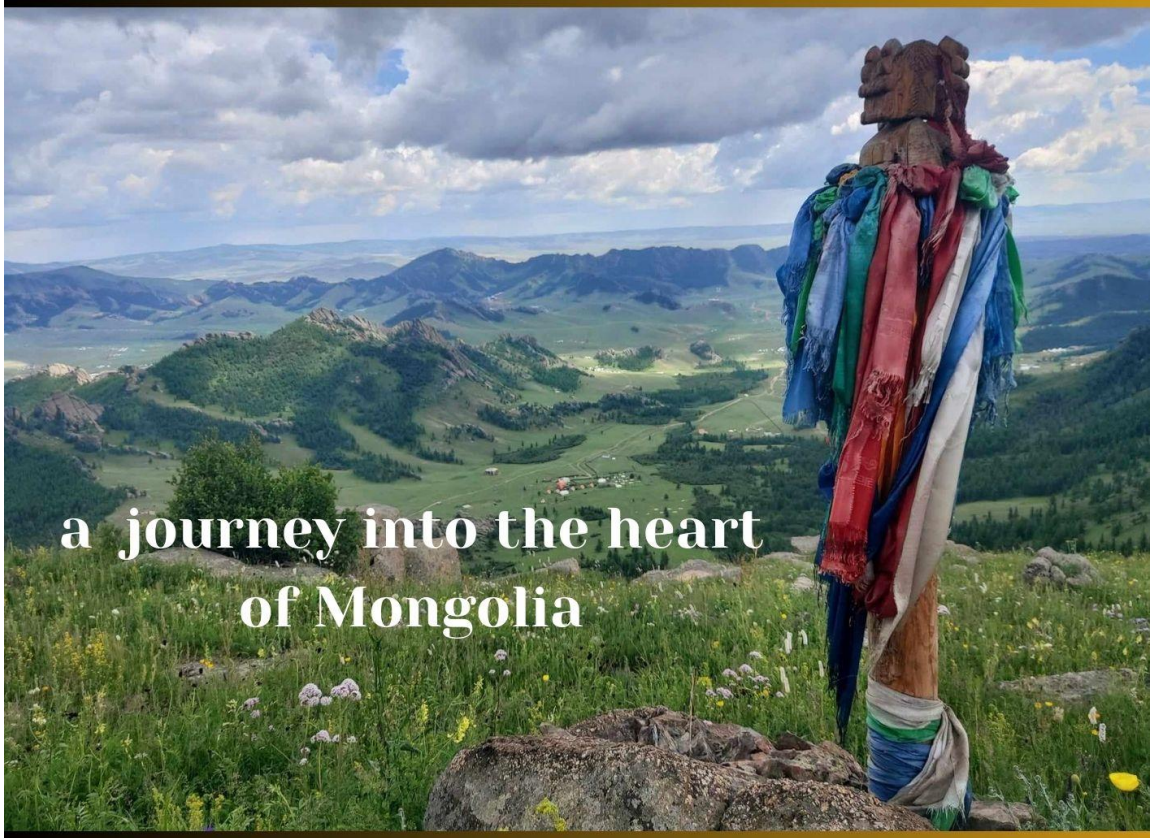
ACROSS
THE STEPPE



Chris Tharp

Across the Steppe

a journey into the heart of Mongolia

by Chris Tharp

For the boys

The Fellowship

The airport was tiny, at least smaller than you'd expect, since it was the country's sole international hub. The vastness of the surrounding grassland dwarfed the compound's newly-constructed terminal, and as our plane swooped through the open country and touched down on the rain-slickened tarmac of Chinggis Khaan International, I felt like we were landing outside of a small town in Montana or Wyoming.

After all, the landscape was almost identical to much of that found in the American West: rolling green hills, pine-sprinkled mountains, and a sky so imposing it immediately announced itself as one of the story's main characters. Periodic sunbursts lit up the landscape like flash bulbs, only to be smothered seconds later by swirling, bruised clouds that seemed to be doing their best to muster an evening squall. Judging from the puddles in the parking lot and lushness of the land, they had been recently successful. Little did we know how much more they would have in store.

The rain, it seemed, had followed us from Korea, where the swampy press of the summer monsoon had just set in. While less than a four-hour flight from Busan, Mongolia already seemed like a different world, with almost no buildings in sight and air so clean it made me momentarily curse my choice to live in a place so often choked by dust, smog, and dank humidity. Despite the fact that we were less than an hour's drive from Ulaanbaatar—a grungy town infamous for its coal plant pollution—everything already felt magnificently unspoiled, and I was immediately glad to have made the decision to come.

It hadn't been a quick one, as there are many things to consider before traveling to Mongolia. It's a notoriously tough place to get around, and while it's close to Korea by air, it's also vast and undeveloped, with primitive infrastructure, when it exists at all. The result is that if you want to travel deeply, you have to plan for it, and most importantly, pay for it. While prices for food and consumer goods aren't high, once you're out of the city you need people not only to drive you around, but also organize all of your meals and accommodations. This quickly adds up, and while it is possible just to roll up solo and see what you can manage on the ground, Mongolia is a country best experienced with a group and through a reputable tour company who can coordinate all of the details.

This, of course, requires cash.

So when Scott and Scraggs cast an invitation my way, I bit. We had been discussing the possibility of such a trip for a few years, but Covid put a hold on such shenanigans. Now that the viral dust had settled, it was go time, and I was honestly doubtful that this particular chance would come again. So despite the fact that I knew I would have to come up with creative ways to fund the expedition (which include getting a very skeptical wife to sign off), I committed to the thing a good six months before we even got on the plane.

All three of us were longtime expat residents of the city of Busan and firmly (or flabbily) in the realm of middle age. Scott and Scraggs were friends of mine going back to my first years in Korea, hailing from Canada and England, respectively. I'd traveled with both before, and we were eventually joined by Welsh Will, who, while a few years younger, had also spent ages with us in the Korean trenches. He also happened to be an accomplished photographer, so we were guaranteed top-notch pics, if nothing else.

This was, of course, a terrific opportunity to see a country that had long loomed in my imagination, though I hadn't traveled with a group of friends for many years. I had spent the last decade heading out on my own to destinations such as Laos, Mexico, Georgia, and Japan, not to mention several long-distance walking jaunts in Korea.

In fact, I had managed to make a side career out of it, securing writing commissions from some of the biggest travel mags in the world. This caused me to grow accustomed to solo travel to the point where I realized I preferred it to running with a pack. I relished the freedom of waking up every day and doing exactly what I wanted to do, of never feeling weighed down by others. It's perhaps a selfish way to explore, but also very gratifying, so I knew that adapting back to the group dynamic might take a bit getting used to.

We christened ourselves "The Fellowship of the Ger" (*ger* is the Mongolian word for "yurt," the portable nomadic dwelling found throughout the country), meeting in coffee shops several times leading up to our departure, where, between sips of Americanos, we'd pour over a couple of massive, old school paper maps of the country. And while we were all in it for the buzz of traveling to such a rugged and wild destination, we also had our pet reasons for going: Scraggs and Will were dedicated birders and stoked to take in the staggering number of species that call Mongolia home in the summer, while Scott and I were more interested in underwater life. We were going there to fish, hoping to hook into fat lenok trout, northern pike, or—if we were exceptionally lucky—a taimen, Mongolia's gargantuan river predator that is also the largest salmonid on earth.

Dirty ol' town

The Tara guesthouse sat deep in the midst of what appeared to be student housing

for the local university—Soviet-style blocks of cracked and crumbling apartments ubiquitous throughout the capital. The little road leading from Peace Avenue (UB's perpetually traffic-snarled main strip) into the compound was uneven and strewn with broken pavement and mucky potholes. A growing pile of trash festered just half a block from the accommodation's front door, and as you strolled down the shaded concourse, you could catch glimpses of the claustrophobic lives endured by the local students through grease-smudged apartment windows lacking either curtains or blinds.

The overall effect was cheerless and dour, driven home by the scarred sides of buildings, stripped of paint and pockmarked by the unthinkably brutal winters that give Ulaanbaatar (often referred to as "UB") the distinction of being the coldest national capital on the planet.

The four of us shared a four-bed dorm room with a private bathroom, though the toilet was Barbie Doll-sized and sat perched at an awkward angle where your knees hit the door any time you attempted to sit down and do your business. These bogs were clearly designed for tiny Asian girls to delicately deposit their rabbit poos rather than four large middle-aged white men who were guaranteed to lay waste to the unfortunate bowl.

Most hazardous were the bunk beds. The top bunks lacked safety rails on the sides, meaning that one careless late-night toss or turn could mean a potentially neck-breaking fall. Both Scraggs and I ended up with the top beds and positioned our backpacks between our snoozing bodies and the great abyss in an attempt to avoid drunkenly rolling our way into becoming quadriplegics.

It wasn't until the first morning that we discovered the Tara Guesthouse also lacked hot water. While technically early summer, UB was still pretty chilly at the time and a steamy shower would have been welcomed. When inquiring with the staff member as she cooked our breakfast of fried eggs, toast, and hot dog franks, she informed me (via Google Translate) that, due to pipe maintenance, hot water was shut off for the whole area.

At first I didn't believe her, since I was entirely ignorant of the idea of communal hot water systems. I had only lived in places where buildings have their own boilers. I had no idea it was sometimes done on a districtwide basis. This was likely a remnant of the city's communist history, and while it sucked not to enjoy a warm shower, it also reminded us that there would be days ahead where we'd be grateful for a rinse off of any temperature, whatsoever.

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The first thing that stood out about UB was the omnipresent Korean handprint on this former Soviet outpost. CU and GS25 convenience stores dominated the street view and Korean cuisine seemed to be the default setting for the city's restaurants; they were everywhere. It's not even as if there were loads of Koreans in UB; it's the

peninsula's businesses, instead, that had moved in and taken advantage of a void that, for whatever reason, Mongolians failed to adequately fill.

Ulaanbaatar was a city that presented itself on its own terms. It didn't preen and ask for you to love it, but rather lived as a thrumming, very practical place of business and government. A lot of the buildings were flavorless old Russian blocks that tended to suck the joy out of the surroundings, though these were losing ground to the new UB, one of gleaming high-rises, as well as coffee shops, fashionable women, and even an E-Mart that beat out my local one in Busan when it came to variety and prices.

I immediately liked the unpretentious nature of UB, where the uglier old coexisted with a shinier new, and the residents also possessed this laid back, bullshit-free demeanor. Mongolians are a bit gruff and half the old dudes look like they could pull your arms off, but beneath the tough masks lie a playful, warm people used to enduring ungodly winters and other hardships as just part of the daily slog.

The city was surrounded by verdant steppe and pine-covered hills—including the dominant rise of Bodg Khan, one of Mongolia's sacred mountains. Much of the nation's industry and commerce was concentrated in this slightly shabby burg that was also enjoying a sparkling boom thanks to the infusion of piles of mining cash. It was a fascinating place with many levels of human existence and endeavors existing at once, and while perhaps not the most photogenic capital I've visited, its down-home charms immediately soaked into my skin.

Still, despite its modern creature comforts, it looked like a tough place to call home. The city maintained its dour facade in the form of two massive coal plants belching their smoke into the air of the Tuul River valley. Come winter the ridges rimming the city help to create a thermal inversion zone, resulting in some of the planet's most severe smog.

Many UB's buildings had obviously seen better days, and old drunks with rough, vein-exploded faces, staggered along the cracked sidewalks in search of more cheap vodka. I could also make out a certain weariness in the locals that lack of sun, frigid temperatures, and limited opportunity tends to etch into the skin.

We spent two days making preparations for our departure into Mongolia's deep, wild interior, along with getting down with the hearty food and drink that the city offered up on all corners. This presented some challenges, as Scraggs was a long-time committed pescetarian. This meant that meat was off the menu, and Mongolia is a country where piles of meat are guaranteed every time you sit down to eat. It's pretty much the country's only food group. Luckily, UB had a variety of other options including a bang-on Georgian restaurant and a couple branches of Loving Hut, an international franchise that serves up nice vegan fare.

We wandered up and down Peace Avenue and its offshoots, including Seoul Street and Beatles Square, an outdoor space featuring a sculpture of the Fab Four. We checked out the historic State Department Store and spelunked the city's Black Market, a sprawling labyrinth offering up everything from power tools to clothing to

ger stoves to huge tubs of curds and yak butter. It was a fascinating, living and breathing complex, and the otherwise grumpy stall keepers always returned my greeting of "Sam bain noo!" as we shuffled by on a quest for supplies for upcoming adventures.

It was at the Black Market where I was approached by an old man in a cabbie hat. He gave me a smile, revealing a mouth containing three or four surviving teeth, and stretched out his palm, which contained some kind of commemorative medallion from the Soviet era. He gestured to it and back to me, obviously wanting to make some kind of a sale.

"Sorry old fellow." I shook my head.

He pocketed the medallion and then stretched out his empty palm. "Moe-nee," he wheezed. "Moe-nee."

At this point I had no Mongolian *tugrik* on me. I had only managed to get a pittance out of the airport ATM the night before, and had yet to find a machine that would give me some more love. In fact, I had stepped away from the group to try my luck at a couple that I'd seen near the entrance to the building.

"Moe-nee," the gramps continued. "Moe-nee."

