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# Pass the Butterworms

REMOTE JOURNEYS ODDLY RENDERED

TIM CAHILL

## Pass the Butterworms

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—*The Fresno B*



***Tim Cahill***

**Pass the Butterworms**

Tim Cahill is the author of five previous books, including *A Wolverine Is Eating My Leg*, *Buried Dreams*, and *Pecked to Death by Ducks*. Cahill is currently *Outside* magazine's editor at large and a contributing editor to *Rolling Stone* and *Sports Afield*. He lives in Livingston, Montana.

*Buried Dreams*

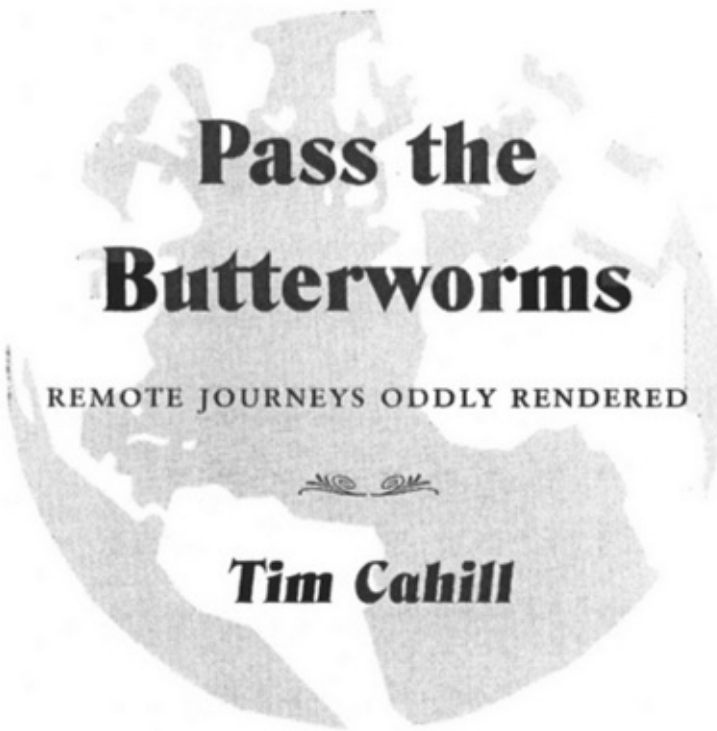
*Jaguars Ripped My Flesh*

*A Wolverine Is Eating My Leg*

*Road Fever*

*Pecked to Death by Ducks*

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# Pass the Butterworms

REMOTE JOURNEYS ODDLY RENDERED

*Tim Cahill*

**Vintage Departures**

VINTAGE BOOKS

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To those Arizona miscreants,  
my very nearly saintly brothers, Rick and David Cahill



## Acknowledgments

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# Thundermug: An Introduction of Sorts

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Out where I live, in Montana, we'd call it a mild cussing.

I could do that for this nice lady writer who lives out west somewhere and makes a living as a contrarian. She recently wrote an article in a New York literary magazine that said, in essence, that the current crop of travel writers sucked real bad and just bored her spittle. She manages to slag me in the same paragraph as Redmond O'Halon, Jan Morris, and Paul Theroux, which I regard as a compliment. That's distinguished company.

The woman, as I say, is a contrarian: Her last book—I'm forced to admit that I thought was rather good—was titled *Talk Dirty to Me* and generally took the view that pornography was sorta spiffy and enriched her fantasy and sex life. This, of course, is a position at odds with the conventional wisdom. Everyone knows that women, without exception, hate and despise smut of all varieties. Simply not true, she said. Not in her case.

Apparently on the prowl for other instances in which the conventional wisdom is mistaken or wrongheaded, she fastened on travel writers, who, she felt, had become darlings of the literary scene and were unjustifiably celebrated by reviewers in influential journals both here and abroad. She seemed to feel the conventional wisdom is that, over the past twenty years, a kind of golden age of literate travelogues has developed.

Poppycock, she said, or words to that effect. The woman complained of feeling that she herself might not be welcome on a journey undertaken by any of these writers, which, I think, is not an unreasonable assumption.

I was also taken to task for the manner in which I titled my three previous collections of travel-related writing, all of which remain in print and continue to sell. The first, *Jaguars Ripped My Flesh*, was a joke, meant to rile colleagues with whom I'd worked closely.

