

# ADVENTURE IN THE HIGH PAMIRS

HIGH-ALTITUDE HUNTING AND  
A UNIQUE CULTURAL EXPERIENCE  
MAKE FOR AN UNFORGETTABLE  
IBEX HUNT IN TAJIKISTAN.



BY DIANA RUPP

The sun dipped below the jagged peaks of the Pamir Mountains, leaving them bathed in a pink glow. The evening chill descended instantly on our rock-strewn spike camp, and I scrambled to the small tent to retrieve my down jacket, fleece hat, and gloves. My friend and hunting partner, Kirstie Pike, was right behind me, and we bundled up quickly. At 14,000 feet, even a relatively mild fall evening carries a sharp chill that drives right to the bone.

As we emerged from our tent, layered in high-tech warmth, the young assistant ranger, Latifa, was waiting for us. "Come quickly," she urged us. "You must see this!"

Figuring she and her fellow rangers had spotted some ibex on one of the many mountainsides surrounding the camp, Kirstie and I grabbed our binoculars and followed Latifa to an outcropping where our hunting team had gathered, everyone training their optics on the backlit ridge to the west. The young Tajik spoke surprisingly good English, but it was still a struggle for her to explain to us where, exactly, to look. But once I was focused on the right spot, I gasped.

"It's a snow leopard!" Kirstie exclaimed. "I can't believe it!"

The big cat, perfectly silhouetted on the spine of the ridge across the valley from us, strolled casually into a small saddle, its big body and long tail clearly visible through my

10x binocular. Then it stopped and sat, upright, turning its head from side to side. Soon it moved on, walking along the ridge again, then stopped and scratched at the dirt. It continued to prowl the ridgeline, slowly, as the light began to fade. Then it moved behind a small pinnacle and emerged again on the other side, hunkering down slightly.

"There are female ibex below," Latifa murmured. I had been so glued to the cat I had not noticed what it was stalking. The cat remained unmoving on the dizzying height above its prey, apparently not intending to make its move until nightfall. Eventually, darkness descended and we could no longer watch the drama, so we headed back into the ring of tents to warm up with some hot tea and talk excitedly about what we had just seen. Visiting Americans and native Tajiks alike, we all knew we had just witnessed something incredibly rare and special.

We had known there was at least one snow leopard in the area. Several days before, shortly after arriving at this high camp from which our hunt for mid-Asian ibex was based, the rangers had spotted its calling card in the form of a mostly eaten ibex carcass far across the valley. On our daily forays after ibex, they had pointed out several places where a snow leopard had left scratchings in the meager soil. But

to actually catch a glimpse of the apex predator of the Asian mountains was more than I had dreamed of.

### Spike Camp

After hunting ibex in Kazakhstan several years before, I had fallen in love with the pursuit of these long-bearded Asian goats and their rugged habitat. The first hunt, while challenging, had been conducted at an elevation of some 7,000 feet, with the peaks of the truly high mountains looming tantalizingly in the distance. Despite taking a magnificent ibex on that hunt, I was eager to go back to central Asia. I wanted to experience a hunt in the Pamir Mountains, to see if I could handle a sojourn on the "roof of the world." When the opportunity came, in 2018, to travel to a high-mountain village in Tajikistan and hunt ibex in a community conservancy, hosted and guided by the people who lived there, I jumped at the chance. I invited Kirstie, founder of Prois Hunting Gear and a fellow mountain-hunting junkie, to join me.

The hunt had been a full-on adventure right from the start, and it kept getting better—and tougher. We arrived at our hunting area in eastern Tajikistan, the Parcham Conservancy, via a long drive from the capital, Dushanbe,

