

## **40 Days a Mongol**

So there I was, in Mongolia....

A quick audience participation moment:

- 1) put your index fingers in your ears
- 2) close your eyes and image a place so silent that you can hear a birds wings flap as it flies by  
that place is Mongolia

A Google search tells me there are about a million words in the English language. Traveling the miles of Mongolia and then trying to describe what that's like and suddenly a million words leaves me a bit short on adjectives.

**Vast, remote, barren, stark, rugged, dusty, harsh, bumpy, challenging**

But conversely:

**Warm, engaging, calm, silent, peaceful, wonderful, welcoming, rewarding and memorable**

The first group summarizes the terrain of Mongolia, the second, its people. Here you endure the first to come in contact with the second.

Over the course of nearly two months and three "adventures" I've seen, smelled and felt many areas within this amazing country and it's left an impact. Once you tick off a few bucket-list countries, finding a place that's not like the others and I mean REALLY not like the others is pretty rare; Mongolia is such a place.

Taking the overnight flight from Moscow, and getting the reassuring passport control "kachunk" of entrance, my gear and I landed with a thud in Ulaan Baator. The driver was there to greet me and thru the stupor of another sleepless night, I was serenaded with what sounded like Mongolian House music on our way to Sunpath hostel. Sunpath is more than just a bed and a Wi-Fi hotspot; it's a tourism "basecamp" where, from the second floor of a "rustic" urban housing complex, the world's nomads deplane or detrain and then congregate in the main area of a four-bedroom apartment near the center of the city.

### **"Basecamp"**

All travelers are sorted into four buckets; just arrived, just leaving, returners and couch sucking bums. The "arrivers" are tired, well packed, and eager to sit down. There they collide with the "leavers", guests who are about to embark on a tour. The 'leavers' are anxious lot, fairly disorganized yet excited to be

leaving for the parts of Mongolia NOT called “UB”. Once the “leavers” leave, their rooms are tidied by about 10:30am and the “arrivers” get assigned a bed and make quick use of it.

Later in the day the “returners” come. These are generally a dusty, funky-smelling bunch. Tours generally range from 12 to 17 days and feature one shower per week. These folks are full of tales; lots of adventure, some sickness, but all with a yearning to stay/do more in Mongolia. They have been to Sunpath before, so their only question is which bed as they quickly blow up their backpacks to hand over their funky duds for an overdue laundering. Then it’s a race to the showers where the winners get an overdue shower and the losers go to bed. The couch-sucking bums fill the remaining space, either waiting out another tour or hanging around for a few days until their flight/train departs. These bums interact freely with the “arrivers” to suggest food/shopping/sight as well as offering valuable insights such as “take it easy on the fermented mare’s milk”. Truer words were never spoken.

### **Grey Ghost Drivers; the Mongolian “Click and Clack”**

The basic mode of transport on the ruts of Mongolia is the Russian-made WAZ truck, complete with two bench seats behind the driver. These “mechanical camels” are cheap, easy to fix and as common as sheep poop in Mongolia. They are still in production, but carry all the hallmarks of Soviet-era utilitarian design; more VW love-bus than caravan. My first impression was the striking resemblance to the Scooby Doo’s “Mystery Machine.” Each can hold the gear and goods of up to six nomads, who get placed inside with the precision of a sardine canning station. Once safely “packed” in the hostel parking lot, adventure begins.

For my Gobi and Central Mongolia tour, there were six fellow “nomadic sardines”, along with a cook, a guide and two drivers. This is the tale of “Bata” and “Hata”; the Mongolian “Click and Clack”.

Those readers familiar with NPR’s car-talk show will know of “Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers”; but for those who don’t, it was a listener call-in show where the brothers would diagnose car problems by having the listener imitate the sounds their engine were making. Their intimate knowledge of the internal combustion engine and what could go wrong made for an enjoyable way to waste an hour of my life most weekends.

But back to our story; two Russian-made vans loaded with tourists and their kit rumbling down the road towards the Gobi. Our WAZ(zoo) van was driven by “Bata” and became known as the “Bata-mobile”; the other by “Hata” and logically the “Hata-mobile”. The first hours of any tour are filled with lively banter, as the “cargo” spent time discussing how and why they were on the truck. Within an hour our van pulled into a road-side swap-meet to exchange a front tire. This would be our first experience with roadside maintenance in Mongolia. In America, when you swap a tire, the tire is already mounted on a rim; here, they only swap the rubber, using a pry-bar and hammer to remove and reseal the rubber. This would be our quick introduction to the world of Mongolian Overland Touring.

