

Mongolia Trip Report

June 2 - 19, 2017

Beijing Adventures

In the end, the timing of my departure from Juneau worked well for resetting my schedule for the other side of the world. I almost entirely stayed awake for my arrival at the airport around 4:00 a.m. for my 5:20 a.m. flight--probably necessitated by purchasing mileage tickets but also creating a comfortable buffer for my 2:00 p.m. flight to Beijing. Predictably, I slept all the way to Seattle, then found some unoccupied seats around the B gates for another nap after a yogurt parfait breakfast. I was shocked by the density of people in the Seattle airport, the most crowded by far I have ever seen it, with no relief anywhere. Was it the result of my unusually early arrival, a prime time for traveling...? It seemed not, as the crowds never dissipated all the time I wandered the airport. I didn't find any armrest-less seats, so I slouched in a chair with my luggage attached to me and had a satisfying nap. It was 9:30 or so when I woke up, though I thought I'd have slept longer given that I'd arrived at 8:30 and then had a snack. But, there was no immediate falling asleep again, so I lingered a little, read for a bit, and charged my phone (directly from the outlet, as all the nearby convenient charging stations on the seats were inoperable). Around 10:30 I went to Beecher's for my usual lunch of mac and cheese and tomato soup, after which I slowly made my way to S gates to pick up my boarding pass for the overseas flight. To my shock, I noticed that the time displayed at the counter was 12:15, an hour ahead of my phone. For the first time since I've had a cell phone, it's time display did not automatically update, which explained a lot. I was relieved I hadn't lingered any longer. It could have been catastrophic! Several days earlier I had attached my watch to the outside of my checked bag so I wouldn't forget it, but naturally forgot all about it there, so I had no other point of reference on me.

Around 1:30 I sent a few texts and boarded the plane along with scores of Asians; scanning the boarding area, I found no other Caucasian faces--for a Seattle-based flight, I was surprised. I was also so tickled to be boarding a Chinese plane and starting my adventure that I overshot my seat before I even started looking at the row numbers and had to backtrack, not giving a very good first impression to my aisle seatmate, a young Chinese (I presume) woman. I even had to bother her again to tuck my camera bag in the overhead compartment. I tried a few times to win her over after that, to no avail.

Overall the flight was pleasant. Service was acceptable, but not particularly good, and the special Asian vegetarian meals were rather uninspiring, consisting primarily of white rice, limp spinach, and soft vegetables. I had half a glass of red wine with the first meal shortly after departure, watched about 2/3 of the movie *Arrival*, and fell asleep for I think a couple of hours. Although I was in one of the middle of the middle section of seats, I was lucky to have an empty seat next to me (except when temporarily occupied by a little girl of about four whose seat by the window was too cold). Unlike my other neighbor, she was unashamed to be friendly. The entertainment/information screen on the seat back in front of me was excellent--plenty of options with the local time at the point of departure, local time at the point of arrival, and time to destination conveniently displayed on the home screen. When I woke up, I was dedicated to not sleeping again until the "day" (the Beijing day) was over. I read a little, but was mostly so tired that I turned to visual media for entertainment, watching two *Better Call Sauls* that I'd been

saving for just this purpose, a Portlandia, and the beginning of a Big Fat Quiz Show of Everything with my friends Noel Fielding and Richard Ayowade. I also wrote the Snettisham trip report for the weekend before--really just four days prior!

I had my first glimpse of Beijing as we completed our descent, shuffled off the plane onto the tarmac, and very quickly stepped onto an elongated bus, tightly packed. The ride was quite long and I tried not to bump into the people behind me with my backpack. The air was warm and a little muggy, and I was quickly overheating. We were disgorged into a building where I passed through immigration without incident, except that I had to write my Mongolian flight number and date of departure on my arrival card, presumably because I was overnighing. While waiting interminably for luggage to arrive, I leaned against a row of baggage carts, repositioning farther down the line when it disappeared behind me as one after another of the waiting passengers extracted one. I'd imagined myself trekking through the Beijing airport with my big pack on my back and my little pack on my front and my camera bag in my hand, but it didn't take me long to follow what virtually everyone else was doing and pull out my own cart. People were packed around the whole baggage carousel and I had to let my bag go around once before I snuck in to pick it up. I saw one Caucasian man on the other side, so perhaps I was one of two on the plane.

I walked through the "nothing to declare" customs line without being stopped and without seeing the dog that barked somewhere nearby. And just like that I popped into a multi-story terminal with gates and restaurants and doors to the outside. Because I'd arrived on an international flight, I assumed I was in Terminal 3, the new international terminal and the one I needed to be in the next day (thankfully noted on my confirmation email); also the one that had the sleeping pods I was aware of. But where? I scoured the terminal for signs, rolled my cart around the bottom floor, then the third floor, and gradually came to the solid impression that I was, in fact, in Terminal 2, a suspicion I confirmed with a pleasant man who pushed me (unsuccessfully) to book a hotel with him but also told me that I could find the shuttle to Terminal 3 back downstairs. Sure enough, I found the sign and proceeded out the door to the pickup and taxi zone outside. I turned right, intently looking for the shuttle sign. There were lots of buses coming through, but all to the city. I made several abandoned attempts to ask someone for directions before I hit the end of the sidewalk and turned around. Eventually, I stopped by a bus attendant and managed to ask about the shuttle. He pointed in the direction I was going and counted "one, two, three, four, five," which I guessed was referencing the pillars supporting the story above. I counted my way down the sidewalk, deflecting many friendly taxi drivers who tried to convince me that the shuttle would take a LONG time. In fact, the shuttle was there when I arrived and departed as soon as I'd ditched my cart (an attendant assured me that is was acceptable practice to do so right there); a nice woman moved her bag so I could take the last seat inside. The ride was surprisingly long--could the terminals be so widely spaced, I wondered, or was the route just impossibly circuitous? It must have been ten or fifteen minutes. The area was familiar enough and could have been the area around the Seattle airport for all the concrete walls covered in ivy (or whatever it is over here). Streets and parks and buildings and neatly planted trees. At one point we passed a distinctly cottonwood type tree, the leaves intimately familiar from my black cottonwoods at home, the bark like the Yukon's quaking aspens. Soon we passed a whole grove of them from about tree top level and I was tickled.

We stopped first at Terminal 1 and then Terminal 3. By this point I was woefully exhausted and desperately in need of sleep, only slightly less desperately in need of food. Terminal 3 was overwhelmingly large and I did not know my way around. It was a huge room of row after row of check-in counters under a domed ceiling several stories high, flanked at the back by small shops and cafes. A small second level in one section boasted of restaurants and I finally headed up there, disgorged by the lift directly into the entrance of a Chinese restaurant overlooking the rest of the terminal below. Needing food, I decided to stay and was led to a quiet booth where I ordered a Chinese beer and "marinated gluten with peanuts and black fungus." The waitress indicated that this was a small dish, so I spontaneously added a noodle dish that cost about the same (18 yuan) which turned out to be a bowl of thick white noodles, a dish of thick, gloppy sauce, and some thin slices of cucumber and a pinkish vegetable. Together they were delicious and I left with more energy and a bit of information--that there was a help counter on level four just below me and that sleeping areas could be found on level 2.

The help counter was not very helpful, as it turned out, the attendant indicating that hotels could be found on level 2 but not understanding "sleeping pod." But I went down anyway, into the arrivals area, and turned left. Near the very end I finally found a place that sold resting areas by the hour. The attendants didn't understand "private room" but showed me their pods, which were really quite cool. On the other side of a curtain were rows of what looked like leather recliners separated by chest-high cubicle walls. There was no floor space inside the pods and it would have been tight with all my luggage, but better than nothing! I asked again about other options with private rooms, but I was not understood. I left to use the restroom, intending to rent a pod there if I found nothing else. Thankfully, on the way to the restrooms I saw a sign to a sleeping lounge with showers including an estimate of how many meters away it was (repeated at intervals). At the very opposite end of the terminal I found the facility and asked for a private room for the whole night, since the pricing chart indicated that it was less costly that way than renting one by the hour for the ten or so hours I had until I had until I needed to get up. And I needed to sleep as much as possible. It was then about 23 hours since I'd arrived at the airport in Juneau with little sleep. They called someone with better English over and she eventually communicated that it could be ready in ten minutes. I paid for the room, only then doing the math and discovering with surprise and some alarm that it was going to be quite expensive--about ten times what I'd paid for dinner, or nearly \$100! I imagine I could have booked a less expensive room in a hotel, but I was committed to this path, desperate for sleep, and sleeping in the shabby little room was worth it just for the adventure.

The shabby little room was bigger than I expected, maybe twice the width of the double bed inside and including a couple of chairs, a night stand, a small table, and a desk with a TV. The bathroom was a little snug (my knees barely fit in front of the toilet), and the shower was just the end of the room, quite near the toilet, with a drain beneath. There was a "sanitized" paper band across the top of the toilet, but I'm pretty sure it had just been laid there (there was no seal to break). Nothing was particularly clean, least of all the floor, which was the sort of fake wooden linoleum you might see in an old, cheap restaurant (I'm thinking about the pelmeni place in Juneau) and the bathroom was an equally industrial whitish gray linoleum with more pipes around the walls than one normally sees. After I blissfully took my shoes and socks off, I was grateful for the flimsy paper slippers provided. I brushed my teeth and stripped, cool at last in the very warm airport, read for a few minutes, and was asleep around 8:00 p.m.

I slept reasonable well, waking up around 4:00 (noon in Juneau) and feeling considerably better. It was noisy through the night with people talking, showering, and coming and going at all hours (predictably); there appeared to be very little sound insulation, but I was too tired to be bothered. I was showered and nearly ready to go when the phone rang at 5:00 a.m. for my wakeup. The woman on the other end spoke in Chinese for a while and I waited for a pause before responding with "she she" (thank you); I assumed it was my wakeup call and nothing else and wondered if she thought I had understood. About 15 minutes later, much refreshed, I rolled out of the lounge and found my way to the lift back up to level 4 check-in. People were already queued up outside enough to fill the first lift, and they just kept coming. I'll chock the lack of courtesy with lift queues up to the impossible mass of people in that airport (and the rest of China?). After six or seven lifts went up filled entirely with people who had showed up after me who had pushed their way to the front, I finally got aggressive and positioned myself directly in front of the doors, successfully thwarting the people without carts who tended to infiltrate the queue and fill the lift before we carters could enter. We went down first, then stopped at every floor on the way up before it disgorged the bulk of the passengers on level 4.

I was pleased to find my flight on the international departures board and even more pleased that it showed what check-in counter to use. When I found it, though, it showed not only a different flight (Seoul), but a different airline entirely. Confused, I returned to the board to verify that I had the right number; the Seoul flight departed at the same time as mine (I thought maybe it left earlier and therefore would soon change to my flight). This time I stayed in the indicated line and was relieved to find the flight information switching slowly back and forth between the two flights—I guess there were more flights than counters? It was a slowly moving line, but I eventually had my ticket, checked my bag, and ditched my cart to head to the international departures area. First I passed through a revolving-door type barrier that required a scan of my boarding pass to enter, then onto a train to the gates. From there the mass of people disembarking with me rushed to the immigration line to shuffle through the queue and have our paperwork stamped. Suddenly the percent of Caucasians in the mix rose dramatically and I recognized people from the check-in line.

Immediately on the other side of immigration, we started another long queue, crammed in together in a narrow section on our way to yet another counter; I was confused, but "security" was clearly written on the barriers organizing the line and I could see a few corridors beyond the counters that appeared to go to x-ray machines. It was crowded, narrow, and close, and I was by this time quite hot and sweaty again. I had the option at one point to change lines, but I stuck to the one I was in because the agent at the end was stamping paperwork with satisfying vigor that could be heard as soon as I entered the queue. From there I went through a narrow corridor and to the x-ray machine. In addition to liquids, I had to take out my portable battery bank, camera, and camera lenses. On the other side of what I assume was a metal detector, everyone stepped onto a little stool and was thoroughly wanded by a security agent with no preamble or explanation. It was actually a pleasant sensation, having this wand lightly run over my legs and arms!

Naturally, in my hot and over-stimulated state, I forgot to take my tablet out (you don't have to in the states, but the agent had asked if I'd removed all electronics), so it and my binoculars were

run through a second time. Sticky and uncomfortable, thirsty and hungry, I packed everything hastily back into my pack and took off toward my gate, ignoring the tantalizing coffee stands and restaurants just on the other side of security. As I entered the departure wing for my gate, the crowds, already dissipated past security, disappeared altogether and it was practically deserted (with the notable exception of an impossibly long, sinuous queue for a flight that was boarding that required me to reroute to the other side of the concourse). I passed a little snack stand and, much farther on, spotted a restaurant close to my gate. After verifying the time and that I had over an hour until boarding, I stopped by the bathroom, freshened up a bit, and then entered the small restaurant despite the fact that the only food displayed on its posters looked decidedly like dinner options. I figured they must have something in the way of breakfast foods if they were open so early, but the menu was small, had nothing that looked like even a Chinese breakfast, and lacked much in the way of vegetarian options. Soup in that heat was out of the question. So I ordered "baked bran," not at all sure what that was, and an iced mochaccina and water. The waitress pointed to a beef dish on the menu and said that the one I'd chosen was like that but tofu. I said okay, then gratefully sucked down the small bottle of ice cold water she brought and sipped the coffee drink, giving thanks for the quiet sanctuary after a most crowded morning. My food looked a lot like my marinated gluten from the night before, so maybe "bran" was tofu as well? Only it was cold, and not particularly good. And half again as much. But I was still grateful and ate it to the last bite.

On the way back to the gate, I filled my water bottles and sat down among a mixed Asian-Caucasian crowd, making pretty good headway on this trip report. Without any drama, someone announced that we were now boarding and people began to get up. I stopped by the restroom, entered the queue, and was quickly on board in my window seat, charmed by the fact that the English announcements were made, inexplicably, in an Australian accent! Now I appear to be over the Gobi, well on my way to Mongolia.

Ulaan Baatar

Prior to landing, we made a wide swing around the Ulaan Baatar (UB) valley. I had been surprised that the steppe was still pretty uniformly brown as we flew, though the area around UB was showing a blush of green (or maybe we were just close enough to see it). Grinning out the window like a fool, I picked out my first gers and animals dotting the landscape on the approach. We disembarked without preamble and I hastily filled out an immigration card in the small airport, picked up my bag, and walked along a wall of greeters, searching for my name among them. At the end I saw a tall, young, handsome Mongolian with a sign for my company, Horseback Mongolia, and off we went. Shortly thereafter he handed me his phone for a chat (my first on the phone) with Enguerran, my faithful contact, to confirm the details of the trip and whether I needed any other assistance. We approached the city past tall power stacks that made me think of Russia in the 1980s (I'm not sure why) and then into the city center. The trees, many poplar-like, were all fully leafed out and we passed statues of a camel caravan and other Mongolian art as we drove. The city looked like a city, with Cyrillic everywhere (I really should have learned how to read it).

We stopped by The Department Store to change money, then promptly on to my hotel down a narrow street/alley off Peace Avenue. We drove through a gate, manned by an older Mongolian man with a heavily lined face, parked, and then entered a wholly unmarked, nondescript,

concrete apartment building through a steel door; walking through another door inside it was suddenly almost pitch dark. It occurred to me that I could be on my way to a basement to be killed. But after several disconcerted steps into the darkness, the lights came on automatically, as they did twice more as we ascended bland stairs, equally unmarked. At last we came to a nice wooden door on a landing, rang for entrance, and stepped into the marvelous little Zaya Hostel occupying one floor of the building. All exquisitely clean and new, I was led around the place by its manager (it was a bit of a maze) and at last to my narrow room inhabited by three twin beds (beds for each of my packs, as he joked). The bathroom was new, marble, and quite urban looking, and there was a comfortable lounge and kitchen area.

I began unpacking a little, arranging things, deciding what documents and how much money to carry around with me, etc., and then headed out the door with my little google maps printout in hand headed toward the state museum, which seemed like a good place to start. It was about 1:00 p.m. Nearby Peace Avenue was lined with little shops, larger shopping complexes (including The Department Store), restaurants, and tourist companies. Not able to read the signs, I passed by several promising little restaurants almost before I realized what they were. I was feeling a little hungry by then (the dry white bread and cabbage sandwich on the plane didn't have a lasting effect), so when I was a block away from the square I turned to the left and went into the first Mongolian restaurant I could find. I expected a warmer welcome, but the lady I walked up to said something in Mongolian and was no further help. I would have thought it was obvious what I was there for and tried to communicate that. I gestured every way I could think of to no avail. What else would I be doing in a restaurant? Maybe just point me to a table, maybe to the counter? Nothing. Finally another lady behind the counter took pity on me and opened a menu—perfect—in which I pointed to mutton dumplings. She asked how many by covering all but one with her hands. I tried to ask how big they were and how many were appropriate for a meal, but that didn't work. I suggested five, then pointed to a fruit drink (I was quite thirsty) and sat down. Soon five enormous dumplings showed up, an embarrassing volume and quite impossible to consume in one sitting. All for about \$2.50 I believe. I ate three and was surprised by the delicious mutton inside, seasoned with onions and other spices. This time, when I approached the attendant, my request for wrapping the dumplings was instantly understood and she put them in a little bag. I was grateful for the water closet.

And then off I went back to walking along Peace Avenue, leaving it to turn left across from Sukhbaatar Square for the nearby museum. Outside were deer stones....real deer stones, and I had my first up close look at their eerie, ancient faces. Inside I toured Mongolia's history from "prehistory" (really enjoying the bead necklaces found in Bronze Age graves, so similar to our tastes today), to the ancient states (the topic of much of my research), to the Mongol Empire, to the communist era, and to the post-communist area, a small room with enthusiastic music playing (the only music in the museum) and photos of young Mongolians bringing their world into democracy. I think the highlights were a Mongol Empire era stone statue of a life size Mongol noble, the traditional clothes hall (amazingly beautiful and complex clothing and hair fittings for women from the various tribes in Mongolia), and the mummies. Three mummies were on display, two of which were open to the air and could be approached intimately. One was a Khitan mummy, complete with tufty hair. Another was accompanied by a mummified horse.

I was severely exhausted by the time I wandered out of the museum, but since I was already there, I walked over to the square to admire the huge statues of Chinggis Khan, his two flanking horsemen, and Sukbaatar himself. There were clusters of white tents in rows on the far side and I strolled through there in the hopes of water. I found none, but did see something calling itself a tourist information center. It turns out that they sell tours, but in chatting with them I did manage to mention that, although I had tours planned, I was interested in going to the Tumen Ekh performance (and had no idea where it was). One of them showed me on a map, definitely within walking distance, down the street from the nearby corner of Peace Avenue. I really wanted a little rest first and to read the directions for my international SIM card which refused connection to a service, so I headed back toward my hotel despite the fact that it was already 4:45 and I should be at the concert at 5:40 at the latest. Along the way I bought a huge bottle of half-frozen water, which partially revived me, and after heading down the wrong side street and getting panicky, I did find my hotel with enough time to grab my SIM card directions, drop off the souvenirs I'd bought at the museum and the dumplings, and head back out. I resorted to jogging my way down Chinggis Ave. For once I'd understood directions correctly and recognized the pink building off from the main road. The whole place was poorly signed and really quite shabby, a building of peeling pink painted concrete surrounded by unlevel dirt, weeds, and overgrown trees. In fact, it was so poorly marked that I wound up walking around the wrong side of the building, though a friendly neighbor working in a dilapidated area among cars on blocks enthusiastically said "Yes ma'am" and pointed around the building. I got an amused look from another Mongolian, possibly on a smoke break, and soon joined a crush of people waiting to get inside. Most apparently had tickets already and were with tour groups and only a handful of people were at the counter buying tickets. I had my 2,000 tugriks all ready, as I'd been told, but the sign said it was 2,500, necessitating me digging out more money from the pouch I had under my shirt. I'm afraid I may have shown some skin in my sweaty, panicky effort to pull more money out, desperate to get a ticket before they sold out.

It didn't appear to be a problem in the end and, in fact, they packed more people into the small theatre than they had seating for and continued to do so well into the show. The building seemed rather old, the inside wood covered in faded paint. The theater itself was small with carpeted bench seats along the back and the corners. It was decorated like a temple, every beam painted in animals, flowers, and other designs, and was wonderful. The show was wonderful too. They had male and female singers and dancers, fairly traditional clothing, and a wonderful array of traditional instruments. My favorite were the horse head fiddles, played like a cello, with a surprisingly sweet sound. Instruments were played alone or in orchestras and the music was all beautiful. We were treated to long songs and throat singing, and even contortionists at the end (which I doubt is traditional). And, although we were not in a religious setting, I appreciated seeing the Tsam dance at the end, a truly impressive, energetic dance in magnificent, immense masks. I recognized the Old White Man, the pre-Buddhist earth deity, among the characters, and wasn't sure why the audience was laughing at him. It was well worth the trip.

I was foot-sore on the way back after all the walking/running that day. I tried to buy some ice cream at one of the many street stands and met a well-traveled Mongolian man there who wanted to chat. He was an interesting guy, spoke several languages, and apparently guided a little; he gave me the card of a tourist camp somewhere and tried to find the name of a guest from Sitka he'd traveled with. I finally had to pull myself away to make sure I was back at my hotel at 8:00

and made one more futile effort to buy a cone with a single scoop. That option was clearly marked on the menu with the price next to it and I kept waiving around that much money (was it 650 tugriks?) but he kept telling me I could do that, pointing to the two scoop option; all attempts to explain why I couldn't have a single scoop failed and I left completely baffled and without ice cream.

I laid down and relaxed a little bit when I got back to the hotel, waiting on Angie's friend Subdaa to come and exchange packages with me. Apparently you can't ship nutritional supplements to Mongolia, so I'd brought a bag full of them to deliver to Angie's mom via her friend. Someone eventually came to find me and I met Subdaa in the lobby for a pleasant exchange. Then I packed until after 9:00 before I collapsed. It was a noisy night with some rather loud men somewhere below me, but I woke up early feeling somewhat whole again.

Central Mongolia, Day 1:

I'm snuggled into my ger. there is a large flock of sheep and goats outside and i tink this was one of the best days of adventure I hav e ever had. its past ten now and i;m thoroughly exhausted with no ess to look forward to tomorrow. i thin i was bor nto be a nomad.

That's exactly what I typed lying in bed the first night. I'm now at Terelj three days later, the first time I've had time to write, and my sentiments are exactly the same. I'm now wondering if raising children in cities is just as cruel as keeping dogs in cities. We are meant to have space, children are meant to run around with freedom. I have strong suspicions that nomad children do not throw tantrums (or at the very least, fewer of them); like unexercised dogs, city children are bored. They need baby goats to chase and cows to herd and horses to canter around on proudly.

I met my guide Soni (pronounced "Sunny") at 8:30 a.m. the day after arriving in UB in the lobby of Zaya Hostel, and we headed downstairs to meet up with the driver and the large white View Mongolia van. The driver, Tsegmed, greeted me with a wide grin and ushered me to my throne inside. The setup was perfect--a two-passenger seat that left room between it and the van door on the left side. There was a little rug on the seat, a bottle of water waiting for me, and a grit-catching mat on the floor. The interior was a surprising white and very clean. Tsegmed climbed in and showed me his badge so I could learn his name. We headed out, my guide and I chatting and getting to know one another as we ever so slowly escaped the city center and the ger districts beyond.

And then there was the brown steppe, just blushed with green. Other than a few fences here and there and half-buried tires indicating land boundaries, there was mostly just livestock and steppe, a few gers and cabins, but mostly steppe covering gently rolling hills. I soon discovered that, while the steppe is endless in one sense, it is not at all flat, at least not in central Mongolia, so there are always mountains or hills not far in the distance. Some of the valleys, like the Orkhon, are quite wide, but still probably not more than ten miles to the next range of mountains or hills.

I soon discovered that two of the Mongolian characteristics I'd read about were already outdated. For one thing, we passed many ovoos without consideration (my guide book from 2006 suggested that they would be stopped at either repeatedly, or that we'd at least stop at the first

one of the day). When we were coming up on a large one just on the side of the road, I asked Soni if I was right in calling it an “ovoo” (with more or a purpose of bringing the topic up) and so we stopped. I circumambulated it three times, saying prayers for the well-being of all the creatures in that area. One creature was clearly doing well: long-tailed rodents popped in and out of burrows around us in astonishing numbers!

