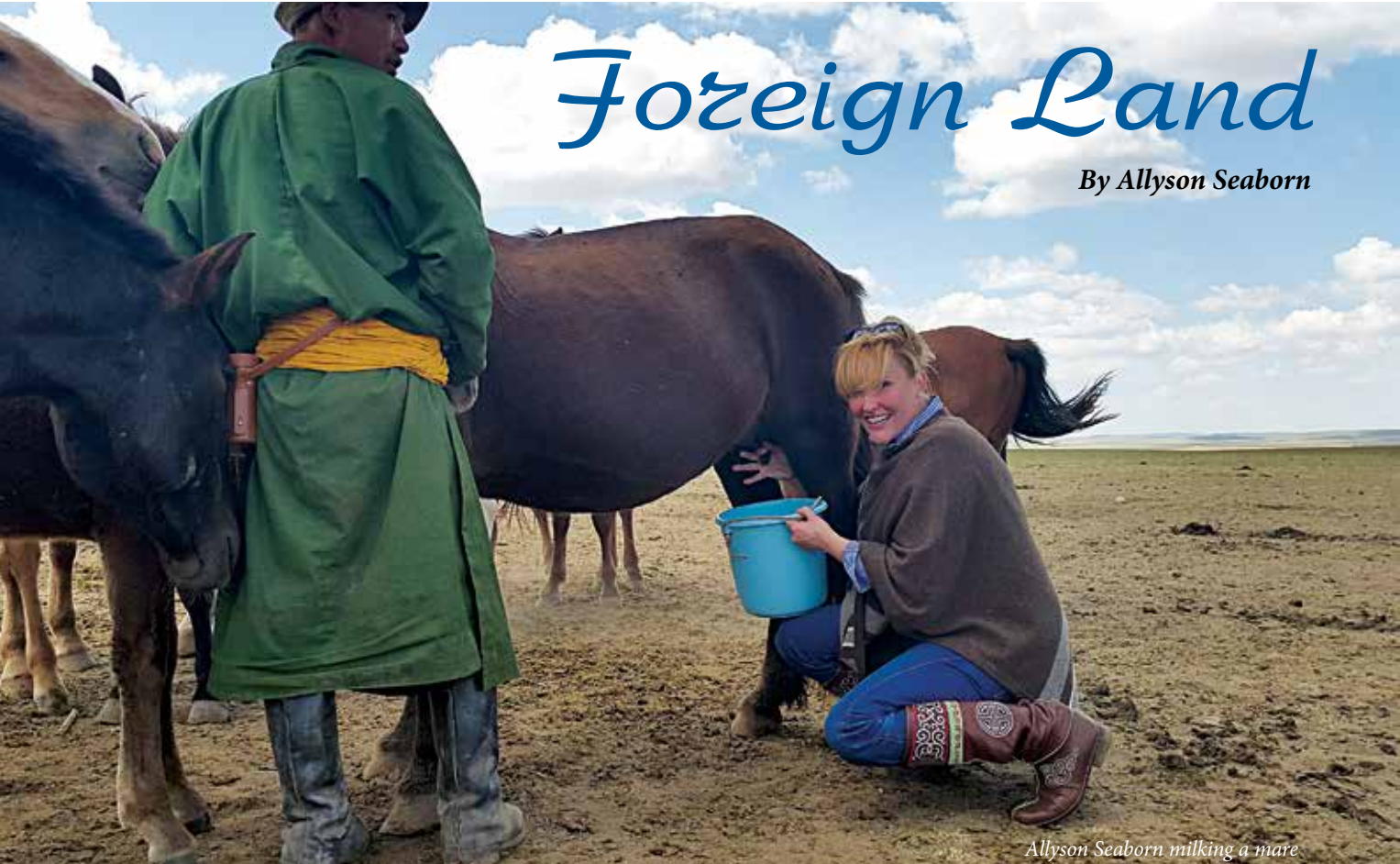


AT HOME IN A

Foreign Land

By Allyson Seaborn



Allyson Seaborn milking a mare

EACH TIME I FLY INTO CHINGGIS Khan International Airport I am overcome with a sense of relief. I'll soon be home - home in a country that inspires me, a country I love with all of my heart. As we start our descent into Ulaanbaatar I gaze fondly at the kaleidoscope of multicolored roofs in the city's outlying districts, sheltered beneath that big, blue sky Mongolians call the "Khökh Tenger."

