

REVISITING MONGOLIA: JULY 2011  
by Clarence A. Crawford

Time passes. Since our 2005 visit to Mongolia, Amy falls in love, and after a painful delay Enkhee finally ends up in Alaska. Marriage, at Sadie Cove, on July 29, 2008. Establishing a profession and a domestic life in Unalaska/Dutch Harbor. The birth of Tengerjin (meaning “Sky,” plus Enkhee’s mother’s suffix) on May 17, 2010, in Anchorage, followed by a period of hard labor in Unalaska, which begins with Amy (nursing an infant) and Enkhee moving the materials for an entire house and cabin up the mountain to the building site; 50,000 pounds moved against gravity more than 100 yards up a steep slope, then secured against the Aleutian winds. Then an intense period of construction; and the continual stress of teaching. And finally, in June 2011 Enkhee, after an absence of three years, is in a position to visit his ancestral home and family, and the two of them are in a position to have a traditional Mongolian and Buddhist wedding ceremony.

I separate the words because the ceremony is more Mongolian tradition, dating back many hundreds of years, than it is Buddhist; Buddhism has no fixed ceremonies, unlike Christianity; but Buddhism is an element within the Mongolian tradition. I was struck by the fact that the complex ceremony we experienced, lasting two days, all day, is preserved only within the memories of the people present. Yet I found in my reading (Friar Rubruck’s journey to Mongolia in 1250) a description of a wedding that closely paralleled that which I observed, and participated in, 761 years later. Hence, the ceremony is preserved in memory and tradition without the aid of a written text. More about this in its proper place.

My journal notes a number of what I think of as heartwarming moments. The first: after we collected our bags at the airport, Mongolian security wanted to X-ray my duffel. Why me? They seemed to select me at random. Not as I boarded, but as I was leaving the airport! Why? Had the Koreans called ahead to tell them that my bag was suspicious? But the Mongolians didn’t have any way that I knew of to identify my bag once it was on my cart. So, through the x-ray machine, and the technician called me over to the screen behind security to identify the shape on the screen. Some camping equipment, said I. He smiled and said OK. He took my word for it. No one looked into the bag. They just believed me.

In 2005 we traveled by “meeker,” (a hired van). This time we were driven in a family-owned van, a Hyundai diesel, driven by a flamboyant

young relative. The extraordinary generosity of the Purevsuren family starts here: sister Urna lives in Tsetserleg, 500 kilometers to the west, but keeps an apartment in Ulaanbaatar for business reasons, and she kept it vacant for our use, at considerable inconvenience to her family. When we traveled to Tsetserleg two days later, I considered the wear-and-tear on the van (owned by brother Taivaa). The Mongolian “roads” are being upgraded, I think with international loans and grants, but most of the trip was rough indeed. A very high percentage of the route was simply over the grassland, either on traditional tracks or around detours, and when we were on established roads the ride wasn’t much better. The van took a beating.

In this regard—automobiles—the biggest change I observed since 2005 was increased vehicle use. My subjective impression was that there were many more vehicles on the roads than there were just six years before. The common talk was that vehicle traffic in Ulaanbaatar was increasing daily. The vehicles seemed to be much newer than in 2005. Most were SUVs and vans; many were sedans; we even saw a few hybrids; I think I saw only three pickup trucks in the month we were there. Unlike in the States, in Mongolia SUVs are actually a practical choice, with 4-wheel drive and high clearance. On the other hand, fuel economy is important too, hence the large number of diesels. I saw many vehicles, such as the rear-wheel drive Hyundai diesel van that we used, that I never see in the States.

Another change that I observed, again subjective, was the increased aggressiveness of the drivers. In 2005 I was struck by the courtesy of the drivers. In 2011 I was struck by the risk-taking and flagrant defiance of road rules that Americans accept as necessary. Such as not turning into oncoming traffic. Still, this flamboyance was not aggressive, and under the circumstances probably necessary.

In many ways Ulaanbaatar was much as I remembered: a confusion of decaying Soviet cement monoliths, new construction, and Mongolian tradition; tall buildings and traditional gers tucked into the unlikeliest places, an urban center surrounded by ger neighborhoods; a large city and the barking of village dogs.

But there were changes. Ulaanbaatar seemed to be in turmoil. People are leaving the countryside for UB, the kind of migration that is happening globally, so I read. And UB seemed to be a perpetually active construction site. The basis for this, and the large number of expensive vehicles, must be that there has been an influx of money into the economy. From where, I know not. I do know that there is a mining boom under way, but I don’t know how the revenue moves through the system into private hands, nor do I know how credit is used. The Mongolia I know is based on the mutual

sharing of resources, and the use of cash is severely limited. But someone has money. Those Toyota Land Cruisers don't come cheap.

We were determined to take our time getting to Tsetserleg, and we did so in three stages, first stopping at Khustai National Park, a preserve designed to protect Mongolia's wild horse (the Takhi, or Przewalski, horse, extinct in the wild by 1969 and reintroduced from zoo stock; a wild horse that is the forerunner of the domestic horse), and other species as well (red deer, gazelle, deer, boar, manul wild cat, wolf, lynx). However, the weather was vile, strong winds and cold rain, so we stayed at a ger camp at the park entrance, which was just as well, since we could not get into the park because of slick mud.

The next day we continued west and stopped at Khogno Khan Natural Reserve. The storm blew through as we traveled and we made an excellent camp at the base of the mountains. Here I felt liberated, back home, in a tent on open ground, with the additional benefit of seeing stars at night, something we can't experience in July in Alaska. This reserve is near extensive sand dunes, and includes mountains occasionally reminiscent of southern Utah, but the main feature for me, emotionally, was the monastery.

Amy, Enkhee, and friend Jeff Dickrell (of Unalaska, a colleague of Amy's) hiked to the ancient monastery over the mountain from camp. The next day we drove around the mountain to the contemporary monastery, and from there Amy, Di, and I hiked to the same monastery by a different route, deep in the mountains and at elevation.

The feeling for me was a mixture of awe and tragedy. Awe: who labored at this construction at this remote location, and supplied it by using mountain trails, and inhabited it through the long cold winters? What was the spiritual and material life of the ancient Buddhists? And tragedy: the Communists did what they could to destroy Buddhism during their sixty year tyranny, including dismantling almost every monastery, including this one, so that we could only view ruins. The utter senselessness of this laborious, wasteful destruction is incomprehensible.