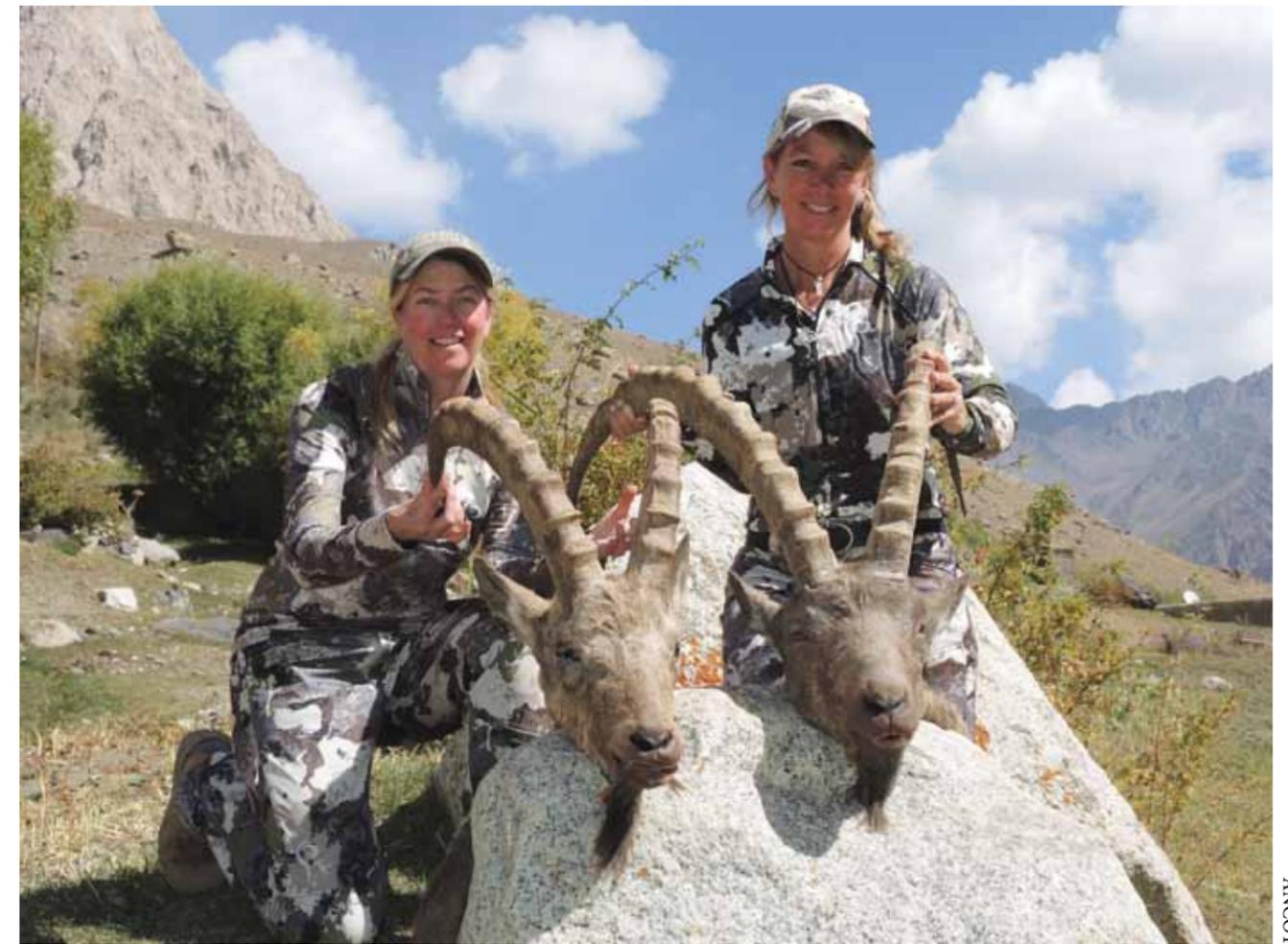
on the spine-jarring Pamir Highway, which follows the Panj River along the border with Afghanistan. From there, a four-wheel-drive trek up a winding mountain road only a few years removed from its origins as a donkey path deposited us—dusty, jet-lagged, and exhausted—in the village of Ravmed. This scattering of square houses built of earth and rock is nestled in a narrow, stunning mountain valley at 10,000 feet. It was late September; a few small, tiered grainfields were in the process of being harvested, and women were digging enormous carrots from vegetable gardens sandwiched between the carefully tended homes. Several thin donkeys, goats, and a few cattle were tethered wherever sparse grass grew.

