



Kyrgyzstan White Water Kayaking 2024

Final Report

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1. Expedition Purpose, Aims, and Key Outcomes

1.1. Purpose

Kyrgyzstan is a relatively unknown destination for many Westerners, and little information or video existed prior to this expedition about the whitewater available. Indeed many of our nine-person group were only vaguely aware that the country existed before we started planning this expedition. A small number of Russian-led tours operate, and some basic information could be found on whitewater.guide, but we saw this expedition as our chance to explore some relatively unknown paddling and relay our findings to the British and European paddling communities.

This document contains all the river reports from our trip, as well as detailed information about our preparation and planning, such that other groups can use this to inform their own whitewater expeditions. Where information useful in planning, but not exciting enough or otherwise contributory to the Expedition narrative, it has been included in the Appendix.

1.2. Expedition Aims

1. To safely, independently, and self-sufficiently explore and document rivers of Kyrgyzstan in the form of river reports and video guides.
2. To improve our kayaking ability both as individuals and as a cohesive team to support us in leading the Imperial College Canoe Club, including practicing multi-day kayaking trips to open new opportunities to the club.
3. To explore and experience the culture of Kyrgyzstan.
4. To share our expedition experiences in the form of a short film to inspire other people interested in kayaking around Kyrgyzstan.

1.3. Expedition Outcomes

This expedition has created a detailed account of all rivers that were paddled in Kyrgyzstan, both through daily write ups, which have been published on <https://kayak-diary.com>, as well as videos of all rivers, with the rapids in chronological order, available on the Imperial College Canoe Club YouTube channel for members of the public to view, along with a short summary about the river, and key information such as the put in and take out locations.

<https://youtube.com/@imperialcollegecanooclub6286?si=x3XZEKIDLVtcNLL5>

In almost all cases, there are the only YouTube videos available about each river, and they have been named in such a way that they are easy to find for all other paddlers attempting to plan an expedition to the Kyrgyzstan region. A full DVD and additional video from the trip will be published at a later date, complete with further videos from our travels.

2. Introduction

In 2005, Phil Carrivick and Dave Manby established a biennial expedition for the top one percent of UK university whitewater kayakers. Its purpose was to teach the lost art of scouting rivers and to ensure that the handful of students who took part returned the best uni kayakers in the world. They succeeded. Today, the sponsors call it the British Universities Kayaking Expedition. The paddlers call it: BUKE. We've got nothing to do with that. We're all terrible. But we went to Kyrgyzstan anyway.

The team: six students, three 'recent' graduates, two (almost exclusively) Russian-speaking drivers, Zippie the Dinosaur, and a four-week-old puppy nicknamed 'Spud' —acquired for 1000 som from a small farming outpost in the hills east of Tokmok.

The equipment: two Mitsubishi Delicas, nine whitewater kayaks, many litres of dangerously cheap vodka, and a 1:700,000 map of the country.

The objectives were two-fold: Firstly, to explore rivers somewhere outside of Europe; ideally somewhere warm, ideally somewhere inexpensive, ideally somewhere Turkish Airlines fly to (as they have one of the more paddler-friendly sports equipment policies).

Secondly, we wanted to be somewhere we could reasonably claim to be uncontactable for a month; to avoid the demands of our jobs, PhDs, or disquieting thoughts about the future. And so it came to be that we were stood in Manas International Airport with our nine boats, five tents, and the scribbled list of rivers we thought might just lie in the intersection of picturesque, exhilarating, and non-lethal.



3. Expedition members



Ewan Badcoe

Team role: Media

Degree: 3rd Year Medicine

Kayaking experience: I had never touched a paddle before joining university. However as soon as I went to my first pool session I was hooked. Since then I've been to Wales, Lake District and Devon countless times as well as Scotland and the French and Austrian/Swiss alps. I have a strong passion for film making in association with kayaking so I can't wait to get some incredible shots in the natural beauty of Kyrgyzstan. Being a Medic I also have a great interest in safety and First aid so am the coordinator for the groups training.



Ethan Beech

Team role: Treasurer

Degree: 4th Year Civil Engineering

Kayaking Experience: Having paddled on flat water prior to university the sudden step-up to white-water was a shock, however I quickly realised that flat-water paddling didn't compare and have become increasingly reliant on kayaking to provide a suitably enjoyable activity for any spare time. I've now paddled across Wales, Devon, the Lake District, France, Switzerland and Austria. Having spent the past academic year as president of the club I have great experience of the unique logistics, planning and faff-management required to run larger kayaking trips.



Peter Bryan

Team role: Medical

Degree: 2nd Year PhD Bioengineering

I started kayaking after joining Imperial in 2021 and very quickly, weekend club trips became the thing to look forward to every week. Now, 2 years later I have been lucky enough to get changed in laybys across the UK as well as France, Slovenia and Austria. Aside from kayaking I have been on several independent trips including Norway, Iceland, and West Africa and so have a lot of experience with expedition planning and logistics.



Liam Donnelly

Team role: Logistics

Degree: 3rd Year Aeronautical with Spacecraft Engineering

I joined the Imperial College Canoe Club in my first year at Imperial, having kayaked since I was 7 years old, training weekly since I was 13. Between ages 13 and 18 I competed in the sport of Canoe Water Polo, winning the second highest division nationally and being invited to train with the under 18 GB. Development squad. Since joining ICC, I have developed my Whitewater kayaking through leading other students on a variety of rivers around the UK and during our summer tour in the Slovenian, Austrian and Swiss Alps. I completed my Whitewater Safety and Rescue training in September 2022 and intend to further complete Outdoor Health and Safety training later this year.



Jonah Harrison

Team role: Journalist

Degree: 3rd Year Chemistry

I started kayaking on the river Wye when I was 12. I was soon paddling on more rivers in and around South Wales and went to the French Alps in 2019. After a few, largely kayaking free years, I returned to my senses and joined ICC in my second year. Since then, I have paddled in the Lake District, Wales, Slovenia, Austria and Switzerland with the club. Alongside whitewater, I occasionally dabble in sea kayaking as well.



Sam Parsons

Team role: Food and Water

Degree: 2nd Year Biomedical Engineer

I've been paddling since I was old enough to hold a paddle and started on white water when I was 13. During my paddling career, I have spent most of my time paddling in Dartmoor and North Wales, expanding my experience to areas like the Lakes, Scotland and the Alps around the time I started university. On top of my white-water skills, I've also been developing my leadership skills, this year achieving my white water leadership qualification and for the past two years working professionally as a kayaking instructor at an activity centre.



Edoardo David Santi

Team role: Accommodation

Degree: 3rd Year PhD Electric Engineering

I started kayaking when I was 11 on the Adige river in Verona, Italy and progressed to participating in slalom competitions around Italy in the following two years. After moving to a different country, I kept practicing slalom when going back to Italy in the summers and helping teaching kids. In my first year of university at Imperial, I started whitewater kayaking with the Imperial College Canoe Club. After paddling on multiple trips and a summer tour, I took a year off whitewater paddling, before being drawn back! Since then, I have been on multiple Easter and Summer tours, including paddling some of the more advanced sections on these trips such as the Soca Cataracts.



Cameron Stanislawski-Doyle

Team role: River Leader

Degree: Imperial College London Graduate

I started kayaking when I was 13 on flat water at first and then on rivers across Yorkshire. I completed a flat-water safety and rescue course and assisted the coaches at my local canoe club. When I was 17, I started to paddle harder white water in Wales and at Holme Pierrepont in Nottingham. I joined the Imperial College Canoe Club in 2018 and have been on countless weekend trips, as well as multiple Easter and Summer tours across Europe. I was also part of the previous successful ICCG expedition to Georgia in 2019, giving me excellent experience to pass on to other members of the expedition team.



James Hemmingway

Team role: Video Editor

Degree: Kings College London Graduate

I started kayaking in scouts and the cadet force, quickly progressing into whitewater trips to local rivers. Upon joining Kings College London to study Maths with Philosophy, I couldn't help but think 'if only my university had a kayaking club'. However, a quick search suggested that the Imperial College Canoe Club would accept students from other universities, and I have not looked back since. I've been on many a trip with the club, all across the UK and Europe, and despite never officially taking a WWSR course, would like to think that I have used all the techniques enough times to be of adequate assistance to this trip.



Victor Chernovolenko

Team role: Driver and Translator

We got into contact with our drivers for this trip via a phone number for Dimitry (Dima) on whitewater.guide. Dimitry put us in contact with Victor, who had previously run similar kayaking expeditions around Kyrgyzstan for the company Two Blades over the past 10 years. When not driving crazy kayakers around, Victor is also a plumber and a ski instructor, depending on the season. He has a particularly eclectic music taste, with a particular affinity for female rap and Kung Fu Panda!



Ivan Chernovolenko

Team role: Driver and Vodka Supplier

Victor told us that he could get us a second driver. However, it wasn't until much later that we found this second person was his dad! Ivan had also been involved in many of the previous Two Blades expeditions and possessed an uncanny knowledge of all wildlife around Kyrgyzstan, including what berries we could and could not eat. Despite being at least 55, he was in the best physical shape of anyone on the trip, regularly stopping to go swimming or do push ups during the drive, and he seemed to know everyone in the country and greeted them all like old friends.



Spud the Dog

Team role: Team Dog

Spud was an early addition to the team when we arrived in the Chon Kemin region. When we stopped off to camp with a local farmer, Ivan approached us and asked if he should buy one of the farmer's puppies for his daughter. Little did we know that 20 minutes later we would have a new team member for the next few days, before Spud made a solo trip back to Bishkek, for us to meet once again before leaving Kyrgyzstan.

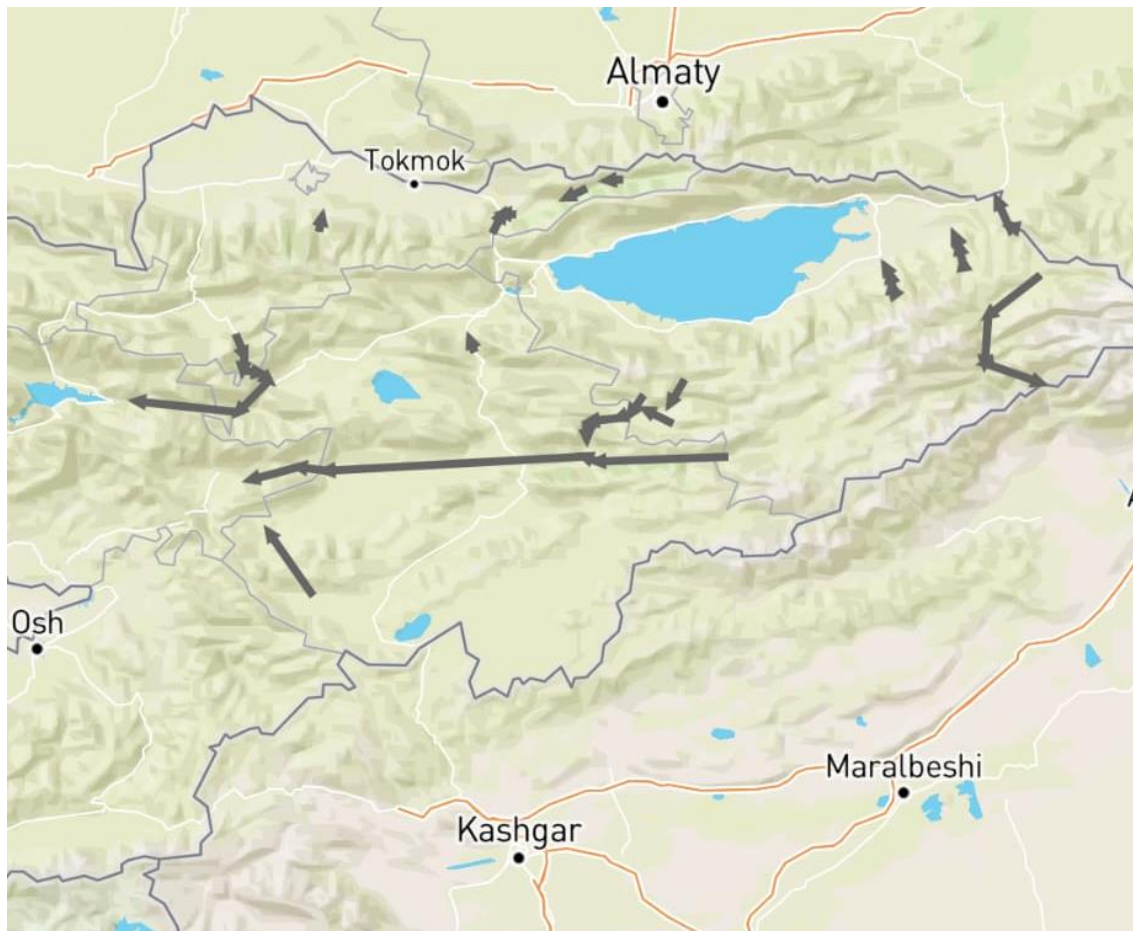


Zippie the Dinosaur

Team role: Team Mascot

Zippie really needs no introduction, beyond a suggestion to check out her Instagram @zippie_iccc. A well-travelled dinosaur, Zippie can now add a new continent to her travels with the club as a supportive club mascot and essential committee member!

4. Kyrgyzstan Country Profile



4.1. Terrain

The Tien Shan and Pamir Mountain ranges dominate 65% of the country, and the average elevation is 2,750 metres – a fact that is clearly felt during the kayaking here. The country is lightly forested, with woods covering only about 3.5% of the country due to the altitude. However, supposedly forests in the south of the Kyrgyz Republic include the largest walnut groves on earth, although we did not explore towards that region during our expedition.

4.2. Weather and River Levels

Climate: Kyrgyzstan has a distinctly continental climate, owing to its position near the middle of the Eurasian landmass and the lack of bodies of water large enough to influence weather patterns. The main variations come from the altitude – with many of the nights coming in below freezing, especially in the Naryn Valley. Before travelling, we read that ‘the air is dry year-round, precipitation is moderate in the west, while the centre-east of the country is arid, even desert at lower elevations.’ This did not match our experience, as we had rain on at least a quarter of the days we were there. Perhaps we brought it with us from Wales but be aware of this when you are packing.

River Levels: Due to glacier coverage, the rivers in Kyrgyzstan are at their highest in July and August. The paddling season runs from late June to mid-September, with water levels lower towards the end of the season. We found most rivers to be a medium level during our trip, although the first week (starting in mid-August), was a little spicy.

4.3. Languages

Kyrgyzstan has two national languages, specifically Russian and Kyrgyz. None of the nine members of the expedition knew either of these languages before planning the expedition, so we sought out a local driver for help with translation and communication. See the section on transport for more information.

In the month before the expedition, a few members of the group also studied Russian and Kyrgyz respectively, developing a good enough understanding to read key signs and to go shopping for essentials. We also had a phrase book to assist with translation, as well as Google Translate with both Russian and English downloaded (you need both for it to manage translation between the two!).

4.4. Sources of planning information

The expedition team used the Whitewater.guide app, which contains information on approximately 40 different whitewater kayaking sections, and general information about kayaking within the country.

A previous expedition to Kyrgyzstan was completed by the British University Kayaking Expedition (BUKE) group in 2005, for which their trip report can be found here <https://web.archive.org/web/20131213190218/http://kayakstan.rob.cx/>.

More recently, the company TwoBlades Adventures has been running annual summer trips to Kyrgyzstan. Imperial College Canoe Club graduate Moritz Unmann went on one of these trips before Covid and offered us some advice on the region.

Other reports on Kyrgyzstan have also been put together by Adrian Mattern in combination with Red Bull, and Andy Holt who runs a different kayaking expedition company called Escape to Adventure



5. Itinerary

5.1. Pre-Trip Plan

Within our planned itinerary, we focused on accounting for the following points:

- Time to acclimatise to the high altitude
- Sensible progression through river difficulty
- Use of guides where sensible

However, plans remained flexible depending on the weather and river levels once we arrive, as well as any information that we can get from our drivers or other kayaking tour guides with whom we scheduled to meet.

<i>Day</i>	<i>Activity</i>
1	Flight into Bishkek and book into accommodation. Check equipment.
2	Meet guide/ driver. Potentially pick up car(s). Sort supplies – food, money etc
3	Drive to Kekemeren region
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	Drive to Big Naryn region
9	Multiday?
10	
11	
12	
13	Little Naryn
14	
15	
16	
17	Issyk Kul Region
18	
19	
20	
21	
22	Revisit little Naryn on way back to Bishkek
23	
24	
25	
26	Paddle alamedin - Main
27	Travel to Bishkek. Sort luggage and equipment for flights.
28	Flight from Bishkek to London

5.2. Our Final Itinerary

When we arrived, Tomass Marnics— an authority on whitewater kayaking in Kyrgyzstan—happened to be in the capital, Bishkek, and invited us to dinner. We outlined our plan to him: seven rivers we would complete in a clockwise loop around Issyk Kul—the endorheic saline lake that dominates the North East of the country: the Kekemerren, the Chu, the Chon-Kemin, Karakol, Sarydzhaz, the Naryn and the Eki-Naryn.

