

**Celebrating The New Millennium
With Kazakh Eagle Hunters
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Christmas Day, 1999

Last August, when I made my reservations to travel with Boojum Expeditions (www.boojum.com) out of Bozeman, Montana, to Western Mongolia and spend New Year's Eve with Kazakh Eagle Hunters, the idea of leaving on Christmas Day, while unpleasant, didn't seem as hard as the reality of leaving my family when this day actually came. What kind of low life leaves his family on Christmas Day? We had all discussed it, and even earlier this week I told Karoline and Michelle and Cheri that if they were really upset with me going I would forego the trip. The trip had been paid for by the end of October, and my airline reservations were all set. They all told me to go, but all the State Department warnings about possible terrorism acts had them understandably upset. I had tried to leave later, but unfortunately, in order to make my connections with Mongolian Miat Airlines to fly from Ulaan Baatar, the capital city, to Ulgii, I could not leave later than Christmas Day. I stayed up packing until 2 AM on Christmas morning, then with a heavy heart, departed the house about 5:30 AM to Houston's Ellington Field, where I parked my truck and caught a taxi to the big airport for an 8 AM departure on United Airlines to San Francisco.

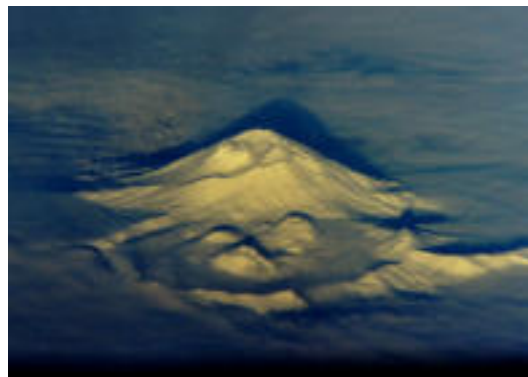
One thing good about flying on Christmas is that the airlines aren't completely full. My window seat enable me to see beautiful canyons, and the magnificent deserts of America's southwest, bathed in the morning sunlight, displaying all kinds of desert colors of pinks, tans, oranges, yellows, among bluish deep shadows.

From the San Francisco airport, I called Karoline, Michelle, and Cheri, as well as Mom and my sister Karen. I gave another call to my friend Hawks Abbott. With my spirits lighter, I boarded the long flight to Tokyo. This time I sat on the right side of the plane, and had a good view of the Golden Gate Bridge. I can never see that bridge without thinking of the time that I sailed under it at midnight upon my return from Japan and my Army honorable discharge fresh in hand, on the USS Fred Morris, in April, 1969.

As we flew Northward, we followed the California shoreline, where the foamy white breakers of the oceans danced under the rugged cliffs, sometimes the water a deep blue, other times it was greenish, at all times delightful. Off to the East Mt. Shasta rose from the clouds, then Mt. Hood made its majestic appearance. As the flight continued, I dozed, only to awake to find that my window had been closed. It is important that the lousy movies must be easily seen by all the passengers, forget that the window seats offer a more spectacular view. I can't stand to have them closed, so since the guy behind me was sleeping, and I was setting on an exit row with nobody immediately in

front of me, I half opened my two windows, and shoved a pillow at the window between my seat and the one behind me. Later, I went to the restroom at the back of the plane. Walking back to my seat, I could see that the only windows open on the entire plane were mine. I felt triumph in my rebellion.

