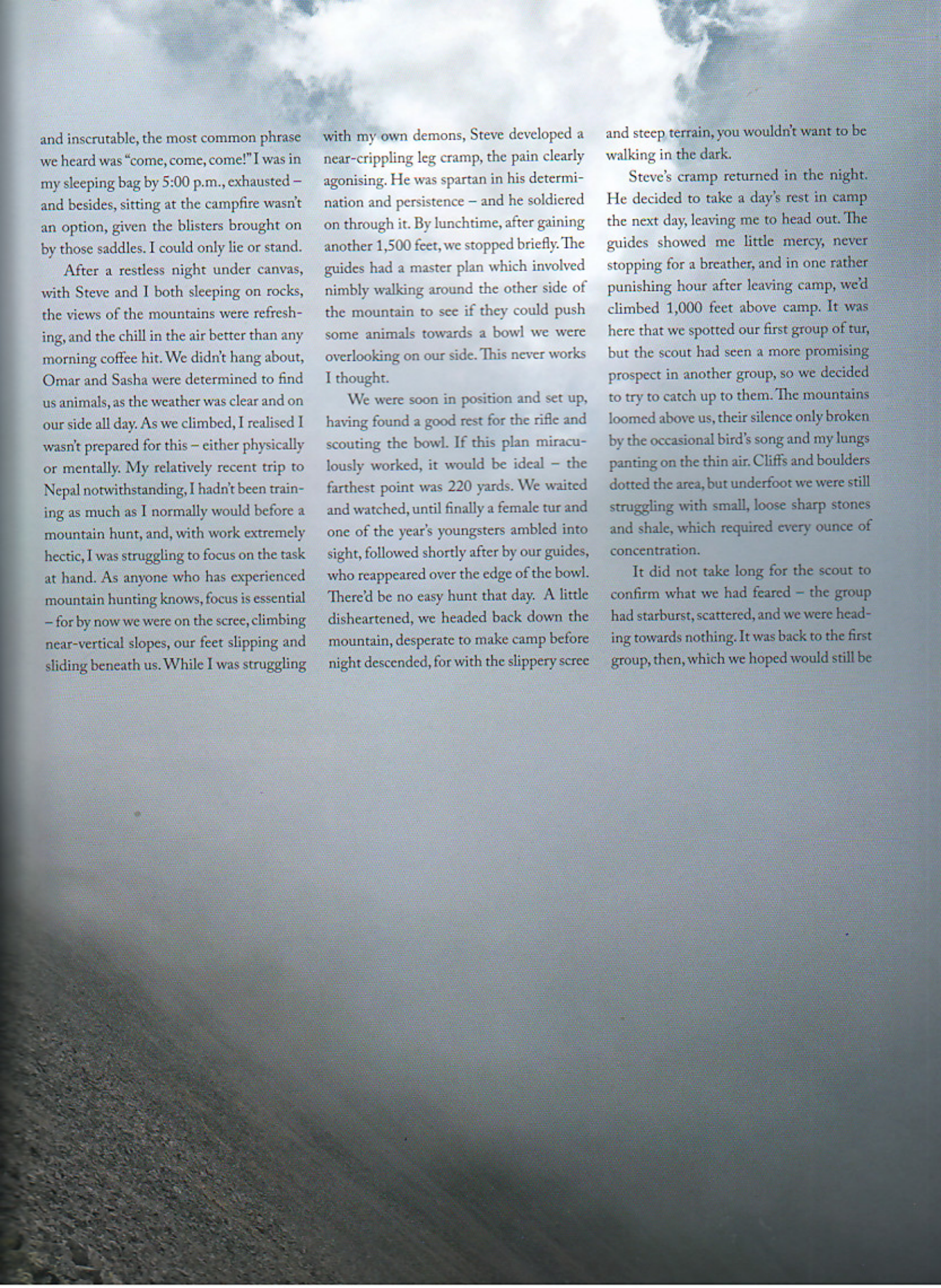
Mid-Caucasian Tur

Found east of Mount Elbrus and west of North Osetiya, the mid-Caucasian tur is only found in a small area of Russia. The *Capra caucasica caucasica* stands slightly taller than the true West Caucasian tur, at 38 to 43 inches at the shoulder. The black horns are smoother than those of its western cousin, with smaller cross ridges, and the tips are closer together. The beard is shorter, and the mid-Caucasian tur has a darker forehead and chest, and a reddish-gray colour to its summer coat. Its similarities are unsurprising – it is thought to be a true naturally occurring cross between the Eastern and Western tur, showing horn characteristics of both. There is a strict licensing system for the tur species in Russia, only 100 licences issued every year, with ProfiHunt, the company that this hunt was organised through, taking twenty of those. All the licences are for mature males, with ten of the licences going to other outfitters, and the remainder used by local hunters. The aim of the licensing system is to prevent poaching, which, along with overgrazing of the lower pastures, is the biggest threat to these species.

For more information about hunting the mid-Caucasian tur, visit: www.profihunt.com.

