

I had no idea what was going on. All I knew was that a guy with piece of paper with my name on it would be waiting at the train station in Biysk for me (courtesy of a travel agent named Igor Fedyaev who knows the Altai well), and somehow I'd get to Beltyr with all my stuff. I dragged my three big bags off the train after an overnight ride and, sure enough, there was Ivan, ready to go. He drove like a race car driver for seven or eight hours, gaining some 4,000 vertical feet over 300+ miles from the forested flatlands and foothills of southern Siberia, until I transferred into a Land Cruiser with another stranger who spoke no English. We darted off down a bumpy dirt road into the barren landscape towards the village I only knew by virtue of Google Earth as the place where three different valleys leading towards the mountains converge.

I didn't even know if this place was really inhabited, as I had heard it described as "abandoned" by a travel agent a while back. I did know there was a place where I would stay, but I had no idea what it would be like, or who I'd be staying with. We bumped down the dirt road for 15 miles as the new driver, Victor, played the most surreal traditional southern Siberian chant music – a reminder of both the wildness and ethnic identity of where I was, and where I was heading. As the Land Cruiser pulled up in front of an ancient-looking log cabin, I was signaled to get out of the car and take my bags. Victor, it turned out, was my host, and this was his house. His original house crumbled away in a major earthquake in 2003, leaving his entire family homeless, and this was where he lived now. A 50-year-old soviet style haul truck sat in jacks in the backyard, next to a horse, by the outhouse among a cluster of shacks.

I began getting ready for my journey which would start first thing in the morning, but the pack was approaching an unreasonable weight and I became a bit uncomfortable with the thought of hauling it so far. I was heading towards snowy mountains 30 miles away in April when isothermal, hollow snow is at its worst, making overland snow travel difficult without snowshoes, so they had to go. I also needed mountaineering boots, an ice axe, crampons, helmet, 8 days of food (much of which was not exactly lightweight), four-season tent, clothing for ten degree Fahrenheit weather, a DLSR camera and telephoto lens, satellite emergency communicator, stove and plenty of fuel, and a whole bunch of other stuff needed to make this little expedition possible. As I got the kit together and loaded it into the pack, I could barely shoulder it, but I couldn't figure out what to ditch to get it much under what felt like between 70 and 80 pounds. As I took my first steps out of town the next morning, I felt more like a porter or Sherpa than a trekker or

mountaineer. It was brutal, but as the miles started ticking away I felt inspired as the mountains grew closer.

I knew that in summer, rugged four wheel drive trucks can and do venture up the Taldura Valley where I was heading, but I figured that in April there would be far too much snow in the high country and that I'd have the entire valley to myself. A glimpse into the valley from Beltir seemed to confirm that theory, as most everything passed a certain point seemed to be covered in snow. The livestock herders wouldn't be active yet, I assumed, and even though Victor could have driven me a few miles back until the jeep track became impassable, I figured I'd just keep my style pure and walk the entire 60 mile round trip with an absurdly heavy pack. I suppose it's one of those stupid things climber-types like me do – make things way harder than they need to be. As I passed the first band of wild camels, though, I realized I was living the dream I had created in my mind as I was planning this trip a few months before, and was glad I was on foot.

I had passed a few herder's huts that first day, and encountered a few people that apparently were getting things ready for grazing season, but I figured the further I got back, I probably wouldn't encounter anyone beyond a certain point. But I was astonished to see that the track kept going, linking up tiny herder's huts through seemingly impassable terrain. And even more amazing; a vehicle had actually been back there already, somehow managing to navigate deep snow drifts and mile-long sections of thick overflow ice which dominates much of Taldura Valley's meadows during winter and spring. Later, I would learn just how risky it was to try to get a truck back there in these conditions, reaffirming my choice to approach on foot.

I had covered about 22 miles and was utterly exhausted as I set up my first camp by the overflow ice. Most of my body hurt from the pack weight, but I was in a good position to set up base camp up at the toe of the glacier in the afternoon of the second day, and I figured I'd put on the mountaineering boots to cut down on the weight on my back. The Beltir locals had conveyed by pointing at a map that it would take me three days to reach the glacier, so I was pleased with being ahead of schedule. That second afternoon, after having trekked across vast plains of braided gravel bars, I pitched the tent on a glacial moraine overlooking the most impressive peaks flanking the valley. If the weather held, I'd try to haul my achy body up a nice looking peak directly across from base camp the next day.

With perfect weather, I had no choice but to go for it. The route I chose was an obvious one; a series of snow ramps to an elegant, clean looking, corniced west

ridge. I didn't know what the other side of the ridge looked like, or what the elevation of the peak was, or even the exact elevation of my basecamp for that matter, but I liked the thought of giving it a try and figured getting up high one way or the other would afford good views of my surroundings and allow me to decide on other objectives. With no expectations, I set out at a casual morning hour and started snowshoeing up the initial approach towards the cirque underneath the peak.