From then on I stayed awake until I checked into the hotel in Beijing. One of the things that intrigued me was watching crystals of frost gradually expand on the forward window. Somewhere we were flying over clouds, with the sun shining from the left, and I could see the shadow of the 747 centered in a full circle rainbow. I have seen these circular rainbows in the past, but it is always a thrill for me to see them in flight. Clouds illuminated pastel colors of pinks and light blues. Four hours into the flight we flew over a shoreline impacted with ice build up, and a snow covered volcano. Contrasting with the warm colors of the desert several hours earlier, the solid-white ice floes had pancake shapes, kind of like ice paddies, then clear ice leads on the floes had long parallel paths of just grayish-blue water which gradually emerged into pieces of gigantic jigsaw puzzle - I could imagine looking down on earth from space and seeing the continents drift apart and form newer, bigger ones. Seeing the floes made me wonder how Sir Shackleton's men had lived on an ice floe for six months in 1916 in Antarctica. As we flew on, the ice started breaking up more, and funny shapes could be seen, such as a seal body with the head of a bird, or a turtle with a pig's snout, or a dinosaur head on the body of a shark. As we flew on, the water cleared of ice, but then the clouds started to build up, and soon we were flying into such thick clouds or fog that only the wings of the plane could be seen.



Ice floe (looks like a bird) and volcano as seen from the plane, en route to Japan

So I listened to the music on the headsets. I even stopped on the Mozart channel for a while, which for me, is like putting silver tack on a mule. Then I listened to light classics, and found one of my favorite pieces of classical music - The Overture of the Lone Ranger. But that even disturbed me a little, because I once had heard the Lone Ranger really did not use silver bullets, but only plastic ones that looked like silver on black and white TV. If you can't trust

the Lone Ranger, who can you trust, Tonto? See what Indians, Kemo Sabe? (On the way back, I was back to normal, listening to the music of Kris Kristofferson.)

Since the exit row is next to the flight crew station, every now and then I chatted with one of the flight attendants. She asked me where I was headed, and I told her Mongolia, for New Year's Eve. Just before the flight ended, she came up to me and gave me a bottle of champagne, telling me to enjoy it on New Year's Eve. I think she felt sorry for me that my New Year's would be celebrated in Western Mongolia, out in the middle of nowhere. What she didn't understand is that I chose to be a remote, isolated region of the Earth, instead of someplace where many people would be gathering, such as Sydney, Australia.

Along the way we crossed the International Dateline. We finally landed at Tokyo, about 1 PM on Sunday, which was about 11 PM on Saturday back in Houston. After a three or four hour wait in Tokyo's Narita Airport, we boarded the three-hour flight to Beijing. Clearing Chinese customs was no problem. I did tell the man I had some food with me, but he just waved me onward. I found a machine to exchange money; it gave me 825 Yuan for a \$100.00 bill. I was tired, as 24 hours had passed since I left home. Airport information told me to see a uniformed man about a ride to the Holiday Inn Lido, and he told me I could wait an hour and take the bus for 20 Yuan, or take a taxi for 50 Yuan. I was exhausted, and didn't want to wait. The taxi driver wanted to charge me 100 Yuan. I had to pay 15 Yuan for a toll, and then when I arrived at the hotel, I gave him 50 Yuan. He tried to tell me that the fare was 100 Yuan, but the meter showed 28 Yuan, and when I pointed that out to him he just shrugged it off, since he knew that I knew he was trying to overcharge me.

Most of the time when I travel overseas I try and not stay at American Hotel chains, but I knew I would be tired, and figured that I didn't want a hassle with some unknown level of cleanliness in a Chinese hotel. Besides, I figured that I would have a chance in Mongolia to experience local culture.

Monday, December 27th

My flight for Mongolia didn't leave until 2 PM. I could not just sit at the hotel waiting for that to happen, so I caught the Holiday Inn bus to Tiananmen Square, and started walking by myself on a side street. An old man driving a bicycle-powered rickshaw offered to drive me around. I thought we were going to the Forbidden City, since we were near the entrance, but he drove me around it. Occasionally, we stopped for photographs. One of the interesting sights was seeing traveling barbers, just giving haircuts on street corners. We went around the outside of the walls of the Forbidden City. Then he wanted to take me other places, pointing them out on a map, but they were all away from the Forbidden City, so I finally made him understand that I wanted to go inside. So all of a

sudden he made a turn into a narrow alleyway, and I admit I experienced a little fear. I guess he was just trying to clear traffic, because he soon was on a main street again. The smell of fried meat made me want to stop and eat, but I couldn't quite communicate this to him. He took me back near the entrance of the Forbidden City, and I gave him 100 Yuan. He wanted more, but again, knew that he was receiving more than the going rate of about 50 Yuan, so he didn't argue.