Over twenty years ago, in 1975, I was among a group of editors assigned to develop a new magazine about nonmotorized outdoor sports. It was to be a literary effort, and I suggested that we might include articles about remote travel in difficult situations. The other editors objected vociferously. Such articles were then found in magazines with titles like *Man's Adventure* and were directed, apparently, at semiliterate, semi-sad bachelors interested primarily in the "nymphos" who, in this genre, seemed to populate the jungles and mountains at the various ends of the earth. The events reported in these stories were generally of dubious veracity and the authors were not darlings of the literary scene. If in 1996 we are living in a golden era of literary travel writing, 1975 was pretty much the stone age.

The articles in *Man's Adventure*, my colleagues said, were "subliterate" and always had imbecilic titles like "Jaguars Ripped My Flesh." I argued that it was possible to write well about travel and the outdoors, that writing about wilderness of all varieties was a staple of American literature, and that, goddamnit, I'd just bought a good backpack and a stout pair of hiking boots.

The magazine we developed was called *Outside*. It very quickly became the literate forum we envisioned back in 1975. (And, for what it's worth, *Outside* is not, and never was, a man's magazine. Its readership, and my own, is about 45 percent female.) For over twenty years

I've written about remote travel for *Outside*, which in 1996 won a second National Magazine Award for General Excellence.

When publishers first approached me about collecting some of my work in book form, I knew the title right away: *Jaguars Ripped My Flesh*. It was an inside joke, meant to be a poke in the eye with a sharp stick for all my friends who said the kind of work I preferred to do couldn't be done or, if it could, would never be accepted.

The next collection, a stinging left jab at those same colleagues, was titled *A Wolverine Eating My Leg*. I cribbed it directly from a story in an old magazine actually titled *Man Adventure*. My third anthology, *Pecked to Death by Ducks*, took the joke about as far as I wanted to go.

The contrarian writer found my titles "precious." This, mind you, from the author of *Talk Dirty to Me*. Still, the woman does have a point. Readers don't know what to expect from these oddly titled books. I've found them filed on bookstore shelves under "humor," "fiction" or "literature," and sometimes even "travel." Worse, an animal-protection society in upstate New York once demanded that my publisher send them a copy of *Jaguars*. The letter was rather forcefully stated, and I believe they imagined the book was about some guy who battled tigers with a penknife. That sort of thing. I'm happy to say that the group, after a close perusal of the text, saw fit to review the book in a glowing manner in their newsletter. Ignore the title, they said; this guy's mostly on our side.

Well, I thought, maybe this time I should try for a perfectly descriptive title, something you might see hanging from a wooden shingle in Kansas City circa 1890, when people needed to know exactly what it was that happened behind the storefront. Such shingles might be emblazoned CHARLES WELLINGHAM CURTIS, ESQ., ATTORNEY AT LAW, OR PETE WATSON, GOOD BLACKSMITHIN' DONE CHEAP. Mine reads: TIM CAHILL, REMOTE JOURNEYS ODDLY RENDERED. It's what I do. Exactly.

But did this reformulation of the titling process please my discriminating editor, the ever-tasteful David Rosenthal? It did not. Missives flew out of his office in New York: "Smart-ass titles," he averred, tastefully, "help make you palatable to America."

Palatable? I thought about the word for a bit. And it occurred to me that there was something of an epicurean subtext to the book at hand: Aside from my recommendations for the Malaria Diet, the book contains descriptions of a sautéed sago beetle lunch in Irian Jaya and a drinking session featuring pre-masticated manioc beer in the Amazon basin. Delicacies. The book's full of them. Hey, pass the butterworms.

And the question came down from the New York editorial office: Shouldn't the animal in the title rip your flesh, or eat your leg or something? Don't the creatures in your titles tend to cause you distress?

Precisely, I replied. Ever eaten a big mass of butterworms?

So there you have it: another precious title.

But, hey, if the contrarian writer from Oregon still wants someone to talk dirty to her, I could do that. It'd be sort of a mild Montana cussing and would probably feature the precious noun *thundermug*. (This is a local euphemism for a container found under the bed in certain cabins that lack running water. You could use it, I suppose, to pass the butterworms.)

August 27, 1996  
Hideout Cabin



## Mongolia: Adventures in You-Cut Hairstyling

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There were a dozen of us, riding the immense central Asian grassland on sturdy Mongolian horses. When I glanced back for a view of the glacier and the sacred mountain we had just visited, I saw two tiny specks inching down the steep windswept hillside, moving in one direction. I turned on my horse and glassed the hill with a little four-power Russian monocular. The pursuing riders were coming toward us at a stiff trot. They were at least two miles back and about a thousand feet above us. Each man held something in his right hand. I could plainly see the glint of metal.

“They carrying?” one of the Americans asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Both of them.”

Bayaraa Sanjaasuren, our translator, conveyed the information to the Mongolian wrangler. This was serious: We had yogurt riders on our tail. Again.

