

## The Big Five – Mongolia Style

Dear Friends and Family,

October, 2014

50 million animals and 3 million people live in Mongolia according to our guide, and half the people live in the capital, Ulaan Baatar (UB). The “big five” here are not the same as in Africa – here they are horses, Bactrians (2-humped camels), cows/yaks, sheep and goats. In this country, roughly the same size as Alaska, once outside UB one is almost never out of sight of freely roaming animals



and the only evidence that there are people around is the occasional round ger (the portable dwelling of the nomadic herders) and a herdsman on horseback (or motorbike) moving the animals along to fresh pastures.



More Mongolians actually live in the Inner Mongolia Semi-Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. One thing that really surprised me is that the animals are not used for transport – i.e. pulling carts and wagons like in so many other countries I have visited. In two weeks we saw maybe only a couple of horse-drawn wagons and no donkeys. In addition to the Big Five there is also a significant bird population, especially raptors and water birds in the



numerous lakes and rivers.

I particularly appreciated the yaks, which I had not seen since Nepal, and the goat from which



your cashmere garments derive.

Travel outside UB has until recently been on dirt tracks “pistes” but gradually the government is working to develop paved roads connecting the provincial capitals. These are mostly being built by Chinese construction companies using Chinese labor, a source of irritation for Mongolians who have a rather high unemployment rate. 250 kilometers (150 miles) is a full travel day in a 4x4 vehicle in most regions. But the scenery is so stunning with constantly changing vistas that you really don't want to rush along.

Small towns en route usually occurred where there was an employment center, often mining or agricultural processing. Families are now permitted to petition to buy a plot of land, 1.7

hectares in size, and you see these fenced and expanding around the former core of the town.



They contain either a ger, or a house (multi-colored roofs), or both. Also, periodically along the routes there will be a settlement of travelers' services, mostly for eating and refueling.



For some reason the writers of Lonely Planet Mongolia seemed very negative regarding the food – perhaps they are vegetarians? For sure meat dominates the cuisine, but well-prepared in a variety of methods. Fried khuushur (a pierogi-like pastry filled either with chopped meat and spices or vegetables) or steamed dumplings known as buuz normally sufficed for the evening meal while the hearty mid-day meal usually consisted of a soup to start (often filling enough to be a meal in itself) followed by a meat course accompanied by at least two vegetables and perhaps boiled dough, finished off by a dessert of fruit. The Mongolians' beverage of choice is milk tea which is made by adding milk and a pinch of salt to black tea and boiling it.

Late fall is the major slaughter so that meat can be smoked or otherwise preserved to last through the winter. Apparently although the temperatures are very cold the snows are not normally terribly deep, so some grazing still occurs. We saw haying taking place and being



transported to see the animals through the winter. Often in our landscape we would see basic shelters for the animals up against the lee of the hillsides.

Our two week itinerary took us north and west of UB, the furthest distance being Lake Hovsgol. Geologically this is a smaller, younger sister to Lake Baikal 195 miles northeast in Siberia. Lake Baikal, formed 25 million years ago at 400 miles long and up to one mile deep contains 20% of the planet's unfrozen fresh water, approximately equal to the combined volumes of the Great Lakes. Lake Hovsgol is not nearly so deep, maxing out at about 750' deep with 1-2% of the



planet's fresh water. It is surrounded by hills largely forested by pine and larch, the same taiga as in Siberia. We were just a bit too early to see the larch in their bright yellow autumn glory. And, sadly, the pine forests are suffering from a blight for which no cure has as yet been discovered. All forms of water sports are available here as well as great hiking, horseback riding (on the famed Mongolian horses) and trekking on horseback. Three separate ethnic groups populate this

region, the Darkhad, Buryat (who extend to Lake Baikal and Ulan Ude in Siberia) and the Tsaatan also known as the reindeer people who live in teepees rather than gers. Shamanism rather than Buddhism is the religion here.

There were some extinct volcanoes along our route which provided different vistas, including lava fields, plus hiking to view the craters.