Back on the road I continued to glue my eyes to the livestock, such a pleasant and novel sight, spotting most of Mongolia’s “five snouts,” the basis of traditional nomad livelihood: horses, sheep, goats, camels, and yaks. A few times, we stopped to allow a herd to cross the road, which of course totally charmed me. The steppe in sight was still mostly brown, though there were patches of lush green (some of which was inaccessible to livestock). It was unseasonably dry.

I also stared with fascination at the small villages we passed, some no more than a row of stores on the side of the road, all rather shoddy looking. We later stopped at a couple of them and I enjoyed seeing what was for sale in the ubiquitous “mini market.” It didn’t take me long to figure out how to recognize “mini market” in Cyrillic! There was some pasta and flour and rice, some ketchup and sauces, vodka, potatoes and sometimes other root vegetables that were clearly local, eggs, frozen meat, and lots and lots of bags of candy.

A couple of hours out of the city we left the paved Millennium Road and took a left toward Khustai National Park. Soni had at first talked enthusiastically about the wild horses we'd be seeing, then shifted gears and warned me that they usually come down out of the mountains only in the morning and evening to drink and that there was a good chance we wouldn't see them at all. I assured her I already knew that possibility. She even went so far as to suggest that we switch the itinerary and take our route backwards, as that would put us closer to evening in the park on the return trip. When she called her boss, though, we stuck to the original plan, perhaps because the herder family was expecting us that night.

Not far beyond the first row of low mountains, we drove across the plain to the edge of sand dunes, surprisingly sporting quite a few of the only trees in sight! We stopped and climbed up through the pleasantly hot sand and I went a little further to find the shelter of a tree to go use the toilet. There were quite a few plants growing on the sand in addition to the elm trees. Soni did not have an explanation for why the trees were growing on dunes and not in the perfectly good soil of the steppe right next to it.

It was a very cool stop, and then we continued on our way to the visitor center/tourist camp of Khustai National Park. My motivation for going to the park was primarily to see the Turkic bal bals and deer stone, but the tour around the ger-shaped visitor center with the local guide quickly had me enamored of the park more generally. The center was really excellent, the walls covered in interpretive panels in Cyrillic Mongolian and English. I took pictures for reference later of common plants and animals, pleased to identify my ovoo friends as Brandt’s voles. There was a stuffed saker falcon that shocked me by its enormous size--buteo hawk sized, I'd say. I then watched a ten minute documentary about the park before we were back on the road in the not-so-hopeful chance of seeing horses.

What I was seeing was a dizzying number of larks or what I thought might be larks! I was beginning to be able to distinguish several species, but couldn't identify them yet. They buzzed

away from the van and larked over the steppe. Soon after leaving the center I saw my first Siberian marmot (an important species for many steppe animals that utilize its burrows) and then my first of many many many ground squirrels. We were winding our way through a narrow valley at this point, me still marveling a little at being in Mongolia, when I noticed a couple of horse-like shapes on the hill in front of us. I could see that Soni and Tsegmed saw them too and, based on the fact that they said nothing, I assumed they were not wild horses. But I kept glancing at them and, when we were right alongside them on the hillside above, Soni announced that we had found wild horses and we stopped. I grabbed my camera and binoculars, peering up the mountain at the one or two horses I could see up there. Soni sent me off with Tsegmed, staying behind in fear that her white shirt might scare them, saying that he had a route he thought would bring us closer without bothering them.

And so we climbed, and one beautiful dun horse after another came into view against a backdrop of brown steppe hillside with rocky outcroppings and a little draw. The lowest horse on the slope was a male and stood with some bearing as we slowly walked past. None of the horses seemed bothered, and only one started easing off when we got about 50 yards away, but moving slowly, not startled. They were stunning, tails whipped up by the steady breeze. I counted ten horses including two yearlings (judging by the fact that they were clearly babies, but also shedding winter coats), one of which nursed (or tried to) while we watched); three others were males, one of which was probably young, but another of which stood above the herd and seemed large and confident, making me wonder if the first one we'd seen was in fact the stallion. Przewalski horses, I'd learned at the center, will kill the colts and fillies of herds they win, unlike feral horses. It certainly seemed unlikely that a rival would be allowed so close. After some time watching them and snapping endless photos, thoroughly delighted, the lower male wandered back down the valley. I expected everyone to follow, which they eventually did, but not for another ten minutes or so. And then, fluidly, they drifted after him, tan coats, black manes, little stripes on the backs of their legs. I could clearly see the visitor center down the valley!

While we were up there, Tsegmed pointed out another four horses across the valley, above which there were at least 14 more in addition to some deer (less obvious, but I'm pretty sure I saw one sky-lined). Soni came up to meet us and lingered a little longer and then we headed back to the car, with assurances from both about how lucky we were. More little birds flew down the hill below me that I hoped to identify later.

Not far on we saw three more deer against a ridge, the tell-tale snout revealing them as red deer, a.k.a. elk. Wow! A little later, we turned around a low ridge and began following a small spring-fed stream that trickled over little rock waterfalls at the bottom of the valley. This was apparently where tourists come to watch the horses drink in the morning and evening, as we passed rectangular sections of steppe on the side of the track bordered by rows of small rocks with parking signs. It looked tidy and amused me, and I hoped it would protect the steppe vegetation. For ourselves, we drove to the side of the stream where we picnicked on a large flat rock. The welcome breeze that had swept down the valley among the wild horses kept us cool enough in the hot sunshine, though it required rocks to keep our lighter items from flying away. Lunch consisted of a deli salad with teriyaki chicken and a cheese burger, complete with pickle and tomato. The latter was a surprise--a cold cheeseburger? But it was tender and delicious and I devoured it along with most of the salad and the chocolate muffin that followed. Food so far has

been easy and delicious! While we ate, several takhi (the Mongolian name for the wild horses) wandered the hillside in the distance.

After lunch, we continued to wind our way along the narrow valleys which began to be dominated by complex rocky outcroppings, some covered in yellow lichen. At one point I was taking a picture of a particularly picturesque rock when I happened to see some takhi wandering along behind it, and we continued to see more herds! In all I believe we saw six different bands and 47 individuals, well over 10% of the entire takhi population! We also came around a corner and stumbled past a herd of seven male elk drinking in a little stream not far away. We stopped and they reluctantly moved off, pausing on the hillside to (we imagined) wait for us to leave before coming back to water. They stuck their tongues out for the heat. And again, later on and closer to the plain, a band of 17 female elk (plus four on the hillside) lingered in a stream bordered by deep green grass being also appreciated by a group of cattle. My companions were convincingly astonished at our good luck, as red deer tend to hide like takhi in the day time.

And then the valley released us into a very wide, flat plain. Tsegmed must have taken a wrong turn at that point, because a couple of minutes later he made an abrupt left and I watched with puzzlement as we drove across virgin steppe. I thought maybe we were chasing wildlife, but a few minutes later we merged with an established track, sliding into it like a toboggan run. And somewhere in the middle of that steppe was the Ungut monument, my Turkic bal bals. The main complex was surrounded by an iron gate, but thankfully it was not meant to keep humans out. Inside was the grave of a Turkic person, evidently one of some esteem. His grave was surrounded by four stone slabs about three feet tall, each engraved on the outside with a crisscross pattern reminiscent of the lattice framework on the inside of a ger (evidence, Soni said, of the relationship between these Turks and modern Mongols). Facing the grave was a double row of bal bals, granite stones carved like men. Offset this was an empty square area with a granite sheep marking one side, a granite lion another, the grave another, and two bal bals the last. I imagine that "empty" square has significance. There were about 30 bal bals near the tomb, if I remember right, and beyond that, beyond the fence, a row of 550 standing stones, slate (or similar), not granite, and uncarved, trailing off into the distance across the steppe. Interpretations vary, but most people seem to think they represent either commoners honoring the dead or vanquished enemies. It was marvelous to learn that the grave was untouched--that the Turkic man was still there, still watched over by the bal bals and standing stones some 1,250 years or more after he died.

I was already having the time of my life, and it just kept getting better. From the Ungut monument (named for the nearby Ungut Mountains), we drove back into the mountains and through a valley, winding our way among livestock to the head of it. And there was my deer stone, the only one I'd found that was within the parameters of my travels, but one of the things I had to see in Mongolia. I wasn't sure what this one looked like (not all of them are as well preserved or as interesting as others), but it turned out to be outstanding. The deer/bird carvings were clear, pointing downward on one side, upward on another, with a circle at the top of one side that might have been an earring. Spectacular. And, as a bonus, right next to it was a khirigsuur! Soni thought they were unrelated, that the khirigsuurs were burial mounds for commoners and the deer stones for noblemen (though the deer stones are not necessarily associated with graves); I have no idea, but it could be that the khirigsuur was put there because

the deer stone made the site auspicious? Anyway, it was a huge bonus, as I had not expected to see a burial mound. It consisted of a roundish pile of slate in the middle surrounded by a square border that seemed to have clusters of rocks in the corners. The area at the top of the valley was, in fact, quite a stunning place. Nearby was a perfect circle of stones with a skull in the middle of it.

On the way out we stopped by a local ger and Tsegmed chatted with the people there, something about letting them know that we were there, and then we soon stopped by a gully so I could use the gully facilities. From there I watched a bunch of vultures fly by, some entirely black, others browner, but all unidentifiable. From there we descended out of the mountains again and back onto flat steppe, passing along and then through a few earthy fields without crops which sported several beautiful eagles (golden or steppe I can't tell). In the distance the sky turned tan and soon the incessant wind surrounded us in a dust storm as we drove. It blotted out the fields and livestock to either side and a fine dust settled on the top of my phone sitting next to me!

The day was already getting on at this point and I began to wonder if there'd be time for a camel ride that evening or not (an hour on the dunes at Elsen Tsarkai was the plan), which by that point I was not too concerned about as I had had a marvelous day. As we approached the nomad camp, which was located near the dunes, we stopped at two mini markets (I think the first wasn't accepting credit cards) at the second of which Soni picked up some gummy candies at the request of one of the nomads we were going to see. She talked to me about giving the nomads gifts and asked if I wanted to pick some up, but I told her that I had brought some, which she said was not common.

As we drove, I kept my eyes glued to the steppe and was rewarded with my first glimpse of a gray demoiselle crane close to the road followed by another pair on the other side. We also passed a huge assemblage of black kites right on the side of the road—there were scores of them, with nothing obvious in sight to draw them in.

With the sun lowering, we approached the dunes, one of which was spilling onto the road (we were back on pavement now), and unexpectedly stopped at some camels. Soni said that it was probably too late for our nomad family to bring their camels to the dunes that night, so we would just stop and have my picture taken by the dunes on one of the camels there and then go for a longer ride in the morning. A rather surly Mongolian had his camel kneel down and I was told to hold onto the hairy front hump. I was unprepared for the lurch forward that resulted from the camel raising its hind legs before its front legs, but I stayed on and was taken in a circle for photos. I won't say that it wasn't delightful to be on camel back. I wasn't wild about the fact that the camel bellowed a little every time it was asked to do something (pulled really), but what do I know about camels?

Just a little farther down the road we stopped again so I could photograph the dunes, and suddenly Tsegmed took off toward some camels tied to a rail, in the middle of which was a baby on its knees. He boldly walked up and petted it, so I did the same! Soni ran back for the gummy candies, which apparently camels love, and soon I was pushing gummy candy into the somewhat resistant mouth of a baby camel. He never did really take to the candy until they were actually in his mouth, but he loved me! At least, he loved chewing on me. And, probably, anyone within

reach. I'd been careful offering the candy, thinking about how you're supposed to feed treats to horses with an open palm to avoid nips, but I soon found my hand completely inside this camel's mouth. We hypothesized that he was teething, as he would not leave me alone, mouthing my ankles, my arms, and my hands, and licking or nibbling my toes. It was totally unexpected and delightful. By the end he was standing up and starting to frolic a little, but alas we had to pull ourselves away. One day this camel will have a bone poked through his nose and be led reluctantly through the dunes with tourists on his back, bellowing in protest, but for now he is a guileless and playful calf with big brown camel eyes. I later learned that "Camel Eyes" is a Mongolian name for very beautiful children.

And at last we turned off the road and drove a short distance to a row of three gers near a large herd of sheep and goats, a few cattle, a couple of horses, and several camels near a rail. I said hello to the lady of the family, who was trailed by two serious looking young girls, then my gear was dropped in one of the gers and we immediately went to the main ger for dinner, since it was 8:00. The lady, who I later learned was named Oro, brought in a thermos of milk tea and served the three of us at a little table at the back of the ger, then delivered a bowl of fresh Mongolia donuts (a little denser and not very sweet, but totally delicious). By then the air had a chill to it, so the hot milk tea was welcome, and delicious. Soon buuz showed up--traditional Mongolian dumplings (more noodle-like than the doughy ones I had in UB)--along with a plate of potatoes and enormous carrots. It was an astonishingly good meal.

I asked Soni where to go to the toilet and she pointed to the family's long drop, a few hundred yards away from the gers and on the other side of the sheep and goats. I took a few hesitant steps and asked her if it was alright to go and she assured me that the livestock was friendly! They parted for me as I made my way over there. The toilet consisted of a pit dug into the sand (it looked freshly dug, or at least what had been in there was covered with fresh sand) with two boards over it to stand on and shoulder-high wooden walls on three sides. The fourth side looked over the steppe toward the camel rail and above a large moon hung in the sky. On the way back, I was met by one of the two friendly family dogs, a hairy, reddish pup which was sprouting an alarming volume of pale winter wool from the back half of his body. He must have been young, and mouthed and romped around me like a puppy. Dogs are dogs everywhere (or, I should say, puppies are puppies everywhere) and I knew exactly how to play with this one! I romped and played with this pup through the livestock to the wondering gaze of one of the girls who looked both amused and astonished by my behavior. I found the dog's soft biting interesting--this is the behavior we train out of our dogs as young puppies, but this dog was a working dog and probably hadn't had much use for western house training.

Afterwards I gave my bag of gifts to Oro and I heard a shriek of excitement as the little girl ran off to the third ger to open it. She emerged a few minutes later playing with the little rubber spiky ball I'd put in there and seemed to be enjoying it. She was with the other girl and I realized that I should have put an extra toy in there for her (she wasn't a member of the family, so I wasn't sure of protocol). The sheep and goats had moved in next to the gers and Soni asked the girls to bring me the little baby goat that had been hanging around the gers earlier. Running through the scattering herd like cowboys, she grabbed the little goat and brought him over and I got to cuddle him as his heart stopped racing. Then I beckoned to the neighbor girl to follow me and, to my surprise, she did so without hesitation. They followed me into my ger where I dug out a blue ball

like the other and gave it to her, indicating that she could turn it inside out to show the spikes, which she did. The girls really warmed up to me after this and I even got smiles, whereas before they wore blank expressions. They giggled as they blew up their toys like balloons.

While Soni and Oro were chatting in one of the other gers, I was looking at the paintings on the ger supports and asked what some lumpy brown ones were. Soni said they were sheep knuckles and asked if I wanted to learn how to play. I said sure! One of the girls brought a bag of bones and Soni spread a blanket over the little table. We clustered around and played the knuckle game; in short, the four long sides of the knuckle bone are all unique--camel, horse, sheep, and goat. You look for two that are the same and flick one against the other. If you succeed without touching any other pieces, you get to keep the flicked one. If you wind up with just one piece on the table, everyone gives you two from their pile to continue the game; if someone else only has one at that time, you give them two to continue. There is no definitive end to the game, but the one with the most when you quit wins. It's a good game, suitable for everyone (easy enough for kids, entertaining enough for adults). We played until 9:30 when, all exhausted, we turned in. I could have asked for a fire, but didn't think there would be a need.

When I got up at 4:00 a.m. to use the long drop, the sheep and goats were laying down in a tight circle outside the gers, about 100 feet away, and the white dog (the other friendly one) was curled up just where I'd last seen him in front of the middle ger. It was just light enough that I could see where I was going without a flashlight and as I squatted over the pit, I concentrated on making out the shapes of the camels where they lay down at their hitching post in the distance. Then I stood up, glanced to the right, and cackled a little when I discovered that the rump of another camel was about two feet away, sitting just next to the pit. The next morning one of the long drop walls was cocked over the pit and I wondered if the camel had rubbed it there.

Central Mongolia, Day 2:

I managed to sleep a little more before the camp came to life around 6:00 a.m. The sound that awakened me may have been hooves on the wooden porch of my ger, but that was only the start. I can't express how delightful it was to lay in my ger while the whole herd of sheep and goats passed by; the thick felt cover of the ger didn't extend all the way to the ground, so in the early sunlight I could see the shadows of legs passing by on the other side of the thin fabric. The bleating and baaing was quite comical.

Before breakfast at 7:30, I took a quick walk to the low sandy mounds near the long drop which had some shrubs that some birds seemed to be enjoying. I never got a good look at them, but they were pale brown streaky creatures, probably Eurasian skylarks (or possible sparrows)? I did spot a vole as he scurried under a shrub and snapped several photos of him eyeing me from cover. Before breakfast, I took a short camel ride, led by the 20-year old boy who was quite a bit friendlier this morning than he had been the evening before. There was less to hang onto with this camel, the front hump being practically flat and drooped over. The back hump appeared nonexistent, though I did eventually confirm it was there, flat as a pancake, so limp that it appeared to have been removed altogether! I was glad that I had read that this is a normal result of using their fat reserves over the winter and that they won't stand up until much later in the summer. These camels were the slimmest of any that I saw in the steppe, perhaps a testament to

the struggle the family was having with the dry weather and lack of forage. Soni had said that they aren't milking very much yet, as the calves need all the milk the mothers can offer.

As we headed slowly away from camp, I spotted two demoiselle cranes in the distance and asked Soni to have him take us there (my camel was led the whole time). They were browsing along a little green trickle of a stream and I wondered if they had young ones or a nest nearby, given their extreme reluctance to fly when my dog friend trotted up to them within a few feet, only lowering their necks close to the ground. Thankfully, he didn't harass them further and, not wanting to harass them myself, I indicated that we could go and my guide turned us around. So it was a very short ride, but I'd had such marvelous time doing other things that I was in no way disappointed. This camel also bellowed every time he or she was pulled along or, especially, when asked to kneel so I could dismount, which took some time. I thought it was possible that the bellows were just the style of the camels and shouldn't be taken too seriously, but as I dismounted I was saddened to see fresh red blood trickling from the spike through its nose and yellow froth around its mouth. I know that this is how camel wrangling works, but I wished I hadn't troubled this particular camel that morning. Soni said that when the nomads go to winter camp, they can leave the camels behind, as they are able to fend for themselves, so perhaps these camels were still getting used to captivity again. I'm not sure where the camels had spent the winter, but the family had only arrived at this camp in the last couple of days.

Breakfast was Mongolian pancakes (thicker and denser and not as sweet, cut into rectangles and triangles) served with honey and jam if desired, and rice-milk porridge which was sweet and delicious. I ate more than I intended because when Tsegmed offered me more I passed him my bowl which came back filled to the brim. Oro seemed to appreciate my surprised appreciation of her meal and, in general, was quite a bit warmer this morning. Soni later told me that she really liked my unique gifts, especially the pocket knives which she was going to secret away so her brother or others wouldn't want it! So perhaps that helped. After breakfast they dressed me in a fancy del for photographs--a black silk robe with purple embroidery--along with a traditional hat trimmed in convincingly fake sable. I looked pretty imperial! They even put me on a horse, and Soni dressed in another del to join me in the photos. Everyone was in a good mood.

And then we were off after hasty goodbyes in which Soni translated some of my thanks for the lovely time I'd had with the family. I even got smiles and waves from the son (maybe he liked the second pocket knife I'd put in the gift bag). The drive to Kharkhorin from their camp was only about an hour, much of it through agricultural fields (which, I liked to remember, had been cultivated for more than 2,000 years). Our first stop was Erdene Zuu monastery where Soni and I admired the many inscriptions on the brick wall surrounding it, which had been literally built from the ruins of 13th century Kharkhorum (the Mongol capital built by Ogedai Khaan, Chinggis Khaan's son and heir to the empire). I was excited because I'd read that you could see the original marks on some the stones from the brick makers in Kharkhorum, which I believe is one way they proved the connection to that ancient (and completely demolished) city. Some of the marks we saw were probably old, but Soni said most were recently written, probably from people hoping for help or luck.

As I stepped through the looming gateway I was struck, not for the last time that day, by how woefully inadequate every single photo I've seen of Erdene Zuu has been in depicting its beauty.

Even without bright green grass and flowers, the monastery was stunningly beautiful inside. How was it possible to take such uninspiring photos of it, or, I later thought, write of it somewhat dismissively?

We first visited the oldest three temples built in the late 1500s and early 1600s, each featuring a representation of Shakyamuni Buddha in the middle of a single small room flanked by two other Buddhas (or Shakyamuni at a different age). I'd paid the extra fee to take photos inside and tried to moderate my photography pace as I let the temples sink in—they were so rich in detail that it was difficult to grasp, and you could easily spend hours studying all the statues and paintings in just one of the rooms. I made an offering in each, awed by their beauty and antiquity. Soni pointed out a couple of the deities we'd talked about including a ferocious female protector that had overcome a powerful demon by marrying him, later killing him and then their baby. I would not have recognized her on my own.

By the time we'd toured the three museum temples and their intricate, nail-less roofs, it was almost 11:00 and we walked over to the active Tibetan-style temple to listen to the monks chant. While Soni was in the bathroom, I walked around the outside of the single room following some locals and imitated their actions, turning a wheel loaded with sutras, running my hands up and down cubbies full of sutras, and bowing at photographs and the statue in the center. When I got to a portrait of the Dalai Lama I felt right at home and made another offering to the temple—not for any particular petition but to honor the place and support it. When the monks headed outside I followed to hear them announce the service from a small platform by blowing on conch shells which, I couldn't help but notice, were not in tune! Then I went back in and we listened to the chanting for a while, with the addition of some symbols at one point. The center of the room had two rows of benches facing each other where most of the monks sat crosslegged; the front and side walls had benches for laypeople, where we sat for about ten minutes. The young man (at most my age) who seemed to be in charge prostrated himself several times to the main statue while the other monks continued chanted. I enjoyed watching all the monks, most of whom were fairly young.

We wandered back outside and Soni disappeared in the temple's entry building while I went to look at the beautifully blue-roofed temple (that may have been the first one built at the site). She caught up with me, having purchased small bags of powdered incense (juniper maybe?) and sweet holy water that we each sipped and then dabbed on our hands and heads. It was a lovely gesture. On our way back to the original temples, we walked into a prayer ger where there was more chanting (and a handful of items for sale). Upon reentering the old complex, we went inside the buildings on either side of us (which we hadn't seen before), the small rooms of which were lined with thangkas. Soni was wonderful about explaining them to me. Nearby were the simple tombs of Avtai Sain Khan (largely responsible for building the monastery) and his son Tusheet Khan Gombodorj, Zanabazar's father. It was by this time rather overwhelming! Before we left the monastery complex, we also toured a museum hall with more exquisite art, but I really couldn't take in any more at that point. A person can only absorb so much art and beauty in one day.

From there we drove up to the top of a nearby hill to see one of the two turtle stones that are the only standing evidence of Kharkhorum from the 13th century. Though now enclosed by a metal

fence, the very realistically carved turtle still bore hadags and the nose, worn smooth and black by myriad pilgrims, was accessible between the bars (though I didn't rub it). A portion of the stele on its back remained. Nearby was a picturesque ovoo looking over the valley with a line of horse skulls at its base.

We then visited the Kharkhorum museum, starting with a short film about a truly spectacular Turkic tomb from 200 km north that had recently been excavated. The tomb was dug into a hillside with a long, narrow entrance chamber sporting paintings of an elongated dragon on one side and an elongated tiger on the other, followed by smaller chambers with paintings of people, clay human figures, clay guardian figures, and other objects, and finally a tomb with cremation remains, stunning gold and silver items, and fabric. Many of the items were on display in the next room, jaw droopingly beautiful. I thought again of how the Turks really had (have?) it going on in the aesthetics department! Everything was beautiful, a little Celtic, a little middle-eastern. I didn't spend a great deal of time in the rest of the small museum, having seen many similar items in UB (and being already rather overwhelmed by the day), but I did finally cave and buy the photography ticket, in part to photograph some blue tiles taken from the mandala on the floor of the Great Buddhist Temple from Kharkhorum which were probably imported from Iran (these tiles are usually used on the ceilings of mosques) and, of course, those beautiful Turkic artifacts. Most museums, I was learning, charge an extra fee for taking photographs. At the gift shop I bought a felt camel that reminded me of my friend from the evening before.