While I snapped a couple of photos of the painting of Chairman Mao at the entrance of the Forbidden City, another man came up to me and asked in very good English if I would like a tour. Most any other time I would have gone on my own, but I only had about an hour, so I told him this, and he said for 125 Yuan he would give me a quick tour. I said that was too much, so he dropped the price to 100 Yuan. This is about the equivalent of \$12.50, but I decided to go with it. He walked me through the courtyards of many temples, but we couldn't go inside any. He showed me that concrete tiles were on the courtyards, but told me that at one time before the Culture Revolution, these tiles had been beautiful blue ceramic mosaics. I think he was trying to draw me into political discussions. He normally worked as an engineer designing lathes. But he was knowledgeable, and friendly.

The Forbidden City actually consists of three distinct areas that cover several kilometers. Just before we entered a taxi to go to the second area, he told me to stay away from the rickshaw drivers, because they belonged to the Chinese Mafia. We went to the second area, which overlooked the first area (located inside a wall) and the third area. The guide showed me where one of the famous temples stands, and off at a distance, just in front of another temple, was the awful Golden Arches. It is one thing to take McDonalds to a foreign country. It is very bad taste to place one in front of a famous temple or cathedral, such as the one in Köln, Germany, that took 600 years to build. He told me how the ancient Chinese had dug a canal forty kilometers long for the Emperor's Summer Palace, and had used the dirt to build the hill where we were standing. Shortly after that, it was time for me to go back to the hotel, so I could then go to the airport. I cheated though. I didn't want to eat at McDonalds, but the Holiday Inn had a Texas steak house, and as a lunch special, offered a steak, baked potato, fresh salad, and corn-on-the-cob. I couldn't resist. I finished this great meal, and took another taxi to the airport. Once the Mongolian Miat Airlines flight was called to Ulaan Baatar, we were bussed around all the 747's to an old Boeing 727 sitting about as far away from the terminal as one could be and still be on the airport property. It was interesting at the perimeter of the airport. About every one hundred feet there was a sign giving Latitude and Longitude. The Latitude stayed very constant at 40.05 degrees North, but it was almost like looking at a GPS receiver seeing the Longitude change as we drove to the plane.



Temple Roof Carvings in the Forbidden City

We loaded from the back of the plane, in the drop down stairwell of the tail section, amid sort of a controlled chaos. I had a window seat on the right side of the plane. Sky Land, the in flight magazine of Miat Airlines had an interesting article on the Gers, the round nomadic tents that the Mongolians use, and other stories that were written in both English and Mongolian, which uses the Russian Cyrillic type of characters. I found pleasure reading the magazine and looking at the photographs, but some of the stories were rather funny in their lack of good journalism. For example, in the story of “Three Fatal Hills”, one paragraph read:

“Smith master’s son Junden was living in the XIX century. His father was very tall and lived near Khalkh river region and had around twenty goats mainly did blacksmith’s work.” Another example from the same story read: “In this province there was lived a poor family’s very pretty daughter Sirijma who loved him and Junden also visited this family regularly.” Oh well, my attempts to write Mongolian would be much worse!

Snow and ice covered the rolling hills between Beijing and Ulaan Baatar (commonly called “U. B.”). I admit that the thought of spending five or six days in these conditions, with temperatures down to -30 F. made me ask myself why didn’t I pick someplace warm to spend New Year’s Eve. We landed near sunset, and taxied past several Russian or Chinese AN-2 Colts, a single prop aircraft with a bi-wing configuration that holds 12 passengers. Immediately, I started trying to figure out how I could finagle a ride on one of these planes, but it didn’t happen this trip, although it wasn’t because lack of effort. Maybe on the next trip.