We visited another lake, Clear Lake, which was just that and you could see the tourist ger camps (our preferred accommodation) gathered around the lake as well as the typical “piste” roads.



The ger measures ~20' in diameter and other than having to stoop through a low entry door is amply tall for tall people to stand comfortably. Furnished to accommodate 2-4 people each

they have a small wood-burning “summer stove” which is used every evening and morning to take away the chill and damp. The door always faces south away from the prevailing winds.



A separate building houses toilets and showers, sometimes with solar-heated water. There is a structure for communal dining, in our case usually breakfast and dinner since most days we were on the road for the noon meal, sometimes a picnic, often with company.



The tourist ger camps are seasonal and are packed away and stored for the winter with the operators moving to town leaving only a security guard behind. The nomads normally move 2 – 4 times per year to pasture their animals, and a ger can be transported on a camel, although more often these days on a truck. These days they are likely to have the comforts of solar power and satellite dishes.

Our itinerary did not include the Gobi desert so we were very fortunate to encounter a herd of Bactrians on our second day, just before running into a severe hailstorm that coated the surrounding hills white. The country must be equally beautiful when wearing its winter white.



Later in the trip we were in a region where the desert, the steppe and the taiga zones touch each other and here we took the obligatory camel ride. The Bactrians walk like the

Dromedaries with the two feet on the same side moving together creating the sideways rocking motion earning the title of ships of the desert. Having a hump fore and aft, however, was a much more comfortable riding experience for me.



There are many rivers in the country, and in the northern region where the forests predominate you see buildings constructed from logs, as well as fruit orchards.



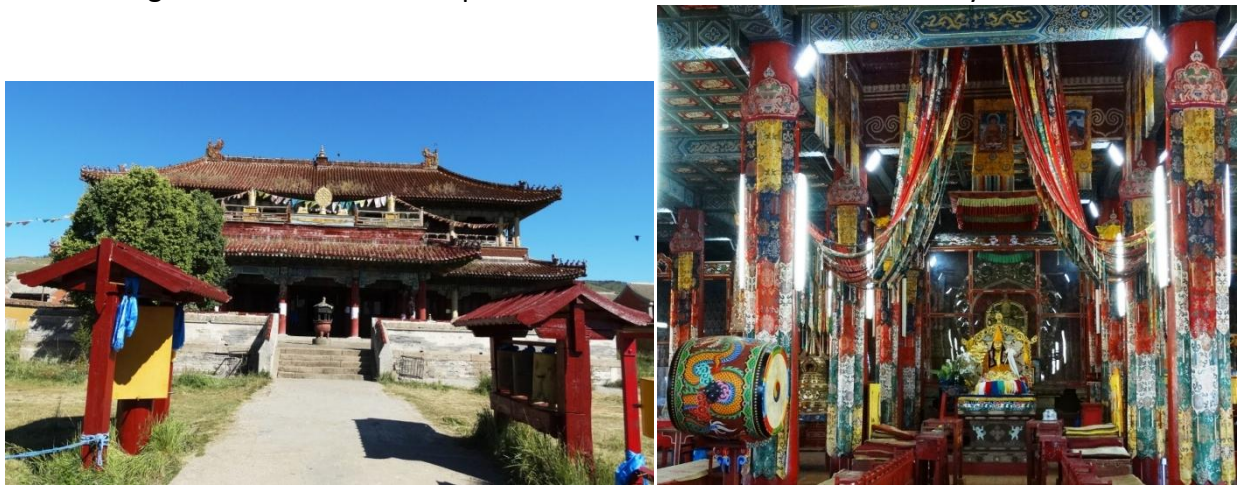
The Buddhist religion was banned during the Communist years with most monasteries destroyed during the 1930's and the monks either killed or sent to gulags. However some historic sites remain, and the religion is actively practiced today. All along the roadside are seen ovoos, piles of scarves, where stupas are seen visited had monks ages as well. One visited at the Erdene was briefly the capital