“*Tchoo*,” half a dozen men shouted at once.

*Tchoo* is the Mongolian equivalent of “giddyap.” Mongolian horses respond smartly to *tchoo*, no matter who says it. Guy next to you says “*tchoo*,” you’re off at a gallop. We were riding a dozen men abreast because Mongolians do not ride in single file. A defeated army, they say, rides single file. And now, with the dreaded yogurt riders in pursuit, our little party sounded like the whole first grade trying to imitate a locomotive.

“*Tchoo, tchoo ...*”

“*Tchoo, tchoo, tchoo ...*”

Significantly, there is no Mongolian word that corresponds to “whoa.”

We’d been riding eight to twelve hours a day, every day, for a week, and I was fairly comfortable in the old Russian cavalry saddle I’d been given. It was a pair of metal hoops on a wooden frame, covered over in peeling leather stuffed with horsehair. The stirrups were metal hoops connected to the frame with rawhide straps. The Mongolians in our party rode ornate hand-carved wooden saddles, the best of them festooned with beaten silver and gold medallions.

“*Tchoo*,” I said, and stood up a bit in the saddle so my horse could stretch into his long gallop.

The ground we were approaching, however, was humped up in the marshy tussock characteristic of soil that is permanently frozen a few feet below the surface. We were on a plateau at about 48 degrees north—about the latitude of Seattle—but cold fronts originating in Siberia, to our north, seem to flow down the great Yenisey River, northern Asia’s Amazon, and funnel into Mongolia. Nowhere else in the hemisphere does permafrost extend so far south.

Trees cannot grow in permafrost, and here, in the shadow of the mountain called Olgontenger, with bare hillsides rising to ten thousand feet on all sides, we were sitting ducks. We could run, but we couldn’t hide. There were no fences, no roads, no trees, no telephone poles, no buildings, no cattle or livestock of any kind. It was just us: a dozen or so men, one woman, along with several pack horses and a string of remounts, all of us dwarfed

under the immense vault of the sky.

If our party had consisted solely of Mongolians, it might have had a chance. But there were seven Americans in our group and—with one exception—we couldn't outpace a pair of determined Mongolian horsemen with only a two-mile lead.

As we hit the hummocky marshland, our horses settled into a short hammering trot, which is the gait favored by Mongol riders who want to make time. Mongolian herdsmen churn butter by strapping a jug of milk to the saddle and trotting for ten minutes. This is the truth. I had a bottle of aspirin in my saddle kit, and it had long ago been reduced to powder.

Every night, as I tried to massage whatever it was that was sore and measured out my dose of powdered aspirin, I thought about this: Mongols have a reputation of being the best horsemen on earth, while their horses have what must be the world's most punishing gait. It was, I concluded, the nature of the land itself that produced this jackhammer trot.

Often the ground was marshy but studded with grassy hummocks, so a horse either ran tussock to tussock or it stayed in the equally uneven footing of the marsh. Additionally, there were marmot holes everywhere. In places where springs flowed out of rock walls, the relatively warm water melted the permafrost below, and on a warm summer day, a horse could sink into mud up to its withers.

The horses knew the land, and they made their way over it in a jouncing weaving sort of way. The short, punishing gait—I wasn't the only American who called it the Mongolian Death Trot—fit the terrain perfectly. A horse that extended—that stretched out his trot or gallop—was a horse that was going to break a leg, which is to say it was a dead horse. Mongolia is a harsh land, and only the fittest survive.

Our Mongolian companions, raised in the saddle, simply stood up in their stirrups on legs made of spring steel and pneumatic shock absorbers. The trot was too jouncy for me to raise and lower myself in the saddle, as Western riders do. I could stand, like the Mongolians, but for only a few minutes at a time. Sitting, I had the sensation of internal organs shaking loose. When I looked back after an hour, the yogurt riders had halved the distance between our parties.

Mongolia, sometimes called Outer Mongolia, is an independent country. Inner Mongolia, which borders Mongolia on the east, is part of China, and it was the Chinese who coined what has become a hated terminology: Inner Mongolia is closer to Beijing; Outer Mongolia is further away.

In fact, the country isn't outer to anywhere. Mongolia is set square in the center of Asia and lies between Russian Siberia to the north and China to the south. It is protected by impressive natural boundaries: The Altai Mountains rise to fourteen thousand feet in the west; to the north are the dense forests of the Siberian taiga; to the south and east is the Gobi Desert, the coldest, most northerly desert on earth, a place where trekkers still find dinosaur bones scattered across the wind-shattered gravellike sands. These natural boundaries protect the grazing lands of the steppes, in the interior of the country. The average altitude is just about a mile above sea level, making Mongolia one of the highest countries in the world.