The Kekemerren, we were told, would be too high at the start of August, so with a strike of the biro, it was moved in sequence to the end of our trip—in four weeks’ time, when the snowmelt and glacial flows would be lower. Aside from that, he approved of our intentions, though informed us that it would take longer to drive to Karakol than we were anticipating—the road we were intending to use exists only in the imagination of Google Maps. Our true trip itinerary is given below:

<i>Day</i>	<i>Activity</i>
16/08	London - Group 1 fly from Heathrow
17/08	Bishkek - Group 1 arrive in Bishkek and get essentials, group 2 depart.
18/08	Bishkek - Group 2 arrive in Bishkek minus 2 boats, exploration
19/08	Bishkek - Packing, shopping, money withdrawal to pay drivers
20/08	River Chu – Drive to and paddle river
21/08	Chon Kemin – Drive up Chon Kemin Valley
22/08	Chon Kemin – paddle
23/08	Chon Kemin – paddle
24/08	Issyk Kul – Drive to Ak-Say canyon on the Issyk kul on route to Karakol
25/08	Karakol – Drive to Karakol and find hostel
26/08	Karakol – paddle Karakol river
27/08	Sarydzhaz – drive to Sarydzhaz over 3800 metre pass, ice cave
28/08	Sarydzhaz – paddle upper Sarydzhaz
29/08	Sarydzhaz – paddle most of middle Sarydzhaz
30/08	Sarydzhaz – paddle lower half of middle Sarydzhaz, explore 2km mineshaft
31/08	Karakol – Drive back to Karakol and find nice hostel
01/09	Big Naryn – Drive to the Big Naryn over 4000 metre Barskoon pass
02/09	Big Naryn – Paddle starting multiday
03/09	Big Naryn – Multiday
04/09	Big Naryn – Finish Multiday
05/09	Eki Nayrn – Paddle upper half of ‘Mini Gorge’
06/09	Eki Nayrn – paddle all of the ‘Mini Gorge’
07/09	Kekemerren – Drive to the Kekemerren region
08/09	Kekemerren – paddle ‘Lower Playrun’ and some of ‘Lower Classic’
09/09	Kekemerren – paddle ‘Upper Playrun’ and ‘Lower Classic’
10/09	Bishkek – Drive back to Bishkek
11/09	Bishkek – general tourist activities, first group leaves
12/09	Bishkek – general tourist activities, second group leaves

6. Expedition Diary/River Reports

6.1. Arrival in Bishkek

6.1.1 Day 0

A very eager group of five kayakers arrived early at Heathrow airport, ready to start the journey to Bishkek. So early in fact, that upon arrival, our check in desk was still 2 hours away from opening for the day. We took the time to do some networking with the Heathrow staff, making sure we knew what was in store once we finally made it to check in with our kayaks.

Once the gates finally opened, our group managed to take our (massively over-weight) boats through airport without issue; the man at oversized luggage simply didn't care, although the objectively absurd nature of our baggage raised a few eyebrows and no shortage of photographs. We had a quick pint after passing through security to celebrate, and because we now had a significant amount of time to kill on account of being so early.

Although our flight was delayed, we made it to Istanbul to find our second flight was equally delayed and so our layover was less hectic than we anticipated.



6.1.2 Day 1

Immigration let us into the country!

All our boats were there!

Victor was there! He has a very soviet looking 4x4—on the dash there’s an attitude indicator of the kind you don’t normally see outside or an airplane cockpit. What are we getting ourselves into? Victor doesn’t speak a huge amount of English but is good at lashing boats onto the roof. He reassures us that the second driver, Ivan, is still available and will meet with us later; also informing us that Tomas Marnics has invited us to dinner. Tomas is the world expert regarding whitewater kayaking in Kyrgyzstan. He doesn’t take too long to size us up and let us know that the first river we were planning to run will be too high at this time of year (Levels are better across the country in September). When he hears we have mainly 1/2-slices, he laughs. That said, he provides us much invaluable knowledge about put-ins, take-outs and more accurate grades for sections that have very sparse information available about them online. We become much more excited about our planned multi-day on hearing that it was Nouria Newman’s favourite section the year he showed her around the country. (Even though she found it very chill; who know how we’ll find it...). We also meet Ivan, as promised; who, it transpires, is Victor's dad. Which was another bit of information we wouldn’t have had were it not for Tomas. The burgers we had to eat were incredible value for money; we feel pretty rich in Kyrgyzstan—Is this how Andy feels all of the time?

Meanwhile, in London, the 2nd group are having fun at the airport... Yesterday, after the first group had left, the man at oversized luggage must have been severely reprimanded for allowing so much kit through that was clearly contravening the airlines weight policy; or perhaps, he’d not slept well overnight and was in a foul mood; maybe his wife had recently left him for someone who looks exactly like Ethan Beech. Whatever the reason, the second group were not breezing through the airport check-in as we had. They were made to pull all of the kit out of their boats and had everything thoroughly swabbed for explosives/ drugs.

None were found... until Sam’s boat was searched. “‘Ello, ‘ello, ‘ello, what do we have here, son?” Said the security officer, as he pulled out a rectangular block of some unknown solid white substance from the boat. After a great deal of testing, the security personnel concluded that Sam wasn’t smuggling cocaine in his Kendal mint cake, nor was he intending to use it to blow up the aircraft. They were let through to go to the gate and the boats accepted.



We’re not entirely sure what happened to two of the boats—whether they stayed in London for an extra day or missed their connection in Istanbul—but everything else, and everyone, would make it to Bishkek.

6.1.3 Day 2

Following their initial sprint around Heathrow airport, the second group had a relatively relaxed two flights, arriving in Bishkek in the early hours of the 18th. Good thing too, because their travel chaos was not over yet!

As the luggage appeared through the oversized baggage doors at Manas International Airport, the group started counting the equipment through. One boat, two boats, three... where the hell are the third and fourth boats? As time passed, it soon became apparent that Ethan and Sam's boats had not made the trip, likely still being checked for drugs back in Heathrow Terminal 2.

Whipping out their not so fluent Russian, a phone number was conveyed to the airport staff, and delivery of the missing luggage was promised, although the timeframes for this were unclear!

Regardless, with little they could do at the airport, the second group exited in search of (a likely very bored by this point) Victor, to go to our hostel and meet up with the first group for a late breakfast from the local market. Assorted stuffed breads and some local classics in the form of "meat" Samsa (think Cornish Pasty) were consumed fervently to set up the group for a day of exploring Bishkek!

A long day of general new country faff commenced, with new SIM cards collected, money withdrawn and local markets explored. Ewan and Liam had their first experience of Kyrgyz pricing when purchasing a 12kg watermelon, first confusing the listed price per kg with the overall cost, but still spending only 160 Som (about £1.50) after the initial confusion.

Eager to start their integration into Kyrgyz culture, the group also made the decision to try some of the local delicacy- fermented horse milk - from a street vendor in the market. If the rumours were to be true, the Kymyz was a cure for all illness and a source of strength and vitality, setting the group up for an excellent trip. Essentially a slightly more liquid form of yoghurt, surely it would at least have a probiotic effect and help us adapt to consuming the local cuisine...

The group had dinner at the mega burger place again, consuming perhaps more grease than most would consider wise... I'm sure that Kymyz will help to protect our gut health though...

6.1.4 Day 3

So
How
Is
Today?

I'm glad you asked! Following on from our investigation of the local cuisine yesterday, some of us have become slightly, or not so slightly afflicted by uncontrollable bowel motions! With this being our last day in Bishkek, I hope we can recover nice and quickly in time for our kayaking!

Regardless, we still had things to do today, and a slight illness wasn't stopping anyone! Peter, Ewan, Jonah and Liam left early in search of something resembling a supermarket, trying a few magazines before finally finding a proper store - Globus! Resembling a cross between Lidl and Wholefoods, it was time to put those two weeks of Duolingo into practice and create some culinary masterpieces. With

no shopping list, but enough hours to lose all semblance of sanity, they have now returned with wild plans for a булгар пшеница tomato pilaf (WTF is that?), and wild ideas of replacing mash and gravy with mash and soup. Perhaps we won't be recovering from our illnesses after all! The four-hour shopping experience finally came to an end once Ewan received a long awaited phone call:

'we have your luggage'

'Where is our luggage. Is it our boats'

'Yes big. We deliver, where are you stay'

'Tunduk hostel, we leave tomorrow morning. We can collect'

'No, we deliver'

Call disconnects immediately... I think that was promising?

The second group of James, Cameron and Sam headed off to the Expedition shop in central Bishkek with the task of finding camping gas. Expecting a regular shop, the sight of what appeared to be a slightly large shopping trolley didn't fill them with confidence. However, gas was found, and an additional extra-large gas canister, just in case, all for less than £40! With this task complete, the group decided to hit up the local pubs to celebrate. Feeling slightly homesick, they aimed for one of the few signs in English - the BBC pub. Would you believe it, not only were they able to get 6 pints for £8, but they even found an imperial crest and whipped off their T-shirts to pose with it. I'm sure the other patrons were pleased!

The final group, Edoardo and Ethan, were tasked with collecting our Military border zone passes from the random hotel that seems to have bribed the government to be the sole distributor of these passes. Despite this being a fairly quick and simple task, 'essential' detours past the British Embassy meant this group didn't get back to the hostel until very late. 'You haven't really visited a country until you have seen your own embassy there' - said only one person in the history of ever.

The final task for the day was withdrawing money to pay our drivers. How hard could it be to withdraw \$3000? Peter had scouted out some banks earlier, so surely James could just pop in and out... Or maybe not. Following extensive discussions over google translate, James was asked to leave the soon to close bank and stood around outside trying to plan our next steps! The drivers needed paying tonight! About 5 minutes passed when the security guard and the bank manager approached and invited James back into the bank, and down into the basement. Nobody knows what happened down there, but James reappeared with the money, which we subsequently found to be about twice the GDP per capita of Kyrgyzstan. That would explain why it was so hard to obtain! By this point the whole group had appeared, ready to escort James back to the safety of the hostel!

The evening was spent packing, having a couple of cold beers, and making use of the hostel swimming pool - it's always wise to get some last-minute practice in. We walked to get dinner downtown at a restaurant that was far too nice for the bill for all 9 of us to come to <£70 and served slightly more traditional food than our previous establishments. The trip was now well and truly beginning.

6.2. Chu

The footage from the Chu can be found on our YouTube channel here:

<https://youtu.be/wN695esmj1Y?si=NaprSOyVgIEWhxbC>

6.2.1 Day 4

It was finally Chu's-day, and time to run the Chu. So named because you can *chu-chu* the entire section; however, before long we realized that we may have bitten off more than we could chu.

We left Bishek behind, and with it the showers, washing machine, comfortable beds and swimming pool of the hostel. At least there'd be plenty more opportunity for swimming. We drove North along the border Kazakhstan before turning East, heading to the section of the Chu we intended to paddle. But one can't paddle on an empty stomach, so we stopped off at a small diner to sample the local noodle soup, flatbread and dumplings.

Ok, first river of the trip, the Chu:

After 400m or so of flat from the put-in, the wave train begins... and never ends. Increasing in intensity from class 2 to 3+/ 4-. We'd got on pretty late in the afternoon, but all was going well, until Jonah swam. It wasn't a bad swim, but the section is a little gorged in between very steep high banks, so reuniting boat and swimmer took quite a while, and by the time we'd done that Jonah had decided he'd had enough and opted to walk off. ("Don't worry Jonah, we've got you pregnant" was the message the drivers texted him when arranging the pick-up).

We were into the evening now, and I was getting cold enough to put on a shorty cag despite the warm water. I'd spend a while hand surfing and rolling in a hole after a failed paddle-toss over a footbridge; but because the water felt almost like a swimming pool, I wasn't at all panicked. As the sun started to set over the cliff faces, that was beginning to change; stress levels were rising.

How far did we have left? How dark would it get?

After the confluence with the Chon Kemin, the water temperature drastically dropped. And it was only getting darker - paddling the Dart Loop blind is one thing, but this? At last we turned a corner and saw the road bridge we were planning to check in with the drivers at; this would be today's take-out. We scrambled up the bank/ cliff face and got changed by torchlight. Then a little nighttime off-roading to the spot where we'd wild camp.

After destroying the rice (and our lungs from the fumes), Ewan adapted the situation: discarding the ashen remains of the rice and begging to cook up the pasta. All seemed to be going ok—pasta's pretty hard to mess up, right? Wrong. After brilliantly boiling the pasta to a perfect just-past-al-denté, he got greedy, started to think of himself as a cordon bleu chef, and hubris got the better of him.

"Some of the powdered mac-and-cheese sauce would be the perfect added touch, no?" That may be so Ewan, but why oh why did you have to pour an entire packet of powdered starch all over our pasta?? The second pan of carbohydrates had been rendered inedible by the cruel hand of Ewan Bagcoe.

I fear I cannot go on writing. My thumbs struggle to move to the letters on my phone. My god, I'm so hungry. It's 23.34, please let there be food soon.



6.3. Chong Kemin

The footage from the Chon Kemin can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/TSfBFs7lZo8?si=riaLUayGQJh5ubiz>

6.3.1 Day 5

Today consisted of off road driving heading upstream along the Chon Kemin river (North of the huge Issyk Kul lake that dominates this region). We stopped to scout the grade 5 occasionally; it scared us. The river was definitely higher than the videos we had seen, and the once blue water was a silty shade of grey! At one stop we gathered and ate orange wild berries alongside an unassuming section of grade 2. Unassuming that is, aside from the roar coming from around the next corner, where the walls of the river gorged up and formed a series of huge crashing holes. Safe to say we will avoid this section!

After about four hours, we got to the field that would be today's campsite, complete with an enclave next to the river lined by fir trees where we set up a tarp to shelter our cooking area. We put up the tents in the light and ate lunch—realising that a single sausage and can of mackerel wouldn't be sufficient in future.

We spent the afternoon hours napping, reading, or taking a walk up the nearby hills for the view. The altitude (over 2400m) was very noticeable, with heart rates over 160 BPM recorded simply walking up the hills!

In the evening we had mashed potatoes, vegetables and beef. Thankfully much of the cooking relied on a single pot of boiling water and was easy enough for even our group to manage. There was however the gravy... Having been unable to find gravy in the shop, Liam and Peter, in their infinite wisdom, decided that we could substitute gravy with very concentrated beef noodle soup. The added crunch and copious salt definitely added something... At least we won't be getting cramp tomorrow!

We finished the night with a beer by the fire, expertly lit by James. An early night will ensure that we all feel rested ahead of tomorrow!



6.3.2 Day 6

The CHONKY Chon Kemin

We got up in good time and cooked/ ate with haste—incidentally 3 cups of porridge is too much and 2 cups is too few—we wanted to get to the river before levels rose too much. But Sam screwed up by losing a screw to his helmet in the undergrowth. Eventually, we found it and were on our way.

A mere look at the Chon Kemin was enough for Ethan and Jonah; Ewan could only handle the first 200m, and 100m later the rest of us concurred. Fortunately, Ewan had sprinted up the bank with his mamba in time to catch the attention of the drivers/ Ethan + Jonah. Who were presumably expecting to see us all the way at the bottom.

We ‘portaged’ the next km and then got on again. Here it was a little easier (Lower Oetz style wave trains with some sizeable but non-lethal holes). Team media got some excellent media, including a few rolls. I spent a little while exactly vertical in a hole I’d been too slow to avoid before somehow flushing out, still perfectly vertical.

When we got off, a horse borne farmer (“horse-man” - *Victor*) in a flat cap offered to let us camp by his farm house (right at our take out) for a meagre fee and we happily agreed to have access to a sink with running water, an outdoor shower of sorts, and the company of a couple of friendly flea-ridden dogs. (Correction: 3 dogs and a puppy)

It proved impossible to teach the dogs the concept of fetch with the tennis ball we had.

Edoardo cheffed and finally we had enough food for dinner. Why it had never occurred to us before to put the Italian in charge of cooking pasta, I don’t know. We rounded out the day with another beer around the campfire!



6.3.3 Day 7

At breakfast, Ivan showed us his phone; he wanted to communicate something to us over google translate:

“What would you think of me if I took that dog [puppy] for my daughter?”

We all laughed. What a funny joke.

40 minutes later, as we were loading up the vans we were startled to see Ivan gently placing the confused creature into a cardboard box. Apparently he bought it from the farmer (horse-man) for 1000 som. There were now 9 of us + two drivers + one puppy.

We paddled the same section as yesterday, to the same effect—finishing without Ethan, Jonah or Ewan. We had lunch by the side of the river (a wrap with some tomato purée, sausage, and peanuts) and got a little cold (storm clouds were gathering over the nearest ridge, the sound of thunder in the distance). Jonah, Ethan, and I were too cold or too uninterested in the flat section (gd II) to do any more paddling, but it was possible to bully Ewan into it.

The rain clouds broke as the group set off down the section. The vans chased down the single track lane to catch them at various points. The river didn't look quite as flat as we had been led to believe and I think Ewan and I were regretting our choices. Ewan certainly was, and the peer pressure must have eased off because at a bend in the river he got off during a grade 3 wave train.

Ethan and Jonah used this break from driving to check out the precarious-looking footbridge and Ewan joined. Personally I thought balancing on the two planks of God-knows-how-old wood above the water was far more dangerous than being on it in a boat.

After loading Ewan's boat on the roof, we set off down along the river, driving slowly and looking for the group. When we got to the takeout for the “flat” (grade 3+) section without seeing them, we figured we must have missed them and waited. And waited. Then waited a bit longer. Surely they wouldn't have blown past the takeout and into the grade 4/5 gorge?

They had, in fact, unknowingly started the 4/5 section.

By the time we drove down far enough to see them, Cameron and Sam were off the river. Peter and Liam were debating whether or not to run whatever horror was coming up. Edoardo was somewhere. After convincing Peter and Liam that this was not just a hard part of the 2/3 section, they also chose to get out. And the day's paddling was done.

As the gnarlier-than-they-were-expecting paddlers were getting changed, a minibus with a huge roof rack that was driving up the valley pulled over. A swarm of drunk Russians poured out. It transpired that they were rafters who were doing our plan in reverse. One particularly excitable (drunk) one pulled out a guitar and began serenading us.

