

A scenic landscape photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a calm lake reflects the sky and the surrounding mountains. The sky is a clear, pale blue with a few wispy white clouds. The mountains are rugged and rocky, with some snow patches visible in the distance. The right side of the image shows a steep, forested slope with dense green trees. The overall atmosphere is serene and majestic.

Eugene Kaspersky

# Come Hell or High Altai Water

Eugene Kaspersky

Come Hell  
or  
High Altai Water

## From the author

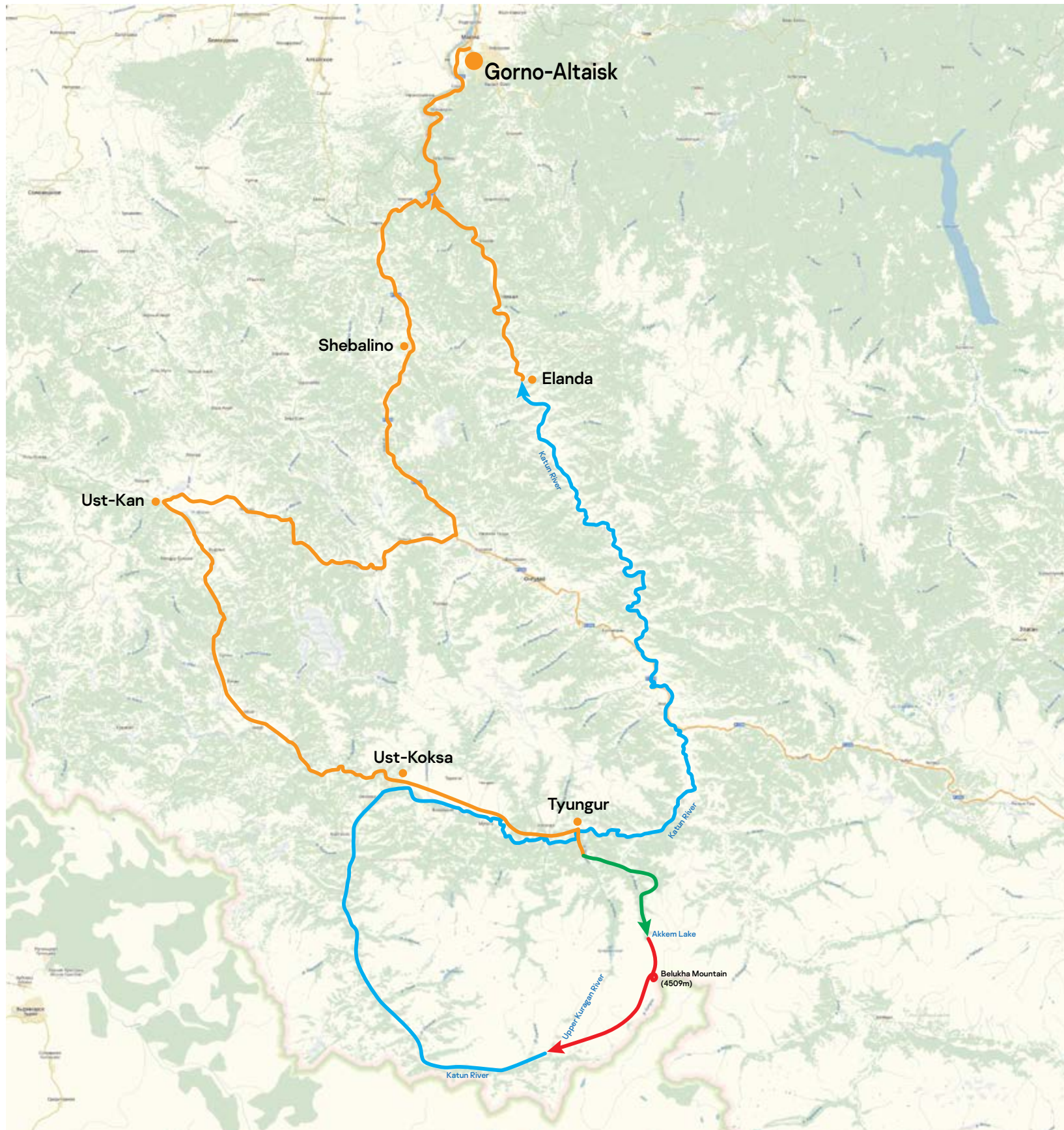
In my piggy bank of mind-blowing places on the planet I've been to, Altai ranks up there as one of the most fascinating and magical of them all.

But that's not only because Altai is off-the-scale beautiful; there's something else about the place. It might be some sort of special energy in the rocks, something in the air, something in the water, or something else we'll never fathom. It's just that here the colors are brighter, the water is tastier, the grass is greener, and the mountains contrast all the more against their surroundings.

In 2016 I was lucky enough to spend a full three weeks in Altai with the group of like-minded adventurers I often go away on an extreme vacation with. We trekked, we choppered, we rafted (down the Katun River), and – of course – we snapped lots of pics, which fill out most of this book you're now holding, if you haven't already guessed.

Briefly, our route went like this:

In all we walked around 70 kilometers to Lake Akkem and then round it; we flew around Mount Belukha in a helicopter; and we flew up to the headwaters of the Katun and rafted down to the lower reaches of the river – almost 400km (four HUNDRED kilometers!!) in all and descending over a kilometer on the vertical axis. And that was how I spent the summer that year.



# Route

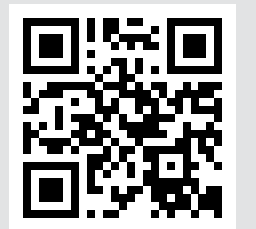
So, how did we cover such a great distance walking, flying and rafting in just three weeks? Let's just say... 'no rest for the wicked!' For we must be wicked since we got zero rest – apart from brief sleeps – in the full 21 days. But we're used to that; in fact, it's only ever like that with us lot! Oh, but we were also greatly assisted logistically to cover such a great distance by our friends at the company 'Altai Guide', so to them, for that, a massive thank you!

So, in 21 days we traveled ~1100km, including:

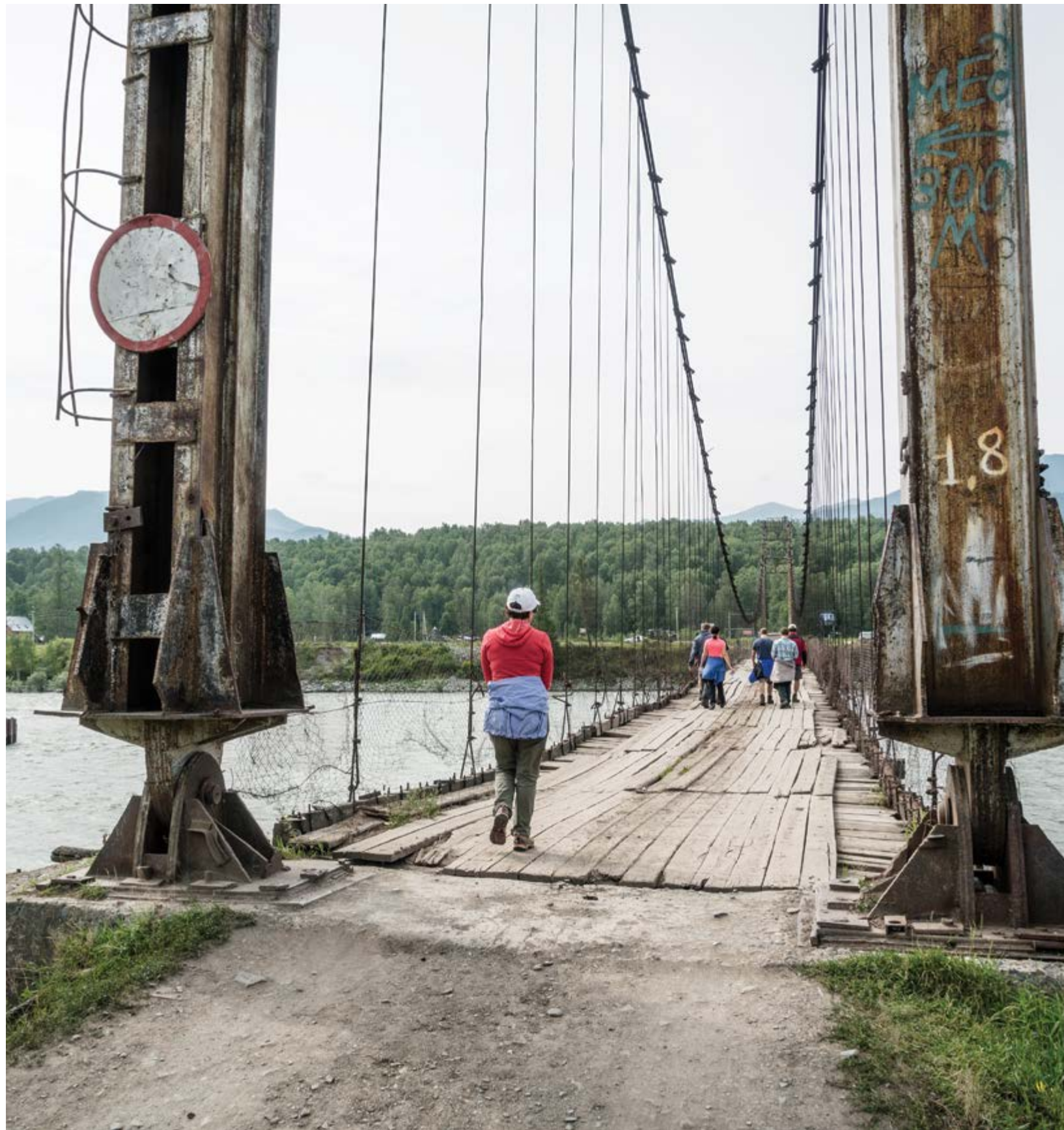
- 560km in vehicles;
- 60km on a Soviet Mi-8 helicopter;
- 70km trekking to Mount Belukha and back;
- 420km rafting from the Verkhny Kuragan river to the village of Yelanda.