I recently spent a week in Hong Kong feeling suffocated and claustrophobic - much like an ant in a swarming sea of nameless faces, where everything goes according to schedule, expeditiously and efficiently. High fashion, large diamonds in windows and far too many insincere "Thank you, have a nice day Madam" expressions. I've missed the white smiles of Mongolian children who've grown up chewing on

aaruul (dry home-made cheese. TMO). Pure, innocent, calcium enriched grins. I've developed a strong emotional attachment to this country over the past four years - perhaps it has to do with my own nomadic background. I was born in the United States to an American father and a Chilean mother who both had a keen sense of adventure. Much of my childhood was spent in both North and South America, before

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moving to Australia at age 15.

“So, where are you from?” strangers inquire. My instinctive response is “Well, I’m from Mongolia.” It seems like a totally natural answer.

The Hong Kong taxi driver says “You mean part of China?”

“No, I mean Mongolia, Mongolia. The Democratic country. The capital is Ulaanbaatar. I live there.”

The usual look of confusion follows, and precludes more questions. Good – done.

Deep down I secretly think the blood of Chinggis runs through my veins.

I love the wild beauty of this country. One of my most vivid recollections of Mongolian grandeur was in Khen-tii. I was at Khökh Nuur one summer surrounded by endless fields of wild knapweeds – *khongorzuls* to be exact. I can only describe these in Dr. Seuss terminology - as Horton Hears a Who blossoms or Wizard of Oz flowers. Flowers that look as if they would giggle and dance with you if they could. Purple, prickly, and larger than golf balls. They’re ubiquitous in Mongolia, and particularly abundant surrounding the banks of Khökh Nuur Lake where, according to the *Secret History of the Mongols*, Temüüjin was coronated Chinggis Khan. The *khongorzuls* run up to the top of the hill overlooking the lake where my favorite *Ovoo* (cairn, erected as a shrine for local deities. TMO) in all of Mongolia is. I prayed there, glancing up at the endless blue sky knowing that if there is indeed a God, he could hear me loud and clear from there.

In July 2015 I met young Australian documentary filmmaker Emma Hudson and her friends enjoying the *Naadam* festival in Tsetserleg, Arkhangai. She had planned to visit Mongolia since she was 16 and described her journey:

“As three young women travelling spontaneously in Mongolia, we had little knowledge or expectation as to how we’d be received. Initially I felt

quite safe, but what I didn’t realize was how far that intimacy would grow during our travels; I never expected to be touched by such welcoming people. We were driven across the Arkhangai region for two days by a male driver that spoke no English. Baatar taught us the name for every animal we passed in Mongolian and sang two-phrases of a song on repeat, and that was about as far as our communication went.”

“Baatar, translated to English as ‘hero’, was exactly that. He drove us safely and gently through a mud-ridden landscape and cared for us like we were his own. I was humbled by the generosity and nurturing instinct carried by every Mongolian we crossed paths with. I have never been in such an unforgiving landscape and would not have felt the awe and wonder I experienced without the selflessness of the people of Mongolia.”

It was gratifying to have someone else capture in words what I have felt for years and I asked Emma to expand on what she found most amazing about

Mongolia. She shared:

“I found it incredible how preserved their nomadic lifestyle still was. It was raw, primal and only testified the deep connection they hold with their families and the land. We are increasingly becoming more and more disconnected from nature and our spiritual instincts; however this kind of human and somewhat magical energy was still very much alive in the countryside of Mongolia.”

Emma describes it so well – it is indeed a spiritual instinct, a magical energy. It is as magical as the dancing, purple *khongorzuls* I often dream about. It’s the emotion I experience when I witness young *Naadam* jockeys urging their sweaty, exhausted horses onwards to the finish line in a cloud of dust. The cheers from the crowd of people in traditional Mongolian deels and the excitement and raw energy always brings tears to my eyes, even though I’ve seen this race dozens of times. Beauty does this to me.