A word about Parks, Reserves, and other protected areas: Americans must set aside the idea of visitor centers, signage, uniformed staff, bathrooms, potable water, groomed trails, etc. Only the most visited parks, such as Khustai, have recognizable entrances and staff. Most are names on the map, although Mongolians are aware of them. But most significant, to me, is that the traditional nomads who have used the area for generations retain the right to use the land as they have always done, which to me is a simple recognition of the Mongolian connection to the land; that connection

is organic; humans here are no artificial graft, and what Alaskans call “subsistence”—which for us is often just wishful thinking—is in Mongolia a reality.

Except near cities, there is no ambient light at night in Mongolia. This fact is significant. Few people in the modern world get the chance to experience the brilliant, undiluted night sky.

To Tsetserleg, in the aimag (province) of Arkhangai, in central Mongolia; the home of the extended Purevsurin family. Gurvan and Urna’s hashaa (enclosed yard and house; or houses, in this case; or ger) stands on the very edge of a neighborhood, where the last hashaa meets the open grassland and the mountains begin. (This important mountain is named Bulgan, a sacred site, a revived—or reviving—temple at the base of its cliffs. Below it, at town level, is the temple complex Zayan Gegeenii Sum, built first in 1586, expanded in 1679. This monastery escaped Stalinism because it was made into a museum, and today the museum and monastery continue to function. In my reading of 20<sup>th</sup> century Mongolian history, I learned that Arkhangai was the center of the strongest resistance to Stalinist anti-Buddhism in all of Mongolia.) We were instructed to take over the house, all the usual occupants having relocated into a second, smaller house within the hashaa. The six of us moved into unaccustomed comfort. Yet even this comfortable house lacked plumbing, and hauling water was a daily necessity. We were fortunate that the creek was just seventy-five yards away.

Tsetserleg sits in a bowl, with steep mountains to the north, lesser mountains and hills to the east and west, and a valley to the south, through which runs the South Tamir River. *Lonely Planet* claims that it is the only really attractive aimag capital, and on the evening of our arrival, and the following sunny morning, the setting was glorious. The highest point in Mongolia is Nayramadlin Peak, 14,350’, in the Altai Mountains in the far west. All of Mongolia is higher than 3,000’, and the average elevation is about 5,200’ (Tsetserleg is about 5,070’), and the thin clear air and long golden rays of the sun on the green grassland and gray rock mountains warmed and stimulated my heart.

My mornings: coffee or hot water (Enkhee) for everyone in our party; oats for breakfast (a very good quality grain there, though I was the only one really enthusiastic about it); haul water; walk, or sit in the morning sun. Our time in Tsetserleg was spent exploring the city, marketing for our upcoming wedding and horseback trip, (which meant stocking up for about fifteen days

for our party of six, though Tenger was still drinking straight from the pipe), socializing with the extended Purevsuren family, and viewing Naadam, the summer festival.

Our first evening with the extended family, at the house we inhabited, owned by Gurvan and Urna, was certainly the most memorable.

Except in restaurants, Mongolians usually don't sit at tables to eat. In the ger, people sit on chests or beds around the periphery. In our dwelling, we sat on conventional sofas and chairs around a low table (Americans would call it a coffee table).

Food preparation took most of the day, and centered around a doomed goat that I found tethered to the porch when I returned from walking, and which was eventually killed according to ancient rules by an expert (who stayed for dinner). In the evening, food arrived from next door or from a back room, and people gradually drifted in. Meat carving came first, though vegetables, mainly roots such as carrots and potatoes, were abundant. (I got the impression that our hosts went heavy on vegetables, noodles, rice, and breads in deference to us). Part way through dinner Gurvan poured a round of shots (high quality vodka) and the eldest of Enkhee's eight siblings, Jandag (Jaya), proposed a most gracious toast (Enkhee and Amy had to undertake the ongoing job of translation).

(Jaya later drove a furgon for us on our horseback trip. His daughter Handaa babysat Tenger so Amy could ride her horse Hongor ((“Red Horse”; also “Beloved”)), and his son Nanza came along just for fun. A furgon ((*Lonely Planet* spelling; Amy prefers porgon)) is a durable Russian-made van with high clearance and four wheel drive. They actually have carburetors, and apparently last forever. Drivers such as Jaya specialize in their ongoing repair and maintenance.)

We learned to greet properly, arms overlapping, over or under depending on who is the elder (elder over, and Di and I were decidedly elder; few Mongolians were older than us) and a facial sniff (both cheeks). We learned to accept food and drink properly, with a touch of the left hand to the right elbow. Much chatter and laughter. Urna's husband Gurvan was the host and server. Vodka. Vodka topped up. Wine. Wine topped up. The alcohol was an appropriate lubricant but there was no drunkenness, not even any tipsiness (except for Di, who was in unusually good, and good natured, form).

Gift giving is important, indeed crucial, to Mongolian hospitality, and in preparation for the trip Di (in Alaska) and Amy (in Mongolia) each carefully assembled packets for the seven families for whom we planned gifts. My contribution was a Kobalt tool set, consisting of a multi-tool and a separate

knife, both in one sheath, for the men, and I must say they were a big hit. I must also say that by the time we left Mongolia I felt like a miserable cheapskate. We received gifts of the very highest quality, in my case, to name two, a very fine camel's hair sweater (that must sell for at least \$300 in the States), and a traditional jacket/shirt (we have no word for it; call it a blouse; not a del) of very fine wool, which I wore during the wedding. (A del is the universal traditional garment, a wrap extending from the neck to the ground, woolen when used for work or winter wear, long voluminous sleeves, very practical.) (Ehkhee and Amy bought Di and me riding boots before we arrived, and they are of the best quality also, though these were not part of the traditional gift giving. I did not want to present myself as a fake Mongolian, as some tourists do, but I enjoyed the garments, especially during the wedding, and the boots were essential on the horseback trip.)

People drift in, drift out. Photo albums are opened and are closely examined. (Photos are immensely important to Mongolians, and they are happy to be photographed; they would stand in line for it.) Good will abounds. I go to bed feeling better than at any time since arriving in the country. (I suffered for five days from jet lag. We crossed seven time zones, counting east to west.) A memorable pre-wedding feast.

