

## Altai, Russia

🌐 Discover a mythical kingdom where horses and lofty mountains rule

✈️ Fly UK-Barnaul (via Moscow; 11 hours)  
12-15 hour drive into the Altai

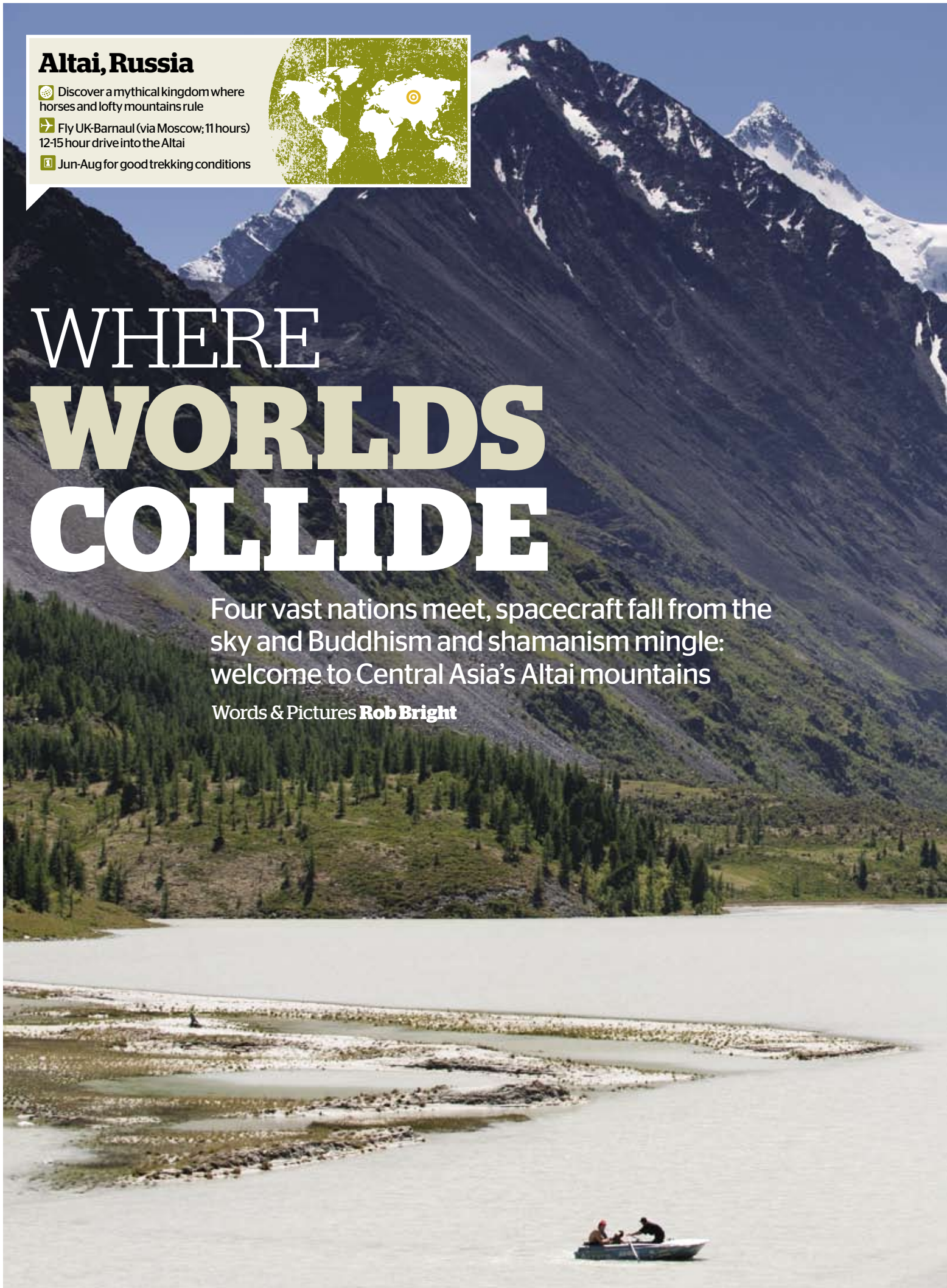
📅 Jun-Aug for good trekking conditions



# WHERE WORLDS COLLIDE

Four vast nations meet, spacecraft fall from the sky and Buddhism and shamanism mingle: welcome to Central Asia's Altai mountains

Words & Pictures **Rob Bright**







Go west: a herd of horsemen cross the mountainous Altai plateau



or days now I hadn't texted or talked into a mobile phone, hadn't seen or heard a car, hadn't stared into a cash machine, hadn't wrestled with

something wrapped in plastic, hadn't fretted about Facebook, hadn't eaten a sandwich at an office desk, hadn't been at the mercy of advertisers and hadn't heard a disembodied, metallic voice utter the words 'unexpected item in bagging area'.

