

Kazakhstan

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRADEN GUNEM

Kazakhstan boasts the largest economy in Central Asia—and some of the world's biggest mountains and driest snow. Add athletes, a Russian Mi-8 helicopter, and some warm vodka, and you get one outrageous ski adventure.





Despite the economic boom, Kazakhstan's ski industry has yet to take off. The team did, however, find an old Warren Miller poster hanging in a storefront. Inset: Almaty is vibrant and thriving. "I saw more Bentleys the first day than I'd seen in my whole life," says photographer Braden Gunem.

Last March, at the foot of the Tian Shan Mountains in Kazakhstan, pro skiers J.T. Holmes and Espen Fadnes, cinematographer Chris Patterson, and photographer Braden Gunem climbed into a helicopter to go skiing.

Not just any helicopter, but the same Russian Mi-8 chopper that once flew Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev to dignitary appearances around the country. Roomy enough to fit 20 passengers and staffed by two pilots and a crew chief, the chopper's interior felt at once like a private plane and a giant school bus. There were comfortable chairs and a table, round windows and curtains—but no seat belts. A few feet from the passengers, tucked in a corner, was a tank capable of storing hundreds of gallons of jet fuel. It was full.

President Nazarbayev had long since moved on to more modern air-transport options, leaving this particular Mi-8 in the hands of Kazakhstan's Ministry of

Industry and New Technologies. Karlygash Makatova, a well-known Kazakhstani fixer and former U.S. Embassy employee who helped arrange logistics in 1996 for Warren Miller Entertainment's *Snowriders 2* film shoot, wrote a letter to Minister Asset Issekeshev in advance of the *Ticket to Ride* crew's arrival, requesting permission to use the Mi-8 for a few days of free heli skiing.

Her request was granted, which is how Fadnes and Holmes found themselves landing on a nearly 15,000-foot peak on the first day of filming. The chopper's rubber tires—no skids—precariouly clung to the rock and snow 12,000 feet above where they'd taken off 20 minutes earlier. The crew chief got out with a wary scowl the skiers would come to know well and began chucking their gear onto the snow.

Patterson and Gunem had been dropped on a glacier thousands of feet below, completely out of sight. Holmes and Fadnes, two of the world's premier speed riders—masters of a hybrid

discipline combining big-mountain skiing with paragliding—took in the scene. "We couldn't see anything because of the fog," says Fadnes, a former product developer for the Norwegian Military Geographic Service. "I asked the guide, 'Where are we? What is happening?' And he said in a thick accent, 'Now you have one foot in Kazakhstan and one foot in Kyrgyzstan.' I was looking around, like, Seriously, is this heli skiing? We can't film anything, we can't see anything, it's way too high, I have no idea where Chris or Braden is—this is insane. J.T. and I were just looking at each other. Then we started to laugh."

In American culture, Kazakhstan is probably best known for delivering us an outrageously inappropriate tourist named Borat. Fictional mustachioed gawkers aside, the ninth largest country in the world also happens to harbor some of the best mountains in Central Asia—and some of the planet's driest snow. In fact, should you



Clockwise from top: A sheep's head might be what's for dinner, but Chris Anthony knows good snow is always delicious; military in the streets of Almaty; flying the flag high.



KAZAKHSTAN

When you go...

GETTING THERE Fly into Almaty International Airport.

LODGING Stay at Shymbulak Resort. shymbulak.com/en/

DON'T MISS Spend a few days off the hill exploring Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city. Shymbulak ski resort is just 15 miles away. Also, check out Charyn Canyon, the Grand Canyon of Kazakhstan, and the Tien Shan mountain range via helicopter.

find yourself off-piste on a deep day at one of the four notable ski resorts in landlocked Kazakhstan, beware: The snow is so light that skiers who click out of their bindings have been known to sink up to their necks.

Add the fact that it's an accepted practice to dispose of old chairlifts and outdated metal machinery by tossing them just beyond the groomers' edges, alongside giant boulders, and you can understand why skinny skis were not the ideal tools with which to explore Kazakhstan's wild snow. Yet just as equipment advancements have made the ski experience safer and more enjoyable over the past two decades, so too have societal upgrades.

Kazakhstan gained its independence in December 1991 after 55 years as a Soviet republic. You need look no further than its natural resources, notably oil, gas, gold, coal, and uranium, to understand why it now has the strongest economy in Central Asia. The only president in the country's history—Nazarbayev, a shepherd's son and former steelworker—got 95.5 percent of the vote in the most recent election, according to data kept by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Despite the economic rise and gorgeous mountains, adventure tourism, particularly skiing, is not big business in Kazakhstan. Makatova aims to change that, or at least bring more attention to its potential. After *Snowriders 2*, she stayed in touch with the crew and began pushing for a return trip to chronicle how the country had come of age over the next 17 years.

Last November, Patterson happened to be filming a deodorant commercial in South Africa in which Holmes and Fadnes were flying their wingsuits. Skiers being skiers, the trio didn't wait for one trip to end before dreaming up the next, and they got to talking about WME. Patterson had been planning a trip to Pakistan, but when that fell through due to the country's turbulent political situation, they decided on Kazakhstan—speed riding through the Tian Shan in early spring.



Cinematographer Chris Patterson ends a long day at the hotel bar. Kazakhstan gained its independence in 1991 after 55 years as a Soviet republic, but Lenin is apparently still larger than life.