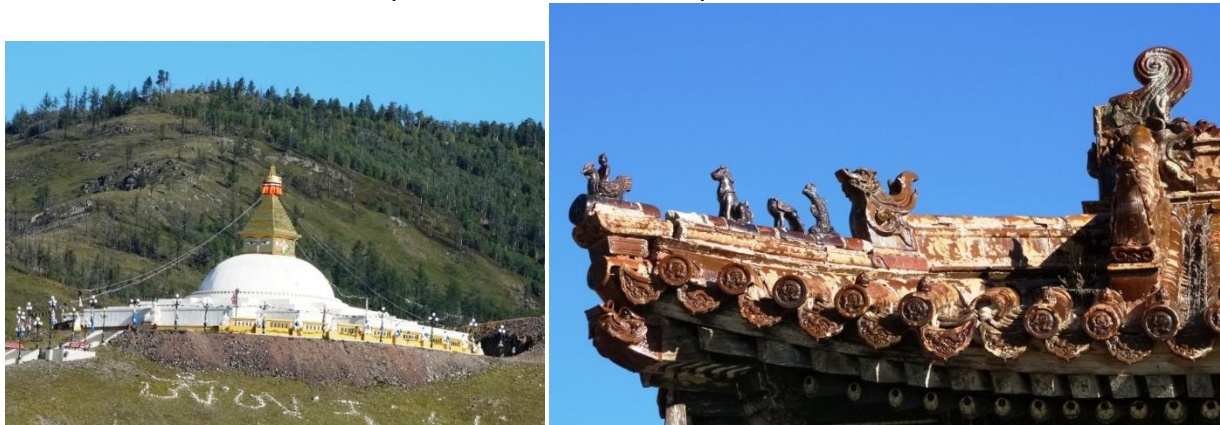
rocks or teepee-like poles draped with prayer travelers stop for good luck, and Tibetan-style frequently on hilltops. The monasteries I from young to old and worshippers of varying beautiful, Tibetan-style monastery can be Zuu Monastery complex in Kharkhorin, which of the Mongolian empire in the 13<sup>th</sup> C.



Amarbayasgalant Khiid was built between 1727 and 1737 by a Manchu emperor and dedicated to the Mongolian Buddhist and sculptor Zanabazar and is in the Manchu style.



Recent additions include a stupa and Buddha statue up the hill.



Another which escaped destruction is in the provincial capital of Tsetserleg. It houses an excellent museum of the region. Behind it, mounting the Bulgan Uul rocky hill to the Golden Zuu temple and a 7 meter high standing Buddha is a recent addition known as the Divine



Enlightenment Achievement Lane. Also in Tsetserleg was a handicrafts cooperative that had been assisted by USAID where I bought some souvenirs.

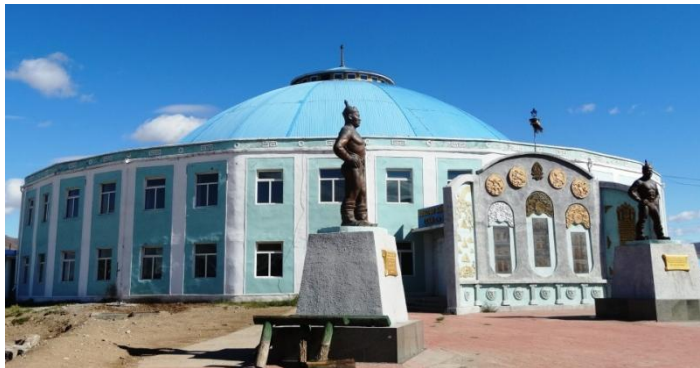


This is a very rich region for paleontologists as attested to by the wide variety of dinosaurs from 70 to 80 million years ago displayed in the Central Museum of Mongolian Dinosaurs in UB and for archeologists with the burial mounds and Bronze-age deer stones of a more recent period (2500 to 4000 years old) found in several regions.



Most anthropologists agree that the Mongols and Native Alaskan Americans are of the same stock with the Alaskans having crossed the Bering land bridge 10-20,000 years ago.