The residents of Ravmed welcomed us with open arms. We were ushered to our guesthouse—actually the home of one of the wealthier families in the village, who had temporarily vacated their living quarters to make room for two visiting American hunters. The inside of the traditional Asian home was clean and well-tended, its dirt floor sprinkled daily with water to keep the dust down, pretty carpets covering the seating areas and walls. The only running water came from a diverted creek nearby, and the outhouses were traditional squat style. The residents plied us with hearty food, all



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Diana Rupp and hunting partner Kirstie Pike on a high ridge in the Pamirs.



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Rupp and Pike pose with their ibex back at Ravmed Village.

of it grown or raised in the village, and gallons of hot tea.

The house had electricity from the village's small hydroelectric facility, which powered a generator. This, as well as the recently upgraded road, a community-owned four-wheel-drive vehicle, and educational opportunities for young people like Latifa, were among the improvements that had come to this hardscrabble subsistence

village through the money paid by visiting ibex hunters like Kirstie and me. There was a reason the villagers made us feel so welcome: We were.

But there was little time to relax and soak up this unique cultural experience. It was time to go hunting. We were instructed to pare down our gear to the bare minimum needed for a few days of camping on the mountaintop. Unsure how long we'd be up there or

what we'd actually need, Kirstie and I loaded our daypacks with cameras, ammo, energy bars, a satellite phone, Diamox, and extra socks. We packed our sleeping bags and an extra layer or two of clothing into my waterproof duffel bag, which one of the Tajiks would haul up the mountain for us, along with a lightweight tent. At 2:00 in the morning we were awakened and dressed ourselves in light, wicking layers for what we knew would be a tough climb—ascending some 4,000 vertical feet above the 10,000-foot village. A full moon lit our path, so we didn't even need headlamps as we followed the head ranger, Gulbek, on a faint, switchbacking trail that climbed nearly straight up from the village. The guides on Tajikistan's conservancy hunts are known as rangers. They're local residents who know the surrounding mountains, and the habits of its wildlife, better than anyone. Many of them are former poachers who have, since the advent of paying hunts, become staunch conservationists and protectors of wildlife because of its benefits to their communities.

To our relief, Gulbek set a slow, steady pace, and Kirstie and I managed to keep up with him for most of the five-hour climb, with a line of other rangers and packers strung out behind us on the mountain. Every moment of the hiking and fitness routine I'd followed all summer paid off as I labored up the steep, rock-strewn mountainside. Some three hours into the hike, I stopped and leaned hard on my hiking staff, a wave of altitude-induced nausea washing over me. Kirstie, a veteran of high-altitude hiking, urged me to eat an energy bar and drink some water. I did, and my stomach settled down and, blessedly, stayed that way.

It was a relief, around 7 a.m., to arrive at the mouth of a broad high-altitude basin. At its base was a series of rock ridges strewn with jumbled boulders. Throwing down our daypacks, Kirstie and I collapsed on the rocks, as did the packers who were hauling the tents and sleeping bags. Gulbek and another ranger, Rakhim, climbed a pile of boulders, staying low, binoculars in hand. Returning to us, they reported a group of six male ibex in the basin. In a

few minutes we had recovered enough from our hike to crawl up and take a look. The goats, unfortunately, were on a wide-open slope well above us, and with the morning sun now fully up, the wind was funneling uphill.

The fact that we couldn't do much until the ibex moved into a better position was actually, from our perspective after a grueling five-hour hike at altitude, good news. Our position on a small bench beneath the basin, screened from it by the rock ridges, gave us good cover and no fear of spooking the ibex. Latifa, who is Gulbek's daughter, and Anisa, another young female ranger-in-training, seemed unfazed by the tough hike. After glassing the ibex with us, they fired up a small camp stove, boiled water for tea, and dispensed bread, cheese, and fruit. I spent the morning and part of the afternoon alternately napping in the warm sun and staring at the stunning vista of tremendous peaks that surrounded our position like jagged fangs.