We cleared Mongolian Customs easily, but my visa was only good for 10 days, even though it should have been issued for 30 days. Boojum Expeditions had written a letter to the officials to extend it, but eventually the people at the airport said, "No problem, don't worry about it." One of the most delightful people I have ever met, Ariunbolor, who goes by the nickname "BoBo", met me after I cleared Customs. She is a Mongolian lady who works for Boojum Expeditions in their office in UB. We waited a few minutes for Diane Louie, Sheryl Shapiro, and Moshe Liron to come out with their baggage. Then we all walked outside, where BoBo had a van and driver waiting to drive us into the city. It was dark by this time, and cold. The fifth member of our tour group, Michael Awanian, was waiting for us at dinner at the Bayangol Hotel. This is one of the better hotels in UB.

After checking into our rooms, we all met for dinner, and ate a decent meal of Mongolian bar-b-que, which was quite tasty. I think it was beef, but not sure. It may have been lamb. Sheryl and Moshe had each been on a previous trip riding horses in Mongolia with Boojum, but at different times. Sheryl works as a technical editor in an environmental office in Boulder, Colorado, and has previously travelled to Pakistan, Kenya, China, and several other countries. She went to school in my home state of Wyoming for a degree in journalism. Moshe emigrated from Israel in 1972, and is now an owner of a successful Internet software company in Palo Alto, California. He previously worked for Bell Labs for 12 years, has a Ph.D., and 6 patents under his belt. Diane was born in Kenya, has a Canadian passport, was raised in New York City, and now lives in Los Angeles, where she is principal at a high school that is set up to help addicted kids and their mothers. She also writes and produces music for some television productions. Michael works in the San Francisco area as a patent attorney. All of us have travelled a fair amount. BoBo's husband is currently in the United States learning English, and also works as a guide. They have a six-year old daughter. BoBo speaks excellent English, is very efficient in handling logistics, and is really a fun person to be around. I have a great deal of respect for her.

December 28, 1999

Wow! Six pages, and I haven't even started writing about all the fun stuff! Sheryl, Diane, and I had breakfast - I told them I had wintered in Antarctica, and that someday I had hopes of driving my truck around the world, only taking a boat when it necessary to cross bodies of water deeper than twelve inches and wider than twelve feet. (I just added the dimensions!) Moshe and I shared a room, but for some reason he didn't join us at breakfast. So after eating, we all went back to our rooms to gather our gear, and then met in the lobby. I knew my sleeping bag wasn't designed for extreme cold temperatures, and being the cheapskate that I am, didn't want to spend the money for a good sleeping bag that I only expected to use for a few days (at least on this trip). So I took the

comforter off the bed and hauled it downstairs to the lobby. BoBo was there to meet us, and asked the desk clerk if I could borrow it for a few days. Since we were coming back to the same hotel in a week, the clerk agreed. That was one of the best decisions I made.

Cold is one of those things that is easier to talk about at 70 degrees F., than to experience at -30 to -35 degrees F. The temperature this morning was much colder than the previous night, and I once again wondered why I chose Mongolia in the winter to celebrate the change of Millenniums. Our baggage exceeded the allowed weight, which caused us a delay in receiving boarding passes. I found out later our excess weight cost Boojum \$56, which should have been spread out among the group, depending upon the weight each individual had. I had one bag, plus the comforter. I may have exceeded the weight by 5 - 7 pounds, but some members had three heavy bags. All of it was X-rayed, then handed back to us. When we boarded the plane, everyone squeezed together at the door, where some guy stood calling out sequences to embark. It seemed quite unorganized, but we all managed to find a seat. I chose a window, next to the landing gear, near the front.



Miat Airlines AN-24, which is a Russian-built plane.