#### A word about alcohol in Mongolia.

Alcohol is important. It is part of what every countryside household produces, along with milk, meat, cloth, leather, and herbs. The common beverage is airag, fermented mare's milk. It is slightly alcoholic, tasty, and refreshing. The next most common drink is vodka, which I suspect gained popularity during the seventy years Mongolia spent under Soviet influence. Then there is "Mongolian vodka," which to me is an unfortunate label, because it is not vodka at all, but a traditional drink made in the countryside of distilled airag. It has a pleasing, distinctive, mild flavor. Beer is available (Korean is best.) As for the wine, and the small amount of whiskey we encountered at the wedding, I suspect these were obtained for the Americans. (Amy confirms: yes.)

I like their manner of serving alcohol to groups, such as at the family dinner and the wedding; and Mongolians seem to be always in groups. A server has access to the container of airag or whatever. He fills a container, a glass for airag, a shot glass for vodka. He hands it to you; you accept with the left-hand-to-right-elbow gesture, and a slight bow; you sip or drink deeply depending upon your inclinations; and pass it back to the server, using the same gesture. No matter how little you have sipped, the container is topped up for the next imbiber, and the drink makes its rounds. (Two days

after the wedding Di showed severe cold symptoms; then me the next day; then most of the rest of the crew except Jeff. A nasty bug that I could still feel a month later in Anchorage. Everything is indeed shared.)

I saw some public drunkenness in Mongolia. I tried to sleep with the windows open in Ulaanbaatar but needed earplugs (the traveler's greatest boon) because sooner or later I would hear some drunken noises and probably the sound of glass breaking. Worse than parts of Anchorage? I don't know. The alcohol consumption at the wedding seemed to be thoroughly friendly. Good will prevailed. A few men over-indulged but I saw no bad behavior (except an obnoxious party-crasher on the second day, who was ushered out).

But we're still in Tsetserleg. The morning after our social time Di and I were up early and walked up the green valley into the mountains in the flawless clear morning light under the blue sky above.

Then to Naadam. Pageantry in the stadium as participants joined a procession around the periphery and into the infield. A variety of formal dances. Serchin (Serjee) the schoolteacher, a brother-in-law of Enkhee's, had students fly model planes. Singers. More dancing. Wrestling. To a stall for hushuur (a meat concoction wrapped in wheat flour and deep-fried). Urna seemed to have a hand in everything and she was the proprietor of this stall, a ger with a table in front.

Aside from the pageantry in the stadium, the three events of Naadam are archery, wrestling, and horse racing. Wrestling is the most accessible to spectators, since it occurs in the stadium, and the wrestlers carry great prestige. Horse racing, however, is at least equally important and prestigious. The depth of this field, I was told, was somewhat diminished because horsemen desired, in 2011, to go to Ulaanbaatar to participate in the largest of all Naadams in this anniversary year. Yet horses were brought to Tsetserleg from great distances for this event, and there were many entries. (I learned that 2011 was the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an important event in Mongolian history. In 1210 Genghis Khan, who had recently unified the Mongol tribes, received word that he must submit to the Golden Khan of the Jurched dynasty of Manchuria and northern China. Instead of submitting, he launched a campaign against them in 1211 and in 1214 completed his conquest. After that, the world.)

Di and I walked to Naadam the next day—clear and cool after thunderstorms—Mongolia's long drought is over for now—and met our party at the stadium. The big event now was that Gurvan, a man of local

consequence, took us in his Land Cruiser to the start line of a horse race, this one for two-year-olds.

The horse races are point-to-point across the open steppe, and the horses are walked and trotted from the finish to the start, accompanied by privileged vehicles, one of which was Gurvan's. The riders are always quite young, perhaps aged ten or twelve, occasionally girls, and many ride barebacked. This race, one of many, was probably ten miles in length. At the start the vehicles raced parallel to the herd of horses—there must have been nearly one hundred mounts—and the drivers must have imagined themselves as part of the competition: it was a wild ride, across open steppe, streams, gullies, embankments; sudden swerves to avoid long steep drop-offs; a wild ride. My little man, #29, whom I mentally adopted on the ride out, finished near the back. All of our crew but me liked the wild ride. Even Di, usually a stickler for safety, abandoned her usual caution and was ecstatic. And how those little riders did it, whipping their horse, avoiding obstacles, some bareback, I have no idea. Except that the horse and the Mongolian are one.

To the stadium. Met good friends (including Pulee, Amy's particular friend) from our 2005 trip. Wrestling finals, the climax of Naadam. Awards. A fine evening. Time for a wedding.

Except that Amy awoke with a bad case of food poisoning, probably contracted from some hushuur—good sanitation is unlikely—and she was suffering in bed when we were scheduled to drive to the wedding site, which was in the countryside, across the steppe and over three mountain passes; no roads, of course. But she was sufficiently recovered the next day—the day of the ceremony (July 13)—to make the drive, and we got away early enough to get on site by mid-morning.

This is a very big deal. Many people—hundreds?—were already on site, many had been there overnight, many had come hundreds of miles, all had set aside at least several days, for this event. The planning had gone on for months, driven by Molroo, an exceedingly warm woman, Enkhee's sister and wife of Serchin, otherwise in the background. Like Tuya, wife of brother Taivaa, she was a workhorse and driving force, but often invisible, behind the scenes, doing the hard work.

A word on names. The Mongolian script was set aside after the 1920s, when Soviet control began, in favor of Cyrillic. During Soviet times, Mongolian life was severely altered, Buddhism suffering most. Much of today's physical infrastructure, such as coal-fired power plants and

monolithic cement apartment buildings, was built during the Soviet era. The representation of language in Cyrillic characters seems to be as enduring as the cement. The best option from the traditional standpoint is to revert to Mongolian script; the best option from the global standpoint is to switch to Latin (Roman) script, since English is the language of the globe, and since many other important languages are so represented. But it is exceedingly difficult to switch script. Signage, legal documents, books, including text books and other school books, remain in Cyrillic, though English is encroaching and displacing Cyrillic gradually. This means that names have no fixed Latin spelling, and so every name in this essay I have rendered phonetically; every name can be represented in several ways. Also, Mongolian nicknames can be odd. A nickname for Enkhee's brother Monho is Mogi: mushroom. Amy told me that another man's name was the word for "three." I have no idea what they put on legal documents. On the other hand, legal documents might be irrelevant for most Mongolians.