That afternoon we ventured out into the basin, hiking and climbing over endless rocks to a spot where we could get a better look at the ibex herd. There were six males, four of them quite impressive specimens, and two younger billies. The wind was still not in our favor, so around dusk we hiked back to our rocky retreat. Small tents had been set up, and Kirstie and I unpacked our sleeping bags and prepared for our first night in our high-altitude spike camp as the sun dropped behind the peaks, leaving a frigid darkness behind. We were in great spirits, thrilled to be in ibex country.

### Tajik Tough

After a frigid start to the morning that made slithering out of our sleeping bags an excruciating ordeal, the sun's rays hit the high camp and turned the day bright and beautiful. After a breakfast of hard-boiled eggs, cheese, a meat-filled turnover, and coffee, Kirstie and I and two rangers embarked on a long day of stalking the ibex herd in the high basin. We crossed the rock ridges that screened us from the basin, then skirted the eastern edge of the hanging valley,

sticking to the steep, rocky mountainside, which climbed gradually but relentlessly. We had eyes on the ibex most of the day, or at least our guides did—most of the time my eyes were focused on negotiating a steep ravine or slippery scree slope.

We worked our way clear up to the head of the basin, more than a thousand feet above camp, crawling over fields of sharp rocks that shredded our gloves, and worming our way up the crests of steep rises in the terrain. The weather was fine and sunny most of the day until we got to the highest point, when a brief snow squall blew in and obscured our view for a few minutes, but it quickly passed. We refilled our

nearly empty water bottles from a small seep in the rock, and, spurred by friendly reminders from Kirstie, I continually recharged myself with Clif shots and energy bars, even though I didn't feel at all hungry.

Eventually we crossed to the other side of the basin and began working our way along a steep mountain wall on the other side. There were small ridges to move up and peek over, and we thought the ibex herd was behind one of them, but we didn't know which one. At some point, however, they wined us and gave us the slip. Then followed a dispirited, three-hour slog back to camp. By this time my legs had nearly given out and I was doing frequent face-plants in



The view from a tent at 14,000 feet in the high Pamirs.



After shooting the ibex, the hunters set up a second spike camp at 16,000 feet.



Rangers-in-training Anisa and Latifa serve up the local version of ramen noodles.

the rocks. We arrived long after dark, dead on our feet. With the extreme elevation and challenging terrain, it had been the most difficult hunting day I'd ever experienced. Crawling into the tent, however, we congratulated each other—tough as it was, we now knew we could do it, and surely we were bound to kill an ibex sooner or later.

As the next day dawned, we were relieved to find the ibex herd was still

in sight, but high on the ridge above us where we could not stalk them without risking blowing them out of the area entirely. We rested in camp, drinking tea and water in preparation for our next attempt. Latifa and Anisa took on the arduous task of water duty. The nearest source of water was nearly halfway back down to the village. The two young women made several treks down, climbing back up with heavy

packs filled with loaded water bottles. We were also tremendously impressed by our male guides. Lean and wiry with not an ounce of fat, they carried heavy packs, insisted on toting our rifles, and literally ran up and down mountainsides that took us hours of gasping and panting to traverse. They seemed to subsist only on a few nibbles of bread and cheese, and smoked thin cigarettes from tobacco grown in the village, which they hand-rolled in bits of old newspapers. We hadn't seen them drink a drop of water, eschewing it in favor of tea.

"I'm going to coin a saying for those fitness junkies back home," said Kirstie. "You think you're tough? I guarantee you're not *Tajik* tough!"

That evening, as we sat watching the snow leopard stalk its prey on the ridge across from camp as described at the beginning of this story, I knew that whatever happened next, my experience in the high Pamirs had already been one of the highlights of my hunting life.

### Up and Down

The next morning, the ibex herd was far up the basin again, and early on, the guides watched them top the ridge on the west side. Now we could go after them. Kirstie and I, with Gulbek and Rakhim, set out to scale the ridge. Kirstie and I were gaining confidence and we made a strong climb, topping out at what we later determined to be 5,000 meters—16,404 feet. We felt pretty good about ourselves.