Wrestling is THE national sport with competitions starting at the local level and culminating in national champions. The three top ranking Japanese Sumo wrestling champions are currently Mongolians. In the provincial capitals there are memorials to champions who came from the province alongside the wrestling arena. Another interesting sport involves flicking a small “ankle bone” from a sitting position using the middle finger to an ankle bone target thirty feet away. I watched a man patiently practicing, preparing for next year’s Naadam, the three day festival of traditional Mongolian sports. Several other games are also played with ankle bones, no doubt whiling away long winter days in the gers.



UB actually has quite nice modern architecture, including this landmark building “Blue Sky”. When in UB on a Saturday we were treated to the sight of many wedding parties on the main square below the statue of Ghengis Khan. The brides wore white, and the attendants western-style gowns, but many of the family members were wearing traditional Mongolian clothing. Each wedding party seemed to have about a quarter hour to take their photos. It reminded me of a similar tradition in Chisinau, Moldova where the brides lay their bouquets at the foot of the statue of Stephen the Great, the 15<sup>th</sup> C Moldovan ruler who withstood Ottoman Turk advances.



In the History of the State museum we were able to understand the history of the Mongol empire, which at its peak controlled the largest single land mass of any empire in history. During the advance of the Mongols Genghis Khan would send ahead a messenger with a golden gerenge, about 8" long. If the messenger returned alive with a welcome message the area was



welcomed into the Empire. If not, it was added by force.

We had a chance on our final night to attend a performance of traditional music, dance and



theater, including throat singing.

A highlight of the trip was a visit to see the takhi, the wild horse that was extinct in the wild in the 1960's but approximately a dozen existed in zoos around the world. Following a carefully managed breeding program that population increased to about 1500. From 1992 after Mongolian independence until 2004 the horses were re-introduced to the wild in three protected areas in Mongolia. To see the horses, which live in small family units of one stallion

and his mares and foals, you wait until sunset when the horses start to descend from the rocky high ground where they live, to the streams in the valleys. They are a genetically distinct species and considered the forerunner of the modern horse. While waiting for the horses we were also treated to a close-up view of a marmot, which are also endangered from hunting.



After the wide open spaces, it was a shock to return to UB's traffic jams! But, I will always



remember the Mongolian people.

The objective of the next phase of my trip was to travel by train to Vladivostok where I would take a ferry to South Korea.

First step was a sleeper coach overnight from UB to Ulan Ude (UU) in Siberia, just east of Lake Baikal. My compartment-mate was a Mongolian merchant lady whose wares (mostly Mongolian leather goods) consumed much of the volume of the 4-person second class compartment, known as a kupe. She kept re-packing items long after I and the other female occupant fell asleep. I awoke to a beautiful sunrise, I didn't think we were in Russia yet, but the train station toilet minders wanted payment in rubles, and I was able to exchange the last of my Mongolian Turgits, probably at a horrible exchange rate. Each rail car has a samovar kept constantly hot for making tea or noodles, except for right then. When I got off the train to use the toilet I realized we were 2 Mongolian sleeper cars on the track, attached to nothing and no longer with our car conductor (who keeps the Samovar going). Fortunately I still had a couple remaining "power bars" which I ate for breakfast. According to the posted schedule we arrived at 5:12 am and would be there for 288 minutes. I am extrapolating, because all train schedule times in Russia are given in Moscow time and one has to adjust accordingly, if you know what time zone you are in. The merchant lady left the train here with all her product, the last two boxes of which appeared to be Chinese imports from which she removed all the tags before stowing them into her onward-bound giant 4'x4' cases. After about 3 hours a switcher engine attached to us and took us two more stops, one a log cabin station (still with the Mongolian



flag), the second, "5 km station". This is apparently the Russian frontier control point, no photography of course. Passport/visa checkers; an inspector for contraband (at least we didn't have to change undercarriage due to different gauges like going from Ukraine to Poland); inspector with drug-sniffing dogs; lady inspectors confirming that we were within the luggage allowance limit; and, somewhere my passport got stamped and I got a departure card to guard until my departure from Russia ten days later. After this, another long wait, fortunately this station also had toilets (10 rubles to use versus 5 rubles previously) and nearby a small shop where I bought water and more packaged noodle meals. Eventually five passenger cars were attached to us, and ultimately an engine, and at 2:30 pm local time (or 9 hours after originally being detached) we were on our way again, destination Ulan Ude in Siberia.