Tsenkher Hot Springs, the wedding site, includes four tourist camps. The largest, Duut, was well established, a stout log lodge, full restaurant, showers, hot pools, many gers. Our camp was the smallest, owned and run by Enkhee's brother Bansai, a Buddhist lay monk and a herder. Enkhee has some kind of partnership arrangement with him. Relatives of Enkhee also owned Duut; his relatives and friends seem to be everywhere!

So, we arrived mid-morning of the wedding day, twenty-four hours after we planned to be there. Mobs of well-dressed people beamed at us as we emerged from the van. The women, mostly older matrons, were in full satiny dress and big hats, distinctly Mongolian and magnificent. The men wore dells and fedoras. I lost track of our group here, because I was immediately surrounded by a host of men who were to officiate, including the master of ceremonies, Enkhee's deceased mother's oldest brother Riimaadai (Tom Akh, or Big Brother) the oldest male on the mother's side of the family. We exchanged snuff bottles, a Mongolian custom and an important sign of friendship...except that I had left mine in Anchorage, viewing it as an artifact and a souvenir instead of the vital symbol it is. (Beginning with this exchange, I was informed of every detail of every traditional custom, and was made to conform; this wedding was done the right way; and all the detail was in the heads of the elders. There is no written liturgy or script as with Christianity.) Photos. I was fitted with a fine long woolen shirt; I wore my new boots; someone stuck Jeff's Mongolian hat on my head, and I was as much a Mongolian as a fair Scot can be. Di was fitted with a dress and a satin sheath. (I learned later that

Pulee made Di's dress and sheath and my blouse, all of the finest material and workmanship. Another example of quiet, anonymous, extremely valuable gift giving. I didn't even know that Pulee made them until it was too late to thank her.) More photos. Di, Amy, Enkhee, Jeff were all similarly outfitted with dispatch in their own gers. Yet more photos; everyone, it seemed, wanted to be photographed with us, people whom to this day I don't know. I came to realize that including Americans in this traditional ceremony was unprecedented and immensely important, though the family of the bride would in any case be highly honored. And the ceremony began.

Our party was driven to a large ger at Duut. We were instructed to sit behind a huge pile of bread and hard cheese and butter, and the corpse of a roasted sheep. I later concluded that I was playing the role of host and father of the bride; I was walked through several rituals, such as the cutting of the meat in a certain way; we drank Mongolian tea (chai, mare's milk, salt), and much else (airag, vodka); another exchange of snuff boxes. We are all this time accompanied and instructed by three or four certain male dignitaries who stayed by my side throughout the day.

Eventually Amy is taken off to hide, like a good Mongolian maiden (behind the woodpile); Enkhee asks permission of me to marry her; I say something about how delighted I am at the prospect; Enkhee's sisters "hunt" for the reluctant bride and capture her; Enkhee and Amy mount horses and he leads her off to the wedding (in a smaller ger in the upper camp, where the rest of the ceremony occurs). Enkhee looks like a real Mongol horseman, because he is; Amy too rides very well; she sits the horse naturally. I imagine that she is found to be a satisfactory Mongolian. The rest of the party retire to the wedding ger by van. Here the mob has been awaiting our arrival, and the ger is packed.

A crowd awaits us. Here we eat and drink, two fellows, standing in a central location in front of the table, steadily offering airag and vodka, Mongolian style, in rotation. Bansai, (as I mentioned above, Enkhee's brother and a Buddhist lay monk, and partners with Enkhee in the ger camp), eventually offered a prayer, and incense, burning in a bowl—the incense was passed around the group, and Amy and Enkhee passed it around their bodies to purify themselves—then we moved to an open tent for general eating and drinking and socializing and the presentation of wedding gifts—I wondered who orchestrated all this, and later learned that it was mainly Enkhee's sisters, and brothers Taivaa and Monkhoos—then back to the ger for the red goat ceremony. Here a fire was lit in the stove, and after Amy demonstrated her household skills by serving milk tea (mostly a symbolic act), a young red

goat (which in the meantime had been cooed over and fed grass by some young girls) was decorated with the sacred blue scarf (ubiquitous in Mongolia) and consecrated by Bansai. This goat symbolizes the lives of Enkhee, Amy, and Tengerjin, and will not be shorn or killed, but will die a natural death, after leading a long and comfortable life, and its fortunate life will symbolically parallel theirs. In this land of nomadic meat-eaters, a lucky goat indeed.

To the open tent once again. Singing, poetry, toasts, food, more singing, a steady offering of airag, vodka, later a very good whiskey for Jeff and me, offered in a large wineglass as a toast from the patriarch. It was sipping whiskey, but down it went in one piece, and it wasn't just a shot. An abundance of good will. Di and I were assured that we now have a Mongolian family—in fact, we should come and live here, I was told. I am certain that our Mongolian family is rock-solid, and whenever we return, we will be remembered as and treated as genuine family. And being offered residency was more than a formality. Once a Mongol, always a Mongol; and for a Mongol, Mongolian citizenship is second to none; we were offered the ultimate compliment. Who in their right mind would want to be anything but a Mongol?

I was up before dawn on Day 2, and enjoyed my coffee outdoors on the grass in the golden mountain light. (We Americans were unanimous in our desire for coffee, which must have puzzled our hosts, who do fine with hot water or milk tea in the morning. We did appear to be genuine addicts, probably because we are.) A good soak in the hot springs. To the tent for sociability. More singing, always solo, mostly by the men, but a few women as well. (Singing occurred when some individual was simply moved to burst into song. Not chorus singing, such as the English and Germans like.) Some tipsiness in evidence. One of my mentors literally forced a full glass of airag down my throat by grasping my arm in a grip I could not escape: not a hostile act, just a desire to make me loosen up more, perhaps. I declined an invitation to arm wrestle, citing my recent hand surgery. (A close call, that one.) Sun. Blue sky. Herds of animals periodically amble by: yaks, goats, sheep, cows, and many many horses. All the animals are everywhere unfenced, though they are fenced *out* of the ger camp—for the most part—and we mingle naturally. The passage of Mongolian time, where clocks are secondary and the moment is everything. Guests begin to depart, in one case in a forgon holding perhaps twenty-four people in its eight seats. There is always room for one more.

