Is it safe to go?

Avoiding trouble in a climbers' Shangri-La

The politics -- not just the heights -- of Central Asia are enough to make your head spin. But don't cross this mountain paradise off your travel list just yet. Here's a quick primer, a climber's rough guide on how to avoid war zones when in the Stans.

Stalin put up the lines in Central Asia. And looking at it from today's perspective, he did a crummy job. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has taken full advantage of the area's muddled borders, hiding its gunmen in the poorly defended valleys that divide Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The IMU doesn't particularly dislike the Kyrgyz and Tajiks. Rather, its beef is with President Islam Karimov (don't be fooled by the name), the mosque-closing dictator of Uzbekistan. Karimov, though, unlike his Kyrgyz and Tajik counterparts, has a real army to throw at the rebels. Thus, it's more out of convenience than animosity that the IMU fighters have set up shop in
Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

As Caldwell, Rodden, Dickey, and Smith discovered in August, this messy little war poses some difficult access issues. And the American climbers aren't the only travelers to encounter trouble. Last year four Japanese geologists were similarly taken hostage in southern Kyrgyzstan. Nabbing nationals of wealthy foreign countries brings ransom money for the IMU's local insurgents.

Did Caldwell, Rodden, Dickey, and Smith know all this beforehand? They should have. Here is the easy way to stay out of trouble: Find a 1:45,000,000 map of the world, place the nickel over the point where Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan meet, and trace a line around it. AND DON'T GO THERE!

This cuts out the southern Karavshin, granite-walled valleys in which you could lose a Yosemite or two. But it leaves Kyrgyzstan's northern Tien Shan, crowned by Pobyedi (7439 meters) and Khan Tengri (7000 meters). While granite lovers lose out, these peaks more than live up to their reputation as Central Asia's "Celestial Mountains." In short, stay north and you won't get stuck in the middle.

-- Eric McGlinchey

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