I applied to the British Exploring Society 2023 Kyrgyzstan expedition because I wanted an adventure. The opportunity was a chance to travel and explore a country I’d never heard of, in a completely unique way- 5 weeks wild camping without a loo, clean water or electronics! I hoped to challenge myself and build up outdoor skills and experience that I could use in planning my own trips later in life.

My trip was without doubt an adventure, but perhaps most importantly it was an ‘expedition’. The word brings to mind the explorers of the past, discovering new lands and overcoming all sorts of adversities.. I enjoyed every minute (even the hard ones) and learnt a lot from the walking and scientific aspects of my trip but where I feel I’ve benefited the most is the expeditionary side. Learning to work together with a group of 12 other people who I’d met only once before, working within the group to solve problems I’d never expected to experience. We repaired huge rips in tents in the rain, helped each other through illnesses, developed unique sign languages trying to communicate with the local nomadic herders. We fought for our chosen plans against the more conventional wisdom of our basecamp team and completed a medical evacuation after summiting a 4000m mountain that morning. We walked up gorges and in rivers, cursing the insufficient mapping of the At-Bashy mountains!

I had the most fun of any trip I’ve been on but also the most challenging moments. Communicating effectively in the face of the cold, hunger and stress on some days was a real test for myself (hanger is real!) but some other tests, such as not washing for 7 days straight were just as difficult! As a group, one of our main focuses was improving our individual leadership skills by taking charge for about 3 days at a time. As one of the youngest and least experienced members, at first this daunted me and I didn’t feel prepared at all. By the end of my second go as leader I was ready to take on any leadership issues thrown at me and my confidence had grown exponentially! One of the first things my dad said to me, the evening of picking me up from the airport, was that I seemed far more confident. As a fairly chatty person generally, I hadn’t thought that possible. But, in my day to day life I feel that I have noticed a difference in myself- I’m less afraid to speak my mind- which may be worse for everyone around me!

The country of Kyrgyzstan was a stunning environment to live in for 5 weeks. The valleys and mountains were simply huge and so beautiful. One of the hardest parts of coming home was leaving the gorgeous views behind- photos don’t seem to do justice to the sheer size and majesty of the landscape we were living in. By the end of the trip I was ready for the comforts of my normal life but also dreading the return to normal! It went by far too quick and felt like a paradise out of time (if that paradise included way too many cows!).

One of the highlights of my trip was a camping spot by the Kol-Tor Lake, a stunning blue lake, which while difficult to get to, was worth all the effort! The view was incredible, the swim was so refreshing and messing about with the echoing valley was literally hours of fun. It also highlighted to our group just how lucky we were. If this place has been in any other, less remote country we would never have been the only ones there. (or if we had it wouldn’t have been for long!) My friend suggested that in Europe there would have been a cafe, ice-creams and shouting kids. We realised just how unique and extraordinary it was to see such a wild, untouched and unknown country. The local nomadic Kyrgyz herders were so hospitable of us strange people, laughing at us walking everywhere, while they rode their horses. They embraced our presence and were constantly giving us Kumas (the national drink) and those who we could communicate with more effectively were effusive about more travellers coming into the region.

The whole trip was once in a lifetime. The spark that was my enjoyment of the outdoors was kindled and thoroughly lit while on expedition. I cannot wait to do more travelling of this kind and am already trying to plan my next trip, wanting to work on gaining a mountain leader qualification and trying to organise to do more climbing and scrambling. The confidence in myself and my skills this trip has given me cannot be understated.

Memories watching the sunrise from the peak of a 4000m mountain will stick with me forever, as will the sound of our group telling jokes around the fire or the sight of the sky covered in stars, so many that it looked more white than black, all twinkling in the complete dark of the night as the perseid meteor shower streaked across one corner.