Our driver “Bata” was clearly the seasoned veteran, and drove about twice his age (in kilometers), but that’s only an estimate since a check of the speedometer showed it didn’t work. The high rate of speed maintained by Bata ensured a thrilling roller-coaster effect for the passengers and a prompt arrival, but at a price; as the “Bata-mobile” would need nightly rebuilding. “Hata” drove with more caution and thus needed fewer repairs, but was slower. Bata and Hata weren’t just WAZoo drivers, they were owners as well, capable of diagnosing and repairing their vehicles “on the fly”; with the engine access point resting between the front two seats. And when one driver meets another coming in the opposite direction, “Click and Clack” always asked how the other car was driving, or at least that’s what it would sound like, if I spoke Mongolian.

In the first five days of southern driving, the “Bata-mobile” had both front brakes replaced, as well as both tires, and a wheel alignment. The drive shaft was serviced nightly and even the door lever got replaced. I could have sworn I saw some transmission parts piled up one morning, but they quickly disappeared as if we wouldn’t miss them. All work was done “ger”-side, with parts and drivers lying on sheets of cardboard. My uncle Otto would have loved these guys. Their tools range from Craftsman to caveman; and yes, a bent coupler on the drive shaft was flattened by hitting it with a big rock...repeatedly; but confidence in the driver’s ability to pilot and repair their vehicles grew with each passing day, among the livestock being transported.

## **You Go Ger!**

The Mongol equivalent to Motel 6 is the “ger”, and yes, both leave the light on. These squat units run about seven feet high and dot the landscape like tiny marshmallows floating in the pastoral “hot chocolate” that is Mongolia. Most “Gobi Guest Gers” (G3’s as we named them) come with either four or six wooden bed frames, fit with a comfy plywood mattress. Sure each comes with a blanket, but that’s just to keep you from getting splinters. The door height is a robust five-foot, suitable for the average Mongol’s children but requires all others to remember to duck on their way in. Each encampment has been electrified to some extent. Mongolia is the land of Blue Sky, so each nomadic “community” comes with a solar panel array which then powers the communal satellite dish, light-bulbs and television. We were amazed to learn American WWE wrestling is quite popular, though I don’t know if they know it’s fixed. Everyone from the elders, to goat-herders on motorbikes, have cell phones with data plans.

My last adventure brought me into Kazak gers. Larger than the Mongolian “marshmallows” the Kazak versions are more “homey” and can house an army...while we enjoyed the shelter, rarely did these gers have enough beds to accommodate more than two or three guests, so we became familiar the Kazak flooring instead.

So if you “go ger” and then literally “have to go”, the adapted phrase is “where’s the ooh-ooh?” Outhouses are all the rage in modern Mongolia. They are cleverly designated by placing two large “O’s” on the outer door, thus “ooh-ooh” is an accurate descriptor. The construction of these ramshackle units is also universal yet highly regulated; you dig a hole, and place two 1x6” board over the opening, making sure to leave at least a four-inch gap between the boards for hole-filling purposes. The outer “modesty

shield” is more open to interpretation. Some are elaborate with hinged doors, windows and perhaps even a magazine to peruse during your squat. Others are more Spartan, with perhaps only two sides about knee high placed so the visitor has but a whisper of saved dignity. The overall condition and emanating smells of these ooh-oohs lingers long after your visit. As we moved further west, the existence of the ooh-ooh became rarer, so the visitor is asked to “do like the sheep and dot the landscape.”

A comment must be made about the ger heating system. All came with metal “burners”; rectangular boxes with openings on top for large Mongol pots, and side for stoking, along with a vent stack reaching out the top of the ger. The fuel burned based on location. In the Gobi, they burned wood; in the north, they burned a lot of wood. In the near-west they burned coal and wood, but as we drove farther west, there was no wood, and no coal; they burned poo. The Mongol yak is noted for its warm wool coat, its milk useful for making cheese and curd; but perhaps its greatest attribute is its “patty” which when dried can provide heat for between five and ten minutes. The harvesting of patties isn’t just for fun, it’s a serious enterprise. Farmers have learned to “plant” the gathered ‘fresh ones’ into a crop where the recycled plant material can reformulate with the nutrient rich soil producing a layered ‘crop’. This crop is then allowed to age over the summer; maturing from brown to ash-gray. The fall ‘harvest’ is done by shovel and yields odd chunks of “petrol” (poo-trel?) which are gathered and stacked outside the ger like cord-wood awaiting the eternal winds of winter. It is not uncommon for two herders to discuss the quantity and condition of their “winter fuel”, much like American farmers discuss corn yield. But it must be noted that all this “aging” has absolutely no effect on the smell generated when the stove is stoked with this product. It’s haunting.