It was about 1:30 by then, so we stopped by a Korean restaurant for lunch where the unexpected wifi allowed me to send some Signal messages and actually live text a few times, back and forth. The Korean beef and carrot dish was the first time I had not been impressed with food in Mongolia, the beef chewy and a bit gristly like you'd find in America. I had two delicious cups of coffee, though--my first since arriving--and, refreshed and energized, we took off for Khar Balgas. It was about a 40 minute drive, partly paved and partly dirt over smooth steppe.

Suddenly, from that vast expanse of flat valley bottom loomed a stone wall, crumbling atop the eroded earthen bank below it, rising out of empty steppe. It was the Black Fort, Ordu Balik, the Uyghur city built on the ruins of the vanquished Turkic Khaganate city, founded in the 8th century. Soni and I climbed the outer wall after passing through a row of ruined stupas on the other side of a slightly depressed green line in the brown steppe that indicated part of the original mote. On the other side of the wall we descended into the center of the rectangular walled area and walked across the middle of it to the huge structure at the far end. We were trying to work out the ruins we could see relative to the map I had of it and came up with our best theory of how the two related, but nothing quite worked out according to location and direction (the walls were oriented the wrong way, for example). Most of the ground inside the high walls was flattish with only low mounds in straight lines indicating ruins. However, at the far end was a tall structure with exposed earthworks at the top and we made our way there. To reach the top we climbed up a winding path around the structure past large areas of brick-like exposed walls, full of holes and little caves that birds were making use of. A gorgeous ovoo adorned the top of what we were now calling the citadel and birds, Isabelline wheaters I later learned, fluttered all around, many appearing to be fledglings. Some allowed me to get wonderful looks and even photos. Tsegmed drove into the area and joined us at the top. Feeling pressed for time, I sprinted off to the east wall, stopped to go to the bathroom at the base among a lot of sheep parts (I looked

unsuccessfully for knuckles), then walked along the top of the wall to the northwest corner for a commanding view of the whole compound. From there I noticed that there was a similar row of mounds outside this wall and, looking at the map again, I finally realized that we were not in the city of Khar Balgas, we were in the citadel/sacred complex, a tiny component of the whole city off on one corner. The ruins of the city proper lay across the plains behind me, and now I could make out the straight mounds of the collapsed walls there. This made a lot more sense, as the city is 32 square kilometers and this area was nowhere near that large. These walls were so much higher than the rest of the city, I think it must have been a defensive citadel. The photos I took do a much better job of showing how this city looked.

Elated, I jogged across the compound to tell Soni what I had learned, which finally matched up with her knowledge of directions. I wanted to check out the high walls in the southeast corner, so I told them I'd meet them back outside and sprinted over there. I hoped later that it didn't seem like I'd wanted to ditch them--I really just didn't want to make them climb around after me. After I checked out the corner compound--not much to see really, but something was obviously built there--I descended to the plain and looked around one of the decaying stupas before joining the others. We then had to drive all the way back to Kharkhorum to pick up the road up to Lake Ogi. When we reached the city, we took a detour up to the top of a hill where there was a monument to the Hunnu/Xiongnu, Turkic, and Mongolian empires. I was again impressed by Soni and Tsegmed's willingness to make stops and detours, as the day was waning. On the other side of the hill, the Orkhon River flowed in multiple channels down the last narrow valley before opening onto the wider plain and the city.

The road to Khushuut Tsaidam was paved, thanks to the Turkish government and, exhausted, we stopped there as the sun worked its way south. We were all by this time talking about how this was, thankfully, our last stop! Although we could have seen some of the ruins outside, we only visited the museum inside where we saw an array of gorgeous Turkic gold and silver ornaments, bal bals, carved animals, dioramas of the memorial complexes, and, of course, the steles to Bilge Khan and his brother the general Kul Tegin. They were evidently large and elaborate tomb complexes built shortly before the Turkic empire was conquered by the Uyghurs (another Turkic people) who built Khar Balgas. The depiction of the burial complex inside was impressive and boasted a similar line of standing stones as those at the Ungut monument. The steles loomed above us and the local guide was very kind in helping me identify the animals carved toward the top—entwined dragons on the top of both (a Chinese influence), with the Ashina clan ibex carved below it and, apparently, a wolf suckling a baby on one, which is impossible to recognize from the ground. The Turkic origin story involves an orphan raised by wolves, in the Altai Mountains I believe, and the Ashina clan was the clan that first called themselves Turks and ultimately overthrew the Rouran Empire (which they had previously served) to form the first Turkic empire. The runes were fantastic to see close up (the Turkic runes were on the front, the Chinese characters on the back) and the guide graciously allowed me to take a picture of just the one stele without paying the photography fee. We were the only ones there. These steles sport the oldest known Turkic script.

Elated and with some relief, we piled in and took off down the extremely unpaved road to Ogi Lake. It was particularly bad as far as my experience with Mongolian roads thus far. We wound our way up into brown mountains where it became rocky and brutally rough in places. As we

were passing a new temple and stupas on the other side of a valley that Tsegmed said were probably built at the request of locals, a piercing stomach ache came on. It is a not unfamiliar sensation and I never know exactly what brings it on, but that road must have been to blame. The pain was intense and I could hardly breath, trying not to grimace too much and give away my state to my kind driver, who could do nothing about the road. At last we reached the final pass, I managed to give Soni my phone for a photo of the lake below, and down we went, unfortunately not immediately to camp. The pain diminished a little as we found less bumpy roads along the lake shore, but I was hoping despite myself that our camp was not one of the ones we could see on the far side of the lake. It was a large lake, and the breeze brought small waves to shore.

Finally we arrived at a quiet little camp overlooking one end of the lake. It was 8:00 and, although Soni and the attendant that showed me my ger both said it was dinner time, I begged ten minutes to lie down. In the calm of my ger I swayed a little as though I'd just left a boat and my stomach relaxed enough for me to soon join the others in the restaurant building, shared only by a large party of Japanese tourists. We all headed to bed after dinner for well-deserved rest.

Central Mongolia, Day 3:

Breakfast was at 8:00 I think the next morning and I was up early enough to take a shower and a quick walk beforehand. I felt much better, of course, to my relief. No one else was in the bath house (which had several toilet stalls and several showers) when I came in and there was no guidance about using the showers there. I had hopes for heat, but turning the faucet in the hot water direction cut off the water supply altogether and it didn't warm up, so I wound up taking a cold shower, refreshing only afterwards. I felt much more human! Soni later said that hot water probably came from solar heat, so she was not surprised to find it cold in the morning.

Once dressed and ready, I had time to take a walk outside the compound, stopping to sit on the steppe near some low shrubs in the hope of birds, not far in front of the camp and overlooking the lake. One lark (?) landed nearby with a beak full of bugs and I thought he might just lead me to a nest. As I not-so-subtly watched, he disappeared down a ground squirrel hole! Wonderful. I checked it out afterwards but didn't see or hear anything inside. The battery for my big camera was dead, so I couldn't take a good photo, but that was alright. I then walked to an ovoos over a bluff above the lake shore and watched myriad fry in the shallow water below me, predated briefly by a tern, as well as a bunch of trout-sized fish rising in deeper water. The lake was clear enough that I could see them swim beneath the surface. Four geese drifted into view with three bars on the backs of their heads, stunning on the calm morning lake (barred geese I later learned) for which I did rue the lack of my camera.

Breakfast was eggs with what appeared to be a grilled hotdog, and bread that tasted mildly like sourdough. We drove down to the lakeshore past the ovoos on the way out and stopped to look at three whooper swans nearby and chat with a herder who was moving his flocks to find greener grass. He had the first yaks I'd seen so far in Mongolia, and posed charmingly on his motor bike when I asked if I could take his picture, his herd behind him. We drove around the corner of the lake to get a better look at the swans, lounging in the morning sunshine, one with its black foot stuck out over his tail, and then I slowly walked down the shoreline to a group of white birds with long bills....long bills that gradually manifested into spoonbills! I had a marvelous look, if my camera wasn't quite up to auto focus at that distance, and was pleased with my choice to stop

stalking them short of alarming them. Unfortunately, Soni had been following and when I beckoned her to join me boldly, thinking we were at a safe distance, the flock flew away, all but one. She had been hanging back to make sure I had a good look.

The ride north from Ogi was through smooth, rolling steppe dotted with small white rocks, a beautiful land. Tsegmed asked for my binoculars and stopped periodically to scan the hillsides, looking for antelope we never found. It was good antelope habitat, apparently, but they too had probably gone to look for green grass. Both Tsegmed and Soni were thoroughly impressed with my binoculars and I enjoyed sharing them with them whenever they had an interest.

With a little relief, we reached the Millennium Road and pavement, where a loose group of healthy looking Bactrian camels wandered, and soon reached the turn off to Khar Bukhyn Balgas (Black Bull Fort), clearly visible from the road. The museum keeper came over shirtless from his ger to open the tiny museum which had an assortment of art and artifacts inside from the nearby ruins; I could hear my guides speaking with him about Anym Sum and looking at pictures of petroglyphs on the wall. I'd found one and only one reference to Anym Sum in my research, where it was included in an itinerary for an archeological tour of Mongolia. All I knew was that it had the ruins of a monastery and Bronze age petroglyphs. I had asked my contact at View Mongolia about it, as it was apparently proximate to Khar Bukhyn Balgas, but she couldn't discover anything about it. Amazingly, Tsegmed grew up in this area and had actually been there looking for animals when he was a kid, though he didn't know anything about the site otherwise. Perhaps they were learning something more.

Khar Bukhyn Balgas itself was impressive. The older Khitan ruins (built sometime in the 10th or 11th centuries) were only low, rounded mounds, but a Mongol prince had reappropriated the site in the 17th century and build several buildings with well-intact, impressive walls of stacked slate. I first ducked behind one low wall to go to the bathroom (Soni recommended against using the local's long drop), and was charmed to find some very busy and agitated parent tree sparrows (eastern Asia's house sparrows). I was patient, and the one bird I was watching was desperate enough to fly into a hole in the wall to feed the suddenly screaming babies while I waited. Several families were using this one low wall, and there were many others in the many other walls.

I wandered around the scattered buildings admiring the decorative slate construction and met up with Soni who suggested that she have Tsegmed take the van and meet us at the distant stupa, somewhat outside the walls, so we didn't have to double back (we were definitely going to visit that stupa). At the time, I was scanning the big slate building in the center of the compound from the top of a Khitan era mound (that had something to do with grinding) and spotted a raptor sitting on a nest on its corner. She took off, revealing a half-feathered fledging, panting in the heat. The mother quickly disappeared so I suspect she landed on the steppe to await our departure. I walked closer and climbed a mound next to the structure to get a better look. The nestling looked about half grown. When I walked around the front of the ruin's wall, I was surprised to find at least four other adults apparently laying on the top, just next to the nest! Fascinating. Although I was entertaining the notion that they were saker falcons (they didn't look much like falcons, but neither did the stuffed saker in the visitor center in Khustai), I later

determined that they were probably upland (Mongolian) buzzards (a.k.a. buteo hawks). Their barred tails were beautiful overhead.

I then hastened to the stupa and was impressed by how the builders had managed to create a round side by stacking flat pieces of shale. It was a little puzzling to find there, though, as Soni said that the Mongolian prince who built the place was very anti-Buddhist and warred with pro-Buddhist factions. Perhaps it was built later when the state conversion to Buddhism was not so contested.

Although I was beginning to be anxious about dwindling time, with two stops yet ahead and a long drive to Ulaan Baatar, I scurried along the top of the low wall that was once the edge of the compound to its corner and surveyed it again before turning my attention to the ground outside the wall where the map I'd found on the internet marked a ditch that may once have brought water to the fortress. Sure enough, on the other side of the track was a faint indentation in the steppe that soon made a curve to the east—it could be none other than the old water channel. Amazing that such a thing was still evident 1,000 years later.

And then we went back to the road and crossed it onto a dirt track that led to Sunym Am. I was again impressed by Tsegmed's driving skills, his inerrant ability to leave a track and head cross country to find one more to his liking. I wondered how much of it was local knowledge and how much was the fact that there are endless tracks across the steppe, so you were bound to find one if you just kept driving. We passed through a low spot in a range of mountains into a valley where people were growing vegetables in the lowlands. We turned right and soon left all habitations behind, passing gorgeous rock outcrops and acacia-like trees that I hoped were the sort of spot that Bronze age people might have utilized—both because I wanted to stop in those lovely places and because they were, well, close by. With guidance from Tsegmed, Soni pointed to the pair of peaks we were headed towards, but I wasn't sure which ones she meant and truly hoped it wasn't the most likely looking pair, far far far in the distance. Mountains rose on both sides of us, very picturesque. As we continued driving and driving and driving, more than once I thought that if anyone had told me how far away it was, I would have nixed the excursion. It was already early afternoon and we would have to retrace our steps from here, eat lunch, and drive several more hours to UB, with a hopeful stop at Bayan Nuur on the way. I was also feeling rather guilty for putting my guides through all this extra driving.

On the way we passed what looked like two deer stones and stopped for the first one. It was the right shape and size and surrounded by a decaying fence with some hadags on it, but there were no obvious marks on the stone, so I'm not sure exactly what it was. Eventually, about 40 minutes in, we reached the mountain...and then started going around the toe of it, past a short valley at its foot, and on to the opposite side, where the valley opening onto a wide plain, the rocky, beautiful mountains we'd been following on the far side. In the middle was a low hill, and up this we drove, past some square burials (!), and to the black rock outcrop bluff at the top of it, against which nomads had built a winter shelter. To my surprise, Tsegmed took me into this shelter to show me a handful of faint petroglyphs on the back wall! And, bonus, I got to see a winter shelter first hand, an open pen with the rock wall as its back and another pen in front of that with a shed roof shelter over part of it. The ground was covered with what I presumed were clumps of sheep wool. The view out over the valley on three sides was spectacular.

I found another petroglyph nearby, then started climbing the rocks to look for more, finding only some Tibetan script. But, fortunately, a boy on a motorbike came by (probably wondering what on earth we were doing) and Tsegmed chatted with him. With the usual nomad facial expression that I would normally interpret as disinterested disdain (but which is probably more aptly described as shy inscrutability), this boy led me first to the Tibetan inscription I'd found and then all the way to the top of the bluff where there was a stacked stone structure of unknown function. He pointed to a hole in it and at first I didn't see what he was looking at; I politely started to take a picture of the hole and then realized that the stone at the bottom of it, what looked like just a piece of shale, had two beautiful petroglyphs on it! And he had one more to show us, back at the bottom and some distance from the winter shelter. This collection was low to the ground on a mini bluff and housed the best petroglyphs by far, mostly ibex reminiscent of the Ashina clan ibex on the stele I'd seen the day before. Soni asked if I had some candy for the boy, which I didn't, but she was enthusiastic about the idea of a notebook. Telling him that I was grateful, that I'd come to see the petroglyphs, and that I wouldn't have found those best ones without him, I gave him some pencils with Tlingit designs, the 3D dinosaur notebook I'd bought for a boy just his age, and an Alaska flag. Soni explained what it was and they told him he could fly it on his motorbike, prompting the first and only smile I saw. I hope he likes the notebook too.

And then I took a few minutes to look over the square burials, which I'd only heard about from the national museum and that I think date back to the Bronze Age as well. There were at least half a dozen right there and I think more. I wonder if they were a family, or maybe this was just a favored place for a burial? It certainly was an inspiring place, overlooking the valley in all directions. To the north was a mountain that looks a bit like a temple--Sumyn Am means "Temple Entrance." The two lines I'd read about Sumyn Am also said that there were the ruins of a Buddhist monastery there, making the spot interesting in that it included Bronze age to modern period finds. I didn't see the temple remains, nor did I look, but the winter shelter built around the petroglyphs is just as suitable to represent modern times. Another winter shelter was just at the bottom of the hill with a ger nearby—possibly where the boy's family was living. I told Soni and Tsegmed that now they knew how to get here and what there was to see in case any other tourists were as crazy as I was (in part to thank and acknowledge them for their hard work) and got a laugh out of both.

Pleased, but still a little worried about the time, we headed back down the track, this time passing the road we'd entered the valley on and continuing down along the vegetable farms and entering Dashinchilen from the back. I was impressed by how large a community it was, with typical wooden fences enclosing houses and/or gers. We stopped by a hotel for lunch and Soni and Tsegmed both seemed tickled that I chose what turned out to be a traditional Mongolian dish that everyone knows how to cook--homemade noodles with mutton and vegetables (all cooked together). While we waited, I sipped a sprite and Tsegmed asked to see my phone on which he started looking at the photos I'd taken. I was again charmed by the freedom with which my two guides exchanged one another's phones, and that they included my own in that easy freedom. I boldly did the same with his and laughed with appreciation at some of the photos he took of the van in fun poses at the ruins.

When lunch came I saw that a lot of the mutton pieces were attached to mutton fat, some as large as the meat itself. In fact, there were free floating pieces of mutton fat throughout. Uncertain of

those prospects, I ate a bite of meat/fat and....it was outstanding. Not gristly or tough, the fat just melted in my mouth as though it were another delicious noodle. I devoured the whole plate--even the free pieces of fat were delicious!

After lunch, Soni told me that Tsegmed's family was near and asked if it was okay to stop by. It was finally revealed for certain that Tsegmed was raised as a nomad (he'd already pointed out the area he came from near our first host family), and this was an older brother who had stayed in the lifestyle. We drove back through Dashinchilen and onto the dry, dusky plain beyond, crossing a little creek to reach the family's truck. Tsegmed's brother, wife, and daughter were there. The horses and cattle had already crossed the creek, but the sheep and goats were behind. They'd traveled 20 km already and had 40 more to go. Soni thought they might go another 10 and then camp for the night. The pickup had the satellite dish, ger top, and what may have been all the ger felt and fabric...oh, and about four calves who were too little to make the walk on their own. Tsegmed gave his family water and drinks and chatted for a bit, then took a motor bike to bring the horses back, so I got to see him herd a little, and got a great video of it. Soni asked if I had something for the little girl so for the second time I dug into my pack and produced pencils, a very pretty little notebook, and another flag. Soni liked the flag so well she asked if I had some for her daughter and nephew.

And then back to the road for the short drive to Bayan Nuur. The first lake in the area we passed looked white-edged and not very promising; two nomad children on horses rode by and Tsegmed talked to them, asking a question (I think he asked if the lakes were dry). They shook their heads no and we drove on, soon approaching a little pond near the road with a bunch of cattle grazing on the green grass on this side of it. "That looks promising!" I said, really desperate to just have a leisurely sit by the water for some proper bird watching. Well, we did stop there, but there would be no sitting for me, and not just because the ground was soggy most of the time! As soon as we stepped out I (and Soni) spotted them--two white-naped cranes at the edge of the lake in the tall grass. I couldn't believe it, right out of the car, the reason I had chosen this spot to bird watch, based on a single trip report I'd read by some people who had seen them there. And there they were, the very rare and endangered white-naped cranes that Peter Matthiessen had sought out in Mongolia more than 20 years ago. Leaving my guides behind to hang out by the lake, I crept along the side of it, watching the cranes slowly retreat, browsing their way into the bushes. I watched them for a long time before they disappeared from sight, after which I focused on other birds, and there were a lot of them. It was the richest birdwatching by far of the trip so far. There were several species of ducks, swans, coots, and stilts, some black and white birds swooping on the water, some crazy crested shy bird walking the land (northern lapwing), gulls, etc.

I made my way past the lake, thinking by then that I might make use of the tall grass in the distance for a toilet and perhaps get a better view of the mysterious crested bird. But the going proved to be an adventure, as the relatively firm pasture turned to muck with hummocks of grass making stepping stones through hoof sized puddles and depressions. I was wearing my sandals with the idea that it might get wet. I decided to take the plunge and made a small leap to the first hummock, surprised when the ground exploded around me. Huge tadpoles wriggled in the holes and frogs jumped and crawled. Right! This is what cranes eat! I stopped to take some photos and then crept on, pleased to see a yellow colored warbler type bird after all the foreign steppe birds. By now I was half way to the tall reeds and a crane reappeared at the edge of them, standing

regally, so steadily that I wondered if he was on watch. I took a bunch of photos, some with auto focus, some with manual, ranging between what looked in focus for me and slightly out of focus in both directions, since I've learned not to trust my own eyes through the camera. So cool to watch him, red face occasionally gleaming in the sunshine. I started to make for the tall grass again (well beyond where the crane was) when I realized that there was a van parked on the road just behind me and about five tourists were lined up with cameras and spotting scopes looking right over the top of me. Oops! I'm confident I had not alarmed the crane, so I didn't feel bad about being there on that account, but it felt a little awkward. I seriously doubt any of those birders would have been down in the muck like I was, so I tried to feel good about my being there instead of guilty. In any event, a toilet break was now out of the question and my time was probably up, so I slowly headed back to the lake, hopefully showing the tourists where I'd come from, and wondered if they would also have balked at walking through the herd of cattle and horses at the end. Closer to our van were two or three other vans, also with tourists lined up to look toward the lake. Apparently Bayan Noor isn't exactly off the beaten track for birders in Mongolia! They were gone by the time I came up, however, and I wondered if they'd seen the white-naped crane.

I wound up using the toilet on the other side of the road in a mucky culvert, with some relief. On our way out we passed more people on the side of the road, this time looking intently on the opposite side where I could see more water in the distance beyond green steppe. I hadn't even thought to look over there! And then I spotted two more cranes, demoiselles, moving obliquely away from us across an open mucky field, shepherding two tiny brown fuzballs. We stopped and Tsegmed got out of the car so I could look through his window and take pictures. I'd regretted not having more quality time with demoiselles, although I'd had some nice, brief looks, and this was my one last wonderful farewell, a whole family. A man from the group who'd been behind me watching the other cranes came over and asked if anyone spoke English, then asked us if we'd seen the chicks. I asked him if he'd seen the white-naped cranes and, after an almost dismissive affirmative, apologized for being in their way, confessing that I had not seen them behind me. He said I had not.

And with that last gift, my magnificent central Mongolia three-day intense adventure was over. It was five o'clock and we had three hours driving ahead of us. We made one stop at a mini market on the way and Soni bought some strange jelly candies in little plastic cups that you sort of suck the jelly candy out of. Fun and delicious, but very sticky, and everyone partook of my handy wipes. I think we were all anxious to reach UB, me getting increasingly panicky to have some space, a bathroom, and probably some food, although I didn't realize it at the time. I was thoroughly exhausted and had a new guide to meet the next day at 9:00! Tsegmed retained his guileless good humor, announcing grandiosely, "Debbie, the city!" when we came in sight of UB.

It was 8:15 by the time that we pulled out of the thick UB traffic and Soni announced that we had arrived at Hotel Nine. She and Tsegmed helped carry my bags inside and immediately to the third floor, announcing to the clerk that I was with Horseback Mongolia. It seemed that the reservation was hard to find at first, but after I gave her my passport and, with great relief, went to the bathroom, I had a key and was all set. I gave my guide and driver what I hoped was a generous tip, said my sincere thanks for all the hard work and long days they'd put in, and sent them off with flags for Soni's daughter and nephew and the pocket knife that Tsegmed coveted (I

chose the eagle design over the moose, which is somewhat symbolic of his efforts to find and flush eagles for me). An attendant carried my bags up and showed me how to insert the key card into a slot in the wall in order to use the light switches. Suddenly I was overwhelmingly hungry on top of intense exhaustion, to the point of panic. I dove into my snacks, which proved to be inadequate. I considered raiding the mini bar but it had no more substantial fare, and was on the verge of ordering room service when I realized that it would be complicated to pay for since I was not paying for the room. I dug out my phone carrier/money holder bag to find my credit card and discovered that it was not there. More panic. Desperate, I grabbed some cash and headed out the door hoping only for a mini market somewhere nearby. Heading in one direction, the prospects were looking grim (as I was about to hit Sukbaatar Square), so I turned around, reached an intersection, went around the corner, and was hugely relieved to see the sign for a mini market. In the end I opted for viola cheese wedges, an apple, an ice cream, and a Golden Gobi beer. I pleased myself by answering "dzaa" (yes) when the clerk asked if I wanted a bag (she pointed) and saying my thanks in Mongolian. Perhaps it was convincing. Probably not.