The last line in my journal entry for July 14: “Wonderful faces. Much much laughter. The warmest, most thoughtful hospitality. Singing. Everything felt right and feels right.”

A word about Mongolian song.

There is a distinctive male voice. It arises from the diaphragm and emerges as a full-bodied alto or base. It is rich and in some cultures would be considered too fruity, too stagey. Men are apt to burst into song at any time, but most often on a horse, or when driving. (Tenger, who doesn't like to submit to sleep, has the good fortune of hearing his father sing to him for hours every night.) I do not know the origins of the songs, but I suspect that a few are self-created as poems, then sung, and many are certainly traditional songs, learned by children within the family.

I deeply respect this love of singing, and wish that I had that ability; but I am too constrained. In our culture, few people sing: church choirs, hymns, community choruses; but most of us get our music manufactured for us; it is an industry, not a personal accomplishment.

On the horseback trip, I one day decided to sing to my horse, inspired by Enkhee's example. Since my horse knew no English, and I knew few songs anyway, I simply produced what I thought were melodious sounds from my diaphragm, and warbled them in a way I thought sounded harmonious. I watched my horse's ears, and concluded by their erectness and rotation that I had done well. We enjoyed ourselves.

On the third day at the wedding site, we finally had time to visit with our host Banzai and his wife Davaadorj; adolescent daughters Nasaa and Bultenee were always busy with one chore or another. (In Mongolia, girls seem to be chronically shy and self-effacing.) We exchanged gifts. I received a sacred blue scarf and gave Banzai my standard tool-and-knife kit. We were extremely interested in what Banzai did with these blades. He performed a ceremony with hot butter and prayerful incantations, the intent being to render the blades harmless, since a knife can be used for both good or bad. And we each received a horse—foals—as gifts! That's four foals (Tenger, Di and Clancy, Amy and Enkhee, Jeff). The foals were in fact at Banzai's nomadic camp elsewhere in the countryside, and we decided to go there late in the day, arriving at 8:30, which made a long day for Di and me, since we were developing the cold I mentioned, which was very severe and lasted weeks. I thought of our human vulnerability in the face of disease: here was a Central Asian bug that my body was not prepared for, and the bug had the upper hand.

We staged our horseback journey from this countryside ger camp. Here were our horses, including Amy's Hongor; and here was Banzai's marvelous son Bandi, perhaps twelve or fourteen years of age, an amazingly competent horseman, camper, traveler; the young prototype of the resourceful Mongolian. And sweet-tempered, considerate, and completely without egotism or self-regard.

We camped by the creek. During the night, a continual sound of animal noises, including a wolf; a brilliant full moon in the deep summer sky. The next day I was happy to rest while Enkhee did the necessary task of arranging for our six horses and their gear while visiting three camps of relatives in the area. In the afternoon, when the mares were brought in for milking (tied to a picket line, one hoof bound up to limit her motions, the foal tied to the picket line likewise to command her presence) we were introduced to our foals, now in mid-July about three months old. I accepted the Mongolian notion that one must whisper the horse's name into its ear, and it will remember that name, and I quickly knew that this horse must be named Hokh Tenger (Blue Sky), named for the sacred Mongolian "blue sky above," an idea that is very real to me wherever I go. The horse, however, had no Romantic notions, and was so strong and wild that we could barely hold it. I don't know who will break the horse, or how, in our absence, and I can't visualize that wild horse under me.

By late afternoon we were packed, and Di and I and Jeff received simple instructions on riding—the first time a horse for all of us—and off we went, grateful that our horses had been selected for their docility. We camped within a few miles, an excellent camp in a meadow by a stream, but that few miles clearly established that my body needed to make major adjustments to this mode of transport: stress on the thighs and lower back, bouncing internal organs, pounding on the lower back; not an easy transition.

Flies. We did not struggle with mosquitoes or other insects familiar to us. But the flies can be a plague. They are more intense when large herds are near, but that doesn't always correlate. For instance, the worst flies I experienced in 2005 were during a forest hike far from herd animals. They don't bite. They are simply so numerous that they bounce off your skin, which is nuisance enough, but it is disgusting when they carom off one's face. They are more intense when it is hot, and we all relished the early mornings and cool evenings when the flies disappear and the air is comfortable. As hot as the days of midsummer might be, at this altitude the nights are invariably cool. I soon determined to get up at 6:00 rather than

7:00 (about when the sun clears the horizon), to take advantage of the cool mornings.

The second day took us to the hot springs at the village of Khujirt, and we dithered a bit about what to do—soak, camp, what—and settled for showers and a camp south of the soum (village). I spent 3.5 hours on the horse and was pleased with his response to me—I could usually get him to trot with just a voice command (chu, chu) but he really responds best to the presence of other horses. I learned, mainly by watching his ears, and of course speed and gait, that horses are certainly herd animals and are intensely aware of each other. He was reluctant to trot or gallop without voice, strap, or the example of his equine friends. Enkhee explained that the horses were all “family,” and the description is apt. My thighs are tired, especially the insides; the lower back also (I remember painfully my back problem in 2005), and stretching helps considerably. The Mongolian stirrup does not have a block for the toe, and the boot is pointed and has an upward curve, and one must continually think about foot placement: keep on your toes, not the instep, otherwise a fall might result in dragging and death. And this creates some tension in the calves.

The Mongolian saddle is wooden and deeply dished. Our hosts provided plenty of padding for the Americans, however, for which we were thankful. One holds reins in one hand, a 10’ strap in the other. The strap is used liberally as a stimulant by the Mongolians, less often by me, not at all by Di. But the strap is really useful when you dismount, to control the horse or to tie him. When a post or tree is not available, I have seen Mongolians use the strap as a hobble, to tie up one foot, as mares are tied when they are milked.

Jaya, Enkhee’s oldest brother, drove our forgon, into which was packed all our food and gear. His daughter Handaa was along as a babysitter to free up Amy for riding, and of course we stopped regularly so Tenger could feed. Jaya’s son Nanza, aged nine, was also along for the ride, and he ended up riding quite a bit if Di or I took a break.