Sadly, we realised that there would be no first descents left in a 2000 mile radius, as a crew of Russians of indiscernible age and negligible fear of death will have already run everything. Maybe we could be the first group to paddle something sober?

We tried to figure out how to cook Bulger Wheat with no prior experience, or access to google. Cameron beat a dream-team of myself and Sam at chess. Edoardo beat Ivan at backgammon despite having the rules explained to him via sign language (Ivan was definitely going easy on him). The bulgur wheat turned out to be the best meal we'd had so far. The smoke from the fire kept the midges away. A short spell of rain sent us to bed.





6.4. Karakol

The footage from the Karakol can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/IWOeDYZQkME?si=qxZCkYli-Fx35FTY>

6.4.1 Day 8

Sadly, this is our last day with the puppy so we took a group photo before setting off for the long drive East. With some kit in the boats, the vans are pretty comfortable and those in Victor's get treated to his music playlist—which seems to be the entirety of Spotify on shuffle.

We descended the rocky single track and joined a main highway. As we drove East, the landscape shifted from a sort of cross between Snowdonia and the Austrian alps to a much more arid picture similar to Arizona.

When we took the fork south of the lake, the landscape changed again: ahead of us on the straight highway, there were a series of mountain ranges, the very far ones looked Himalayan; to the right, there was an expanse of sandy-orange rock that looked as if it had been hewn into many sand dunes; to the left, there was a lush green field stretching to the cyan lake in the distance. In the field was a camel.

The temperate had risen to the high 20s and we drank our communal bottle of red roadside KVAC to keep hydrated. Victor's playlist had changed from Polovinka, to the Red Hot Chili Peppers, via Too Many Zoos and Queen.

Edoardo bought a kalpak (traditional white headpiece) at the market earlier and has not yet taken it off. By tradition, he cannot be killed whilst wearing it, the would-be murderer would fear being afflicted by the inevitable bad luck that would follow.

We turned off the highway onto a track that gradually became rougher and rougher, then took another turn following a "feel like nomad" sign into a small canyon.

We followed the twists and turns of the canyon for five minutes until it opened up to a beach that stretched as far as the eye could see, the small waves of the sea lapping at the shore ahead of us.

At least, it looked like a sea; this was the great lake Issyk Kul stretching into the horizon. It was a stunning location to wild camp for the night; the light blue lake before us, and behind, in the far distance, snow-capped mountains.

We swam in the lake to cool off before pitching our tents and starting on the egg fried rice—the cooking was going well until the sun set and the sandflies emerged. So so many sandflies. About [redacted] made it into the pan and became additional protein.

Stars filled the sky this cloudless night and guided by chief astrologer Liam we were able to identify some constellations and the North Star.

6.4.2 Day 9

Today we were driving to Karakol—the fourth largest city in Kyrgyzstan at the far Southeast end of Issyk Kul. It was a long enough drive that we stopped for an hour for lunch to break up the journey. We pulled over next to the lake and went for a swim before assembling our standard mackerel/peanut/chorizo/cheese wraps. An exciting evening lay ahead of us because tonight we were staying at a hostel—so we'd be able to sleep in a bed and take a shower!

We got to Karakol at around 5, and so had a little time to explore in daylight.

I took a stroll down the wide tree-lined boulevards to the north of the city, dropping into a fake, but superior Starbucks for an iced coffee. Then walking past the first of two giant dragons I'd see—at this point we're only about 60 miles from China.

It was still light, and a lovely temperature, so with the mountain range on my left, I walked across town to the large bazaar. The market was just shutting down, but you could see the selection of wares that the locals buy and sell. From spices sold out of large sacks, to prayer mats, to sports equipment and lingerie.

This town, though small, is popular with tourists because of its proximity to the nearby mountain range (there are a number of stores from which one can hire skis in the winter). As such, it has a bar with all the essentials for the western traveller: dart board, fuzzleball table, and Guinness on tap. It looked good on google maps, so we decided to go to The Hut.

But first, pre-drinks. Victor produced a bottle of homemade vodka from somewhere and communicated to us that he wanted to share. We each toasted *За здоровье* as we had a shot or two. Except for Sam, who had about 10 shots over the course of an hour. He seemed a little tipsy, but more than capable of the 15-minute walk, so we took him along to the bar.

It was pretty small, but nicely decorated, with make peace not war written around the top of the walls in different languages with their flags, a board of foreign currencies, and Tibetan prayer flags. The blackboard above the bar listed the prices: 250c for a beer. This was probably more than 2x what a local would expect to pay somewhere else, but 1/3rd the price of a pint in London, so we had 3x to make up for it.

Edoardo has a hidden talent: he's moderately good at fuzzleball. Good enough to beat us all individually, and almost good enough to beat a combined team of the rest of us (minus Sam, who had passed out long ago).

Sam did regain consciousness briefly, and in a massive lapse of judgement, we allowed him to play darts. Until he threw a dart into a stranger's hat, proving himself to be too much of a danger to all others around him.

The fact that Edoardo was good at fuzzleball had got around, and someone suggested he might be a match for the bartender. He was not. He lost in humiliating fashion, 10-0. Italy should be ashamed.

I proposed a drinking game that I remembered from my younger days to decide who would pick up the tab. And lost.

We asked the bartender if any places were still open for food, he told us only Pizza Imperium was, so half of us set off to there, whilst Jonah and Ethan dragged Sam's motionless body back to the hostel.

The pizza place was actually a fancy sit-down restaurant, but we were able to get a table at 1230am on a Monday. We ordered our food and waited. And waited. And waited. Ewan stole a plate of dumplings from a neighbouring table. We waited a little longer, and just as we were about to head out, the pizzas arrived. We do not recommend the establishment, but the leftover pizza was great for lunch the next day.



6.4.3 Day 10

It was finally time to do some more paddling. At this point, we'd all sort of forgotten that's why we were here.

A few lines in whitewater.guide told us that the lower Karakol is a 5km grade 3 or 4, but there's not much else about it online.

It turns out that this river is a better version of the Gyronde. Other than a bridge with some pretty narrow pillars that would make for a nasty pin, there's nothing to be particularly worried about here. But it's very continuous. The lack of eddies and never-ending wave train/ small holes, and rocks to avoid make it a grade 3 river for grade 4 paddlers

It didn't take us long to get to the takeout, where we admired the view (it looks as though a part of Switzerland has been dropped here), and had some pizza.

Ewan and I made a TikTok whilst the others played with a foam toy glider that Peter had fished out of an eddy.

We'd enjoyed rediscovering whitewater kayaking enough to get back into our wet kit for a second lap— at the end of which we were pretty tired and in desperate need of calories.

Ivan/ Victor recommended a restaurant in Karakol which we were initially sceptical about due to our disappointing lunch at a cafe serving the local meal of cold noodle soup.

This restaurant however was very good. We sat cross legged on cushions surrounding a large central table and read through the menu. There was so much choice. Too much choice really, and we decided to order many communal dishes and split them. Only Cameron, Ewan, and I wanted to split a bottle of "mixed Kyrgyz wines". We were glad when it arrived and was recognisably wine.

We had: various breads, spicy Chinese soup, a horse meat dish, dumplings, rakmat, dragon's tongue, and many others. When we were all full, the meat tray appeared. So much meat. Too much meat.

Half of us had a fun £0.50 taxi ride back to the hostel, the rest of us walked. We were expecting another sleepless night because of the lack of a/c, but keeping the door open kept the temperature tolerable. Sadly it did nothing for the meaty, socky aroma.





6.5. Sarydzhaz

The footage from the Upper Sarydzhaz can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/EAFygoqVQV0?si=AXudmNa9sjP5xFWu>

The footage from the Middle Sarydzhaz can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/KlxysFpe8jY?si=vuBKrqzhhFcBEDqs>

6.5.1 Day 11

Well it's happened - the drivers have finally given up on our food. Today Victor decided to show us what breakfast should be, by preparing Shakshouka to fuel us in the long drive to the scary jazz (Sarydzhaz). Before setting off the drivers filled up a variety of containers with petrol, preparing for what we are told is the most remote region of Kyrgyzstan.

The drive takes us through scenery similar to that of Tuscany, only distinguished by the prevalence of Ladas on the roads here, and a not insignificant number of people riding on the roof racks of their vehicles. The drivers are occasionally exchanging information by walkie talkie, although the permanent low battery warning requires that they are only switched on occasionally. To indicate when, each driver would wave their walkie talkie out of the window and wait for the static and broken Russian to kick in like the sound from a film or video game. I guess it works great while we have good line of sight...

BANG! A sudden lurch in Ivan's car indicates that the rear left wheel has finally had enough of the bumpy terrain! Ivan pulls to the side of the road, just in time to watch Victor disappear around the next corner - so much for those walkie talkies! Ivan throws a rock under the wheel to stop the car rolling and sprints off after Victor, while Ethan, Jonah and Liam wait with the car. Thankfully before too long, the second car returns and Victor and Ivan demonstrate their mechanical prowess by quickly swapping the tyre for one of our three spares.

We continue up the mountain pass, cresting over 3800 metres in altitude at its peak. Just below the peak, our drivers pulled off the road, eager to show us something. Leading us up the side of the mountain, Victor directs us into a stunning ice cave. As we walk along, the perfectly formed ice crystals distract us from the increasing yellow glow of the rock. That is until we reach the end of the cave and it looks like a pool of toxic waste on the floor. I sure hope that wasn't uranium!

As we continued to drive, Victor's playlist took an unexpected turn into Jazz tunes. Ewan keeps asking if we can do a first descent of the small stream next to us, but I'm not sure it's large enough to float a kayak!

We crossed through the military checkpoint without issue (nobody got the chance to tick off the relevant bingo item), and finally got our first look at the not so scary jazz. Driving upstream revealed more grade 1-2 paddling for about 20km, before we pulled off into a dark field to camp and prepare dinner. It was chilli tonight to help us deal with the cold temperatures up at 9400ft, and James decided that the chilli would be most effective if made extra spicy. One bag of pure black pepper later, Ivan was not able to stomach the spice - we will have to bear that in mind for the future!

We spent an hour appreciating the extra dark skies, breaking out various cameras to try and capture the stars, before heading off to bed ready for a long day of kayaking tomorrow.



6.5.2 Day 12

Following the luxury of our Shakshouka breakfast yesterday, we decided to push the boat out and have eggs and bread today, accompanying the usual porridge. We decided we had driven far enough upriver and we prepared to put on the “Grade 3+” section, which as we had seen yesterday was very much a grade 2. Liam decided that a more relaxed paddling position could be used today and loosened the backrest on his boat accordingly.

For a while it looked as though the most exciting part would be close to the very start, when Sam made friends with a farmer on river left who provided us with 4 apples to share. You could tell how boring the river was, as Ewan had started to turn on the go-pro for even a singular wave or hole. And thank God he did or we wouldn’t have captured Liam’s perfect back loop in the only hole for the entire 20km section! He says he was just doing it for the bingo points, but when we stopped for lunch, that backrest got tightened right back up (and probably a bit more so than it was before)!

Lunch was the usual sausage, mackerel and cheese wraps, subsided with some leftover chilli from the night before. The river improved slightly after lunch, maybe warranting a grade 3 and we passed the military checkpoint. About 1km further down, we also passed a disused gold dredger, which although creating an interesting looking siphon, Liam did manage to avoid.

The takeout appeared just as we were getting into it, but the promise of un-inspected grade 4 (5-) did not tempt anyone (too much). As the drivers made their way down the steep mountain track to reach us, a rather inquisitive horse started to approach, clearly intrigued by Peter’s attempts at communication.

Once the cars were packed, we set off to scout the upcoming section for tomorrow's paddling, yet again to the tune of Victor's Jazz. Suddenly Ewan burst out with 'Oh ****. It's Jazz because we are in the Scary Jazz', and Victor turned around with the biggest grin we had seen all trip. Of course, that was topped almost immediately when Victor heard that Ewan was considering running the grade 4 (5-), his laughter booming off the surrounding mountains. However he did also inform us that the river was at least 30 cm lower than normal, so perhaps there is a chance.

After driving down to see the whole section and get our first glimpse of the abandoned town of Englchek, we turned back around to camp closer to the put in. Edoardo prepared another pasta dish, whilst Ewan released his animal instincts by defecating in the nearby farmer's barn (about 2 minutes before said farmer appeared to chat to Peter). Ivan subsequently brought out some inconspicuous water bottles from the back of his car. Oh he's offering it around... in shot glasses?

Yep, so it turns out those water bottles were actually an emergency supply of homemade Vodka (alcohol percentage unknown, but noticeably high). The quality was far superior to the bottom shelf Tesco's vodka we were used to, and even Peter was convinced to have a shot.

This, it turns out, was exactly the trap Ivan had been waiting for us to fall into. He hurriedly said something to Victor in Russian, and Victor translated: 'In Russian tradition, 3 shots is lucky number. You must have 2 more!'. Not wanting to offend the local culture, we did as instructed, although with the way the shots were being poured, I'm pretty sure each one was a triple on its own!

[By the second shot, Peter had to take a seat, his normally impeccable balance thrown off by the alcohol he was so unaccustomed to. By the third shot, we were in for a treat, with comments such as "I need emergency Peter portions", "my spoon doesn't work" (note at this time it was upside down), and "I can balance better than you" (said whilst walking backwards into a box and tripping over). To avoid further embarrassment, Peter ended up hiding in the front seat of the car, his face covered by a beanie for 'disguise']. *This information was not able to be verified*

Overall a successful evening. Hopefully we don't feel this one too much in the morning!



6.5.3 Day 13 – The Carnage Highlight Day

The weather of North Wales seems to have found us. Guess what was for breakfast. That's right: 2.5 cups of porridge! The plan for today is the scary bit of the Sarydzhas. We'd scouted 2 of the 3 hardest sections yesterday leaving only the section hidden in first canyon—impossible to scout from the road, but perhaps viewable after a 200m scramble up the less sheer roadside face of the canyon. Edoardo went for a look. Perhaps not so much. In the end, we didn't scout it but it wasn't horrendous.

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The second canyon contained the crux rapid for this river. A big grade 5- with a powerful right to left curler leading directly into a powerful hole on river left, and no shortage of upstream holes and waves to catch you out and push you off-line.

Following an inordinate amount of faff (no, Ethan. You can't climb out via the sheer 50m cliff face!), the whole group made it to river left to scout/portage the feature. With the duration of the faff and the bitter cold, all but Peter decided to walk around. Liam, eager as ever led the way, deciding he was better than to need ropes to carry his boat across the scree slopes. With the Rewind on his shoulder and paddle in hand, he stepped onto a loose rock, slipping over backwards and slamming into the ground. Sliding down the slope towards the roaring rapid, all he could think was 'if I lose my boat here, that's my expedition over'. Whilst honourable, this was perhaps not wise, as the Rewind dragged him to within a metre of the 3m drop down into the mega hole below, Liam then lay there for the next couple of minutes contemplating what had just happened (and the complete agony in his backside).

Cameron, Ewan and Edoardo stayed out with ropes and cameras to watch Peter, while Liam got in his boat at the bottom for safety. I'm sure Peter won't need them, but it never hurts to be prepared!

One down! Peter drives around the first couple of holes, then punches directly through the right arm of the V-shaped wave, heading towards the safety of river right. Just one more hole to boot and get right of the rock, up on the safe side of the curler... Oh no. The hole grabs the tail of the ripper two, dragging Peter left of the rock and into the meat of the curler.

To take you back about 20 minutes, Peter and Liam had been discussing this exact worst case scenario and what to do from this position. 'Just reach over with one big right stroke to get up and onto the curler' Peter said, and that is what he would now attempt to execute!

With all his might, Peter pulled a powerful right stroke, his boat creeping up the side of the curler, all the while moving further left toward the hole. Up. And left. And up... and straight over backwards, straight into the mega hole.

Panic erupted on the bank, whilst below the rapid Liam started to wonder why he hadn't accepted Cameron's offer of a second person in a boat at the bottom. Briefly out of sight, Peter reappeared facing upstream and drifting rapidly towards the abrasive black rock that dominated the right half of the river. If he ends up on that rock, the best-case scenario is some serious cuts. The worst case, safe to say the siphon on river right looked unpleasant.

Thankfully Peter has the same realisation. A strong ferry glide and he is past the rock. Relief floods onto his face. The water in his ears preventing him from hearing the shouts on the bank. 'GO LEFT OF THE POUROVER!'. You see, having made it past the rock, Peter had forgotten the final move before the

rapid was over and was heading towards the top of a powerful pourover on the middle left of the river. Thankfully, Peter reacted just in time to avoid the clutches of a second mega hole.

As the others put in about the final pourover, Sam pointed out that it would be cleaner to ferry across to the right of the pourover, rather than the small chute on river left that Peter and Liam had taken. Ewan on the other hand decided that he could make his own decisions. Specifically, the decision to run the mega hole backwards, as that is the only explanation for his complete failure to paddle during the ferry glide. A quick roll followed, but he washed out. This was however the final straw for Ewan and Ethan, who subsequently took out at the next available opportunity.

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Feeling hungry but also nearing the end of the river, the others decided to paddle on without a lunch break into the third canyon of big big water (>Inn or Oetz). A large bridge loomed over the river, just as the walls of the canyon closed in, creating some gargantuan waves. A powerful current pushed into an undercut on river right, so the line involved lots of left momentum, straight over all the waves. Thank God they were waves, because if any of the crests had crashed down into a hole, I don't think there was anything any of us could have done about it!

Just around the next corner, I was munched by the mother of all holes—biggest hole I've ever seen anyone get munched by in person, excepting Ethan. A little past the road bridge at the end of one box canyon, the river takes a right turn and then dead centre is the hole of regret.