All of the white noise of modernity was gone. Instead, on a ten-day trek amid the Altai Mountains, what sound there was came from the roar and fizz of water rushing over rocks as I walked alongside the Ak-Kem River in the direction of Mount Belukha and the glacier that lounged at its base like a dragon guarding its secrets. Legend has it that this Russian mountain is the site of Shambhala, a mythical kingdom with roots in the folklore of both Buddhism and native shamanism, a 'Pure Land' where the physical and spiritual worlds dissolve into each other.

En route I'd noticed increasing numbers of stones gathered to form small conical piles, but these were not created by Buddhists or shamans. Rather they were the product of Belukha's new believers, a mish-mash of



Theosophists, Gnostics, mystics and post-Soviet hippies. Some of them had probably made good use of the marijuana I'd seen growing in abundance in the meadows nearby.

At the urging of our Russian trekking guide Timofei, a few of us climbed onto the glacier, marvelling at its scale and strangeness – its ice buckled and compressed into corrugated layers of charcoal-black and faintly glowing jade, its vast form suggesting motion yet still. After 30 minutes walking on the gritted ice towards Belukha, we saw oily clouds gathering about the massif and so had to turn back. As we climbed off the dragon's back, a peal of thunder rumbled from somewhere behind us, its timing so apt as to feel staged. We laughed a little uneasily

and hurriedly began the four-hour journey back to camp, trying to beat the rain.

## Ponies & ice princesses

Not many people have heard of the Altai Mountains. The range straddles four countries – Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China. Belukha, at 4,506m, sits just inside the Russian border to the north, making it not only the highest mountain in the Altai but in the whole of Siberia. It's one of the furthest places from the sea in the world, a handicap compensated for by 1,500 glaciers, 7,000 freshwater lakes, and a network of brooks, streams, rivers and waterfalls. On a clear summer day, you look out on a landscape made up from thousands of acres of spruce and cedar that constitute a small portion of the *taiga*, mountain tundra not unlike the Scottish Highlands, meadows brimming with hundreds of species of flora and – floating above it all – the jagged snow-flashed peaks themselves.

A geographical crossroads, the Altai has long been a cultural and ethnic one too. Native Altaians are Turkic-Mongol people. They have wide, Asiatic features and regard themselves as belonging to a lineage stretching back to Genghis Khan in the 13th century, although since then the generations have split and reconfigured into >

**‘The horseriders seemed to feel that those of us walking were missing vital mental faculties’**





## “The views were always changing... outdoing each other in scale and beauty”

◀ a dizzying arrangement of tribes and clans. Further back still, the region was home to the Pazyryk, named after the Pazyryk Valley where 2,500-year-old remains of tribal chiefs, perfectly preserved thanks to the permafrost, were found in burial mounds known as *kurgans*. These mummies, including the ‘Ice Princess of the Altai’, were laid to rest in such extravagant splendour as to leave no doubt about their pre-eminence within the world of that time.

The Pazyryk people were fine archers and horse riders, part of a wider Scythian empire and culture that may well have been the first to conceive of the idea of riding on horseback rather than behind a chariot. This tactic gave them great mobility and helped reinforce the view that the horse was an extension of man himself – a theory still common among native Altaians right up to the 20th century. For this reason, both among the Pazyryk and in living memory, people were often buried with their horses.

A ten-day trek in the Altai is practically impossible without horses, at least if you want to avoid a 40kg backpack and powdered food for the entire trip. In the mornings before they were saddled up for the day, I liked watching them, their coats gilded by the sun, nostrils steaming in the still-cool air, heads angled towards the earth in that stoic, melancholy way. Stocky geldings, their powerful build would carry them doggedly up steep ascents and delicately down again, four or five linked together by ropes, an Altaian horserider urging them on with unearthly rasps and chirrup.

I only really saw a native Altaian off his horse when he was sleeping or eating. I got the feeling they regarded those of us walking up yet another 1,000 metres to yet another summit as missing vital mental faculties. ‘Why put yourself through it when you can ride instead?’ the wry smile seemed to say. There were times, groping my way up a muddy path made treacherous by the rain, that I was inclined to agree with them.

The prosaically named Andrew was the native Altaian responsible for the horses on my trek. He’s spent so much time in the saddle that on foot he has a bandy-legged swagger that wouldn’t look out of place in a Western. He spoke proudly of his father’s prowess at horseracing and told me his own

diminutive build means he will race too.

They train the horses through the cold, snowy Siberian winter and in summer they race in festivals, riding bareback. I asked how dangerous this is. Andrew shrugged: “I used to fall off when I was a kid but not any more.”