In 1996, Kazakhstan's post-Soviet

modernization had barely begun, and when veteran WME skier Chris Anthony and a pioneering crew flew into Almaty, Anthony described it as a *Mad Max* atmosphere. They caught a ride to their hotel in a WWII ambulance. Much of the city was dark save for windowsill candles. The only harbinger of the development to come were the Pepsi and Marlboro billboards in every direction.

This year, his 24th with WME, Anthony returned to join the party a few days after Fadnes and Holmes. When he flew into Almaty this time, he found the difference staggering. Gone were the flaming trash barrels on the side of the road. In their place stood luxury car dealerships, ritzy

restaurants, and flashy clubs.

The boom had even reached the ski resort up the road from Almaty, Shymbulak, which had recently undergone a \$100 million refurbishment. Where a machine-gun-toting lifeline in military fatigues once manned a rickety single chairlift that sputtered along a cable so low your skis dragged along the ground, compressing your knees into your chest, Shymbulak now featured a state-of-the-art gondola and high-speed quad. You could even buy a GoPro at the base lodge.

Indeed, the country has moved forward so fast even the internet can't keep up with its progress. "All the research I was looking at showed yurts and people

herding and this primitive lifestyle,” photographer Gunem recalls. “Then we get there and I saw more Bentleys the first day than I’d seen in my entire life. There were Maseratis, Mercedes, Porsches, Land Rovers. A cup of coffee was \$7 and a cocktail was \$15.”

The main drag through Almaty, Anthony says, “made Beverly Hills look average.” Giant mansions surround Shymbulak’s base area, which, latitude-wise, could be in Montana. Anthony, who lives in Colorado’s Vail Valley, compares the Shymbulak scene to Beaver Creek.

The skiing isn’t priced as extravagantly as the amenities, so some can afford to ski their local mountain. (According to Makatova, the average monthly salary in Almaty is roughly \$400.) A lift ticket costs \$50 at Shymbulak, which also offers night skiing. After dinner one evening in the hotel restaurant—where they ate in front of a bust of Vladimir Lenin—Anthony, Holmes, and Fadnes geared up for some runs under the spotlights.

During their two weeks in Kazakhstan, the skiers booted up couloirs, piloted their speed-riding rigs off fatal cliffs, and nearly vomited from terror as the Mi-8 whisked them around the Tian Shan. But they might never have been in more danger than when they joined the circus that is night skiing on Shymbulak’s groomers.

On one run, Anthony decided to try to keep up with the herd. He failed. On another run, Fadnes collided with a snowboarder who shot out of the forest without looking. “Your intermediate skier is going 45 miles an hour there,” says Holmes, who lives in Squaw Valley, California. “It was the wobbling-leg, oversteering-with-the-upper-body technique. Kind of like, Oh boy. We didn’t feel very safe on the groomers.”

Although most of the trip consisted of filming on snow, the crew drove down to the Almaty suburbs one day to have brunch with Makatova’s relatives. They sat on floor pillows and feasted

Pro skiers are obviously adrenaline junkies. Because riding a helicopter, skiing fast, and hucking cliffs just aren’t enough, J.T. Holmes adds a paraglider.



Espen Fadnes is one of the world's best wingsuit flyers. Which means he dives off 4,000-foot cliffs like a peregrine falcon. He's also pretty good at plain old skiing, too.



on a wide range of Kazakhstani dishes while drinking large glasses of room-temperature vodka at 11 a.m.—a gesture that brought their hosts great satisfaction.

The (relatively) standard food was another departure from Anthony's experience in 1996, when he ate horsemeat kabobs, a goat head (including the tongue, ears, and forehead), and a sheep's head. This year it was mostly beshbarmak (boiled pasta and meat), plov (rice and meat with onions and

carrots), manty (dumplings), and lagman (noodles with meat).

As it does in any worthy destination, culture takes many forms in Kazakhstan. And although a zest for powder skiing is not common, it does exist. During their

two days of heli skiing, the film crew met some kindred spirits: the guides Makatova had found through one of her many connections in Almaty.

Picture Borat as an old-school Alaskan guide during the cowboy days of the early 1990s. Then name him Vitaly. That's who was responsible for Holmes's and Fadnes's safety while they rocketed down the mountain, carving turns and then lifting off to clear a cliff or a crevasse, never more than a few hundred feet from one another. Giving the athletes a longer leash than protocol might have dictated in America, the guides developed a habit of "checking for snow safety" that didn't always sit well with Patterson—even if he could identify with their motive.

Patterson and Gunem had set up their cameras for what they call a "barbie shot," looking across a powder field at a gorgeous mountain face. The helicopter dropped everyone else at the top of the valley. Patterson watched as Holmes and Fadnes began preparing their rigs to fly. He looked away for a minute. When he looked

back, he could hardly believe his eyes.

"All of a sudden I see three dudes skiing down, having the run of a lifetime, right down our shot," Patterson says. "And I'm like, what are they doing? They ski all the way down, they're high-fiving, just so happy. And I'm flipping out. Who can it be? There's no one else around. Well, it turns out they're our guides."

The three men skied over to Patterson and Gunem. "I'm like, 'You guys just skied through our shot!'" Patterson says. "And how in the hell are you going to rescue our dudes if you're at the bottom, and the giant flying bus is who knows where? And we can't even communicate with the flying bus anyway!" And the guides are like, "What do you mean, rescue our dudes?"

"From a safety standpoint," Patterson continues, "'it would make more sense for at least one of you to stay at the top of the mountain in case one of our skiers gets hung up somewhere.' But they had no understanding of what I meant. They're like, 'Well, we're just out here to ski, man.'" 