The entire section is a game of "wave or hole" and on this occasion Edoardo, Sam, and I guessed wrong. Edoardo was far enough left to avoid its gravitational pull, Sam far enough right to skirt around it, I was dead centre.

At the bank, Cameron told Peter to be ready for a swim, Liam was getting out of his boat reaching for a throw line. All this was unknown to me as I embarked on my personal battle with the hole.

I'd seen it so late that instead of being side on attempting to flee, I was pretty straight as I crested the upstream side of it. This would often be enough to plot through the average hole, but this was no average hole.

As I plummeted down the upstream slope, I pulled a strong stroke in a desperate attempt to climb up the foam pile on the other side. As I descended down into the depths of the hole, I realised just how screwed I was. The water towered over me. It was about a boat length from the bottom to the top of the hole. This was bad.

I resigned myself to this being my world for the foreseeable future. And the likely event of my boat being swept downriver to China. (It would be entirely unreasonable to expect anyone to chase it down this section, not knowing what was coming up.)

The desperate pull on my left blade and the speed I was already carrying was enough to climb most of the way up the enormous oppressive face of the hole into the foam pile at the top.

I was vaguely aware that the eddy and safety lay to the left and threw on a huge amount of left edge in an attempt to carve out of the hole. (It was, at least, fairly narrow.)

Now sitting perpendicular to the river near the apex of the top, I had a whole new perspective: looking down over my left shoulder, there was nothing but six feet of air. I started to fall into the empty space.

The black void began to close in around me. The hole had won. At least the first round.

At the bottom of such a powerful hole one feels a bit like a rag doll and I can't recall if I rolled (was rolled) or not. The GoPro footage doesn't help—it's all just black.

At some point though, I felt pressure on my right paddle blade. A great deal of pressure. The shaft was ripped away from my left hand. Apparently at this point, my left arm could be seen flailing.

The battle between me and the hole now condensed to one central fight: whether or not I could keep hold of the paddle.

On the Chu, I'd been surfed in a hole without a paddle (just because I'd been playing about). It had been much harder to exit that pretty small hole than one would otherwise expect. In fact it had taken a couple of hand rolls and loading the slicey stern of the ripper to get pushed out.

The difference between that hole and this being like the difference between a kitten and an adult tiger, if I lost the paddle I may as well use my remaining breath to (attempt to) swim out.

On the other hand, every pound of force on the paddle was a pound of force dragging me to the side of the hole and safety.

Fingers slipping, despite the grip tape, I held on with my right hand with all the strength I had left as character in an action movie might hold on to the landing rail of a helicopter suspended above a city. The hero always manages to hold on, the villain's grasp always gives way. I had no way of knowing what would happen to me.

As slowly and suddenly as the darkness had set in, it became light again. The force on the paddle relented. I'd made it to the left side of the hole and was being flushed out.

Now able to grab hold with my left hand, I wasted no time in darting to the eddy. Where Cameron (looking as relieved as I felt) offered me congratulations on my survival.

I would live to paddle into another hole after all.

...

And paddle into another hole I did! The exhaustion was taking its toll now, and the whole group was struggling to make the continuous moves from side to side across the river, slaloming between the holes. Mercifully this hole only flipped my boat once, and a weak back deck just about restored my balance. It's time to get off!

...

This evening, we set our sights on camping by the famous hot springs, just downstream of the town of Engilchek. We stopped in the abandoned town to fill up our water, finding it to be not so abandoned (apparently it still has a population of around 150), and an interesting mix of dilapidated buildings and a brand new football pitch with colourful LED lights.

The road down to the hot springs was by far and away the worst yet, with people having to hang off the side of the van as a counterweight to stop us tipping over the crumbling edge of the road. Dinner tonight was an interesting take on Tiroler Groestl by Liam, best described as oil with a bit of meat and potatoes to accompany it, topped with a sprinkling of sand.

Settling down to sleep, the sound of the river fuels my nightmares of being stuck in that hole!







6.5.4 Day 14

Following a very long day of kayaking yesterday, today we had a slow and relaxed morning. We took the opportunity to bathe in the (very) hot springs, managing to fit almost the whole group in for a photo at one point. The morning was so relaxed in fact, that we even ended up having lunch before leaving the campsite (finally finishing one of the two massive watermelons Ivan had purchased in Karakol).

We decided that today we would try to finish the last part of the middle Sarydhaz, which we had been too tired to complete yesterday. We started with a 'scout' of the final gorge, walking up as far as we could from the bottom of the gorge. We could see the end of the final rapid, which had a siphon on river left, but we were unable to see any higher up. Regardless we assumed it was probably fine and decided to run the section.

We started just above the bridge that marked the beginning of the third canyon. Most of us decided to simply walk down to the river to put in, but Peter and Edoardo had different ideas. Ivan had noticed a small tributary coming in on river right, with a nasty 3 metre weir drop onto some rebar-ridden rocks. Regardless, upon pointing this drop out to Peter, he started planning out his line, with Edoardo slowly becoming convinced as well.

As always, Peter made the line look easy, with a nice boof and some right to left momentum keeping his nose up and his boat far away from the rocks on river right. Now it was Edoardo's turn! Deciding that this was his opportunity to one up Peter, Edoardo aimed to perform a boof worthy of an Instagram post – which in fairness he did achieve, although perhaps he had not been targeting @the_beater_academy! Missing the lip entirely, Edoardo plunged vertically down the drop, the nose of his boat dredging up some large rocks and throwing them out of the water! Somehow the boat wasn't damaged, although the same cannot be said for Edoardo's pride!

James successfully avoided the mega hole today. The big water moves across the river were working a bit better now everyone had got some rest! We quickly made it down to the final canyon.

Well... so much for that scouting. As the walls closed in, Peter and Cameron realised that there was quite a lot more rapid than initially expected, and very few places to scout it. In a very questionable micro eddy, Peter jumped out onto the left bank to try and get a better view of the rapid. An extended hand signal conversation with Cameron then ensued, instilling much fear in the paddlers further upstream.

Following this, Cameron decided that he should also scout from an equally poor micro eddy on river right, whilst Peter told the others to get out and scramble up the cliff to see if they could also get a view from further back. Eventually a line of river left moving centre then eddying out on the left was agreed on, although us upstream paddlers had no idea what exactly we were heading left of, or where the eddy was...

The plan was to follow each other down closely to pass on the line, but this plan quickly went awry as Cameron slipped out of his eddy, and Peter, precariously balanced on little more than a pebble above his seal launch, soon followed. This left the remaining four paddlers winging the line, with Liam leading the way.

The pressure got to him, and Liam decided to tip upside down in the seam line so he didn't have to lead anymore. Despite the pushy and boily rapid, James nailed the line, keeping close enough to Liam for some excellent video footage. Once the group got to the bottom in an eddy on river right, some questions were asked about the scouting process, especially the non-existent eddy on river left that we had been aiming for. Regardless, everyone had made it down and avoided the siphon, and the rest of the paddle out was a fairly nice grade 2-3.

For the rest of the afternoon, we went to explore the abandoned tin mine, which had once employed the majority of people in the town of Enilchek. Aware of how cold the previous caves had been, most people wrapped up warm for this, although Ivan was rocking just a tank top and shorts - that seems brave. That was at least until we made it 100 m into the cave and started feeling the heat radiating from inside the mountain.

Layers were quickly removed and discarded for collection on the way out, with most going shirtless after the first kilometre of walking. It was at this point that Victor informed us that he had never actually been to the end of the mine, and that his information about its 2km length was possibly inaccurate. We had come too far to want to turn around now, but with this heat, could we even make it to the end and back.

It's hard to put into words the heat in this mine. It was the powerfully dry heat of a sauna, but hotter than any sauna had the right to be. James managed to burn himself on his belt buckle, while the rest of us felt like our eyes were melting. Phones stopped working (thankfully only half of the group were using these for their torches), and the estimated temperature was in excess of 75 degrees.

At last we reached the end of the tunnel, quickly tapping the scalding mine face and posing for a photo before starting the long walk out. This time you could feel it cooling off, and the balance of walking faster to get to the colder air started to make a lot of sense. Ethan and Cameron led the way, and waited at the end to capture photos of the ragged ghost miners as we exited the tunnel. This experience had been too much for Ewan, the heat of the mine doing bad things to his bowels, and he ran off behind some buildings to deal with that.

After some water the group went to check out the other parts of the mine, most noticeably a dilapidated metal structure made of rusting scaffolding. It would appear that Peter, in addition to being a gnarly kayaker and caver, is an avid free climber; he descended 15' of the structure down a route that would make Alex Holland think twice. Others declined to attempt this, although Sam and Liam did find an alternative scramble to get down.

Those three took so long exploring the ground floor of this structure that those of us at the top left them for dead and drove off. Well ok we told Ivan to wait for them, although it turns out he missed them and they had to run about a kilometre downhill to catch back up with the car.

We filled up our water at the soviet ghost town Enilchek—when the mine was open it had a population of some 5,000, now there are fewer than 500 inhabitants. There is, however, a shop that sells cigarettes at less than 1/10th the UK rate; Ethan was delighted and eventually found someone who was willing to lend him the money.

Dinner was Jonah's mother's special of horse meat, peas and rice. With all due respect to the cooks, it wasn't great and at this point I think we ought to give up on rice entirely.





6.6. Big Naryn

The footage from the Big Naryn multiday can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/un5sgZmw0dk?si=UQcQjliWPcO9dkmh>

6.6.1 Day 15

Porridge again :(

Hot springs again :)

Cameron's aeropress coffee :D

Today we're going to drive to the Naryn via Karakol (as soon as I'm found and dragged away from the hot springs).

There, we intend to look at the river, exclaim "this is huge", and possibly paddle it. (By which I mean: put on our dry suits, carry our boats to the river, and then carry them around every feature bigger than Serpent's Tail on the Dee. This we will term "minor portaging", and claim to have paddled the river when we return. But at least that way we will return.)

Just before we left, met a German motorcyclist who had spent 6 months in Germany learning how to ride a bike before setting off to Nepal. He's visiting the hot springs here on his return trip. Another cool individual to add to the collection we've met including Tomas, the cyclist on the Silk Road trail and the climbers.

We explored the abandoned 5-story apartment block in Engilchek—only the bottom part of the concrete staircase was missing, and we trusted the crumbling rebar with our weight. We then climbed into the carcasses of several cars—there's a sign that indicates the Madway Rally is held here

In an effort to make the daily lunch wraps more interesting, we added a tin of squid today (despite the obvious concern re. buying oceanic food stuffs in a very landlocked country). Peter joined Victor and Ivan for a dip in a very cold pond at our lunch spot, although the thick covering of algae on one half of the pond put most of us off (ok maybe it was also the cold too!).

We were all looking forward to dining at the nice restaurant in Karakol again. Even another burst tyre on the same road as last time couldn't dampen our spirits. It also helped that we were booked into a very nice hostel - this one even had proper showers that you felt cleaner after using!

We ended up going to a different restaurant with Victor and Ivan. From the outside it looked more like a greasy spoon cafe, but food was surprisingly nice (once James finally found something that was available)!

6.6.2 Day 16

This morning we awoke early - scratch that - five of us awoke early for the short drive down to Globus for our best planned food shop of the trip. With the possible multiday on the horizon, many portions of instant noodles or similar were acquired.

Returning to the hostel, we were surprised to see margaritas on table - it was still a little early even for us. Turns out, these glasses actually contained jam, which would accompany our Kyrgyz take on a continental breakfast this morning.

Despite having woken up early, the faff law of equivalence struck, and we had some time to kill while the drivers went to get the tyres repaired for the upcoming section of driving. While we waited, we noticed that Victor had sent us a meme overnight! We then passed the time rating committee of different uni canoe clubs based on their insta introductions!

When the drivers returned around 12:00, they were eager to get going, but we had one final stop for our time in Karakol - a trip to the glorious establishment of KFC. The infamous Karakol Fried Chicken may be the less well known chicken shop by the same acronym, but we knew we were in for a treat. Six members of the group shared a KFC KOMBO for lunch (Peter, Edoardo and Liam decided to search for what they called 'safer alternatives' before the long drive and the multiday).

We took a break at Issyk Kul again during the drive, while Ewan and James were 'smiced' with 40% кедровая (whatever that is - it had pictures of acorns on bottle).

Our drive took us through the famous Barskoon 4000m Pass, so named after the Barsk (snow leopards) the live there (unfortunately we didn't see any). In the back of Victor's car, space was running short as all the crisp packets had inflated to more than twice their normal size!

At around 3800m, the pass opened up into a wide expanse of glaciers and lakes that even Peter + Ivan didn't fancy swimming in. It was around this point that we noticed a distinct odour of petrol coming from Victor's car. Surely not, if we break down here we will probably freeze to death!

Following an extensive check of the car engine, nothing was obviously leaking. It was also noticeable that the smell was fading. Or at least it was until we got back in the car and realised its origins. One of the Primus stoves had popped its gasket at the altitude! Maybe we should have thought of that after observing the crisps!

We climbed through the final 200m of the pass, peaking at 4030 metres, before descending back down to the top of the Nayrn multiday. As Victor has promised, it was bitterly cold up here at 3200m, and the Nayrn valley was channelling a powerful wind heading upriver - we ended up using the kayaks as a windbreak! I'm sure that wind won't cause us any other issues...

Dinner was another Bulgar wheat special, and everyone soon settled down for the cold night and the multiday ahead!

6.6.3 Day 17

The day has finally come. For six members of the group, today would be the start of their first ever multiday! From the amount of conversation we were getting out of Sam, anyone would think he was slightly nervous!

Packing the boats proved to be a challenge - I'm not really sure what we were expecting doing a multiday in a fleet of half slices. The rippers turned out to have just enough room, but following a valiant attempt to stuff his sleeping bag into the stern of the small rewind, Liam did have to accept defeat and swap to the mamba for his kit!

The whole morning was taken up with packing, kit checks and repacking again, everyone terrified of leaving something essential behind, but lacking the space to take anything unnecessary.

Following lunch, we set off, the overladen boats feeling incredibly sluggish, and sitting very low in the water as we scraped over the shallow sandy section under the road bridge that marked the put in.

The first 8 km or so was very flat, but that did not come without its challenges! About 2 km down, the wind from last night reappeared with a vengeance, howling upriver and at times almost stopping us in our tracks! Combined with the glacial water, I have never been so fearful of frostbite, regularly trying to move my fingers to keep some form of circulation. To add to the wind, there was also a large herd of horses running ahead of us and kicking up sand, making it almost impossible to see ahead.

Finally the horses crossed the river and headed away from us, just before we reached the first section of grade 3 paddling - about 2 km long. By the end of the first rapid, Peter was shivering violently, and took a quick pause to add more layers under his drysuit - some of us had thought to do this before setting off!

The river opened back up to some more grade 1-2 for 10km, before the hardest section for today, which was about 4 km of grade 3 ending with a 3+. Thankfully the heavy boats were punching straight through any of the holes, and side to side movements across the river were starting to feel less sluggish as we got used to the weight.

Another 5 km down, we started to see the first trees as we finally got below 3000 metres, and with it getting on past 5pm we started looking for a campsite.

Or at least some of us did. Unfortunately that wasn't Cameron or Peter who were out at the front of the group, powering us towards the next major rapid. About 6km on from the first trees, we found a continuous grade 4 section - one I was certainly too tired to tackle today! A quick ferry glide over to Cameron on river left later, I pointed out how sheltered we would be if we camped right here - a decision that the whole group soon agreed to!

After getting our boats up the bank with a little rope work, it was time for the moment of truth. How dry was our kit? The answer for most of us was surprisingly dry - most of us that us except for Liam, whose dry bag of clothes (and all of our toilet paper!) had not been so lucky. At least it wasn't his sleeping bag!

Stuff was laid out to dry, whilst we started to prepare food on the small stoves we had brought with us. Ration packs made a nice change from our cooking, although in Sam's case this still involved a portion of poorly cooked rice!

Whilst most of us had been struggling with our packing this morning, it turns out that Cameron had plenty of space and had even managed to pack 1.5L of beer which was shared around. However by about 8pm, it was cold and dark and everyone had settled down to try and sleep!

6.6.4 Day 18

With plans for a long day of kayaking, the multiday group awoke early and went to start getting ready. That was until they realised that there was a thick frost covering the ground right outside the tent doors. A very brief discussion resulted in the plan for at least 30 more minutes in bed as the sun rose up to melt the frost.

Despite the wait, Peter's shoes were still frozen when he tried to put them on. Liam on the other hand opted for empty ration packs as footwear, avoiding the discomfort of icy wetsuit boots and the cold floor, at the expense of looking like a complete idiot as he tiptoed around.

Our kayaking equipment was laid out to melt in the sun, while we settled down for breakfast. Sam took the opportunity to claim his bingo points by making James a rather substandard coffee, before the faff of repacking the kayaks commenced! Thankfully it could all fit back in and we were soon ready to go.

Well we thought we were. It turns out Liam had packed his wingnuts in the back of his kayak, and needed to empty everything to find them. At least that didn't take too long.

We made our way down to the river, ready to start the section we had been too scared to run last night. At least the sun was out and the wind had died out! We got in the boats. 'Oh for goodness sake'. Liam had managed to put the wingnuts down somewhere! A frantic search ensued, and about 10 minutes later, Liam's footplate finally secured, we were able to set off!

The paddling started off with some fairly continuous grade 3-4 for about 5km. This was a big step up from yesterday and we were quite glad we hadn't attempted it last night. This then flattened out into some grade 2-3 for about 8km, before ramping back up into probably the hardest and longest continuous section with about 8km of grade 4 kayaking.