At the base of the cirque, a short but steep step to gain a shoulder required careful route finding to avoid a possible avalanche in the given conditions, but soon the shoulder was gained and a long snow slope led to the ridge above. I had hoped to stay on the ridge proper all the way to the summit, but that wasn't safe, as too many sketchy and loose rock gendarmes blocked one side, and cornices overhung the other side. I decided to head slightly down the other side of the ridge where I could see a route that traversed snow patches, scree, and parts of the ridge to gain the upper summit ridge. But it was pushing 3 pm and I didn't know how long it would take, plus I wasn't sure I was looking at the actual summit. I set a turnaround time of 4:30 pm.

Less than halfway up the ridge, I was forced off of it, to a series of traverses and gulley climbs behind the ridge. I looked above and lost a lot of motivation as the route appeared to be longer, steeper and generally trickier than I had planned. I stopped a few times and considered turning around, but the weather was good and I still had another hour until my turnaround time, so I just kept going onwards, but the choice wasn't easy. Just after 4 pm I crested the upper summit ridge and could see the top not far away, so I knew it was in the bag at that point. I motored hard, pulling onto the summit at 4:10 and super psyched. Views of huge peaks within the Altai Mountains stretched into Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China – the borders of which weren't more than 50 or 60 miles from where I stood.

I compared my perch to the surrounding peaks and realized there's a good chance I had just climbed one of the higher summits in the Taldura Valley. But some of the region's higher peaks were visible in the distance, in particular, Belukha Peak (14,700 feet) – the highest mountain in all of Siberia's vast expanse, some 3,000 miles across. Later map work determined that I was indeed on the highest summit in the Taldura Valley area, which despite being only 12,800 feet, offered almost exactly 5,000 vertical feet of climbing from my base camp. The crux occurred right before the summit, where plunging the axe was essential to prevent a potential tumble down a long couloir, but there were other parts of the route that

might warrant a class IV rating as well.

Downclimbing the route went smoothly, and I was back at the base of the cirque about two hours after summiting. From there, a several-mile slog retracing my steps through snow-covered glacial moraines brought me back to camp an hour before dark. Mission accomplished. I vowed to take a much-needed rest day the following day, and read more pages of a book (Three Cups of Tea) than I've read in the last year of my normal life.

The next mission was to head up to an icefall I had spotted from the mountain, and poke around the other side of the upper Taldura Valley. But the weather had taken a turn for the worse and visibility was low and sporadic. I had hoped the weather would clear while I was approaching the icefall so I could attempt another peak, but that didn't happen, so I returned to camp early after duking it out with 30 mph winds and a bit of sideways snowfall for a while. With only one full day left in the upper valley, I decided I would only use it if the weather improved so I could try another peak, but in the morning I awoke to 5 inches of new snow and bad visibility in the mountains, so I decided to start the long trek back, allowing for an extra detour on the way out with the time I'd still have.

I covered good ground that day, and in the middle of one of the largest sections of overflow ice in the entire valley was the same truck whose tracks I think I had seen before. But this time, it was hopelessly stuck all the way up to the top of the wheels, in over 2 feet of standing water with slushy ice in all directions. Clearly the driver misjudged his route through the thawing ice, and my guess is that this vehicle will stay there until all the ice is gone, if it's not within the river channel by then. I was again happy to be on foot as I set off, never seeing that vehicle or its occupants again.

I set a camp on a meadow next to overflow ice at sunset that night. The next morning I started looking for a way to gain a long ridge that separates Taldura Valley from the next valley to the south. I wanted to score some views of the other mountains in that valley which I had only seen briefly (and not completely) from the valley floor near Beltir. I chose a route up through a Larch forest (the only deciduous conifers I've ever seen), and came across a few small log boxes about three feet wide and seven feet long. When I peered down through an opening in one of them, I was shocked to see a human skull and other bones. I had come across a grave from a long time ago, and there were others in the area too. I'll never forget the feeling of coming across something so unexpectedly morbid, yet

there was also something beautiful about that soul resting in such a beautiful place – I place I have no doubt that person's spirit was intimately connected to in life.

I gained a long, broad ridge with spectacular views in all directions, and set up camp in 25 mph freezing winds that didn't let up all night and into the morning. It was the only time I had to wear everything I brought with me, but I was nice and warm as I wandered around and enjoyed my second to last day in this mysterious land. The next morning I packed up for Beltyr, and on the way down got a good vantage point of the landscape that the 2003 earthquake had demolished. I've never seen anything like it – an entire piece of the mountain had caved in on itself, leaving huge planes of dirt uplifted and tilted. Photos I saw from my host in Beltyr from 2003 showed an entire area of forest that had broken away from the mountain – hundreds of trees pointed straight out sideways.

Back in Beltyr, Victor had fired up his traditional sauna for me and prepared bathing water inside it. He also had slaughtered some type of small animal and let me indulge in the feast in his house. The following morning I left to meet my ride back to Biysk, then Barnaul, then Moscow, where I write this now. Today was the first time I've had any sort of conversation in English with anyone. It sure is a trip spending the better part of two weeks with no one to talk to. But it also affords the clean thinking that, every once in a while, does good for a person's soul.