Once over the ridgeline, though, there was a steep, loose scree field to cross. I lost my footing and slid a few feet at one point, which scared me, and a few minutes later, Kirstie's water bottle came untethered from her pack and went rolling down an avalanche chute—we watched helplessly as it leaped and bounced far out of reach. I gave her my spare bottle, but by now, both were nearly empty, and the slope we were on was nothing but dirt and shale. We rested on a finger of rock with a yawning chasm below us until we had somewhat recovered our sense of humor, which had pretty much abandoned us.

After a time we continued on, following the rangers. We came unexpectedly back into view of the ibex and spent more than an hour pinned down, lying on a flat rock in odd, skewed positions, afraid to move as the animals gazed alertly in our direction. Eventually, the herd moved over a rise, and we were able to make our move across some more loose rock and up to a little ridgeline. Though we couldn't see the ibex, the guides gestured that they were just on the other side. It was very late in the afternoon, and the sun was about to set. It was now or never.

We shoved our packs up on the ridgeline and the guides placed our rifles on top of them. As I crawled up and pressed my cheek to the stock, it was immediately apparent that the situation was not good. The six ibex had spotted us and were getting out of Dodge—not running, but moving at a good clip. We were going to have to shoot simultaneously, something I don't like to do. We tried for a few moments to coordinate our shots as the ibex moved farther away, but whenever I had a clear shot, Kirstie did not, and vice versa. Finally, with the herd at more than 400 yards and still moving, we had to act. Kirstie counted to three and took her shot. A split-second later, I picked a trotting ibex at random, placed the cross hairs just in front of it, and touched off a rushed shot. Both animals flinched, but they kept running with the herd, vanishing over a high saddle into the next basin. A moment later, dusk dropped on us like the curtain on a stage play with an anticlimactic ending.

Silence descended on the high, lonely ridge. The rangers found a flat spot to make camp; two more rangers arrived after dark with tents and sleeping bags. We sat around the sputtering camp stove glumly waiting for water to boil for tea, and I kept replaying the scenario in my head, wishing I had not taken such a risky shot. Using hand signals, Gulbek explained he and Rakhim would go after our ibex at first light, and I reassured Kirstie it was a sure thing they would find hers—it had obviously been hit hard, and we had both seen it lagging behind the others as they ran. I knew my own shot had been

a poor one, however, and I was worried my ibex might not be recovered. We crawled into the tent and I tossed and turned despite my exhaustion.

Gulbek and Rakhim headed out early the next morning, giving us reassuring smiles. As much as we wanted to go with them, we knew we would only be a liability—who knew how far they might have to track the ibex, or through what kind of terrain? We were already at 16,000 feet, and the ibex had been headed up into a saddle when we had last seen them. Breakfast was a sparse meal of cheese and stale bread; we had now been on the mountain for five days, and food was running low. I found a last remaining energy bar at the bottom of my pack. The rangers who had joined us helped us pack up the tents, and we slung our packs and began the steep, four-hour trek down the mountain, back to the village.

It was midday when we came in sight of Ravmed, which now took on the

aspect of a luxury spa. The women of the village welcomed us back in the best possible way, heating water in buckets over a fire and filling a tank atop a shower house. Kirstie and I took turns standing under a trickling faucet, washing off the dust and grime. It felt heavenly. We were further restored after a hearty meal of goat stew and fresh vegetables, and we spent the afternoon taking short walks around the village and hovering anxiously around the guesthouse, waiting for word from the rangers.

To our joy and relief, Gulbek and Rakhim returned in triumph late in the afternoon, bearing the capes, horns, and some of the meat from both ibex, and sending another group of rangers back up the mountain to recover the rest of the meat before a snow leopard could eat it. They had found the two animals not far apart. Kirstie had shot a beautiful nine-year-old ibex with impressive horns curving over 41 inches. My ibex turned



KIRSTIE PIKE

There was nothing easy about this high-altitude hunt.



KIRSTIE PIKE

Taking in a panoramic view of the Pamirs.

