

# TRAVEL PLAY LIVE

The Women's Adventure Lifestyle Magazine



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ADVENTURE x EMPOWER x INSPIRE x DREAM x CHANGE



*TO KYRGYZSTAN*  
*and back*

Kyrgyzstan, a mountain bike, Soviet-era maps, and a few pack horses for support - the ideal journey for Tracey Croke.

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INTERVIEW WITH: TRACEY CROKE BY: LUCY STONE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: TOBY MAUDSLEY [WWW.MAUDSLEY.COM](http://WWW.MAUDSLEY.COM)

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**W**ith adventures in Afghanistan and Ethiopia behind her, a ten-day trip across Kyrgyzstan's remote Talas mountain range was right up Tracey's alley. It's a long stretch from the comfort of writing freelance travel articles under the Sydney sun, but the adventure is what Tracey looks for. "The most liberating and exhilarating place I've been is outside my comfort zone," she says. "It's where I've learnt most about myself, the world we live in and the people we share this planet with." So when the opportunity arose to join a team in September 2015 – and to be part of the first team to cross the Talas mountains by bike? Tracey was there.

Twenty years ago, facing a diagnosis of Ankylosing Spondylitis, an inflammatory and degenerative disease of the joints, Tracey was told to get active or risk losing her mobility entirely. "I took baby steps at first, just going for long walks and doing gentle gym sessions, but once I got my physical and mental strength back I adopted a can-do-seize-the-moment attitude to life." But the leap from gym sessions to pedalling across mountains, washing in glacier water, taking wrong turns down unmarked trails, and sharing yoghurt with nomads, took Tracey a long time. "It was a colossal climb," she says. "I didn't know how long I'd have my spine health for, so I decided to test my limits and set about ticking off (what seemed) some ridiculously ambitious experiences." Testing her limits translated to twelve years training in martial arts, cycling the 980km Mawson off-road trail, a career change to journalism, and a new identity as a traveller hungry for the roughest tracks. "I exercise most days to manage my condition and stay fit so I can keep exploring the world on two wheels or two feet. I seem to have a constant need to learn something new." So how do you go about taking on such an adventure? Expedition travel company Secret Compass invites applications from people with a decent level of fitness, and a sense of adventure. For Kyrgyzstan, Tracey found this ideal as it meant less time for her organising the painstaking logistics. However, she notes that these expeditions aren't simply a tour led by one person

– decisions are team-based, accidents happen, and unexpected challenges mean you never quite know what will happen next. For some, perhaps, this is less than ideal. For others, it spells adventure. The trip was limited not to how far the team could ride in a day, but instead on the stamina of their support group: packhorses, who required fresh water and feed at each stop. It was another reminder of how different life is on the far side of the world.

With China to the east, and bordered by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan's history takes part in the Silk Road, nomadic tribal culture and the eventual dominance of the Soviet Union. After 1991, the country took on an erratic narrative of governments rising and falling, the present still reacting to the past. The conglomerate history makes it a challenge to communicate if you only speak English. Translators were required for Tracey's entire trip, crossing English, Russian and native Kyrgyz to communicate the most basic requests from the pack horse handlers to the mountain bike team. Even so, the natural hospitality of the Kyrgyz people gave the team many opportunities to share meals, skills and information across the language barrier.

Her ten days spent in the Talas mountains were, for Tracey, defined by such encounters. A yurt spotted in the distance invariably meant a warm welcome, fresh yoghurt and chai tea. Hospitality and information were two of the most crucial things offered by the local Kyrgyz people. This welcome was offered to every traveller, not just those puzzling Westerners on bikes crossing the mountains for no practical survival purpose. The difference in attitude struck Tracey: "Travel is the norm in nomadic life so our movements were rarely questioned, but the bikes confused them. People who live their lives around basic survival don't understand what drives us to go on these adventures." Even so, a bike can be the best ambassador. An immediate destroyer of barriers – language, culture, age or fear – the mountain bike acted as a point of discussion and a shared experience. Tracey notes wryly: "A young dzighit [cowboy] we met driving his cattle over the mountains from summer pastures put on

a skills performance for us. Afterwards, he jumped on my bike and pulled a perfect wheelie with miniscule practice. Annoying!"