The route turned out to be a figure-of-eight shape, marked here on the map.

- By road vehicle
- On foot
- By helicopter
- By river



Information on 'Altai Guide', the company that organized our expedition



# Altai transportation

First, a few words about the transportation side of our expedition.

How do you get to Belukha, its glaciers, and the surrounding multi-colored rocks? Well, the shortest route (from Moscow) is by plane to Gorno-Altai, and then 440km by car to the village of Tyungur. Part of the road (about 160km of it) goes along the famous Chuya Highway. It's this part that's federally maintained – mostly flat and smooth, good asphalt surface, road markings, new road signs, and some super 'warm-up' views.

The road was first built back in the mid-18th century, apparently. It follows the route of a much older road – the Mungal Tract – referred to in Chinese chronicles from a thousand years ago. The route was used by both soldiers and traders.

After turning off the federal highway at Tyungur the road conditions sharply worsened. In places the asphalt was alarmingly lacking; still, it was by no means a dusty dirt track dotted with potholes. Meanwhile, the views all around were becoming all the more the striking.

Tyungur is situated on the left bank of the Katun River near to where the smaller Kucherla River branches off the Katun. It's from here where most tourists set off to get to Belukha Mountain. To cross the Katun here there's a single-track suspension bridge.

Visitors normally get to Tyungur in the evening, which tends to be spent milling around one's tent or the rather decent hostel-hotel (featuring separate rooms, showers, Wi-Fi and – of course! – banya (traditional Russian sauna) and plunge pool).

Come morning, fully refreshed, it's time to head out toward Belukha!...





Apparently there's an option of getting to Belukha real quick – in a helicopter. But we reckoned that would be unsporting. There are two other options – on foot or on horseback. We chose a happy medium between the two: our big bags were carried by the horses, while we walked alongside with small backpacks and other light bits and pieces. Oh, and part of the way, over the first mountain pass, we traveled in a Soviet GAZ-66 off-road military truck along the 'road' shown in the pic here ).

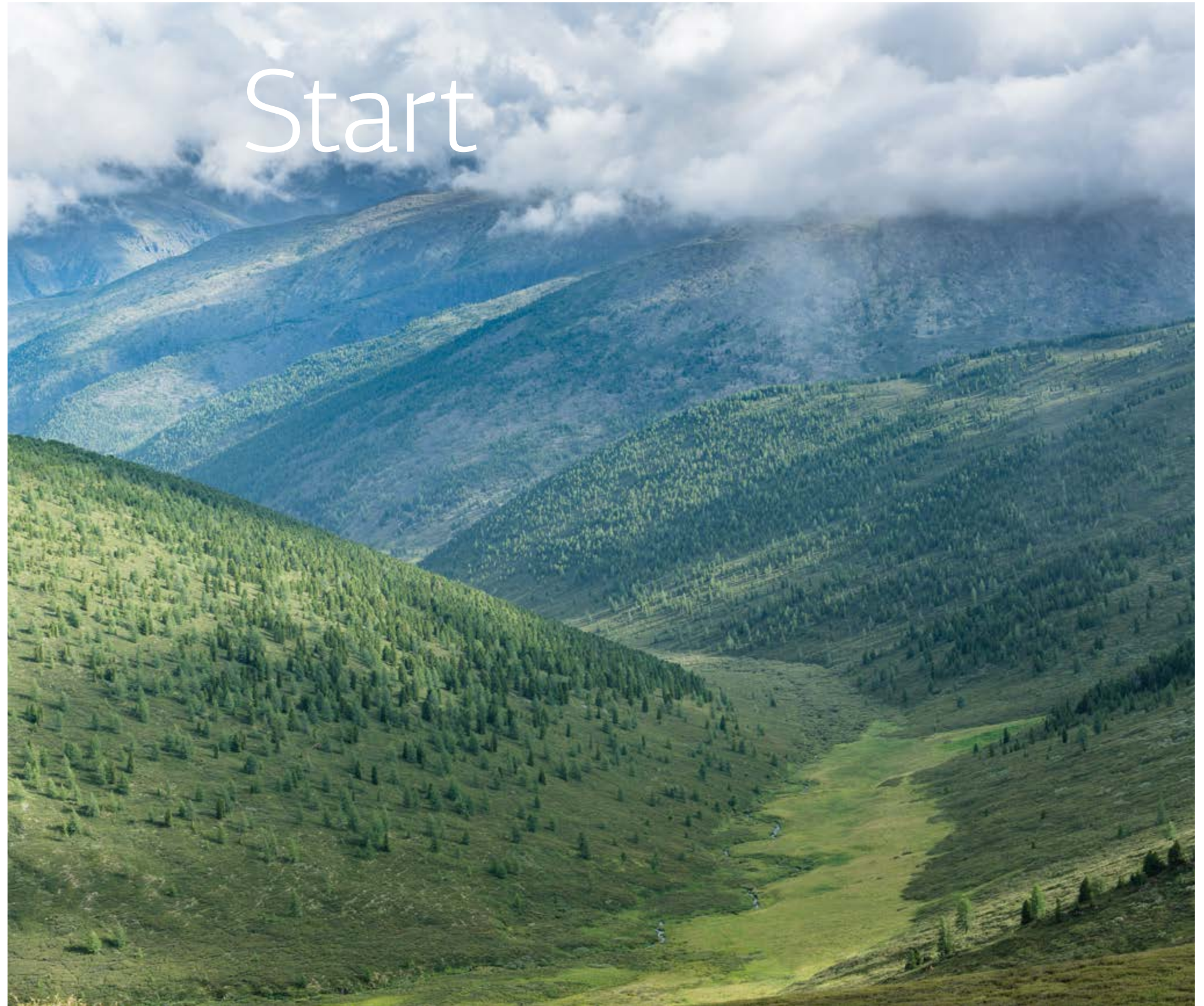
After that it was all on foot, and we didn't take the shortest route either. In order to see as much scenery as possible and to meditate thereupon, we took a roundabout way, over mountain passes.