We stopped for lunch around 15km in, with a noticeable air of concern about the group as if the difficulty kept as high as it was, we would not be managing the 40km we had planned for the day. Peter told us we would only be stopping for 30 minutes, so everyone powered through their lunch and used the remaining time for a quick nap in the now very warm sun!

Setting back off for the first rapid, Peter turned on his borrowed GoPro to capture gnar. However, 500 metres later, said GoPro was nowhere to be seen, the mount having ripped off his helmet despite some fairly clean lines, along with all the embarrassing footage contained within. This was most unfortunate!

Probably the hardest individual rapids of our trip was located at 41°28'44" N 76057'11" E, although there were multiple long and continuous grade 4 sections today, and exact difficulty could vary quite significantly with river level. Thankfully after this 8km of grade 4, the river opened up into some

relatively fast flowing grade 2-3 for around 23km, allowing us to eat up the miles until the end of the day.

We camped just around the corner from one of only 3 yurts we had seen so far this trip. Arriving in the light meant that Cameron, Sam and Liam had time to go and collect firewood, ready for a nice warm fire later this evening. More ration packs were consumed, then everyone gathered around the fire for the evening.

In spite of the fire, we were still good by around 9pm, and as we headed back to the tents, we noticed the leftover water in our mess tins had already frozen into a thick layer of ice. It's going to be another cold night, so we planned a slightly later start for the morning.

6.6.5 Day 19

Waking up at 9am, the multiday was starting to tire everyone out, and a slow start was the order of the day. That was until the local who lived in the yurt around the corner from our campsite started yelling at us across the river. With our non-existent Kyrgyz, we managed to communicate that we were English, and the remainder of the conversation was a poor attempt at sign language. Some ominous crossing of the arms and waving of a red piece of fabric clearly had some meaning, but unable to understand, we simply sped up our packing and got on our way!

Today was relatively relaxed kayaking - mostly grade 2-3 for the whole 22km. There were a couple of individually harder rapids, the most memorable of which was formed by two massive boulders in the river, with a narrow and powerful channel between them. A grade 3+ at our river levels, this could have been worse with more water. The style of kayaking also changed today, with the river noticeably deeper and more walled in with some boils to grab the tails of our lighter but not light half slices. This was more what we had expected of the whole river before getting on, but it had been slightly more alpine until now.

Before too long we were approaching the takeout. A few checks of our phones later (we were acutely aware of the grade 6 waterfall soon after the takeout), we found the house on river left with a cable pulley across the river, and the path starting just upstream of this house on river left, crossing the small tributary on that side and heading up through the trees. It was around 1pm as we got off the river, and we decided to commit to the '30 minute hike out' that Tomas had promised us before stopping for lunch...

Equipped with the power of the KCS (Kayak Carrying System), masterminded by James (despite hours of Peter trying to one up this design), this should be a walk in the park. We even stopped to converse (via sign language) with the local who came out to try and talk to us.

As the path entered the trees, we started to realise the error in our judgement - the gradient increasing and the weight of our KCS nearly pulling us over backwards. Assuming we didn't have much further to go, I left my paddle to better support the boat. Two times the distance we had already done later and with no end in sight, I realised I should probably head back and get it!

As I passed others on the way up, looking haggard and exhausted, they all looked up thinking I must have come back down from the top. Surely they were nearly there! Each time, the bitter

disappointment of knowing that I hadn't even seen the top of the climb hit them harder than any rapid. The number of expletives used whilst climbing was a testament to the experience.

As I walked back up, I heard a crash behind me, running back down to find James had dropped his boat on the slippery incline. Thankfully alright, I continued up to find the welcome sight of Victor walking down towards us. Our text message to the others had got through and they were here to help!

Well help is putting it strongly. They pointed out that it wasn't really a complete multiday unless we carried our own boats to the top, so another slow and gruelling kilometre of walking later, we reached the vehicles. A climb that took almost 2 hours, with well over 400 metres of elevation gain. Never had lunch been more deserved!

The others had managed to find us a nice campsite for the evening over by the Small Nayrn that we would paddle tomorrow, complete with (much to Ethan's excitement) the opportunity for some horse riding. At 800 som per hour, the 15000 som Ewan had withdrawn seemed slight excessive, but we did have 2 hours as a group, most of us learning for the first time how to ride.

Thankfully we had an enthusiastic teacher. A 12 year old boy named Nurislam (Nuri) who was the son of the yurt camp owner, cantered over and proceeded to eagerly demonstrate how to move your hips smoothly with the horse. Such an innocent child...

Ethan went first, looking tense but competent as he guided the horse on a few loops of the campsite at a trot. Little did we know that would be the best display we put on, as everyone else struggled to even mount the horse, yet alone manage a walk in a specific direction.

This campsite was luxurious, complete with a hot shower (bucket of warm water with a hose underneath) for only 50 som, so we all took the opportunity to clean up.

Dinner tonight was a budget Mexican night, with vegetable and sausage fajitas (surprisingly nice), and no small amount of Iván's recommended local vodka.







6.7. Eki Nayrn

The footage from the Eki (Small) Naryn can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/jrSa84goe8U?si=biTQMZI59oKSw7mn>

6.7.1 Day 20

This morning we awoke to the luxury of Shakshouka for breakfast again - our cooking of which has been steadily improving throughout the trip.

The drive up to the 'upper' section of the Small Nayrn took us past the 'Untouchable Canyon', which we stopped to scout in a few locations. Some of the features looked touchable, but many did not, and the gorged in nature of the section meant you did not have the luxury of choice after setting off. The worst of the run seemed to be near the start, immediately downstream of the road bridge at the put in. A massive river wide hole, with a 'line' on hard river right, or two 'almost lines' hard left through a tiny slot between the wall and a rock, or just right of said rock with a powerful boof. None of the options looked doable to me!

We were however slightly more interested in the rapid situated just about the grade 5 section, which either ends the middle section or starts the grade 5. Maybe one for tomorrow!

We continued up-river until our drivers stopped the vehicles. We had in fact not made it to the upper section as marked on Whitewater.guide, but instead only to the start of the section marked as a grade 4 (5-), with a description stating that 'swimming can be fatal here' - we will bear that in mind!

Some trepidation was perhaps natural, although our driver insisted that the section down to the next bridge was no more than a grade 3+ (if Tomas' grades were to be believed after his wildly inaccurate estimations of the big Nayrn multiday hike out)!

Making our way past some inconveniently located human faeces, we put on to the section, those who had been on the multiday commenting repeatedly about how light and manoeuvrable their empty boats now felt, and demonstrating this with some powerful boofs down the grade 2-3 entry moves.

This river had much bluer water than the Big Naryn; contrasting really nicely with the sandy brown cliff faces of the gorge and the evergreen trees. This was probably the most picturesque section so far, which is definitely saying something!

As the walls rose up and closed in, the difficulty took a big step up. Whilst it could be described as a grade 3+, as screwing up the line had little consequence in most cases, Ewan stared at us incredulously when we made the suggestion that this was anything less than a grade 4. Safe to say he has lost confidence in the grades our drivers attach to everything!

The particular challenge of this river was mostly the difficulty to boat scout, as it was quite a steep section. This was highlighted by one rapid in which we had four completely different lines as a group before finally finding a good one! They all ran, just some more cleanly than others.

Approaching the end of our run for the day, the road closed in next to us on river right. Feeling the need to show off, Ewan "used-to-be-a-swimming-instructor" Badcoe decided to show off his prowess

in the 200m butterfly, unfazed by the earlier warnings of the guidebook about the possible consequences. A very efficient rescue followed, with 6 paddlers contributing to ensure we could get everything out before the sharp final corner leading to the road bridge that would be today's takeout.

Returning to the campsite we found a horror scene. Rubbish strewn all over the place, with the owner of the yurt camp stood helpless in the middle. Slowly a realisation dawned that it was our rubbish, the bin bags ripped open by the local wildlife while we had been away. Realising this, we quickly got to work helping to clean the site back up, taking greater care with where we stored the bin bags this time!

An evening of assorted games ensued, starting with a number of throwing games as a group, complete with the drivers, the yurt camp owner and his son. Our American football and frisbee throwing needs some work, but by some miracle we didn't lose either item down the hill into the river.

After a while, Ivan and Nuri introduced us to a new Kyrgyz game. A 4x2 grid of squares is drawn on the ground, and a stack of 9 rocks placed at the intersection between the third and fourth rows. Teams take turns bowling at the tower from 15 paces away with a football or equivalent. Once the tower falls, the team that knocked it over is now the attacking team, and their task is to put one of the stones in each of the 8 squares, plus one at the original base of the tower (a smaller square). The defending team gets to use the ball to throw at the attackers, in a one life dodgeball game. This is quite attacker favoured, until some strategy started developing for the defending teams. Eventually, and perhaps expectedly, the team is Kyrgyz people (plus Liam) ended up victorious in a best of 7 series, with everyone thoroughly exhausted by the end of it.

Tonight we yet again left the pasta cooking to our talented Italian chef. Talented in so far as he is the first Italian I have ever seen to create such a formless starch block from what was once penne pasta! With a display that was almost as bad as Ewan's pasta from the start of the trip, a very embarrassed Edoardo took all of two bites of his own abomination of a meal, before heading to bed to contemplate how he could ever set foot in his home country again. Thankfully, despite being a formless blob, the flavour of the meal was acceptable, and this sustenance was achieved - helped down by yet more of Iván's hidden stash of vodka that kept appearing from the back of his car. Suitably satiated, we all went to bed ready for a bigger day of kayaking tomorrow!

6.7.2 Day 21

Today we continued our streak of non-porridge breakfasts (much to James' delight) with some egg and bacon sandwiches.

Our peaceful morning was rudely interrupted by a very energetic Nuri, running around with his plastic knife pretending to attack us. Peter soon got bored of such antics, choosing to lift Nuri by the legs and spin him around violently. Nuri was a little quieter after that.

Or at least he was, until he found his new favourite and slightly sinister game. Just on the edge of the campsite were some bushes sprouting red berries. After disappearing off for a minute, Nuri returned covered in 'blood' pretending that he had cut himself. Not wanting to encourage such behaviour, we were all rather quiet and offering no comment. Soon our drivers had what we assumed was a strong word with Nuri in Kyrgyz to tell him not to make such jokes.

Turns out the joke was on us. The drivers had actually been teaching him the more lethal way to cut someone's arm. Equipped with the knowledge, Nuri now pretended to repeatedly 'kill' multiple members of the group, telling us to perform first aid to save them.

Ever one to chase some bingo points (and as our resident medic), Ewan rushed to our 'aid' with his bandages, eager to show what three years of practice had taught him! Absolutely nothing, as it transpires... Immediately after opening the bandage, Ewan threw the long end onto the ground, both unravelling it and getting it dirty, perfect to infect the wound. With his now unwieldy length of bandage, Ewan managed to create a dressing that was both far too short for the wound, and applying negligible pressure, with the ends flapping all over the place. Thank god Edoardo was still wearing his Kalpak, or that one would have been fatal!

Ewan redeemed himself with a bandage on Cameron, but our faith was little restored. If we need any first aid this trip, I think it will be Peter I call upon!

We then headed back up to the put in for the 'mini gorge' section we had paddled yesterday, with the intention of paddling the whole section today.

With more knowledge of the section, we shot through most of the rapids today. Ewan 'still used to be a swimming instructor' Badcoe remained eager to disprove the guidebook's dire warnings, decided to try swimming in a slightly more precarious section today. A somewhat blind left hander into a sharp right turn, complete with many waves and holes - Ewan started further left today, finding a hole we had not seen yesterday and taking a swim. It took those of us at the bottom a while to notice how low he was sitting in the water, assuming the waves were simply obstructing our view, but before too long we saw the white mamba drifting off without him.

Suddenly it was all hands on deck, as the river left, down which Ewan and his equipment was heading, had a nasty rock siphon, with a path either left or right of it. Ewan managed to get out just above the siphon, but his boat went straight in, just about squeezing through the gap. That was enough paddling for Ewan today, and he took out at the next available opportunity!

The rest of the section was if anything slightly easier than the above, except for a single tight gorge which Liam managed to roll on, blaming a powerful seam line and his not so powerful Rewind! Before too long, the horizon line dropped away around a sharp left bend, and we knew we had reached the final optional rapid of the section!

Optional suggests there was an easy climb out. This perhaps understates the process, but eventually Cameron, Sam and Liam all made it out. Peter, Edoardo and James on the other hand, were all eyeing up the grade 5- rapid that is just between the 'mini gorge' and 'Untouchable Canyon'.

Peter, with his usual disregard for his own safety, was eager to get going, and a bit of scouting later, James and Edoardo were happy to watch Peter's line and make their decision after. The rest of the group set up media and safety at the bottom - equally thoroughly in both cases. With 5 throw lines and Cameron on a live bait, this was being taken slightly more seriously than most.

The rapid itself was a 100 metre lead in with many powerful holes requiring lots of weaving. The paddler then ends up on river left needing to drive right through a river wide hole, just above the crux feature. The entire river, 50 metres wide only a short way upstream, poured through a 5 metre slot on

river right, with a big foam pile on the right at the top, that the kayakers were aiming for to get a sick boof off the rock. A messy hole at the bottom looked a little unpleasant, especially as the outflow pushed directly into an undercut rock in the middle of the river. Assuming you made it this far, you also only really had one eddy with a nice takeout, before you would find yourself entering the grade 5 gorge below, and perhaps 50 metres in between to contemplate all the life choices that got you into that predicament!

Peter went first, taking a roll at the end of the lead in, but quickly back deck rolling to set back up for the left to right move. He punched through the hole, which looked less retentive than feared, and powered over the main drop, paddle face fully on display!

Edoardo followed, managing a head dry line that was not without its moments! Managing to get onto the foam pile on the right of the lip of the drop, he lacked the speed to power through and the nose of his boat stopped in its tracks, spinning him around in a 180, and landing him directly in a grade 5 micro-eddy just at the bottom of the drop. Regardless, with effortless style, he managed to eddy out of this just below the main hole, making it down to the main eddy with Peter below.

Saving the best until last, we have James. Having seen the two lines in front of him, James had seen exactly how to do each part of this rapid... So obviously he instead chose to take the opposite sections, combining Peter's roll on the lead in, with Edoardo's line on the drop. However the river had a bone to pick after Edoardo cheated death on the main drop. James got spun a full 180 degrees, dropping backwards and vertical into the munching hole below. One second, two seconds, three... he finally reappeared, fighting to roll back upright, and looking adequately shaken once he managed to. He regained his composure just in time to make the eddy with the others. Thankfully they had all made it!

Tonight we played a few more rounds of frisbee. Nuri had also spent his day studying his English, so we were met with some enthusiastic shouts when we returned. 'Fak u, fak u, fak u'! Perhaps he is not so innocent after all. At least James had the patience to try and teach him other pronouns to use when talking about someone rather than at them.

Tonight we had a dinner. In retrospect (like 1 month later) I have forgotten what said dinner was. However, by virtue of the fact that I don't remember the subsequent day, I am sure that it didn't give us food poisoning, which by our standards must have meant it was pretty good!





6.8. Kekemerren

The footage from the Kekemerren Lower Playrun can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/rr7CvSwhc6k?si=y3iOEAwLmacQK8fb>

The footage from the Kekemerren Lower Classic can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/qhOSmNH6xs?si=UfP0iax-e5OzLLk0>

The footage from the Kekemerren Upper Playrun can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/q3zZMWfoRJ8?si=UNapNDbYMEd6cjno>

6.8.1 Day 22

This morning we departed the Small Nayrn campsite - the longest we had spent in one place all trip. This was probably a good thing, as James was running out of things to teach Nuri. We had moved on to some more 'colourful' language, creating nicknames for everyone in the group - I won't be repeating most of those here, although it is safe to say that one of those who did not paddle the multiday shall forever be known as 'Massive Pussy'.

We drove to Kekemerren today, a region we have heard many good things about, but Tomas told us it would be too high when we arrived. Hopefully now, a little under a month later, it would be a good level for us.

On route we heard a loud crunch in Victor's vehicle - the rear left shock had finally given up the ghost on these Kyrgyz roads. Thankfully we were just arriving into the fairly large town of Nayrn, so could look for some auto repair shops.

We decided this would be a good opportunity to stop for lunch, finding one of the fanciest restaurants in town, complete with our own personal yurt. Yet again, James struggled to find a dish that was in stock, but eventually we had all ordered - even the drivers who were still out trying to fix the car.

Towards the end of our meal, the personal yurt became not so personal as what seemed to be a family's weekly shop got delivered just inside the yurt entrance, then subsequently cleared out again.

The drivers returned to their cold food, Ivan deciding to pack his up and save it for later. We set off - it turns out they hadn't had much luck with repairing the car, so we checked another four auto repair shops - finally finding a replacement shock, but no way to fit it. Looks like it's going to be a bumpy ride! At least the crunching from the shock was drowned out by Victor's ever more eclectic playlist, today featuring his ever present female rap, as well as a jazz cover of 7-Nation Army.

For the first time, it turns out our drivers had not been kidding when they said the drive would take 7-8 hours, and when we arrived it was thoroughly dark. Thankfully small Magazin was open for us to purchase water for the following day, and we made it to our campsite at the put in for the Lower Playrun. Given the time, dinner tonight was the leftover ration packs and instant noodles, before we all got some well deserved rest!

6.8.2 Day 23

Nothing happened today. - James H

...

For the first time this trip, Sam was one of the first up. To be clear, he had not intended for this to happen. In fact he waited a full 15 minutes more than me to get out of the tent. However, a miscommunication last night meant that only 4 members of the group had been informed of the plan to get up early and attempt to paddle two sections today - the Lower Playrun and the Lower Classic. Moreover, Peter, normally ever so reliable as the first to wake up, was also nowhere to be seen. Nevertheless, Sam did see his opportunity to finally claim those chef bingo points, and actively contributed to the preparation of Shakshouka for breakfast, whilst Ewan and myself unloaded boats!