Ice and snow still covered most of the runway, and it seemed to me that the pilot taxied too fast for comfort. We had arrived at the airport when it was still dark, but by the time we took off, the sun bathed the nearby mountains in that special pink glow that it alone is capable of making. Our turboprop twin engine Russian-built AN-24 aircraft lifted off normally, and I watched the landing gear retract. The exterior of the plane looked much more streamlined than the Spartan interior. We were offered tea after take off, and a Hershey candy bar and a chocolate-covered cookie that tasted better than the Hershey bar. There were no tray tables, the seats reclined every which direction, and clearly, this aircraft did not fly under the FAA regulations. However, that did not bother me. This plane was built to be rugged; the C-130's that I fly to Antarctica aren't much better on the inside. The engines sounded good and the pilots obviously were experienced.

As we flew westward, the snow-covered ground gave me more doubts as to the wisdom of my choice. When one goes to Antarctica, he or she is issued very cold weather gear. Except for long johns, woolen socks, and boots that I had used in Antarctica, all my cold weather gear was new, and untested. The parka was rated for -30 degrees F., and I was cold that morning. But one doesn't grow tall in Wyoming (notice, as in previous statements, nothing was said about growing up) and spend eighteen months in Antarctica without

learning something about dressing for the cold, and the idea of using layers. I thought I would be able to handle the cold, but still, I wondered.

About an hour-and-a-half into the flight, we landed at Mörön (I think) for fuel. The rest rooms were outside toilets, which didn't surprise me much. What did surprise me was the interior: Two six-foot long snow-covered boards about a foot apart, over a deep trench. In other words, if you sit, you squat, and you better hang onto the wall and be sure of your footing. At least in Turkey they have pads for your feet! Glad I didn't have to go that badly. The interior of the terminal was much better. There was a small stand selling cigarettes and candy, and I bought some large European bars of chocolate for about forty cents. To go inside, one had to walk by some men selling frozen fish, ranging from about a foot long to three feet long. Hand painted murals depicting some typical Mongolian activities colorfully decorated the terminal walls. Outside, an Andrews Corporation (USA) satellite dish stood next to an array of solar panels.

As we flew towards Ulgii on the second half of the flight, the snow began to disappear, revealing a dry, rugged, sandy area that looked like the American Southwest. As we exited the plane in Ulgii near noon, a strong cold wind reminded me of Casper. Even with the wind, though, it was not as cold as UB had been a few hours earlier. One sight that caught all of our attention was the local taxi service. A motorcycle had a sign printed in English that said, "TAXI". Just as we left in our van, two boys hopped on behind the driver, and then the three of them took off on their merry way.

A person I took an instant liking to is Canat Cheryazdaa, the man who met us. Canat grew up in UB, and had lived in Ulgii for the past four years. He is the person who had made all the arrangements with the Eagle Hunter, and served as our guide, driver, and Kazakh interpreter. The Kazakhs have a different language than Russian or Mongolian. Our luggage had been placed on a cargo plane, which didn't arrive until about 5 PM. Canat owns a Russian-made van, similar to a Volkswagen van. He drove us to his home where we met his mother, son, daughter, and wife, Igul (pronounced Ika). Igul prepared lunch for us, which consisted of homemade bread (which later we saw came from an electric bread maker), cheese, rice, and a lamb patty (I think) made like a hamburger patty. She spread a cloth on the floor, used a very ornate hot water pitcher to make tea by pouring it over a strainer into a cup, and made us all feel very welcome.

All the homes that I saw in this town of about 5200 people were made of wood and mud, much like adobe. There were a couple of cows in Canat's yard. He has electricity, a TV that picks up Russian channels, and a Packard Bell computer that was not connected. Photographs of his family adorned the walls, as did the pelt of a fox, and a photo of his father with a bunch of Mongolian service medals. Another surprise was the decorated Christmas tree, even though I think he is Moslem. The outside of his home looked very barren, but

the inside was spotless, quite modern (with the exception that they did have an outdoor toilet, of the same style as seen in Mörön, but much smaller and cleaner.) I felt very comfortable in Canat's house. His 73-year old mother has a classic beauty about her that shows a life of physical hardship and an inner peace. I would have liked to been able to spend some time with her and hear her stories, but she stayed mostly near the kitchen area, next to a wood-burning stove.