Americans and Mongolians on the trail: We Americans had MSR gasoline camp stoves that could use 87 octane, which burns cooler than white gas. We had smallish stainless steel camp pots. At 7,000’ or higher, where we spent much of our time, it often took us an hour just to boil enough water for, say, noodles. On the other hand, Jaya, Handaa, and Nanza, upon making camp, would scour the area for any bits of wood and dry dung they could find. They constructed a small fire ring which

supported their wok. They usually had water boiling before I did. We westerners stayed as close to our accustomed foods as we could (heavier on carbohydrates than meat) while the Mongolians usually cooked rice and dried meat boiled together. (I have in my mind an image of Jaya breaking apart his hard dried meat by hammering it with a wrench every evening.) For breakfast, we westerners cooked oats; the Mongolians ate last night's leftovers, if anything. We westerners drank coffee; the Mongolians hot water; Jaya drank instant coffee (it's hard to get real ground coffee except in the larger towns). We all drank tea later in the day, the westerners black with sugar, the Mongolians preferably green with milk and salt. We had two separated cook sites at each camp, the Mongolians staying near the forgon, the westerners more isolated, nearer a stream and away from the vehicle. In short, I was duplicating what I do when travelling in the wilderness in Alaska, they were doing what was traditional for them.

Day three: over the next mountain pass, down into the next valley, and up to the Tovkhon Sum monastery, on the north rim of the Orkhon Valley. I am impressed, once again, at the remoteness of these monasteries, this one also high in the mountains and surrounded by dense forest. The site was founded in 1653 and since the time of Soviet destruction has been restored, I think with international aid (one sign credited a German organization with help with signage). From the forgon the trail led three miles up to the monastery—we went by horseback—and the visit was extremely rewarding. I found it best to let my mind roam, try to visualize the past, how the old monks lived, how they “spent” their time; this is so far far away in space and time. The monastery is built against steep cliffs, with caves in which monks once lived or meditated. On the top of the cliffs, an ovoo, and spectacular views of the surrounding mountains and forest. (An ovoo is a pyramid-shaped collection of stones and other objects, such as bits of glass, often supporting pieces of wood, which has spiritual significance in the shamanistic tradition. They almost always are draped with the sky-blue scarves that are ubiquitous in Mongolia, and are usually located at high points such as mountain passes and hill tops.)

Thunderstorms and rain on the descent. Enkhee rented a ger near the spring at the base of the mountain; Di and I in the tent, however. Exhausted.

Day 4. A comfortable morning. After examining an ancient burial site, we crossed the valley. The horses were frisky and ran well, maintaining a brisk trot and occasionally breaking into a gallop, and we all, including cautious Di, enjoyed the brisk trek across the valley and up to the next pass.

These horses were indeed herd animals. They enjoyed running together. They communicate with each other too. A shrill neigh can be a shock to the rider, but it's all just talk.

A pause at the pass, then problems. Jeff's horse spooked—a flapping, crinkly jacket flipped his switch—and Jeff dismounted to hold the plunging horse by the strap. I turned my horse away so that he would not be spooked by the commotion; Enkhee dismounted to help Jeff and his horse spooked also and broke free, galloping past Di, whose horse in turn spooked, and she galloped past me and I saw her deteriorating position from behind: unable to rein the horse, unable to hold on, she listed steadily to port until she fell hard on her back. I dismounted and pulled my balky horse as quickly as possible to her; it seemed to me that she had suffered either a concussion or hip damage, but in fact the breath was knocked out of her and she was shaken but unbroken. She had tried to signal to us that she was not paralyzed by waving an arm and trying to move. Amy ran to the scene and controlled her emotions until she saw that Mom was unhurt; then wept.

Enkhee was able to capture the loose horses because they did circle back to the “herd” rather than disappearing into the distance. We reorganized and continued into the Orkhon valley. Di stayed off the horse and tended to Tenger, which gave Handaa and Nanza opportunities to ride. Camp at the big rapids on the Orkhon River.

Somewhere along the way we gave our horses names. I designated my sluggish horse as Flash, and suggested that Enkhee call his unpredictable, squirrely animal Knucklehead, which he did. Jeff settled for the descriptive Ginger. After today, though, Di did not have sufficient empathy for her horse to provide it with an English name. I assume, of course, that they all had Mongolian names, unknown to us; they are usually named by color.

Day 5, July 20. Another crisis. At 5:30 AM Amy was at our tent. Hongor, her beloved horse, gifted to her by Enkhee's family, was gone.

Hongor is an excellent horse, larger than most, well proportioned, spirited, responsive, with a pleasing red coat. A horse thief would be glad to have him.

We regularly staked our horses within a few hundred yards of camp, each horse tied by a 30' line to its own stake, driven into the ground, about which the horse can circle to graze. It was possible that, spirited as he is, Hongor pulled the stake, perhaps if a herd moved past, as they often did, and he was moved to travel with them; or he was stolen.

Enkhee and Jaya had just left in the van to look for him. I was out and afoot to do my share, and wandered the steppe until 8:00 with my binoculars (and had an interesting walk). I felt enormous relief when I saw in the distance the van return, Enkhee just behind, afoot, with the horse. Handaa had located Hongor. She too was afoot and saw him grazing with other horses and kept near him until she was spotted from the van. Relief all around.

Horses. According to my *Lonely Planet*, the Mongolians have more than 300 words to describe horses, mostly relating to their color. Hongor is one word for red, but Amy was searching for a better name, one more personal and less generic. She'd have to whisper that one in his ear too, I suppose.

Our goal for the day was the waterfall Orkhon Khurkhree, a protected area and major (by modest Mongolian standards) tourist attraction. We had a pleasant ride up the Orkhon valley, the river on our right, and walked to the falls in the afternoon. The area is volcanic (we rode through lava fields the next day) and the falls were formed by volcanic actions and earthquakes. The falls are on a clearwater feeder stream, not the Orkhon River, which we eventually concluded was heavily silted from upstream mining, not heavy rains as we thought, which is a big problem because the Orkhon is 1120 km long (672 miles) and the water ends up in Selenge Gol (River) and eventually Lake Baikal: that's a lot of downstream impact. Our camp that night was the best of the trip, and we had some good ones: a meadow on a medium sized stream (it reminded me just a bit of a Western trout stream, but not quite) at the base of steep hills, not too close to gers or lots of grazing animals, though there were some. The day had been hot, and we bathed in the stream and felt mightily refreshed.