Landlocked, mountainous, and far from the moderating influence of any ocean, Mongolia offers some truly operatic weather: 90-degree summer days, 60-degree-below-zero winter nights, and twenty-four-hour temperature swings of 80 degrees and more. A European friend



John of Plano Carpini, who visited Mongolia in 1245, called the weather “astonishingly irregular.” He experienced “fierce thunder and lightning” that “caused the death of many men, and at the same time there [were] heavy falls of snow.” Carpini lived through an absurdly fierce hailstorm, which was followed by such warm weather that the resultant flash flood killed 160 people. He thought the country “more wretched than I could possibly say.”

There was a time when geographers, expressing a kind of universal medieval dread, called Mongolia “the dead heart of Asia.” The people who survived there were supposed to be barbarians, nomadic herdsman with no culture and no interest in agriculture. Every few centuries, throughout the whole of recorded history, these “uncivilized” Mongolians came bursting out of their high, cold plateau on horseback to conquer any peoples who stood in their way. Once, in the thirteenth century, they conquered the known world.

Mongolians, like many people who live in cold climates, tend to be physically bigger than their southern neighbors, and I imagined them pouring down on, say, the smaller Chinese as merciless barbarians, armies of huge men on fast horses wearing boiled-leather armor, their faces smeared with sheep fat against the cold and wind and sun.

So thundering across the steppes on a Mongolian horse in company with Mongolian horsemen carried a certain savage hormonal rush, like tearing up the highway on a Harley with a pack of Hell’s Angels.

But the horses, when I first saw them, didn’t inspire confidence. They were small and rattly with big gawky heads. No animal was of any one single color. They were all about half wild and there was a rodeo every morning when we tried to saddle them up. Flapping rain jackets spooked them. Shadows cast by the campfire set them bucking. A sneeze could start a stampede.

On the other hand, they were fast, and by far the toughest horses I’d ever ridden. They could survive in conditions that would kill any other horse on earth. The animals graze on their own—they are never fed—and yet live through 60-below-zero winter nights, cutting through snow and ice with their hooves for something to eat. Unshod, our horses routinely put in thirty-mile days, accumulating as much as eight thousand feet of altitude change. And they did it day after tireless day.

The herdsman inspected their horses for sores or bruises. They doctored them when it was necessary and rested them when they were tired. They knew each horse intimately—probably saw it born; probably broke it—but they were never sentimental. Mongolians name their horses about as often as Americans name their cars.

And the horses serve the same function as cars. They are transportation devices, meant to be kept in superb running condition. Out on the roadless grassland, a horse is the essential link to the outside world: to the market, to the nearest town or school or hospital.

Mongolians in the countryside literally learn to ride about the time they learn to walk. No one of them has ever attended Miss Prissy’s Academy of Equine Etiquette. They gallop right up behind you and give your horse a smart swat on the backside if they want to race. And, in my experience, they always want to race.

For what it’s worth, I thought the seven of us from America made a fairly impressive group. Arlene Burns, a well-known river guide, had been Meryl Streep’s rowing coach in the film *The River Wild*. I believe Meryl does Arlene in that film: I recognized the confidence, the feminine athletic swagger, even the hairstyle.

Christoph Schork was a pilot and ski instructor in Idaho. He rode his own horse marathon hundred-mile mountain races and was the only one of us who might have had a chance against the yogurt riders.

Photographer Dave Edwards was working on a photo book about men who hunted with eagles in the Altai Mountains. He guided horse trips out of northern Mongolia to pay his expenses. Jackson Frishman, eighteen, was the son of a woman Dave had guided with whom he worked the Grand Canyon. Jackson had a lot of white-water experience and wanted to be a river guide himself. Michael Abbot, a computer networking expert, was an avid fly fisherman who'd spent a good deal of time camping along salmon and steelhead streams in Alaska.

Kent Maiden, of Boojum Expeditions, was our guide. We were all getting a break on the price of the trip because it was an exploratory. Kent had never been to this area of Mongolia before and couldn't vouch for the quality of the horses we'd ride. Or the wranglers who would ride with us. There were no guarantees. Whatever happened, happened.

What happened was yogurt riders.

For my part, I'd been trying, and failing, to get to Mongolia for over fifteen years. And now, in my saddle kit, I had eight Ziploc bags, full of human hair—hair cut from the heads of Mongolian herdsman and herdswomen.

It was what I had traveled to Mongolia to get. I am a member of the advisory board of the Center for the Study of the First Americans, located at Oregon State University, where it is believed, fervently, that the earth is a giant hair ball.