So barriers can be broken, friendships made. But Kyrgyzstan? Mention to your Sydney friends that you're going on a remote bike riding tour through a country ending in '-stan', and the most common reaction is fear or surprise. For Tracey, it's those very assumptions that are worth challenging when she takes on such big adventures. "I learnt very early in my travel experiences to wipe away any preconceptions I had of a country. Our idea of a place is mostly formed by the media." That's not to say that, faced with an upset Kyrgyz nomad blocking her group's path halfway up a mountainside, Tracey didn't have moments of wondering what she was doing there. "It turned out, further on, the trail had been washed away by a landslide. He wasn't angry, he was anxious to tell us that we were wasting our time. He brought us to the right trail, but first he insisted we sit with his family and have some meat and tea." Kyrgyz hospitality had struck again.

The remote location and thoroughly outdated maps meant that the trip required serious thought before even signing on. When preparing for an adventure, Tracey trusts the local knowledge, and the preparation put in by Secret Compass. "Our esteemed expedition leader, Patrick, is an Australian who has been living in Kyrgyzstan for the past eight years. Secret Compass have contingency plans in place should an incident happen, but the mountains are isolated and help isn't going to arrive quickly," she says. The isolation is compounded by the very human feelings of self-doubt or uncertainty. But for Tracey, the fear of the unknown is an important part of self-learning and discovery. For her, fear can be both good and bad – the useful fear of immediate danger, for example, compared to the pointless fears of being too old, too young and so on. "Over the years I've learnt to tell that fear to shut up and go away."

'Shut up and go away': exactly what Tracey told her diagnosis to do twenty years ago, with huge rewards. Tracey finds people with warmth, welcome and friendship across the world, and engages with them to learn and share. From her earlier trip to Afghanistan



she remembers an encounter that defines the reason she travels. “I’ll never forget an elderly man I met in at a bazaar in Afghanistan. ‘Thank you for coming to Afghanistan,’ he said. ‘This is wonderful, welcome,’ he repeated. Some younger men tentatively approached to reassure me that ‘the Taliban are not here, we don’t like them and they are a long way away.’ Others invited me into their homes for tea. When I arrived back and wrote about trekking in the Pamir mountains, I got more heart warming messages about ‘showing the beauty of the Afghanistan.’ It makes my travel and my work all that more rewarding.”

And coming home? Away from the painful grind of forcing an oxygen-deprived body to push the bike up to 4000 metres altitude – away from slogging across thirty icy river crossings, fighting fatigue and the punishing terrain to eke out just twenty-three hard-won kilometres

a day, debating the next move in a directionless valley between mountains? Hot showers, comfortable beds and modern healthcare are all things Tracey appreciates the more for having experienced the lack. Being aware of the trivialities of modern life – the pointlessness of road rage, missing a train – also makes the importance of socially responsible tourism more apparent.

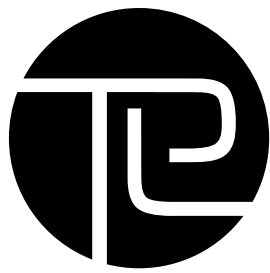
Tourism in remote countries can often be seen as yet another example of Western excess, consuming the local economy rather than supporting it. However, it can also have a significant positive impact. Ethical tourism starts with careful thought about the reasons for visiting remote locations, and how you can give back to the local culture that has welcomed you. Tracey believes that socially responsible tourism is critical to the success of her adventures. “Good adventure travel companies will develop strong bonds

with communities, leaders and elders, employ locals, arrange homestays with families and brief you on customs and culture. The best set up their own giving-back projects.”

Giving back – an expedition to Kyrgyzstan may sound like an exercise solely for self-fulfilment, but for Tracey it was also an exercise in discovering humanity across the world, in becoming a better person, and in understanding the value of travel as an exchange of culture, and friendship, and laughter. Now officially the first woman to traverse the Talas mountains by bike, Tracey is home, back in the Sydney sunshine, and ready to go after that exchange again. As long as she keeps moving, she’s happy. “I have a lot to thank my AS for. I’ve learnt so much about the world, banked some big life experiences and gratefully find myself still testing my limits after twenty years.”

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