

## An Empty Land: A Mongolian story

Written by Dom Kihara-Hunt, July 2005

The hills roll off into the distance. Absolutely nothing breaks the view, the monotony, the green. No fences. No people. No roads. No houses. No trees. Nothing.

The sky is large, blue, dry. It is summer, so warm.

We are driving towards Terelj national park. I have tried to hold a conversation with the driver, but the only words we share are a few broken phrases in Japanese. I am proud of myself because my Japanese is better than his. Geraldine, my travelling companion, is asleep in the back. I envy her, but feel I should be awake, if only for politeness' sake.

Back in Ulaan Baatar we passed some Mongolian polo players on the way to a match, who looked splendid in their yellow tunics and leather armour, riding really short ponies. Apparently it is fairly rare to see them.

We left town, passing through populated countryside that seemed quite normal: *gers* (or *yurts*) inside a fenced compound, drifts of litter outside, and dry, dust-laden air pouring off the surrounding hills. Much nicer than the drab, communist city centre, which is full of grey blocks of apartments, huge government buildings around even larger squares, where nothing happens, and steaming heating pipes snaking along the side of the roads.

It is good to leave town, which has been a terrifying driving experience. I think the short time when the road surfaces are not covered in ice, when drivers can finally relax a little, turns them into adolescent adrenaline junkies.

The scenery changes a little, becoming more rocky, with some trees clinging stubbornly to the sheltered south-facing slopes, and we wind down into a river valley, which is obviously the ancient focus of all nomadic life: dusty paths join us as we cross the river next to a modern hotel development whose garden is full of dead wood stacked in psychedelic sculptures. I cannot figure out why people with so much space would choose to build immediately next to the highway.

On the other side of the river we pass the first runner. Cars stack up to let her pass. Then the next one comes, running down the road, with race officials there to keep the road clear. To avoid the runner we drive off the road, onto the plains of endless grass. Our car is not suited to this kind of terrain but that doesn't stop us.

Everyone else is doing the same. The landscape becomes criss-crossed with tracks. Dust billows up, and pours through the open windows, especially as yet another brand new 4x4 roars by.

Round the bend and over the hill we come to the start/finish of the race: it is the Friendship marathon, which seems to be mainly Mongolian v. Korean. Race officials halt us completely. There is nothing to see or do. It seems that everyone who is rich enough to own a car is in Terelj today, and the traffic jam caused by the race officials is reaching epic proportions.

Time passes. More and more cars stack up. The tail-back is now long enough to pass over the horizon, if you look back along the road, but not for long. Impatience pounces quickly, and people drive off the road onto the grass, in order to bypass the jam. Race officials get wise to this manoeuvre and more come to 'extend' the block off the road. The block becomes several tens of meters wide, with cars lined up next to each other, leaning on their horns.

However much impatience and irritation is shown by the crowd, the race officials are impervious to it. People get more and more frustrated, and lean for longer on their horns. Nobody switches their engines off, and the hot summer sun turns the air into soup. Dust roils

in as yet another person tries to skirt the jam on the side.

This is my first experience in Mongolia's 'empty' countryside.

Our destination is a *ger* camp, where we are to spend a night in Mongolian traditional style. After several hours roasting on the road the race ends, we finally get moving again. It is heaven to feel the fresh air gusting through the windows. The landscape has gone back to being empty, even though we are on the main highway through the closest park to the capital.

We pass a *ger* camp / hotel with concrete statues of dinosaurs in the front yard. We hold our breath as it looks like the driver wants to take us there, it looks like a terrible mistake as the last place we want to spend the night is in such kitsch style. We are relieved as we pass, but 10 minutes later on our spirits dive again as the driver leads us into a large car park area on the side of the highway, which is filled with *gers* in the middle, and overlooked by an imposing concrete structure, the restaurant.

"Here you sleep" mimics the driver.

"No ways!" we respond. This is not what we wanted. I explain again, somewhere quiet, traditional style, far from the road, simple.

Time passes, the driver is talking to people in the hotel, he comes back with someone else who point us back into the car and drive down into the river valley.

Hidden below a stand of trees is a 'real' *ger* camp, with paddocks and stable for the horses, chickens, barking dogs at the *ger* doors, an easy walk to the river. The man from the hotel offers us a *ger*, \$9 USD for the night. This is what we wanted, we accept. He goes in and removes his toothbrush, clothes and hi-fi system. We are embarrassed, we have forced him to give us his home for the night, we didn't realise it would be so difficult to find a humble place to stay, we feel like the inept, bumbling foreign tourists that we really are.

I have learned the word for Mongolian noodle soup, and ask if we can get some, and write the time (9:00) in the sand. He appears to understand, charges us \$4 USD for it. We have some time before it gets dark, so we go for a walk.

Night falls, 9:00 passes, we are hungry. By 11 we are starving, and wondering what the hell happened to our food. When it comes at 12:30 we are past hunger and half asleep. It is greasy and tasteless, just wheat noodles and lumps of gristle in thin broth. We eat and then sleep.

I have just dropped off when someone knocks at the door. It is about 1:30 in the morning. It is the *ger* owner, he has forgotten something. I open the door to let him in. It is cold at night, I want to get back under the blankets again.

I doze lightly, too tired to switch off my mind, and in the fullness of time dawn approaches, the chickens wake up, and seem to congregate just by my right ear. Then I hear one walk across the *ger* floor. I must be dreaming! No, there it goes again. I fumble for my torch, and see a hen escape under the cloth walls of the *ger*. I fall back into bed, and another one wanders through the *ger*. Now I am fully awake again.

I get up, go outside into the dawn, to tug the walls of the *ger* down to stop the chickens getting in. I find bricks to fill up some holes where the *ger* felt lining is too short, I lean my bag against others, but there is no point, I will not sleep again.

Maybe we should have slept in the *ger* camp in the car park instead, but at least we had an 'authentic' experience.

We walk all morning, across the plains and up a hill to overlook the village and the river valley. In three out of four directions there are no people, no roads, no signs that this is an inhabited land. It would have been more full of people before, but the demise of the Russian communist system, and some particularly harsh winters (called *dzuud*) have killed off a many

people's livestock, and they have left their nomadic life in the countryside for the urban sprawl of Ulaan Baatar. More than half of the population now live in the city. Many of them still live in *gers*, unconnected to city services, with no jobs and no livelihoods. The temperature regularly drops to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the winter. Their toilets are long drop outhouses. I cannot imagine living like that. I start to understand their poverty when put into the context of winter.

I am glad I came, it is a fascinating, harsh and beautiful place. I am glad it is summer.