Although no one knows the absolute average number, humans naturally shed an enormous amount of hair every day. Cosmeticians figure that number at about 170 daily strands. If so, the average human being sheds a little over 3.5 million hairs over a sixty-year life span. This figure is significant to the cutting edge of archaeology.

Not far from my home in south-central Montana, for instance, there are several "early man" sites. One was populated by humans as early as fourteen thousand years ago. There's a lot of naturally shed human hair buried at that and other sites. Previously, archaeologists searching for the first Americans, discarded human hair in their digs. They tended to study bone fragments and stone artifacts.

There were problems with this approach. The first was cultural: Some Native American groups saw the exhumation of bone fragments as a kind of grave robbing. Second, stone artifacts, such as Clovis points, could be dated by standard techniques, but isolating the technology in time sheds very little light on the identity of the people who embraced the culture. If Clovis points were effective, wouldn't various groups of people adopt them? Humans being human. Is someone who drives a Honda Japanese or American, African, or Latin?

The study of naturally shed human hair at prehistoric campsites does not desecrate graves and provides important, confirmable information as to the identity of the people who populated those sites. Race can be accurately determined by microscopic and DNA analysis of human hair. That is the work being done by Dr. Rob Bonnichson at the Center for the Study of the First Americans. Field and lab work are focused on the single question: Who were the first Americans?

The theory, of course, is that during the last Ice Age, when great volumes of water were

concentrated at the poles and in various glaciers, the sea level was perhaps four hundred feet lower than it is today. The Bering Strait, today a fifty-three-mile waterway separating Asia and the Americas, was left high and dry. It was probably a vast grassland, alive with woolly mammoths, which humans, acting in concert, could kill and eat. They likely used spears tipped with Clovis or other points.

The folks who crossed the Bering Land Bridge were probably Asians. My mission, for the Center for the Study of the First Americans, was to collect samples of Mongolian hair, bring 'em back through customs, and send them to Oregon State University, where they could be compared with ten-thousand-year-old strands dug up outside Melville, Montana. It is possible that the ancestors of the people who today call themselves Mongolian—the ancestors of the men I was riding with, of the men pursuing us with pails of yogurt—were “the first Americans.”

The air route to Mongolia required a three-day layover in Beijing. There, I hired a taxi and drove two hours through the countryside to visit a section of the Great Wall, the largest building construction project in the history of the world. It's fifteen hundred miles long, about thirty feet high, with towers rising to forty feet, and it has everything to do with the Mongols, and the fear of Mongols. In the fourth century B.C., the Chinese began suffering the attacks of fierce nomadic herdsman living to the north and west. Almost immediately, they began building parts of what we now call the Great Wall.

The ramparts I saw ran along the razored ridge tops of mountains rising several thousand feet above the rich agricultural lands to the east. There were guard towers every hundred yards or so, slitted windows for archers, and the land to the west—terrain attackers would have to traverse—was little more than a steep talus slope. No way could archers on horseback breach that wall.

Those ancient marauding horsemen—the Hsiung-nu—are thought, by some accounts, to be ancestors of the people who were to call themselves Mongols. The Hsiung-nu, sometimes called Huns, would be the same folks who brought Europe the Attila the Hun Show in the fifth century A.D.

Still, in the mid-twelfth century, the people living in what is now Mongolia were a fairly diverse group of warring tribes, living rather like the American Plains Indians. Superb horsemen, they believed all things possessed a spirit: mountains, rivers, rocks, hillsides. They particularly worshipped the sky, which they called Tengri. Mongolia's continental climate produces 260 clear days a year: the sunniest spot anywhere on earth at that latitude. The sky is a brilliant blue dome, arches over the rolling grasslands of the steppes. It is a felt presence in this Asian Big Sky country, with a vengeance.

The ancient peoples of Mongolia lived in round felt tents, and the archaeological record suggests it was a way of life that stretched back to at least 10,000 B.C. The clans warred among themselves, engaged in shamanistic rituals, stole horses and women, put great stock in personal courage, and were terrifyingly accurate archers.

It was Genghis Khan, born in 1167, who unified all of these feuding tribes—the hunters and gatherers of the northern forests; the people who skied across the frozen lakes on polished animal bones; the camel breeders of the Gobi Desert; the herdsman of the grasslands. In 1206, after years of tribal warfare, Genghis Khan, triumphant, declared himself “the ruler of all those who live in felt tents.”

Illiterate and probably alcoholic, Genghis Khan was, according to many historians, the greatest military genius who ever lived.

