

Altai Ski
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Dom:

Usually an expedition means crossing vast natural spaces. Here, I wanted to spend some time, become part of a place and explore it from the inside.

“Initially I wanted to gather together in one yurt all the people with whom I have enjoyed great moments in the mountains.

But that proved to be a bit more complicated than I expected.”

So, in the end it was just me and Damien for two weeks.

DAM:

We’re driving on a frozen lake. Let’s hope it doesn’t crack. All is OK so far. We would have preferred to cross on foot, but we don’t have much choice.

Dom:

I was alone with 19-year old Damien in a vast, totally isolated place.

DAM:

There was this summit which seemed pretty close to the yurt and we didn’t think it looked that high. “That doesn’t look too far, 5 or 6 hours tops,” we thought.

Luckily, we left fairly early in the morning but with only two thermoses of tea, just two litres, and two granola bars each.

Dom:

Holy shit!

DAM:

Yeah, this is way bigger than we thought.

Dom:

Yes. We’re not even half way there!

DAM:

Here in Mongolia everything is bigger and vaster. We’re not in the Alps.

Dom:

I really thought it was a small mountain pass but now we need to get all the way back down.

Dam:

Yep

Dom:

Let's attach the ski crampons because we don't know what's up there. There might be black ice, but I need to recharge my batteries first.

Dam:

OK!

Dom:

We'll see there if we need the crampons, but I think we'll be fine with the ones on the skis.

Dam:

When I don't shave, all I get is a little moustache, not the superb adventurer's beard like you. You told me I could flirt with the Mongolian girls with this moustache but it's so ugly I think I'll only manage to attract the yaks. Maybe I should shave?

Dam:

~~We're like Dimitri's oil barons here.~~

For a moment, when we took off our boots, I wasn't sure we'd make it. We did it but I was shitless. It was really steep. I was frightened it would give way. But that was the hardest bit. We've done the starter, the main course... just the dessert to go now.

I was really scared at first because there was a sort of snow crust...

I messed up at the first corner and told myself: that's enough. You've got several kilometres of glacier to descend. You need to get a grip.

And I'm not an expert skier. I'm starting to get the hang of it but I'm certainly no pro.

It's becoming a bit crusty here but up there it was nice. It was a good descent. I managed to stay on my feet most of the time with my long 1990s skis.

I don't think the wolf will visit tonight.

Dom:

No.

It would be funny all the same.

Dam:

Yes!

I just hope it isn't there when you go out for a piss in the night.

Dom:

Why? That would be a laugh.

Dam:

But what if it mistook you for a two-legged yak?

Dom:

That would spice up our nocturnal sorties.

Dam:

Yeah, that's right.

Dom:

So, the yurt is quite fun. We're not used to this type of space.

As a matter of fact, lighting a coal stove somewhat is a pain in the neck.

There's just a pipe which goes down here. It's not always easy.

We've not quite got it right yet... but it's not stopping us from settling in. We're inventing our own little rituals to heat the water, cut wood, make tea... It's just a matter of organisation.

Dam:

I've poured you a whisky and there's some chocolate.

Dom:

It's still damn good this thing, no?

Dam:

The whisky?

Yes, I'm starting to get a taste for it.

Dom:

With these dried strawberries...

Dam:

I get the feeling you're trying to introduce me to your... somewhat to your way of life.

You've got me listening to...

Dom:

Neil Young, it's not over.

Dam:

You're playing me Neil Young.

Yes, it's not bad.

Dom:

Neil Young ...

Dam:

It's quite good. Not bad.

Dom:

Is it?

Dam :

The whiskey's not bad.

Dom:

Neil Young is the most important. It's the cornerstone.

A little Yak stew...

I've removed all the gristle, of course. I hope it won't attract the wolves.

Dam:

What?

Dom:

The gristle I threw over there...

Dam :

Nope! They'll eat it there.

Dom:

There was lots of howling last night. That's something you won't experience often in your life.