Day 6. A brilliant sunrise, a fine morning, and an interesting ride through lava fields into an open high valley, where we stopped to ponder a monument rock, a "deerstone," perhaps 8' high, placed there 3,000 years ago by ancient Turkic nomads. Faint tracings of animals, likely deer, were just visible on the shaft.

Over a pass as a shortcut to the upper valley, and travel along a high bench. Lunch near an encampment, and the local kids were shy but curious, and they loved Di's balloons.

A great camp at a spring and clearwater stream at the wooded base of hills. But my cold is worsening, moving into my lungs and larynx, and I needed rest.

Day 7. Light drizzle, most of our party slept late. I felt a bit better (but learned by the end of the day that this bug was very bad indeed, every improvement followed by a severe relapse). Took a pleasant walk along the stream and then rested after breakfast until the party was ready to move.

This day was no doubt the low point of the trip, because as we moved upstream on the Orkhon we moved into the mining district. Most of the mining was being done right in the river bed or in the beds of feeder streams, and the amount of silt being caught in containment ponds was negligible. A grim, wasted landscape, made worse by the knowledge that herders had been displaced from their productive ancestral land for the financial benefit of foreigners, in this case Russians, I think. (Australians and Canadians and I think Chinese are also heavily invested in mining in Mongolia.)

A decent camp beyond the mining. I did most of the cooking on this trip and the evenings were difficult for me, being exhausted by my illness as I was. A vile night. The congestion in my upper respiratory tract was extreme, even painful.

Day 8. Fog beneath a brilliant fresh blue sky, as Di and I discovered as we walked in the morning, and the fog shifted and lifted.

I opted to ride in the forgon because of my fatigue, and our ride was short, over a very steep pass out of the Orkhon valley and into the drainage from which we started our trip. We made it a short day because we did not want to close the loop too soon. Besides, we did not want to pass up this excellent camp, at the edge of the forest and near a fine little stream.

Di and I were happy to rest...she remains ill also...Amy is now ill; and Amy and Enkhee were also tired from Tenger's nighttime and early morning demands. That happy little rascal just does not want to sleep.

Day 9. A gorgeous morning. Started at noon. Everyone needs rest and most slept late, and Jaya and his family foraged for a long time in the open forest, finding strawberries, I think. The horses moved briskly, knowing that they were headed home.

We stayed in the area of Banzai's home ger camp, where we initially started our horseback trip, for the remainder of the day. We visited the three households that are friends and relatives of Enkhee's and from whom we rented horses and needed to pay. Each of the three visits was warm and memorable—hospitality uniformly offered everywhere, food and drink served as a matter of course, regardless of time of day, much as at the wedding—but one woman, Baasanhuu, stands out particularly. She seemed

ancient, and though not large she had a strong presence. Barefoot, weathered, exuding good humor and well-being, she with incredible efficiency offered and served tea, airag, Mongolian vodka, while all the time cooking boortsog, a deep-fried bread, in large quantities, in a large wok, served with butter. Delicious. She it was who stood at my elbow to insure that I did more than just sip at the vodka; she made it clear that I was to drink up, loosen up, be a man, Crawford. So I did. She was right. Amy told me that Baasanhuu had recently lost her husband, and a few years ago the woman had been kicked in the head by a mare during milking, and a large part of her scalp had been peeled back; but she simply put her scalp back in place and carried on, as Mongolians do.

A violent storm swept across the steppe during this time, which formed a perfect backdrop for this domestic scene in the ger. The violent rain turned to hail, and the wind shook the ger. Then it all passed with the wind. I have an image in my mind of a younger woman walking into the storm under a small tarp, a child under each “wing,” so the girls could squat and urinate.

Photos and more photos. Into the forgon for the final departure for the ger camp, site of the wedding, from which we departed. Jaya drove there with dispatch (remember, there are no roads, just tracks; another wild ride). Moved into our gers, vacating the van that we had been packing and unpacking for nine days. A full circle, a complete, full experience.

It’s now the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, and we have been in Mongolia for three weeks, with one week left until our departure the night of 31 July. Di and I agree that we are tilting towards Anchorage. The persistent severe colds, full lungs and painful throats, and fatigue, are certainly nagging at us. And we admit that we are ready to get into a settled routine, with familiar food and a predictable schedule. Also, my most persistent regret: I have not been able to master even the simplest aspects of the language. I know a very few words and no syntax, and I have given up trying. I wish I had prepared better during the previous year; yet, as Amy pointed out, it was unlikely that I could learn much with just audio tapes, printed matter, and no context. The language barrier is not very permeable, especially Mongolian, perhaps the most difficult language on the planet, and it frustrates me. I want to connect better with these excellent people.

We are at the ger camp where the wedding occurred, and now all is quiet, though there are patrons renting gers, all Mongolians: we have seen very few Europeans, one Canadian, no Americans. We rested two days—three of us are still very ill—and had the pleasure of spending more time with Banzai’s

family. During the evening of July 26 Jaya drove us all back to Tsetserleg, and we moved back into the house we vacated long ago, it seems. A severe relapse for me on July 27 and I did little but rest. However, the Purevsurens held another horhok (family feed) that night and the abundant good will boosted me a bit. When I went upstairs to bed I had the surreal experience of listening from the stairs to my Mongolian friends chatter while, in the background, the TV played early-70s pre-MTV music videos of groups I never heard of. (TV programming is severely limited. I don't know how deep into the archives Mongolian TV has to dig to find old tapes, but I caught glimpses of ancient Soviet shows; and they show a lot of nature scenes as filler. These music tapes might have been Australian). To illustrate how low I had sunk: that music really sounded good.

Clothing. Mongolians are always careful of their dress. Amy warned us (me) before the trip to keep this in mind and leave my ratty tee shirts at home.

There is traditional Mongolian dress, such as the *del*, modern casual dress (slacks and tee shirt or sweatshirt), and modern dressiness (usually women). In none of these cases do Mongolians resemble anyone else in my experience. The dressy modern Mongolian woman has her own look, difficult to describe, but she inclines to satiny shiny materials, very high heels, and tight clothing.