Eventually the sleepers awoke, only to be forced to pack their tents away before they were given any breakfast. I was insistent that we would manage two sections today regardless of the late start!

Thankfully, camping at the put in does remove much of the pre-river fuff, and seven members of the group soon put on for the 7.5km Lower Playrun. The first 3 km or so was quite exciting, with some nice wave trains and eddy lines. However, the river soon flattened out to some fairly tame grade 2.

Cameron powered on ahead, completely shooting past the 7.5 km mark and oblivious to the shouts and whistles coming from upstream. Eager to get off, I charged after him, desperately needing to replace the plaster that had fallen off on of his blisters!

Eventually Cameron stopped, and much to our surprise, a check of whitewater.guide suggested we still had 2 corners until the takeout. Clearly it was not taking such an accurate route as Peter's watch had tracked.

We took out by a small house and made our way up to the road, where we found... nobody... where had the vehicles got to. After 5 minutes of waiting, Peter, Cameron and Edoardo went walking down the road to find them, while Ewan started to try and demonstrate his proficiency with a throw line by throwing it into one of the boats from about 10 metres. Legend has it that he may still be trying to this day, despite being shown up handily by Sam who got it on the second try!

Eventually the cars reappeared with the three kayakers clinging to the roof bars, just as Jonah and Ethan appeared from the other direction on their hike. What convenient timing. A quick lunch followed before we headed upriver to attempt the Lower Classic.

This time Ewan, Ethan and Jonah chose not to join, instead volunteering to set up camp and start food prep. 'If you have any fuff, at least food will be ready when you are back' said Ewan... Little did he know what was to come!

The Lower Classic was, as expected, a significant step up from the play run. During the drive up, we inspected the grade 5 pour-over that was the main feature about 3/4 of the way down. It had a nasty towback, but the warm weather had many people confident enough to say they would attempt it.

The first kilometre was a really fun section, complete with many big boofs and enough options to play around with the lines. James was really getting into the groove, flying over all the waves.

Before landing directly into a powerful poulover, invisible until the final second. With a fast tongue on either side, the short but powerful poulover had at least a 3 metre towback, and fight as he might, James was unable to escape. Forwards, backwards, upside down... nothing was working. Eventually there was but one option remaining to him.

🎵 Let it go, let it go, turn away and pull the deck.*

Resurfacing downstream, Edoardo who had seen James' battle and come to his assistance, offered the tail of his boat. James grasped at the boat, just about getting a fingertip on the bung, as Edoardo went to paddle off.

'NOOOO!'

Thankfully Edoardo heard the scream, and swung the tail of his boat back to James - straight into his jaw... Too terrified to be fazed by such a thing, this time James got a firm grip of the grab handle, allowing Edoardo to drag him to river right.

Somewhere in the kerfuffle, one Astral had become separated from its owner, but was thankfully returned to the bank, faster in fact than James got there and much to his surprise. No such luck for the boat however, which Peter and Cameron now had to chase.

Typically for ICC leaders a boat chase is quite fun. Typically it's adding a bit of spice to an otherwise slightly too easy river. Without wanting to sound like Ivan, today this boat chase was adding just a little bit too much spice to the continuous grade 4-4+, complete with the ever present threat of the looming grade 5. Peter found out this the hard way, as he dropped his paddle to try and flip James' boat over, as all of a sudden he was forced to T-rescue himself as a powerful wave flipped him over. Thankfully able to recover himself and the paddle, the chase continued for over a kilometre, where Peter and Cameron finally managed to wrestle the boat into an eddy on river right, looking somewhat worse for wear with a giant dent on the nose.

Back upstream, Sam was running down the bank to try and offer assistance, with James trudging along behind, hoping to be reunited with his boat. Edoardo and Liam were blissfully unaware of everything except the passing of a considerable amount of time as they lounged by the river. They did not however remain alone for long, as a three of fishermen made their way along the far bank, while one came down to the eddy they were waiting in. Tzydzd or so Liam heard as the man's name, proudly showed off photos of his previous catches, whilst threading new hooks to use today.

Eventually Victor appeared on the brow of the hill overlooking the river, signalling for us to 'Choo, Choo' down to the others, about 1km downstream. Still left with Sam's boat, a hellish climb out took place, with many a rock tumbling down underfoot, before the equipment was finally up at the roadside and they could proceed.

Following his success on the Small Nayrn, Edoardo took the lead, with me following close behind. This entire section was a bit of a blur, with move after move executed flawlessly in a state of utmost concentration. Never had there been so much pressure to kayak well (ok, I lie, the Soca Katerakt was

equally intense). Regardless, this section of paddling was by far my favourite of the entire trip, with every line feeling clean as we weaved our way down to the others, taking virtually no eddies on route.

Upon reaching the rest of the group, some congratulations were in order all round. I expressed my disbelief that they had told Victor to get us to do that section on our own! It was perhaps the hardest section of the trip so far.

It was at this point that we realised the breakdown in communication. It turns out that they others had not in fact instructed Victor to send us down to them. Rather the intended message had been to take out where we were to avoid the risk. Oops!

Regardless, we all decided that we had done enough paddling for the day, reserving the rest of the Lower Classic for tomorrow. We headed back to camp ready for our dinner, with Edoardo, Peter and Sam taking the roof rack as their seat of choice. Of course, back at the camp dinner had not been cooked. In fact preparation had not yet started. As ever, Peter took charge, and soon we were all eating happily around the fire!

Well, aside from James. He was busy using some warm water to try and pop the dent out of his boat!

* Full cover available on YouTube - Imperial College Canoe Club. While you are there, you can even check out the videos from each of the Kyrgyz rivers for more insight





6.8.3 Day 24

As was to be expected for our final day of kayaking, we awoke to the thundering downpour of rain that was to accompany us throughout the day.

A contingent of three plus Ivan decided to stay at the campsite today - henceforth referred to as the 'Drinking Team' for reasons soon to become apparent. The remaining six climbed into the back of Victor's Delica, ready to warm up on the Upper Playrun, before a second attempt at the Lower Classic.

After driving up and down past the marked put in on Whitewater.guide, we concluded that a scramble down the shear sides of the river was the only practical option to get down to the river.

Putting on, the section was fairly calm for the first few kilometres - hardly anything warranting being referred to as even a grade 3. However, as we approached the final 2km or so from take-out (and our campsite/lunch spot), the river narrowed a bit, picking up pace around some blind bends. As he passed one such corner, Cameron, who was leading the group, began some fairly aggressive back paddling... With little by the way of available eddies, we all soon found out why.

Across almost the entire 20 metre wide river was an enormous deciduous tree, branches reaching out above and below the water ready to catch any unsuspecting kayakers (however infrequently they might pass). With some difficulty, we just about managed to pick a line around river left, but this was the first time we had encountered such an obstacle in Kyrgyzstan - the Kekemerren was truly trying to prepare us for our return to the UK!

The only other rapid of note on this Upper Playrun was a big wave train just before the takeout. These three or four waves were excellent for surfing and we had a bit of a play before heading back to meet up with the others for lunch!

Ewan, Ethan and Jonah came running out to the river bank, with a 2/3rds empty bottle of vodka being offered around. I politely, but firmly declined, knowing what was in store after lunch. James on the other hand needed something to boost his confidence following the previous day, and one burning shot of vodka was just that thing.

Perhaps most surprising was that Ivan declined another shot. Surely the Russian wasn't done after merely a small fraction of a vodka bottle? Wait a minute, Jonah does seem surprisingly talkative... Ah! There is another empty bottle, sticking out from behind a log where Ewan had chosen to 'hide' it. Perhaps this lunch is going to be more useful for them than us!

With lunch complete, those of us not on the drinking team quickly set off, lest we receive further offers of strong alcoholic beverages.

The first kilometre proceeded in a similar fashion to the previous day, with a pain train down all the rapids as we approached the hole that James had become all too acquainted with. Well I thought he had... This time with Cameron and Peter in front of him, both going either side of the hole, James still decided to dip the undented tail of his ripper into the hole, tempting fate... Luckily for James, fate had tired of throwing him around, and this time he escaped with his dignity intact.

The next kilometre was new for two of the group, before we reached the uncharted waters following our takeout from the previous day. Progress downriver slowed as the grade 5 loomed ever closer.

We reached a narrowing in the river, where a huge cliff loomed on river left. Unable to see past, we got out to scout the section to come. The first part of the rapid was not too bad, with the left chute running straight down, and the only challenge being punching through the V-shaped hole at the end of the chute. However, from our vantage point on river right, we could now see what was coming up just a bit further downriver - specifically the bend in the river that led to the grade 5 boof.

We decided to scout the full section now, walking about 300 metres along the bank. The lead in was no easy rapid, with a number of powerful holes, a tree filled siphon, and a couple of very difficult ferry glides to make. All that before trying to find a place to take out and inspect/portage the grade 5. Some discussion about taking the long portage from where we currently were did occur, but before too long we decided to put back in and test our kayaking abilities to their limits.

The first chute was handled without issue, and we steered ourselves well clear of the siphon on river right just afterwards. Unfortunately, in doing so, we were now on the wrong side of the river for the next feature, so a ferry glide across the top of a powerful wave was the only way across. About half the group made this successfully, with the other half dropping into the eddy below where we intended to reach. Thankfully this was still a safe line.

Now on to the final, and perhaps most scary drop of the lead in. A big rock on river right with a curler crashing off it to the left into a big hole, with the line being up and over the curler. Because of how we were arranged in the eddy, Cameron and Peter who normally led down all the rapids were trapped, so that meant I had to go first. Not entirely sure of the line, I went too far right behind the curler, realising my mistake only as I dropped into the messy hole behind it. Thankfully, despite an unintentional 180, I washed out into the eddy on river right, just in time to see Peter powering after me.

Finally we could get out and inspect the main boof. A hard left line all the way, the boof was a big pourover, dropping about 2 metres into a hole with at least 3-4 metres of towback. The confidence we had felt inspecting this in the sunshine yesterday had been leached away, and nobody quite fancied getting munched in this hole. Even Peter, usually so confident, decided he probably couldn't manage the boof and so took the 'grade 3+ with grade 5 consequences' chicken line, skirting around the hole.

A few more playful rapids followed, with everyone feeling a bit more relaxed now the grade 5 was firmly behind us. Eventually we reached the takeout for the section at our original campsite in the Kekemeran region. A few high fives later and the kayaking was complete for the trip - despite however much Peter protested.

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Back at the campsite, the day had been perhaps even more eventful for the drinking team. Following lunch, they had realised that their alcohol supplies were running low and an urgent trip to the shops was required.

With the nearest town a couple of miles away, and Ivan slightly too drunk to drive them, even with his heritage, the group had a long walk in store for them. At least they would have had, if Ewan hadn't thought to try and thumb down a lift.

They were picked up by the first vehicle to come past - a large coal truck. Misunderstanding the drivers signal, the drinking team clambered up onto the coal trailer, ready for a bumpy ride. However some frantic gesturing from the driver and they soon realised he was actually inviting them into the cab for the journey!

The drinking team themselves have very little memory of what happened in this coal truck - something to do with smoking, something about trying to communicate, a large amount of laughing! Thankfully, they had chosen to film almost the entire journey, allowing for retrospective memories to be formed.

Following their coal truck escapades, the group found a shop for alcohol and proceeded to walk back down to the campsite, where the rest of us later found them.

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We arrived back at camp to see Ewan starfished on the floor, complaining about how violently the ground was moving around him! We decided to exclude the drinking team from food prep tonight, especially as it would be the first time we attempted to make buckwheat, having finally been able to find some in the previous shop.

Under Victor's instruction, this buckwheat came out very nice, although the quantity was slightly excessive at 1.6kg between the 11 of us. Ivan had also put in a special request for a salad today, which could not have been more appreciated by the group. Perhaps we should have done this earlier in the trip!

We settled down for the evening around the fire. The drinking team retired early, nursing glasses of water ready for the morning, whilst the rest of us recounted our favourite moments from the trip. Victor brought over some seating, or perhaps I should say brought over entire trees which could double as seats. At this point, none of us were even surprised! We finished off the remaining alcohol, including the beer James had thankfully hidden from the drinking team, before calling it a night all round.



6.9. Return to Bishkek

6.9.1 Day 25

The drive back to Bishkek started early. Somehow on the first day without kayaking to do, everyone had managed to pack up camp about twice as fast as normal - isn't that just typical! We drove up past the Upper Classic of the Kekemeran river, a section which as described in the guide seemed to be a noticeable step up from the other sections of this river. A cool rock protrusion on one of the drops would have made for an amazing boof - you could see Peter basically clawing at the windows, desperate to go and run it.

We drove back through the mountain pass south of Bishkek, stopping off for lunch at a very scenic spot with a view over the entire Kekemeran region. With an excess of leftover food, we had our first full lunch of the entire expedition, and took a group photo with the spectacular backdrop.

Proceeding onwards, we passed through some small tunnels on the sides of the mountains, the concrete and rebar structure supporting which seemed to be snapped in a number of places and barely holding on. A slight delay for a large herd of horses was all that really stopped us on the drive back to Bishkek.

Once we made it back, we stopped off in the west of Bishkek to pick up the extra equipment we had stored at Victor's house, and much to our surprise we also met Spud the puppy again, who was now far larger, cleaner and more energetic. We got another group photo to mirror the one from the start of the trip, before heading back to our hostel.

For dinner this evening, we went out to one of the nicer restaurants in town, highly recommended on TripAdvisor reviews. Various methods of transport were used to get there, specifically in the form of either business plus or economy class taxis. In Ewan and James economy Honda civic, which was missing a window, they were treated to regular comments about how attractive the women at the side of the road were, if they could hear any of that over the excessive use of the horn. Over in the comfort of business plus, the suited drivers were actually obeying road laws... How boring!

At the restaurant, which was located near the Osh Bazaar, we all made the most of the low food prices and ordered multiple meals each. It was deserved after such a long trip after all. Having got slightly too used to the low prices everywhere, James and Cameron didn't even look at the price of the wine before ordering it, realising only when the waiter came back to say they didn't have it, quite how expensive it had been!

Some of the group then headed out to explore the Bishkek nightlife, with Ethan attempting to order the forbidden pint at one such establishment. This was denied as Ethan refused to say the name printed on the tap (for good reason), but other beers were available! Somehow, Ethan managed to rope Cameron into some chess games at the bar, and in his intoxicated state, Cameron finally blundered and lost a game! It only took almost the entirety of the expedition!



6.9.2 Day 26

Today the group split up slightly, with some heading out for sightseeing, others to the Osh Bazaar for some shopping, and others chilling at the hostel and packing

The Osh bazaar (located in Bishkek and not the city of Osh for some reason) was a particularly interesting find, with a number of stalls selling all manner of items. Assorted foods, clothing, and general Kyrgyz trinkets were available. Obviously, many of the group felt the need to acquire an infamous Kalpak, as well as some model yurts and strange looking Kyrgyz shoes.

We all met back up again in the evening for dinner, heading to a more traditional restaurant frequented by locals. Ethan's taxi arrived first, and he went inside to try and find a table. Following a five minute wait, he stepped outside again, commenting that nobody had even approached him to offer a table. We decided that perhaps this was customary here, and so decided to walk in with more confidence and simply claim a table, which seemed to work better for us.

It was around this time that the second car arrived, with Ewan and James suitably entertained and bewildered by their drive over, which was complete with the economy driver offering them some random black pills which they had to politely decline! They were however given control of the music, and so introduced their driver to the wonders of Oasis!

Again, after dinner some of the group went out to complete their tour of the local nightlife, having been unable to hit all the bars on the previous night, while others went back to finish packing.

Around 11pm, Victor arrived at the hostel to pick up the first group heading to the airport. With kit packed, it was a sad time for all involved, but they were at least looking forward to getting home! This time, they encountered little difficulty getting through the airport, and were soon on their flight back!

6.9.3 Day 27

Today was the final day in Bishkek for the remaining five of us, and there were some pressing concerns to address. Specifically for Ewan and James, this was regarding their current bingo scores. Following some unfortunate events, both were very low scorers in the bingo, and neither fancied putting their stomach against the litre of fermented horse milk that awaited the loser!

We set off for the Osh Bazaar again, with Liam and Ewan having not been the previous day. Our first stop was a souvenir shop, scouted by the rest of the group on the previous day. The woman here spoke excellent English, and before too long we were in possession of a few yurts and a presidential Kalpak. We took a brief stop for lunch in the market, before Ewan and James set to what they were really here for. The bingo game attached a large amount of points to one specific task - getting your hair cut for less than 500 som (around £5). Just outside of the market was a hairdressers that charged only 300 som for a haircut, so fearing the worst, they both went in.

Cameron and I looked around the rest of the market again, waiting for the butchery to occur. We found everything from massive knives to kitchen taps, but nothing overly caught our fancy. We eventually returned to what we believed would be the scene of the crime... Ewan and James walked out... Somehow, despite the low price, the haircuts were perfectly acceptable (a fact confirmed by their girlfriends as well).

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In the meantime, Peter had finally had enough of the rest of us, and had found a group at the hostel to go hiking with. He went off to the Aledin National Park to the south of Bishkek, which we had considered kayaking but had been informed that the river would be too low as it was mostly paddled in the snowmelt season before we arrived. He was going to be quite late getting back, so the rest of us went about planning dinner without him

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Since tonight was the last night, no expense was spared in our choice of dining establishment as the four of us headed to an entire tourist resort on the east edge of Bishkek. As we pulled in down the gated drive and past the yurts, we knew we were in for an excellent meal.

