



a place in time

Stanley Stewart revisits the Mongolian steppes of his past and loses himself again in a world of wild horses, chain-smoking shamans, and the haunting songs of nomads

Photographs by Alistair Taylor-Young



In Bayan-Ölgii,
a province in
Western Mongolia,
a nomadic family
moves their ger,
by horse and
camel, to a new
winter pasture



W

hen people ask me what is my favorite place in the wide world of places to which I have traveled, there is never any hesitation. I love Mongolia so much that I once spent five months crossing a thousand miles of it on horseback, the baggage horse loaded with a rattling collection of

gear, from a temperamental stove to a rapidly disappearing bottle of whiskey. I wrote a book about the journey that was translated into a dozen languages. I fell in love with a Mongolian, an intense affair that unwound over years. It ended two decades ago. She has moved on, wisely. But Mongolia is still there. And it was time to go back.

From the air, the emptiness is always startling. Flying over Mongolia before dawn, I saw no lights below, just unfolding landscapes: a spooling river, a range of mountains surging across steppelands, an empire of grass tipping to undisturbed horizons. Only Greenland and the Falkland Islands have a lower population density. The one sign of habitation were the occasional encampments of round white yurts, known here as gers, which appear suddenly and mysteriously in the grasslands like overnight mushrooms. In a few weeks they will vanish and spring up elsewhere, leaving no

trace other than pale circles on the grass as the nomads move to winter pastures. Mongolia is the world's last truly nomadic realm.

I landed in Ulan Bator, Mongolia's capital and its only real city. With traffic that would shame Manhattan and one of the highest pollution levels in the world, it seemed the antithesis of the country over which it presides. I got out of town as quickly as I could and entered into a landscape that might have been carved by the wind.

I didn't have five months this time. The plan was to spend 10 days in the country, visiting a couple of regions with a driver, a guide, and my photographer friend, Alistair Taylor-Young, to whom I had been enthusing about Mongolia for years. My Mongolian calendar for the trip was surprisingly full. I had an appointment with a shaman. I planned to search for wild horses and visit eagle hunters. In between, I would look for myself, for my connection to this place, for what drew me here, for who I had been all those years ago.

We began at the beginning, among the wild horses and standing stones of Khustain Nuruu National Park. Mongolia was home to the Przewalski's Horse, known in Mongolia as the takhi, the only authentically wild horses left on Earth. But by the 1960s these short and thick-chested creatures had become extinct in the wild. Then in 1992, using stock from zoos, breeders successfully reintroduced them to their homeland in this park.

In Khustain's high valleys, deer stones, so named for the carvings they bear of prehistoric hooved animals, stand knee-deep in thickets



Clockwise, from far left:
 Visitor gers
 at Mandala Altai
 camp; Serir,
 one of the guides
 on this trip,
 entering a typical
 Kazakh ger;
 in Khustain Nuruu
 National Park,
 a handmade
 roadside sign
 warns of crossing
 deer; sheep
 grazing under
 a heavy sky a few
 hours outside
 Ulan Bator

of grass. Roughly the height of a man, the stones are the only visible remnants of a little-known culture that inhabited this landscape up to 4,000 years ago. I scanned the hills with binoculars. High on the slopes I could see a herd of red deer moving toward the ridgeline. With the protection of rangers, Khustain has become a sanctuary for them. They are vulnerable to poaching; deer penis is sought after in traditional Chinese medicine.

Then I spotted the horses, a tawny-colored group, females and foals under the command of a single stallion. I suddenly felt I was peering into the Bronze Age. Horses are the central fact of Mongolian history. Their domestication on these steppes created powerful nomadic empires; prompted the building of the Great Wall by the Chinese, who were anxious about invasion; and carried the armies of Genghis Khan to the walls of Vienna in the 13th century.

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Later, on the banks of the Tuul River, where a pair of whooper swans glided beneath willows, we stopped at a ger where a bow-legged woman was milking a restive mob of Mongolian horses. The milking of both yaks and horses is a tricky business, requiring a firm hand and cool nerves; the consensus in Mongolia is that women do a better job at it.