The casual dress, male or female, amused and puzzled me. There has occurred a plague of tee shirts, sweatshirts, and ball caps bearing astonishing, incomprehensible logos and slogans. I assume this stuff is made in China. The logos and slogans are supposedly in English, and a very few of the brand-name imitations are close copies, but usually the English is fractured and often humorous. New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles are usually key words in the logo. I wish I had written down the best. I can remember one, on a sweatshirt, that should have gone something like Newport Beach California Home of the Best Fish 'n Chips, but it was rendered as Newpot Beech Homing CA Best Fish Chips 'N. I imagined cadres of Chinese poring over their Chinese-American-Chinese dictionaries to produce these authentic imitation garments.

Whatever a Mongolian wears, it becomes Mongolian, not Chinese or American. This has to do with manner, carriage, attitude. Young Bandi might wear his baseball cap twisted to the side, but it is a Mongolian look, not American.

Where did the satiny dresses and big hats of the older women come from? They suggest European clothing that is seventy years out of style, but

not quite. I am reminded of the Peruvian women of the Andes who favor narrow brimmed fedoras. How did that happen? The imitation of English headwear became tradition over time. Perhaps something similar happened in Mongolia.

I have often encountered people who think Mongolia is a bit of China. Indeed, the Mongolians conquered most of China in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century; and the Chinese conquered Mongolia in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and were not expelled until the Soviets took over in 1921. There is an “inner Mongolia,” once part of Mongolia, which is now part of China; “outer Mongolia” is modern Mongolia; and part of the original Mongolia was annexed to the old Soviet Union and remains part of southern Siberia. *Lonely Planet* claims that more Mongolians live outside Mongolia than within Mongolia. But the Chinese and Mongolians are distinct racially, linguistically, historically, religiously, and culturally.

Mongolians like to claim that Native Americans are their descendants. The cover story in the November 2011 *Scientific American* discusses the origins of the earliest Americans and their likely migration routes. The author claims that there is enough DNA evidence available to establish the ancestry of the earliest Americans. They came from an area extending from the Altai Mountains in western Mongolia to the Amur River in southeast Siberia. It appears that the Mongolians are right.

Now, with only a few days left, most of us Westerners got the runs. For one of our party this developed into a severe intestinal illness but luckily my cipro worked for him.

Here is a typical Mongolian situation: We are to leave for Ulaanbaatar on July 29. Amy hopes to be on the road by 9:00 AM. Taivaa had taken his van, his Hyundai diesel we had previously used, to the countryside; but it had rained long and hard on July 28 and he had trouble getting back because of mud and high water. We packed and waited. Visiting. More visiting. Everyone knows that this is the big departure, that we may never see these people again, that beloved brother Enkhee may not return for years. Enkhee's daughter by a previous relationship, Oinoo, who may end up with Amy and Enkhee in Dutch Harbor, (she is a charming, shy adolescent), was present, as was her grandmother Javzan, who was raising her. (We had met them both back at Naadam). Javzan is a retired school teacher, and Oinoo is her family, and she is not happy at the prospect of losing her. She was dressed carefully, big hat, satin dress, big glasses, pumps; the perfect Mongolian combination of dressiness and tradition. She exuded dignity; she

was The Grandmother. She presented us with gifts (we were given many gifts large and small during the month) and hugged me and gave me a thorough Mongolian sniff on both cheeks and I knew she was seeing the future: Oinoo eventually gone to unknown America, me the American patriarch—what kind of man am I?—Oinoo in good hands with Enkhee and Amy, she bereft forever—but she retained her composure; she looked strong and sensible—and she laughed a wonderful laugh.

Photos. More photos. More visitors, some entirely new to us. Into the van. It's 1:20 PM and at least ten hours to Ulaanbaatar. Off? Not quite. On the way out of Tsetserleg, just beyond the archway, Jaya and Amaraa are on a grassy hillside, with friends, and we stop for a final greeting and farewell. We have spent considerable time with Jaya, and he will now assume custodianship of the forgon, for Amy and Enkhee have purchased it from Gurvan and plan to use it for their guide business, to be started in 2012, with Jaya as driver, and Banzai as further beneficiary as a renter of gers at the hot springs. It's all in the family. (The new business, Endless Sky Adventures, endlesskyadventures.com, never did get off the ground, at least not yet).

This farewell blessing was important because we were leaving the country, and Jaya, as the oldest brother, performed it by flicking milk to the four cardinal points and in the direction of the van as we left.

Before Jaya blessed us and the car, he received payment for his services as driver, and the keys to the forgon. Photos. Photos. Farewell.

A long hard ride to Ulaanbaatar. I dreaded the ten hours from Seoul to Seattle, but realized that this was somewhat longer and certainly harder, but somehow less painful. On the approach to Ulaanbaatar, sunset, then a long twilight sky. Dust, traffic, dust; Ulaanbaatar seems like an inferno. Into our former apartment. Rest.

Our last two days were spent doing chores (bank, internet café, groceries), visiting (of course), and touring Ulaanbaatar. To the so-called Black Market (completely above ground, in large tents)—we have a new young driver, where did he come from?—and our entourage included Urna (who guided us protectively, I think to protect us from thieves), Taivaa, our driver, and our crew. Then to a Mr. Pizza, or a “Mr. Pizza,” perhaps a franchise, perhaps not; our driver drives a delivery car there; somehow we pick up another driver and his delivery car and now we are a fleet. (While we eat at the “Mr. Pizza,” Tenger naps in the van, tended by three pizza delivery drivers. He will never receive as much attention again as in Mongolia.) To the nearby International School (we are now on the right side

of the tracks) and I am shocked: here is a school that I can recognize! It is not in session but a caretaker allows us to tour. This school may be in Amy's distant future.

A final feed at the apartment, prepared by Urna and Molroo. To the airport. Brilliant red sunset. Easy check-in, unlike 2005. The airport had been improved considerably. (There are even a few shops, trying to be upscale.) Our Mongolian friends, now family, (Urna, Taivaa, Enkhee—he and Amy fly later—and the driver) make a game of waving good-bye to us through the front windows.

Thirty-two hours later, Anchorage. Who would have thought that our home in the sub-Arctic would seem so lush and green? The trees. The trees.

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