Scott wandered up and the old man approached him. Scott smiled and shook his head. As we tried to walk away, the old guy grabbed my hand and held on. He was gentle, yet insistent.

He began speaking Mongolian and pointed to me. It seemed as though he was asking me where I'm from.

"Me?" I asked. "USA. America. I am from America."

"America?" His face lit up. "Ohhhh ohhhh." He enthusiastically shook and patted my hand. I had obviously answered correctly. He then pointed to Scott.

"I'm from Canada," Scott answered. "Ca-na-da."

The old man's expression suddenly darkened. Scowling, he shook his head and made a grunt of disapproval.

I could only laugh.

"What?" Scott replied. "You don't like Canada?"

The Bizarro-world of the situation struck us both. Canadians—with their reputation for good manners and overall niceness—are so used to being showered with affection when they're abroad that this came as a hilarious shock. It's very rare that the USA beats Canada in an impromptu test of international approval, so I soaked up the praise while the getting was good.

I then suddenly remembered that even though I was out of Mongolian money, I did have a bit of USD on me. I reached into my pocket and fished out a crisp dollar bill, which I deposited into the hand of the grateful grandpa. After all, hiis response to my citizenship was well-worth him having a few sips of rotgut vodka on me.

A hard rain's gonna fall

The 4th of July was a wet one. The rain kicked in the night before and by the morning it was pummeling the city in thick sheets, a relentless, chilly downpour that made you forget that it was actually summertime. The forecast called for at least twenty-four hours of this ceaseless piss, followed by wet and nasty conditions off and on for a week or more.

This was the day we planned to temporarily suspend the Fellowship of the Ger. Scraggs and Scott were keen to ride horses, which, in Mongolia, is like walking the Great Wall in China, seeing the Grand Canyon in the States, or eating pasta in Rome: It's just what's done. Most everyone who visits for more than a couple of days gets on the back of a horse at least once in their trip. Locals grow up riding, so much so that it is often said that Mongols learn to ride horses before they can even walk. I found this to be at least partly true, given the number of children I saw on horseback once we hit the countryside.

In order to do as the Romans do, Scraggs and Scott had booked a five-day horseback excursion into a national park south of the city famed for its sweeping vistas and population of wild horses. It sounded like an ideal trip made up of days following the winding Tuul River through the steppe, with nights spent underneath the wide, twinkling expanse of the summer Mongol sky. Heady stuff, indeed.

Will and I had opted out of the horse trip, both out of frugality and fear: while I'd grown up in the countryside, I'd only been up a horse a couple of times; I'd never really ridden one solo, and now, firmly into middle age, I wasn't looking to start. I knew how much power those beasts possessed and I figured that I'd be taking a big enough risk just by jumping in a car for three weeks and careening over the pot-holed calamities that passed for roads in Mongolia. After all, the closest I've ever been to death in my travels abroad has always been in cars piloted by local psychopaths. Vehicle mishaps are certainly the traveler's most underappreciated danger, too often overlooked in favor of more sensational ways to die, such as crime or terrorism.

It does without saying that a horse is a vehicle as well, and as Scott and Scraggs packed up and waited for their guide to come pick them up in the morning deluge, I asked them if they were still keen to proceed, given how unfathomably nasty the weather.

Both responded with grunts, grimaces, and determined nods before slipping into their guide's dented-up, mud-stained white Prius, which sputtered away in mist of the bone-chilling drencher. Will and I shrugged and went about our day, which included moving out of the Tara Guest House to another situated just a block down from the State Department Store in central UB. This involved us packing up and hitting the jagged pavement, and soon we were humping our bags through the rainstorm across town.

Ulaanbaatar had obviously not been designed with heavy rain in mind, as the drainage system in place was clearly inadequate for what the elements demanded, forcing us to wade across immense puddles which formed on the sidewalks and

traffic-snarled roads. Despite the fact that we both wore rain jackets and sturdy footwear, there was just no way to avoid getting soaked, as this was the kind of rain that didn't just fall from the sky, but also seemed to crawl up from the ground.

After checking into our guesthouse and downing a lunch of sheep fat and meat piles at Buuz Khaan—a fast food franchise serving up proper Mongolian stodge—we made the very sensible decision to hit a couple of the city's museums for a much-needed dose of history and culture. The couple of hours we spent wandering the halls of the National Museum of Mongolia and nearby Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum not only fed our heads, but kept us relatively dry by restricting our activity to indoor pursuits. This seemed like a win-win.

Still, I couldn't help but think how Scraggs and Scott were fairing out on the unsheltered steppe, and despite the undeniable romance of experiencing the great expanse of Mongolia from the back of a horse, not a single cell in my body envied them that day, as I knew that such an unrelenting, torrential blast can only bring misery. I had spent too many days of my youth in the Pacific Northwest getting drenched outdoors, so I was well-acquainted with that particular brand of shivering shittiness.

This Mongolian rain was cut from a similar cloth of that of my childhood, and my suspicion that things could not have been going well for my mounted compatriots was confirmed late that afternoon as I lay stretched out snug in my bed at the guesthouse. Will was still out spelunking museums, and as I drifted in and out of a divine nap, my phone began to sing. It was Scott, and straight away I knew that something had gone awry.

His voice was calm to the point of crisis, and when he softly informed me that Scraggs had been involved in an accident with his horse, my blood turned as cold as the rain outside. For a brief moment I expected him to follow this up with the news that David was no longer with us, or at least seriously maimed, so when he went on to say that our comrade seemed to be doing "remarkably well, given what he's gone through," a warm sense of relief overtook me.

Scott recounted the story, how the two of them, plus their guide, had crested a hill and were heading down a steep slope when Scraggs' saddle suddenly slipped onto his horse's neck, startling the beast, who reared and bucked in panic. Scraggs was thrown, but his left foot got stuck in the stirrup, due to the chunky hiking boots he was wearing in an attempt to keep his toes warm and dry.

The horse bolted, dragging him over the stone-strewn steppe for about two hundred meters, repeatedly bouncing his body over the ground like a rag doll. Scott witnessed it all from the back of his own horse—which began to get agitated as well—until David's foot finally came loose, freeing him from the violent maelstrom. Scott was convinced that Scraggs was gravely injured, or even dead, but through adrenaline, shock, and pure British toughness, he sprung to his feet in the sideways rain, badly beaten, but still in one piece.

It was just the two of them along with their guide, a young Mongol who apparently wept and froze up at the sickening spectacle, forcing Scott to—at least

momentarily—take figurative control of the reins. He instructed the guide to call back to the home base (only thirty minutes away by horse) for a car, and, after some expert maneuvering on the part of a driver over the slickened, mud-slogged slopes, Scraggs was soon lying in the back seat of the simple, non-four-wheel drive vehicle as it made its way back onto the highway to a hospital in UB.

Within two hours, Scott was back at the guesthouse, where, after a couple stiff belts of vodka, he went back over the story with Will and me at least three times. He was clearly in a kind of shock, and as he carried on, we all assumed that the doctors would keep Scraggs in the hospital overnight, but soon enough a message came through on our phones from our wounded compatriot: *I'm out. Come get me!*

After locating the hospital on Google maps, Scott and I set off to extract Scraggs, who was either well enough to leave on his own or under the care of physicians so negligent that they were allowing a severely injured patient to make a break for it. We also made the intelligent decision to walk rather than risk a cab, as it was still rush hour, and traffic in Ulaanbaatar could only be described as demonic.

Lacking a subway or any other kind of metro, the capital's traffic was nightmarish by default. The city was only served by a few wide Soviet-style boulevards, with a spider's web of narrow side streets in between that quickly became clogged. This, along with the fact that half of the country's residents now called Ulaanbaatar home—with more arriving from the interior each day—adding far more vehicles to the already-shaky infrastructure than it possibly could handle. This resulted in near-constant gridlock—bumper-to-bumper, stop-and-go chaos that could only be described as a gargantuan clusterfuck. UB's outdoor soundtrack was one of squawking car horns, squealing brakes, rumbling buses, and nouveau riche dickheads in wannabe sports cars revving their engines at crosswalks.

Another bizarre feature of the city's streets was the lack of standardization when it came to steering wheels. Despite the fact that Mongolians drive on the right side of the road, many of the cars—including an inordinate number of Toyota Priuses—were imported from Japan (where they drive on the left) and never got converted. This meant people piloted their cars from different sides, depending on the make and model, which only added to the overwhelming sense of pandemonium.

Despite the fact the city stretched and sprawled its way up and out of the Tuul River Valley, central UB was very walkable, and within an hour Scott and I made it to the hospital, where Scraggs sat in an otherwise empty lobby. While certainly shaken up, the tests showed no broken bones or head injuries, and after a taxi ride back to our guesthouse that took as long as our walk there, David eased down on his bed, cracked a beer, and thanked the universe that he was still alive.

His bandaged back was covered and gouged in bleeding cuts and abrasions, and his left knee was pretty banged up, but he had survived the ordeal otherwise unscathed, save a newfound respect for the power of horses.

The only question now was whether he'd continue as part of the Fellowship or drop out and return to Korea to recuperate. To lose him would be an immense blow

that would surely impact the whole trip for the worse, so the three of us fervently crossed our fingers that he'd bounce back over the next few days. Part of that also depended on the weather, at least when it came to morale.

That day had seen the most rain in over twenty years in Ulaanbaatar, resulting in widespread flooding along the banks of the Tuul. Parts of town were completely submerged, and the forecast called for more periodic cloudbursts that certainly tarnished the splendor of our summer travels. We were just a couple days in and things were already tough.

Even in the city, Mongolia was living up to its expectation as a wild, unpredictable place. We knew this coming in: we were aware that extreme weather was something we'd inevitably have to deal with, that the elements would sometimes work against us in extreme ways. The best play in that case is to usually sit things out until conditions improve, but we were hungry to bite off the natural splendor that Mongolia offers up in spades and went ahead with plans anyway. Scraggs and Scott were eager to get out in it, and trusted that their outfitters knew what was up.

Conditions were so nasty on that 4th of July that no one—especially inexperienced riders such as Scott and Scraggs—should have been making any kind of journey on horseback. It wasn't just that it was rainy: the whole region was inundated with a moisture so thick and overwhelming that it made its way into everything, including the ropes and straps designed to hold a saddle firmly onto the horse.

Whether David's saddle slipped just because the rain had made things swollen and slick was up for debate. It may have been the fault of the young guy who fastened it. He could have just done a lazy, shoddy job, but I can't help but think the weather had something to do with it. After all, this was biblical rain.

What's clear is that the company should have called off the trek until at least the next day, but the pandemic was brutal for Mongolia's tourism sector. They were as eager to recover as we were to get out on the steppe, and the mound of cash Scott and Scraggs plunked down was likely too plump and tempting of a prize to risk losing through any delay or change in plans. The tour company got greedy. They pushed ahead when they shouldn't have, and because of that, my friend nearly died.

Up into it

While Central Ulaanbaatar enjoys the prosperity brought forth by government workers, tourism, and the largess of mining money, it doesn't take too long to discover that, like so many cities, the have-nots far outnumber the haves. Most visitors stick to the town's core around Peace Avenue with its department stores, cafes, museums, and cultural attractions, never really getting a taste of the hardscrabble existence that is the reality for most of its residents. This tough day-to-

day struggle is most evident in the ger district—the ever-expanding zone of small houses and yurts on the slopes outside of the city center.

It was our last day in town before heading out while David recovered from his equine mishap, and Will and Scott agreed to join me on an urban hike. I decided to head up to the hills surrounding the city to taste the real Ulaanbaatar, or at least a flavor of it. While not a proponent of "poverty tourism," I do like to get an honest look at any place I visit, and will certainly wander into the rougher parts of town as long as it's not stupid dangerous to do so.

Mongolia, like most of East Asia, is a remarkably safe place to wander most any hour of the day, though there are stories of drunk young men at times getting aggressive with foreigners, especially if they perceive you to be Russian. Animosities towards the Russkies linger from the Soviet era, though over the decades—since the country's transformation to democracy and market economy—this antipathy has somewhat subsided.

We set off down the perpetual parking lot of Peace Avenue, taking a hard right onto a smaller street after about fifteen minutes of hoofing it along the humming sidewalk. The traffic eased up as we made our way past a few low-rent hotels, dark bars, and sketchy-looking karaoke joints. Soon, the concrete began to show signs of neglect, with plenty of potholes and missing chunks, and the alleyways turned into rough, unpaved tracks. While Will snapped a few photos with his massive zoom lens, it occurred to me that much of UB was still unpaved, lending credence to stories that just twenty years back it was mainly a town of dirt roads.

We soon found ourselves on one of these crude paths, which snaked through the rickety residential area buffering the downtown. The bigger buildings gave way to small houses that could best be described as glorified shacks, each penned in by tall, often makeshift wooden fences.

Each family had their own little plot in a way that was nearly suburban; the fences offered privacy and surely protection from the winds that relentlessly lashed these haphazard structures during the harsh winter months. Still, it was strange to see these people—nomads by nature—cooped up like animals themselves.

This would later become clear outside of the city, where there were nearly no fences at all. Mongolians and their livestock enjoyed a free-range country where private property was the exception rather than the rule, but the city called for a different way of life, and the people in these little homes were making due and adapting to the regimented needs of urban existence.