I arrived, made it to my hotel at 10 pm – bad news, no elevator, but the room was clean and the restaurant open until 11 pm – with a menu in Russian and Chinese. I found something with the Russian word for chicken, ordered it and a Tuborg dark beer. I was happy!

You know you are in Russia when: there are no porters for your luggage at either the train station or the hotel (we should be self-sufficient, right? i.e. the opposite of India where porters will carry gigantic loads for pennies, or Asia's deference to/assistance to the elderly); the Opera

House and adjacent fountain plaza is the most beautiful building in town with classical music playing constantly; there are government buildings everywhere, including a gigantic head of



Lenin, 25' tall, largest in the world; my businessman's hotel staff are fluent in Chinese but no English; and the sculptures on top of buildings are of workers, not lions or angels.



Ulan Ude is very interesting, with a good history museum of the region (related ethnically to Mongolia). There is no information at the information desk at the train station, i.e. how do I exchange my voucher for a ticket for the train that departs at 4:18 a.m.? – just the lady using sign language, show up at 3 a.m. – at which time there are more police and security staff than passengers getting on the train that departed from Moscow 3 days earlier. This is a massive

staging area for with lots of coal other fuels. This just shows a small of the station And this was the throughout the – the train is a



trains, and photo portion area. case four days major

part of Russian logistics, with massive amounts of rolling stock seen throughout the system.

In addition to the historic wooden merchant houses in UU from the late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> C with



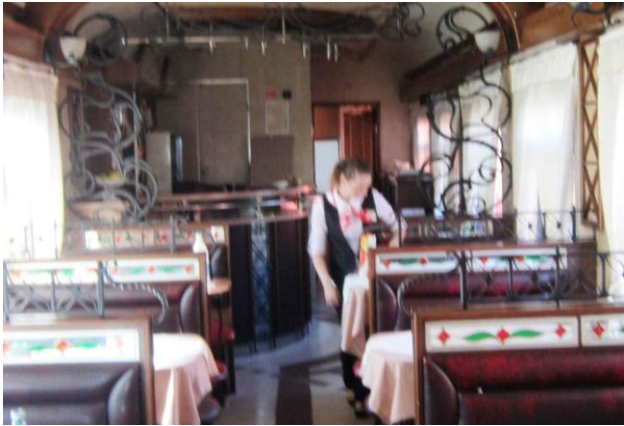
their beautiful detailed workmanship (which I saw more modest examples of as we traveled through the countryside), I visited the Russian Orthodox Odigitrievsky Cathedral, which was the first stone building in UU and is considered a Baroque architectural monument, but devoid of the normal internal decoration; and the Ivolginsky Buddhist Monastery outside of town which is



the center of Russian Buddhism, built new in 1945. I passed many other new Buddhist monasteries as we drove around UU. There is an excellent outdoor ethnographic museum (worth the price of the taxi ride) where I visited a typical early 20<sup>th</sup> C orthodox church with its iconostasis. As I couldn't find any of the Russian restaurants recommended in my (outdated) guidebook excerpts, I opted for Mongolian food at Modern Nomads, a chain we had enjoyed in UB. And, as it turns out, this is the typical local food of this region.



So, six minutes late at 4:24 a.m. I departed Ulan Ude at kilometer 5,640 on the Rossiya, Train #2 of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. This sleeper car, same kupe design as before, seemed to have holding tanks for the toilets, so they thankfully remained operational when we were stopped at the stations. I later realized that the first class sleeper cars did not! We had a restaurant car. Although I had anticipated vendors at the stops, most of the station stops were only for 2 minutes or so, so we only had them at one stop.