The first few days of our expedition were overcast, and the rains that regularly fell from the fluffy white clouds weren't all that conducive to the contemplation/meditation we'd been looking forward to. But our guides advised us not to worry: "Good weather in Altai occurs several times a day!"

Despite the lowered visibility, we could almost sense that the heavenly beauty, the astral plane, and/or the upper layers of prana were right there, behind the clouds, waiting patiently for us ).

# Start





We eventually reached the mountain pass where we got our first view of Belukha. Wow!

Incidentally, the mountain pass was the last place where we could use a mobile phone until we returned to 'civilization'. Regular telecommunications were impossible after here – though we did have a satellite phone, just in case.

Onward to Belukha!...







But first we checked out some rocky outcrops atop a hill. These curiously-shaped stacks of rock were formed over millions of years. The stacks themselves are of a rock that's much tougher than the surrounding rock; the latter was worn away much faster by the elements – be they precipitation, wind, or glacier movements.

After a brief pause at the outcrops, onward we marched: up and down hills that were quite steep and rocky in places and so caused us to work up a sweat, while always enjoying the views – and feeling sorry for the horses. Even though they had 'permanent four-wheel drive' they still slid and stumbled in the same places we did.

Meanwhile, Belukha looms nearer and nearer...





Mount Belukha is well-known, but only in a few niche circles. And that's a pity, because the place is absolutely stunning! Situated right on the Russia-Kazakhstan border, it's the highest point in all Altai (4509m), and one of the tallest peaks in Russia. The name 'Belukha' means ~'whitey', which it truly is – as not just its peak is permanently covered in snow but also its base. And it's from those snowy slopes of Balukha that the Katun River – which we were to raft down – starts out as a stream.

Beautiful, monumental, enormous, and pearly white.

But there are also the contrasting colors of the surrounding scenery that are so jaw-droppingly stunning too! The rocks can be orange, red, purple, also white, plus an undeniably unearthly color – a kind of nickel-silver. There's snow, glaciers, colorful rocks, bright greenery, white rivers ('glacial milk'), and white foamy mountain waterfalls with the purest, tastiest ice-water you'll ever drink. The water's called glacial milk, incidentally, because it contains really fine dust, formed from stones being crushed by glaciers moving down the mountain's slopes.

Still on our approach toward Belukha along the bank of the Yarluk stream, we stopped off at another point of interest: Stone Village – a cult historical location for fans of the late [Russian artist-archeologist-philosopher] Nikolai Roerich and his secret forces of nature and search for an Altai Shambhala.

The Stone Town wasn't met with much enthusiasm. One of our group called it a "collection of locally-sourced construction materials that's become a cult site". Quite!





You could sit and meditate while staring at these multicolored panoramic scenes for hours on end – especially from this wonderful vantage point we’d climbed up to – atop a colorful mountain ridge that divides the valley in half. Then, when your mind is cleared and enlightened, your thoughts may begin to wander, and after a brief discussion with your companions – also taking in the landscapes – the following thoughts may come to mind or be recalled: “The first nonalcoholic expedition to study the upper layers of prana”. Yep, that’s exactly what this was!

And you do definitely get a strange feeling here. Some force or mysterious energy penetrates into your being and... it’s difficult to put into words. It’s probably clogged chakras being cleared. “And if you stand upright, the energy rises so that the skin on your head tingles” – that was written on my behalf in the expedition diary. Or perhaps it was just my recently closely-cropped skull having become sunburned.

But it was time to come back down to earth and slowly, meditatively, set off for our next destination...





...But before I could think of the next destination, I was already planning something for our second expedition to Altai (for coming back was simply mandatory, that was already as clear as the water round here)! Among those plans was this: we'd need to walk along the whole length of this mountain ridge, then down and back along the stream.







Mount Belukha attracts you with its grandeur. The white peaks (of which there are several) and the sheer drops of the glaciers... – the powerful enormity leaves you enraptured.

But we had no plans to climb it. That would be a far-from-straightforward endeavor – even though the mountain is ‘only’ 4509m high. Climbing Belukha requires special equipment and training. We had neither. Anyway, this expedition was all about ‘high water and blue sky’, not ‘climbing Belukha and its sheer ice’!

But a trek along the valley toward the glaciers was a must. We didn’t have enough time to reach them, but then glacier-climbing wasn’t part of our plans either. Nevertheless, the lengthy walk approaching them was superbly scenic and memorable.

A reminder for next time: we definitely have to get to the base camp on the glacier and spend the night there to watch both the evening and morning views of Belukha. The base camp is up there, btw – along the stream between the moraines.







#### Attention! Border zone!

If you ever fancy visiting this part of Altai and you're a foreigner, you need to get a permit from Russia's Federal Security Service in Gorno-Altaiisk in advance. If you're Russian, things are simpler – you just have to show your passport to the border guards here. However, if you need to come within five kilometers of the state border – as you need to if climbing Belukha – both foreigners and Russians need to obtain the mentioned permit in advance.

Thankfully none of us needed a permit as we contented ourselves with a short walk around the Orthodox chapel here – the 'Church of Lost Climbers' – and then continued on our way.



Akkem Lake and the upper reaches of the Akkem River





They say that the Akkem River is also suitable for rafting, but... I'm not so sure: that there fallen tree trunk stretching from bank to bank doesn't look to raft-friendly!...



It can get rather busy around Lake Akkem, with tourists milling about everywhere you look. But that only adds to the atmosphere really: everyone's happy, smiling... and singing! I can vouch for the views here being fantastic of a morning and in the evening (in the daytime we were away hiking).

There's even a banya here too (you need to book in advance), with a stream with the purest of water, plus grazing goats and a few cute dogs.

The only irritant here is the fact there's no firewood to be found near the lake at all: it's all been used up for campfires over the years! You need to walk up into the mountains quite a distance to find any! Oh, and there are no supermarkets, grocery stores, convenience stores, or anything else like that. Basically – nothing. It's a back-to-nature kind of camp, and quite right too ).





Next day, we flew by helicopter to the starting place of the next leg of our Come Hell or High Altai Water expedition.

Oh yes. That meant flying above sharp peaks and deep ravines, over Belukha's summit itself, and the opportunity to get all our rafting gear up to the Katun river head!

And to my pleasant surprise, the chopper trip started off smoother than... a baby's bottom! The helicopter actually arrived on time!

My experience from Kamchatka, with its reliably unreliable weather causing helicopters to never be on time, had convinced me that helicopters in general entail lots of waiting; in Kamchatka – sometimes 24 hours if you're lucky, and sometimes longer if you're not. But then – boom! – what a surprise! Here, the helicopters actually arrive on time!

# Helicopter time









Chop-chop – into this here chopper...