## Eats and Drinks

The “road fare” while traveling is usually “fried noodle with mutton”. The propensity of mutton here is odd since we saw more goats along the road. All those mutton meals leaves the traveler with the thought that perhaps “mutton” is Mongolian for ‘meat’; which would include goat, sheep, cow, camel, yak, pika squirrel, skunk and even horse...yet when mixed with fried noodles, it all tastes the same; and universally not heart-friendly. There were occasional variants; mutton soup, “buuz” a steamed dumpling with mutton, or fried mutton dumplings, but those were unexpected road-side treats which happened about as much as hot showers.

Upon entering a nomadic community, the customs dictate that we sit with the host family and partake in the local drink with snacks. This usually takes the form of a fermented drink along with some unusual and impossibly dry cheese. The fermentation process usually takes place in large plastic kegs, with an occasional stirring with a stick or a kick to prevent improper clotting. There was goat, mare, yak, and cow variants of both drink and snack; each an acquired taste that I have yet to acquire. Occasionally they come across with yogurt which was OK, and the yak-based products are better than most, probably because a yak sort of looks like a cow. To my sensitive palate drinking Gobi mare’s milk was equivalent to sipping sour milk while being slapped in the face.

## **Birthday Wishes**

So on the fourth day of the first adventure, I turned 52. Somehow this came out in normal conversation, probably because the guide thought I was closer to 80 than 50. The day before we were out in the Gobi desert and just finished our camel ride when the “Gobi Princess”, this adorable four year-old ducked into my ger with one of those cone-shaped birthday hats with the elastic string. She offered it up, then looked confused and ran away. She returned a minute later with her hands out, so I thought she wanted it back...but then ran away again. On the third attempt, she finally got the instructions correct and uttered “tomorrow” before running off; so I knew something was up.

With the coming dawn, I dutifully put on my party hat and went to breakfast, an open-air affair out in the Gobi. All the camera phones came out laughs all around and I felt the celebrity for a bit, which was nice. After the meal, we began loading the vans and I grabbed a handful of candy to reward the “princess” for the use of her hat. Entering the family ger, I was instantly welcomed by the elder camel-herder who motioned me to the ground where he was sitting. I offered chocolate, he offered Chinggis Gold vodka, from a bottle kept in a hole in the ground. I thought, “OK, one shot won’t hurt, it’s my birthday”, but it was a new bottle and I had sat down with a professional in such matters. Out came this ornate silver goblet and away went my morning. The two of us swapped hand gestures; he spoke no English which was WAY better than my Mongolian but somehow we managed to put away that bottle in short order. I made a valiant effort to stand up, but my host excitedly uttered “gift” so I sort of felt obligated to hang around to see what it was...and to my surprise, he reached down into that same hole and came up with another bottle. At this point I was almost seeing a blurry version of my life pass before me, but thankfully my “Bata-mates” came looking for me. Soon all of us were partaking in that second bottle of vodka from that same silver goblet. By 10am the bottles were gone and so were we; bumping and swaying in the van, before Bata even started the engine. We would travel to the Flaming Cliffs that day and even squeeze in a hot shower before dinner, which helped a lot. After dinner the drivers produced another bottle of vodka, but by now we were all of the sipping mode, though it was clear that Bata had literally “been down this road before” and helped put a major dent in the bottle, before returning to that night’s task; replacing the starter on the “Bata-mobile”.

As the Milky Way made it’s nightly appearance in the inky-black sky, I set up my camera for a long-timed exposure and thought about how non-standard my life had become; being over-served, in a ger, with a herder, seemed oddly appropriate for this point in my life, and with a final click of the shutter, my fifty-second birthday came to a close.

## **Returning**

Arriving back at Sunpath, I was a “returner” eager for a bed, a shower and laundry. True to form, I had stories to share with the arrivers and a hankering for a meal not based on mutton.

Following my tour in the Gobi and Central Mongolia, I took a week with a friend to visit Lake Hovsgol, requiring a pair of rolling-hell, sixteen-hour bus rides not soon to be forgotten. Then it was a three-week

expedition to the north, visiting reindeer people (I thought they might be actually wearing antlers, but they were just herders with reindeer) and an arduous “adventure” out west to attend the 17th annual “Golden Eagle Festival”.