We ordered a full assortment of traditional dishes to share, including a number of favourites from the trip such as Kurdak and Boso Lagman. Just as we were about to place the order, I finally saw it. The dish I had been looking for all trip... Karta!

For those not familiar with Kyrgyz delicacies, allow me to explain. Kyrgyzstan is famous for its horses, used for everything from their milk (which is fermented into Kymyz - a drink supposed to cure all ills, although in our case had been more of a cause than a cure!), as well as for their meat. Karta is a specific cut of the meat. Specifically it is boiled and then pan fried entrails - otherwise known as horse anus! Having read about this before the trip, I had been looking out for it in every restaurant, but had not seen it until now.

When ordering, we also attempted to order the braised lamb dish, but due to this being out of stock, Cameron swiftly proposed that we got 'braided lung and stomach' instead. This is really shaping up to be an incredible meal.

The horse anus and the braided lung and stomach arrived first, along with some sauces to dip. Here goes nothing! I took my first bite of the Karta...

And immediately retched as the texture and flavour were exactly as bad as the reader might imagine, with the lung and stomach not much better. Thankfully our drinks and more food soon arrived, as

Cameron insisted that we needed to finish all the dishes! The rest of the meal was all very nice, but it's safe to say that Karta is an experience I don't intend to put myself through ever again!

We returned to the hostel to finish packing, with Victor picking us up around 22:00. The hour long drive to Manas International Airport was a solemn one, as everyone wished they could stay longer. We punctuated the drive with a quick but essential stop at Globus, purchasing a large bottle of Glenfiddich whiskey for the drivers, laughing about the irony of them serving us a scotch earlier in the trip! Eventually we reached the airport and unloaded the Delica for the last time. Our flight home awaited.



6.9.4 Day 28

As we entered the airport, we were immediately met with an initial security screening. This didn't seem too strict, as it let almost everything through, except for stopping our Primus stove due to the remnants of petrol in it. However a brief sign language discussion later, this too was allowed in.

We queued up to check in, yet again being told to go to the Business section of then check in desks due to our unusual luggage. During the weighing of the boats, James' briefly peaked at 34 kg, before dropping conveniently down to 31.9 kg. Wasn't that lucky I thought, until I noticed Cameron's shoe just slightly propping up the back of the boat! Sneaky!

The boats then had to pass through a baggage x-ray, which they did successfully right up until Ewan's white mamba. It didn't require any knowledge of Kyrgyz or Russian to understand why it had been stopped, as the security guard mimed out a gun symbol and pointed at the boat. A couple of additional guards hovered closer as a quick search began, digging around and finding... Tent pegs! The situation defused and the guards started laughing as they waved us past.

The flight itself saw most of us get some sleep, as it was past 2am as we left Kyrgyzstan, and the time zone meant we had a full day ahead once we made it back to the UK.

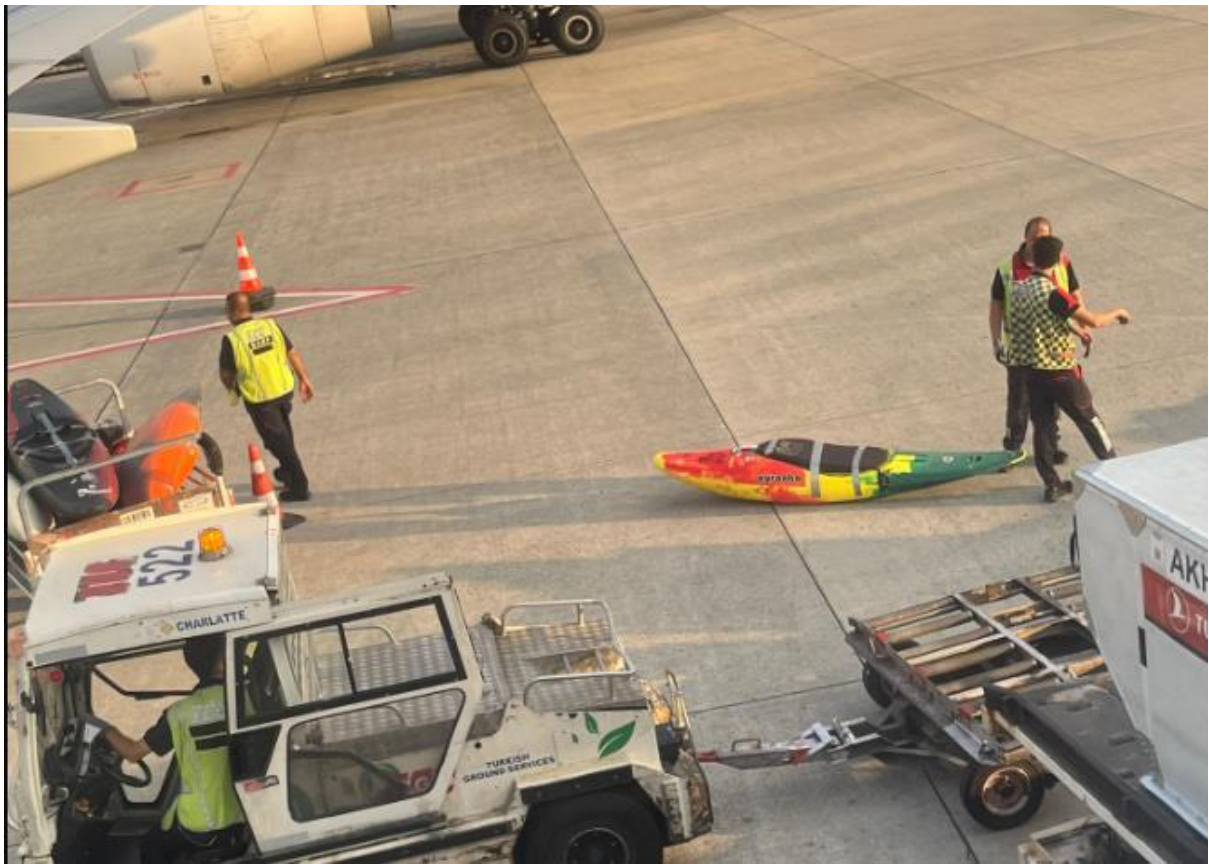
The stopover in Istanbul came as a shock to all of us, as the prices for a simple burger was more than any fancy restaurant we had been to in Kyrgyzstan. It made us feel incredibly poor again!

Eventually we made it back to Gatwick airport, ready to collect our luggage. Some of the bags started making their way through, but what we were really waiting on was the oversized door. Finally it cracked open to reveal a set of paddles, which I eagerly claimed. It was only about a minute later when we realised, these were in fact not the paddles we had brought with us, but rather were the set that had been meant to travel with the group yesterday, but had got delayed. Regardless, they let us walk away with them, which probably wasn't the best decision on their part but did save us a lot of hassle.

Finally with all our bags, there was one last thing to do - award the bingo prize. Secured by no small margin by Cameron (primarily due to his head dry status for the whole expedition), James dug around in his bag for the prize. Uh oh - so much for the bottle of vodka he intended to bring back. This had been smashed in transit and made the search for Cameron's prize slightly more precarious. Despite the shards of glass, James did eventually find the prize - a set of traditional Kyrgyz slippers which now feature as a permanent decoration in Cameron's bedroom!

We left the airport, crashing into no small amount of doors, and with James and myself both losing items from our trolleys on multiple occasions! Thankfully we made it to the car and packed everything away.

James, Ewan and Peter headed back to Beit, arriving as always to the tune of Vengaboys, while Charlotte picked up Cameron to go home. I made my way to the station, ready for a long trek to see my family, and lots of time to reflect on what an amazing month we had!



7. Logistics

7.1. Transport to and from Kyrgyzstan

Initially, we had expected transport of kayaks to be a simple task, given that so many other expeditions regularly referred to carrying them on flights. However, following an amount of research into actual airline luggage policies, we soon realised that most kayakers would need to lie and disguise their boats as surfboards to get them on a flight, and with the number of people we were taking, this was unlikely to fly.

Therefore we narrowed in on two airlines that appeared to say they take kayaks: Turkish Airlines and Pegasus Airlines. Initially, we intended to fly with Pegasus due to cost reasons, but further calls to their team resulted in them confirming that they could not in fact fly our kayaks, leaving Turkish Airlines as the only option.

For future expedition groups, we strongly recommend starting with this knowledge and choosing your destination based off locations you can get to via Turkish Airlines (who also have a pretty good student discount package), unless you are willing to risk the entire expedition getting cancelled before it even begins when travelling with another airline and disguising your equipment.

7.2. Accommodation

Wild camping is legal across Kyrgyzstan which we utilised throughout our trip to keep costs low and allow us to stay in close proximity to the river and to complete the multiday.

More generally, accommodation in hostels costs around 700 KGS (about £7) per person per night, and more fancy places can be quite easily found for £15-20 in the cities. The issue on the other hand is finding accommodation outside of the cities. There are some Yurt camps in certain regions (about £10 per person per night), but most of the time, wild camping was the only option.

7.3. Money

Currency

The national currency in Kyrgyzstan is the Kyrgystani Som (1KGS = 0.0088 GBP). This must be used for all day-to-day purchases, with USD only commonly accepted for very large purchases or for exchange at banks. The only payment we made in USD was to our drivers, and it was hard to withdraw in the amounts we needed as even banks didn't stock thousands of dollars.

Accessing Money

ATMs are common in the larger cities in Kyrgyzstan, but most large towns also have one. They are typically located in or near the markets or supermarkets.

Carrying money

The Kyrgyzstani Som comes in coins of values 1, 3, 5, 10 Som, as well as notes of values 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, 1000, 5000 Som. The largest denomination of note was quite uncommon, and reserved for paying for long-distance travel, or accommodation for the group. We will aim to only withdraw and carry the more usable denominations that are lower in value.

7.4. Food and Water

Most of our paddling occurred in remote areas, meaning that we would need to purchase food for periods of 3-6 days at a time. This meant that we had to plan around purchasing non-perishable food, which was a little difficult for the first shop, as we hadn't created any thorough meal plans until we arrived at the shop, because we were unsure of what would be available.

As it was, we ended up being able to purchase a variety of carbs (oats, wraps, rice, bulgar wheat, buckwheat, pasta etc) and assorted cured meats, tinned vegetables, tinned fish, tinned meat, biscuits, cheese, chocolate spread, nuts, powdered milk, protein/chocolate bars and much more. Typically the cost was quite low for these items, with us paying a total of £3-4 per person per day on groceries.

When in towns and cities, there were also many options to go out for food, with meals in some restaurants being as low as £2. Even the expensive restaurants were typically less than £12 per person, including drinks and multiple courses.

7.5. Communication

The major towns and cities in Kyrgyzstan have good cell coverage from multiple providers – namely O!, MEGA and Beeline (pink, green and yellow sim cards respectively). Outside of the towns and cities, signal was poor, with our drivers recommending MEGA cards, or a dual sim phone with MEGA and O!. However, regardless of provider, many regions lacked any signal at all, so we recommend taking a satellite phone as we did, in case of emergencies.

7.6. Transport Around Kyrgyzstan

For travelling around Kyrgyzstan, it is necessary to have a four-wheel drive vehicle to handle the poor road quality in most regions. These can be hired from several providers, but you have to book early and will likely be significantly overcharged if booking as a foreigner.

For our trip, we decided to hire two drivers through a contact number provided on Whitewater.guide. This number put us in contact with Dimitry, who was then able to put us in contact with Victor and Ivan who had previously driven for the Two Blades expeditions. These drivers charged us \$3700 each for the month, complete with their car and covering fuel costs, assuming we paid for most of the food and accommodation when we used it. This was about as good a price as we saw for hiring appropriate vehicles online, and came with the added benefit of one of the drivers being able to act as our translator. Obviously one downside was that the driver took up a space in the cars, but in the end we had more than enough space between the two Mitsubishi Delicas for all of our kit (assuming wet kit was packed in the boats, and two seats were removed from one of the cars).

For navigation, apps such as Google Maps are very poor, as they do not include many of the roads and tracks for vehicles to use, or as we found during the trip, also include roads that do not exist. The satellite images can be useful for navigating and will be downloaded in advance, but for the most part, standard maps available within the country are more useful.

8. Training Regime

8.1. Paddling Skills and Teamwork

In addition to going on trips with the club every other weekend, to practise reading rivers the group went 'rain chasing' throughout the year, spontaneously going on trips to Wales, the Lake District and Devon without the restraint of a large group of club members whenever there was enough rain for harder rivers to become runnable. We also ran an advanced Easter Tour, with a selective group, to ensure that we could practice running harder rivers in advance of the expedition.

8.2. Qualifications

In terms of qualifications, all members on the expedition attained their Level 3 Outdoor First Aid qualifications and completed White-Water Safety and Rescue training (WWSR) in advance of the trip.

Prices for Outdoor First Aid varied by supplier, ranging from around £100 to £180. It is cheaper to try and book as a group, but this was not possible for us to organise so everyone sought individual courses.

WWSR was completed by any expedition members who didn't already have the qualification. This training aimed to:

- Improve individuals' awareness of safety skills in the river environment
- Teach personal survival skills
- Teach throw line rescue techniques
- Understand the need for structure in an emergency
- Outline basic rescue protocols that prioritise the safety of the individual above all others

In addition, we ran training within our group including theory on equipment, rescues, and boat rescues, and practical training on weekend trips and in Prince's Garden.

8.3. Multi-Day Paddling

The group had intended to complete some multi-day expedition practice as part of either the Easter or Summer tour. Unfortunately, this was not possible, and was something we felt would have been useful, but not essential during our multiday on the trip. The main issue was packing the boat, and understanding how the heavier boat moved in the water, although this only took us a few hours to get used to on the first day. Had the multi-day been more challenging towards the beginning, we may have regretted this lack of training more, but the Big Nayrn was quite nice in so far as it eased us in to the multi-day with some easier paddling.

9. Budget and Equipment

9.1. Group Equipment Taken

Category	Details	Expenditure (£)	Notes
<i>Kayaking</i>	Split Paddles (4)	-	Borrow from ICC
	Inflatable Roof Racks (3)		Didn't take
	Roof Rack Straps (16)	-	Borrow from ICC
<i>Safety</i>	Prussic Cord (3)	25	
	Pulleys (4)	120	Didn't take
	Climbing/abseiling equipment	-	Didn't take
<i>First Aid kits (3)</i>	Self-adherent bandages	-	Borrow from ICC
	Triangular bandages	-	Borrow from ICC
	Gauze bandages	-	Borrow from ICC
	Medical tape	-	Borrow from ICC
	Plasters	-	Borrow from ICC
	Saline solution	-	Borrow from ICC
	Pain medication	-	Borrow from ICC
	Antiseptic wipes	-	Borrow from ICC
	Gloves	-	Borrow from ICC
	Emergency shelter (3)	-	Borrow from ICC
	Diarrhoea medication	20	
	Tweezers	-	Borrow from ICC
	Rehydration sachets	-	Borrow from ICC
	Bite cream	20	
	<i>Camping</i>	Bivvy bags and tarps (8)	
2-man tents (2)		-	Borrow from ICC and expedition members
3-man tents (3)		-	Borrow from ICC and expedition members
Camping stoves (2)		-	Borrow from Exploration Board or ICC as a back up
Pans (2)		-	Borrow from ICC
Lighters (4)		10	
Fuel Bottles (6)		100	Cant take on flight
Dry Bags for equipment on multi-days		150	Didn't need extra
<i>Kayak Repair Kit</i>	Heat gun	-	Borrow from ICC
	Plastic strips	-	Borrow from ICC
	Spare bungs	-	Borrow from ICC
	Spare bolts	-	Borrow from ICC

	Spare nuts	-	Borrow from ICC
	Waterproof superglue	5	
	Neoprene glue	6	
	Sewing Kit	-	Owned by member
	Waterproof Gorilla Tape	5	
	Multitool	-	Owned by member
<i>Food and Water</i>	Water Filter	-	Borrow from Exploration Board
	Chlorine Tablets (100)	-	Owned by member
	Food will be purchased (along with most of our water) once in Kyrgyzstan	-	See 6.5
<i>Navigation and Communication</i>	Satellite Phone	100	Borrow from Exploration Board
	GPS	-	Didn't take – built into sat phone
	Topographic map (2)	-	Print and laminate within Imperial
	Compass (2)	10	
	Phones with regional maps downloaded (all)	-	Multiple offline maps will be downloaded (different sources)
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	Go Pros (3)	-	Owned by members
TOTAL		660	

9.2 Personal Equipment and Costing

Within the Table below, **Y** means the person already owns this item, **B** means the person intends to borrow this item from existing supplies with the Imperial College Canoe Club, and a **numerical value** indicates that they intend to purchase this item before the expedition at or around the price specified. Personal clothing and smaller items are already owned by all expedition members.

Every team member has most of their own personal equipment for kayaking, any equipment that members of the team do not own personally will either be borrowed from the Imperial College Canoe Club (ICCC) storage, purchased with ICCC's 20% discount, obtained through sponsorship, or rented/purchased in Kyrgyzstan.