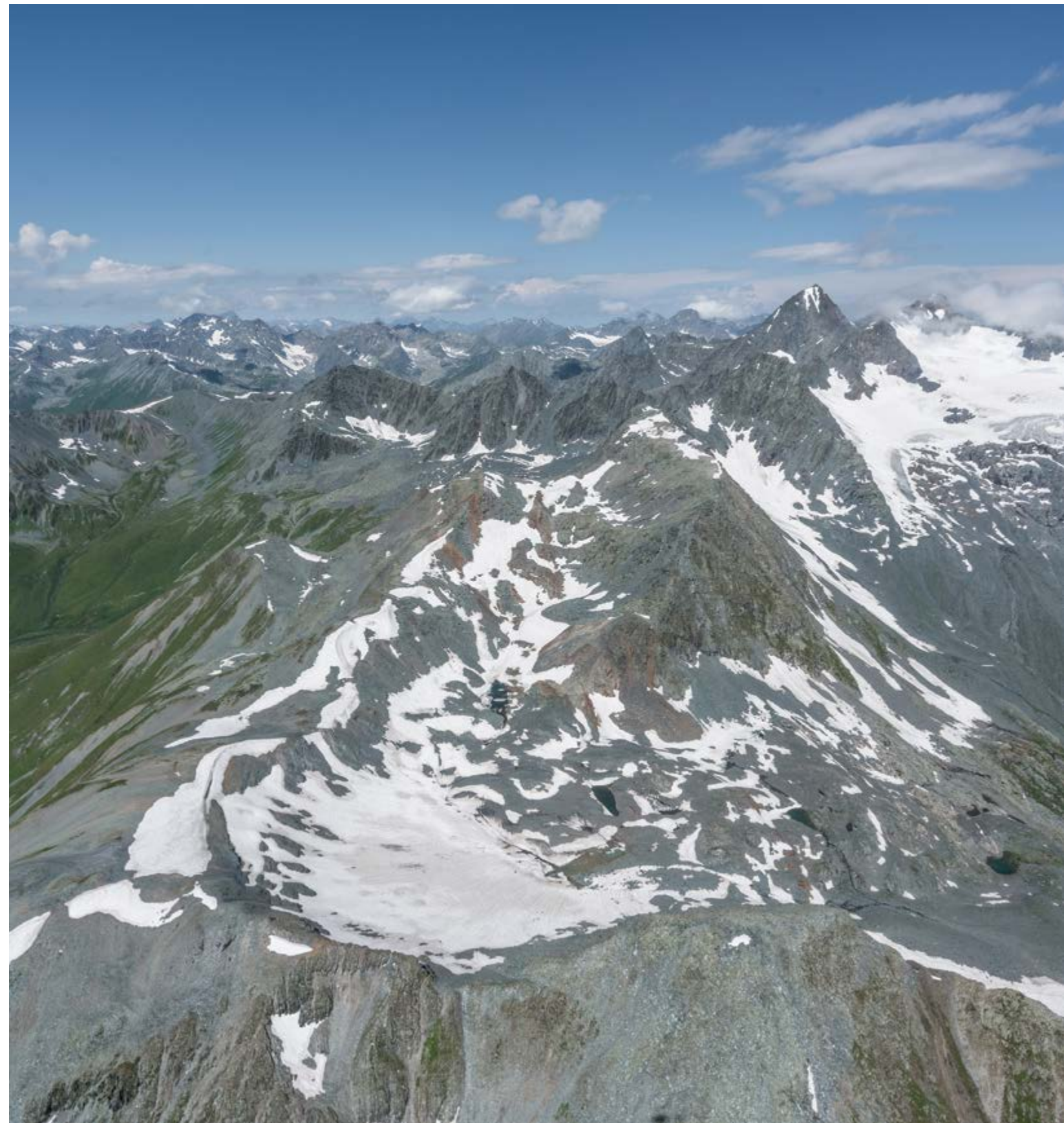
For some it was their first ever helicopter flight. For others – no big deal, but they still took photos so they do seem to still enjoy the experience )



Up we fly, and the views all around – vast, rugged, glacial, awesome... aka – Altai!



Taking a peek at the peak!





Meanwhile inside the chopper...



A hasty landing of the troops

The upper Kuragan stream (we rafted therefrom) and the upper Katun River

Cargo offloaded, off choppers the chopper...



I wonder why they're looking so cheerful?...





...Because they've made it to the upper Katun! Here it's still rather narrow and slow-moving...



In the afternoon before we set off on our rafting mega-thon we tested all our equipment – by using it to simply get from one river bank to the other. Amusingly, so we didn't get washed away down the river, we were attached to someone on the shore via... a fishing rod!

Then, once we'd got the hang of that, it was time for some river navigation without life jackets or other floating kit – or a fishing rod!

Our safety preparations duly completed, come evening we had a final grand open-fire barbecue feast before setting off the next morning – on a 415km-long rafting route!

# Rafting

The rafting route began at an altitude of 1550 meters above sea level, and ended at 440m. That is, we descended 1111 meters in 12 days. The longest stretch of river we covered in one day was on the last day – 60 kilometers.

Rafting route	Altitude (m)	Distance covered (km)	Descent in altitude per day	Average descent in altitude (m/km)	Day's details
	1550	0			Mi-8-MTB
Aug 7	1408	20	142	7.15	
Aug 8	1303	19	105	5.47	Mega-feast
Aug 9	1205	24	98	4.10	Honey farm and sauna
Aug 10	1063	44	142	3.23	
Aug 11	952	42	111	2.66	Ust-Koksa
Aug 12	904	35	48	1.36	Roerich
Aug 13	850	33	54	1.65	Tyungur
Aug 14	770	36	80	2.25	Akkem rapids
Aug 15	680	51	90	1.76	
Aug 16	595	32	85	2.64	Ilgumen, Kadrin
Aug 17	550	21	45	2.15	Shabash
Aug 19	440	58	110	1.92	Teldekpen

The rafting – what it felt like, really:



And here's the posse in its entirety







Before, when I would hear the words 'Katun River' (or just 'Katun'), I'd imagine rapids and rafting; those were simply the first things that came to mind. Now, those images have been set in stone after more than 400km of rafting, scores of rapids, several dozen riffles (shallow, turbulent stretches) and goodness knows how many thousand paddle strokes. But Katun no longer means just rapids and rafting to me – for Katun, I soon found out, is also a place of sublime beauty.

Btw, they say that the name Katun comes from the Altai word for madam, as in – proprietress, which in turn comes from the Old Turkic word Katinn, which means river.

The color of the water along most of the Katun is many shades of green – light green, turquoise, sometimes emerald when mixed with the clear waters of adjoining streams. The reason for this is the 'glacial milk' – very fine rock flour formed during glacial migration when a glacier slowly grinds away at the rock beneath it.



But more on the beauty a bit later. For now, we need to get this rafting thing started – like this



Brave pen-pushers raring to set out on their mega-raft...



And this is just a cute cloud I caught a glimpse of before putting away my camera into its waterproof bag! "It might be a while until the next chance of photography," I thought...



And we're off! The first rapids had the rather tender name of Shyoki, or Cheeks.

The Cheeks are a cascade of five rapids, some of which were real interesting.



"What? Us? Down there?" Our valiant rafters come over a little... apprehensive )





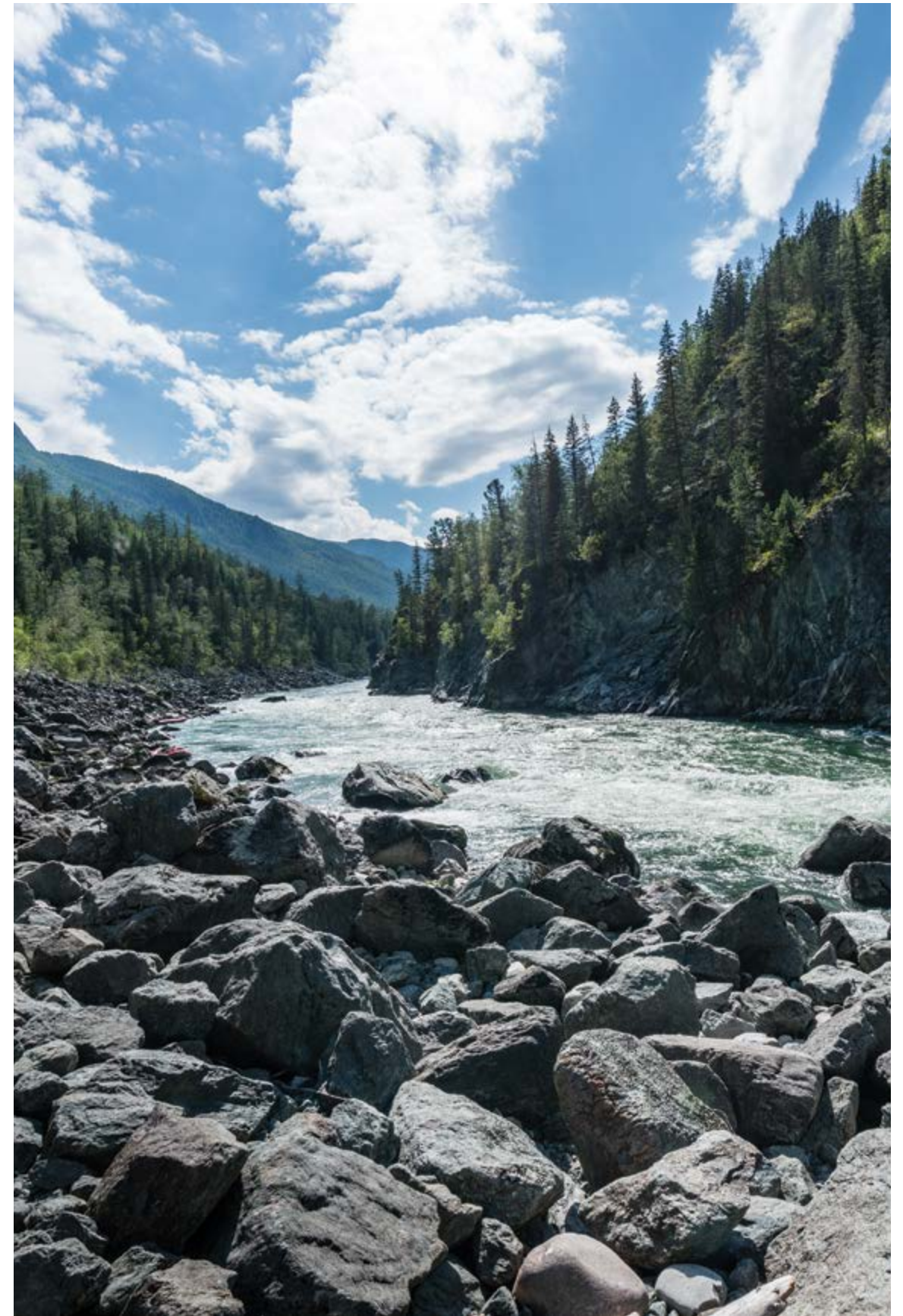
We don our life jackets, seal all the most valuable photo and video devices inside waterproof bags, hold on as tightly as we can with our feet to whatever we can, and – paddles firmly in hand – we set off!