Only the hardest of horses are suitable for this terrain, with its steep inclines and rocky ground.





and inscrutable, the most common phrase we heard was "come, come, come!" I was in my sleeping bag by 5:00 p.m., exhausted – and besides, sitting at the campfire wasn't an option, given the blisters brought on by those saddles. I could only lie or stand.

After a restless night under canvas, with Steve and I both sleeping on rocks, the views of the mountains were refreshing, and the chill in the air better than any morning coffee hit. We didn't hang about, Omar and Sasha were determined to find us animals, as the weather was clear and on our side all day. As we climbed, I realised I wasn't prepared for this – either physically or mentally. My relatively recent trip to Nepal notwithstanding, I hadn't been training as much as I normally would before a mountain hunt, and, with work extremely hectic, I was struggling to focus on the task at hand. As anyone who has experienced mountain hunting knows, focus is essential – for by now we were on the scree, climbing near-vertical slopes, our feet slipping and sliding beneath us. While I was struggling

with my own demons, Steve developed a near-crippling leg cramp, the pain clearly agonising. He was spartan in his determination and persistence – and he soldiered on through it. By lunchtime, after gaining another 1,500 feet, we stopped briefly. The guides had a master plan which involved nimbly walking around the other side of the mountain to see if they could push some animals towards a bowl we were overlooking on our side. This never works I thought.

We were soon in position and set up, having found a good rest for the rifle and scouting the bowl. If this plan miraculously worked, it would be ideal – the farthest point was 220 yards. We waited and watched, until finally a female tur and one of the year's youngsters ambled into sight, followed shortly after by our guides, who reappeared over the edge of the bowl. There'd be no easy hunt that day. A little disheartened, we headed back down the mountain, desperate to make camp before night descended, for with the slippery scree

and steep terrain, you wouldn't want to be walking in the dark.

Steve's cramp returned in the night. He decided to take a day's rest in camp the next day, leaving me to head out. The guides showed me little mercy, never stopping for a breather, and in one rather punishing hour after leaving camp, we'd climbed 1,000 feet above camp. It was here that we spotted our first group of tur, but the scout had seen a more promising prospect in another group, so we decided to try to catch up to them. The mountains loomed above us, their silence only broken by the occasional bird's song and my lungs panting on the thin air. Cliffs and boulders dotted the area, but underfoot we were still struggling with small, loose sharp stones and shale, which required every ounce of concentration.

It did not take long for the scout to confirm what we had feared – the group had starburst, scattered, and we were heading towards nothing. It was back to the first group, then, which we hoped would still be

Finding a flat spot to set up a tent in such steep terrain was challenging.



Hatching a plan: the guides consider where we were most likely to find a group of tur.



Steve Hornady suffered badly from cramps on one of the days, but he didn't let anything slow him down.



in the area. Keeping up with the guides had been hard going uphill, but it was terrifying going down, every step a danger, sending rocks skipping down to the cliffs below. We'd have to drop another 1,000 feet to get into position, the guides announced as we took a short breather. Just as we were starting up again, a group of around seventeen tur appeared not eighty metres away. They'd been in dead ground and we'd startled them. Chaos ensued: they were all young... no, a mature male had been spotted at the back of the group, I should try for a shot, I shouldn't, it might be our best chance, they were moving. Amidst the

gesticulations and the rushed words of the guides, I frantically scanned the hard-flat rocky ground for a good rest, but we had just hit a slope with not a single feature other than shale, and there was nothing. The tur were moving, and fast, and we needed to decide before they disappeared over the ridge.

We hunters are constantly faced with decisions: whether to take a safe shot, or wait, whether the trophy is the right age, the right animal, or whether to wait for a better prospect. It's extraordinary what the brain can process in a matter of milliseconds, our instinct doing much of the work

for us. And, for those hunters who travel, the pressure is immense. It may be the only chance you get, and almost invariably the guide will be urging you on, and pushing for the pull of a trigger. I had trained and imagined a steady 600-metre shot with a dead-rest and time to consider my bullet's path. Instead I experienced a furor of conflicting thoughts and decisions.

I saw the male, a large, mature animal, running on a line slightly higher than the rest of the group. "It's good, it's good, shoot, shoot!" the guide was saying as I took my rifle off my shoulder. "Shoot, shoot!" he urged again. I had no time to range the shot





Top: Hitting the high slopes at 3,000 metres literally takes your breath away.

Left: Faced with a challenge: endless slopes of shale and rock and not a tur in sight.

myself so I called for assistance. I knew that these animals were now a good deal further away than eighty metres, and I'd need to adjust my shot. Not only that, but even as I lowered myself, I could feel the ground under me shift, and my body sliding about on the scree. "Quick, backpack!" I pleaded with the guide. Precious seconds were lost, the guide was so keen for me to take the shot that he didn't at first understand what I needed. I grabbed the pack, slid myself down, and found the animal in the scope. "Range, range!" I said, trying to keep my breathing calm.