Dam:

Wolves howling really close to the yurt.

Dom:

Yes, but what if they come over and wait for us to leave ... with those eyes....

Dam:

We've seen a pretty big glacier over there in the valley.

At first, we thought we could do it in a day but, given how long it took to reach our first summit, we realised it was much further away than we thought. So, we brought the tent and stove with us... and it took us a day to climb to the foot of the glacier.

The lake is cracking.

Best not to take them out in this temperature.

If it's all the same to you, I'm going to put them right back in.

Dom:

When you go on an expedition you're taking a break from a life so hectic you find it hard to keep up the pace.

On an expedition, you take back control of your time.

And being in a place where there's nothing, nobody, in fact means that we are the ones who decide what time to get up, what you're doing that day...

There are no restrictions and that's true bliss. That's what makes you feel at one with this vastness. That's what I love about it.

Dom:

Everything's bigger here, isn't it?

Dam:

Yes.

If you think it'll take an hour, allow two.

If you think it'll take a day, allow two.

Dam:

When we got to the middle of the glacier the wind began to pick up.

And I began to freeze. I felt I was going to get a chill, catch a cold, ... It's the beginning of the expedition...

"This won't do," I tell myself. "I need to speed up. I need to get warm."

Except that, unlike the other trips we have done, we're roped together. So, I want to speed up because I'm cold and Dom behind me is a bit tired... You were taking your small steps, as you call them, those small steps you can do for hours but which don't get you anywhere fast. That was when I thought: "That's it, I've had enough, enough, enough..."

We did get to the top of the glacier and you asked if I wanted to go to the summit. I was like "No, let's go down." And the descent was fairly fast.

Dom:

Damien is 19 and a triathlete so I can barely keep up with him on the way up. But Damien has only been skiing for a year and so the descent wasn't easy in what was like spring snow, a bit crusty, difficult in places... We each have to compromise: him on the ascent; me on the descent.

Dom:

Today, for the first time, we saw two nomads. They came by on their horses to say hello and drink tea with us. Yes, today was the first time we'd seen anyone. That's quite unique. I can't think of any other place I have felt that duality: there is nobody, yet we are fairly comfortable in a yurt.

Dam:

Wolf.

Nomads:

Chono. In Mongolian it's chono.

Dam:

Many Chonos? One? Or Two? Ten?

Chono?

Nomads

Chono.

Dom:

What's incredible is that as you go into this vast landscape, in sheer isolation, you walk differently. You do not just walk watching what you're doing but you also need to constantly watch what the other person is doing. And your vision changes. It expands. You're in the present, in a space of meditation, on an endless trek, then suddenly you feel as if you're seeing more. You really are part of the landscape. You're not just outside moving through it, but inside it.

What's strange is that this new perspective continues in the yurt, in the smallest of details, Damien pouring me a tea, etc. There is that same look in his eyes.

Dam:

Ok it's ready!

The age difference doesn't matter; we just get along just fine.

Just because you're 58 doesn't mean I have to start treating you like an old man, so I don't do it. And because I'm young doesn't mean you have to treat me like a young guy who knows nothing, who needs to listen, and I appreciate that you don't do that.

I think it's great that we can look past the age difference, which people often find strange.

"What? You're going off to Mongolia for 3 weeks with a 58-year-old guy? " And so on and so forth...

It's actually great that we have managed to forget about the age difference and are really good friends. We don't care about the people who think that it's a strange set-up because you're older than my Dad.

Dom:

I'm fascinated by the nomads who live further down the valley. They helped us erect the second yurt on higher ground, but it's all about survival and has been for centuries and centuries.

We tend to idolise this lifestyle and are attracted to it because our lives are so fast and complicated. We are in control of, deal with, so few things. We are so dependent on things like gadgets and tools ... And they're completely autonomous. They have their livestock and are totally autonomous and there's something fascinating about that.

The question is: Is this lifestyle going to survive or not?