Alas, when you're paddling you've no hands free to take photos.

Even the sun was glad to see we were on our way finally – making its first appearance just as we were setting off!



As rivers tend to do, the Katun keeps on flowing and flowing and flowing, with little regard for our achievements or even our existence, or the geopolitical situation or anything else. Well, apart from the speed at which the glaciers are melting, no doubt.





I must mention the unexpected distraction that arose very early on in our rapid-rafting – one which no one saw coming...

Instead of examining upcoming worrisome rock formations, working out how fast the river was flowing, and taking heed of the exhortations of our instructor, everyone... flung themselves down onto the grass, and collectively came to the quick conclusion that the 'Cheeks' should be renamed the 'Stuffed Cheeks' or even the 'Stuffed Cheeks Full of Mushrooms'!

Alas, in the daytime there was nowhere to put the mushrooms so we could take them with us, so we just took a few photos instead. However, on a few evenings while still on the Upper Katun we went for some yummy-fungi overkill – gorging ourselves on suppers of: shroom starter, mushroom main course, and a side of mushies! But of course we did – since they were literally everywhere. We couldn't even pitch our tents without squashing them!





# About Altai's bloodsuckers

The situation re a location's mosquitos and other ghastly insects that bite: it's a topic that worries most any tourist – with the exception perhaps of those visiting a desert or the polar regions (they've other things to worry about). And you might expect the mosquito situation in Altai to be pretty bad. But you'd be wrong, it turns out!

Yep in Altai there are virtually no mosquitoes, midges or other similar blood-sucking pests at all! I didn't see a single specimen along the whole of the Middle Katun! Yes, there was the occasional bite, but each instance was accompanied by a rather astonished "Oh look, a mosquito bit me!" – or suggestions to add

Altai's mosquitoes to the list of the world's endangered species. So yes, they are very few and far between. But they do exist. Here's one, for instance, in the pic.

What also exist in the Altai countryside are ticks – even in August, which certainly is not ticks' favorite month of the year. We caught a full two of them. So, a vaccination against encephalitis is recommended, just in case.

Right, onward we raft. River, mountains – beauty!...



Then, suddenly... Well, actually, that's stretching the truth a bit. It wasn't all that sudden. Everything was going rather sedately and according to schedule, but to liven up the narrative a bit there has to be a 'suddenly' now and again, no?...

So, suddenly – another unexpected-ness! Dozens of beehives in a honey farm! And we were in luck – the bee-keeper was home! Our luck just kept getting better: freshly-squeezed honey was obtainable!

And obtain some we did – a great big tub of it. And that's how things started to look up after the Ozernaya met the Katun: our lives became all the sweeter ). I mean, a vat of genuine Altai honey (and a little mead to go with it) never hurt anyone on a white-water rafting trip, right?!







But then – suddenly! – the sky turned gloomy, on the hillsides there was evidence of recent avalanches, and both the honey and the mead (eh?!) went off in another raft! It was enough to spoil the mood of most any jolly tourist.

Fortunately, a short while later, we were able to focus our attention on an alternative simple pleasure – a most unexpected one at that... We came across some expertly positioned stones that made up a fireplace (placed there, we reckoned, by skillful natives – hardly tourists). So, naturally, we lit a fire inside it, placed a bottomless tent over it, heated up the rocks until they were red-hot, sprinkled water on them to get the steam up, and there we had it, a banya (Russian sauna) for the evening! Just what the doctor declining mood ordered! And just five steps from the pristine icy waters of the Tikhaya River: perfect for those post-banya ice-plunges!

That night, Petrovich dreamed about... his computer password! On the 10th night of our expedition! Poor thing. I would say 'he needs a vacation', but – eek – we were on one ).

Next morning the banya was still warm!





# The Katun Waterpark

After the Shyoki rapids, the Katun transforms into a relatively calm river and stays that way for a full 200 kilometers (!); the river's smooth (though fast) current is only rarely interrupted by short stretches of riffles. All around there are mountains, lush forests and fields, and not a single person in sight – besides us, that is. Perhaps surprisingly, there isn't much wildlife to be seen along the river – we only saw ducks – particularly nettas – and cormorants (aquatic birds) from time to time.

Our raft (i.e., with us tourists on board) splashed down the river and the captain was silent (there were no orders to paddle), so we simply enjoyed the passing sights and as we floated along. The sun came out, warmed us, and stayed out for most of the day. Thus, we fell into a nirvanic, meditative

state. Aaaaah ). Only rarely did we have to rouse ourselves, obey commands like 'paddle left, backwater right', enter yet another rippled stretch of riffles properly, and get a chilly shower of river spray: the waves were quite large, and the front of the raft took in quite a bit of water. The captain-helmsman – right at the back of the raft – typically remained dry; well, he's a pro, no question about it.

And then we returned to meditative-prana-nirvana mode... The raft splashes, the landscapes continue to drift slowly by, the river meanders left and right, and time itself seems to flow in its own merry way. It's all a bit imperceptible but you get carried away, sort of entranced. The scenery slowly changes, the water current is smooth and unhurried (about 7-10 km/h), and time passes without you even

noticing. The tourists had already managed to cover every possible topic for discussion, around here eventually lapsing into long stretches of silence; even when they did talk, it wasn't difficult to zone out and not pay attention to the chatter and to stay with the prana. The captain also kept silent more often than not. Possibly he too was trying to be stay in the moment and meditate with the rest of us.

Later on, we were wrenched out of our taciturn trances by... lashings of honey and mead, and things got somewhat cheerier and more talkative in an instant (fancy that?!). I would have gone on and on splashing along the Katun all Zen-like, but then, out of thin air...



Woah! Motorboat! Then another one! Then another, and yet more! We weren't expecting those! What was this, Katun rush-hour? Thankfully not – after several boats sped past things calmed down again, our meditation having not been disturbed too much.

A while later we slowly started noticing hunters' lodges, apiaries and cottages – more and more as we floated along. Clearly we were approaching some sort of Altai civilization...