Inside the ger, a young woman served us bowls of fermented mare's milk, known as airag, a kind of sour milky beer that is Mongolia's chief tipple. Our host, warming his toes by the stove, was 90 years old. His face was a map. I asked him to tell me what he thought were Mongolia's best years. I was hoping he would reflect on the country's history. Mongolia was the second communist nation. It had spent 70 years as a satellite of the Soviet Union. Capitalism had arrived with a thud in 1990. "The 1930s," he said, looking at me with rheumy eyes. I asked why. "Because I was boy in those years."

We traveled westward, crossing a low pass to a wide plain where sunlight and cloud chased each other across the dun-colored grasses. On a ridge above a silver stream we found the shaman's camp. Crows swirled upward above a ger. Inside was the shaman, Amarjargal, a woman in her 50s.

Shamanism has a tenacious hold on the Mongolian imagination. Even as the country became Buddhist in the 16th century, the herds-men found solace in its reassuring rituals and its promise of contact with the spirit world. In the 21st century, the dramatic changes of the modern world in such a traditional society have inspired a revival of shamanism. Amarjargal's day was packed, but she agreed to make time to perform a "beckoning," a calling upon the spirits, for me.

While her husband lit cones of incense, Amarjargal donned the

shaman's headdress, known as an umsgol. It had a screen of hair that concealed her eyes and much of her face, and was adorned with eagle feathers. Seated in front of her husband, who seemed to act as both manager and roadie, she began to strum a mouth harp. The single repetitive note slowly built to a frantic pace, then suddenly subsided as a spirit entered her, taking over her body. Head bowed, she growled. A low animal sound filled the ger. Her husband lit a cigarette and handed it to her. After a couple of moments, he lit another. The spirit turned out to be a chain-smoker.

After three more Marlboros, Amarjargal's husband turned to ask me what I wished to know. I wasn't sure what to say. I had no idea there was going to be a question and answer session. I hemmed. I hawed. The spirit world was waiting. Amarjargal's spirit was growling again. Finally I blurted out, "Will I have a successful journey?

What should I expect?"

Amarjargal tensed like an animal, crouched on the mat, with puffs of cigarette smoke coming out from beneath the headdress. Then the spirit spoke, sounding eerily like Marlon Brando. "You will find nothing on this journey. What you need is to be found at home."

After a couple more butts and some additional frenzied mouth harp action, the spirit departed whence it came. Suddenly I did have questions, lots of them. Why hadn't I asked about life after death, sent greetings to a deceased relative, or at the very least gotten a hot tip for Mongolia's Naadam horse races? Slumped now at the head of the ger, Amarjargal looked depleted. She had removed the headdress. The spirit was gone, and after a few pleasantries, so were we.

Two days later, I flew west to Bayan-Ölgii in a propeller plane full of passengers carrying saddles and blankets. From the airfield, we set off in a four-by-four, passing a herd of shaggy yaks looking mournful on the edge of a lake. Camels appeared, strolling elegantly in loping slow motion, like elderly promenaders. For several miles we followed a river winding through a gravel floodplain, then ascended over low hills and looked down on a wide valley carpeted with yellow grass. Stopping the car, we climbed out. In the middle of the valley was a single ger with a smoking chimney. At the far end, their backs to sculptural outcrops of black rock, were five more: This was Mandala Altai, our home for the next four days. It felt splendidly remote, a place removed from the world's complexities and our own petty struggles. On a far hillside I could see the miniature figure of a horseman. Even at this great distance, I could hear the soft murmur of the hooves.

With their womblike embrace, gers are the accommodation of choice in Mongolia. While maintaining the atmosphere of the nomads' tents, the visitors' version across the country has reached a level of glamping luxury that is surprising in such remote regions. Furnished with patterned Mongolian chests and tables, Mandala Altai had beds piled with luxury linens. Each ger is centered around

A herd of Mongolian
horses kept for
milking and breeding
crosses a valley
near Mandala Altai
in Bayan-Ölgii





Clockwise from left: After school, a young girl and her little sister pause their playing for a photo; the writer heads to his ger to escape the frigid wind; a local shop in the village of Altantsugts in Western Mongolia

Opposite page: An eagle hunter practices with his three-year-old golden eagle



a woodburning stove; in the early mornings an attendant would creep in to light it so the tent was cozy when we awoke. An adjoining ger acted as a spacious bathroom with hot water, an elegant open shower, and a compost loo. A central dining ger was the setting for evening aperitifs and lavish meals.