As the path climbed up the slope, we began to get a better view of the city splayed out beneath us. Dogs barked from behind the fences, while others—covered in thick matted fur—lurked at the entranceways of the homes, sometimes stepping out onto the dirt road in a bold manner. These canines were, without exception, hulking beasts; they grew them big in Mongolia and you surely wouldn't want one of these local mutts coming at you. Scott was keenly aware of this and picked up a big rock at first sight of one of these hounds, repeatedly warning us of the danger they presented.

Still, despite some bellowing barks and growls that rattled fences, we were left unmolested by the ger district's dogs. As we continued our climb, a few residents passed us on their way up or down, sometimes greeting us with quizzical looks, or more often, shy, warm smiles. They surely didn't see too many big white men decked out in hiking gear trudging up their rough tracks, but Mongolians have a laid-back way about them and rarely seem to express surprise, even if they're feeling it inside. I got the sense that, in their culture and climate, it paid off to appear as if you've seen everything before.

While we were certainly witnessing poverty, it wasn't the severe, crushing variety you're likely to come across in parts of Cambodia, The Philippines, India, or say, South Sudan. These homes were humble but sufficient, and likely warm enough in the winter. There were also a number of stations throughout the neighborhood distributing fresh water through hoses and pumps, as if it were gasoline. The local kids were tasked by their families to keep the water supply going: They strapped the plastic jugs to little carts which they pulled over the broken, uneven road back and forth to these concrete water stations, all manned by bored-looking old men sitting in booths overlooking their mini-domains.

These were people living in very raw, barebones conditions, though I wouldn't describe it as squalor. They seemed to take a basic pride in the neighborhood which meant, while certainly rough, things were relatively orderly. That said, the ground was often littered with trash and other detritus: empty vodka bottles, snack wrappers, cast-off clothing, cigarette butts, and scraps of metal and plastic—not to mention massive piles of dog shit. Pieces of tarp—which fluttered in the intermittent wind—were nailed to sections of fencing in order to cover up holes, and many of the properties had a thrown-together, improvised feel.

This was more pronounced as we crested the hill: there were just as many gers as actual huts. Sometimes they were set up in the dirt yards next to the more permanent dwellings, surely to accommodate relatives arriving from the countryside and their children, who ran about in little packs with dirty faces and dark, curious eyes.

Mongolia, like much of the so-called developing world, is filled with children. Families are large and thriving and it reminds of how things used to be most everywhere, at least until recently. Much of the West—along with East Asia—has been shockingly depopulated of kids. Sure, you'll see one or two with their parents and larger groups at school or other educational institutions, but to take in squads of squealing, semi-feral children just running about unattended is largely a thing of the past, and whenever I witness it in a place such as Mongolia or Mexico, I can't help but feel as if the rest of us have lost something precious.

At the top of the rise, situated next to a small gray building, was an, *ovoo*, the cairns made of stacked rocks found at the summit of most every Mongolian mountain. These stone piles are said to symbolize various deities and ancestral spirits, and act as shrines and centers of shamanism, which is still widely practiced throughout the country.

Like most any, this *ovoo* contained a long piece of wood shoved into the top of the rocky heap, which was enveloped with wide strips of blue silk. Known as a *khadam*, this banner represents the blueness of the open sky and Tenger, the god who personifies it. As I took it all in, a cluster of clouds swirled and closed in behind it, obscuring the heavens in an attempt to muster an afternoon squall. As the wind kicked up, the *khadam* began to flap noisily, nearly overtaking the chorus of barking dogs and incessant grumble and hiss of the city around us.

For a moment I was reminded where we were: in an ancient land of sweeping, rolling hills, proud nomads, and a horseborn empire once so mighty it washed over not only most of Asia, but a good portion of Europe as well.

Ulaanbaatar—this former Soviet outpost of wide boulevards, neglected statues, tatty kiosks, and squares so empty they swallowed you up— was just a temporary, futile imposition over a collection of gers and an ancient monastery along one of Mongolia's many pristine rivers. For an instant, the whole city melted away, until the whine and clank of an approaching car's overworked gearbox boomeranged me back to the present.

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The sky, of course, opened up, and after deploying our rain jackets and descending the little mountain, we found ourselves at the base of another. This required crossing another busy road (one of the main routes out of town) filled with a relentless stream of trundling lorries and honking cars. After playing Frogger across the chaos of the little highway, the rain began to slacken, and I realized that we were standing next to a vast cemetery at the base of the hill.

The headstones were thin and crumbling, and the forlorn field they called home was overgrown and rubbish-strewn, with uneven tufts of grass interspersed with bits of random garbage. Some of the markers were engraved with Chinese characters, while others used Cyrilic, including the resting places of several soldiers, one of which featured the carved image of the military man's bust, recently highlighted in garish gold and green spray paint.

Putrefying at the edge of this neglected boneyard were also two severed cow's heads. The smell hit me first, and once I tracked down the source, we speculated as to why they sat there rotting, though we suspected that shamanism was at play. After all, that's usually the answer in (at least) East Asia when you come across random animal parts. Still, this sad, deserted place of the dead may have also served as a dumping ground. Despite the fact that countless corpses had already been buried there, it looked like the ideal place to dispose of a body, in a pinch.

The ger neighborhood at the crown of the second hill was served by a catastrophic dirt track connecting to the highway at the bottom. The afternoon shower had turned the soil to muck, and the few cars attempting the climb were struggling mightily, slipping and sliding in the slimy face of the rise, bringing home the notion of just how undeveloped these fringe districts were.

As the three of us made our admittedly slow hike to the top, we quickly outpaced the vehicles grinding their way along, and while it occurred to me to perhaps help push, I also got the sense that these drivers were accustomed to piloting their vehicles in adverse conditions. This was soon confirmed by the fact that, despite the difficulty, each car eventually crested the hill and made its way deeper into the outer limits of UB.

The summit of this hill offered a terrific vista over the lower ger district we had just traversed, along with the glimmering high-rises of modern UB down below. In many cities—such as LA—the heights are often considered prime real estate, home to mansions and other swank residences. However, in UB and some other towns, the hillsides are the slums: steep, out-of-the-way, insecure, and hard-to-service.

This was clearly the wrong side of the tracks, yet the view was a gut-punch. Sure, it was inspiring to take in the breadth of the city, but the summits of the surrounding ridges also reminded us of just how grand Mongolia really was: Bogd Khan (a sacred mountain) stared us down from the other side of the valley, suggesting a wild country with a history much deeper than the settlements splayed out beneath us.

We could also clearly make out the belching coal plants that powered this whole endeavor down the valley, and given the number of vehicles—plus the fact that UB was rimmed-in with ridges—I didn't envy the residents once winter set in. Not only would it be crushingly cold, but the air would turn to poison. It's for this reason that—despite the fact that much of Mongolia is unbelievably pristine—Ulaanbaatar is often ranked as the most polluted city in the world.

Given the altitude, these working-class residents would be spared the worst of it, and as the shouts and sounds of a nearby kids' basketball game reverberated among the muddy streets, I was filled with a twinge of hope, though I couldn't but think help if they'd all be happier back out on the simpler world of the steppe, away from all of this toxic, concentrated, citified nonsense.

Of course I considered this while taking photos from my smartphone, soaking up an international journey that few in the world could hope to ever experience. I was lame, viewing people with aspirations of financial and material security so many of the rest of us take for granted through an idealized, even orientalized lens. Did these folks have any less of a right to participate in the modern world and all of the comforts and thrills it offered?

As we once again descended, the landscape turned into one of washed-out, generic, car-clogged awfulness, yet the people went about their day like they do anywhere—ideal or terrible.

Once we got back downtown the periodic rain abated, and suddenly UB looked sexy, at least at certain angles. Money does talk, and that afternoon, as Mongolia suddenly began to resemble the shiny, stacked-up streets of Korea, I heard a voice in my ear.

"Stay here," it whispered. "It's good here."

And while I knew it was, I couldn't wait to get far away, into that rough,

beautiful part of the country that—like the ger district—may be a tough place to call home, but offered treasures far more precious than found in any swank cafe or luxury brand shop.

Gorkhi Park

Whatever his excesses in the day, there is no argument that Chinggis Khaan is Mongolia's undisputed national hero. He was everywhere. I'd never been to a country where one single human held such a grip on the national consciousness, centuries after his life. The only parallels that came to mind were Buddah, Jesus, and Mohammed, but unlike these prophets, Chinggis Khaan wasn't selling religion. He made no claims of some special connection to the divine, but was rather a simple warrior and—most importantly—a uniter, eventually bringing together one of the largest, most wealthy empires the world has ever known. And despite the butchery and rivers of blood shed to conquer anyone who resisted, his rule was surprisingly egalitarian—rejecting nepotism and corruption—while also embracing full freedom of worship as one of its core values.

On the steppe, near rocky hills of Gorkhi Terelj National Park, is a statue of Chinngis Khaan—a shimmering monument depicting the great leader on horseback. This gargantuan metal sculpture stands at 40 meters (130 feet) and has become one of the biggest tourist attractions in the country. Completed in 2008, it's a relatively new structure, but since then, anyone who visits Mongolia feels compelled to pay their respects, even if—like me—giant statues to dead emperors aren't really your thing.

We were on our way to Gorkhi Terelj anyway, so the statue was only a short side trip, and soon the three of us climbed its steps and joined the throngs of other visitors—Mongolians, Russians, as well as some Koreans—milling out on the platform built on the neck of the horse.

After taking a flurry of selfies, we looked across the open fields toward the striking stone formations that make up Gorkhi Terelj. A wind whipped up from the plain delivering sweet air that smelled of grass and soil, and a few fat clouds sulked across the broad, intoxicating sky.

We were elated to have finally escaped the city, and as I gazed toward the park, I could see the sun shimmering on the surface of the winding Tuul River, where Scott and I hoped to wet our fly lines in the upcoming days. Scott was especially taken with the sight, having poured over maps and websites in anticipation of getting into fish on this trip. The river, however, didn't look quite right: rather than a serpentine flow, the water seemed to more resemble a small lake. All of the rain from the past few days had surely blown it out, which was just about the worst news a fisherman could receive.

Our suspicions were confirmed after piling back into the car and heading into

the park. Just before the entrance, a small bridge spanned the Tuul, which we saw wasn't just running high, but near flood stage. The river had just recently jumped its banks, inundating groves of trees, open fields, and even a few ger camps set up along the edge of the big stream.

The river itself ran fat and fast, a gurgling highway of chocolate-brown water. In this condition it was simply unfishable and would be for some days, perhaps even weeks. If more rain came, it could mean that these waters (and others) would be out-of-bounds for the duration of our trip. The elation that we'd felt just thirty minutes before suddenly left us like air escaping from a hole in a rubber tire. However, once we entered the striking, otherworldly surroundings of Gorkhi Terelj, we realized that the pleasures and diversions that awaited us would quickly take our minds off the fact that fishing was currently not on the menu.

* * *

Like Ulaanbaator, Gorkhi Terelj had a large Korean presence, only this time in the form of actual people. We ran into Koreans everywhere we went (our ger camp was almost exclusively patronized by them), leading me to believe that South Korea must have been responsible for about eighty percent of Mongolia's current tourism revenue. I was told this was due to the country being featured on a very popular Korean TV program featuring comedians traveling abroad, but it's also close and relatively cheap, and there's a cultural connection at play: Koreans and Mongolians are ethnically almost identical; they share much of the same DNA, due to the fact that the original people who settled the Korean peninsula came from present-day Mongolia and Russia.

Gorkhi Terelj is incredibly picturesque, like the best parts of eastern Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming all concentrated in one magical spot. You could surely film a Western there and no one would blink an eye when watching it on the big screen. The scenery was dramatic and soothing and hit me straight in the sweet spot. It was obvious why this patch of real estate warranted national protection: it was just one of those places so gorgeous that snapping a bad photo was an impossibility.

On our first day we joined the tour bus packs (mostly Koreans) in hiking into the woods and then up a steep set of stone stairs to Aryabal Temple. This Buddhist meditation center was nestled on the sheer granite mountainside at the top of the valley our ger camp called home. The Mongolian strain of Buddhism mirrored that found in Tibet, and the temple was painted in bright orange and aquamarine, complete with prayer wheels and a *thangka* (painting on silk) representing Shambhala, a mythical Buddhist kingdom said to exist somewhere between the Himalaya and the Gobi Desert.

It happened to be Scott's birthday, so that night we celebrated in camp with plenty of cold beer (they sold it on site) and a big, dangerous bottle of Chinggis Khaan vodka, which, of course kicked everything up into high gear. We also drank

some wine with a woman from Hong Kong and her husband—an incredibly rude and completely hammered Swiss guy. They were both ultramarathoners celebrating finishing a recent big run, meaning that the husband was boozing so hard that he was surely seeing in quadruplicate by 7pm.

He also took an immediate and vocal dislike to me.

"Who is zees guy?" he spat, waving me away like a fly. "I do not like zee vay he talks…"

His surliness hit home, needling my touchy, vodka-primed nerves. His affable, smiling wife kept looking at us with apologizing eyes, obviously a woman well accustomed to dealing with such a messy, obnoxious spouse who couldn't hold his liquor. With each drink he sunk further into his seat to the point where he began to resemble the late Dr. Stephen Hawking, twitching slurring while still flashing his bizarre contempt for me behind wild, half-opened eyes.