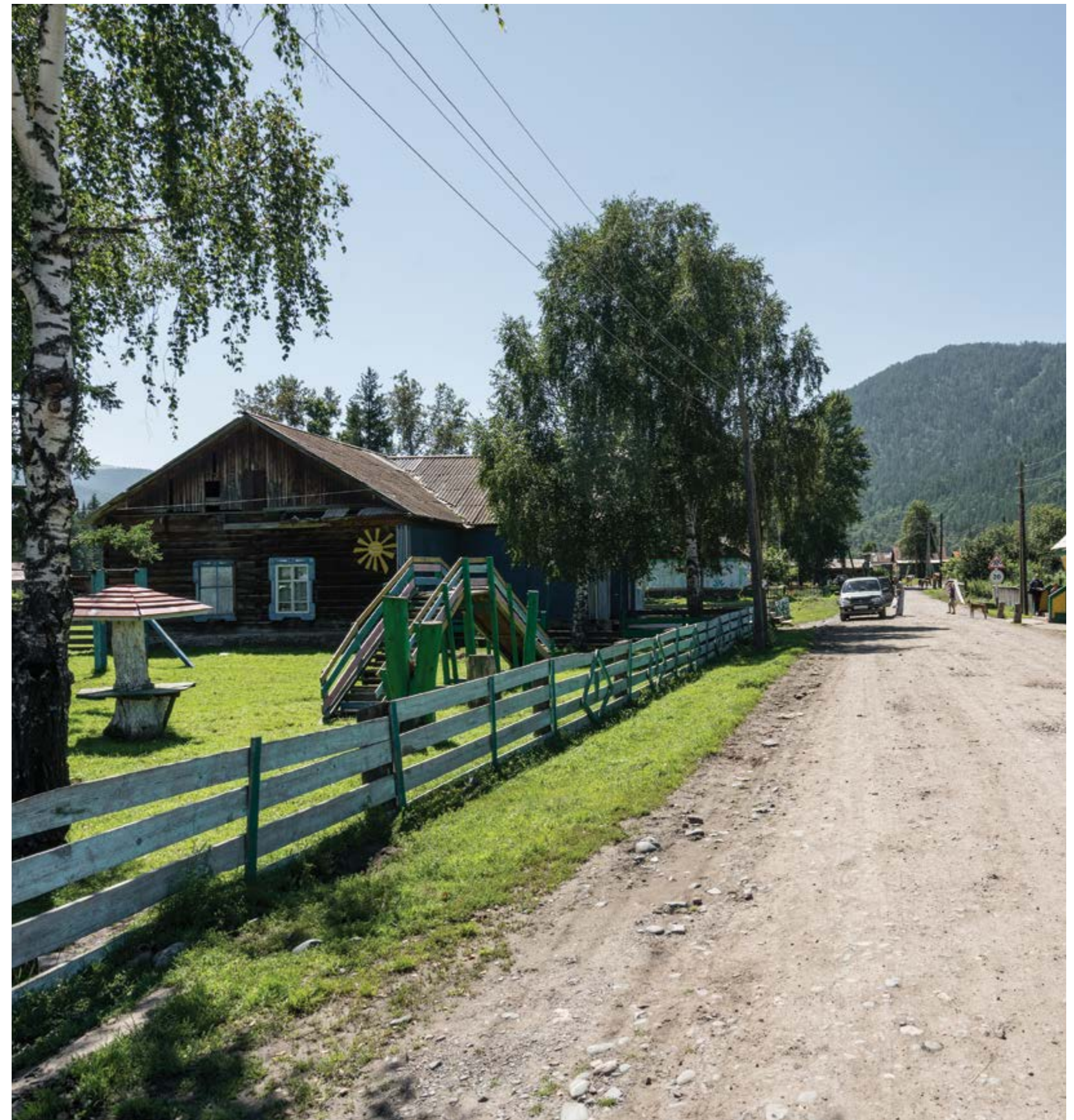




Soon we arrived at a village – Maralovodka, the first settlement we'd seen in 10 days.

So what did we tourists do? Well, what would you have done, dear reader? Of course, we went to the village store! We bought all kinds of stuff: a bit of this and a bit of that. I'll take two of those, no, four!...

We also bought ice cream. Just try spending a week or two hiking, riding and rafting, and plain old vanilla ice cream will seem like a truly delicious treat! :)





After our ice creams, we had another 20 kilometers of relaxation and meditation until we arrived at the relatively large village of Ust-Koksa. There, I forewent the search with the others for a store for another ice cream (but did order a delivery:), and continued to meditate upon the scenery and silence... and then entertained some little kids who'd come running out to check out the visiting 'old guys and their funny boats'!

By the way, we were told that we were the first crew this season to take this route. Nobody before us had rafted the uppermost stretch of the Katun this year. I thought to myself: 'one word: pioneering!'

Another by-the-way – in the photo here to the right you can see a horizontal line along the side of that there mountain... That's the water level of an ancient lake that existed back in much colder times when the water of the Katun was locked in by glaciers that crept down from Belukha's slopes. This means that some of the tops of the mountains here will have been islands in a huge lake!







After our second refreshment stop of the day (!), it was back onto the river. Everything would have been fine – we were meandering smoothly and merrily down the river to the sound of birdsongs, up in the upper layers of prana and all that, when... ta-dam! Surprise! The Nicolas Roerich Museum.

A most unexpected encounter. A cultural center by the Upper Katun! We just had to make a visit... We parked up the rafts, and in we went; and were given a guided tour of the museum, no less. It sure beat the rough rapids of the Katun.

Also, I must admit, it was the first time in my life I'd visited a museum... wearing shorts. When I mentioned this to the others, quickly came back the retort: "And it's the first time we've worn neoprene [synthetic rubber] shorts – ever!"

Verkh-Uymon, the village in which the museum is located, apparently was founded by stonemasons – Old Believers on their way to China. What struck me most about the place was that, though so very remote and tiny, it's main road is a fully asphalted one; also – there was chocolate ice cream sold in the villages stores. Ye gods!





Midway into our Altai trip, we had a... 'day-off'; no – actually, a 'night off': we stopped in the village of Tyungur (where our route had begun) and spent the night at the same hostel we spent our very first night of this trip. Thus, we'd completed a trekking-helicoptering-rafting loop in the

Altai mountains. By the end of the trip, we'd make it into a skewed figure-of-eight; at this point, we'd completed the lower loop.

We slept in the hostel's rooms, but nearly everybody, by force of habit, also pitched their tents in the grounds! Maybe we all simply

sensed it coming – the sensational evening sunset, that is!...

Suddenly, a monument to a certain Pyotr Sukhov, soldier of the Red Army and local hero...