It’s the smell of mutton and dairy,



Australian documentary filmmaker Emma Hudson in Arkhangai aimag

the warm “amar bainuu” greeting at *Tsagaan Sar*, the superstitions and reservedness of the Mongolian people – the shyness and quietness they diligently maintain until they get to know you. Their innocence and naïvety is untarnished, particularly in the countryside.

I met American Apple, Inc. manufacturing designer Jake Ward and his daring girlfriend Jane Thompson at Khatgal, Khövsgöl in 2014 as they were riding motorbikes throughout the Mongolian countryside over several months. Jake said “I had always viewed Mongolia as somewhat of a final frontier for true adventure – a place largely devoid of the modern conveniences and safety that we take for granted, and where one could experience overland travel in a real and trying way.”

Jake and Jane’s route through Mongolia took them in a large clockwise circle through the country. Jake described how:

“Every day on the trip was an adventure, and it is tough to choose a single highlight. I think our favorite section though was the route we travelled during our first five days on the road. After we left UB, we headed northeast into Khentii Aimag, bound for Dadal. The tracks we followed led us through an absolutely gorgeous and unpopulated Siberian landscape in a part of the country that is largely overlooked by tourists. Highlights of those five days included being invited into a wonderful local family’s ger for Mongolian delicacies, loading our motorcycles onto an inflatable raft to cross the Onon River, and incredible, sweeping views of sunsets over rolling grasslands and forested mountains each night at camp.”

He reminds me of what I already know and adds “Whether you’re up for it or not, everyone who visits Mongolia, be it on a guided tour or on a motorcycle, will find adventure.”

Earlier this year as I crossed Lake Khövsgöl in an open sleigh. Sleigh bells



American Apple, Inc. manufacturing designer Jake Ward with local hunters in Khövsgöl

rang, and a stiff shot of vodka fortified me in preparation for the ride. I serenaded my trusty steed with a few Mongolian melodies as we charged across the ice. Never have I been so cold, but the warmth of the experience balanced the brutality of the wind and ice.

After the Ice Festival the thrills continued when we returned to find our charter flight frozen on the runway at Mörön.

A group of senior Italian tourists in designer outdoor gear looked aghast as this clearly was not on their detailed itinerary. I peered outside my tiny window as airport staff tried to manually spin the propellers. “Nope, not going to start,” I mumbled to myself and listened to what the flight staff were whispering about. “Plane is frozen. Shh”

We were starting to get very cold sitting on the tarmac. A gracious Mongolian hostess asked if we would all mind getting off the plane because there seemed to be a “slight” problem. We crammed into a small bus and headed into Mörön, to a strange restaurant that had opened a tab just for us and called in all their wait staff.

“Don’t worry,” I told a nice Italian lady whose face I could barely see because she was wearing so many layers. She remained deeply concerned, telling me “I wish the pilots would tell us what the heck is happening!” I lied in response “We’ll be ok - everything is under control,” and chuckled to myself thinking – “just go with it.”

While a new plane was chartered from Ulaanbaatar we reminisced, sang and ate a delicious meal. The highlight, however, was a few rounds of table tennis with the two charming pilots. They had clearly been stranded in Mörön before, as they knew where to find the paddles behind the check-in counter.

Many hours later, after we eventually arrived in Ulaanbaatar, I spoke with a gentleman from Rome. He was exhausted but grinning from ear to ear. “I was a little worried, but you couldn’t have planned for such unexpected excitement. I thought we were going to freeze on the runway but things turned out ok,” he said. “Now, that’s the spirit!” I thought to myself.

I told him about how beautiful Lake Khövsgöl is in summer and he simply



Allyson, extreme left, with locals from Khövsgöl at the Ice Festival

couldn't fathom that anything could be more spectacular than this large body of water, frozen solid and teeming with festivities.