Back in my room I managed to get a few of my electronics charging, my tablet set up to watch an episode of Better Caul Saul (I needed something to calm my mind), undressed to the point of comfort (I was quite hot), and got my snacks ready. Slowly I began to calm down as my body processed a full stomach, a reasonable temperature, and solitude. Before bed I managed to wash some clothes and send some texts before I closed my eyes around 10:30. Having silenced my phone from mid-night messages, I slept until my alarm went off at 7:00 for the first time in Mongolia, a tiny bit refreshed but still worn through.

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 1:

Now I am sitting on a small plastic bench I've come to associate with gers, my hot feet in the sunshine and the rest of me in shade over the threshold of my ger. This morning's tours were more subdued on my part, partly because I was less interested in them, partly because I am exhausted, and partly because I have just met my guide Zaya, a young Mongolian who teaches Chinese in the winter, and I'm not quite comfortable with her yet. We stopped by a grocery store on the way out of UB for supplies, which was good news for me as the nearby grocery store I'd hastened to after breakfast (guided by a helpful Australian checking out at the front desk) did not open until 9:00, which is when I was to meet my guide. While Zaya and the driver shopped for perishables, I found the handful of items I wanted (scissors, razor, lotion) and, most importantly, wine in a box. It was merlot--just fine. I bought two in the hopes of sharing with Zaya and possibly the horse guide. Zaya says she has never been on a ride this long, so I guess that means we will be entirely led by the horseman. How exciting!

After shopping we drove through the last of UB's ger districts and outlying communities and into Terelj National Park, which is every bit as beautiful as described. The steppe hillsides were only blushed with green (which I only realized when I ducked my head down to see beneath the wide, unfortunately tinted wind guard covering half the windows, which made the hillsides entirely brown), but the cottonwoods and the larches were leafed out and the grass lush in the valley bottom. Colorful, charming cottages greeted us at the entrance to Terelj which are owned and rented by UB residents on holiday from the city. The mountains rose up along the narrow

valley in fantastic rock bluffs and formations and you can see how all the many tourist camps can make a living.

We stopped twice to take pictures of Turtle Rock on the way in (not stopping at the actual rock) and then drove the ungraded rough road to the bottom of the path to the monastery at the back of the valley. I used the long drop, which really lived up to its name this time--it must have been at least fifteen feet down; oddly, a few men were apparently at the bottom working, but just on the men's side... I decided not to worry about it. Then I climbed the main stair case to the prayer wheel and other items of interest at the top with Zaya. One hundred and eight Buddhist teachings lined the stairs on plaques and those that I was able to read (between listening to my guide and admiring the spectacular view up the back of the valley) imparted recognizable wisdom. Perhaps I should have slowed down and read more, but I was trying to follow Zaya's leadership and did not have the energy to absorb very much.

At the top we stopped to see Buddhist paintings and turned a large prayer wheel. Apparently I lost count and turned it four times, according to some helpful tourists there, so I went for a fifth, having been told by Soni that any odd number is okay (something about starting life happy, with a family, and then getting old and sick, and hopefully ending it happy again). We walked over to the bottom of the 108 monastery steps leading to the temple, built in a steep, narrow avenue to mimic an elephant truck, the Buddha's transportation. At the top was the main building, evidently one large room, and we first walked around the sides and back of it, stopping in a small chamber to make an offering to a Buddha or deity (I'm not sure who it was). I was pleased to see a young boy, maybe seven, praying fervently before dropping his bill through a hole in the side of the plexiglass surrounding the large statue. On his way out he commented to Zaya in Mongolia that I was German (or another nationality I don't remember)! Back at the entrance, we took our shoes off and stepped inside a beautiful temple with thangkas on the walls and sutras, photos of lamas (the Dalai Lama was featured several times), and a multi-armed statue of Avalokiteshvara. Self-conscious in front of Zaya I did not show my respect as I would have liked to, but was a little surprised and pleased to see that most of the people inside were. So it is an active temple after all and not just a tourist attraction. That is, an active temple for locals; Zaya says that it is a meditation retreat for monks in other monasteries. There are meditation caves on the hillside above and I think I saw one on the way down.

We took a different, dirt path down the steep slope and I reveled in the fluffing willows at the bottom. It was a delight to hear warbler-type birds in the trees (and possible a cuckoo) and see flowering day lilies and other flowers and forbs. I gather that our trip was a little more brief than usual, as our driver commented on how fast we were, and I felt a little bad, but just didn't have much more in me. We drove the rest of the beautiful way to Terelj Village, me ducking my head here and there to see the gorgeous scenery in real color. When I saw the huge Terelj Hotel sign in front of me, I knew we'd reached the end of the road and the Terelj River, which we soon drove through(!), passing into a park-like cottonwood forest on the other side. We bounced our way into more mixed open country and wound up at the herder's compound where we would spend the night, a large picturesque fenced lot including a fringe of cottonwood forest on the side. It is a permanent, all-season compound with a two-story concrete house painted pink in addition to the gers of two families (cousins), three tourist gers, and a few wooden structures. The connected

long drops (one with a seat) are outside the compound. A few cows and horses were inside, but most of the animals must be elsewhere.

We first entered the family ger in which a television set was playing music and television shows on and off (there was an animated kangaroo for a while) where we were served milk tea, this time salted, an interesting change. I later asked Zaya if there was actual tea in it and she said yes, dried black tea, but there must not be very much. This was cow's milk again and, as I went to the long drop after tea, I passed a cow with large udders by the gate and wondered if I'd just drunk her milk. We lunched in my ger--another deli lunch of salad, fried rice, fried chicken, and cookie--and then I lay down and took a wonderful nap on the bed in the back of my ger. When I got up over an hour later, the compound was quiet, so I sat in the cottonwoods for a while, then wandered over to the family ger corner where a young cow was lowing and several calves were standing around. I lingered for a while, enjoying watching the family moving calves back into the enclosure (and I'm really not sure what else was going on), before wandering back here to my ger, taking photos of choughs on the way and my new white-necked crow friend I have yet to identify (Daurian jackdaw). It is extraordinarily beautiful here in all directions. A strong wind blew up after lunch and I hoped for rain for the steppe, but it is clear here again after brief cloud cover. As I've sat here, a horse wandered by as well as a boy following a cow, who I think he took down to the water. It was the lowing cow, who still appears to be lowing--maybe she's ready to be bred and they can't let her wander? There was a big bull in the compound earlier.

When my energy for writing waned, I got up again and wandered back to the cottonwoods. The girl of six came out of the cooking ger nearby and went to sit on the swing; on a whim, I made a pushing motion with a questioning look and she nodded. So I went and pushed her to huge giggles. She knew the word "stop" and kept saying "deshe" which I suspect means "high." We swung for a long time, taking turns, me trying to touch the cottonwood leaves with my toes at the peak of the swing. She said the ABCs, so I joined her on that, and also counted to three in French, so we did that for a while as I pulled her back to start a swing. The seat was a plank tied to a branch by two ropes and was slightly off level, causing the swing to move toward the trunk of the tree dangerously after a few swings. This was the beginning of a delightful relationship with Nanda Zaya, who loved me, snuggling up when she could and holding my hand. I managed to be a good kid friend, skipping across the yard, running circles around her in a race, all to her delight. A boy a year older joined us at the swing later, considerably more shy, but I eventually won him over too. That night after dinner we swung again, though he was more cautious, then played with a basketball at a hoop in the corner of the yard. This morning (it's now the next day) we played inside a ger with a toy Nanda had, then Mukh, the boy, suggested they show me the newborn calf (so I figured out). The white calf was outside the compound and sleeping next to her mother, woefully adorable and tolerant of petting. Once the mother came over and licked her a few times. We had seen this cow the night before, the last cow to not have given birth yet. After that I started spinning the kids around off the ground by holding their hands and turning, a game that never really got old and continued on and off all morning until we started seriously loading the horses.

Dinner last night was a traditional dish--layers of mutton between hot rocks cooked in a pan with potatoes, carrots, and water, cooking/steaming over a stove in the cook tent. While it cooked, I chatted with my hostess, Tumro, learning about her family and their lives there. Unlike many

other nomads, their family and their cousin's family (the woman who initially offered us milk tea) occupied the compound year round. Their horses and cattle were in that area (the horses thundered home later in the evening), but the sheep and goats were in another district tended by relatives. Dinner was served around a low table in their house and was delicious. The mutton had a lot of fat on it which at first was just as palatable as the fat in the dish I had in Dashinchilen. After a bit it got to be a little more of a trial, but I managed to eat it all. So much fat! These weren't small pieces, these were large chunks of meat with large chunks of fat attached. I tried to always get a bit of meat with my fat to help it go down. To top it off, Zaya pulled a whole chunk of fat out of the pot and carved pieces off of it. "Do you like fat?" she asked. It was a funny question to me (but obviously not to Mongolians)! I ate two pieces politely. Side dishes were fresh cabbage and pickles. Nanda ate with us and played with the tiny white kitten Tumro had brought from the city where her mother and grandmother live.

While playing basketball after dinner to the slight protest of my stomach, the kids suddenly beckoned me away with some milking gestures. It was time for me to try milking a cow! Tumro was milking the second to last cow of the night and soon set me up with a fresh bucket. Nanda was excited to help me out, but really just tried to do it for me. Zaya explained how I should wet my hands with milk, but it wasn't until Tumro took over and I watched carefully that I was able to more consistently produce streams of milk. It's really quite strange and amazing! I probably produced about a quarter of a cup--the trick, I realized, was pinching the teat all the way to the end--only at the very end does it stream out. Fascinating! I couldn't believe the mother cow was willing to be so brutally manhandled by my indelicate hands. While Tumro finished milking her, I helped hold the three-day old calf who was still working out exactly where to nurse when he was finally allowed access. It was 9:15 by then and I was ready to rest, but first I was invited back to the house to try yogurt. I was uncertain about it, as I don't like plain yogurt from home, but this turned out to be only slightly tangy and thoroughly delicious. Zaya said it was good to eat before bed and when I imitated her by licking out the bowl, she said this was good for the throat, exercise!

I slept through the night without getting up for once, and rose to my alarm at 7:00. I freshened up, using the scissors and razor I'd brought, and packed, after which I wrote a little bit before wandering over to the cottonwoods before breakfast. I ate eggs on toast with a piece of cheese, donut cookies, coffee, and fresh cucumbers and tomatoes. I am eating so well here! Afterwards I puttered around, trying to help Zaya make decisions about food. The horseman had indicated that we had too much gear, so I tried to make suggestions like leaving the toilet tent and shower tent behind (the former was accepted) as well as the coffee (which wound up in anyway, as the horsemen like coffee!) and the entire pack of sugar. I put some sugar and tea packets in a ziplock so the whole box of tea could be left behind. Zaya showed me the wares and it was quite amazingly large. We had already agreed that the little table could be left behind. We also left several large totes of food behind.

So I puttered and played with the kids. Mukh continued to warm up to me, to the point that he reached out to hold my hand on the way back from the long drop after a bout of spinning the kids around. I was touched.

Putting the gear in saddle bags turned out to be a time consuming and arduous process. I held one of the horses through most of it, watching the horsemen choose what boxes and totes and bags and bottles went where. On top of the two square canvas bags hanging on either side of the pack saddle, softer items, including my large backpack, were strapped. At last, about noon I think, one of the horsemen pointed to my helmet. I ran to the long drop one more time, donned my camera bag (with sunscreen, handiwipes, toilet paper, lighter, and leatherman included) and hopped up. Zaya gave me quick instructions and I was surprised that they guide the horses like English riders, pulling the bit. I wasn't entirely sure (still aren't) how a person does that while holding the reins with one hand. We walked down the road back down the valley, soon stopping to have milk tea with a family. I have no idea why we stopped there particularly—maybe the horsemen know them?—but a very friendly young man said hello and introduced himself, which is pretty much unheard of when nomads meet a stranger. Zaya explained that he lives in Korea in the winter and just opened a small shop in a tiny cottage nearby for the summer; we went inside to see a small store of instant noodles, coca cola, sweets, etc. on a few shelves on one side. He was just getting it going, and one of our horsemen bought a soda from him and offered me some.

From there we rode out of the cottonwoods along the Terelj River and up across bone dry steppe, passing gers and other buildings here and there and stopping for lunch amid larches along the river. I was amazed at how willing everyone is to go to so much trouble for a stop; the horses were unloaded and Zaya cooked a hot meal for us. It was delicious. The horses were all lined up and I tried to learn to say their colors. I knew from many sources that horses are not named in Mongolia, but are described by their colors. I kept trying to call the red ones “Ulaan” but it turned out that they were considered more on the brown side of things. All in all, it was rather confusing, my interpretation of colors differing from theirs and complicated by difficulty in pronouncing the words. I only came away with two colors: something like “kharum” for dark brown and “hol” for the darker duns, including mine (pronounced with a hard “o” and a voiceless “l” which is more like a lisp (this is the “l” used in Tlingit)). I thereafter called my horse “Hol” for, of course, I could hardly not call him by a name. He and the other dark dun had tattoo-like markings over their shoulders.

I went searching for birds and found a couple of wary geese/ducks and, just before we left, heard a marvelous meandering song from across the river. Wrenlike? Dipperlike? Finally it dawned on me that I was hearing Bebop (my Steller’s jay) with an accent. I caught a glimpse of a spotted jay-sized bird flying away, but probably not enough to identify. I did have a good look at a ruddy shelduck, oddly standing away from the trees and water in the middle of a field.

After lunch and arduous loading, we headed across the edge of steppe mountains, leaving the river and its trees far to the right. We passed a stupa and ovoo and later four carts pulled by three cows and a yak; these were carrying the gers for a group of tourists that were hiking during the day. My horse either wanted to be right up against the horses in the lead, or trailing far behind. He was kind enough to trot for me most of the times I asked him to in order to catch up and, far more often, initiated trots on his own for the same purpose. It was probably the best trotting I'd ever done, but I'm sure it left a lot to be desired. My legs definitely felt it keenly! The last part of the ride was in the direction of a line of trees in the distance past the junction of the Terelj and Tuul rivers (thankfully I asked about passing Terelj Village and my friendly horseman pointed to the confluence of the rivers behind us, well past the village). That particular horseman, Borkhuu

(pronounced more like Barhoe), communicates very well and is the friendliest nomad I've met. We exchanged a lot of thumbs up over the course of the afternoon.

For the last hour or so I would up in the middle behind the lead horseman (Toogii, pronounced Togi) and his pack horse with the other four horses behind. I followed the lead pair into the larches along the river and to the camp where I'm sitting now among the lovely trees, birds cheeping, cows passing by, the soft duff of larch leaves underfoot. The river is nearby, cold and clear and beautiful. As I walked there earlier I was reminded of the Yukon and just at that moment spotted small wild roses. We're camped in a broad fringe of pines along the river with pockets of steppe. Some of the forest floor is open and covered in pine needles and other areas are dense with brush. The grass on the steppe is all dead from last season (not much sign of green), but there are flowers blooming here and there. The horses made due with what was available.

I set up my tent with a little assistance, rested a bit, cleaned up in the river, and ate a fantastic meal of beef and vegetables over noodles. We chatted over dinner, learning about each other's families and again I was quizzed about being as old as I am without a family. Breaking out a photo of my boyfriend seemed to help, and this time I explained that he does not like riding, etc., to explain my presence here alone. It certainly is a puzzle to people. The wind picked up in the afternoon as it has been the last several days, but this time it eventually brought with it a cloud cover a few hours ago. Just now we felt the first sprinkles of rain, welcome rain, for this area is also too dry and badly in need of moisture for the livestock.

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 2: It's 7:30 p.m., we've eaten dinner and done the dishes (a simple affair of washing in one basin of river water and rinsing in another) and I've set myself up in my little camp chair overlooking the stream to write. It's windy again, as it has been on and off all day long, bringing rain showers periodically, none long enough to bring anything that seems like significant moisture, but it's a start. While Zaya was cooking dinner, a big front came through, strong winds and rain, and we retreated inside the cooking tent while it passed. I was looking through bird books and writing down the species I'd seen so far and the horsemen looked at one of the books. We were all drinking wine, which they seem to appreciate. The storm didn't last long and we were soon back outside.

Last night I closed my eyes around 9:15, looking forward to a long night of sleep. Around 1:15 a.m. I woke up to strong winds and thought rain might be coming; I eventually got up to make sure my shoes and toilet paper roll (which I'd put out to dry) were under cover, which they weren't. At that point the full moon was hazy through the cloud cover. Then at 3:00 a.m. I woke to loud music! The others didn't hear it I learned later, but I was wide awake, considering putting in makeshift ear plugs. The music itself was actually pleasant, thankfully, but too loud to sleep to. I'd heard a car earlier so it was probably them, on a Friday night Zaya pointed out. Mercifully, after four or five songs, the music ended. I, on the other hand, had a long dream in which there was a road on the other side of the river and a building complex built into a bluff on this side, from which the music came.

I woke before my alarm at 7:00, in part due to the tromp of feet past my tent. A herd or something was out there quite close and I saw the shadow of a nose at the end of a long neck

inching toward the tent. I touched the wall there and the animal scampered away. Opening my tent door revealed a herd of cattle moving toward the river. I love waking up to the movement of livestock every day!

I washed up by the river after a fruitless pursuit toward a singing bird in the woods, the dawn shining on the water upstream. I was rewarded with a nice look at what I later learned was a grey wagtail that perched on a piece of driftwood.

Not having much luck with birds, despite quite a lot of singing around me, I set up a nice place on the edge of the meadow to continue trying to catch up with my writing. Briefly I saw a big, stunning great tit. I remember from Bhutan that I thought tits were simply the Eurasian equivalent of chickadees and that impression has only strengthened here. Not only do they have the telltale white cheek patch but they'd been chickadeedeedeeking all over the place. After breakfast I headed off into the woods again while the others took down the cooking tent and was rewarded with some spectacular bird watching. While pursuing another great tit I heard a woodpecker working and soon saw the enormous black bird (a black woodpecker) tearing apart some dead wood on the ground with his enormous beak. He allowed me to get quite close as he moved from one log to another picking up huge pieces of dead wood. He stopped on the side of a tree once, peering out at me from the far side. A little farther in, a gray bird caught my eye who soon landed on the ground and began eating what looked like black thorny seed pods but what must have been caterpillars. At last it was my red throated thrush, such a beauty!! I'd heard thrush like soft songs all night long--perhaps it was this one. A great tit landed next to him and I nearly got a picture with both of them in it. There was a Daurian jackdaw, too, and another singing bird I never found. Back at camp, I dug my camera out one last time to photograph a black kite that had landed in a tree right across from camp--into a nest it turns out. Before flying away, she peered toward her feet, so hopefully it was occupied.

The day started out with more clouds than I've seen so far, and more wind. We moved back onto the steppe and cut over some low hills instead of following the contours of the river (I later realized that we had left the Tuul River and gone up its tributary valley through which the smaller Baruunbayan River flows). Over this wide, perfect steppe (somehow more perfect than yesterday's), we trotted over long distances, as we did much of the day, and I felt more comfortable in the saddle than I ever have. Trotting both sitting and standing felt right. My horse was either doing its own thing altogether or staying just behind Toogii and his pack horse, as was the case toward the end of the day yesterday. For a while Hol took the lead and I made haste to snap some photos with his head and the steppe beyond and no other horses ahead of me! I was feeling so comfortable that, especially as I turned and looked at the boys on my heels, I envisioned myself as cavalry in Chinggis Khaan's army, engaged in a patient, mile-eating trot across the Eurasian steppe. Sometimes I was going to war (and I imagined shooting arrows from my saddle) and sometimes I was heading home over endless miles of emptiness.

At one point we passed a circle of rocks with a single large one right in the middle. There were a lot of rocks in the area, but this one seemed just a little too clustered. I asked Zaya if it was a burial site and before I could explain what I meant, Toogii turned around and said "khirigsuur"; I didn't understand until he said it the second time—"khirigsuur?" I repeated, and he nodded. Yeah, so we just happened to ride by a Bronze age burial site AND I recognized it. So cool!!

After about an hour riding we stopped at a ger for milk tea. The mother of the owner was sick and in bed inside. This was definitely an authentic ger, and the shabbiest one I've seen. The lattice frame was black with dirt and everything looked rather run down. They had a phone, though (and used it while we were there) and a TV. Zaya said that these nomads move about four times a year and live very simply during the summer, leaving furniture and such at winter camp. I made use of their long drop, which had just a scrap of tarp flapping on three sides, but was very much appreciated. There was an old pickup truck parked nearby full of ~6" larch logs as well as a yak cart.

We were then invited to the ger of the owner's brother who was also there and, although it was in sight, we mounted up and headed over there. This ger was cleaner and more orderly, the mother busy and the father being harassed by his ~4-year old kid to play with him. The TV was running next to the bed I sat on. I tried fresh yogurt instead of milk tea (though it is traditionally eaten before bed since it is said to make you sleepy) and it was just as delicious as the other I had, if a bit more tart. We were also given slices of fresh bread that I'm pretty sure was homemade, dense and delicious. The mother also gave us some bright blue thread so I could hang my pendant again; Zaya measured out several lengths of it, then rolled it together into a sturdy sting and tied it on. I gave the mother 5,000 tugriks (\$2) "to buy sweets for the child"; she seemed appreciative and met my eyes for a brief moment for the first time. The walls were covered with embroidered art she had made.

So after an hour of socializing and snacking we headed out again for another hour and fifteen minute ride or so. The valley saw more scrub growth the farther up we went and the river we crossed was tiny--I think maybe it was just one branch of it. I pointed out what I thought was rain in the distance and soon felt some sprinkles; Borkuu and I exchanged thumbs up signs for the rain. I'd put a shirt on over my tank top at the second ger and left it on, alternately grateful for it and a little too warm. But I left it on all day. At one point we passed a field that was covered in mole mounds, about one every couple of feet; I continued to see them after that, but can hardly imagine such a volume of creatures. Admittedly, I don't actually know what the function of a mole mound is (or are they mole hills?).

We stopped for lunch by a creek bordered in shrubs and I hunted down a warbler right off the bat while Zaya cooked. It was pale buffy and brown with a pale eye stripe and could have been any number of species. The view was gorgeous; we were at a junction with a tributary valley to the north and the ridge that separated them were covered in the rocky bluffs characteristic of Terelj. A red-billed chough called mysteriously from one of the outcrops, visiting another that appeared to be lying down. I photographed tiny denticulata primroses and other lovely little flowers.

After a lunch of pasta and chicken stir fry (pre-made for Horseback Mongolia in a bag), we headed out for another hour and a half of riding up the other valley. The scenery got more and more gorgeous as the gers and winter camps dissipated and we began riding on the steppe covering the side of the mountain, the valley floor looking increasingly narrow and shrubby. On the left we passed more rocky outcrops and winter shelters for the animals. At last the valley narrowed further and we put the last camp behind us. The track we were following had grass growing in the ruts and the hillside became greener. Not by coincidence, I think, we passed our first marmot hole and soon began seeing them scampering across the flowery meadows. This

was what I was imagining for the ride in Mongolia. It was some relief to leave the gers behind, even though being around the nomad families and their flocks is wonderful. I guess I'm ready for some wilderness.

Now I'm sitting in our second camp outside my tent. The only problem with camping next to a river is the mosquitoes, which for the second night in a row have gotten ferocious in the evening. After brushing my teeth and stepping into the cook tent for my camping pad, I found Borkhuu inside lighting a tiny, fragrant dung fire (he and I both said it was good and I waved some smoke to my nose). Now I've retreated to my tent and found that I can sit inside on my tiny camp chair, which makes typing there much more agreeable. I really can't describe how delightful it was to make our way into what seemed like a more remote area...clearly the area is still used, but for the first time the grass wasn't mown down to a few centimeters off the ground, the area was greener generally, there were flowers, etc. And this is a lovely place to camp, at the edge of a section of valley floor that is steppe, with a narrow fringe of shrubs and trees on this side of the river and an open forest on the other side with several large dead trees. As we were sitting around at dinner, Toogii said that normally the grass would be 8" tall and there would be a lot of flowers, which is what I had pictured. No complaints, this is beautiful as it is, but I have been praying for rain over Mongolia.