While we were at Canat's house, both Sheryl and Diane asked about my family. I told them that Karoline and I had been married for 27_ years, and about Michelle's job as a sports trainer in a high school and Cheri's brand new engagement. Karoline doesn't travel to some of the places I go, nor would she want to stay in some of the strange and/or different dwellings that have often been my shelter from the elements. She doesn't have to stay at some place fancy, but she would rather sleep on a bed than on a floor in a stranger's house. Often, in my travels around the world, I have met and talked with other women. The one thing I tell people with great pride and honesty is that I have always been faithful to her. Even though most of the time we are completely different in our likes and dislikes, our marriage vows were taken seriously and in God's Presence. So while I chat and joke with other women, sometimes send them email and/or postcards, Karoline is still my wife, whom I love very much, and I have no desire to hurt her nor ruin our marriage by doing something stupid like having an affair.

Had our luggage arrived earlier, we would have departed to the Eagle Hunter's place that afternoon. Since it didn't, Canat and BoBo left for a while to make arrangements for us to stay at a local hotel. After we ate, Canat drove us a place he called the "Black Market". This place is a major trading area for the local people; goods from all over, but more prone to be Russian, can be bought and/or traded. Moshe wanted a fur hat, since the one BoBo had had made did not fit him. We spent about a half hour there. Hats, boots, toothpaste, sheepskins, rice, etc. could be bought. This place was more crowded than a shopping mall on Christmas Eve. The strangest sight was the "bank". I have a photo of it, which was either a Mercedes or a Volvo, but did not witness the actual currency exchanges. I believe that Diane traded American dollars for Mongolian Tögrög (Tugriks); She said it was like dealing with characters from the Mafia. Canat talked to someone in front, the tinted window rolled down in back, a hand extended to take her dollars, the window was rolled back up, a few minutes later the window rolled down again, and she was presented the Tugriks. Apparently, the "bank" had thousands of dollars in multi-currencies.

After visiting the "Black Market", we drove to the hotel. We had to wait until our rooms were ready. This time, Moshe, Michael, and I shared the room. Each bed was narrower than the size of a standard single bed in the States. The toilet was Western style, but did not flush. I found another one down the hall that worked but didn't have anything to sit upon except the porcelain. I

discovered a wooden seat lying nearby. So, with good old American ingenuity, I attached the seat, glad to have this convenience, not realizing how much I would later appreciate it in the next few days.



Upper: Hotel in Ulgii

Right: Matt wearing silver rabbit hat and a deel, the traditional Mongolian outer garment



A couple of hours later Canat picked us all up at the hotel and drove us back to his house for dinner. Everybody laughed at me when I tried on the teal deel (pronounced “dell”) that is a fancy version of the deel’s the Mongolians wear as a traditional garment for both men and women. I have a Polaroid photograph of me standing next to the fox pelt, wearing the deel, with an orange scarf tied as a belt, and my new fur-lined hat made of rabbit fur. Somehow, I don’t think anyone would mistake me for a Mongolian, nor a Kazakh. Before I left the States, I bought the Polaroid camera, to use as an icebreaker. This was one of the best things I did. I took eight shots of Canat’s family. The only other one I kept besides the one of me was of Canat’s mother. After a wonderful evening, Canat drove us all back to the hotel about 9 or 10 PM.

