

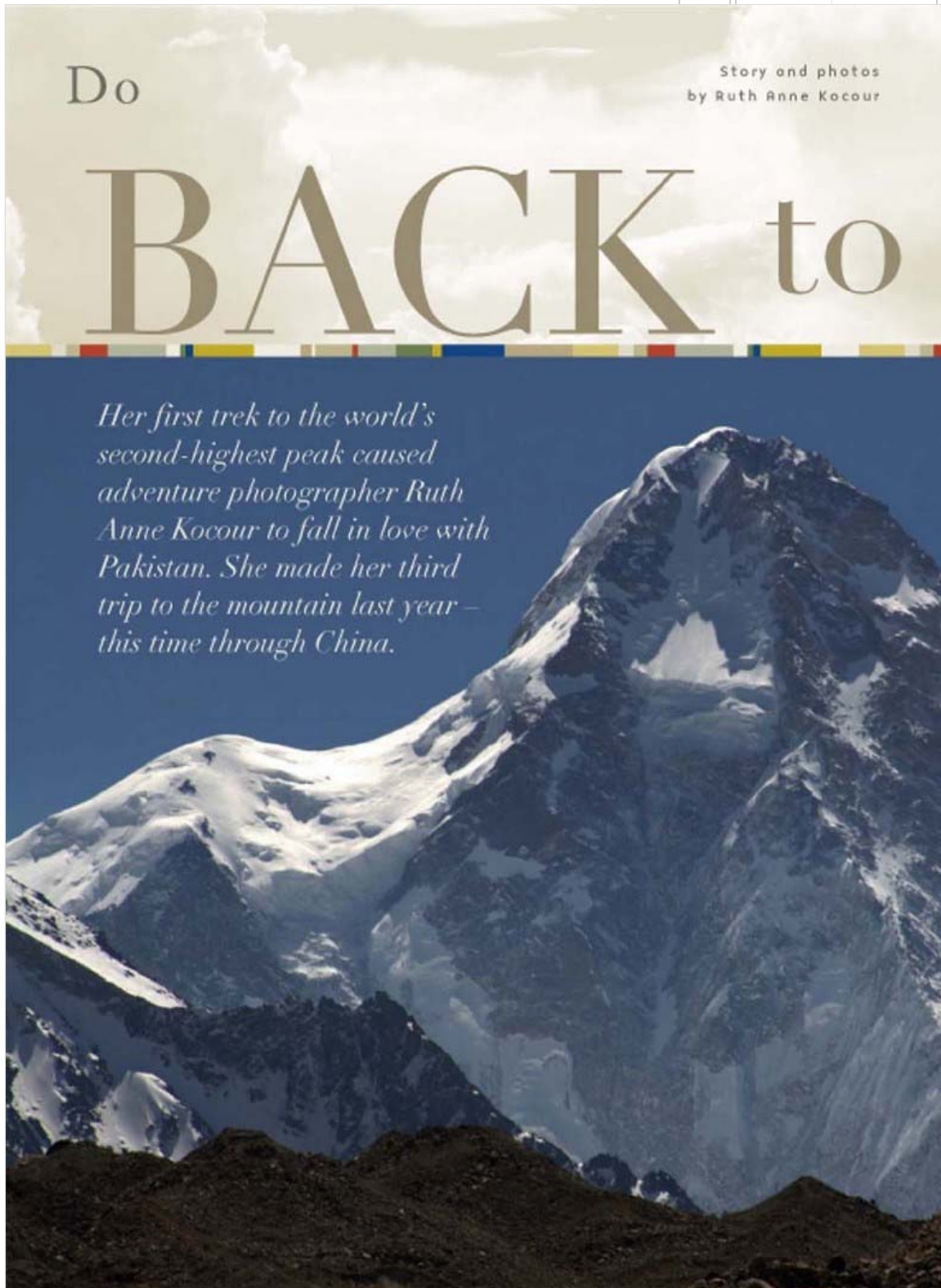
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**R**oads to K2: There are none — no flight-seeing tours either. Located in the heart of the Karakoram mountain range, K2 is surrounded by glaciers, wild rivers, and many of the world's highest peaks, 19 more than 25,000 feet tall. K2 straddles the border between Pakistan and the Xingjian Uygur Autonomous Region of China (Xingjian for short), both fraught with riots, ethnic upheavals, and terrorist attacks. It's a lonely place. This past fall I returned to K2 accompanied by four Muslims (Shiite and Sunni) and three *kara buras*, the woolly black camels of Central Asia.

San Francisco to Beijing to Urumqi — all the way across China — in one very long day. After spending the night in Urumqi I flew on to Khasgar, an ancient oasis empire along the Silk Road set amid moving sand dunes, immense mud flats, and areas that from the air look like southern Utah, only bigger.