The people who lived in felt tents probably numbered two million. This was the Mongol Horde. The great Khan, directing an army of only 130,000 Mongols, conquered the known world, and established the largest empire that ever was' and probably ever will be. Genghis and his sons and grandsons ruled from southern Siberia to Syria, from the Pacific on the shores of what is now China all the way to the Adriatic Sea.

His horsemen sometimes rode eighty miles a day over deserts or mountains others thought to be impassable. In Europe, they were known as Hell's Horsemen. To the east, the Great Wall was little more than a speed bump on the way to Beijing, where Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis, built his Xanadu. He said, "A wall is only as good as those who defend it."

• • •

Probably because of the harsh, irregular climate, Mongolia, the fifth largest country in Asia is also the least populated: 2.3 million people inhabit an area larger than England, France, Germany, and Italy combined. About a third of all Mongolians live in the capital city of Ulan Bator.

This was a little hard for me to figure out, because Ulan Bator did not sing sweetly to the soul. What I saw was a town of rectangular gray cement buildings—Soviet-style apartment blocks—with peeling, pockmarked facades, all of which appeared to be bleeding to death, the result, I saw on closer inspection, of rusting fire escapes. Packs of starving dogs slunk about in the alleys, cringing and snarling.

Our group had been picked up at the airport by the director of the Mongolian Democratic Party Travel Company, the estimable Batchyluun ("call me Baggie") Sanjsuren, thirty-seven, big, hearty man with big, round muscles. He looked remarkably like a Crow Indian artist I know in Montana.

Our translator, Bayaraa Sanjaasuren, was a few years younger: a slender, elegant, and highly educated fellow. One of the first things these men taught us how to say was—I render this phonetically—"Mee Mer-ee-koon," which means, "I'm an American." Caucasian people, Baggie explained, were often taken for Russians and sometimes had the snot kicked out of them on the street by roving gangs of angry, unemployed young Mongolians. Americans, on the other hand, were highly welcome in Mongolia for a variety of reasons.

To wit: After the fall of the Khans, Mongolia fell under Chinese domination. By 1911, Inner Mongolia was already Chinese. In Outer Mongolia, just after the Russian revolution in 1917, defeated anti-Communist forces, led by the "Mad Baron" Ungern-Sternberg, took Ulan Bator, then called Urga. The Mad Baron specialized in citywide arson and mass execution of Mongolian freedom fighters, notably D. Sukhbaatar, Mongolia's national hero, sided with the Russian Communists, defeated the remnant Chinese warlords in Urga, and eventually captured the Mad Baron, who was promptly executed. The capital was renamed Ulan Bator (Red Hero), and in 1921, Mongolia declared itself a Communist state, the second country in the world to do so.

Very quickly, Mongolia became a Soviet client, marching in lockstep with Russia and possessed of its own secret service, its own purges, and its own little Stalin, a mass murderer

named Choybalsan. Religion was outlawed. For centuries, Mongolians had been Buddhists, of the Tibetan variety. Under Choybalsan, soldiers burst into the lamaseries, marched the old monks out back, shot them dead, and buried the corpses in mass graves. Nomadic herdsman found themselves members of collectives. They were encouraged to move to towns, where they could become industrial workers, striving for progress. Mongolian writing was outlawed and Russian, “the international language,” was taught in schools.

Discussions of Mongol heritage were discouraged. The very mention of Genghis Khan was an embarrassment to Moscow in that the great Khan and his descendants had ruled large parts of Russia for over three hundred years. For the last seventy years, Genghis had been a name to be whispered in Mongolia. In 1962, for instance, a party official named Tomor-ochir made the mistake of attending an ill-advised ceremony designed to rehabilitate the image of Genghis Khan. The man was accused of “wrong thinking,” dismissed from his post, expelled from the party and, eighteen years later, mysteriously hacked to death in his own apartment.

People had to be circumspect: They hid their Buddhist beliefs, and they found it expedient not to mention Genghis Khan. Ever. Politically correct thinking was the order of the day. Here, from a 1987 book entitled *Modern Mongolian Poetry*, is the celebrated poem by Tsevegmidyn Gaitav (1929–1979), with a stirring effort entitled “Our Party”:

*Radiant,*

*Boundless,*

*Thinking so clearly and*

*with perspective*

*Steering wisely*

*The state*

*and the people*

*Illuminating our road*

*By the teaching of Lenin—*

*Sagacious, meaningful,*

*Daring, straightforward,*

*You are leading our people,*

*Forward, along the socialist road*

*Our Party!*

And so on, until the people got pretty damn sick and tired of all that sagacious illumination. The first demonstrations started in the spring of 1990. Many people carried signs reading MORINDOO, which means “mount up” and was the battle cry of Genghis and his warriors. The Mongolian Communist party, perceiving that it was riding a razor edge on the arc of history, voted to dissolve itself.