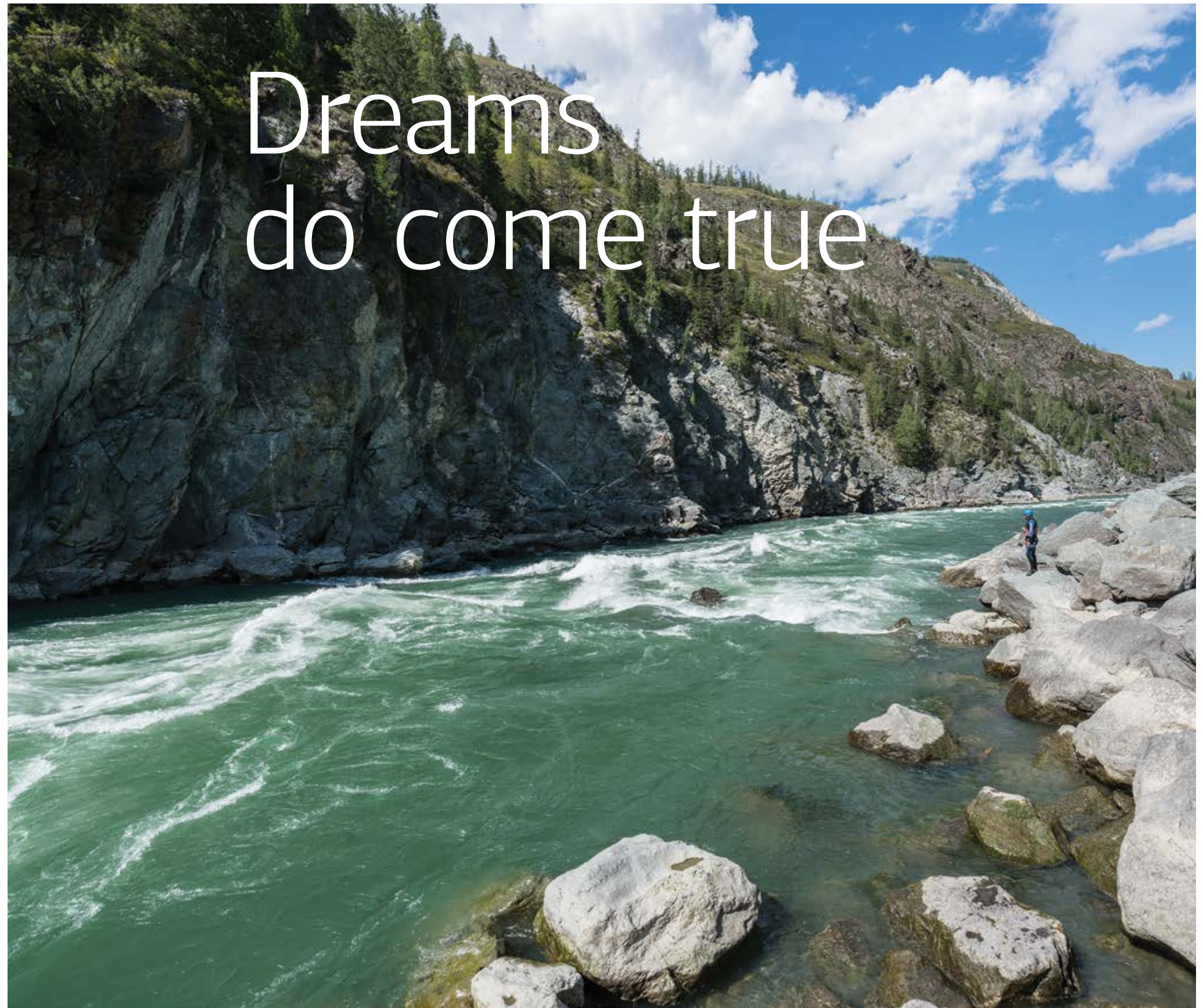


It had been my dream for some 20-odd years to take a rafting trip along the Katun, and especially to go down the Akkem rapids. Well now I've done it! Dreams do come true!

The Akkem rapids are a roughly 10km stretch of the river within a canyon that's rather difficult to get out of. It's practically impossible to walk along the banks – there are either huge rocks and boulders of varying sizes, or precipitous cliffs. You could try climbing up to one of the tracks located higher up the hillside: there's definitely one along the left bank; supposedly there's another along the right bank as well.

However, climbing 200 or 300 meters up some rather daunting slopes (see the photos) is only for extreme climbing enthusiasts. Therefore, once you're in the Akkem canyon, even at its starting point, there's only one way to get out: to take the water route down through it – to the bitter end, no matter what. Yikes!

# Dreams do come true





It starts out as a gentle river and picturesque tributaries. Nothing foreboding about that...

The milky white glacier-sourced water of the Akkem River flows into the powder-blue Katun; stunning!



Next to this mountain  
the river turns left, and  
that's where the entry  
riffle to the Akkem  
rapids is





Technically, the Akkem rapids, for most of their length, are not that difficult in terms of the skill required to navigate them. They're basically a strong river current upon a constricted riverbed, with occasional mild riffles and underwater currents rising to the surface.

However, there is one very tricky place where you can easily capsize. Here, just before it, you have to stop and get up onto the riverbank and spend some time carefully studying the whitewater currents and the obstacles in their way; but there's a bonus: you also get to admire the extraordinary powerful beauty of the rapids, the foam, the spray... and the noise!

"So, had a good look, listen, and snap? Right then, we'll get going." So off we pop... and it all goes by in a flash! Splash-splash, bang-bang, water in the face... and then I was thrown to the other side of the raft (I thought: 'we've capsized!'); then repeat, then again, and again, and again... And then, eventually, the captain turns the raft broadside and shouts: "Well done folks; we've done it!"



Our stern captain just about to give the command to hit the rapids



Later that evening, a thought struck me: 'extreme' water parks will seem like a dip in a paddling pool after today's Akkem rapids! Oh yes, they were indeed amazing: such an adrenaline rush! Yep: very cool indeed. Really must do it again some time.





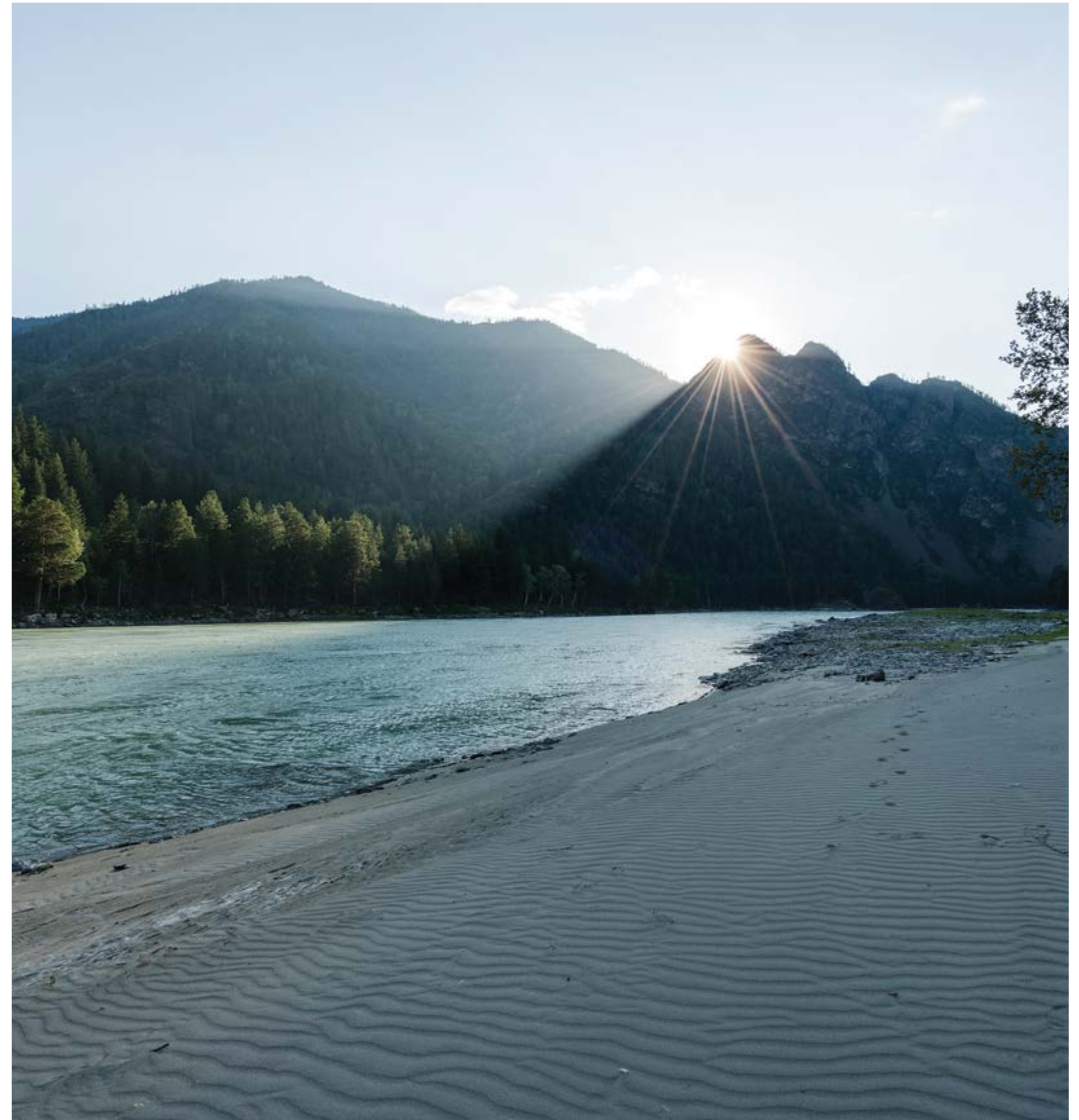
Later that evening we pitched our tents in a clearing specially for the purpose (with a few tourist amenities) used by rapid-riders who've just done the Akkem or the whitewaters of the Argut River (the right-bank tributary of the Katun).