Dinner was stir fried rice with the delicious beef Zaya cooked at home before we left. I am pleased with the down-to-earthness of Mongolians, even city dwellers. I have a hard time imagining Americans taking unrefrigerated meat on a nine-day trek. And we all sit around on the ground when my camp chair isn't handy, doing our tasks. I love the ease with which the horsemen work, especially in the evening as they picket out the horses to graze. Tonight I set up my own tent and then set up Zaya's while she finished putting up the cooking tent and started dinner. Toogii and Borkhuu are sleeping in the cooking tent tonight.

I think this will be fun birding in the morning. Cuckoo calls have been in the background everywhere ever since we entered Terelj and I finally caught a glimpse of one today across the creek, but it flew before I could lift binoculars. Perhaps tomorrow he will come back and I will be more subtle! The kestrels have been more cooperative, hovering over our lunch pasture like harriers, white tail tipped in black, swooping over the mountain steppe to land on a marmot hill, screeching and hovering right here in camp repeatedly. Awesome.

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 3: It was fun birding this morning. I didn't set my alarm and checked the time at 7:30. After freshening up, packing up, and taking down my tent, I wandered into the meadow nearby figuring that it was the last chance I had to bird watch in the steppe before we entered the forest and higher country. And, despite three days by car and two since driving/riding in the steppe, I hadn't really had much of a chance to relax there. Not long after I sat down, I saw a bird fly high in the air as they often do around here and then fly forward in a very inefficient and slow flight before plummeting to the ground. Maybe it is Mongolia's larking behavior, but it is different from the quick up and down flight of the only other larking I've seen (in Colorado). I followed this fellow down and was pleased to see him soon appear from the obscurity of the grass onto a mole hill. As I meandered in that direction, this very accommodating bird would retreat, then pop up on a molehill so I could get increasingly good looks. Streaky, slender, slender bill, pale, no obvious facial markings, a blush of yellow on the

shoulders and throat. I have decent pictures but never identified him. Eventually, having approached close enough, I left him in his flowery domain and headed for the river.

Or, rather, across the river. Our side of the river was primarily steppe with a narrow fringe of brush and trees. Across the river was a meadow filled with dead trees and fallen logs and a thicker fringe of willows or similar. The meadow was relatively lush and a beautiful place to sit on a log and wait. Soon, a couple of ravens flew in and created a ruckus as both magpies and kestrels noisily harassed them. The kestrels were in the same area I'd seen them hovering and screaming last night, so I wandered downstream in that direction while keeping an eye out on one that had landed in a dead tree when the ravens retreated. I had a pretty good look, and this individual was tan-grey and spotted on the back. Maybe this was a different bird from the rusty kestrels I'd seen the day before? But then another landed in a tree nearby, rusty colored and, when I got closer, also speckled on the back. I need to look them up to see if this was a female or maybe an immature bird. I looked around for a nest and found one in a cottonwood, but it seemed a bit dilapidated, so probably wasn't theirs. It seems likely that one is in the area though.

I wandered down to the creek to see if any warblers were about (some were singing), then returned to my dead tree to recline against it for a little bit, as my stomach was feeling a little off. An eagle was harassed against the hillside by a kestrel while I lay there. There were vibrant orange flowers, white anemones (?), and other wildflowers, and it was quite peaceful. I was keeping an eye out on the other side of the river to make sure I wasn't late for our departure. Suddenly out of my reverie I heard galloping and it took a moment to realize that it was coming from the hillside on my side of the river and therefore couldn't be any of our tethered horses. I looked to my right and saw a tawny back fly over the tops of the low shrubs, and then the galloping sounds ceased. I believe I saw a startled deer! I can't think of anything else that would have made those sounds and been that color. There was a little side channel stream over there, so perhaps it had come to drink and been startled by our horses. After a few minutes, I wandered in that direction looking for a good place to go to the bathroom one more time before I mounted up and while there, a stunning bird appeared on a branch in front of me, allowing good looks and photography (it turned out to be a (brown?) shrike).

We left camp riding up the meadow at the bottom of the valley, soon turning off to the right and entering a jeep trail through dense shrubs. These shrubs, somewhat reminiscent of what we rode through in the Kenai Mountains, have myriad stems closely spaced and tiny birch-like leaves. I'd call them mini birch trees except for all the stems. As we road into a tributary valley, we spent a lot of time among them, maybe at shoulder height, and I more actively steered my horse after the first time he went straight through the middle of one. He might have had itches, or he might have been petulant or testing me, but I had to pay attention to make sure he didn't make choices that were uncomfortable for me. Every now and again we would pass through a larch thicket, a welcome, beautiful little paradise, and I saw where all the straight, slender logs came from that are used so extensively among the nomads for corals, fences, etc. It was a welcome sight to see the larger trees still standing, with the trunks of the small ones (about 5" in diameter) cut down.

The road itself was abominable and I could not imagine trying to drive over it. It was uneven, extremely rocky in some areas, and extremely mucky in other areas. Even in this very dry season it was wet in places, and there was a lot of evidence for makeshift bridges of logs. I don't know

how any vehicle could survive or how any human could endure such a ride if it did. A little more than an hour in (we'd departed around 10:15), we paused in the forest and the horsemen chatted with a man who'd caught up with us with only a smart looking pinto pack horse carrying a small backpack. I'd like to know what he was up to, but have forgotten to ask. Meanwhile, I found a place to go to the bathroom and looked around at all the familiar plants. Blooming bergenia carpeted whole areas of the forest floor, there were blooming nagoonberries, what looked like blueberries, wild roses, even those blue columbine I don't care for in captivity.

Zaya had said that the stop was to check the straps on the pack horses and I soon understood why. Back on our horses, we headed straight up the mountain through the forest on dirt or rocky ground, ladder steep with narrow switchbacks, the horses panting and laboring upslope. It was a wildly impressive feat and I admired the horses for their strength and gameness. We reached the top in a light rain at an open area with a few trees and a teepee of logs which was something like an ovoo. To my surprise, there were quite a few horses already there and a white person who said hello in an accent. A Mongolian with a bulging del gave me two pinecones full of pine nuts and I tucked them away. Zaya and the boys had told me about the importance of pine nuts from these mountains, a harvest which is carefully regulated to prevent overuse. People flock to the forest to collect them at the right time of year, which is one of the main reasons there are roads into the uninhabited mountains we were entering, but commercial level harvests are not allowed. If an illegal load of nuts are found, Zaya said they are returned to the forest! We'd passed a number of locals selling bags of pine nuts on our drive to Terelj.

When it looked like we were staying a few minutes, a horseman came to take my horse and I dismounted, walking around a tree to greet the European man properly. He was exceedingly happy about his trip so far and spoke with enthusiasm about the beautiful wilderness ahead of us. He and his one companion (they were with Steppe Riders) were on the same route as I was, only coming in the opposite direction, so he was six days in. They were both French, he living in Wales and she in South Carolina. We chatted amiably for a bit, then bid each other farewell in the drizzle and went our separate ways.

Which, for us, was downhill. Very downhill. But not immediately. First we road at a gentle downward slope along the mountainside, awkwardly passing the group of eight French people and their many horses and horsemen that the French folks I'd chatted with said had descended on their solitude at Khar Noor. The path was narrow and I was not in control of my horse enough to make him move exactly as was needed. But we eventually managed. The French people returned my "bonjours" amiably enough, but they looked a bit harried. One, though, threw in a "Sambano!" afterwards (hello in Mongolian). I was surprised, though I shouldn't have been, at the number of horsemen and pack horses that followed; it must be quite a production setting up camp every night and I felt good about my decision to travel alone. My French friends had also spoken enthusiastically about small groups, and commended my decision.

I don't think the trail was as steep as the one we'd come up, but it was steep enough, mostly dusty dirt mixed with rocks, and a little harrowing. A lot longer too. I trusted my horse, but if he lost his footing I think I would have been lost entirely. I leaned back and often hung onto the steel loop on the back of my saddle to keep from sliding forward and banging painfully against the steel loop in front. I mostly allowed my horse to pick his own way, as I had through the brush

trails earlier, except when he seemed to be getting too far off course. He seemed to keep thinking he saw better ways down than the path, but often turned and came back after reconsidering. I don't know how long we rode before we stopped, but we took another break at the end of the longest, steepest descent. The boys sat together on a log, Borkhuu smoking, and I looked at more plants, including Labrador tea (Mongolians also use it for tea) and what I think was kinnikinnik (the berries are relished here). This was now a pine forest and it smelled wonderful. The sun came out as we continued the descent, somewhat more gradual. It reminded me of the Rockies, and it was beautiful.

At last we reached the bottom and followed a dry rocky stream bed to the left through more forest, the path lined with bright orange flowers (they looked like globeflowers) plus yellow and white and blue flowers. Stunning. The trail opened onto a little meadow in what I suspect is the flood plain of the creek and we lunched there. Toogii marked on my satellite map printout the camps and route we'd taken and then drew me his own map. It was 2:00 when we arrived, about two hours after leaving the pass, and 3:20 when we left. Some of the horses had gone astray while we ate, so leaving was a little chaotic and our order was reversed, Toogii and his pack horse lingering far behind us. This confirmed my suspicion that my horse had a definite desire to be behind Toogii's horses, that is wasn't just coincidence that we wound up following them and trotted hotly when the others came too close. Hol lingered behind the others and then stopped altogether. And he didn't have to go to the bathroom this time (which is often the case when he stops). He kept looking behind us. I assured him they were coming and, with coaxing and rump slaps, eventually convinced him to continue and he trotted to catch up. And then he stopped again, kept looking back, and refused to move. Borkhuu was on his way back to help when Toogii and company showed up and we were soon back in order and my horse was happy to follow.

A few minutes later we found ourselves among the birch-like shrubs again at the edge of a wide valley surrounded by mountains that could have easily been in Alaska. We stayed in this brush for quite a while, skirting then heading down the valley, interrupted only once I think by a small larch forest on higher ground. I was disappointed to intersect with another jeep track at the valley floor (we'd been on a horse trail), used by hunters and pine nut collectors. Soon enough we took a left turn off the track, though, to an almost-dry river bed at the edge of the valley. We let the horses drink in the few pools we found, then continued up a tributary valley. As soon as we'd left the track, the trail had become very narrow, hardly more than a foot path with no real space between the shrubs. So we were essentially pushing through brush and it was difficult to keep my feet in the stirrups, and even more difficult to trot, so I learned that pulling back on the reins was effective both at slowing down the trot and giving me some added stability. I'd been very pleased to find myself even more comfortable in the saddle this morning, often executing a trot in what felt like perfect control, barely moving in the saddle. Trotting through the brush was a challenge, though, and it did not get better in this valley. Leaning back in the saddle on the way down from the mountain pass had put a lot of strain on my knees and legs, and I was feeling it. Here the brush was shoulder high (my shoulder while on a horse). We went partly up the valley and then made a steep ascent to the right to the ridgeline and then back down again to a narrow, mucky valley of brush and maybe even some sphagnum moss. The top of the ridge had been largely khus, or birch trees (for which Khustai National Park was named). And then we went up another arduous slope, and into another brush valley on the other side. This time we crossed the

valley and then followed it out to where it merged onto a much larger valley. I'd assumed this was the same valley we'd started in, as that made sense to me geographically, but the river here was flowing briskly and, when I turned to see where it was going, realized that the valley ended in the direction the larger valley would have been. This valley does continue in two other directions, one of which we'll take toward Khar Nuur tomorrow.

We are camped on a piece of slightly higher ground in the middle of the wide brushy valley; our little clear patch is mostly licheny and next to the river. I am excited to bird watch tomorrow, as I've already had nice looks at a black-headed bird that seems to be quite accommodating and I'm still hearing a lot of bird chatter. There are no trees on the valley floor! After setting up my and Zaya's tents, I asked for a jug of water and a dipper, which Zaya gave me, but when I came back with my toiletries and clean clothes for a bath, they were setting up the vacuum pump sprayer. I declined the actual shower stall in favor of simplicity and some tallish shrubs nearby, but the sprayer turned out to be brilliant, very similar to the garden sprayer I use back home but with a shower type sprayer. I kneeled in the soft moss and thoroughly bathed and washed my hair with river water, the first time since UB, and still had enough left over to wash two of my tank tops and a pair of socks. I've worn exclusively tank tops during my time here, in part to avoid exacerbating my farmer's tan (and attempting to mitigate it) and in part because the weather has been so warm. It's been partly cloudy since we left the pass, very warm in the sun, quite chilly now in the evening.

I and the boys drank wine while Zaya finished cooking spaghetti for dinner. They were both using the camp chairs, so I sat on their sleeping pad as I'd seen them do, and stayed there all night while Borkhuu and later Zaya used the chairs. I hope that gesture was well received. After dinner I shared my full bar of dark chocolate from Juneau with them, which Borkhuu said he liked even though I warned them it wasn't very sweet. Everyone seemed to be in a good mood and when we finished eating we played a game of Mongolian cards. Zaya was excellent at helping me with the rules and we had a good time. She won, and for some reason that meant that Toogii lost, and had to do the dishes. I thought how lucky I was to be in such an intimate group, having a hard time imagining playing a natural game of cards like this among a larger group with more horsemen. It was a wonderful moment.

I went off to go to the bathroom before another game, but when I came back Toogii was at the dishes and the others were off doing other things, so I retreated to my tent in the chill (I put on my Harbor Bar hoodie for warmth earlier in lieu of the comfy delts everyone but Toogii was wearing, who forgot his) and here I am. It's now a little after nine and I'm about to go out one last time before trying to warm up in my sleeping bag. I think it's a night for clothing. I kind of wish I had that long underwear I left behind!

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 4 – to Khar Nuur: I've just returned from two hours on the gritty beach of Khar Nuur. It is a supremely peaceful place with park-like natural camping areas on a shelf overlooking the lake and a beach by the water. I'm sitting now in the shade of spruce and pine trees near camp, needing a break from the sun. I started out in the shade on the sand, but a brisk wind off the lake, lapping it gently on to shore, drove me into the sun. I read for a while there, indulging, rather than writing, and eventually laid on the sand and fell asleep for a few minutes. Concerned about burning my face, I woke up to cover it and spotted a bird on the water-

-mostly white, I figured it for a seagull. My binoculars suggested otherwise: a grebe profile, white mask on gray face, reddish hue below, and two wild ears. That woke me sufficiently, so I read for a while again, then took my socks off and waded in the shallows down the beach, chasing myriad tiny fish in the warm water. Soon larger fish were among the fry, maybe four or five inches long! And when I went further, large schools of striped greenish fish with oranges pectoral fins swam in the glimmering water, six or seven inches long. I love watching lake fish!

My goal in part was to hide the white bucket that was an eyesore farther down the beach. When I came in to shore to move it, I disturbed dense schools of tiny fry in what were practically tide pools barely connected to the lake. A lovely gray bird appeared too, another of my thrush friends, who proceeded to work her way down the water line collecting a beak full of insects. I watched her for some time and through two perches before she disappeared into the trees, her nest's location a secret.

Birds have been singing here in the trees all afternoon, but the only other one I saw was a sweet-voiced rook or something black and corvid-like (I'm confident now it wasn't a young Daurian jackdaw, though I can't be sure). I had a similar morning today--rising at 7:00 a.m. to find, to my surprise, that the grass in the shadow of the shrubs was frosty and a small eddy of the river behind a sandbar was frozen, despite the dawn being some hours old. Surprised, that is, because it is June 11, not because I was warm last night. I woke up at 3:00 a.m. and struggled to warm up and get back to sleep during a frigid golden hour. I was already wearing socks, light pants, and fleece, and added to that a hoody. I was also disappointed to find that my power bank had only charged my phone to 77%, the phone charger having failed at only 54% prior to that. However, this tablet is fully charged now, so that is something. I'm planning to use my phone only during rides now, relying on my real camera in camp. It's a better camera anyway and should be used.

Before breakfast, I set up my chair at the edge of our little camp mound in the valley and waited for the birds to come by. And come they did, flitting up to perch on shrubs, usually long enough for me to get a good look and attempt to take some photos. It'll really be interesting to see how many of my bird photos actually work. I saw many of those I'd seen last night--the eyebrowed warbler with the four or five note song and the striking black and white bird that wags its tail. Plus the bushchat, a beauty with a black head and rusty blush on the breast. But out of nowhere, two other birds showed up, the lemon yellow citrine flycatcher whose bold calls drew my attention both times I saw him and a small bird with a lovely, lingering song, pale gray and brown with a bright ruby chest patch (taiga flycatcher). It was good bird watching, a very interesting area.

After a cold breakfast of bread and cookies, jam and nutello (or the equivalent) I wandered down to a section of the river I hadn't visited yet, mostly sand bars that should be covered with water. I was on the prowl for fish but only saw the beauty of the river and teeny deer tracks in the sand. Well, I did see a large school of fry (which was heartening, given the low water), but I was looking for the larger pair that Toogii had seen.

Packing up seemed more efficient this morning and we were underway around 10:15, following a pleasantly wide trail along the side of the valley through the brush. Not long into the ride, Toogii stopped and pointed excitedly to the valley bottom at a bend in the river ahead of us. I

saw the brown lump in the river, but didn't know what it was and couldn't quite focus on it on the horse, even though we'd stopped. Toogii thought bear and I said I'd see better if I dismounted and was given permission. As I raised binoculars, my horse ran into me, having been bumped by the pack horse behind him. Toogii was really anxious to look, so I gave him my binoculars; he confirmed bear and gave them back to me and I got a quick look at the dark brown bear before quickly passing them to Borkhuu. The bear had by then left the river, but was still visible running through the brush toward the ridge beyond. Zaya dismounted and struggled to find him as he got closer and closer to disappearing over the ridge and came in and out of sight in the shrubs. Finally he reappeared close to the ridge line and she was able to see him. Whew! For once I managed to not be selfish about the binoculars and everyone had a look through them. I asked later how often they've seen brown bears; Toogii, 39, has seen them twice before; Borkhuu, 49, seven times before. This was Zaya's first wild bear. Wow! None of them had seen a bear with a tourist. I learned later that this would have been the Siberan subspecies of brown bear. If the shrubs where he was running were the height as those around us, he was a big animal indeed (they were about shoulder high to me on the ground).

We continued along the valley side, inexplicably riding through obvious jeep trails that seemed to come out of nowhere and then disappear, and I found that I'd strained a groin tendon in all our downward riding yesterday which made trotting very painful and awkward. I tried various strategies, eventually discovering that standing in the saddle at the trot was the least painful. I think it might have loosened up as we rode too.

We climbed over the "ridge" where the bear disappeared (really just a high point in the middle of the valley) and continued to a junction where we turned right, still on the hillside, and eventually curved up along the side of a ridge in a mixed larch-spruce-pine forest. The day was flawlessly sunny and the pines smelled amazing (they smelled amazing here too until I sprayed some deet around). Behind us, Borkhuu sadly pointed out the smoke from a forest fire on the other side of a ridge. There was evidence of older forest fires all around us.

Despite what seemed like a 180 degree turn, the sun remained on my right side and, a few hours in, I eventually put some sun screen on while we were paused at a little creek to drink the thirsty horses. As we passed along the ridge we passed several small ponds and lakes, surprisingly uninhabited. They seemed like perfect high lakes for freshwater breeders. With some relief, we finally wound up riding through the forest on top of the ridge and I finally got to see what lay on the other side--more forest, as it turns out--the floor blanketed alternately in kinnikinnik and Labrador tea. Just three hours in (not having dismounted), Zaya said we could see the lake and sure enough, there it was peeking between the trees, and we stopped in a splendid field. I quickly picked my camp site between several pine and spruce trees, at the back edge for privacy, shade, and a quick escape for toilet breaks. I love this spot, beautiful and peaceful. It is obviously heavily used: there are 50 gallon drums in some spots, evidence of camp fires, jeep tracks to the water, etc., but it is also pretty well cared for, much better than the heavily used camp last night that sported a cluster of toilet paper behind ever shrub, quite unnecessary and off putting (not that I allowed it to diminish my enjoyment in any way).

It's after eight and the sun is just about below the horizon, glowing in the brushy/licheny meadows behind camp where the horses are now pastured. I've retired to my tent after an

evening stroll to go to the toilet and enjoy the beauty of the place before bed. Trees, scattered and in copses, are surrounded by more shrubs and there is a maze of trails through it, all pleasant and well-kept or, should I say, not abused. I don't know if they're people trails or horse trails or game trails, but it seems I could stroll anywhere. I didn't mean to go far, but kept wandering toward some sun that I could see, rewarded by two Siberian jays that were bopping up the branches of the spruces, apparently foraging. I didn't manage to get any good pictures, but I had lovely views of these gray and rusty birds. I really like them, having first seen one during our lunch break on the way down from the pass. On the way back to camp, I saw a creature scuttle behind a shrub and from the other side emerged a huge, perfect hare, pausing on the trail for me to get a delicious look before disappearing. I suddenly realized that there are smaller trails here too, hare trails! So cool. She was enormous, muscular, alert, perfect, and all around pale. When I later looked into it, it seems likely she was a "mountain hare"; she should have been summer brown, but sure looked creamy to me.

After a dinner of sweet basted chicken, pineapple, and rice during which we finished the first box of wine, the boys went for a hike and Zaya and I had a really interesting chat about religion and marriage. She told me about the resurgence of shamanism three or four years ago when people would visit shamans and they would tell a lot of people that they had an ancestor's spirit and that they needed to take care of their family. There was practically a shaman in every family, she said! But she said it was expensive to get all the proper clothing. She talked about seeing a shaman last year that was possessed by an ancestor spirit, drumming and drinking, how only the assistant could serve or touch him, and how scary it was. She said Buddhism is too superstitious for her. She attended a protestant church for six years with her mother and then she was a volunteer teacher at a Christian school in Bangladesh, but not anymore. Now she practices what she calls "aura" which in part uses hand reading. I told her a bit about my story and we seem to be on the same page about it.

We also talked about marriage and how, perhaps partly because of being in Mongolia, she is feeling more inspired to get married and have a family. When I said I really liked my boyfriend, she said that was good, that in a lot of marriages the men like the women and the women eventually get used to the men! Women like us, I said, who have so many interests (which we'd already established) should like our men. :) While we were talking, a bird was making some interesting noises and we found him sitting in the top of a larch in the sunshine, huge beak opening to croak at another farther away. He was speckled brown with gray wings--could this be my cuckoo at last? (He turned out to be a nutcracker!)

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 5 (Rest Day): For a day in camp, I feel like I have an awful lot to write about. I woke up at 6:30 a.m. after a warmer night of sleep and went to the bathroom. It was early morning and I was tempted to stay up and hang out in the forest for crepuscular activity. But instead I crawled back into my sleeping bag and the next thing I knew I was surprised to find that it was 8:30. Breakfast was homemade "Mongolian pancakes", kind of a thick crepe made with flour, milk, water, yeast (or egg), sugar, and butter, rolled with butter once or twice (like croissants) and then rolled flat and fried. Delicious. Afterwards, at 9:50, I took off down the lake with a backpack carrying deet, shirt, toilet paper, spot, etc., my phone, binoculars, and camera bag. I assumed there would be a trail on the top of the ridge overlooking the lake, as there were trails on the other side of camp, and thought I'd start there, as this is such a beautiful

forest and walking along the lakeshore comes with gritty hazards in my sandals (as I'd discovered yesterday). I wove my way through the bushes on small trails that often petered out until it was entirely clear that I was on inconsistent game trails--I suppose that's why there are so many hoof prints on the beach.

I headed down there, encountering my thrush friend foraging in the same area. Our camp is on one corner of the lake and on next corner I came to, I walked onto the lawn-like area I'd seen from a distance and discovered that the panel with what looked like a number 11 on it was actually the side of a long drop, and the 11 was a picture of a man and a woman. The whole area had been cleared, making a pleasant meadow with fire pits and designated camping spots. I saw a plover along the shore as I returned to the beach, then made the turn along the shoreline. Here the beach was mostly large rounded rocks interspersed with sand, one of which sported the tiny footprints of what the boys later said was a female "gurus" (I'm guessing roe deer). It was a little slow going and I wasn't sure how long I would last, but I soon saw a trail close to the beach and turned onto that instead of rock hopping. It was a horse trail, and mucky in places, but very walkable, especially in the drier areas where it looked like a nice, well-tended forest trail. It meandered along the shoreline through pines that smelled wonderful. In quick succession I startled two pairs of nutcrackers from just in front of me, getting wonderful looks at one nonplussed individual from quite close, unfortunately behind too many branches for auto-focus to work.