The answer wasn't forthcoming. "How far?" I asked again. The guides conversed in Russian, while I tracked the animal in my scope, using all my muscles to stop myself from sliding down the slope. Finally, they answered: 240, no, 260 metres. I adjusted my aim to compensate for the distance, breathed, and fired. Stones exploded above the moving animal, and it continued on its path, speeding up, having been showered with supersonic rock fragments. It was a textbook mountain shooting error. I had overcompensated for distance, particularly with such an acute angle. I was zeroed dead-on at 100 metres. But the angle and thus the horizontal trajectory of the bullet

meant that I needed little or no hold-over even with a 200-grain projectile. Using the integrated ballistic calculator of my Leica Geovid binos would have told me this, but time had not been on my side to dial or even to range the target myself.

I kept tracking the now twice-as-fast tur, hoping he might stop, as the guide announced the rapidly changing ranges: 270, 280, 290 metres. The animal slowed to tackle the ridge to leave our sight. Now or never. It paused for a split second, giving me the chance I needed. At 300 metres, I had no time to think, only to act, as he was moving again. I now knew I had aimed high at 260 metres, so taking this into account I squeezed the trigger. The rifle and muzzle break boomed. The animal disappeared over the ridge and out of our sight. Had I or hadn't I?

I was sure I'd hit it, but, after the first missed shot and with no visual confirmation from the guide, I started to worry. The terrain where the tur had been was unbelievably steep, and too dangerous for all but the most experienced scout to get to. We had an agonising wait, watching the scout clamber his way to the top of the cliff to see if there was any sign, and to hopefully retrieve a dead animal. As he got to the

Returning to camp, the horses carried
Simon's tur down the mountain.





Kit Box

- Sauer 404 XTC in .300 Win Mag (www.sauer.de)
- Leica Magnus i 1.8-12x50 scope (www.leica-sportoptics.com)
- Leica Geovid HDB 3000 10x42 (www.leica-sportoptics.com)
- Hornady 200-grain ELD-X (www.hornady.com)
- Swazi Tahr Ultralight Smock (www.swazi.co.nz)
- Swazi Driback Pants (www.swazi.co.nz)

point where the tur had been standing, I drew my breath. We could see him peering down over the rocks, straining this way and that. Finally, straightening his arm in the air, he gave a signal. Found.

But where the tur had died was too precarious for us to get to. The guide caped the 100-kilogramme animal, but had to leave the carcass where it lay. It was simply too dangerous to bring it back to camp. However, the meat would not be wasted. This area was a stronghold for the threatened Eastern Imperial Eagle. We had seen several circling the mountains as we hunted. The carcass would make good feeding for many eagles for days to come. An hour later the guide returned with the unusual looking horns and the cape on his back. It looked more like it was from Mordor, not from the Caucasus.

Steve had spent the day recovering and making camp somewhat more cheerful, adding stone seats around the fire. I could nearly sit again. He shared in my joy, and we spent the evening in a jollier frame of mind, spurred on by my success. The deprivations and discomforts of the previous days were soon forgotten, and sleep came more easily that night.

Following guides up into the high tops of these mountains was no mean feat – the terrain was incredibly hard going.





Bottom left: The guides consider how best to retrieve Steve's tur after it dropped off a steep cliff. It took several days to find.

Above: Simon Barr (left) and Steve Hornady celebrate Simon's tur being recovered in this difficult terrain.

The next day dawned and we headed out early, Steve ready for his hunt. It wasn't that the terrain was friendlier, nor that we were suddenly fitter, but optimism goes a long way to helping when you must climb. There was no reappearance of Steve's cramps, and after a long day of walking we found a group of tur by the treeline in the late afternoon, that included a mature male. This time there was breathing space, and a better rest, and Steve took his shot. Unseen, however, was the steep cliff below the ridge, and the animal tumbled down, out of view. By this time the light was starting to fade, and knowing we had a long descent, there was no option. The guides would have to return for Steve's tur as it was too dangerous to attempt its retrieval that day.

It would be several days before Steve's tur was found. We were already back amid the comforts of home when with relief I heard that he would have a permanent reminder of our adventure. Hunting with someone who has so much experience mountain hunting is an inspiration for what I hope to achieve. With some forty mountain hunts under his belt, Steve has hunted

no fewer than twenty goats and twenty-six sheep, most of which are different species. As he told me when he shared the news that his tur had been recovered, he'd found our Russian trip hard. "I'd say this was the most challenging I've been on – my lungs were okay, but the treacherous terrain was tough. And going downhill was plain dangerous." I agreed – I think that we both had underestimated just what a challenge it would be. We reminisced a little about our hunt, and I asked Steve what had been the best trip he'd ever done. There was no hesitation. "For sure it was a desert bighorn in Arizona. It was also the most expensive. I got drawn, any hunter's dream – and the hunt itself wasn't that expensive, it was the obsession for mountain hunting that the trip started that has cost me a lot!" Steve admits that there won't be too many more of these trips, but he says, "Oh, I still have some I'd like to do. I really want to go to Alaska for a huge Dall sheep next." It's clear that for those lucky enough to have hunted in the mountains, passion eclipses sense, even after a trip as tough as our Russian one... We start our planning. ■