

MONGOLIA

August - September 2022

The flight path flew north over Lithuania and Latvia avoiding Ukraine and Belarus, before heading east to Ulaanbaatar. The label on the Austrian wine, served by the Mongolian national airline was aptly named, Classic Rot. I declined the opportunity of a second glass.

Ulaanbaatar lies on the same longitude as Jakarta and in the same time zone as Beijing, a clear indication of how just far east Mongolia actually is. Once ruled by Chinggis Khan, the founder and first Great Khan of the Mongolian Empire, Mongolia sits squeezed between Russia to the north and China to its south. Glistening in the sunlight the giant Chinggis Khan statue, an hour's drive out of Ulaanbaatar, towers over the landscape facing east in the direction of his birthplace.

Chinggis Khan Statue



Country Number 71



Paved roads gave way to dirt tracks, leading to the Khustai National Park, home of the Takhi (Prezwalski) horse, reintroduced in 1992. The park ranger was quite relaxed when asked if I could ride his motorcycle and my driver promptly presented me with a horse riding helmet.

An hour or so's riding around the Khustai National Park and country number 71 had been achieved.

Read more overleaf...



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MONGOLIA (cont.)

As we ventured out into the evening sunlight the rough terrain and steep inclines provided a challenge to our 4x4 but my driver was more than a match for it. In the meadow below, under a boulder strewn hillside, White Tailed Gazelles grazed on vegetation without a care in the world. As if professionally choreographed the wildlife duly appeared, one after the other, to be photographed and viewed through binoculars. A pair of Golden Eagles stood imperiously on top of a 30 metre boulder surveying their territory from close quarters.

Marmots scurried all over the hillside and the Corsak Fox stood head up staring at us through the long grass before bouncing up and down in search of its evening meal. Finally, as if on cue, the Takhi wandered on, centre stage, to perform their leading role. The reintroduction of this prehistoric horse into the wild has been a globally acclaimed success.

Takhi Prehistoric Horses



Tree Planting



It's not often that you get asked to plant a tree but heading south across the Middle Gobi our overnight stop was at the Gobi Oasis in Mandalgovi. Here a tree planting nursery, founded by Byamba Tseyin in 1975 is now internationally recognised and a visit by an ageing westerner prompted Byamba to ask me to plant a tree. Due ceremony was held and an Elm sapling not only planted but named.

Sculpture by the wind the multi-coloured sandstone cliffs of Tsagaan Suvarga were less than obvious until I was peering down over their very edge. Beyond them, resembling neatly assembled white pillar boxes was a remote Gir Camp and a simple bed for the night.

Read more overleaf...

Gir Camp



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MONGOLIA (cont.)

The Khongoryn Els sand dunes in the Gobi rise up 200 metres out of the desert and stretch for 100 kilometres in length. Beyond the 8 kilometres that the dunes reach back is the final desert road to China. Here the Mongolian Guards patrol the border on camels, fearful of the unreliability of their Russian transport. The Gobi Desert covers much of southern Mongolia and is characterised by barren expanses of gravel plains and rocky outcrops with only a few sand dunes, Khongoryn Els being the biggest.

Khongoryn Els Sand Dunes

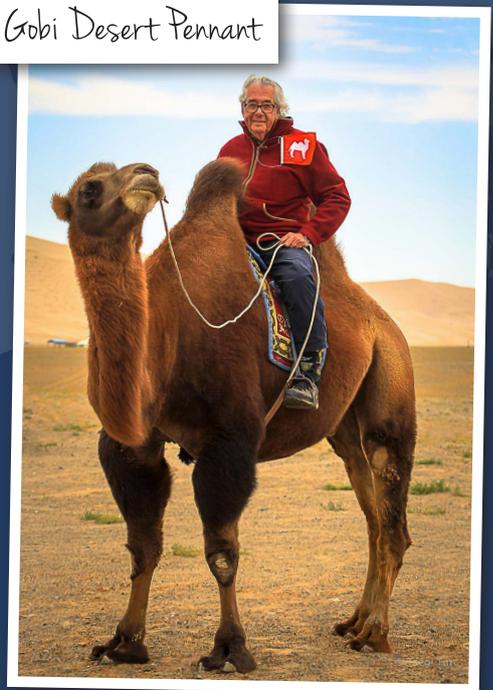


The resplendent red pennant, suitably adorned with a two humped camel, was on display for the first time in 52 years and as pristine as the day it first came into my possession as a founder member of the Gobi Desert Canoe Club.