### **The “Shoot” of My Life**

The Golden Eagle festival was the most “productive” shoot of my life. Holding my 24-105mm lens, I quickly saw I was severely ‘outgunned’ when compared to the optic arsenal brandished by the pro’s standing around me. But after a bit of fumbling, I got dialed in and began finding my line and firing away.

Mongols are predominantly clean-shaven, so a guy sporting a long white beard definitely drew the attention of the locals, and my decision to wear shorts with the weather in the 50’s also piqued some fancy. I literally “capped” off my appearance by donning an improvised “Santa” hat which seemed to amuse the kids and their parents, and giving the Mongol gossips fodder for their campfires. The lens was able to capture the hunter’s jovial nature along with some pretty fantastic wardrobes in a single click. I say “seem” since I’ve only seen the images briefly as I was backing them up yesterday...but I think I have enough material to work with. The total number of shots on the first day of the festival was around 1,400. On the second day, the hunters were more hung-over than we were and I probably posed for more pictures in front of the lens than I took behind it.

There were several events going on simultaneously each day, archery, eagle calling, the “hunter/eagle beauty pageant which is never without controversy; wrapped up by the crowd pleasing “Eagle Hunter’s Tug-o-War”. So you’ve got this beheaded sheep’s carcass. They sew up the open end, lest the participants soil their impeccable wardrobe. Each of two mounted hunters is given a leg to hold onto as they wait for the whistle. At the tweet both try to dislodge the other from their grasp of the communal carcass. Usually there were just a few opportune twists to declare a winner, but one match literally went into the stands, horses, riders and the sheep, but luckily I wasn’t standing there.

### **A Word about Poo**

In the countryside, defined by any place in Mongolia NOT UlaanBaator, there is poo. The land in Mongolia is all free to graze for the nomads, on a daily basis there are herds of sheep, goat, camel, yak, horse and cows crossing the road..all these animals graze and process a lot of grass. A few short beeps get them to clear the lane, but there’s no escaping the poop quotient out there. A sliding scale was developed to help assess the poop level of various places. A city like Ulaan would score like a 1.8..meaning mostly concrete with occasional poop. The Kazak ger camps of western Mongolia would push more like an 8 or 9, which would be mostly poop with some occasional gravel. Suffice to say, you don’t see many people tip-toeing thru the tulips in Mongolia.

### **Things to know about Mongolia:**

The nomads don't bake

Paved roads are over-rated. The WAZoo drivers each had a sense of which dirt path was the correct one. Perhaps they remember from last time, or perhaps there's a hidden GPS, but to travel 4,000kms and NOT get misplaced is really something.

There are pretzels there, but the tagline on them is "Gut and Gunstig" – They are neither

The base currency is the Tugrik. There are 2,250 to the \$USD. The smallest bill I have seen is the 5. It is virtually impossible to get rid of notes smaller than 100, yet your change is ALWAYS given in smaller bills. I'd love to say the one with the most money wins, but this is not the case.

Airag is fermented mare's milk. Shad Airag (yellow mare's milk) is actually beer. DON'T get these confused.

You don't come to Mongolia to lose weight; you'd think the fried foods and fatty mutton solidify cardiac surgeon retirement plans throughout the country, but the Mongolian physique is a lean slender one... I am so jealous.

### **Final thoughts:**

Don't come to Mongolia expecting first-world communication or accommodation.

Things don't happen with the efficiency of a German train schedule; it's called "TIM" (this is Mongolia).. Tourism in Mongolia is in its infancy so come to have an adventure and enjoy every quirk and bump along the road. Pavement is for sissies.

I got driven the airport by the same guy who picked me up, and we cranked the Mongolian House Music all the way, and that too is probably as it should be.

While this narrative is an attempt to describe the experience, the fact is that over 200,000 people visit Mongolia each year. Yes, they endure the roads, the fatty foods and other modest discomforts to be exposed to:

A land whose raw beauty seems limitless

A free and open vista, not marred by cell-phone towers and fences

An experience so complete that you stop caring what time it is, or even forget you're wearing a watch

A place where every ger you visit comes with a warm reception by nomads happy to see another face

A land where you communicate more with hand and facial gestures than words

A place with reindeer, camels, eagles and yaks and sheep all roaming freely

Where you feel like the first person to see the sun rise and set each day

A place so quiet, you CAN hear a birds wings flap

In a world where we're constantly "connecting" and experiences are more like YouTube clips; canned and over-processed for general consumption, Mongolia offers a place:

To disconnect

To discover

To get "lost"

To have an adventure

To reset yourself

In Mongolia, there I was...

BienThere.com Travelogue