"Oh of course… you are American so… fucking…. I like how your friend talks more… I only want to listen to him!"

His wife soon realized that he had fallen into the black hole of a deep ass-out, and luckily led him staggering and weaving back to their ger before I acted on my impulse to repeatedly punch him in the neck.

Scott, Will, and I spent the rest of the night drinking around the campfire with a group of beefy Korean guys and the couple's Mongolian tour guide, an odd, elfin woman who had lived for many years with her family in California before getting busted—and subsequently deported—for dealing meth.

We slept off our birthday booze-up the next day and set out after lunch on an several-hour, improvised trek that took us through coniferous forest, columnar rocky ridges, wide open grassland, horse tracks, and delivered a series of views that ripped the air from our lungs. The landscape featured massive, psychedelic rock formations, reminiscent of those found in Chihuahua in northern Mexico. It was rugged and alien territory that also delivered a kind of pastoral, Tolkienesque coziness.

Despite our hangovers, the day reached points of perfection, with clouds wisping overhead and blanketing the rolling ground with their shifting shadows, while shafts of sunlight blasted hillsides in the distance, creating a brilliant, honeyed contrast that dazzled our retinas and quieted the soul.

The raw beauty of Gorkhi Terelj was staggering, but the park sadly suffered from a far-too-common malady found throughout East Asia, something I call "Cable Car Syndrome."

While lacking an actual cable car, the park's valleys were clearly overdeveloped—full of ger camps and countless other structures—along with monstrous, gaudy resort buildings. There seemed to be little regulation as to what could be built, resulting in the far-too-common phenomenon of large-scale construction projects that ran out of money and stopped altogether, leaving us with the skeleton of some oversized, hideous building that will neither be finished nor used.

Korea's mountains and countryside are full of such aborted projects that sit there, rotting over the years as a testament to greed, corruption, and the small-sightedness that comes with it. Gorkhi Terelj was home to a few as well, including an eyesore of an unfinished megaresort that destroyed the view of a mountain just down the road from our camp. Whoever is responsible for the project should, in my view, at the very least, be thrown to a starving polar bear.

Still, despite their best efforts, Gorkhi Terelj has yet to be ruined, and we only visited a small corner of the park. It's a massive place, most of which is untouched wilderness, so perhaps a convention center or two isn't the cardinal sin I paint it as. Still, you'll know it's all over the day they build a casino (with cable car).

The festival

While we'd come to Mongolia to soak up its glorious and myriad natural splendors, our trip also coincided with Naadam, the annual festival celebrating all things Mongolian such horseback riding, archery, wrestling, and eating piles of meat dumplings washed down with vodka and *airag*, the fermented mare's milk that's the country's national hooch. While each area puts on their own festivities on different days, the celebration usually falls during the second week of July, In addition to the traditional activities, people take advantage of the time off to get out of town, set up a tent on the steppe, and enjoy their country in the exact same way any foreign visitor would.

After arriving back in the capital, Scraggs informed us that, while a bit hobbled, he was well enough to complete the trip. This caused our hearts to soar, and early the next morning the Fellowship shot west in a Korean Starex van piloted by Munkhbat, who drove with the exact kind of heavy-footed malevolence that is all too often the default setting in more undeveloped parts of the world. The pot-hole strewn two-lane road was choked with vehicles leaving the city to take advantage of the Naadam break to visit family in far-flung corners or to just get out under the endless sky, set up a few tents, and savor what Mongolia delivers in spades.

We joined this convoy, and while the four of us were perfectly content to just roll along at the flow of traffic, Munkhbat gunned it at every opportunity possible, passing multiple cars while laying on the horn, often playing a game of chicken with oncoming vehicles who flashed their headlights to let him know they were very much aware of possibility of their impending doom.

Despite his homicidal driving, Munkhbat—after a pit stop at the windswept, serene grounds of Erdene Zuu Monastery in the ancient capital of Kharkhorin—delivered us to our destination: the town of Tsetserleg. Nestled beneath the imposing rise of Bulgan Uul Mountain, this settlement serves as a jump-off point for travelers wishing to explore central Mongolia, and is home to the Fairfield Guesthouse, a remarkable hotel and bakery owned and operated by an Australian

expat named Murray and his wife Elizabeth.

The building was over one hundred-years-old, constructed by missionaries who came to do God's work in the country's rugged interior. As devout Christians, Murray and his wife were continuing that tradition. While primarily running the business—which included organizing expeditions for groups such as ourselves—the couple (who had raised four children in Tsetserleg) also performed outreach in town, working especially to reduce the harms done by alcoholism, which was surely Mongolia's greatest social ill.

Tsetserleg was greatly affected by the scourge of the vodka bottle, as evidenced by the bleary-eyed, hollowed out shells of older men shuffling around its rough streets. As a result, The Fairfield had a no booze policy in its rooms, though Murray did allow drinking in the courtyard out front, even joining us for a cheeky can. He was certainly no prude, and reminded me that—due to moral scolds, hypocrites, and overzealous proselytizers—Christians often get a bad name, when in fact there were many like him and his wife, quietly doing good work in the trenches.

Of course it was good business for Murray to down a can with us, as he was our principal tour organizer during the rest of our time in the country. Both Will and I had logged countless hours online querying and talking to various companies and guides in an attempt to construct an itinerary that would meet our very specific needs of checking out birds and pulling in fish while also seeing some of the country's best sites. Many of them didn't seem to quite get what we were after, but Murray was keen and responsive and offered prices that were on par or cheaper than most everything else that was quoted, so in the end he was our man.

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We had rolled into Tsetserleg right as their Naadam was kicking off, so we had elected to spend some extra time in town to check it all out. While the events in UB are the most famous, I had read beforehand that Naadam is best experienced out in the smaller settlements, and Tsetserleg—as the capital of Arkhangai Province—was hosting the party for the region. They had even built a brand-new facility just a few kilometers out of town that was to be christened for this year's festival, so it seemed our timing was good.

After a breakfast of bacon and egg sandwiches (Fairfield bakes its own bread) washed down with strong, freshly-ground coffee, Murray gave us a lift in his spanky new Land Cruiser to the new festival grounds, where we would spend the day soaking up the local Naadam.

On the way there he filled us in on his dream to expand The Fairfield. The region was known for its thermal hot springs, and Murray and his wife were planning to build a new complex that would include hot pools pumped directly from the earth on a nearby mountain. The whole place would be solar-powered and self-sufficient, with conference rooms and space for group retreats. It sounded like a very enticing project, one that would encourage the kind of tourism that benefits the

local community while also providing a unique experience for the guests. He said the biggest barrier was gathering the investors, but that the plans were already drawn up and hoped to break ground within two years. I certainly hope to return to Tsetserleg in the future and see the operations up and running.

We arrived early at the Naadam site, which was made up of an arena with bleacher seating and stalls all around featuring traditional food and mainly modern drink. The complex's PA blasted traditional Mongolian music, which is haunting and soulful, reflecting the deep, wide-open country that birthed it. I couldn't help but recognize the similarities to native American melodies in the piercing cries of the vocals, lending credence to the theory that the ancestors of American Indians originated from the great Asian steppe.

Behind the arena sat a couple of gargantuan beer tents that would get hopping later in the day, and further back were clusters of men playing *shagai*, the traditional game involving the ankle bones of goats and sheep. Decked out in hats and colorful *del* (Mongolian robes), these men played a version where they used miniature crossbows to shoot at the bones, which were set up on varnished boxes atop little carpets. They set about their task with a very intense focus, though when seeing me check them out, a few broke their stoic competitive concentration to offer me a hearty greeting.

While a group of young women shot arrows in the nearby archery range, the day's main event was wrestling—Mongolia's national sport. Matches had yet to kick off and the weather was ideal, so I decided to leave the complex and have a bit of a wander.

The arena and surrounding tents were situated in a wide valley. Staring down at us was yet another mountain, with herds of cows and horses grazing on its flanks. The rise looked eminently climbable, and soon I found myself improvising a route up its side, zig-zagging through the grass and protruding rocks, until the Naadam site began to resemble an ant colony. Still, the warbling music wafted up the valley, and a breeze periodically whipped around my face.

Like many mountains in Mongolia, the top was blanketed in pine trees. As I approached the summit, I noted several birds-of-prey circling on the updrafts, including the imposing forms of several Cinereous vultures. We'd seen many of these hulking raptors over the past couple of days, and it occurred to me that they get very little respect, when you could easily argue that a vulture is equally as majestic as an eagle. It is, instead, the victim of certain prejudices, due to its bald head, gawky movements, and the fact that it consumes carrion, which turns it into a trash bird in the eyes of too many.

The closer I got to the summit, the thicker and more aggressive the flies became, until I was forced to use my bandana like a horse's tail, whipping it around my head every few seconds to keep the insects off—a trick I picked up to keep the gnats out of my eyes during summer walks in Korea. I was now deep into the mountain and the mournful songs from the arena's faraway speakers were now swallowed by the trees, rocks, and sky, replaced by the gentle rustle of the wind in the pines.

Atop the mountain was a small ovoo, complete with the horsehair banner called a *tug* attached to a rod sticking out of the top, which resembled a king's crown with flowing locks of hair. While, with the exception of livestock and a curious herd dog, I'd been alone on this hike, I was soon joined by a Mongolian man carrying a small backpack. He crested the summit from the other side and ambled up to the stone pile, and after greeting me with a quiet "Sain bainoo," he crouched down, unzipped his pack, and quickly got to work.

The man—dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap—took out a bag containing some bread, removed a hunk, ripped it up, and then handed the pieces to me. He did the same for himself, and then, after standing up gestured for me to join him as he circled the ovoo in a clockwise direction.

As he walked around the cairn, he began tossing pieces of bread onto the rocks as an offering, which I did as well. We circled the ovoo three times before he stopped back at his bag and produced a small bottle of araig, which he unscrewed, pouring some onto the base of the stones. He handed it to me and gestured for me to do the same.

He then crouched back down and pulled out a bundle of some kind of dried herb—most likely juniper—which he lit with his plastic lighter. He blew on the smudge stick until a bright cherry was going strong, along with a stream of sweet, sage-like smoke. Through more hand motions, he instructed me to stand still, as he waved the smoldering juniper up and down and around my body, whispering a prayer in Mongolia under his breath.

I stood there, taking it all in, gobsmacked by my good fortune. When I was down in the Naadam site, I could feel the mountain call me, and now—just an hour later, at the top—I was receiving a blessing from a random, plainclothes shaman. It was an ideal summer day, with a warm sun melting over the unspoiled terrain, interrupted only by the odd drifting cloud, and I closed my eyes and took in the barely-perceptible rhythm and tones of his incantation, I knew that my decision to come to Mongolia had been a wise one.

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Back at the arena, I joined Scott for a lunch of roasted goat skewers and *khuushuur*—a kind of traditional pastry made with thin slices of beef—washed down with a couple ice-cold cans of Sengur, the local lager that soon became the beer of the trip. The khuushuur was a satisfying treat seemingly served up everywhere in the country, though surely a bomb of cow grease and cholesterol. It hit the spot post-hike, and after walking the festival grounds—which also featured a circus tent—we joined Will and Scraggs back in the arena, where the wrestling was now underway.

Mongolians are passionate about wrestling. It's their national sport, and the grappling competitions are one of the most important aspects of the Naadam celebrations. While not versed in the details of the rules, it soon became obvious that Mongolian wrestling was similar to judo or Greco-Roman style: the goal of the game

is to get your opponent onto the ground through leverage or even tripping him up, though this was easier said than done. The most skilled wrestlers leaned into each other like a couple of bulls, and we saw one match that went on for a good thirty minutes before one man yielded.

While we figured out the main goal of the game, its execution was highly ritualized—steeped in centuries of history and tradition. Before competing, each competitor was called out onto the field where he paid respect to the judges while also parading before the crowd. After victory, the match's winner would assume the pose of the eagle; the loser would duck under his "wing" in an act of respect and submission, where the winner would invariably pat his vanquished foe on the ass.

Mongolian wrestlers are known for their colorful, unique uniforms, including open-chested, sleeved jackets called *zodog*, and tight, red or blue briefs known as *shuudag*. They also wear calf-high, leather boots, and despite the somewhat silly appearance of the outfits to Western eyes (Have you seen our wrestlers?), I noticed right away that some of these guys were yoked.

The Tsetserleg Naadam games drew wrestlers from all over Arkhangai Province. Some of these were chunky old men bordering on obese, while others were criminally skinny young dudes getting thrown around and just having a laugh. The serious competitors, however, stood out right away—tree-trunk thick, muscular dudes who didn't just appear physically formidable—but also tough in the way only growing up on the steppe can do. These were guys who spent their whole lives riding horses, wrangling livestock, and eating piles of mutton, goat, and beef, while also sparring with their brothers, fighting with their friends, and enduring the kind of winters that would drive most warm-blooded creatures into hibernation. These countrified Mongols were a tough lot and seeing them go toe-to-toe in person made me realize just how their ancestors managed to come together and kick the world's collective ass.

Grand Canyon

The Chuluut River slices through central Mongolia like a carving tool, creating a gorge that brings to mind some of the great canyons of North America. The familiarity of the landscape somehow reassured me as we scurried down the precipitous path to a great horseshoe bend in the river. David's knee was still out of whack from the horseback riding catastrophe which meant he was walking with the assistance of a cane, but he gingerly descended the treacherous trail and eventually made it to the bottom, the first real test of whether or not he was up for what Mongolia's gnarly terrain was to demand from here on out.