And what really bothers me is whether we're helping to destabilise this lifestyle or whether the tourists who come here in winter, prolonging the tiny, but welcome, tourist season, will keep them going for longer.
And I've no answer to that.

Nurbol:

Hello Damien, how are you?

Dam:

Fine.

Hello.

Three other mates have just arrived. It's completely different but it's great to have a bit of company.

Quentin:

So today we'll be carrying our stuff to the base camp where, thankfully, if all goes to plan, there's a yurt up ready and waiting for us.

Dom:

We advance with our heads down during the storm. There are nevertheless 16km between the two yurts and it's uphill with big heavy bags. It is tough work, pretty exhausting, but if you have to have bad weather, an active transit day is optimal timing.

Dastan:

Can you pass me that pot?

You know...

Dastan :

Yes, Yes I will.

I am just, you know, spiritually getting ready.

Damien:

First climb with the other three: the Malchin Peak. There are 5 of us getting ready in the yurt. There's both excitement and tension in the tent. We're getting in each other's way. The departure's a bit disorganised.

I've never been roped up to 4 others before and – to be honest – it's a bit chaotic. I'm the third man, in the middle, so half the time the person in front of me is going too fast and pulling me forward, and the other half, it's me who's going too fast for the man behind and I'm pulling him.

Quentin:

You should quit smoking, eh, Dastan.

Damien:

So, I put the gloves in my pocket and I left without thinking about closing my pocket and 100 meters later, I had only one glove left in my pocket. So ... that is not very smart but as Dastan says: I'm "young and stupid" but that is still better than "old and stupid", so, ...

Marcel:

Fantastic, best weather imaginable. And this snow is so good, so I am looking forward to the way down.

DAM

The sun was setting behind me, so my shadow was in front of me. Suddenly it got bigger and there was something superimposed on it and the shadow extended beyond mine. And then I looked up and I saw there was a big eagle hovering just above me and its shadow was in front of me and I go "Wow!" I was wide-eyed like a kid. I couldn't believe it. I was touched to the core.

DOM

And then the next morning, the last day, the others wanted to rest but we were in great form, so Damien and I set off. That's when Damien lost it a bit. He set off onto the glacier. I tried to keep up with him for 3 hours but there was no way. There was no stopping him. He was far, far away. And although he didn't realise it, he was putting himself in danger because we were on a glacier, even if, on skis, the danger wasn't enormous.

To stop him, I changed course.

DAM

I could feel it. It was the last day and I was going full tilt on the glacier which was just a gentle slope. I knew things were going well so I thought of nothing else and forged full speed ahead.

And then I turned around and couldn't see you. I couldn't understand it. I should have seen a small dot in the distance even if I'd been charging along for ages without realising it.

I'm like : "Shit. " That's impossible. If I can't see him then he must have fallen into something.

I made a U-turn and yet for 10-15 minutes, I still couldn't see you. There were no crevasses. I didn't get it at all. So I began to climb - there was a sort of small mound – and I began to climb it to try to get a view over the whole area. And that's when I saw you, calmly climbing up the mound to have lunch.

Dam :

I realised I had made a mistake. The glacier looked really cool, but I had charged ahead like an idiot without remembering its dangers.

Dam :

Just thinking about my mates who are... it's Friday so they'll be at school but I think it's 3am where they are so they're probably winding down after a night of partying. That's most likely.

DOM

It was touching because as we were going down, I saw Damien turning around perhaps a thousand times to look at the 2 big glaciers. He clearly wanted to commit the landscape to memory.

That was our descent: nothing was said, but the connections were strong. It was bitter sweet.

Dam:

Yes, it was really hard to leave the Altai because in all my life, I had never been calmer than during these three weeks.

Inside me, everything was so simple and I felt so good. I sometimes think about this trip and every time that same serenity, that calmness, returns. A photo wouldn't do it. I wanted to commit it to memory. And it worked because when I'm lying in bed at night, I can still see that landscape and lots of things come back to me.