Soviet soldiers pulled out of the country. Russia cut its subsidies to Mongolia. By 1992, the country was in a poor way, unable to feed itself or employ its workers.

Baggie, driving down the muddy streets on the outskirts of Ulan Bator, said the country was grateful for an influx of foreign aid from the U.S., among others. “We know,” Baggie said, “that the money comes from taxes American people pay. Mongolians want to thank the American people.”

We passed Sukhbattor Square, where the demonstrations had begun. Baggie and Bayaraa were among the organizers, and both had been active early on in the Mongolian National Democratic party, which advocated democratic reforms, a free market economy and, inexplicably, I thought at the time, a national diet that included more vegetables.

Looking out at the street scene, it was clear that the times had changed. Robed Buddhist monks strolled across the square; a vast expanse of stone stood where there had once been a statue of Stalin. I could hear, faintly, the tinny sound of someone playing “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” on a boom box. The Beatles were very popular in Ulan Bator. Huge hawks buzzed the statue of D. Sukhbattor, and men with ancient cameras took black-and-white souvenir photos of herdsman in town for what might be a once-in-a-lifetime visit.

At dinner in a new hotel, one of several springing up around town, Baggie explained how he’d fallen into the travel business. In 1993, as a member of the Mongolian National Democratic party, he’d visited the U.S. on an international goodwill trip. One of the stops was in Bozeman, Montana, where he met Kent Maiden and Linda Svendsen, who, through Boojum Expeditions, had been running horseback trips in Chinese Inner Mongolia for over a decade. The couple had even been legally married there, in a Mongolian ceremony. International goodwill led to business arrangements.

Prior to 1992, only one institution could issue the written invitations necessary to obtain a Mongolian visa. Juulchin, the government tourist agency, was essentially in the business of soaking the capitalists. When I inquired about a visa in 1980, the price of a three-week trip was \$25,000. Expensive, yes, but you got to hunt and kill Marco Polo sheep, among other exotic and possibly endangered animals. I passed on the deal.

By 1993, with the demise of the Communist party, Baggie was free to team up with Kent and issue his own written invitations to visitors. Prices are a small fraction of what Juulchin used to charge.

Before and after and during dinner, we drank toasts to the ordinary American taxpayer, to free speech, to a free market economy, to the Mongolian National Democratic party, to the American Republican party, which was advising the MNDP on grassroots organizing, and to the new Mongolia altogether, a country finally free to consume more vegetables. The vodka was Mongolian, a popular new brand called Genghis Khan.

. . .

The next day, we flew from Ulan Bator to a town called Uliastai on a Mongolian Airlines jet. At the airport there, one of seven in the country with a paved runway, a young Mongolian fellow walked toward me, dropped a shoulder into my chest, knocked me back a step or two and kept right on going. Five paces later, he turned smartly and started back. It was going to be a series of slow-motion assaults.

“He thinks you’re Russian,” Bayaraa explained.

“Hey,” I said sharply, “Mee Mer-ee-koon.”

“Ahh!” The young man stopped and smiled. “*Saim bainuu?*” he asked politely. How a

you?

“*Saing*,” I said. Fine. “*Saim bainuu?*”

And then there was a lot of Mongolian-style handshaking, in which you grab each other’s elbows, both of them, and nod and smile a lot. The guy ended up helping us load our luggage into a dilapidated slick-tired bus. He was glad to help. We weren’t Russians. We were Mer-ekoons.

Presently, the bus was bashing its way into the mountains along a narrow, rutted dirt road. We made our way through herds of sheep; and goats; and yaks, which looked to me like fringed Herefords. There are twenty-five million head of livestock grazing in Mongolia, about ten times the human population, and according to my Mongolian-language tapes, the thing a polite person says to another—after “How are you?” and “How’s your family?”—“*Tania mal saim bainuu?* How’s your livestock?”

In the pasturelands rising up on the other side of the road, men on horseback worked the yaks very much the way Montana ranchers deal with cattle. But instead of ropes, the Mongolian herdsmen used rawhide loops set on the end of long poles. The poles, Bayaraa told me, serve a double purpose. Stick one upright in the ground, and no one will approach. In this treeless grassland, it was one way for a man and woman to ensure themselves a little privacy. It was also a symbol of virility.

Above, hawks and falcons and huge griffons drifted in great circles, silhouetted against Tengri, the sacred sky, which was a brilliant shrieking blue filled with billowing white clouds. A herd of horses galloped across a nearby ridge, their long manes flying in the wind.