In Khasgar Loyek, a Tajik showed me around the old city, a medieval collection of mud buildings and narrow streets dominated by ancestral Uyghur neighborhoods. He explained that Uyghurs originated in Turkey, hence their looks: Uyghur features are more Western than Chinese. He also told me that Abdul, my Uyghur mountaineering guide, was running a day late. The new plan: Travel with my jeep driver to the "last" >

#### TOP OF THE WORLD

(left) A view of K2 taken from the back of a camel;

Above, The author with a Kryrgyz woman.



**GREAT MOUNTAIN**  
K2 is located partly in China and partly on the western side of the Indian-Pakistani line of control in Jammu and Kashmir. It currently is under Pakistani administration.



Kyrgyz village, where I'd pick up my camels and begin the trek alone with a camel driver. Abdul would catch up "soon" and continue to K2 base camp with us.

The next morning, my Uyghur escort and I began the two-day drive toward the Karakoram across a span of the Taklimakan Desert dotted with oil wells and wind turbines. As we drove, he rattled off so many facts about the surroundings that I complimented him. He had picked them up from the *Lonely Planet Guide Book*, he said laughing. When the road finally disappeared, we were forced to drive along the bottom of a dry river bed so rough that my driver had to shove the radio back into the

dash every time we hit a bump. Finally, and after only one flat tire, we arrived at a cluster of mud-brick huts.

As we pulled up, the entire village came out to welcome us — veiled women, men, children, even the elder. Before I could object, they sacrificed a ram in my honor. After dinner — a delicious ram pilaf — an older woman showed me to a room deep within their mud-hut enclave. By then it was pitch dark. I threw my sleeping bag onto a wooden platform and crawled into it for the night.

The village elder, also the local camel contractor, sent me off the next day with two young men — both named Abdul — and three *kara bura* camels that looked like giant fur-bearing brontosaurus with two humps instead of one. Omar (not Sharif), a big stallion, would be my camel. All day long we walked through treeless desert and parched river canyons of red sandstone and rock-and-mud conglomerate. We slogged up unstable traverses only to give up any elevation gained by dropping back down to riverbed. That night we camped along a white-

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water river. My guide, Abdul, would show up soon, I thought.

We spent the next day climbing higher into the Karakoram. Walking behind our *kara buras* for eight hours straight gave me time to study their legs, which looked like horse legs in furry boots. Instead of hooves, the undersides of their feet were soft leather pads the size of dinner plates. With each step the pad seemed to wrap around rocks like a catcher's mitt does a ball. They seemed cushy and comfortable, certainly more comfortable than my own feet.

There was chanting in the distance — the sound hung in the air and was so pleasant that I didn't need to understand the words to appreciate the context. My guide, Abdul, and his assistant, Rahman had arrived. Abdul spoke "little bit English."

"Shortcut little bit dangerous," he said as we scrambled up a slot canyon. This shortcut spared us having to climb the mountain directly ahead. No kidding, dangerous — whole chunks of rock-imbudded-mud broke off in my hand every time I grabbed on.

We took another shortcut, this time vertical, over a mountain inconveniently blocking the way. At one point I looked up and thought, I can't believe we're going to climb this! But climb we did, hand-over-hand scrambling with plenty of exposure and without proper gear. There wasn't a disturbed rock or animal track anywhere — animals knew better! What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, someone once said, someone who'd never been here.

Every morning my crew got up at dawn and said their prayers as they bowed to the east. Later, they chanted while we walked. At night we celebrated the end of Ramadan, the Chinese Lunar New Year, the 60th anniversary of Communism in China, and we toasted to world peace. We shared what we had in common and shared what we didn't. Mostly we shared a common goal, to reach K2.

We only encountered one other person, a tiny Kyrgyz woman tending her goats. Yet this lonely vastness had a meditative other-worldliness that made me glad such places still exist.

After a long traverse, the route wrapped around the mountainside and angled upward. There, at the end of a corridor framed by some of the world's highest peaks, stood K2, reclusive and unmistakable in geometry, just as I had first seen it from Pakistan. *Chugar* the locals call K2 in Kyrgyz — Great Mountain. So why K2? It was a British survey reference point for the second mountain in the Karakoram range they were mapping.

With a mantle of snow streaming from its southeast flank, the mountain was still angry after weeks of violent weather when we arrived at base camp.

The next evening the mountain calmed. I found a boulder, sat alone, and watched K2 meld into the night sky. And I thought, what a lesser place our world would be without this. And how much less I would have lived my own life had I not come back here.

*Ruth Anne Kocour is author of the book, Facing the Extreme. Contact her at ruthannekocour.com. ■*



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