Category	Item	Liam	Ethan	Ewan	Peter	Eduardo	Sam	Jonah
<i>Kayaking</i>	Buoyancy Aid (with quick release)	Y	Y	Y	Y	60	Y	Y
	Helmet (nose clip optional)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Drysuit	Y	Y	Y	350 (Y)	Y	Y	Y
	River Shoes	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Spraydeck	Y	B	B	B	B	Y	Y
	Cockpit Cover (or spare spraydeck/tarp)	15	15	Y	15	15	15	15
	Paddle	B	B	Y	B	Y	Y	Y
	Airbags (2)	B	B	B	B	B	Y	Y
	Large dry bag for clothes	Y	35	35	Y	35	Y	Y
	Small dry bag for documents	Y	10	10	Y	10	Y	Y
	Phone Drybag	10	10	Y	Y	Y	Y	
	Dry Cag	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Kayak	B	B	B	B	Y	Y	Y
	Swim shorts (for warm kayaking)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
<i>Safety</i>	Throw Line	Y	B	Y	B	B	Y	B
	Sling	Y	Y	Y	Y	12	Y	Y
	Cow Tail	Y	12	12	Y	12	Y	12
	Karabiners (3)	Y	B	Y	B	B	Y	Y
	Knife	Y	25	Y	Y	25	Y	Y
	Whistle	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Water Bottle	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Total		25	92	57	365	169	15	27

Personal Items to Bring

<i>Clothing</i>	Thermal Tops (4)
	Thermal trousers or equivalent (2)
	Fleece layers
	Trousers (3)
	Tops (3)
	Underwear (5)
	Socks (5 pairs)
	Jumper (1)
	Waterproofs
	Warm Coat (1)
	Normal Shoes
	Flip Flops
	Sunhat
	Pyjamas
	Towel
	Hat
Gloves	
<i>Toiletries</i>	Sun Cream
	Insect Repellent
	Toothbrush
	Toothpaste
	Sunglasses
	Glasses/contact lenses if needed
	Deodorant
	Soap
<i>Camping</i>	Sleeping Bag
	Roll Mat
	Cutlery
	Tupperware
<i>Other</i>	Phone
	Portable Chargers
	Passport
	Wallet
	Insurance dog tag
	Emergency Contact Numbers Card
	Head Torch
	Watch
	Notepad
	Books
	Duffel bags (or similar) to hold luggage

9.3 Shared Group Expenditure (predicted)

This section details the costs that were expected to be shared between the entire group – this was estimated when we had 8 members coming on the expedition.

Category	Details	Expenditure (£)	Notes
<i>Group Equipment</i>	Shared Group Equipment	660	See section 8.1
<i>Transport</i>	Flights (with Kayaks)	6160	
	In Country	8220	2 cars at £120 per day plus fuel costs (£1500)
<i>Accommodation</i>	Hostels and Camping	800	
<i>Sustenance</i>	Food and Drink	2000	
		TOTAL	
GROUP		17840	
INDIVIDUAL		2230	

9.4 Shared Group Expenditure (Actual)

This section details the costs that were expected to be shared between the entire group – this was with the full 9 people coming on the trip.

Category	Details	Expenditure (£)	Notes
<i>Group Equipment</i>	Shared Group Equipment	310	Sat phone, stove, etc
<i>Transport</i>	Flights (with Kayaks)	8900	
	Drivers	5800	2 drivers, each \$3700, plus some taxi rides
<i>Accommodation</i>	Hostels and Camping	482	
<i>Sustenance</i>	Food	1449	
	Alcohol	139	
<i>Other</i>	Tolls/Documents	548	Border passes etc
		TOTAL	
GROUP		17628	
INDIVIDUAL		1959	

9.5 Additional Individual Expenditure (predicted)

This section details the additional costs that will be incurred by each member individually. These will not be shared among the group as they relate to specific individuals.

Category	Item	Liam	Ethan	Ewan	Peter	Eduardo	Sam	Jonah
<i>Safety Critical Training</i>	White Water Safety and Rescue	Y	200	Y	200	200	Y	200
	Outdoor First Aid	120	120	Y	Y	120	Y	120
<i>Insurance</i>	Paddling insurance, including search and rescue	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
<i>Equipment</i>	See Section 8.3	25	92	72	377	109	40	27
TOTAL		345	612	272	777	629	240	547

9.6 Additional Individual Expenditure (Actual)

This section details the additional costs that will be incurred by each member individually. These will not be shared among the group as they relate to specific individuals. Costs here are listed before subsidies from the Imperial College Canoe Club were accounted for (around half the price of both WWSR and Outdoor First Aid courses respectively).

Category	Item	Liam	Ethan	Ewan	Peter	Eduardo	Sam	Jonah
<i>Safety Critical Training</i>	White Water Safety and Rescue	Y	145	Y	145	145	Y	145
	Outdoor First Aid	150	180	Y	Y	120	Y	150
<i>Insurance</i>	Paddling insurance, including search and rescue	250	250	250	250	250	250	250
<i>Equipment</i>	See Section 8.3	25	92	72	377	109	40	27
TOTAL		425	667	222	772	624	290	572

9.7. Sources of Funding

Category	Details	Income (£)	Notes	
<i>Grants</i>	Imperial College Exploration Board	5250 + 700	£750 per Imperial College Student in the expedition team. We are also requesting financial support for the safety critical training we must undertake (Outdoor First Aid)	
	Old Centralian's Trust	3750	CGCU funding for our 5 engineering students	
	RCSA Trust	400	Funding for our chemistry student	
	Young Explorers' Trust	400	We received one of the many different prizes of unspecified value on the website.	
	Winston Churchill Memorial Fund	N/A	Applications closed very early (think October)	
	Captain Scott Spirit of Adventure Award	N/A	We placed second in this award	
	Lord Mayor's 800 th Anniversary Awards Trust	1950	Four members received funding from the Lord Mayor	
	Imperial College Canoe Club	750	For First aid and WWSR Training	
	<i>Sponsorship</i>	Kent Canoes (20% discount on all kayaking equipment)	150	On general equipment purchase
Airlines		N/A	Other than the standard student discount, we were not able to get anything further.	
TOTAL		13200	Across all sources. Some of this was shared with the group, whilst other funding was individual.	

10. Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks go out to all groups, organisations and individuals that made this expedition possible!

Imperial College Exploration Board (Especially Lorraine Craig, Phil Power, Chris Green and Ciaran Mckeown) for their help and support throughout the planning of this project and their financial contribution.

City and Guilds College Association (Old Centralian' s Trust) for their financial support.

Royal College of Science Association for their financial support.

Young Explorer's Trust for their financial support.

The Lord Mayor's 800th Anniversary Awards Trust (especially Advisor Richard Martin) for their financial support and assistance.

Kent Canoes for their ongoing sponsorship of Imperial College Canoe Club activities

Victor and Ivan Chernovolenko for going above and beyond as our drivers, tour guides and translators throughout the trip, without whom we would have been unable to complete half of what we managed to do during our four week stay in Kyrgyzstan!

Naz Kyshtoobaeva who reached out to us on Facebook to support us during the planning stages of this trip to Kyrgyzstan with her local knowledge.

Imperial College Canoe Club for bringing all expedition members together and providing key equipment and funding for training activities. We hope our newfound kayaking experience is a benefit to all of you!

Red Bull who didn't sponsor us, but with the amount of marketing Ewan did for them, you would have thought they did!

Go Pro for their noble sacrifice in the name of recording gnarly footage.

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A. Appendix A – Risk Assessments and Safety

A.1. On River Safety

In-Country Contacts:

We will aim to always have at least one contact within Kyrgyzstan in case we need help with communications or logistics. While finalising plans for the trip we will be in contact with drivers, guides and people who have accommodation, we will ask these people to be contacts and give them details of our plans in Kyrgyzstan.

Guides

Throughout the planning of the expedition, we have been in discussion with several guides working in Kyrgyzstan. We aim to not use a guide so that we can develop our river leading and scouting skills. Running rivers by ourselves will take more time than with a guide as we will have to inspect more of the features, this will be factored into the team allocated for each river. However, these discussions give us a much better understanding of the level of the rivers, which is essential during planning stages.

Dealing with Unfamiliar Rivers without a Guide

For some of our expedition, we aim to take ourselves down new rivers, without the assistance of a guide, to improve our own river reading and leading skills. However, this poses additional risks, which much be mitigated.

Specifically, where possible, we will scout the rivers from the riverbanks, either the evening before we paddle the river, or first thing in the morning. We will also allow adequate time to run the river, as going down any section for the first time will always take significantly longer than once you know the river. For this reason, it will likely be necessary to take entire scouting days at some points during the trip, and all members are aware of this before going. Suitable hiking equipment will be taken for this purpose.

Once on the river, we will work as a group to scout sections, with our strongest paddlers leading. We will focus on ensuring effective communication throughout the river with clear line of sight between paddlers. We will get out of our boats as regularly as is necessary to scout sections and discuss the section among the group, should any members find the section too challenging we will find suitable portages to walk around the section. Our river planning will ensure we do not end up in gorges with no portage or walk-off options.

A.2. Risk Assessment on River

Separate ICCC risk assessment submitted alongside proposal document.

A.3. Risk Assessment off River

Separate ICCC risk assessment submitted alongside proposal document.

A.4. River Rescues: Crisis Management and Evacuation Plan

As discussed in section 4.2 on River Plans, we will have already researched each river that we will be paddling in advance, ensuring that we know all possible places to get off the river, where we can easily

get to the road, and where local hospitals are. However, we still need to get people off the river to utilise this information. For each situation, the specific details of the rescue plan will have to be adapted, but a basic outline is included below, as well as some examples.

The basics

All whitewater safety and rescue starts from the same list of priorities: 'Self, Team, Victim, Equipment'. When dealing with any issue, all members will follow this to ensure that they are not putting themselves, or any others in the team into danger. We will also have a clear understanding of who the stronger paddlers are in the group, who will be better able to assist in these situations.

Any members not actively involved in the on-water rescue, will sit safely in an eddy, or exit their boat onto the riverbank and walk down to try and assist from the safety of the side. Those on the river will focus on getting the victim to the side using techniques covered in WWSR, only after which will they chase any equipment if it is safe to do so. Specific techniques are covered in the WWSR training and our risk assessment, so to avoid repeating a two-day course here, the exact details are omitted.

Specific Examples

The steps below are written in order of priority however, as there are multiple team members it will be possible to complete multiple steps concurrently, for example contacting emergency services while emergency first aid is being administered. This will be managed by the river leader and practised in scenarios during training sessions.

Case 1: Mobile casualty

In this scenario there has been a serious injury where the person involved is mobile but unable to continue paddling.

1. Assess the situation
 - a. *Assess safety and condition of all team members on the river*
 - b. *Perform survey on condition of the injured person(s)*
2. Stabilise casualty
 - a. *Get all team members to a safe location to prevent further harm*
 - b. *Provide emergency first aid to injured person(s) and prevent worsening of condition*
 - c. *Contact emergency services if required (using satellite phone if needed)*
3. Assess evacuation options
 - a. *If Search and Rescue not needed/ available use maps to assess access to road*
 - b. *Support and monitor person involved during all points of evacuation*
 - c. *Contact transport if needed*
 - d. *Travel to closest suitable hospital*
4. Contact UK contact
 - a. *When situation is stabilised contact imperial exploration board if there is serious injury/ impact on the expedition*

Case 2: Immobile casualty

In this scenario there has been a serious injury where the person involved is unable to be moved due to the severity or type of injury.

1. Assess the situation
 - a. *Assess safety and condition of all team members on the river*
 - b. *Perform survey on condition of the injured person(s)*
2. Stabilise casualty
 - a. *Get all team members to a safe location to prevent further harm*
 - b. *Provide emergency first aid to injured person(s) and prevent worsening of condition*
 - c. *Contact Search and Rescue (using satellite phone if needed)*
3. Assess evacuation options
 - a. *Use maps to assess access to road/ helicopter landing sites*
 - b. *Continue to monitor person(s) involved*
4. Contact UK contact
 - b. *When situation is stabilised contact imperial exploration board*

Case 3: Blockage across the river

In this scenario, the lead paddler in the group has encountered a blockage that will obstruct the group from progressing downstream. This should normally have been noted during the scouting phase, but may have appeared since scouting the previous evening etc.

1. The lead paddler will immediately get into the closest available eddy to avoid getting taken further downstream by the current
2. As soon as it is safe to do so, the lead paddler will communicate back to the rest of the group who will have already 'eddyed out' having seen the lead paddler do the same.
3. The lead paddler will assess the situation, determining the best course of action to get everyone safely out of the river, or past the obstruction.
4. The lead paddler will communicate back to the rest of the group what to do (e.g. to get out where they are, or to proceed with caution to a specific exit point).
5. The worst-case scenario for this, would be if the blockage occurs in a steep-sided gorge. Depending on the specific situation, it may be necessary to call for assistance, if there is clearly no safe way to get the group out of the situation. This will be done as quickly as possible.

A.5. Dealing with unsafe political situations

While there is no FCO travel advice in the region we will continually monitor the news in the region to ensure we are not at any risk. In the event of unsafe political situation or changing FCO advice we will:

1. Contact UK embassy and inform them of our current situation
Listen to advice given by the embassy
2. Contact Imperial Exploration Board and provide updates
Listen to advice given by Exploration Board

We will also follow current advice to avoid protests and large gatherings, as these are known to turn violent. Given we will not be in major population centres for very long, this should not be an issue.

A.6. Contacts

Emergency contact: Imperial Exploration Board

Daily contacts: Family members

Off trip support: Members of ICCC (current and past)

Ambulance

Phone number: 112

Details for specific hospitals are included in the River Plans

Search and Rescue

USAR Team Details

Team Name	1-Rescue squad of the State Rescue Training Center of the Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Kyrgyz Republic
Accronym	KG-01
Home country	Kyrgyzstan
Team Type	USAR
INSARAG Classification	No IEC or national classification
Number of Personnel	50-60
Structure	
Foundation Year	2020
Website	gcps@mail.ru
Team Focal Point	
Country Policy Focal Point	Mr AZAMAT MAMBETOV Member of UNDAC team, Government Coordinator INSARAG, Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Kyrgyz Republic Email: mambetovazamat@mail.ru Tel: +996 (3222) 72329
Country Operational Focal Point	
Last Update	1/26/2024 1:32:00 PM

British Embassy

+996 (312) 303637

British Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic

21 Erkindik Boulevard, Office 404

Bishkek

720040

Kyrgyzstan

B. Appendix B – Additional Country Information

B.1. FCO Advice

The FCO did not have any particular warnings for Kyrgyzstan, which made this aspect of planning nice and simple.

B.2. Visas and Documents

A visa is only required for stays of more than 60 days. Passports must have an expiry date at least 6 months after the day of arrival. You can drive in Kyrgyzstan on a UK driving licence, although we did not end up doing this.

B.3. Local Laws

Personal ID

In Kyrgyzstan you can be arrested if you do not carry ID. Nobody checked, except at the border checkpoints, but do be aware.

Using Cameras in Secure Areas

It is illegal to take photos of anything related to the military or security, including border checkpoints, military barracks and police stations.

B.4. Vaccinations and preventable diseases

Kyrgyzstan Vaccinations

<i>Advised Vaccinations</i>	Tetanus; Rabies
<i>Others to consider</i>	Hepatitis A; Hepatitis B; Tick-borne Encephalitis; Typhoid

We reviewed the list of vaccinations with healthcare professionals and discussed with some Kyrgyz individuals now living in London. The conclusion was that they were not needed so we did not bother getting any of those listed.

Common Kyrgyzstan preventable diseases

Disease	Precaution
<i>Leptospirosis</i>	Avoid urine-contaminated water and soil
<i>Crimean-Congo Hemorrhagic fever</i>	Avoid Bug Bites - Ticks
<i>Leishmaniasis</i>	Avoid Bug Bites – Sand flies
<i>Hantavirus</i>	Avoid rodents and areas where they are common Avoid people who are ill
<i>Tuberculosis</i>	Vaccination if possible Avoid people who are ill

We did not get any of the diseases listed above. See the first aid section for more information.

B.5. Wildlife

General Precautions

- Boat covers were left on every evening to prevent insects from entering the cockpit.
- Shoes and clothing was checked before being worn to prevent any bugs from being inside. Most clothing was also kept in bags where possible.
- When walking along tracks and paths or beside rivers, closed shoes were always worn, and we made sure not to put our hands into any crevices without checking them first.

Specific Animal Dangers

Of those listed below, we only encountered a single scorpion during our expedition.

Animal	Danger	Severity	Likelihood	Specific Mitigation
<i>Pit Vipers</i>	Venomous	Non-Lethal	Most common snake in the country, with some species being aggressive but most are not	Back away when seen
<i>Scorpions</i>	Venomous	Painful-lethal		Back away when seen
<i>Tarantulas</i>	Venomous			Back away when seen
<i>Bears</i>	Crushing/biting	Lethal	Rare	Secure food up a tree away from campsite when camping
<i>Snow Leopard / Wolf</i>	Crushing/biting	Lethal	Rare	
<i>Boar</i>	Crushing/biting	Painful		Give space
<i>Ticks</i>	Bite – Diseases such as Lyme Disease	Non-lethal - Lethal	Common	Avoid areas where ticks are common, wear covering clothes and check regularly for ticks

C. Appendix C – Our Environmental Impact

Following our original proposal to the Exploration Board, we reduced our environmental impact through a change in location from Ecuador to Kyrgyzstan, which reduces our CO2 emissions from our flights by 40% (this change in location was also motivated by political, logistical and financial reasons).

Whilst in Kyrgyzstan, we will be minimising our environmental impact, as we will be camping for the majority of our stay, which will have low carbon emissions. We will also be taking care to clean up after ourselves, and to remove any plastic waste from the rivers as we paddle along them. This will ensure that we leave the landscape in a better condition than when we arrived, helping to protect wildlife in the-region.

We also aim to use our expedition to highlight the threat posed by damming of rivers in Kyrgyzstan. One of the key attractions of the country for kayaking is that many of the rivers are completely untouched by such infrastructure projects, which is beneficial for both wildlife, and for our kayaking. Whilst dams can be used for hydroelectric power, irresponsible and inconsiderate dam construction poses a significant threat to the natural environment in the surrounding region.