Baggie said he approved of my hairstyling mission and had always thought that Mongolian people, his ancient ancestors, may have been the first Americans. It is a theory strongly promoted by the Museum of Natural History in Ulan Bator.

Fifty miles east of Uliastai, the cruel joke of a road ended in what was an attempt at a hot springs resort, a series of whacked-together wooden buildings originally built for Communist party bigwigs. The place looked embarrassed, like a man in a tux at a beer party. All the other habitations in the countryside, without exception, were round felt tents, basically unchanged since the time Genghis declared himself “ruler of all those who live in felt tents.” They looked like white puffball mushrooms and were called gers. Don’t say *yurt*. Russians say *yurt*.

At the end of the road, wranglers, hired for the trip, watched as we set up our American tents. The men thought our gers were flimsy, but they liked the portability. It took, they said, several hours to take down a Mongolian ger. The wranglers seemed shy, and they smiled constantly, nervously.

In the saddle, though, these same men laughed and sang unselfconsciously, utterly at home on horseback. In Montana, we’d call them can-do cowboys.

Our head wrangler, Lhagra, a lean unflappable man in his fifties, took it upon himself to coach me in matters Mongolian. The wraparound jackets all the men wore were called *del*. The sleeves could be rolled down to warm the hands in cold weather, and the sash that held the garment together was a handy place to stash a knife. The oversize boots with turned-up toes were called *gutuls*. For the past seventy years, children had been taught in school that *gutuls* were a symbol of Mongolian subservience to religion. You can drop to your knees s

much easier in boots with turned-up toes. Actually, Lhagra explained, the boots are designed to slip easily into the stirrup, and to show respect for the earth: 'Turned-up toes don't tear into the ground.

I learned a Mongolian saddle song about a young camel in the Gobi Desert, just starting out on his first caravan. It is late in the day, and the shadows fall long across the sands. The camel is leaving his mother for the first time. Here the song breaks into a lot of mournful wailing, which is fairly easy to do given the jouncing gait of the horse. The singer then expresses a similar love for his own mother. Mongolian songs never concern death, divorce, or unrequited love. Life is hard enough.

We were circumnavigating Otgontenger (Young Sky) Mountain, which was, at 12,982 feet, the highest point in Mongolia's central Hangay range. The peak itself was hidden behind other, smaller, mountains and we got our first clear glimpse of it when we topped out on the pass at 10,300 feet. A millennium of tradition required that we stop and pay our respects to the mountain at an elaborate *ovoo*, a construction of sticks and poles, piled tepee-like on an altar of stones. Tattered blue prayer flags tied to the poles snapped in the wind. There were cigarettes and banknotes and pieces of hard cheese piled on the stones. We walked three times around the *ovoo*, tied hairs from our horses' manes to the poles, and left our offerings.

As we led our horses down the steep slope on the other side of the pass, a cloud passed over the sun, the temperature dropped thirty degrees, and the wind drove a sudden snowfall directly into our faces. It was August, but it felt like winter. Then, maybe half an hour later, the sky cleared and the sun seemed to boom down on us. It wasn't hot, but there was a harsh, unfiltered quality to the light. I could feel my face burning.

We mounted up and rode down into an enormous river valley. There were wind-sculpted boulders on the ridges of the hills that framed the valley, and these ornate rock formations looked like Oriental dragons. It was impossible to estimate distance or to figure the size of the river below, because there were no trees or gers or livestock to measure against the immensity of the land. Lhagra said he saw riders moving along the riverbank. I couldn't even see them with my pocket telescope.

The riders, two men in their early twenties, joined us for a short time, which in Mongolian terms meant two days. We named them for their looks: the Movie Star, and Bad Hair Day, who had about a dozen swirling cowlicks on his head. The strange style made him look perpetually startled.

The men were out marmot hunting, and would sell the skins for a good price at a market in Uliastai. The Movie Star carried a Russian .22 rifle and a bipod strapped to his back. He wore a white sheet over his del, and a kind of white doo-rag hat topped with ludicrous rodent ears. Marmots, I was given to understand, stay close to their burrows and disappear into them at the slightest hint of danger. They were, however, curious, and might stand still for a moment when faced with the eerie specter of a man dressed like the marmot angel of death.

Hunting these bucktoothed rodents was a serious business. An animal that was too easy to shoot—one that was slow or stupid—could kill you and your family. The marmot disease was a bad way to go: ten days of delirium, swollen glands, fever, and screaming pain. In the West the same misery is called bubonic, or black, plague. In the fourteenth century it killed a third of the population of Europe: twenty-five million people.

The theory is that ship-borne rats brought the plague to Europe. But Tim Severin, in his



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