Roy Chapman Adams left Beijing in the spring of 1922 heading for Mongolia and the Gobi Desert determined to find evidence of early civilisation. What he found instead was the world's first dinosaur eggs. Later his American expedition unearthed over 100 dinosaurs, many of them under a sandstone escarpment he named Flaming Cliffs. It's suggested that Adams, renowned for his four corned wide brimmed hat, was the inspiration for Indiana Jones.

Read more overleaf...

Gobi Desert Pennant



Flaming Cliffs

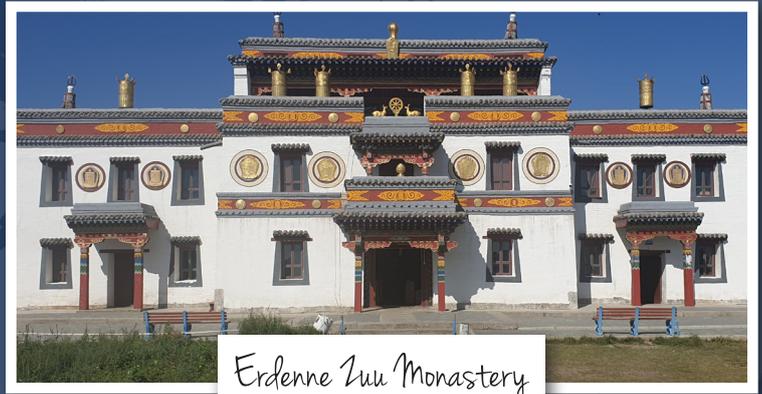


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MONGOLIA (cont.)

Travelling north the barren Gobi gave way to greener landscapes before arriving on the pastures of the Steppe. Little remains of the Erdenne Zuu Monastery after its demolition in the 1930's by the communist regime, below ground however and in the newly created museum, are some splendid artefacts from the ancient city of Kharkhorin, once capital of the Mogul Empire before its unpopular relocation to Beijing. Under the rule of Chenggis Khan, in the 13th century, the Mongolian Empire stretched to the Danube Delta in the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east. North to Siberia and south to Hindustan (India).



The Kazakh region to the far west is dominated by the snow capped Altai mountains and Eagle Hunters but unless secured well in advance tickets and accommodation for the popular Eagle Festival, held around this time of year, are hard to come by. Perhaps another time.

Finally, the paved road stretched out, past Chenggis Khan's sacred mountain, across terrain reverting back to semi-arid scrub as far as the eye could see and beyond, ultimately delivering me up to a landscape of communist style apartment blocks shoulder to shoulder with city centre coal fired power stations that is Ulaanbaatar.

The note slipped under my door seemed a reasonable request. *"Please vacate your room between 10am and 12 noon for fumigation"*. Later that day I witnessed a mobile hospital theatre being wheeled through the hotel reception, followed by communication equipment and large quantities of brown boxes. Signs in Chinese characters started to appear at the lift entrances and on every floor, puzzling to the man in reception who had come to complain, like many others, of being told to leave the hotel tomorrow as his reservation had been cancelled.

A final beer I thought, heading to the top floor bar but as the lift doors opened there was nothing but a cavernous hall, emptied in recent hours of all and everything that once resembled a bar. Back in reception, to enquire about the disappearance of the bar I was joined by men in green uniforms who looked rather more Chinese than Mongolian. I wasn't sorry to leave early next morning, armed with the knowledge that President Xi of China was about to make a secret visit to Ulaanbaatar and would be staying the night in the hotel. It wasn't a very well kept secret though.



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