The camp is notable for its unique 'tourist installation', also dubbed the 'Museum of Water Tourism', on which visitors leave a little something to show they've been there. It's like 'been there, got the t-shirt' but in reverse: 'been there, left the t-shirt!'. So if you happen to be there one day, the black one is the one we left, but I think you'll guess that by what's printed on it...



Along the shore – trees that had been knocked over during a spate of very high water. Wow, now that really was very high water...

Of an evening – meditation on the river bank; by day – a quick march up the nearest mountain (for a little more meditation:).





By the way, if you want a signal for your cellphone you need trek up to the top of a mountain! Even there it's hardly stable: it's OK sending and receiving messages, but not strong enough for making calls.

I did manage a weak signal up at the top of this here mountain. It wasn't all that tall – 350 meters up vertically from the camp (which is 550 meters above sea level), meaning the peak is 900 meters above sea level).









The river wasn't always calm. Occasionally we had to paddle when we passed through riffles.



The Chuya River flows into the Katun from the right, after which the Katun's roughest rapids begin.



The category-four Ilgumen Rapids are things of sheer fierce, untamed beauty. They only last some 300 meters, but white-knuckle rafting down them is unforgettable. You really need to experience them for yourself though. Until then, here are some photos; and for those who've already experienced them – here's a chance to get all nostalgic!

The sign says 'No swimming'. Well, I suppose you could try – in a life jacket, hardhat, and with a safety line, but... I think I'll pass, thank you ).

"Are you sure those there rapids are even realistically doable in a raft?" one of the other (road tripping) tourists at the camp asked us. "We're about to find out," we replied.





One of the cars at the camp had a sign in it that read 'Computer Assistance'. That was rather handy since we were running out of memory on our GoPro. But unfortunately they didn't have any spare memory cards. A pity: it would have been fun buying a couple in such an unusual, remote place.



# Rapid rapids...

At one point it was rapids after rapids...

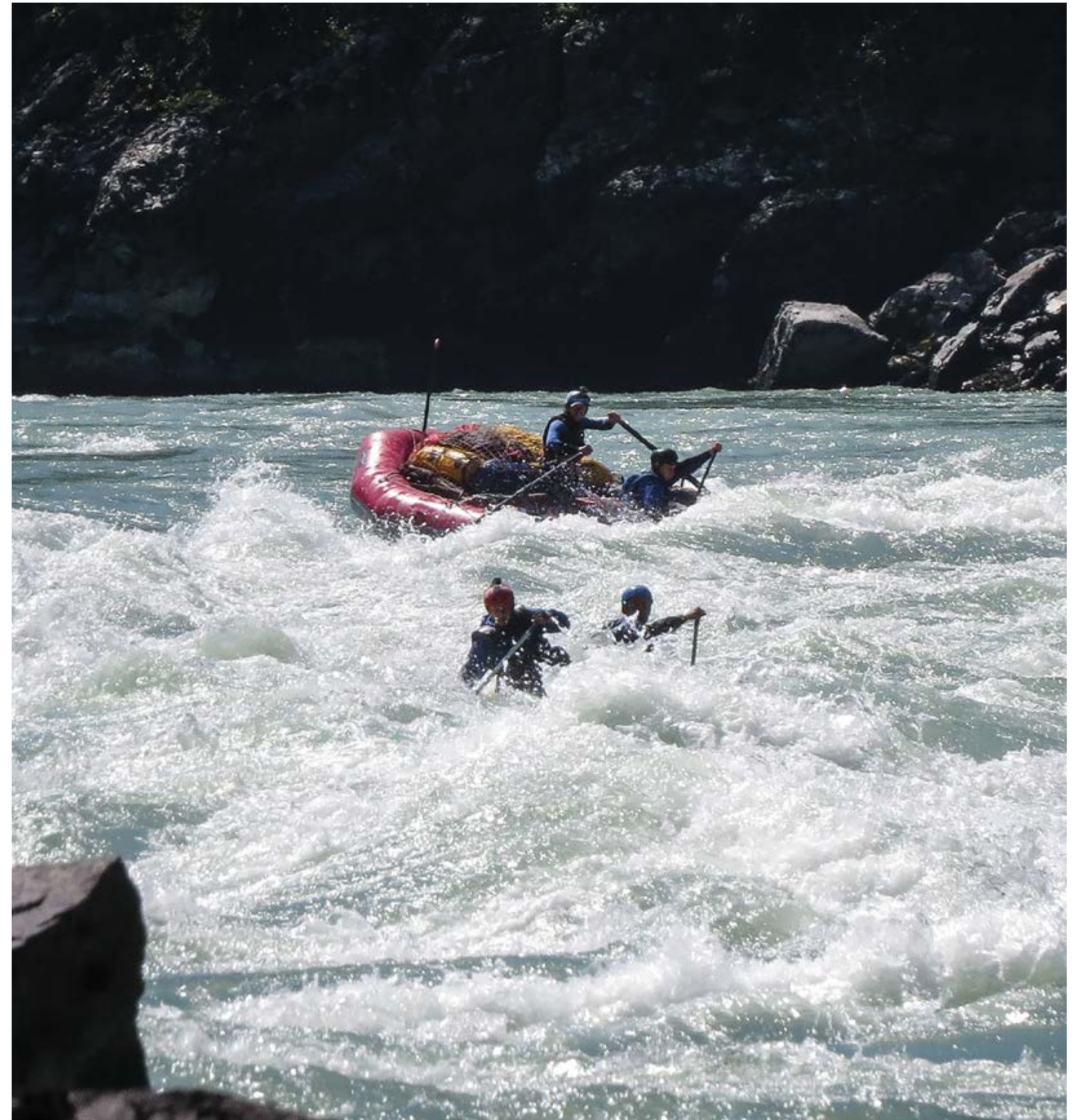
We descended down the Kadrin Rapids while all taking part in the steering of the raft so, alas – only one pic thereof at the end. Then it was a full 10-kilometer (!) series of rapids, including the Kadrinskaya Truba and the Kadrinsky Proriv. In a word: intense.

The Shabash (or Kuzyursky) Rapids are yet further magnificent features of the river.

The evolution of a wave: a roller emerges out of nowhere, and splashes into you with all its might!



But that's enough rapids-watching – time to go down them. So we did – with no major incidents.







The Teldekpen rapids represent yet more wow rafting moments. The Katun passes through a narrow rock constriction and though there are no significant holes in the mid-water season (the time of our expedition), there are however powerful rising underwater currents and whirlpools.

They say a good rising current in flood season can capsize a raft or break a catamaran. On one occasion a kettle sucked in an entire five-seat raft, and then spat the raft out and then its passengers one by one!

We're through! But I want to do it again already!

Curious onlookers sit with their cameras high up on a bridge, waiting for us to pass through the rapids, probably paddling like mad and screaming for Jesus God, or our Moms – more likely all three )







# Excerpts from the rafters' diary

'It's a good water park, and the animation staff are fun!'

One of our animators guides proposed a toast one evening: 'Let's drink to those on board. Those overboard will have plenty to drink where they are.'

Another diary entry reads: 'Reliance on power sockets is the Tao of robots.' I don't remember why I wrote this. Maybe somebody's batteries ran out :).

And the last entry in the diary reads simply: 'Dogs of the wave', which is just what we were while rafting down the Katun!...

And then it was all over. Along came melancholy when we realized this; not long later – nostalgia: for what we'd been through. Finally – desire... to someday do it all again!...

Eugene Kaspersky

# Come Hell

or  
High Altai Water

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Altai is extraordinarily beautiful, it's true. But there's something more to the place. Could it be a mysterious energy in the mountains and rocks? Something in the cleanest, freshest air? Something else? After three weeks there, I still don't know. I only know that in Altai colors are brighter, water tastes better, grass is greener, and mountains contrast more with their surroundings than any others I've seen – and that's a great many mountains (and volcanoes, of course). All this goes to explain why, to me, Altai is one of the most mysteriously, magically, mind-blowing places on the planet.

*Eugene Kaspersky*



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