This dramatic turn in the Chuluut's flow created a deep pool that was said to hold some sizable lenok trout and even the odd taimen. This would be our first chance to wet our lines, so Scott and I bulldozed our way down in anticipation of

perhaps hooking into our first fatties of the trip. While there had been a couple of evening thunder showers, the rain had largely slacked off over the past couple of days, raising our hopes that the water levels may have dipped low enough to actually have a shot finding some fish.

While the Chuluut was in much better shape than the completely flooded Tuul from just a couple days back, it still ran fast and high and was full of mud and sediment. This meant that the only hope of hooking a fish to hit would be to get the fly or lure directly in front of its face, a feat of dumb luck, given the conditions. Still, we were stoked just to finally be out on the water. We had been in the country for well over a week and had yet to make a single cast. Scraggs and Will had already glassed loads of birds—especially black kites, who seemed to be everywhere—so the fishing half of the Fellowship of the Ger had some catching up to do.

The spot was idyllic, a perfect location to throw a couple of flies and let the rhythms of the water take over. We had passed a couple of local fishermen hiking up the path right after we arrived, so the hole wasn't exactly a secret, but we had rumbled for about forty-five minutes over an extremely rough track to get there, which, in my experience, was always a good sign. The more difficult the journey, the better potential for fishing, as it tended to weed out the lightweights.

Munkhbat joined us, along with Abaka, our "guide," the young dude who had occupied the passenger's seat since setting out from Tsetserleg earlier in the day. Murray had been careful not to build him up as an actual fishing expert—but rather a local who was familiar with the lay of the land and would know of some primo spots. He was cheerful enough and wore a bright red del (Mongolian robe), though as soon as he unpacked the fishing rod from the case (one of Munkhbat's) it was clear that he had no idea what he was doing. He was so utterly inept that Scott had to rig him up, which included tying on his lure.

Despite the fact that birding was their main passion, Will and Scraggs had also equipped themselves with rods and reels at the Black Market back in UB and were keen to try their hand at fishing. David had done a little bit of angling—including a trip with me to Idaho over ten years before—but Will was entirely new to the pastime, and from his first few attempts at casting, it was clear that it would be a steep learning curve.

I assembled my fly rod, tied on a long leader and some tippet, and attached my favorite—and most productive—fly: a black Wooly Bugger. I'd landed nice trout on this pattern in Idaho, Washington, Oregon, as well as the wild rivers of New Zealand, and knew that if a black Bugger couldn't coax a trout into a bite, perhaps nothing would. In fact, I'd brought a dozen of them along, knowing that they'd surely be the most potent fly in the arsenal, and I was right.

It took a while to get back in the groove, but after about thirty minutes my cast was smooth and fluid and I was getting a big drift from the Bugger. Still, the water rushed by like a spill of milky coffee, and I realized that no matter how pretty and well-placed my fly was, it was unlikely any fish would take interest. The river was just too blown out.

While the group concentrated on the big pool at the top of the bend, I decided to hoof it down the canyon. My instincts told me that if there were fish to be had, they would be hanging in spots that received the least pressure. Over the years I've learned that fly fishing is often just as much about hiking as it is pattern choice and presentation. You have to work the stream, which means walking and casting into every spot where you think the fish may be laying. This active aspect of the pastime is one of the reasons I'm so drawn to it: I think a lot of non-anglers imagine fishing to be an exercise of just sitting around in one spot waiting for your prey to strike, but proper fly-fishing is simply hunting on a river, and involves covering a lot of ground in pursuit of your goal.

We had arrived in the late afternoon, so the sun was already beginning to lower in the sky. The day was partly cloudy and warm, and soon the shadows of the canyon wall cast themselves across the water, which tends to make the fish less wary. As I trudged over the rocks and sand next to the surging stream, I noticed a couple of black kites swooping and circling overhead, and I felt the whole of my body—completely primed and conditioned in urban rhythms—finally begin to relax and slow down. Even though Gorky Terelj National Park had been a remarkable piece of nature, we were now really *out in it*. If you were to throw a pin on a map, it would look like the middle of nowhere, because it was.

I stopped at a smaller bend about a half a mile down from my compatriots, working the pool furiously with my Wooly Bugger, along with a larger, more colorful streamer purchased back in the capital during our several days of gearing up. While I didn't get any hits, for just a few moments I lost myself among the constant gurgle of flowing water. My mind emptied as my body took over, casting, retrieving, and doing it again. And again.

It had taken seven years, but I was finally back on the river

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Our camp sat in a vast meadow right above the Chuluut George, with low hills on either side. It was utterly bucolic—with tufts of tall grass and herbal plants whose soothing aromas often drifted on the breeze and hit you with an almost narcotic effect. After a standard dinner of stewed mystery meat (mutton? goat?) with carrots and potatoes, rice, and the milky Mongolian salt tea known as *suutei tsai*, we were then treated to the main attraction: the sunset.

As I emerged from the meal tent, I took in the edges of a brooding thunderhead reaching out over the adjacent hills, casting a dark blanket over much of the sky. The sinking sun blasted its dying rays through the gaps, resulting in a dazzling, explosive contrast. At one point the cloud moved past the little mountain, which, for a few minutes, was lit up by a wash of intense, deep golden light that burned with an atomic incandescence.

It was, of course, pure magic, only to be outdone by a double rainbow (What does it mean???) created by the mists of a rain shower perhaps a mile away. This was

the mother of all sunsets, a 360-degree kaleidoscopic panorama of otherworldly awesomeness. All of the Mongolian families enjoying their Naadam holiday poured out of their gers and picnic shelters and gawked at the sky with the same disbelief and wonder that gripped the four foreigners in their midst. Most of them were from the city and likely unaccustomed to such spectacle. They gasped and laughed and spun around in pure joy, soaking up the scene before it rapidly dissolved into the unremarkable dark.

Packs of children sprinted about and shrieked as many of us impotently brandished our phones, overcome with the impulse to record a moment that deep-down we knew had to be experienced firsthand to be believed. The heavenly light show ended almost as quickly as it began, with the days' glow receding to the far edges of the sky, and soon everyone in camp was back to doing what they were before everything suddenly lit up: eating, drinking, and dancing.

A large family had set up in a picnic shelter near the meal tent. Mongolian pop music blared from their stereo, and several of them moved to the throbbing beat. As I walked by, a guy about my age stepped out and greeted me.

"Want a beer, bro?"

"Uh, sure… thanks."

He handed me a cold Heinenken tall boy, which I cracked open and tapped in a toast with the big green can in his hand. We both drank and took in the scene before he spoke again.

"This is beautiful, yeah?"

His English had only a trace of an accent, because he'd actually spent much of his life in California. His name was Jason, and he was in Mongolia visiting family for Nadaam. He asked me where I was from, and like most any immigrant to the USA I've encountered abroad, reacted to the fact that I actually chose to live in Asia with eye-squinting incredulity.

"You LEFT America? Why?"

We all have our promised lands, I suppose. That said, as I described our coming itinerary in Mongolia, his face lit up

. "Ah man. You're gonna love it, bro. This place is amazing."

I couldn't disagree, and as he turned away and rejoined his family's thumping party, I made my way across the dark field back to the ger I shared with Will. The stodgy food, beer, and exertion of the day made bed suddenly seem like a very good idea, and soon I crashed out, sinking into a blissful sleep as fast as the setting sun.

The White Lake

While the people in Mongolia were usually warm and easygoing, aggro drunks were a recurring theme. During a stop for supplies in the town of Khorgo, Scott was nearly assaulted by a besotted old dude in a shop. Lost in a vodka haze, the

inebriated grandpa staggered into the store and locked onto Scott, getting up in his personal space and slurring, "You are in Mongolia!" before switching to his native language and raising his fist, which Scott bumped in an attempt to defuse tension. Sensing trouble, the shop owner—likely well acquainted with the old man's antics—grabbed him from behind and physically ejected him from the store. This was the second time a Mongolian had to physically intervene to prevent an angry alkie from harassing one of us, and it was a sad testament to the ravages of hard alcohol on the population—particularly older men.

Despite the rough greeting, we were stoked to have finally arrived at Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur—known in English as the "White Lake." This 61 km^2 (24 sq mi) body of water sits surrounded by central Mongolia's Khangai Mountains and—despite the existence of a number of ger camps on the lake's eastern and southern shore—is still very wild. It's also home to the extinct Khorgo volcano whose presence lends a wild, otherworldliness to the windswept surroundings.

Our accommodations for the leg of the journey would prove to be the most bare-bones of the trip. All four of us were crammed into a single ger, which often resulted in competing nocturnal gas attacks. Four middle-aged men on a steady diet of beer and meat meant some serious flatulence, and gers—as cozy as they are—aren't constructed with ventilation in mind. The result was fart bombs so intense and sickening that they periodically caused all but the culprit to flee the befouled yurt.

The camp also lacked any kind of showers, and the bathroom was just a pit toilet so malodorous that I was forced to cover my face with my bandana every time I entered the privy. Still, compared to some of the God-awful bogs I've squatted in in China and Southeast Asia, this Mongolian outhouse was luxurious and pristine. It was also early enough in the season to where the poo vat was relatively—and mercifully—unfilled.

Much of our first day at the lake was actually spent away from the lake, as Munkhbat decided to take us on a side quest. His best buddy was camping with his family nearby, so after stopping for a quick coffee, his friend loaded up his fishing rod, took over the front passenger seat, and soon we were off over the muddy calamity of a dirt track back to the main two-lane highway.

Abaka, the local "guide," squeezed in the back of the van. It was clear now that Munkhbat had just brought him along as a lackey, as he frequently ordered him around like his personal servant. Soon we were cruising along the lake's southern shore until leaving Terkhiin Tsagaan completely. After about an hour we pulled off onto the crudest of tracks, eventually stopping near the banks of a nice-looking river meandering through the open pastureland.

This stream looked extremely fishy, and for a moment my heart soared in anticipation of finally hooking into some monster trout. However, the weather had been taking a turn for the nasty all day, and as soon as we got out of the van and began to assemble our rods, the wind picked up and skies unleashed a miserable, frigid drizzle that surely would affect fishing as well.

Despite the fact that it was July, we were up over 2000 meters in elevation, and Mongolia is very much a northern place. This meant that, despite my rain jacket and hat, I got cold very fast, and took to moving as much as possible to keep my blood pumping in an effort to stay warm.

Everybody—drivers, guides, friends, and travelers—hit the water that afternoon, though Scraggs and Will soon surrendered to the elements and instead focused their efforts on spying and photographing some birds, which again, proved to be much more successful than our fruitless fishing efforts

Our luck, however, was to change the next day. The bone-chilling rainstorm had passed, and we were instead greeted with a warm, overcast day—perfect conditions for hauling in fish. We also decided to focus on the White Lake itself, and were soon out on the end of a long sand spit that hooked out into the Terkhiin Tsagaan's placid waters.

Munkhat's buddy was there with his son and daughter—a gawky, bored-looking teenager who spoke almost perfect American-accented English (The day before she had nonchalantly offered her services for our river excursion: "So, do you want me to come translate for you or what?"). The boy's rod suddenly bent; at first, I was so absorbed with my own casting and retrieval I didn't notice, but after a bit of a fight he dragged a massive northern pike out of the water and up onto the sand.

This was the first time I had seen a pike up close, as they're not native to the waters I grew up fishing. It was a sizable fish—at least eight pounds—and you could see the power in its spotted, torpedo-like body and huge mouth full of long, sharp teeth. This thing was a top underwater predator and I understood at once why they're such a sought-after sport fish.

The bite was apparently on, as soon after Scott hooked into a pike of his own. He had seen it following his lure the cast before and got it on the next, but as Will grabbed the net to help secure the catch, the beast got off the hook and shot back into the depths.

The fact that we now not only knew there were big, aggressive fish in this lake—but that were also biting—did wonders for our angling morale. That afternoon we relocated to a more secluded spot a few kilometers up the lakeshore, and Scott hooked in again. This time he was determined not to let the fish get off, and expertly fought the pike, getting it close enough for me to wade out and scoop up with the net.

It was a monster that weighed in at ten or twelve pounds, and after a couple of intense minutes of Scott extricating his huge treble-hook lure out of the fish's maw, he returned the pike to the lake, where, a little worse for wear, it slipped back into the dark waters.

I was next. I'd already lost a fly to a big strike, and was hoping to coax the fish—or one of its buddies—into hitting again. I wasn't geared up to land gargantuan northern pike. While the others were using relatively hardy spinning rods and reels, I just had a light, five-weight fly rod designed for catching much smaller trout.

However, any doubts that I had about my setup were soon put to the test, when a lunker pike hit my fly like an underwater freight train.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I felt the full weight and power on my bowing fly rod. The fish ran straight out toward the center of the lake, taking meters of line with it. My reel spun and whizzed as the beast made a break for it and, at least for a moment, I was powerless to stop it. This was easily the biggest fish I'd ever had on a fly line, which confirmed everything I already knew about the appeal of the pastime: fighting a fat fish with this kind of setup was a straight blast to the dopamine center. It was a rush as intense as any drug I'd done, and I've done a few.