### Looking out for UFOs

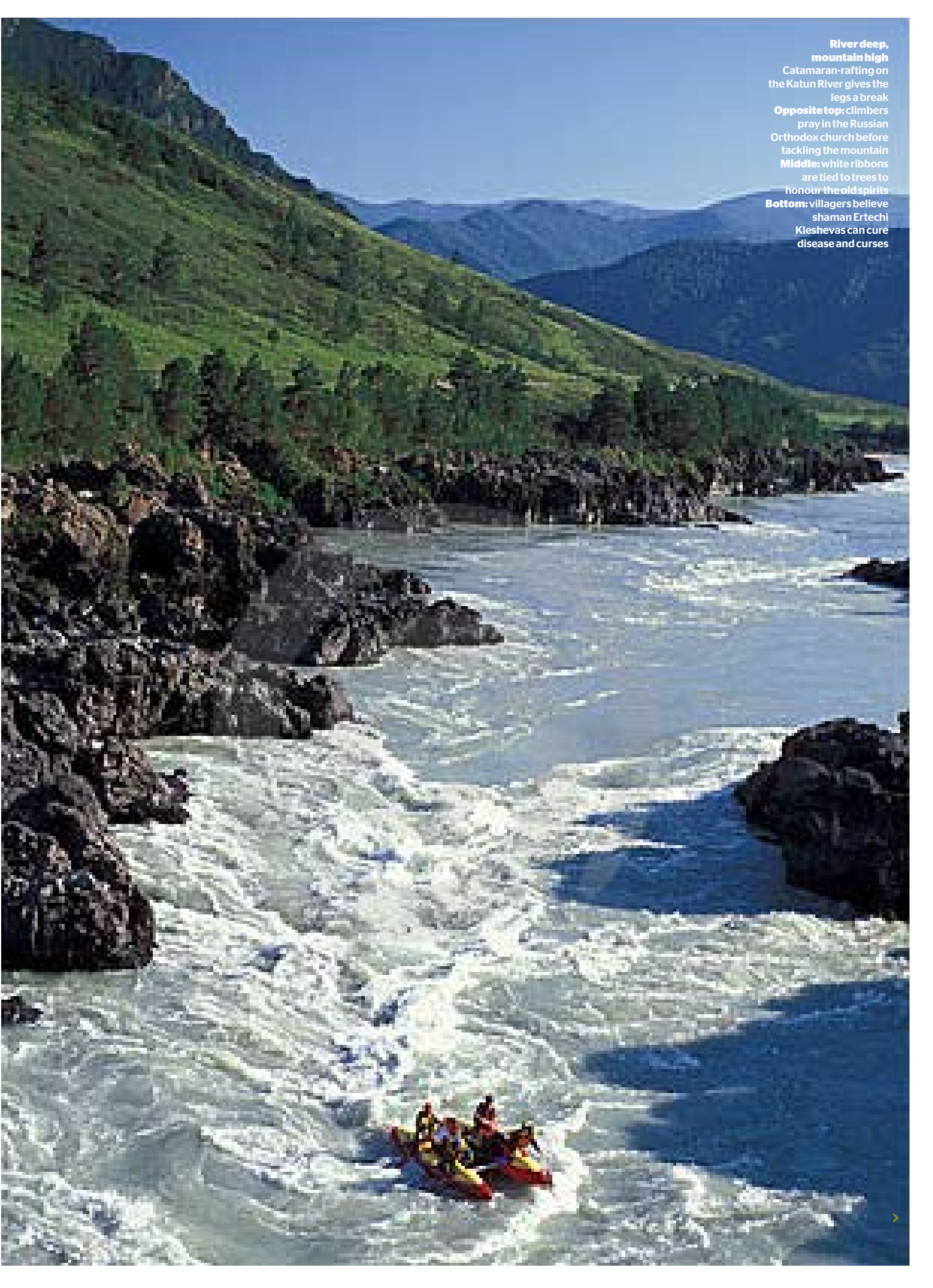
On our hike, we would be on our feet for at least five or six hours a day, punctuating mountain hikes with less strenuous walks. The views were always changing, always outdoing each other in beauty and scale. One day we walked to the Tekeliu Valley, the sun-drenched sight that resembles the famous Ansel Adams view of Yosemite, with the Tekeliu waterfall sparkling in the distance and the river snaking through it, lit up like a filament.

Another day we were strolling in lush meadows where aconitum, absinthe and aquilegia prospered (to mention just a few of the ‘A’s – the Altai has close to 300 endemic species of flora), before heading past the aquamarine Ak-Kem Lake at the foot of Belukha. From here we turned left into the Yarlu Ravine, its lunar atmosphere of white-clay and ferrous rocks in stark counterpoint to what had just gone before.