Another cold and remote place I have fond recollections of is the East Taiga Region of Northern Mongolia, about seventy kilometers from Tsagaan Nüür lake. In August of 2013 I arrived at a tepee (uurtz) camp after an arduous eight-hour horse ride through open grassland, pine forests and snow-capped rugged terrain.

This is the most remote place on earth to me, the edge of civilization. The forests are filled with wolves that regularly threaten reindeer, the Tsaatan people's only livelihood.

During my visit I was (ironically) called on to treat the local shaman's tooth ache, received a proposal of marriage and had a moose sighting, all in one day. I meandered my way up a valley where cold, clear water trickled down the mountains. An enveloping, endless cloud made me feel like the only person on earth. A few male reindeer passed me, curiously nodding their velvety antlers towards me. Surreal is the only way to describe this part of Mongolia.

Barry Jiggins is an Australian radiographer and founder of the charity MongoliAid, which helps nomads and communities within the Gobi Desert. Barry has had a love affair with Mongolia ever since he first arrived.

His eyes twinkle as he recalls "Ever

since my first visit in 2003 the hospitality of Gobi people has been on show. It is ingrained in the culture to offer directions, refreshments and even a place to sleep to visitors, and particularly to those of us who might arrive unexpectedly from a distant land."

Barry and I joke about what it would be like to rock up unexpectedly at a stranger's house anywhere else in the world looking for a bed and a meal. It just doesn't happen. And if it did, "the police would certainly be called," he laughs.

"Gobi people have an expanded sense of fraternity that is seldom found elsewhere in the world and never in cities. It is a philosophy that reflects a shared battle for survival in a harsh environment. Long may the nomadic heart beat!" beams Barry.

The Gobi is indeed a landscape not to be missed. In July 2015 of this year I completed a 4,000 kilometer overland journey through five aimags, discovering my very own dinosaur fossil while walking just east of Bayanzag, also known as the Flaming Cliffs. This is the name given to this region by American palaeontologist Roy Chapman Andrews, who visited Mongolia in the 1920s. This part of the Gobi is most famous for yielding the world's first discovery of dinosaur eggs.

Scampering around and scaling



A collection of ancient bronze arrow heads

small cliffs in the brutal desert heat, my friend Chuka and I unearthed a Palaeolithic claw of gigantic proportions – buried beneath the surface for millions and millions of years. "These bones are lying around everywhere," a local tells me. They are often smuggled over the border to China but this one lies here for me to marvel at. I gazed at it, blew sand off of it, touched it and then covered it back up pretending I was Indiana Jones. A secret lost in time. I want to take my children to this spot, which is etched in my memory. I hope the monstrous claw is still there for years to come.

That evening in the Gobi I peered into the night sky, teeming with distant galaxies. It was so bright and so beautiful. That same sense of peace and wonder I often get in Mongolia overwhelmed me once more.

The next day we headed further west along a dusty desert road, past a silvery-haired man, his face carved with lines. His deal was old but the color hadn't faded. He was selling centuries-old bronze arrow heads, which he had found over the years. I see these in Ulaanbaatar's museums but the Gobi is a living museum. It's all there, I imagine, mostly unearthed and untouched.

In Dornod Aimag's capital city of Choibalsan I once stumbled upon an old military bunker outside the main museum, which is usually empty and quiet. The musty underground hole was packed with authentic Russian military uniforms, grenades and machine guns. There was nobody in sight to scold me so I pulled the khaki garments off their chains and put them on, like a child playing dress up. A photo of Stalin on the wall glared at me. I sneezed and coughed - an allergic reaction to dust embedded in this military attire for decades.

Nobody was selling me souvenirs or offering to take cheesy photos. There was no kiosk to grab a coke from. This was a real bunker and I'm wearing a heavily starred Soviet uniform, holding an old grenade. I felt a part of history standing there on my own. Stalin's portrait was a little unnerving, but I straightened, determined to savor the moment.