At this point my reel was nearly out of line and I was looking at the possibility of having it all snap, so I gingerly began to bring the fish back in, careful not to pull with too much vigor, lest I break my leader. Fighting a massive fish on light gear is an exercise in restraint: you have to let your prey run and fight as much as possible, because your only hope for success is tiring the creature out. You're certainly not going to outmuscle the thing.

I managed to get the fish within a couple meters of me before it rolled and splashed, showing its true size. This thing was a pig, and as Scott waded in with the net, it shot back out again, nearly pulling the rod from my hand. My wrist began to ache from the tension and I had to remind myself to breathe. Every ounce of my attention was concentrated on this mammoth pike; the world melted away and time oozed to a near standstill as I pursued the single objective of landing the fish.

Will and Scraggs looked on from the shore at the spectacle; Munkhbat recorded it on his phone and Scott offered calming words of encouragement. It now felt like a team effort, and after once again nearly running all the line from my reel, I started to pull and crank, bringing the fish back in, until it bolted one more time.

This went on for a good ten minutes; the fact that I hadn't lost the fish in the opening salvos meant that I had hooked it well, so I was gaining confidence that I might actually get this monster to the shore. My arm was hurting badly at this point and I could feel the pike start slow down. Its exhaustion was beginning to show and I stupidly thought that now was my best chance to get it into the net. Scott stood next to me, ready to scoop, so I cranked hard on the reel and pulled on the rod, leaning into it with my weight.

For a moment it seemed to be working. The tiring fish came closer, almost into range, but the sight of the net must have spooked it, because the pike immediately woke up and shot away with all of its remaining strength. This proved to be too much for my line, which snapped under the sudden tension.

The fish was gone.

All four of us let out a collective gasp. I just stared out at the mirror-like surface of the lake, which reflected warped images of the afternoon clouds, as well as the nude forms of the surrounding mountains. Scott put a hand on my shoulder and said, "You almost had him. Pretty impressive fight for a five-weight fly rod."

Back on shore, I cracked a can of beer and bummed a smoke from Will, still trembling from the battle. While I was disappointed that I didn't land the pike, I was

more than satisfied with the day, and had to pinch myself that I was actually here—in the middle of fucking Mongolia—casting lines for fish so hefty that they would always have the upper hand. That, to me, was real angling.

"You were incredibly focused," Will said. "It was interesting to see."

"It was unbelievable," Scraggs added. "For the first time this whole trip, you didn't say a single word!"

* * *

As a traditional nomadic culture, Mongolia is a wonderland of herd animals, and unlike in the West, where they're penned up behind barbed wire or live out miserable lives in pavilions and barns, Mongolia's livestock roam freely throughout the land. You see the flocks and herds everywhere: sheep, goats, yaks, cows, camels, and horses. These animals often cluster by the hundreds, and any drive outside of the country's handful of cities is punctuated by crossings. Drivers in Mongolia are used to dealing with livestock on the roadways and react by slowing their cars to a crawl and tooting the horn. This most often does the trick; the herd invariably parts like Moses' Red Sea, allowing the vehicle to slowly pass through.

Mongolia's population is just 3.4 million people, while its herd animals number over 70 million, and my three weeks traveling around the country convinced me that if I'm ever reincarnated as a stock beast, Mongolia is where I'd want to live. While I'm sure the winters are harsh, the animals that I saw every day appeared to be happy and healthy, free from the industrialized horrors of factory farming and big ag.

That said, these creatures are most definitely on the menu, which makes the country a nightmare for vegans. Most any Mongolian dish includes a lot of meat, and while the cuisine has a reputation for being a bit dire, I found that after a long day of trekking through mountains or working a river, that the grease and stodge offered up usually hit the spot. Mongolian fare perfectly reflects its surroundings, and while it will likely never take the world by storm, the cuisine is simple and satisfying and incredibly honest in that you know exactly where the ingredients come from.

This was certainly the case at our ghetto White Lake ger camp, where both nights we were served very basic, very meaty dishes, washed down with the ubiquitous salt milk tea. The dining area was just a cramped room in a wooden hut, with slabs of bloody, freshly butchered cuts of animal flesh sitting on a table by the door. You were greeted by your ingredients.

The first night we were joined by a slurring dude in a traditional gel catastrophically hammered on vodka. He plonked down at our table and brayed loudly in Mongolian, peppering us with questions we couldn't hope to answer. He got stroppy later at the little shop next door when Will refused to buy him a beer.

The ger camp had livestock wandering through here and there, and the second night, as we approached the dinner hut, a couple of the local boys had two goats

pinned to the ground—just a few feet from the entrance. These otherwise happy animals bleated in existential protest at their unfortunate fate, but the death stroke was quick. The guy wielding the knife made a small incision in the goat's breast and then reached in with his hand, where it appeared that he grabbed the animal's heart and twisted it. This brought an immediate and relatively humane end, and also resulted in very little spilled blood.

Witnessing a slaughter is never a pleasant experience, but if you're going to eat meat it's fair to know exactly which animal was sacrificed in the name of your meal. There is also something reassuring about personally connecting with the creature that you will later eat; witnessing its death could be viewed as an act of respect. There is an undeniable honesty there, and despite the fact that I'll admit to wincing when the man killed that goat, I walked right into the little restaurant and dug into my simple, meaty meal with zero qualms.

Shine-Ider

This was the Mongolia I had dreamed about: rough, remote, and absolutely wild, a place of wide plains, timeless mountains, and vistas so stunning that they kicked you in the gut. We pulled out of Terkhiin Tsagaan Lake knowing that the day's drive would be one for ages, and it didn't disappoint.

After all, how could it? We were heading north, cutting across the jagged back of a mountain range on our way to Lake Khovsgol—Mongolia's biggest body of water—on a gnarly dirt track. This was hard, untamed country, the kind of terrain that could chew up a four-wheel drive piloted by an experienced driver, but here we were, rumbling over the rutted, pot-hole strewn dirt road in a second-rate minivan.

We'd swapped out drivers back in White Lake: Munkhbat had other obligations, so a guy named Hishgay took over. Hishgay was older—nearing sixty—and drove with a caution that Munkhbat entirely lacked. He was laid-back—cucumber cool—and exuded a quiet competence that helped to put the rest of us at ease. Though he spoke almost no English (Google translate was to become our friend), he clearly knew his way around these forlorn backroads and despite the fact that his van was a bit old and not really designed to tackle the kind of blown-out tracks that are just a fact of life in his country, he plowed forward anyway, driving with the gentlest of touches, which served us well.

It was a gorgeous day, with the sun pouring its gilded honey over the hills and ridges, interrupted here and there by a scudding cloud. A light breeze kicked up in the valley as we pressed along on the rocky road. Hishgay concentrated on the rather treacherous task at hand while haunting, operatic traditional Mongolian tunes poured forth from the stereo. This, plus the stark, raw beauty of the landscape, lulled us all into a hypnotic state.

We had been in the country for two weeks now and were currently as deep as we were going to get. The Mongolia of our inner thoughts had now manifested itself, and while it still took on aspects of familiar places—the American West, Canada—it also assumed its own noble character. This was perhaps a long time coming, but we had put in the hours and gone hard enough to where Mongolia was now just Mongolia: an epic place of impossible history punctuated by infinite plains, shapeshifting herds of animals, and crumbling, towering blasts of sheer stone.

Like most Mongolian roads, this one followed a river, and when it came time to eat we pulled off on a grassy spot near the bank for an improvised picnic. This was just one of our many "Russian lunches," which turned out to be a beloved part of our daily routine. While Mongolia is positively meat-tastic, its local shops almost always have a nice selection of canned fish, much of which comes from Russia. This was acceptable fare for the one pescatarian member of The Fellowship of the Ger—David Scraggs—so fish quickly became a protein staple during our midday meal. We'd also bust out loaves of bread, jars of pickles and carrot/onion relish, as well as cured meats and sausages.

These lunches were washed down with swigs of water, beer, and vodka—followed by strong instant coffee (Hishgay, a teetotaler, mainlined the stuff). This style of eating also showed this British/Canadian/American axis that the Russians just might be onto something, at least cuisine wise.

Whatever the case, there's something about busting out a load of food in the sun-soaked glory of the great outdoors that heightens the senses, especially taste. Despite the wind and the flies, these outdoor feeds were perhaps the best of the trip, and also helped to foster a sense of camaraderie, as perhaps nothing enriches human connections more than sitting in a circle and sharing a meal. Years in Korea had taught all four of us this, and having Hishgay join in was just an added bonus.

We pressed on, summiting one valley only to drop down into another and resume the climb. We had entered a mountain range composed of several seams of ridges, a disconcerting up-and-down yo-yo of climbs and descents that gained us altitude little by little. The vodka I'd knocked back at lunch helped to launch me into a soporific state, but the jostling of the van over the raggedy, uneven ground prevented sleep from taking hold.

At one point I popped in my earphones and played the album "Eternamente" by Los Hermanos Gutierrez, whose dreamy, Mexican desert-inspired guitar instrumentals seemed to perfectly match the equally psychedelic landscape we were passing through. Aside from the rumble of tires over a very rough road, the van was silent, as each of us had retreated into a place of splendid introspection. I think we all realized that this day was in some ways the peak, perhaps as sweet as this journey was going to get. As a result, we were trying to savor it all as long as possible, with the quiet sadness that comes from realizing such moments are both fleeting and ineffable.

Late in the afternoon we finally crested the pass, the great divide separating northern Mongolia from the rest of the country. We got out of the van and stretched

our legs, marveling at the view, which just featured more mountains and valleys in a 360-degree panorama of untainted nature. This was it. This was as remote as we would be—smack dab in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere, Mongolia—with the wind blowing and flies swarming as they always seem to do in places of high altitude during the summer.

It was sublime to realize that—after a day of grinding up and down rawbone mountain tracks— that we were finally at the acme. Multi-colored prayer flags fluttered from the *ovoo* marking the summit, and the knowledge that we walked on one of Mongolia's highest points surely filled us with both pride and pure mental drug buzz. This was soon driven home when three young teenage boys rode by horses. They paused to say hello and even pose for a photo or two, before trotting off to who-knows-where. Their arrival was almost perfectly timed, as if the omniscient Mongolian tourism gods had cued these kids to gallop through just as soon as we arrived, reminding us just how endless rich and photogenic this country was.

We descended the pass, rolling into a wide plain where we came across one of the few towns of this day's long, bone-rattling journey. The settlement was called Erdenet—not to be confused with the much larger Erdenet in Mongolia that's also home to a mammoth strip mine. This Erdenet had much more in common with a slapped together town in the Wild West, complete with dusty streets, sleeping dogs, and shuttered business.

It truly felt like the town at the end of the earth, and the shop I entered just drove this home. The place saw such little business that the owners could not justify even turning on the lights. Customers were instead forced to browse the contents in the dark; the woebegone shop was lit up with dusty slats of sunlight that managed to make their way through the store's one window. Still, they amazingly had a cooler full of cold beer and the owner was exceedingly polite, so it was easy to forgive her for saving on the electricity bill.

Eventually we trundled off the main gravel road onto a dirt road that led us to Shine-Ider ger camp. Situated on an idyllic slope overlooking Zurkh Lake—a saline body of water that lacked fish but attracted birds—including a stunning pair of bar-headed geese we spotted on our way out. At first it looked like we had the place to ourselves, until three Russian vans rolled up, depositing a good twenty Euros on a big group tour into the camp.

They were Spanish, immediately recognizable from the declarative form of their language punctuated by the Castilian lisp. Still, they were friendly enough, and happily engaged me when, after sipping vodka all day, I sloppily attempted to use my Spanish on them. The problem is, most Spaniards who travel also happen to be fluent in English, so they'll often only humor me for so long before switching to the least effortless language.

Shine-Ider felt like the end of the word, a deep, meditative place where I wanted to stay longer. That night, after passing out in a booze/meat coma, I came to and then joined Will outside, where he'd set up his camera to get shots of the stars. It was the first real moonless night, and the heavens stretched out and shimmered like a

million diamonds, awash in the cosmic dust of the Milky Way.

Will and I stared up at the sky while our compatriots snored away in their adjacent ger. A few of the Spanish were still awake and celebrating, but their machine-gun laughs, along with the lonely barks of the camp's sad, chained-up dog, were quickly swallowed by a sky much too big to be concerned with such nonsense.

Big Water

Situated in the country's far north and rimmed by craggy mountains, rocky shoreline, and thick pine forests, Lake Khovsgol is Mongolia's largest body of water, so mammoth that it accounts for 20% of the country's freshwater and .04% of all on earth. Sometimes referred to as "Lake Baikal's younger sister" because of its similarity and proximity to Russia's famous big lake, Khovsgol is where Mongolians go to escape from it all, though it's increasingly drawing international visitors such as our ragged crew.

Most of the ger camps are situated on the lake's western shore; ours sat on a rise overlooking the icy, clear waters, and while accommodations were basically the same as everywhere we stayed (white yurt with wooden table and chairs; very basic beds tucked along the edges; cast iron stove in the middle; single electrical outlet for charging devices), the camp's restaurant was head-and-shoulders above anything else we'd had. Not only was the food good (with vegetarian options for Scraggs and Will, whose digestive tract had been ravaged by the non-stop meat feed—which meant mustard gas farts at night), but the vistas were outstanding. The building was designed like an old-school North American lake lodge, with walls of windows on three sides.