I also found one singer that I thought might be a thrush but turned out to be my ruby-throated friend from the previous camp. And then I was spit out onto another cleared camping area on the next corner of the lake (which extended across that entire side), and this one was much poorer tended. There was toilet paper (no long drop here, evidently) in various places, and I startled at least five ravens from a fire pit full of charred cans; another fire pit was full of unburned plastic bottles and other trash. But it was a beautiful place and I rested on a licheny bluff overlooking the lake where you could set up a dozen or more tents on flat ground easily. I can certainly see why Khar Nuur is a popular destination. Zaya said that locals probably don't come here to camp, but city people would. Locals would come in the fall to collect pine nuts and pick the kinnikinnik berries that blanket the ground. Every bird and mammal, and probably invertebrates too, must gorge on those berries in the fall.

I saw another of my citrine wagtail friends on my way out, and soon turned the corner and headed back toward camp. This shoreline was more challenging as there wasn't a trail near the beach and the beach was either pea gravel sized sand or larger rocks that weren't perfect for jumping between. Beyond that it was scratchy brush and I was in shorts and tank top. I spent most of the time wading, which was pleasant enough, though a little slow. Not long after I started I heard a bird making a simple repeated call and scanned the trees ahead with binoculars, surprised to find a gray bird sitting in a dead tree. Could this be my cuckoo at last!? He allowed me a nice look and a number of photos--probably too far to be very good, but good enough to help me identify him later. (It was a cuckoo!)

I think this shoreline took me over an hour to traverse; unlike the others it was cut with little coves, but was a lovely walk, and I scared probably millions of tiny fish in the shallows as I strolled. On the final leg, I was forced to walk inland along a grassy coast as the water was

getting above my knees. There I found a little game trail with some more deer tracks and deer scat and what looked like ptarmigan scat. And toilet paper. It seemed I was never too far from camp sites and toilet paper, though I never did stumble across a trail or road on that side. I guess it's possible they hiked in, but given some of the trash I saw, I would have guessed they'd driven or ridden.

On this end of the lake I saw more birds on the water, ducks that I didn't see clearly enough or long enough to identify (though could have been sea ducks) and birds flying over the water that looked a lot like storm petrels. I also noted gray smoke over the horizon from what could only be a forest fire. Behind it, a huge white plume rose up. When I approached the corner near camp again, I crossed a shallow inlet to the beach where the horses were grazing and followed it curiously inland until I saw clothes hanging on branches and the bare top of a man, presumably one of the horsemen. I beat a hasty retreat and headed up to camp, three hours after I started. Zaya was relaxing in the shade and said that the men had taken the camp shower with them, but the shower tent was set up and she'd used it earlier. I relaxed in the shade until they showed up, then took a shower in the tent (which is really quite cute, the size of a shower stall) and washed some clothes while I was in there, the last I expect to need to wash this trip. We had lunch after that, after which I indulged in a cup of coffee with the last of the sugar. Then we agreed to rest before getting together on the beach for group photos. I carried my gear and a camp chair down one of the trails away from camp and set it up in the shade under a cluster of spruce trees, the same area I'm in right now but facing the opposite direction. It was immensely peaceful. Birds sang around me but were typically elusive and I spent most of my time reading my Mongolian mystery novel.

But there was excitement. In fact, just a few minutes after sitting down, some movement caught my eye and I looked over to see an adorable Siberian chipmunk sitting on the edge of his mossy burrow just 12 feet away! He paused and eyed me for several long seconds, then ran back to a tree and climbed a couple of feet up to regard me from its safety. I was so close to such an amazing little animal, not unlike my encounter with the hare last night. I also saw crossbills with two white stripes on their wings in the top of a spruce a little farther down the path and, though mostly silhouettes, I could see what looked to be their crossed bills and they were definitely eating seeds. Later I was sitting quietly and started to hear some bits of things falling from the trees around me, like a squirrel was eating a pine cone. I slowly got up and peered above me and there were more crossbills, perching and hanging upside down and feasting. I saw young streaked ones and yellow females. The whole time I sat there, they flew around in cheery flocks. And, finally, my tit friends showed up, twice in the tree just in front of me. The first time I saw several flitting about but the only look I had was of a gray individual flutting and tittering in a fledgling sort of way. I'm pretty sure he was being fed, but I couldn't see his head. Later they returned to the same tree and, though disappearing in and out of the dense twigs and branches, I did see an adult through binoculars enough to see the white stripe up the back of the head, suggesting they are coal tits, the only tits here with that white patch, according to my guide. That's three tit species so far, I think! They chickadeedeedee here just as they have elsewhere. I also saw another nutcracker. All in all it was a perfectly lovely hour and a half at a sit spot, and I even made good progress in my mystery novel.

When I got back to camp, Zaya was already preparing dinner, so it seems I missed my photo op. She is amazing, making homemade noodles to go in the traditional noodle-meat-vegetable dish that is cooked/steamed all together (the same dish I had in Dashinchilen). Borkhuu was changing out his stirrup straps, Toogii was relaxing in a camp chair, and the whole scene was very serene. I started to look through bird books, and both Toogii and Borkhuu at different times looked through them too, showing me birds that are here, birds that aren't, and communicating directly or through Zaya about this or that. I think we communicate basic things pretty well! I told them about the forest fire smoke I'd seen and Toogii went to check it out, returning to say it was only a cloud. Puzzled, I showed them the picture I'd taken of it earlier and they confirmed that it had been a forest fire, but evidently it was short lived.

At one point, I again heard the continuous warbling song of the elusive bird that's been around camp often since we arrived, but remains hidden in the foliage. I finally made a serious effort to find him, and he obliged me by singing continuously and letting me determine that he was definitely in the top of a particular larch tree. I walked around it and peered up for several minutes before I finally saw a flicker of movement and found his tail. I maneuvered until I had the best possible look available and, although I never got a clear look at his head, I believe he had an eyebrow stripe and definite yellow coloration. There are a lot of warblers in the book, but only one with a yellowish head in this area--Pallas's warbler. My book notes that they are called the "canary of the taiga" and that sounds like my little friend.

After dinner we played the Mongolian card game again for dishes. I said I'd play one game and then go and start writing. I understood the rules better and learned more--I really like the game! Borkhuu won when Zaya failed to play her joker, which is the only card that would have thwarted Borkhuu's playing his own joker (his last card), as one of the jokers is higher than the other. So, Zaya had to do the dishes. Then we played another game for packing the horses the next day and, to everyone's delight, I won, and Toogii has to pack the horses. There was a lot of laughter and I got high fives from Zaya and Borkhuu for that one. And then we had to play again, this time for 50 pushups, and Toogii won, so Borkhuu put down a piece of blanket on the grass and, to laughter from the rest of us, proceeded to do 15 pushups like a worm. I'm giggling about it right now! So naturally we had to play a fourth for hauling water from the lake, and Zaya won, so that is my duty, put off until tomorrow. It was everything card playing around a camp site should be. How lucky I am to be traveling with these people!

After dinner, Toogii asked if I would rather go back on the same path we came in on (all the way back over the mountain) or take a new path out, warning me that if we took the new path, we would not be able to visit Gunj Monastery. Although I hated to miss that, there was no question--I want to see new areas! I think the horsemen were pleased. Toogii said he knew I wanted to see more country and that's why he asked. This new route will not be a place that any tourists go, or locals except to hunt. Wow!!!! This could be one of those things that traveling alone is going to allow me to do. Not even locals should be there at this time of year? How lucky could I be? Last night when we were chatting, Zaya said that she had never been on horse trip more than two or three hours at a time and that she'd never been horse pack camping (just car camping). So this is a bit of an adventure for her too.

Well, the light is fading and my evening spot has failed to turn up any wildlife, despite what I

think is a rather nice location near a hare trail, so I am going to leave behind the last of the birds and all the mosquitoes and tent it up with my novel. Goodnight.

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 6: It's 8:10 p.m. and I'm in my tent for the evening. I've been warned that it will be cold again tonight, colder than last night, but the good news is that, unlike the other cold nights, I am starting it quite toasty rather than already fighting a chill, thanks perhaps to my mistake about the direction we were traveling. I set up my tent with the idea that it would face the sunrise down the valley we've camped in, but instead I can see the glow of the setting sun through the green rain fly. Oops. We change directions so much I cannot keep track. And the tent is quite warm inside, my hands actually feel like they're glowing with heat. Wonderful. My directional error is also the reason that I thought the location of the lake we left today was 180 degrees from where it actually is! I need to consult a map before bed.

I awoke to a slightly hazy morning, both literally and internally. Smoke hazed the air around us, the lake was dead calm for the first time since we'd arrived, and I felt a subdued. Before breakfast I walked down to the lake, stretched, and contemplated the water, watching lots of fish rise, fin, and even jump. A kite made a brief appearance. While I was there, the breeze began to pick up, but from a different direction, north I think. We ate the leftover noodle/vegetable/beef dish Zaya made last night in hot milk, a Mongolian tradition for leftovers, plus leftover "pancakes." Zaya told a story about a Japanese tourist who had fallen in love with a particular dish in Mongolia, but didn't know what it was or how to describe it. When he came back to Mongolia, he kept searching for this dish without success until one day he was with a nomad family and was served this traditional breakfast of milk and last night's dinner, and that was his longed-for dish!

We tried for a group photo by the lake and, while we eventually succeeded in making the camera take a timer photo, the results were not good due to the position of the sun, so we will try for another in another location. I wandered around a little while the horses were loaded, but wound up mostly in the shade and embrace of a pine tree which wrapped its roots around me like protective arms, listening to Pallas's warblers counter singing.

We left the lake by a different route, riding through the meadows behind the camp, but I soon recognized the creek we were riding by and we mostly retraced our steps down a shallow valley and into the broad valley below. From that vantage, we could see to the neighboring valley the way we'd come two days earlier to the left, but instead turned down into the bushes and descended to the river at the bottom of the valley we were in, fording it in water over my shoes (I lifted them up to stay dry). But we didn't make it much farther. A few hundred yards beyond the river was a treacherous swath of hummocks and potholes. Toogii tried several times to find a route through and even led the horses briefly, but it was too dangerous and he was afraid the route would be too muddy for them, even with the dry weather. So we turned around and were soon back on the road to bear ridge and the third camp site.

Hol was more energetic today and, to my surprise and delight, cantered twice while catching up with Toogii's horse (Zaya confirmed today that the first four horses (Toogii's, Toogii's pack horse, the red pack horse, and my horse, all belong to Toogii, hence their desire to stick together). At one point, Hol decided to take a trail higher on the mountainside where it split, while the boys

stayed on the lower trail; the two did not merge for a long time. Hol managed this for a while but got increasingly anxious and, when it didn't look like the two trails would come together any time soon, I "led" him across to the other trail (he might have done it anyway, but I did actually give the physical command). He was very eager to go, but I reined him in over the rather treacherous pothole area of sphagnum and lichen hummocks. When we reached the trail, he broke into an unexpected run to catch up with Toogii, something approaching a gallop, up a hill no less, but he was so close it was over pretty quickly. Exciting though. It made me more encourages to perhaps request a canter when we're back on the steppe, something I didn't feel confident enough to do on the way up.

I was feeling a little let down at that point, having failed at the extra adventure of traveling to new places few tourists had seen. I didn't relish the prospect of camping in the same toilet paper ridden camp site--however nice it was the first night--and entertained the idea of going around and collecting it all to take back. A nice bout of comfortable trotting first, and cantering later, put me in a better mind, and when we finally descended toward the camp site I decided I'd spent the rest of the afternoon hiking to the steep, grassy hill we were passing with neat rocky outcroppings. I am not one to let vacation disappointments get me down.

But to my surprise, Toogii stopped the horses on a different meadow--a smaller, prettier one nearby--and indicated lunch. It was lunch time, but I was expecting by then to exactly retrace our path, which would mean camping here after a short day. I wanted to ask where we were going to camp tonight, but decided I'd prefer it be a mystery. I was really looking forward to lunch and, while it was good, it was not the best one so far. The starch base was potatoes and carrots that Zaya cooked this morning topped with pork in sauce and veggies. To my pleasure, a bag of four cookies followed and I ate up three of them.

After that we continued to retrace our steps, riding up into a brushy tributary valley, then taking a left over a ridge, down to the soggy bottom, back up to the khus-topped ridge (where we paused, to check straps, I think), then down and up a third ridge before descending into that first big valley. We rounded the corner into the main valley along the bottom of a steep, rocky bluff topped with larch trees, pulled away from the valley wall, and paused on a large grassy mound. Zaya asked if I wanted to camp there or cross the mountain today, which would be three hours from now. She said the boys said it was 50/50 to them but, as we were talking and after I asked how it would change what we did tomorrow, the boys called it and we camped. It's actually a super cool camp site, pretty similar to camp #3, but in a bigger valley and with that rocky outcrop and steep grassy slope nearby.

I set up my and Zaya's tents as usual, collapsed gratefully with a cup of juice, then rallied myself for a hike to the rocks. The boys also said they wanted to hike to different points on the mountain. It only took me ten minutes to get there, and a few more to climb up the lower rocks and onto a deer trail that took me to an overlook in the middle of the bluff. The view was spectacular and I took pictures of the camp site and Toogii hiking into some rocks farther down the valley. There was a big raptor pellet there with an orange rodent tooth sticking out. I enjoyed the view (after moving once to avoid an ant hill I'd nearly sat on nearby), then wandered a little farther up the slope to a few smaller rocks. Each time I said I didn't need to go any higher, but each time after I rested, I was able to keep going. I wound up first on top of the rocky bluff which enabled me to

see down the rest of the valley and to the entrance of the tributary valley we'd ridden down, and then to the next saddle up. I had nice looks at two warblers, one of which was right above me on top of the ridge in a larch; he or she looked down at me, giving me an excellent look at the dark eyebrow, so unusual in Alaska. I also took a photo of a huge insect on a Saskatoon leaf, the only real use I made of my big lens that I kept putting on and then taking off again for scenic shots.

By the time I reached the top, I was very ready to come back down and made it to camp at 6:20, a little over an hour after I left. Zaya and I chatted for a while, then I went to finish setting up the inside of my tent (I discovered that I had to switch the end I slept on, as the ground here is deceptively not flat), then used my camp cup to wash my face near (not in) the small creek, a welcome activity after my sweaty hike. The weather had turned from sunny to mostly overcast and very windy during the morning ride and I'd wound up wearing my blue blouse over my tank top, though I regretted it during the last part of the ride when the sun came back out. It was so windy at lunch that I had it back on when we left, but quickly regretted it and took it off rather awkwardly; Toogii noticed and stopped and held my horse while I finished, though I was getting along okay. My back was sore from carrying the camera over my shoulder, so I tried caring it in front for a while, which worked okay if I held it against my body while we trotted; later I put it across my other shoulder and tightened the straps and that worked pretty well.

Now, just half an hour after sitting down, it is already noticeably cooling down. A cuckoo is calling on the mountainside nearby and I can hear the boys settling into the cook tent. I think I'll go to the bathroom one more time, then tuck in wearing a bunch of clothes and hope for a good night's sleep. We're leaving an hour early in the morning and, somehow, expect to reach Gunj Hiid in the evening to camp. Last night I had to get up at midnight to go to the bathroom and was rewarded with a moon-less sky full of stars. I was pleased to see a bright Big Dipper prominent among the others--perhaps my nomad children who did not receive the explanation of the Alaska flag they received will recognize it after all.

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 7: I'm not sure I have ever been so exhausted. What a long day! Or so it felt. I was up at 6:30, having slept through the night pretty much warm enough, thanks to the warnings of Toogii about the cold night ahead and starting out so toasty to begin with. There was frost again on the grass and flowers and it occurred to me that, in this drought, that could be an important source of moisture. I packed up my gear, but left the tent up while I sat and watched for birds, largely unsuccessfully. The only one I saw clearly and close by, for unknown reasons, was an extremely obliging bushchat who liked the bushes growing on the side of our mound and posed beautifully. Not long after I turned in last night, the nightjars or snipe or whatever they were began whirring around camp, sometimes quite close. I wanted to see them, but opted against getting out of my warm sleeping bag. I was tickled that they were at it again this morning, even until we left (sporadically) but try as I might I never could locate one. (They turned out to be snipe.)

We had breakfast about quarter to eight, just cookies and jam/Nutella and some sardines for the boys. I ate plenty, spurred on by Borkhuu. As is our habit, we got going about an hour and a half later at 9:20. Down the valley to the north, the smoke hazed the mountain out and I could see shafts of sunlight through the smoke in our own section of the valley as it was coming over the mountain. By the time we left, the whole valley was a little hazy. It was time to leave the Khentii. We rode out through the brush, along the side of a high hill in the middle of the valley covered in

larches (I remembered it from the ride in), and back to the brush before winding our way through the mountain valley where we'd lunched on the way in. In the morning light it was even more beautiful, the trail lined with orange, yellow, and blue flowers, the air scented with pine. Apparently it was a better time of day for chipmunks, as I saw no less than four of them! And then with a hard right we started up the slope, up up up up, the horses climbing like hooved bears straight up the path. I timed our ascent but now I can't remember the numbers. Forty minutes maybe? The last section was nearly flat as we angled along the mountainside passing scree slopes populated by asters, violet columbine, and other flowers. We found the top uninhabited this time and stopped for a rest/smoke break for the men. When they were ready, Toogii gave us each a handful of pine nuts as an offering at the oboo. We scattered them on the wooden structure as we went round three times with our "wishes." Borkhuu also knelt before it, putting his head on a wooden block to pray.

And then the descent. This took a full 20 minutes, straight down the mountain on the dust and loose rocks. Such horses! I hope my photos and videos capture it. On the way, I saw quite a few trees with a bare patch of trunk as though they'd been marked by cutting away part of the bark. Zaya later told me that that's where nut gatherers hit the trees to make the pinecones fall.

At the bottom, all in one piece, we rode through the forest carpeted with bergenia and then onto the lowlands of the valley bottom where I was surprised to see the road lined not just with my false alder/birch which I remembered but with willows and potentilla too. Those soon gave way, though, and I heard the warbler with the four/five note song singing in the brush. On this trail we began what would be a long day of trotting. For myself, I was mostly relieved when we finally won the steppe again and left the embrace of the brushy road. When we'd last been in that area, the day had been overcast and threatening rain. This time it was bright and sunny, as it had been all day long (I'm afraid I've burned my chest, unintentionally; though I did put some sunscreen on, it was clearly not enough) and it was beautiful. We trotted toward lunch across the narrow step, Hol as usual behind Toogii and his pack horse. Borkhuu was close behind and we were traveling at a pretty brisk trot. Borkhuu was chuing (making the "chew" command to get the horses going) and I had a sneaking suspicion that he was trying to break them into a canter, as we were clipping along about as fast as we could. And then suddenly Hol started to run and I was loping over the steppe, for a long enough interval that I could really enjoy it, giving Borkhuu a thumbs up behind me and Toogii a thumbs up with a big grin, mostly to let him know that I was happy about it. Not long after we slowed to a trot, we picked up the pace again and again we had a nice canter and this time I remembered to try to entirely keep my seat in the saddle. What fun! We gestured and smiled and thumbed up about it when we stopped for lunch shortly thereafter, across the river from our second camp where I'd seen the deer. The horses looked lovely grazing among the flowers and I saw kestrels again. Earlier, not long after we regained the steppe, I'd seen a dove-like gray bird fly to the ground, then up into a dead tree. I had a sneaking suspicion it was a cuckoo friend and sure enough, as we rode away, he cuckooed (one has been calling here frequently as I type, sometimes adding "ah ah" to the end of his cuckoo).

We left lunch at 2:00 and rode onto the steppe hillside. This time Borkhuu took the lead, so sometimes Hol wound up in front of Toogii, but generally not for long. Toogii originally stayed behind at the lunch spot for a while; Hol kept up with the others for a while but finally just stopped, after a nice neigh, and Toogii and I laughed about it as he caught up and Hol started

going again. The valley was really beautiful and I wasn't unhappy about traveling over this ground again. The marmots were hiding as were most of the raptors (except another accommodating kestrel), perhaps because of the brilliant sun, or the wind that raged across us at times. Behind us we could see a smoke plume rise beyond the mountains with the same billowing white cloud behind it that I'd seen at Black Lake. The Khentii is burning. I wonder if the white cloud is perhaps moisture put up by the fire? It was a sad sight to see behind us, though I'm glad that Mongolia does not fully suppress its forest fires as the U.S. has done to such detriment.

We did a lot of trotting across the hillside, serious trotting, and I began to make a choice each time whether to rub my saddle sores by sitting in the saddle or stand up and stress my tired knees. We were supposed to reach Gunj Monastery tonight, but I had no idea how far away that was. Remembering my map, though, it seemed like maybe it was pretty far away...

It was. But oh what a ride! Around the time we got to the big rock bluffs where Borkhuu played as a child (so before joining the Baruunbayan River valley where we had lunch on the second day), Borkhuu and Toogii headed uphill, through some alarmingly beautiful rock formations, and down into a small valley with an imposing and impossibly beautiful bluff with clefts grown up in green grass and small birch trees. And at its base were a huge assemblage of winter pens and shelters for livestock, several nice cabins, and an outhouse. Grass was pushing up in the pens and one section housed a swath of blue-green lushness that the animals are going to love when they get a chance to eat it. I was astonished. Zaya said that maybe three or four families would live there and they could be friends or relatives. It was certainly a spot I would choose. Some of the winter shelters are in obviously sheltered places like that, others are inexplicably located on what seems like the side of an ordinary steep hill. I'm sure there's a lot going on there for site selection, but it's not obvious to me what it is.

Anyway, what it looked like we were doing was cutting out the corner of the mountain between the valley we'd been in and the continuation of the valley we'd left shortly after lunch the second day (that of the Baruunbayan River I think). We passed up and down ridges, one of which gave me a splendid view down that valley, a tributary of the Baruunbayan perhaps. And oh, what a beautiful landscape! Steppe and wild rock formations with birches and larches, steep steppe slopes and stunning vistas. Terej really is a spectacular place to ride, and we were not following roads or trails for a lot of the time. One cozy valley we crossed, which certainly seemed accessible to the main valley, didn't have a road in it at all!

And all the time, the wind howled and howled, thankfully keeping the temperature tolerable, and blowing up Hol's mane so I could see his whole neck for the first time. One time both sides of his mane were suspended in the air in a very comical manner. At the top of one ridge, we descended a ladder-steep slope with no trail, the horses in front of me making their own zigzaps down the slope which thankfully Hol followed, turning at the corners on a dime in a really impressive way. When we reached the bottom, we stopped and looked back to see only the head of Zaya's pack horse (off lead) staring down at us. It was so windy and so steep that he refused to come down, and Zaya's horse was waiting for him. With a lot of laughter, one of the horsemen went up and pulled the pack horse down at a more reasonable angle from farther down the ridge where a faint trail showed up. We all laughed about it later.

And then down to the valley we rode and across a band of green where a little creek ran through and cattle grazed and we gave the horses a welcome drink. The day was hot and sunny and I was parched. On the way, Hol cantered a little and I found it a little painful. It had been a long day already and I was getting saddle sore, for we must have trotted more than we walked and, while I felt at times glued to the saddle, barely moving up and down over the horse, there was still inevitable movement. I found myself more and more standing in the saddle in the Mongolian way, which limited the friction to the very back of the saddle but which put considerable strain on my knees. I switched between styles based partly on what the horsemen were doing (Borkhuu spent much of the time in the lead for the first time) and partly based on what hurt less. Also based on the pace and style of the trot--I think small, fast trotting is easier sitting down and bigger or more erratic trotting is easier to manage standing.

From the drinking stop, we rode up the valley on a jeep trail, gaining ground slowly, and I kept looking ahead to forested slopes in the distance hoping we were approaching the monastery. I was well and truly exhausted. On the way, I suddenly realized I was hearing a new voice, or that the boys were talking more than usual, and I looked over to see a Mongolian in a blue del riding a beautiful gray horse carrying on a lively conversation with the horsemen. As usual, I did not get a look, let alone eye contact, from the stranger. The conversation went on for some time and, bizarrely, we were trotting most of that time, a fast, mile-eating pace. The newcomer was riding alongside Borkhuu and Toogii and, because Hol usually wants to be immediately behind and next to Toogii's horse, I wound up in the line--all the horses were clustered together. And as the conversation continued, I couldn't help but giggle at the absurdity of the situation. I can see someone coming along and carrying on a conversation at a *walking* pace, but we were trotting, fast...and chatting. I don't know how to convey how ridiculous this was...maybe something along the lines of two people running a sprint and having a conversation at the same time. It just seemed too fast for talking.