Canadian Julie Veloo, founder of the Children of the Peak Sanctuary Project, describes her most memorable Mongolian experience, which took place after the International Equestrian Club Mini *Naadam* at Saraa's Ger Camp in August 2014:

"We had just finished hosting about 60 local children in a *Naadam*



Choibalsan's Remington-Mongolian script typewriter from New York



Dino claws (above) and Allyson Seaborn in the Gobi with her new 'find' (right)



race. Having thundered across the wild Mongolian *Naadam* steppe alongside some 40 of the cheekiest children around, I enter a crowded ger, with three other Westerners and 52 Mongolians and surrendered myself to the

moment. Amongst the swelling tide of chatter and rising heat, one lonely voice suddenly raised itself up with a tale of a different victorious horse race and there was that moment of absolute stillness as everyone paid the singer the compliment of their attention and then, in one grand, goose bump-raising moment that seemed impossibly coordinated, they all joined in."

"Fifty-two voices inside one ger all rose in glorious harmony over and over again to honour their history, their ties with the land and their traditions. The songs were the same ones



Allyson with her children near the Tavan Bogd mountain. Photos, courtesy ©Alleyson Seaborn

their fathers and forefathers had sung, and as their amazingly reverberant, beautiful voices threaded into a powerful, booming sound that penetrated right through my body I knew what I loved about this country. These people truly do love their land, their mothers, and their horses. Their way of life and bonds of friendship include simple direct and honest pleasures along with the corresponding difficulties. They simply live. And then, if you're lucky, they sing about it."

I spent seven days driving around Tavan Bogd in Bayan Ölgii Aimag with my two children in the summer of 2014. Altanbek was our Kazakh driver and, oh my, he could sing - loudly and with gusto! Had it not been for song, our drive would have been more arduous along the rugged terrain in a beat up Russian Uaz jeep, across raging rivers, past ancient Turkic archaeological ruins and old Kazakh graves.

I'd always wanted to see Tavan Bogd and stay with genuine Kazakh eagle hunters. To my children, who usually trip around with me, this was completely ordinary.

We'd just spent a few days recuperating at Khoton Nuur - a remote turquoise lake surrounded by high alpine meadows. We'd rescued a stranded baby goat that was bleating in a dark pine forest, spent some cold nights wrapped

in fur on the dirt floor of a brightly decorated Kazakh ger and raced around the countryside on the back of the local doctor's motorcycle. It was windy. It was heavenly.

Altanbek reached our final destination. "Look at that kids! Ta daa...the glorious Tavan Bogd mountain range!" My children were car sick, cold and sleepy.

Seeing the weariness in their eyes and sensing a meltdown of magnanimous proportions I pulled their legs "So, what do you say we do this again next summer?" They simultaneously burst into tears.

My son sobbed "Mom, why can't we please just go to Disneyland?" and flopped his body upon the cold, rocky ground. The overland journey had taken its toll - plus we'd run out of chocolate and two-minute noodles. They were hungry and refused to touch the ever-present smorgasbord of sheep parts. The charred head (often with tongue sticking out between a cavern of teeth) was always the most confronting. Inside I laughed, hoping that one day these kids of mine, who missed their Xbox and modern day niceties, would recall how lucky they were to have experienced this trip - the toughest one I'd dragged them along on yet.

I want to leave you with a passage

from the novel *Big Tiger and Christian: Their Adventures in Mongolia* by German author Fritz Mühlenweg - it's a passage that resonates with me:

'The poor foreigner,' he said, 'has been acquainted with our grasslands but for four short days.'

'We must pity him,' said the old man with feeling.

'How hard it must be,' commented the woman, 'not to be born a Mongolian.'

'To be sure,' said the old man, 'the fellow is most unfortunate. But how blessed he is to have found his way to us!'

I've dreamt that after sauntering alongside the purple *khongorzuls*, I'm lying in a warm ger on the steppe, wind whistling outside, and I can smell the boiling *öröm* (cream). I'm looking up at the central ring of the ger, which is called a *toono*. It is ornately painted with bright blue and orange. I am listening to the quiet chatter of my hosts who are whispering so as not to wake me. It is always a peaceful slumber.

I hope that my children return to this country with their children and their children's children to relive the adventure. I hope that the rich culture of my home, Mongolia, endures throughout the years. ■