“Here’s where you’ll find the UFO landing site,” said Timofei, smiling. He was referring to the New Age shrine located here, full of the by-now-familiar conical mounds of stones. We watched a lurid sunset sitting on a large boulder within the shrine, the mountains glowing violet and russet around us, but the aliens failed to materialise and what otherworldly ambience there was felt closer to an English church graveyard.

By about five or six most evenings we were unpacking the horses and setting up camp. With enough firewood gathered, we’d get some tea boiled, frequently including mint leaves picked that afternoon. Then the process of preparing the evening meal would begin, something like a rice stew with carrots, spring onions, peppers and the option of tinned fish or meat. Dessert was usually some fruit or chocolate, washed down with plenty more mint tea. It was simple fare, but after the exertions of the day, it tasted magnificent.

As the night drew in, often cold even in July, we’d set more wood crackling on the fire. Looking up at the moonless sky, I might >



**River deep,  
mountain high**

Catamaran-rafting on  
the Katun River gives the  
legs a break

**Opposite top:** climbers  
pray in the Russian

Orthodox church before  
tackling the mountain

**Middle:** white ribbons  
are tied to trees to  
honour the old spirits

**Bottom:** villagers believe  
shaman Ertechi  
Kleshevas can cure  
disease and curses

# 'Any life in the Altai needed Mount Belukha to survive'



◀ catch sight of a satellite making slow, even progress through a crop of stars, and be reminded of Timofei's comments about how the Altai were frequently rained on by space junk, the logic of the Russian space programme being that, who'd notice a jettisoned Soyuz rocket landing here?

At the end of one of our tough hiking days, working our way up 1,000 metres to the tree line, using the exposed roots of spruce and cedar like a staircase, we emerged onto a promontory. Belukha was visible in the distance, while to our left stood a larch tree festooned with white ribbons by those who kept faith in the old spirits, spirits dwelling in the trees, the rocks, the very soil itself.

They were shamanists and animists, just as those found in the Pazyryk graves had been, sharing a belief that blurs the lines between spirit and matter, taking in a complex folklore of real and fantastical animals, trickster gods and demonic underworlds. It's why the Ice Princess and other mummies had been covered in tattoos resembling griffins, dragons, deer and the elusive snow leopard, native to the Altai but a rare sight even in prehistoric times.

Somehow shamanism had survived both Christianity and Communism, although only just. After the semi-nomadic populations were collectivised by the Bolsheviks and put into villages, it's said the life-blood was ripped out of them. Yet still, here was a tree covered in white ribbons. Perhaps all was not lost and, with a returning pride among the native Altai after the collapse of the USSR, a way back to the fulfilment of these intrinsic, ancient traditions might still be possible.

## The call of the wild

A couple of days before heading back to base camp, we hiked up to the highest point on the trip. Climbing to 3,084m, up a mountain that translates from the Altaian as 'black heart', mine was battering against my ribcage by the time we reached the summit. From here, Tim pointed out our whole route, how we'd rafted east along the Katun River before turning south and walking in the direction of Belukha, how we were now about to start heading north where we'd pick up the flow of the Kucherla River leading us back.

Above us, clouds roamed in heavenly puppet shows creating startling effects, pillars of light fanning out behind rows of cumulus, shadows in slow procession across the mountainsides all around. If it was beautiful, it was also a reminder of how changeable the weather is.

The following day, these benign cloud formations transformed into dark thunderheads and released a deluge. It caught us as we made our way up and

down a series of mountain ridges, politely paused while we hurriedly ate a lunch of bread, cheese, salami and oranges, then recommenced as we began a descent down through forest along a muddy path that was by now doing a good impression of the Somme. At this point, base camp was assuming the role of my own personal

Shambhala, what with such luxuries as a hot shower and washing machine.

But the following and final morning of the trek saw the sun launch itself into a blue limitless sky, and the memory of the previous day's downpour quickly faded. Andrew got up from under his sheepskin blankets to pack the horses and Tim prepared a breakfast of buckwheat with jam while the rest of us drank copious amounts of coffee. Once the tents had dried and been packed, we began our hike.

Belukha was at our back but we still felt its presence in the boisterous Kucherla River running alongside us, the river itself partly the product of the mountain's glaciers. As I filled my water bottle from it, this series of connections got me thinking about one of the fundamental aspects of shamanism, the belief that humans are simply another manifestation of nature, that we hold no special place within it. My life, like any life in the Altai – whether horse, grasshopper or

lichen – needed Belukha to survive. It sounded suspiciously sentimental to my cynical, city-bound mind, yet after nearly two weeks away from all that, the obvious truth of it struck me as feeling more than fact.

I guess this, at last, was the fabled call of the wild. And what's more, it didn't come with an irritating ringtone. ■



## LOCAL VIEW

*Timofei Minichkin,*  
Guide

"I can never get used to the view of Belukha. This is my Shangri-La"