### Tajik Trailblazers

Among the crew on my ibex hunt were two impressive young women who are rangers-in-training. As part of its work to involve all locals in the conservation of wildlife, the Association of Nature Conservation Organizations of Tajikistan is training a group of enthusiastic Tajik and Pamiri women to guide hikers and hunters—a move that makes sense with the increasing number of adventurous women heading to the magnificent mountains of central Asia. As you can imagine, this is not a traditional career path for women in this country, and these women are pioneering this new ground with incredible enthusiasm. I can attest that they're tireless hikers and climbers, tough as nails, and are always upbeat and encouraging no matter how steep the mountain.—D.R.



ANCOT



Making bread in a stone oven.



Inside a typical Pamiri home.

### Conservancies and Conservation

The Association of Nature Conservation Organizations of Tajikistan (ANCOT), formerly H&CAT, is a coalition of eleven communal conservancies in various regions of Tajikistan, formed to train and empower the residents of poor, high-mountain villages to conserve and protect their wildlife and serve as year-round rangers and hunting guides. Visiting hunters live and hunt alongside locals who know these mountains better than anyone. It was unlike any hunt I have ever experienced because of the involvement and interest of everyone in the community. On most hunts you stay in a separate camp and interact only with your guides. On this hunt, we were immersed in village life and made to feel a part of it.

Other than the government license fee, every cent of the money paid for these hunts goes directly to the local people in the conservancy—there is no outfitter or middleman. The villages have used this money to upgrade their standard of living dramatically. The program has had phenomenal success in bolstering the country's populations of ibex, Marco Polo sheep, markhor, and snow leopards. It has turned local villagers into front-line champions and protectors of Tajikistan's mountain wildlife. The members of the Parcham Conservancy, where I hunted, are going to great lengths to protect their wildlife for visiting hunters. They have even made some areas around their village off-limits to their own grazing animals in order to improve habitat for the ibex.

For information and prices, go to [BookYourHunt.com](http://BookYourHunt.com) and type "Tajikistan" in the search box. Depending on what you decide to pursue, you'll experience an extraordinary hunt for ibex, Marco Polo sheep, or markhor. But even more important, by participating in a conservancy hunt, you will be supporting what is arguably one of the finest hunter-funded conservation projects in the world.—D.R.



A view of Ravmed village.

out to be one of the younger males in the group—my own fault for not staying calm and focused enough to make a trophy judgment, but somewhat understandable, I guess, considering the difficulty of the shooting situation.

We thanked Gulbek and the rest of the rangers repeatedly for their dedication and hard work in recovering our animals. Our hunt was a success thanks largely to their resourcefulness and signature Tajik toughness.

The entire village turned out for the photo session, with everyone, from kids to grandmothers, eager to pose with the ibex. Not a single scrap of either animal went to waste. The meat was divided and distributed throughout the village. The organs—lungs, heart, kidneys, liver, stomach, and all—were chopped up and boiled into a paste-type dish the Tajiks devoured. The cheeks, or facial muscles, were the most sought-after delicacy.

The next night we had a huge dinner in the guesthouse, featuring traditional Pamiri dishes along with ibex meat. Locating an electric skillet, we Americans introduced the Tajiks to sliced backstrap grilled medium-rare. We thought it was delicious, but the Tajiks were taken aback at the idea of eating meat with pink in it. With no refrigeration in the village, they would boil the remaining meat and can it without delay.

Later that evening, two musicians with an accordion and a hand drum played traditional Tajik tunes on the patio of the guesthouse, and all the villagers turned out to dance. The music filled the mountain air with upbeat yet haunting melodies as the dancers moved with skillful steps, turning and clapping.

As the festivities wound down and our hosts said good night, the overwhelming quiet of the mountains returned. I stood for a while in the doorway of the guesthouse, gazing past the small collection of homes and dusty fields at the jagged peaks faintly visible in the starlight. It had been an incredible experience, and I felt both blessed and humbled to have experienced the raw and mighty beauty of the Pamir Mountains in the company of the tough, resourceful people who live in their embrace. 🇹🇯

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