I could hardly take my eyes off that beautiful gray, though I tried not to stare and only surreptitiously took photos. He was joined by his shaggy dog who trotted happily along with us, a typical tan and brown Mongolian dog shedding his winter coat in big fluffy clumps, ears floppy or half-cocked, reminding me of Nigel. He seemed merrier than most Mongolian dogs and behaved as I imagine Nigel or Cailey would if they were along. We even made friendly eye contact once.

At last, as we reached the head of the valley, we peeled off to the left past a lush green area around a stream (probably the same one we'd stopped at below) where a herd of cattle was happily grazing. Our guest lagged behind and started whooping, driving the cattle back up to the nearby steppe, presumably the goal of his excursion. To my relief, we rode along a pleasant dirt track then through larch trees and shade, making our way gently up the side of the valley. We came in and out of meadows and Hol stopped in one at the top of a very steep hill to pee while the boys continued on ahead. With the immediate prospect of a ladder steep descent and knowing that Hol would want to catch up, I was careful to rein him in a little when he was finished, not relishing the idea of trotting down such a steep slope. He tossed his head back and gave me a look as if to say, "Oh, you don't want to trot? HOW ABOUT THIS," and took off at a run straight down the hill. I was not in control. And, I freely confess, all I could do was hang on to the front of the saddle. Thankfully, the boys didn't turn around to look at me until I was heading

back up a gentler hill to reach them and, by that time, I was holding the reins correctly and at least looked like I wasn't about to fall off, and naturally had a big grin on my face. Borkhuu mimed the incident many times over the next couple of days, always to laughter. A little later, I was again lagging behind along another stretch of beautiful forested trail and Zaya approached; being Mongolian I guess, she was allowed to carry the whip rope in her hand and was hence better able to encourage her horse to move. Their approach from behind led Hol to make another beautiful cantor, and this time there was no pain, only the joy of loping.

And then ahead of us was a little temple--we had won Gunj Hiid at last, after the most arduous day of the trip. Amazingly, we'd left a high mountainous valley, climbed a ridge, descended again, eaten lunch at our second camp site, wound our way down that valley, cut across several ridges and up more valleys to arrive here; we'd left an hour early and what with the mountain and all the trotting and the searing sunshine and wind over the steppe, I think we were all exhausted. I for one had a tiny stomach ache which I suspected had something to do with all the trotting. I managed to set up my and Zaya's tents right there in front of the monastery (thankfully we were the only ones there) and tour the ruins, then begged a camp cup of water from the jugs Toogii had pulled from some water source within walking distance to wash my face and hands. It was the only night we didn't camp next to a water source and the night I wished most to wash up!

The area was truly beautiful, wildflower meadows mixed with larch and khus (birch) forests that reminded me of the Yukon. Little pink wild roses and the occasional strawberry plant bloomed under the canopy and pale gray logs lay across the forest floor. But I was not feeling well enough to spend much time enjoying it or watching for larch forest birds, being well and truly beat. I had suggested to Zaya, who had worked much harder than I had (not only cooking but pulling a stubborn pack horse much of the day while all I had to do was stay mounted), that she cook the easiest meal possible and, to my surprise, she did, though it was also what the horsemen had requested that morning. She'd asked me if I liked "noodles" which I realized at dinner meant something more specific than I realized. We ate TV dinner sized trays of instant noodles, supplemented with the beef Zaya had brought along. After we ate they asked if I wanted wine and I begged off, saying I had a little stomach ache and wanted to lie down. It was partly an excuse to disappear, as I really just wanted to rest. I'd apparently left my watch at camp that morning, having taken it off shortly before departure to avoid a tan line (since I would have my phone on during the ride), but I snuck a peak at Toogii's watch and saw that it was just after 7:00. I was too tired even to write at that point, and just laid down in my tent after setting everything up inside and started a new book, having finished my Mongolian mystery at lunch. After about an hour, I set up the little camp chair inside, having selfishly appropriated it from the cook tent, and wrote for a while. Being such a dense day, for the first time I did not finish the day's events that night. I did lay awake in the dark for a bit, however, and listen to what I think was an owl hooting nearby.

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 8: Nor did I even have a chance to write the next day. I'm currently about three and a half hours into my flight to Seattle after a stressful layover in Beijing. Only one more complication (U.S. customs and immigration) before the world is wholly familiar again. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I woke the next morning, the final full day of riding, early again and determined to face the day with energy and enthusiasm. It was calm and serene outside and, after packing up, I wandered back through the monastery which had won me over

the evening before. Zaya was concerned because a lot of people are disappointed in it, not realizing that it is a ruin. But I'd done what research I could about it, reading several slightly different versions of the story of a Manchu princess possibly sent to marry a Mongol noble to spy on him (the Manchus were then extending their influence over Mongolia), but who fell in love with her adopted country instead. Whether she was actually a spy and whether she was subsequently assassinated by her own father (the Manchu emperor) for failing in her duty seem somewhat uncertain, but that she was loved and that this monastery was built around her tomb is well established. Zaya added that when her life was at risk, the princess hid in this area, but the supply trains into these mountains gave her away. I'd never heard why exactly she was buried in this specific place.

I also read different accounts of the nature of the monastery's decay. Some sources said that it has simply fallen into disrepair, others that it was ransacked during the 1930s religious purges. Both may be true--it could be that it had ceased to be a functional monastery by the time of the communist era, and also true that the tomb of the princess was dug up and looted during that irreverent period. Zaya said that she was buried with jewelry and other precious items; I'd read that subsequent investigation had revealed fragments of a birch (?) coffin and burnt remains of the princess, apparently cremated by the looters.

Regardless, I was wildly charmed by the place. Some of it had been repaired, including the little temple outside the wall which houses a stone turtle with stele, the same design I'd seen used by the Turks for Bilge Khan and Kul Tegin in 750 and at Kharkhorum in the 1200s (and at the meditation center in Terelj National Park). It was wrapped with silk scarves and there was ash across its neck where people had lit the incense sticks available there. There was a picture of the Dalai Lama and the Potala Palace in front of the stele. What I loved most about the small temple, though, were the doors, painted with a dragon on either side and, apparently, perpetually open, the doors swinging inward. The paint was not new, which made me hope that the paintings were the originals from 1740, though the walls were clearly repaired more recently. Paintings on wood, still good after nearly 300 years? What isn't amazing about that? Perhaps this is only really impressive to a person who grew up in a rainforest which would have rendered this whole place unrecognizable in short order.

Some of the stone steps at the entrance were still in place and appeared to be grooved, maybe for traction, maybe in a design I couldn't make out; most were overgrown. The square wall encompassed a pleasant compound grown up now in larches, but which once apparently housed 60 monks, or maybe it's just that 60 monks were present at the princess's interment. Some of the wall had evidently been repaired, but other sections appeared naturally intact. Large stones stacked about two feet tall made the foundation on which rested a wall of bricks perhaps seven feet high. In some places the wall was tiled on top, sloped toward the inside of the monastery; possibly it was peaked originally, but it was hard to tell. Much of the wall was now only several feet tall with only the top foot of bricks exposed, the rest having eroded away to form an overgrown slope on either side, reminding me of the ruins at Khar Balgas.

The dominant feature inside the compound was the remains of the main temple, gutted and open on the front with a central opening in the back. The whitewashed walls were covered in Cyrillic graffiti which I imagine I didn't want to read even if I could. But the timbers appeared to be originals. The stone foundations for the vertical log posts were decoratively grooved, similar to

the stones at the entrance, and the horizontal beams still showed what I suspect is the original decorative temple paint job. Dragon heads were carved over the front opening.

And behind the monastery, the rudely excavated grave. Between the mounds of dirt, I could see the large stone slabs that once encircled the tomb. Inside them were two large pits about eight feet deep and between them the remains of a brick arch which appears to have covered the whole tomb. A single blue hadag was tied to a tree root inside. In the quiet of the morning, I was moved.

Outside the compound wall were a couple of mounds, one of which was probably the guard tower I'd read about, the other perhaps related to the main entrance. I wandered around a little outside after my morning tour, but ultimately returned inside the monastery, both for the serenity and the birds, which I found there in more abundance than elsewhere. Again it was a pleasure to visit a tourist site in Mongolia with no other tourists around. The only birds I identified in the area were a tit and a great spotted woodpecker (which was actually in the tree above my tent), but I saw others and watched them sing, never sure whether I was seeing a sparrow or a warbler or something else. Still, it was quite a nice morning watching them within the old walls.

Breakfast was the same cold cookie and jam affair we'd had for several days, as I'd been avoiding the sardines and liver pate that have been provided for protein. A new jar of cherry jam came out which was wonderful, and I filled up, but was never quite satisfied. The big heart-shaped biscuits were too sweet on the outside and the finger cookies...well, they were on the cookie side of things. While we ate, I assured everyone that despite my little stomach ache the day before, I was fully ready for more trotting and cantering that day, which Zaya said was a relief to the horsemen. I confess that I wondered whether they trotted that much with every group--it's an intense amount of trotting! I did eat a small apple with breakfast that morning and finally was bold enough to ask directly whether I could give it to my horse, gesturing directly to Toogii and just speaking "Hol?" He shook his head no and picked at the grass with his hand and Zaya translated that the horses eat grass. I did not grace that information with a response, but simply said that in the United States we give horses apples as treats. "Treat" was probably the wrong word to use with the horsemen. The response was that, in Mongolia, horses don't eat apples. I resisted the urge to say that they probably would if they ever had the chance to try them! I don't know whether their reluctance was a matter of truly believing that horses wouldn't like apples or whether they just don't want tourists babying their animals. I was reminded that Tsegmed knew that camels liked candy. It's hard to imagine horsemen wouldn't know that horses liked sweets, so I suspect they just don't want their animals treated like pets by crazy tourists.

While the horses were packed, I told Zaya I was headed back to the monastery in case I wasn't around when they were ready. I didn't see much more in the way of birds and, when they were getting close to being ready to go, I went behind the back wall to go to the toilet one last time. On the way back, I spotted a young chipmunk on a stump who allowed me to watch her and take pictures for some time. She eventually scrambled down her stump and under a log, but I was pleased that I didn't really startle her.

Under another sunny sky, we headed down the same valley we'd come up the evening before, leaving about half an hour earlier than usual (9:50). We made a small detour to the left to water the horses before continuing along the right side of the valley, following a different course that

meandered on and off the road, in and out of the forest. Along the way we stopped briefly when we encountered a pair of horsemen, including an American woman on her way to the monastery on an overnight. Her guide/horseman carried her pack on his back. Her first question was how long we were out for and whether we'd been to the lake. I wondered what her story was and what other Mongolian adventures she had planned, but didn't get the chance to ask. As they left, Toogii and Borkhuu dismounted and rearranged the pack on Borkhuu's red pack horse who had a bloody patch on his side from chafing. He didn't seem overly bothered by it until the flies started feeding there, his neck twitching and twisting as he tried to nip at it.

Soon we forded a lovely little creek which I verified was Baruunbayan River, which meant that we were following the itinerary again. We soon passed the bottom of a steep slope of steppe bordering a green meadow of mole hills. I'd already wondered if that stupa and oboo in the distance was the same I'd seen a few days below, and this looked a lot like my first but certainly not last mole meadow. Zaya confirmed that we were now retracing our steps. I believe we'd just ridden down part of the valley that was on our left when we had lunch on our second day, instead riding up the narrower valley to camp #2.

And, soon enough, we were approaching the gray ger in the distance where we'd eaten yogurt. The other two gers in that area were gone, moved with their flocks to other areas. Now that we were back in more intense livestock country, the steppe, which had shown small signs of life higher up, looked like barren, scorched earth. A single teenage boy on a black horse was home; he chatted with the horsemen before riding off, reporting that one of Borkhuu's eight brothers had gone to fight the fire in the Khentii. We'd watched the plume of smoke from over the mountains behind us the day before and, now that we were lower, we could both smell smoke and see the haze around us. Later on, Zaya and I had a conversation about how things always work out; case in point: if we'd taken the less travelled road that we'd abandoned, we would have wound up perhaps uncomfortably close to that fire.

It was after noon and I found myself nearly faint with hunger. I wasn't sure why we were stopped there and didn't ask in the hopes that it was for lunch, or at least some milk tea to fill my stomach. I made a pretense of photographing some yaks on the other side of the ger to devour a granola bar I was grateful to find in my pack, which only helped a tiny bit. I returned to chuckle with Zaya as Borkhuu and Toogii unloaded a pack horse and Borkhuu dug out his sleeping bag, unrolling it for the sole purpose of pulling out some string he'd borrowed from this family and wanted to return! She told him he should have just given it to her to put in her day pack.

But despite the empty ger, we went inside for tea. Except there wasn't any, so we just helped ourselves to fresh yogurt instead. I was given a large bowl full and found it a little tarter than before, but still palatable with a little effort. I was looking forward to getting a video of the whole ger without bothering the family, but soon a truck pulled up and the parents and three (apparently) kids came in, two teenage boys and a grown daughter plus the little one I'd seen before--assuming I'm gaging age correctly. They'd been to visit someone who'd had a death in the family and had apparently been shopping as well, as bags of food came in: potatoes, Fanta, coke, noodles. From nowhere, a big platter of attractive potato salad with ham was presented and I had some of that too.

I asked Zaya if there was a toilet around, not having seen a long drop, and she didn't find one either, but I thought that lunch would be soon, and we headed on our way. I think she must have mentioned that to the horsemen for, about 15 minutes later when we did stop under the willows by the creek, Borkhuu made walking motions with his fingers into the trees after I dismounted. We'd been at the ger for about half an hour and it was then 1:30 and I hadn't gone to the bathroom since we left camp. Probably dehydrated!

While lunch was made, I wandered out of the trees and onto the steppe, thinking of looking for birds out there. Instead, I saw wild running across the ground, having stumbled upon a ground squirrel colony right there by camp. I'd seen plenty of ground squirrels, but always mounted or in a car. Finally I was able to watch and take photos, first of two young squirrels playing, then a red, tan, and white adult who maintained a watchful pose for an impressive amount of time, and another adult in the distance carrying clumps of grass in his mouth. I hope some of the photos of them turn out.

After lunch, I posited to Zaya that we couldn't be too far from camp, having assumed that we were retracing our steps all the way back and even looking forward to camping under the larches by the Tuul again. When she said it would be three more hours I was puzzled. The gers had been one hour from camp the second day, and the first day was only about three and a half hours of riding. We must be staying very close to our host family tonight if we had three more hours to ride!

In the end, that was a correct statement, but the route we took was unexpected. I assume it was the usual way, but I like to think it was chosen in part to provide me the novel path the horsemen knew I craved. For the last couple of hours I'd been waiting for the right moment to tell Toogii that I wanted to see the khirigsuur again, planning to ask him directly since he was the one who had verified what it was. I was glad that I hadn't, as we turned from the valley we'd been traveling down just before we began to climb the slope toward the burial site and the Tuul River beyond, turning around a steep and parched ridge that separated the Baruunbayan River valley from this tributary valley. We passed some livestock while we rode on the right side of the valley (going up), separated from the shrubs and trees growing at the bottom to the left. Along this route we saw several herds of horses and I enjoyed the little foals and the different colors--white and pinto among them.

Unfortunately, the ride began in slight discomfort as I immediately had to go to the bathroom as soon as we left our lunch site (where I'd, of course, just gone). I was proud of myself that I'd never yet asked the horsemen to stop, only finding a bush when we were stopped for other reasons. Perhaps it's because I hadn't gone all morning and had drunk a lot of water at lunch to help with the parched air and inevitable dehydration. Although I was carrying water in my pack now, I wasn't drinking it en route. I tried to remember it was only a sensation and vowed to wait as long as I could, at least an hour, maybe wait until 4:00 which would make it about an hour and a quarter. At 3:45 I caved, and asked Zaya to ask for a break at the next convenient location (I'd already spotted a place ahead where it looked like the track we were following came closer to the brush). We turned off even sooner and headed for a couple of trees at the edge of the shrubs. I gratefully dismounted and headed off into the heather until I found a depression behind a stump to use. Feeling a little ashamed, and knowing I shouldn't, I returned to find the boys lounging on

the grass smoking, in no hurry at all to move on. This might have been a little early, but when I thought back to the rest of the trip, I realized that they take frequent rest breaks anyway.

Feeling better, we moved up the uninhabited valley. And then my patience just ran out. We were trotting a lot, my behind was a little sore, I was thoroughly exhausted after the long day of riding the day before, it was hot, the ground was scorched, and I was desperately in need of solitude. I knew it was bad when Borkhoo's whistling, normally a charming backdrop and certainly not chasing any wildlife away from this human-occupied landscape, was almost too much to bear. I was ready for a change, I was ready to come home! Instead, we rode up the valley, over a larchy pass, and down into another barren valley with only a glimmer of green along its floor occupied by quite a few livestock. We crossed to the other side and followed a track down the valley past livestock pens and a ger in the dry and dust. Borkhoo looked at me and held his finger and thumb close together, like I often did to indicate that I was only a little bit tired, but he pointed ahead and I realized he meant that we had only a little ways to go. A relief! Zaya said that we were meant to camp in that valley, but the spring there had dried up and so we were going to camp by the river. Towards the bottom of the valley we ran into two boys on horseback who grunted and rode away when I greeted them with a "sambano"; there were a couple of gers in a lot nearby.

A few minutes later we were fording a creek with a gray yak watching us and found ourselves suddenly in an inhabited and slightly greener world. There were yaks and cattle all over the place and gers dotted the landscape, trees and shrubs among the lawn-like sections of steppe. A little farther and we forded the main river--I correctly identified it as the Terelj--and onto a little shelf of land on the other side where we camped. Beyond a fringe of bushes was a larger pasture and then a dense row of trees and, in the far corner, some wooden structures.

It was a beautiful spot, if rather busy. The trees did offer some privacy and I couldn't actually see any gers from camp, though livestock was all around us and I could see what looked like tents upriver. Later, some westerners rode through the nearby pasture, the lead party cantering and reminding me what a novice rider I really was, no matter my improvement and visions of riding with Chinggis Khaan. The river was shallow where we'd forded it, shallow enough for vehicles, but it was quite deep just upriver, probably eight or ten feet. I wondered if there were fish in it and looked upriver to see most of the river bank eroding into the water, relentlessly trampled by livestock. I could imagine what we'd do in Alaska to restore those banks (where bank trampling is mostly a human affair) and considered the implications of hundreds or thousands of years of such use. While the fish populations may be impacted, the river is obviously stable.

I set up my and Zaya's tents as usual, collapsing into mine for a few minutes of much needed rest. It was 6:00 when we rolled into camp, almost an hour later than the latest prior arrival. I think we were all tired. Because of the open terrain and the nearby people, I wandered farther from camp than usual to find a place to go to the bathroom. I crossed the pasture first and checked out the structures, including a dilapidated cabin, corral, several roofed pens and....a log long-drop. I wondered about the appropriateness of using a long drop without the owner's permission, but the place was clearly abandoned and run down and I snuck inside, hoping no one would see or mind. The view out the doorless opening was onto the trees that bordered the back of the pasture. They were unfamiliar, willow-like and dense, and inhabited by wary, singing birds. I wandered among them during my time there and discovered dry river channels weaving between them, evidently flood channels. I wondered at what time of year the Terelj floods.

I had a few minutes for bird watching before dinner and saw a red bird briefly, but mostly just sat by the water. The guys showed me a brand new calf stashed in the arbor of a shrub nearby, apparently left there for safety while its mother grazed. I didn't have the energy for a full shower, but I wanted to wash up a little bit after the hot and sweaty day, so I went to seek my camp cup from the cook tent to get some water from the river. I found it and retreated back to my tent where I rested for a little bit inside, grateful for some protected solitude. When I emerged and went to reach for my cup, which I'd left outside, I found only a kitchen rag. Baffled, but unable to find my cup, I returned to the cook tent, hugely relieved to find it still there. Zaya had wondered why I hadn't taken it after asking for it, and wondered where her rag had gone. We laughed and agreed I must be tired!

With my cup of water I washed my face and feet and felt a little more human. Dinner was a quiet affair, as we were all tired and Toogii had ridden off to see his children who were staying with his parents somewhere relatively nearby. We had quite a lot of wine left from moderate drinking for two days and abstinence the day before so I tried to ply them with more wine, but they refused, telling me we could finish it around a campfire later, a campfire to celebrate our last night together (less dangerous because we were next to the river). After dinner I collected wood with Borkhuu, really astonished at all the dry sticks lying around everywhere. I'd already been eyeing it and went right to the troves of it lying around the edges of the bushes. Borkhuu was building a six foot pyramidal pyre of sticks on the dirt in the middle of the vehicle tracks carved into the bank of the river for fording cars. Zaya said that Mongolian campfires were always like this and that Mongolians climb mountains at New Year's to see the first sunrise of the year and build fires like this. It looked impractical to me, as I know they burn out fast, but we had plenty of wood. When I dropped my second load, Borkhuu indicated that I should stop gathering wood and instead add my existing wood to the structure. I followed his example and added to it and when he returned, he said it was enough.

I brought over my bar of 92% chocolate from Ulaan Bataar and the wine and our cups and Borkhuu lit the fire as dusk descended just moments before Toogii rode into camp, having found his parents but not his children who'd returned to their mother a few days prior. The bonfire was beautiful and we managed to get a group photo taken eventually, then Toogi roasted a sausage on a stick that Zaya cut up and handed around. It was dark by then and we sat around the fire enjoying the last of the wine. And somehow the topic of singing came up. Mongolians, I know, love to sing, but I hadn't heard very much yet. Sitting there on the bank of the Terelj around a fire, Borkhuu started a song about mothers and both Toogi and Zaya joined in, and it was beautiful. I can't describe the melody, not so different from western tonality to be strange, but very, very different. Then Borkhuu sang a long song, which Zaya explained was called so because the words are elongated, not because the song itself is long. Mongolian songs, she said, were typically about mothers, horses, and nature and, Borkhuu added, fathers too. It was an amazing experience, sitting around that fire and hearing Mongolians sing their songs, lounging on the grass, completely at home. We exchanged kind words to each other through Zaya, I expressing my enjoyment and appreciation for them, the trip, and Mongolia, they thanking me for visiting and tagging on a compliment about my riding skills and my comfort on a horse, which they said not everyone has. I'm not sure if they were just being polite, but I was grateful either way. I wondered what they would have done with a less comfortable rider on those long,

long trots? If nothing else, I like to think I made a good impression through my ease with camping, undemanding attitude, and appreciation for their company and country. They asked if what I'd heard about Mongolia was true and I began by saying that some things that I'd heard about had not seemed to be the case when I arrived, including the prohibition against saying how long it would take to get somewhere. They talked amongst themselves, asked where I'd learned that (reading) and said it was a good book. Saying about how long something would take was okay, but not specifics, they clarified. I was glad I hadn't offended them.

But of course, the singing couldn't stop with them. I was urged to sing one of my songs and I, of course, balked. There would be no one joining in with me in this quiet landscape, and I am no singer. I told them I couldn't sing, couldn't remember all the lyrics, didn't have a voice, etc., but they kept urging and....well, what did I have to lose? I tried to think of a somewhat topical song I can sing, one that I love and, while continuing to outwardly protest, inwardly tried to patch together the lyrics I could remember into something coherent. And then, there in the firelight, I sang an abbreviated, a capella version of "Sweet Baby James" while the Mongolians politely listened. Remembering their lyrical songs, it couldn't have sounded very pretty (let alone the voice that dispatched it), but they said they liked it. For me, I was quite proud of myself, and I like to think that James Taylor would be pleased that his song, among all others, was the one I sang out for my friends in the Mongolian mountains.

Northern Mongolia Riding, Day 9: We let the last load of firewood die down (we had eventually needed more, which the boys gathered) and I trundled back to the tent. I don't know what time it was, but I know that I found myself unable to sleep in the next morning despite assurances from everyone that we had a short day and didn't have to hurry. Quite tired and ready to go home, I packed up for the last time and sat for a while by the river to bird watch. I saw my red finch friend again and began to recognize his call among others and watched a trio of female goldeneyes diving in a pool upriver (so there must be fish in here, after all, or plenty of aquatic invertebrates). When nature called, I headed across the pasture among the yaks (they were thankfully rather skittish, though this made photographing them difficult), and found myself watching birds near the collapsing log building. I wondered why someone didn't either fix it up (it looked like a nice place) or salvage the logs. The cabin's door was secured, but the whole structure was obviously sagging.