In the morning we went to visit our neighbors, the area's only other inhabitants, who lived in a single ger in the middle of the valley, a quarter of a mile off. A couple of horses were tethered outside. Sitting on perches close to the ger were two magnificent golden eagles. Western Mongolia is home to the Kazakhs, a Muslim minority, who have a long tradition of hunting with eagles. Inside the ger we met the eagle hunter, Tastulekh.

When I asked how he acquired his eagles, he described climbing the face of a cliff to an eagle nest and choosing a female chick from the brood, all the while fending off the mother—a creature with a wingspan of almost seven feet and a curved flesh-ripping bill—as if talking about a visit to Walmart. But he was not unsentimental. The Kazakhs say an eagle is a member of the family. When the birds reach about six or seven years of age, their keepers release them into the wild again. Tastulekh was in mourning. One of the birds outside, whom he had raised from a chick, was due to be released soon.

In this landscape, the weather is unpredictable. One night, winter came. I woke to hear winds singing in the ropes of the ger

and wolves howling from the ridge behind us. In the morning, snowdrifts were banked around the tents beneath a slate-colored sky. We had a breakfast of warm sweet porridge and mugs of coffee, and then set off on horses, riding south into a newly white world.

On horseback again, I remembered the delight of my previous journey and the way it had stripped away all the measures of self—ambitions, fears, desires, all the nagging preoccupations. In the immense solitude of Mongolia, I had felt liberated. I had been content with the physical sensation of the present—the contours of a sloping valley, the way the light fell on a distant lake, the sense of movement, the horses jerking their heads. Now, once again, life was reduced to these delightful simplicities, and to that rare feeling: that this was enough, that I didn't need anything else.



In the evening we were all invited to dinner with Tastulekh. The photographer and I, our guides, the drivers, and the cook from our camp were all seated in the warm embrace of his ger. The tent had that wonderful aroma of Mongolia—of butter and mutton, of dung fires and horses. Saddles were piled by the door, and bridles hung from the rafters. A sheep had been slaughtered. The entrails—deemed to be the best parts—were bubbling in a pot on the stove.

We ate with our hands. You reached in, never sure what you would pull out. Among the innards and the great slab of white tail fat was the sheep's head, balefully gazing up at me. As the guest of honor, I was instructed to cut off the cheeks and pass them to the other guests. Then I was told to cut off the ears and give them as a treat to the children; this is thought to help them listen to their parents.

After the meal, Tastulekh and his wife, Guljan, asked if I would bless their child Tanerbergen, who was not yet one. Apparently the parents thought me a model citizen and believed that whatever good fortune I had enjoyed might mysteriously be transferred to the child. I thought it was probably not the moment to mention the missed mortgage payments or the habit of procrastination. A long sinew of intestine was fetched out of the remaining broth and wrapped around little Tanerbergen's legs. I made a speech full of gallantries and then cut the intestinal ribbon as if I was opening a rec center, and Tanerbergen set sail into the future buoyed by my good wishes.

After dinner, the Chinggis Khan vodka came out, followed by the

tovshuur, a two-stringed Mongolian lute. One by one the nomads' voices filled the ger with haunting songs. The most beautiful singer was Guljan, the eagle hunter's wife. She sat on a low stool, looking down at her hands folded in her lap, and voiced tales about birds flying away at the end of the summer. The changing of the season is the height of the nomad year, a time of festivals and family gatherings before the days draw in, the migrations begin, and the hardships of the winter pastures return.

Later, after the songs and the toasts, the laughter and the speeches and the greasy plate of entrails, I stepped outside. The wind had died. In the moonlight, Mongolia ran away into her infinities, armored now with that fresh fall of snow. In the distance, rising against the stars, was a ragged range of mountains. No lights showed anywhere. In monochrome twilight the great sweep of landscape seemed empty, as if it were newly made, as if we were the first people to have arrived, as if it belonged to no one. In these illusions, in this startling emptiness, all of life's baggage fell away. This was the Mongolia I sought. ●

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