Khovsgol felt up there because it was. If you follow the lakeshore to the northern tip, you're at the Russian border. The semi-arid landscape that had dominated so much of central Mongolia now gave way to great stands of pines and other conifers. It was an area that clearly saw more rain, and after sunset (which were always spectacular) the temperature would quickly plummet, making a wood fire in the stove a welcome addition to the inherent hominess of the ger.

We spent our first full day at Khovsgol fishing from the shore. The camp's owner volunteered to guide us, so we set out with Hishgay and him in pursuit of any fish the lake could offer. With the exception of a couple of very small perch, we got skunked, but the day was a stunner. The crystalline waters took on turquoise and deep blue hues as the bottom dropped off from shallow to deep (267 meters [876 ft] in spots), and a chilly Russian wind sliced in from the north and chopped up the lake's surface. Khovsgol was a place where the weather could shift in a snap of the fingers, and the sky went from brilliantly bright to ominous gray and back again as clusters of clouds did their best to unleash a bit of rain. But other than the odd sprinkle or two, we remained unsoaked, and retired to camp with the hearty,

satisfied weariness of anyone who spends a quality day outdoors breathing in fresh air, soaking up sunlight, and engaging hard with their natural surroundings.

We decided that casting from shore in a lake as immense as Khovsgol was an exercise in futility, so the next day saw us heading south to the Egiin River, which flows out of the great lake. Hishgay encouraged this course of action and we readily agreed, knowing that stalking trout in smaller water would likely produce greater results. Also, because it comes straight out of the lake, the Egiin wouldn't be blown out from all of the early July rains. We had seen it driving in and it looked to be in excellent shape, so Scott and I were particularly stoked to get onto it. The area would also surely offer some great opportunities to glass birds, but that was a given almost anywhere in Mongolia.

After another long drive down another rough, chewed-up road, we arrived at a beautiful bend in the Egiin where a family had set up camp. The father and son had lines cast into the deep pool formed by the bend, and Hishgay walked over to talk with them and get their permission for us to fish the spot.

Permission to fish is a very important thing in Mongolia. Before departing, Scott and I spent hours online researching just how to secure local fishing permits, but never seemed to be able to get a straight answer. If you hire a big outfitter in order to catch taimen—the gargantuan salmonid that many Westerner anglers come to Mongolia in search of—you're required to pay hundreds of dollars from your license. The rules for chasing smaller fish are unclear, though—through Murray's contacts—-we did manage to procure permits for White Lake, though the actual documents were handed off in a meet-up in a gravel parking lot like some kind of drug deal. This seemed appropriate, given the Byzantine, and legally-murky nature of it all.

Our permits to fish in and around Khovsgol were an open question; Murray assured us that the ger camp owner would organize them once we arrived, and even though he at one point collected our passports and made some phone calls to the local office in charge of such affairs, the permits never materialized. While at first this made us uneasy, the fact that Hishgay was a former cop instilled a bit more trust in the situation. After repeatedly asking him about the permits, he just looked us in the eyes, pointed to himself, and said, in his best English: "*I* am your fishing license."

The family granted us permission to join them in what appeared to be a primo spot, with Hishgay excitedly pointing toward the big channel and then extending his hands nearly three feet, the universal gesture for "There's a massive fucking fish in there." As if on cue, I heard a heavy splash, followed by the telltale ripples of a lunker that had just taken to the air. All our eyes shot to the river, and I understood at once that there is only once fish in Mongolia that could achieve such a spectacle: the mighty taimen.

While I love fly fishing perhaps more than any other outdoor pursuit, it's also incredibly frustrating. It requires a light touch and finesse that I entirely lack as a matter of talent. I tend to be big and obvious and overdo things, so the gentleness

that fly fishing calls for is a challenge; perhaps that is one of things that attracts me to the sport. It's a wonder I've had any success at all casting a fly, but I suppose the fact that I grew up catching trout on rivers with spinning rods gives me a leg up. Even if my approach is clumsy and inelegant, I know how to read a stream. I can almost always sniff out where the fish are holding. Whether I can trick them into biting what I'm putting out there is another question.

By far the most difficult aspect of fly fishing for me are the myriad knots required. I've always been useless at any kind of spatial mechanics and reading the directions for tying a specific knot and then applying that to real life in 3D is often beyond my abilities. That said, I have the basic knots down, but then there's the problem of actually being able to see the line. In fact, it was fly fishing that showed me I needed reading glasses in the first place. A few years ago I was back in the States hiking with a buddy and decided to cast a line. I was horrified to discover that I was unable to get the ultra-light three-pound test leader through the eyelet of the hook. I couldn't see shit and had to admit for the first time that my facilities were fading.

I've carried readers ever since then, but in Mongolia, I accidentally stepped on my pair of prescription readers when they fell out of my pocket onto the floor of the van during my first day in Khovsgol. They were fucked, which meant I'd have to resort to my backups (I had anticipated the problem), just a crappy pair of magnifiers I had bought for two dollars at a street market in Korea. While they allowed me to see text and other close up stuff a bit more clearly, they weren't proper glasses and everything was still kind of blurry. This was triply true for the super-thin fishing line and the tiny flies I was trying to attach to it.

This meant that, on this breezy morning, I was having a hell of time getting rigged up, as I kept messing up my fisherman's knot. The wind also whipped the line around, and since I lacked my proper glasses, I just couldn't see any of it clearly, resulting in me eventually bellowing a cascade of profanities, cursing my inherent clumsiness that worked so hard against me in a hobby designed for very detail-oriented, delicate people: the exact opposite of me.

I was also bursting with adrenaline, excited to get on what was clearly the fishiest water of the trip so far. We had finally arrived at what appeared to be a perfect trout stream with a mammoth fish leaping out of the water, and I couldn't tie on my damned fly.

"Hey guys," shouted Will. "I think I got something."

I glanced over and saw his rod bent, but figured he was just snagged, as he'd been many times before.

"It feels pretty heavy."

We all ignored him, accustomed to his dry sense of humor, where surely a big stick or pile of weeds would end up being his catch of the day.

"No, really guys... I got a big fucker on!"

The crack in his voice told me that this was no cheeky prank. I threw down my gear and jogged over to Wil, whose rod tip was now poking under the surface of the

water.

"Keep it up! Keep it up!" I yelled.

He pulled up the rod and from the arc it made, it was clear that he indeed had something sizable at the end of the line.

"Reel in!" I said, my heart now pounding.

Will cranked the reel. The fish responded by running downstream.

"Follow it! Go go go!"

Will took a few steps downstream and began to reel in vigorously. The fish suddenly changed directions and shot upstream, causing the line to slacken.

"Reel! Reel!" I commanded. "Hey Scott! Bring the net!"

Will followed my coaching and brought in all of the loose line. He pulled up on the rod, and for the first time I could see the form of the fish. It was reddish brown, and, like Hishgay indicated, about three feet long.

A river wolf.

Will—the least experienced angler in the Fellowship of the Ger—had hooked what some people pay tens of thousands of dollars for just the chance to go after. He'd never caught anything in his life, and now, for his very first fish, he'd hooked into a taimen.

And then just like that, it was off.

* * *

Things cooled off at the big hole after Will's taimen episode. Despite the fact that the waters looked like they should be holding loads of fish, no one got so much as a nibble after the monster predator snapped off Will's lure. One thing I've learned about river fishing is that if you pull out a fish, it often spooks the hole. Any others hanging out in the same stretch of water quickly clue in to the fact that something unnatural is going on and either flee or hide out.

In this case, your best bet is to move on. This constant movement is one of the things I love about fly fishing. Make a few casts, then take a few steps. Hike down to the next fishable water (holes, seams, ripples, shelves) and do it all over again. You really have to work the river to have any success, and I find this process immensely gratifying.

The Egiin meanders through a wide valley after leaving Lake Khovsgol, with only the odd tree and herds of cattle to get in your way. While over-your-head deep in parts, most of the time I could just wade across the stream, so that afternoon I made my way upstream looking for spots that might hold fish.

While not blown out, the river was pretty fast—shallow channels of rapidly moving water—exactly the kind of places where fish don't hang out. So it became my mission to walk and eyeball the water for little channels and pools where the fish may be laying.

Just about a kilometer up I came upon a nice pool where the things got deep and relatively slow. A few clouds had also moved in, obscuring the sun that had

mercilessly beat down. The sun is not the fisherman's friend, as it increases outside visibility into the water and makes the easy-to-see fish vulnerable to predators—which includes anglers. The fish know this and hide out accordingly. Overcast days are really what you're looking for, and the bank of clouds that slipped in provided me with the cover I needed to get into it.

You'll usually get any action in your first couple casts, and it was on lucky number three that I felt the line suddenly go taught. For a moment I thought it was a snag, and then I felt it moving. I'd hooked a sizeable, and my heart began to race in that way that only happens when you got a nice one on.

While I was adequately geared up, I lacked waders (it was a warm day so they weren't needed) and more importantly, a net. Scott had bought one for himself back in UB, but looking to keep costs down, I opted to go without. I knew that landing a fish without a net can be tricky—or even impossible—depending on its size.

Lucky for me there was a sand bar nearby, so after a brief fight, I reeled in the fish and pulled it up onto the sand, where it flopped and gasped. As I expected, it was a lenok, the species of trout native to Mongolia that was my target species on this trip. Despite the fact that I enjoy catching most any kind of fish, trout are what really get my blood pumping, and this one was a healthy, thick specimen, probably measuring in at a good eighteen inches. I quickly unhooked the fly from the fish's front lip and released it back into the stream.

Modern fly fishing is built around the ethos of catch-and-release, though I don't always stick to the guidelines here. Unlike, say, pike or bass, trout are easily stressed, and a lot of them will die after release anyway, especially if indelicately handled: this is one reason why you should usually carry a net (mea culpa).

Trout also happen to taste delicious, so I am very willing to harvest a nice fish or two if it means a nice dinner. I intended to bring some back to the ger camp if possible, but I also follow a strict tradition where I always let my first fish go. I consider it a sign of gratitude, and feel free to call me a hippy, but these small gestures just make sense to me.

On my next cast I felt the same thump and pull as before, and found myself fighting another lenok. I whooped and cheered in order to get the attention of my compatriots who were still working the taimen hole in the vain hope of pulling out another, and after pulling this fish onto the sandbar, I released it like the first one.

I wanted to bring back a fish that day, but sometimes the decision to harvest (a nice euphemism for "kill") comes down to an impulse. There it was, a gorgeous, chromed creature that I consider one of the most beautiful life forms on the planet, at my mercy, in my hands. In the moment I decided to let it go, confident that there would be many more that afternoon, since the first pool I'd moved to had been so immediately productive.

My confidence that this river would easily give up more fish was the kind of hubris that is the angler's curse. I spent the next several hours hiking up and down the banks, wading, casting, and working the hell out of that stream, only to get no

love. I blame part of this on the conditions. After landing my second fish the clouds burned away, and the Elgiin was subjected to a relentless blast of sun that surely had the rest of the lenok hunkering down until the evening. I figured my chances would be best once the sun began to sink in the sky, and I was right.

Don't get me wrong. It's not as if the river suddenly came to life and I was pulling fish out left and right. But I did hook into the kind of trout that keeps you in this game, a girthy, spirited specimen that slammed my bugger as it swung underneath an overhang on the embankment. It hit like an electric jolt and ran straight downstream. I was wading the middle of the river and followed it in pursuit, but—like the pike at White Lake—this one was determined to take out more line than I could reel in. Feeling its size, I just let it wear itself out, secure in the knowledge that I'd hooked it as well as you can with a little barbless fly.

The fish began to slow down and yield, and I knew it was mine. There was only one catch: I didn't have a net. I was standing in the middle of a rushing river with a huge trout on my line, and both sides of the stream were hedged in my four-foot embankments. I'd have to trudge through the water to a spot where it was possible to land this fish.

Patience is often described as the most important quality of a fisherman, and it's an attribute I totally lack. And not only is patience required to catch fish, it's also totally necessary to land them, especially when you've got a big one on. So as I moved this fish downstream looking for a place to haul it in, I wasn't seeing a lot of options. I was also afraid of it breaking free in the river, so I was keen to get it out of the water as soon as possible. *Fuck it*, I thought, and made my way the bank, where, bowing rod in hand, I scurried up the side, and proceeded to yank the fish up.

It was beautiful: fat and shimmering, a monster trout that would surely rank among the biggest and best I'd ever landed. It was big enough to feed all of us, and I knew in an instant that I wanted to harvest it.

I also knew that the 3.5 test leader I had tied on was far too thin for such a behemoth, and despite the fact that I managed to lift it up out of the water, as soon as the fish hit the crest of the grassy bank, the line snapped.

I dove with both hands in a desperate attempt to snatch the impossibly slippery lenok, but it easily wriggled out of my grasp and then dropped back into the surging waters.

Another one got away.

I returned to van invigorated, yet exhausted, recounting my stories of success to the other members of the fellowship, who took it all in the the jaundiced eyes of people used to hearing exaggeration.