In addition to more looks at the rosy finch, I tracked down a new bird singing on a bare branch of a large cottonwood next to the compound and was surprised to find him lemon yellow and black--an oriole surely (except he turned out to be a Daurian restart!). A Mongolian walked through the compound and I wondered if he was the owner and thought I was trespassing, but quickly put that thought from my mind. He probably just thought I was strange. I enjoyed discovering that several cows had plunked themselves down inside the covered shelters and appeared to be contentedly chewing their cud.

I ate the last of our cold breakfasts and took myself away from camp as the others packed up and loaded horses. I not only sought solitude, but this was my last chance for birdwatching and I enjoyed the jackdaws landing among the yaks and turning over dung piles for bugs. When we headed out around 11:00, I gave Zaya my phone to take the only pictures I have of me actually riding. For most of the short ride, the two horsemen rode ahead as we followed a road through cottonwood groves, across parched and ugly fields crawling with heavy equipment and trucks,

past a group of military personnel evidently taking group photographs, and over little branches of the Terelj River. Here and there along the water groups of city Mongolians camped--their big tents, vehicles, and loud music a dramatic contrast to the scene we'd left farther upriver. As we passed one house I spotted a dog lying in the middle of the road, just lying there; when the horsemen made a wide arc around it and looked at it intently, I began to suspect that he was as dead as he looked. He had a harness on and I wondered, if he was dead, why did they just leave him there so close to their house, maybe 20 yards away?

And then I saw a familiar compound ahead--we were back to the family we'd stayed with, just an hour after leaving camp. Without any fanfare, we rode into the enclosure and over to the trees on the far side while I steeled myself to put on a good face for Nanda if she was around even though I just wanted to collapse and be cranky. She and the other kids didn't show up right away and I had time to sit on Toogii's horse to try out the wooden Mongolian saddle with the metal decorations. It was...hard. Not uncomfortable walking around, but I was grateful for the cushioning of the English saddle they'd provided.

Nanda did come over and wanted to swing and we made a good effort, but she wasn't nearly as excited as she had been before. Munkh was around, but being shepherded by older boys and did not acknowledge me, though I smiled at him and wished I'd had the courage to wink instead of the rather lame wave I made. We ate lunch, provided by Tumro, on the camp table we'd left behind outside. There were flat fried dumplings somewhat like the Mongolian pancakes Zaya had made (but stuffed)--I'm not sure what they're called. Out in the sunshine, the dishes looked a little dirty, I wasn't enjoying the tea, and the mutton in the dumplings tasted strong and unpleasant. I garnished as many bites as I could with pickled beets and, when I found (and ate) a black hair embedded in the dough, I decided I was ready for western food again. I ate two dumplings to be polite (and because I was hungry), declined seconds on the tea, and we were soon on our way. I quickly shook hands and thanked the horsemen again, pressing their tips into their hands (carefully calculated and bundled that morning in my tent), made an awkward goodbye to Nanda (but she had already adopted the Mongolian habit of not making a big show out of goodbyes), and off we drove through the trees and back across (through) the main river where a car was stuck in the middle; it seemed at dire risk of flooding the engine with water, but everyone was calmly going about pulling it out.

Not far beyond the crossing I realized we were in Terelj Village and from there we wound our way down out of the mountains to the outskirts of UB, stopping on the side of the road to use a long drop at the top of a steep embankment. I was not feeling well physically or emotionally; I desperately wanted to get to my hotel room, but the driving was achingly slow through weekend traffic, the villages and ger districts (one of which is where Nanda goes to school) creeping by ever so slowly. And we had shopping to do! When we had talked both of dels and cashmere, Zaya had graciously said we could shop for them on the way into the city. I am extremely grateful for both, as I would not have managed either without her. The del shop was in a large indoor shopping complex, one of two places in the city where you can buy them, and Zaya led me to a tiny, narrow, pocket store with an alarmingly small selection of dels. It was where her parents had bought some dels the year before. Thankfully, I managed to find a blue one for myself (a little silkier and fancier than I'd imagined, but I like it), and a more serene, traditional, pretty beige one for my mom. I used most of the last of my tugriks paying cash for them, as they only took Mongolian credit cards.

We then moved to the cashmere store where I agonized over purchases in the worst mental state for shopping, managing to find a few nice gifts and even a shirt for myself before calling it good, paying my bill, and heading back outside. I'd affirmed with Zaya that tipping the driver would be a good idea (I was pleased he was the same one, as I'd failed to do so the first time, hiding in my ger and resting while he unloaded and went on his way), so I asked about an ATM machine. We walked a block around the corner to a grocery store, failed to find it the first few times, and then failed to make the transaction several times once we found the machines. I thought I could feel Zaya's frustration mounting as I changed machines, then went back to the original one, and finally managed to press all the right buttons. She was being amazingly stoic and cheerful given the intense exhaustion she must also have felt.

I was about at the end of my rope when we pulled up to the hotel; they both accompanied me to check in and then took my luggage to my room. I tipped the driver, then told Zaya how much I recognized and appreciated how hard she worked and pressed what I hoped was a generous tip into her hands as we said goodbye. It was 4:15; I closed the door and collapsed on the bed, beyond exhausted, all thought of arranging a driver and getting out of the city the next day abandoned. There was no way I could muster the energy to put that together and I had more museums and other places to visit in the city than I had time for anyway. I struggled just to plug in a few electronics, send a few messages to friends and family that I had returned to the city, and rest a bit before heading out in search of food, for I was also desperately hungry by then (having eaten a sparse lunch with the herder family). I returned to the Mini Market around the corner, disappointed to find that the only cheese they had was mushroom flavored (!?). But I bought it anyway, along with a small loaf of rye bread, two beers, and an ice cream bar. Back at the room, I didn't exactly relish the small sandwiches I made, but ate enough to ease the hunger, drank a not-as-cold-as-I-wanted Gobi beer, and then devoured a Klondike bar which I was surprised to find had no chocolate covering—just vanilla perfection. And finally I took a shower, my first proper shower in ten days. I think I was too tired to enjoy it.

Not much else happened that night. I did manage to charge all my electronics and wash the pants I'd been wearing the last two days to wear again in the city. They didn't look particularly dirty, so when the bathroom sink water became a murky brown through repeated rinsings, I realized how dusty our ride had been. At some point in the evening I realized I needed some more substantial food, so I headed down to the little wine bar café in the lobby and caught the eye of the desk clerk who gave me a food menu and a drink menu. I admit, all the advertisements of classy wine around the café were looking pretty enticing and I searched—in vain—for a wine list. I'm not kidding—all the ads for this hotel and restaurant touted the fine wine variety they had (these ads were everywhere in and out of the hotel). There were wine glasses and a bottle of wine on every table and at least one full wine rack. And yet, nowhere did I see a list of wines to order! When my waitress finally arrived I first asked if they were open (I was the only one there even though it was after 7:00) and then asked for a wine list. I got a confused look. "Wine?" I said, trying to look enquiring. "Wine?" was the response. "Could I...have a glass of wine?" I asked. (I'm IN A WINE BAR.) I gave up an attempt to choose wine and just hoped she'd come back with something red. I also ordered a chicken burger, having enjoyed the delicate chicken I'd eaten so far on the trip.

The wine was good, the chicken sandwich very chewy and drippy and disappointing. I retreated to my room, used the last of my energy to book an airport hotel for my overnight in Beijing, and went to sleep.

Ulaan Baatar and Home

The next morning I felt slightly refreshed and began tackling my packing problems. It was complicated by the fact that MIAT airlines only allows one checked bag and one carryon, which means I couldn't put souvenirs into a second backpack as I'd planned. Also, everything was in bags and locations most convenient for camping, so everything had to come out and be repacked. When it was nearly done, I wandered over to the nearby grocery store to pick up gifts—primarily candy for my coworker and canned cream for my dad (inspired by pancakes at Khar Nuur). The candy was easy to find, but a few wanderings did not bring me any closer to blue cans of cream. I spotted one of the ubiquitous employees standing at attention that seem to populate UB stores and showed her the zoomed in picture on my phone of breakfast at the lake that included a half-obscured can of cream and gave her a questioning look. For once, my question was interpreted correctly and she led me straight to the right section. I picked up a couple of them plus a couple of jars of honey with pine nuts in them and some candy—both the little jello cups that Soni and Tsegmed had enjoyed and some unknown candy with delightful Mongolian pictures of camels, bears, warriors and such on them.

Back at the hotel I integrated my new purchases into my luggage and trooped downstairs, having squeezed everything into my large backpack, carryon backpack, and camera case. I checked out of the hotel and stashed all three bags in the luggage storage room with a little trepidation. After doing an inventory of what I really didn't want to lose, I swapped out my camera's SD card and carried the full one along with my passport and money all day around my neck.

First stop: Zanabazar Fine Arts Museum. Pleased with my google maps printout, I headed west a couple of blocks and found it with ease. Once again I was puzzled by how the desk that meets you right inside the museum doors was not the place to buy a ticket; instead, I was routed to another room, the gift shop, then escorted back to pick up an audio guide machine after the very nice lady established that I was there without a guide. For a time, I am pretty sure I was the only person in the museum. I visited the bathroom, then started listening. I'd had the mistaken impression that this museum was small and that it primarily housed Zanabazar's art; it was not only much larger than expected, it spanned all of Mongolia's human history from deer stones and Bronze Age ornaments through the beautiful clay and wood ornaments of the Turkic period, thangkhas of the Uyghur period, and knives, ornaments, snuff boxes, saddles, and games from the Mongolian era. The narrative was good and extremely thorough and more than a little difficult to follow. The described exhibits were numbered, but the narrative was not numbered, so you had to really study the exhibits to know what to view next. I often listened out of order, walking ahead, as the narrative was long and included a lot of history and general information, much of which I already knew or was certain not to absorb. I suspect listening the whole tape would be very enriching and take hours I did not have. There also weren't enough batteries in the device to last, it turned out, and I soon went without. After spending considerable time downstairs, I finally ascended to the Buddhist art section on the second floor, half a dozen rooms filled with statues, thangkhas, embroidery, wood blocks, statue molds, and a giant Kalachakra mandala. It

was overwhelming. I started in and later returned to the room that houses Zanabazar's statues, several buddhas and one of the Taras. They were, as described, exquisite, and I was grateful these had at least escaped the purges. No one had mentioned anything about paying for photography, so I snuck a few photos of the statues as well as the thangkas, feeling better about it when I purchased some cards of his work later from the gift shop (and even better when I discovered that my photos through the glass cases were blurry). Unable to absorb any more, I descended back to the gift shop to look around and was pleased to find some puzzles of Mongolian art for the kids as well as a scarf I could not resist of felt and silk with a deer stone design.

My intent was to visit the dinosaur museum from there, which was definitely advertised as small. But as I walked in that direction, hunger came to dominate my desires, and I realized that I probably didn't have time to see both it and Ganden Monastery before my 3:00 return to the hotel. As I hadn't seen the Gobi, I decided to save all dinosaurs for my next Mongolian vacation and find a place for lunch. I confess that western comfort food was sounding better and better and I had pizza in mind, having passed a Pizza Hut on my earlier walk. That seemed a bit more than I needed, and was in the wrong direction, but I did step into the first restaurant I saw that advertised pizza. Walking upstairs I was again faced with an absolutely blank faced waitress who seemed to have no idea what to do with a tourist walking in off the street. I really don't understand how confusing this could be. I tried to be more direct this time, pointing around to the tables to see if I could just sit down. Nothing. Instead, she ushered over a woman who spoke some English (and, surprisingly, looked African), who asked me if I was just one. Was that really the hangup? Could the other lady not have looked around me, seen that I was alone (and had made no effort to give her a figure), and suggested a seat? I remain puzzled. In any event, I was seated in the main room facing away from a white gentleman occupying the adjacent booth with a laptop out. I ordered a Chinggis beer and zuivan, the traditional Mongolian dish of homemade noodles, meat (beef this time), and vegetables steamed together, my third iteration.

After the first couple of sips, the gentleman behind me asked if I was visiting Mongolia and we struck up a conversation, so I joined him at his table where he was finishing his meal. He had lived in Mongolia for several years about a decade ago and had just moved back after a stint teaching Sikhs in northern India. He was quite an interesting person, an author and former employee of the Mongolian intelligence agency, though primarily an English teacher. We had a lovely conversation at the end of which he found me on facebook and ostensibly sent me a friend request that I never received. He had written some surrealist stories about Mongolia I'd hoped to read. Around 1:15 I excused myself, paid, used the W/C, and headed west to Ganden Monastery. The map showed it surrounded by a sort of ger district or similar and when I reached the edge of the modern city buildings, I boldly crossed the street and headed up a dirt road between wooden fences. It was a bit unnerving to suddenly find myself away from the city and in what could have been a rural village. I tried to look purposeful and not stare into the yards too much. I didn't notice any actual gers, but the buildings there seemed generally....well, of the ger district/rural village type, and it wouldn't surprise me if they are not even connected to the sewer system (but I really have no idea). Among the residential areas were a few larger buildings with businesses. It was an odd little area, but probably an old one, built up when the original Ulaan Bataar was founded when Ilk Kuree, Zanabazar's traveling monastery, finally settled here in 1778.

After a couple of blocks of rising dirt road, I was spit out onto a wide thoroughfare that runs up the middle of the district to the monastery at the top of the hill. This was a more bustling place with the wide walk in the middle of the paved street packed with pigeons eating the rice people were throwing for them. The monastery entrance spanned the end of the road in a large gate, beyond which were widely spaced clusters of buildings only recognizable as a monastery by the architecture on some of the older ones. The area was actually quite sprawling and the brochure I was given with my entrance fee not entirely helpful. Neither was my historical printout, which described three temples, difficult to recognize among all the buildings. I wandered through an old area with several green-roofed buildings housing the library where efforts are underway to digitize the documents there. I entered one packed room where a large queue of people were waiting for something—blessings maybe? Appointments with a lama? I didn't know and was too tired to poke into it further.

According to my brochure, most of the buildings were universities teaching different elements and styles of the dharma. After circumambulating one of the temples/library surrounded by prayer wheels, I made my way up the central avenue (complete with a cartoonish protector deity fountain near some children's play equipment) to the large temple at the back of the compound which houses the enormous Avalokiteshvara statue. I paid the fee to enter and gaped quietly at the enormous Buddha before reverentially circling the building, clockwise of course. The walls were covered in cubby holes housing thousands of tiny buddhas as well as sutras, and rows of prayer wheels. When I came all the way around, I basked at the foot of the large statue again as people lined up to pray and make offerings. Though I would have liked photos to remember the room and the statue, I didn't even consider it. Too holy a place for sneaking photographs.

Unfortunately, by then I'd nearly used up my allotted time. I swung by one of the universities nearby where I could hear praying and climbed the steps to see a bunch of people inside prostrating. A month-long class was taking place inside, so I headed out, all the way down the long avenue through the district to where it connected with Peace Avenue. My object was to visit the State Department Store on the way back, in part to change back the rest of my Mongolian currency. I knew the route home this way, as the Zaya Hostel was near Peace Avenue. The day was windy and cooling off as I headed down the street; I bought some sprite and water at the store, then waited in line a long while to change money. Finally someone told us that the clerk there was on a break and, after a few more minutes, I could stand it no more and headed out. It was only about \$17, though I didn't know what I'd do with \$17 in Mongolian currency at home. Perhaps I could yet find a home for it.

A few blocks later I passed a "souvenir shop" and, although I hadn't seen much in other shops of interest, I thought I'd check it out. It was actually a pretty good store and I found a handful of last-minute gifts I was pleased about. Even better, when I counted out the money on the counter I'd used up nearly all the bills I had left. Pleased, though unsure where I was going to put my new-found treasures, I continued on to Sukbaatar Square where it started raining and the wind was so ferocious I could hardly walk against it. It was just after three and I was looking forward to sitting in the lobby and collecting myself and my belongings for a few minutes before my ride at 3:30. But it was not to be! As I walked up the steps, a man hailed me from a car saying "Horseback Mongolia?" It was my ride, and he already had two passengers in the car. We headed up to get my luggage and I ran to the bathroom desperately. And then, sweaty and

stressed, I hopped in the car with a couple of French people for the airport, managing to get a good enough signal on the way there to send and receive a few precious texts.

We were to the airport around 4:00, nearly three hours before the flight. Checking in, security, and immigration were quick and smooth, after which I hung around a quiet part of the airport and ate an enormous (sweetened) yogurt and a few bites of an atrocious cheesecake just to be polite. The directions in the airport to Gates 1-4 were confusing and I finally realized that there may only be one gate and that it was....well, right there where all the chairs were downstairs. There never was a sign that indicated you were at a gate, just a bunch of signs pointing you toward Gates 1-4 that culminated in that spot. With some uncertainty, I plunked myself down in a seat, thoroughly stressed out and harboring a great sense of impending doom. And so I prayed, and felt better. I didn't have the energy to read or otherwise entertain myself, so I was grateful for the Harry Potter movie playing silently nearby. As boarding time approached, I went to use the bathroom several times, and eventually jumped in line as a huge queue rapidly formed. After about 20 minutes, some attendants came by with an announcement that I did not hear and most of the crowd dispersed. I heard some people mumble about cleaning the plane, which I later learned had arrived late. I stuck in line, winding up pretty close to the front, not really wanting to find another seat and trying to practice patience and serenity. Sometime after six (we were supposed to leave at 5:55), we boarded and no one questioned the three items I was carrying on, to my relief (backpack, camera, bag of souvenirs).

Feeling that I'd been in Mongolia a perfect amount of time, and happy to be heading home (though dreading the overnight in Beijing), we took off over the steppe and headed south to China. I saw the last of the white gers below and hoped that the rain that fell on our way to the airport, long overdue now, would help the vegetation. Our snack on the way was a small bowl of cold meatballs for which I was grateful, if not particularly what I was hoping for. I also had a tiny cup of wine. The flight was less than two hours long and we were soon offloaded at Terminal 3, thankfully directly at a gate. We were not given entry forms on the plane, so I filled one out at the immigration tables with my own pencil and experienced the same confusion from the attendant as I had two weeks prior--she had to call someone over and I had to write the next day's flight information on my ticket. And then I was off to pick up my bag and find my way to the passenger pickup area for the CITIC hotel van. The directions on their web site were perfect; I had no confusion on the way there except where to roll my cart off the curb, and found the van sitting there. The driver was not particularly helpful when I asked if it was going to the hotel (because I didn't know how to pronounce "CITIC"); he clarified "sitick" hotel and I nodded, but it still took some time before he got out of the van to let me put my bags in the back. It was the first of several not great impressions of the CITIC airport hotel. The hotel was about five miles away according to the web site and the drive started out as you'd expect through major streets surrounded by vegetation. Then, through a series of sharp turns, it got a little weird. Or, just not what I expected in an airport hotel. The neighborhood began to look a lot like poor urban China—dirty, lots of motor bikes, shoddy stores, dingy apartments. At one point we had to stop in a narrow street as a concrete truck squeezed by, I estimate only 8" off my window. The driver looked stressed and it occurred to me that we might be going somewhere to be murdered or ransomed.

But we did eventually turn into a driveway that took us to a mediocre looking hotel. Checking in took an abominable amount of time as I sweated in the hot and humid air and, after I received my key, the clerk took my passport and disappeared with an explanation I did not hear. Trying to keep it together, I waited, my passport was returned, and I trundled down the hall and up to my floor, where the ceilings were about a foot shorter than I was used to. My room smelled faintly of cigarette smoke, there was no information about wireless, and I was generally unimpressed. But all I really needed was a bed, so I cleaned up and tucked myself in, rising some seven hours later to repack (using two checked bags now) and head downstairs to quickly check out and wait for the 7:45 transport to Terminal 3. A van left just as I finished checking out at 7:42 which I hoped was not my ride leaving a few minutes early, as the next wasn't supposed to be for half an hour. I headed outside into the unbearable heat and humidity, checked with a tour bus parked nearby to make sure it wasn't the shuttle, and sat around with a group of loud, smoking Italian men until they thankfully boarded that bus and disappeared.

Close to 8:00, a shuttle van appeared and I wandered over to find out what terminal it was going to. The truth is, I did not know what terminal I needed to go to as I had no internet access and the final email I'd received from Delta Airlines had been silent on the topic. I assumed 3 because that's the big international terminal and I was flying internationally. After some confusion, it was determined that this bus was going to terminal 3 and so was I, so I got on board for the long drive back. Confident that I knew what I was doing from then on, I boldly took a lift to the fourth floor and looked at the international departures board to find my check-in desk. And failed to find a flight to Seattle. I looked at some others, I wandered around, I went to the bathroom and started to panic. I finally made my way to the information desk I'd used before and thankfully had an immediate response; my flight was leaving from Terminal 2. At my crestfallen face, she said something about pickup area 5, which sounded familiar, so down I went to the ground floor and over to the waiting bus. By this time I was drenched in sweat and stressed out, now coming up on two hours to departure. Some ten or fifteen minutes later we were disgorged at the much more modest terminal where I found my check-in area and quickly got in line. A very nice Chinese Delta attendant asked if I had my boarding pass yet and when I said no, took my passport to the nearby machines to get one. I was very grateful I'd managed to check in online the night before from Ulaan Bataar. When I reached the ticket counter in the very slow line, I plunked my backpack down without another glance. The clerk there was kind enough to check my bags to Juneau and upgrade me to an exit row seat.

And that was the last thing I wrote on my trip! My flight to Seattle was sleepless and occupied primarily by TV shows and movies, as I could not sleep and had not the energy to even read. The Delta attendants were a little surly when I tried to order slightly unusual (though advertised) drinks (e.g., jasmine tea), but it was overall a fine flight, and I was grateful to have an aisle seat right near restrooms. Customs and immigration to the U.S. was quick and easy (I felt a surge of patriotism when the customs official welcomed me back) and I was soon ordering Beecher's mac and cheese in familiar territory. I landed that afternoon in Juneau, just a few minutes after I'd left Beijing by the clock.

In general, I try to travel with few expectations, taking the adventure rather than inevitable disappointment (my only formal goal this time was to see demoiselle cranes). But, had I built up wild expectations based on all the wonderful things I'd read about Mongolia (which were many),

those expectations would have been met and wildly exceeded. Mongolia is a brilliant country and it is...well, 100% Mongolia. Yes, the nomads often wear western clothes, there are vodka bottles and trash rambling about the steppe, and motor bikes often replace horses. But it is all very Mongolian. I don't know how else to express it. A wonderful country and a wonderful people!

Mongolian birdwatching:

All identifications are from the two Norman Arlott's "Birds of Europe, Russia, China, and Japan"; habitat range was often the deciding factor and usually narrowed the possible species to one. Nevertheless, all identifications are tentative and I've noted those that are especially so.

Central Mongolian steppe (days 1-3):

- Tree sparrow (I thought they were house sparrows!)
- Black kite
- Mongolian (upland) buzzard
- Demoiselle crane
- Pied wheatear
- Hoopoe
- Horned lark
- Mongolian lark
- Isabelline wheatear
- Common raven
- Red-billed chough
- Eagle (golden or steppe?)

Ogii Lake

- House martin
- Whooper swan
- Eurasian spoonbill
- (Common?) tern
- Barn swallow
- Barred goose
- Ruddy shelduck

Bayan Nuur

- White-naped crane
- Whooper swan
- Coot
- Northern lapwing
- Common shelduck
- Stilt
- Gargarney

Terelj nomad compound

- Red-billed chough

- Daurian jackdaw
- Black-billed magpie

Riding Day 1

- Great tit
- Black woodpecker
- Gray wagtail
- Ruddy shelduck
- Red-throated thrush
- Black kite

Riding Day 2

- Eurasian kestrel
- Warbler
- Merganser
- Cuckoo
- (Brown?) shrike

Riding Day 3

- Siberian jay
- Warbler
- Citrine wagtail
- Stonechat
- Taiga flycatcher
- (Common?) snipe

Khar Nuur

- Spotted nutcracker
- Rook?
- Siberian jay
- Great crested grebe
- Two-barred crossbill
- Taiga flycatcher
- (Little-ringed?) plover
- Sandpiper
- Coal tit
- Pallas's warbler
- Cuckoo

Riding Day 7

- Great spotted woodpecker

Riding Day 8

- Hoopoe

- Cuckoo
- Great spotted woodpecker
- Hill pigeons
- Rosefinch
- Daurian redstart