It was difficult to take photos from the moving train through dusty windows. The vistas: open spaces – but no animals!;





taiga forest here includes a lot of birch trees and more fall color as we are further north; and



usually following along a river. But, I missed the crossing of the great Amur river at Khavarovsk because it was before dawn and foggy when we crossed the 2.6 km trestle, the longest bridge in the Trans-Siberian rail system. This is the longest undammed river in the eastern hemisphere at 9000 kms. Its headwaters are in northeastern Mongolia and it forms a natural border between China and the Russian Federation for much of its route.

My kupe-mate introduced herself with an SMS in English! So began the use of translating software to communicate for the rest of the trip in Russia and South Korea!

The train stations were impressive, often with art work.



My car conductor loaned me a nice mug to enjoy my tea, and there was more interesting scenery along the route.



On the last afternoon we travelled south along inland waterways with many active recreation areas (it is Saturday). A lovely older Russian lady, not using translation software, makes sure I don't miss the best photo shots! And, finally, we arrive in Vladivostok. It is a hilly city with water vistas everywhere, especially from all the high rise residential buildings. Since most of the tourist sites have to do with military history, and after 4 days on the train, my objective is to

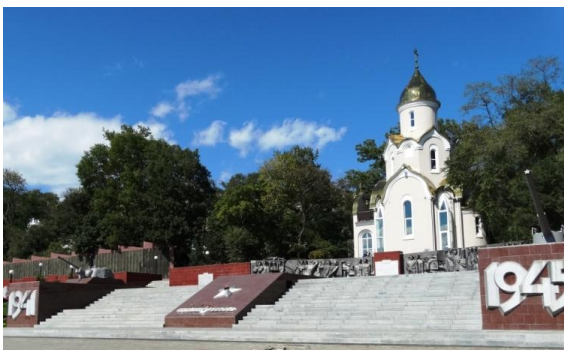
walk and enjoy the views and architecture, which still includes quite a few classical Russian



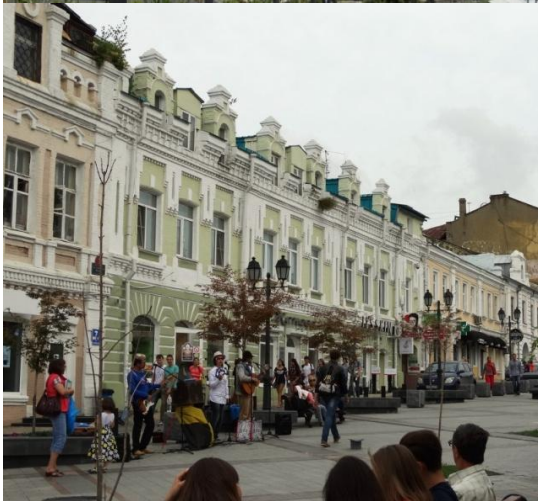
buildings from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> C (including the family home of Yul Brynner before they emigrated at the time of the Russian Revolution) as well as two new cable-braced bridges, a



design I really appreciate. The major commercial bay is known as Golden Horn with all types of maritime shipping and navy activity and the memorial to WWII which includes St Andrews chapel and a submarine, S-56.



On the other side of downtown is Sports Harbor with an aquarium, a massive sports facility (pools, gyms, etc), the fort museum, and lots of pedestrian facilities, snacks and water sports



accessed by a lively pedestrian street. I also appreciated some humor in the art and some unusual high fashion.





I was able to find some traditional Russian food at Nostalgia Restaurant near my hotel as well as



to enjoy pizza from the two rival pizza chefs. Interestingly, coffee shops seem to have taken over Russia, whereas before I remember Russians being tea drinkers. But all the youth are in the coffee café's with their laptops and smart phones.

The beautiful train station similar to the one in Moscow, is directly opposite and connected to



the marine terminal from which my Korean ferry, Eastern Dream, would depart for Donghae, S. Korea and Sakaiminato, Japan. As at most of the railway stations along the route there is an old train engine with its tender on display. This engine carries the number 9288, which is the number of kilometers from Moscow to the terminus at Vladivostok. So, overland travel is completed, I will switch to water travel for a day, and begin again overland in South Korea.