"He was THIS big!" I gasped, desperate to get them to believe me. "I almost had it, I swear…"

As I slid out of my river shoes and wet socks, I took a few steps to the van's open side door to retrieve my regular shoes and dry clothes. Just then I felt a sharp pain in the bottom of my foot and let out a yelp. I had stepped on the top of a broken beer bottle. This spot was popular with campers and fishermen and was no place to walk

barefoot, but abuzz in my post-fishing glow, I didn't think about it and now was gushing blood from a nasty cut in my foot caused by a chunk of old, filthy glass.

Fortunately, we weren't short on first-aid supplies. We had a whole host of creams and antiseptics which we were forced to rub all over Scraggs' scabbed-up, oozing torso each day, and Will had come prepared as well. He carried a big bottle of iodine which he used to douse the cut before wrapping it all up with tape and gauze. We'd have to do another dressing back in camp but would do for the time being, and I just silently prayed that I could avoid infection, as the last thing I needed—in the throes of blood poisoning—was to hunt down a hospital in remote Mongolia.

Despite my wound, we returned to the lake just in time for the sunset to work its magic, that time of day in Mongolia that never ceased to drop our jaws. A pack of clouds had moved in, blanketing the sky like pillows. The slipping sun bled into their forms in brilliant blasts of fuchsia and salmon that set the firmament afire. This was then perfectly reflected on the glassy surface of the lake in a mirror image that only served to amplify the photogenic wonder.

The tranquility of the sunset was soon shattered by an electrical storm that rolled in over the hills on the eastern shore. As the day's light seeped away, huge thunderheads rumbled forth and throttled the lake and far ridge with jagged fingers of lightning, flashing the horizon every few seconds with dazzling effect. It was a natural light show that put any fireworks display to shame, and the perfect final moment to a day that—despite my throbbing, bloody foot—had come about as close to my idea of perfection as possible.

On the banks of the great Selenge

While Mongolia's land strikes you deep with its raw, unspoilt splendor, the mirrored sunset at Lake Khovsgol proved yet again that the sky was the star of the show. The heavens, however, could be equally impressive during the day: a mottled blue blanket pulled taught overhead with horizons so far that you swore you could make out the stretch of the atmospheric dome.

We'd spent one more day in Khovsgol; Will and Scraggs visited a camp of reindeer herders and trekked through the hills and along the lakeshore spying and photographing more birds, while Scott and I returned to the Elgiin for one last round of wandering its cold clear waters in search of trout. While the lenok managed to elude us, I did catch a handful of very spirited Khovsgol grayling, who—with their sail-like dorsal fins—were a brand-new species for me, and one that I had counted on checking off the list this trip.

We now found ourselves back on the road, heading to our final stop: an upscale camp on the banks of the Selenge, one of the country's mightiest flows. This was to be our last gasp of fishing and birding before rolling back into the grimy hustle of

UB, and as Hishgay piloted our van down the narrow highway through yet more effortlessly gorgeous country, we rode along in sublime chill-mode. While each of us was unshowered, wind-chafed, and sunburned, Mongolia had finally seeped into our bones, to the point where we were unconcerned about our outward appearance. There is something about spending a lot of time in nature that forces you to let go of your own ego-driven vanity.

Like the open highways of the American west, Mongolia is perfect for multi-day, long-distance drives. The country rolled by gently as ballads from Hishgay's stereo lulled us with their epic, mystical, and at times psychedelic melodies. The result was a kind of splendid hypnotism, a massaging of the nerves which—combined with days of sun, wind, clean air, icy waters, and physical exertion—had me the most relaxed I'd been in years.

I usually seek out kinetic travel, and this jaunt had been a journey of velocity. I was in near-constant movement, whether enduring a jostling eight-hour van over remote mountain passes, or days spent stalking trout on wild, winding rivers. This meant that I was so absorbed in the action that I scarcely had time to reflect on the big picture, save early-morning journal entries and the odd social media post. My time in Mongolia surrounded me and then passed by in a whirl, and as I sat there in the van, staring out at the vastness moving steppe, I realized that I would soon be on a plane with my compatriots back to Korea, lamely trying to digest it all.

* * *

We reached Airkhan Lake after pulling off the ragged highway and creaking down one of the worst roads yet. Murray had suggested stopping off here as it was renowned for its concentration of migratory birds, and despite the fact that it attracts twitchers from far and wide, that day we had it to ourselves.

After getting out of the van and tromping through the waist-high grass toward the lakeshore, it was no wonder why we were alone. While Mongolia was wet and chilly when we'd arrived, summer had now come into full effect, with the late-afternoon sun sizzling the surroundings. The bugs were also relentless, thick clouds mosquitoes and gnats undeterred by the weak repellent we had sprayed over our completely covered forms. All four of us also wore hats outfitted with mosquito-nets that we had picked up for cheap back in UB's Black Market, which—while keeping the skitters off of our faces—also made things unbearably stuffy and claustrophobic.

We heard the birds before we saw them, an unbelievable cacophony of squawks, honks, shrieks, caws, and quacks that blended together into a single aural organism. Clusters of different species swooped and fluttered by high overhead, and as we got closer to the shore, David motioned for us to crouch down in order to survey the colonies that currently occupied the lake.

Despite the fact that we were attempting to be covert, the birds closest to us immediately detected our presence and took wing. Great groups of herons, ruddy

ducks, and others flurried into the sky while calling out in both annoyance and warning.

"You can't get anywhere near them," David sighed. "They saw us coming from miles away."

Still, it was a big lake, so we elected to just walk up to the water's edge and check out the creatures far enough away to tolerate our intrusion. Scraggs and Will both possessed quality field glasses, and shared them with the two fishermen on the team. Once I adjusted the binoculars, I began to appreciate the sight in front of us: Tens of thousands of birds of different colors, shapes, and sizes, bobbed and floated on the lake's surface or hunkered down in uncountable numbers on the shoreline. What I had taken for rocks on the other side was instead a flock so colossal that it could have been mistaken for a human city in the distance. I had never seen so many avian creatures gathered in one spot, and despite the heat and the relentless assault of the bugs, I was temporarily awestruck.

Still, it wasn't all glorious. Not only could we see and hear these vast quantities of winged animals, but we could also smell them. Birds produce a lot of waste, and this colony's crap washed up on the shore, creating a foul, half-congealed layer of shit that must have ringed the whole of the lake in one gunky mass. It was a reminder that—even in the most untouched spots of nature—too many animals in one spot will pollute a place.

On the way back to the highway we were treated to even more birds, including a number of black kites perched on fence posts that allowed us to approach within feet of them; we then came across several pairs of demoiselle cranes sauntering and scratching in the grass—large, elegant waders with distinguished white tufts sprouting from the sides of their heads—which, along with the homely vulture, were among my favorite birds spied during the trip.

* * *

The Selenge is one of Mongolia's biggest rivers, and our accommodation sat right on its banks. We had our first tire blowout right before hitting the bridge spanning the wide, heavy flow, and witnessed Hishghay's expertise in action: he had the popped tire changed out in ten minutes flat—which included the deployment of two jacks. It clearly wasn't his first rodeo.

This was our final stop on the itinerary Murray had plotted out for us before returning to UB, and it was to be the nicest place, overall. When we crested the hill and lay eyes on the mighty Selenge and the resort where we were to stay, the optimistic among us assumed we'd put up in the several-story hotel structure on the hill overlooking the more basic ger camp and river beneath. Soft beds! Private toilets! No insects! Hot showers!

This of course, was a delusion, and after a quick registration in the building's spacious lobby, were herded back into the van and ferried down to the camp, which I found appropriate. Why break up our string of yurt stays now? We might as well

end the jaunt across the steppe as we'd experienced it all along: from the farty confines of bug-infested, glorified tents.

Still, this resort did possess luxuries that elevated our stay. The first was hot showers with water pressure that could have stripped the paint off of a school bus, and the other a restaurant that not only had a full western menu (burgers, pasta, steaks), but also served-up mugs of ice-cold draft beer, which at this point in the trip was like liquid gold.

The kicker to the whole complex was the restaurant's deck, which extended all the way to the river's sandy shore. This wooden platform had tables and sofas and chairs and even hosted a small stage—complete with lights and PA—where a pair of long-haired Mongol musicians set up and got their rock on.

As the sun began to slink behind the purple mountains across the river, these two old rockers plugged in their axes and jammed classics from The Beatles to The Eagles, with plenty of Mongolian standards sprinkled in between. They strummed and shredded and nailed their harmonies, and the four of us from the Fellowship of the Ger soaked up every note, along with the comparatively well-heeled customers who had surely come from the nicer side of the tracks back in the capital.

We got gloriously drunk on acres lager that night and could scarcely believe that this place—which seemed like it had been plucked straight out of Montana or New Zealand—was actually smack dab in one of the wildest spots of one of the wildest countries on earth.

As I staggered and danced and swayed and attempted to harmonize with a pretty damned good version of "Hotel California," it occurred to me that Mongolia—for all her rough edges—kept surprising me. While the mountains, stones, and vast grasslands were a constant, the modern world had made more than a toehold in this ancient land and kept revealing itself in unexpected ways. These contemporary currents have certainly led to upheavals in a society based on nomadic herding, but as a creature of the 21st century, I couldn't help but enjoy them.

Still, despite the fact that I was downing one of the most refreshing beers of my life surrounded by pampered perfection, I knew this wasn't really the Mongolia that I craved or even came for. But who was I to dictate? The Mongolia of the future will (hopefully) be the one the people create, a country of both the traditional comforts of warm gers, strong horses, and heart-lifting sunsets, along with fast Wi-Fi, sealed roads, health care, beer on tap, and yes—even live, amplified music ringing out in a gorgeous river valley at 10pm on a summer night.

After all, with so few people, so much land, and so many resources, there was surely more than enough room and possibility for both the old and new here. This was a nation of unimaginable riches, so Mongolians could have it all if they wanted.

Couldn't they?

A taste

The ruins came out of nowhere, unmarked and without signs, just a wall of eroding stone on the side of yet another dirt track. Hishgay pulled the dusty black van off into the grass, and gestured for us to get out and explore. His only explanation was a sentence translated into English on his phone: "The ruins of an illegitimate king."

It was only later that we'd learn the site's actual name: Baibalik's ruins. The walled city was thought to be built by the Uyghurs during their imperial expansion in 758 C.E. It was both a trading post and an important cultural Central Asian cultural center before being destroyed by Kyrgyz nomadic tribes in 840, who—in their fanatical ignorance—burned all of the books and Buddhist sutras.

Of course none of us knew these details as we wandered the grounds. I scrambled up to the top of the wall and could make out the perimeter of the fortress, which made it clear that in its heyday this place was a sizable settlement. I gazed across the site, taking in the trees that lined the bank of the Selenge at the feet of the mountains in the distance, while the Mongolian breeze whistled through the grass and kicked up puffs of dust at the base of the wall's crumbling stones.

Hishgay stood next to the van and smoked as we took in this bit of history. While ignorant of any details, we somehow understood its importance implicitly. Like so much in this country, Baibalik's Ruins seemed to just exist in its pure state, without any fussing, entry fees, or fencing. While whittled down by wind and time, the remains of the wall still stood defiant and seemed just as natural a part of the surroundings as a pine tree, the crown of a mountain, or a gurgling stream.

While there were no other humans there that morning, we were joined by hundreds of goats, who bleated and leapt and scurried up the broken rocks to reach the rich green grass growing in the center of the former compound. They were fat and happy and moved around us in fluid streams, unafraid and utterly at ease. They reminded me that Mongolia, for all of its history and beauty, was also, at its core, a place of pure utility where all of the streams flow concurrently. In this sense it is the most unpretentious place on the planet: what you see is what you get… but man, there is so much to see.

And we did. We saw so much. In three weeks we took a massive bite, but as we rolled along rough roads back to the capital, we still felt like it was only a nibble. Despite the rawness and danger and elements and insects and gut-punishing meat-blast meals, I got the sense that none of us were in a hurry to get on the plane and resume our utterly urbanized lives back in the electric hustle and flow of Busan. We all would have willingly stayed for weeks more in warm gers on the shores of icy lakes.

Mongolia is a place that gets under your skin and stays there, and I often find myself drifting off while standing on an escalator, sitting in a crowded subway car, or scurrying along a noisy, hectic sidewalk. Suddenly I'm back on the steppe, with clouds slipping by and the wind whipping through my hair. For a moment I'm transported into the middle of a river that rushes around me, or drifting off into an inky sleep while a fire crackles and snaps inside an iron stove. I smell the dirt and

animals, tromp through the mud, feel the heat of the sun on my arm, taste the chewy, gamey meat, and—at least for a moment—remember that I am a human being.

When I come to, surrounded and crushed by countless other human beings, I'm pushed to the brink of vertigo. And then I remind myself that not only is Mongolia still there, but only a three-and-a half-hour flight away. This somehow manages to make all of the manic urban madness that is my daily life a bit more bearable, until only one question remains: When am I going back?

About the Author

Originally hailing from Pacific Northwest, Chris Tharp's award-winning writing has appeared in National Geographic, CNN Travel, ***Condé Nast Traveler, Travel + Leisure, Asia Times, and*** many others. He is the author of two books: "Dispatches from the Peninsula," and "The Worst Motorcycle in Laos." His novel, "The Cuttlefish," will be published by Plum Rain Press in 2024. He lives in Busan, Korea, with his wife and a houseful of anima