December 29, 1999

We all met in the lobby about 8 AM, but had to wait for an hour before Canat arrived. It was still dark outside. Diane stood outside in the middle of the street that had no streetlights, looking at the stars. I joined her, we chatted how brightly Orion and the Big Dipper graced us with their presence, shared a chocolate bar, and then I walked around the monument in the park nearby. Men walking to work glanced at us with curiosity. Somebody asked what the monument said, so I said that each side had an engraved carving saying in consecutive order, “Welcome, Diane”; “Welcome, Moshe”; “Welcome, Diane and Michael”; and “Welcome, Matt“. Even in Mongolia, the Welcome Matt is out! Then another sign read, “Enjoy your stay in Mongolia!” Of course, it was dark,

and I didn't use my flashlight to read the Cyrillic writing, so I kind of wonder if everyone really believed me, because it seemed that they were laughing at me. But then, it could have been they were all sharing my happiness to be there. I think this was the first time of many times that Diane asked, "Matt, do you know where we are?" And immediately, the quick response became, "WE ARE IN MONGOLIA!" Then it sort of became a game between us, because there were times I asked her the same thing, and always had the same reply.

Canat took us to his house for an excellent breakfast that Ika cooked for us. About 10:30 AM, we all loaded into the van, and headed East out of town, making a stop so Michael could be fitted for a Mongolian fur hat. I was riding in back, being bounced from side-to-side and up-and-side-and-up-and-down-and-side and then the gasoline fumes begin to do their evil things to my stomach. Well, I didn't quite leave my breakfast next to the horse carcass, the cold fresh air helped, and I did better riding in the front for the next few miles, until once again I decided rather quickly I could use more fresh air. The barren scenery of tan desert had its own stark beauty, which I concentrated on while walking for a mile or so while trying to convince my body that I really did like it. Canat drove the van ahead. Upon arriving, I jokingly told him that I didn't have any problems when I drove. So he asked me if I wanted to drive. Sure.

The clutch pedal on this Russian made van is about 12 inches or more off the floor, which was rather uncomfortable to use, but still beat sitting in back. The transmission wasn't synchronized, but I managed to drive on the rolling dirt road for about thirty minutes. Diane and Canat rode in front. She asked me how I knew where I was going, and I said, "Simple - just keep Russia on the left and China on the right!" She laughed, and then those words became a joke. I stopped to take off my coat, and then Moshe started driving. I must have not driven to badly, because Sheryl told me that I had done a good job.

A few minutes after Moshe started driving, the engine stalled. I think one tank of fuel had run dry, but I'm not sure. Canat took over the driving through this rugged and stark country, stopping every and now and then so we could take photographs of camels. Except for the tracks in the dirt road, we saw very few signs that mankind had ever even been in this land. Diane gave us a running narrative of American highway culture, such as, "The Texaco station over there looks like it might have gas", meaning the station in Tulsa, Oklahoma, or similar such statements. (This isn't an exact quote, but is close enough for this story.) She told Canat to watch out for the construction on the road, but forgot to tell him to steer away from the nails. With thirty seconds of passing through this "construction zone", Canat stopped driving and said we had a flat on the back left tire. But the spare was also flat.

I learned something from him then. The Russian-made tires had tubes in them; to break the tire away from the rim on the flat spare (which apparently had a better tube than the tire which had just gone flat), Canat drove the left

front tire of his van over and over on the spare. Then the jack was jammed. Canat hammered-and-banged on the jack, while Diane and I proceeded to loosen the lug nuts. After the jack started working, I removed the tire on the van, Canat exchanged the tubes, and Moshe and Diane shared efforts of making the handle go up and down on the hand pump. I don't remember exactly what happened next, but all of a sudden the air just swished out of the tube. Diane's air is now somewhere in the Western Mongolian desert. It just disappeared, and no one ever saw it again! (Diane is a funny person to have as a travel companion - we shared many laughs.) Canat managed to avoid any more construction sites on the way to the Eagle Hunter's place.

About a mile away from the Eagle Hunter's place, Canat stopped and suggested we walk, because the ground was very rough, as he knew we would be bounced all over the place. Sheryl suggested that I taste the natural salt that the camels and cattle lick, and then laughed at me when I did, saying I had just probably licked some dried up liquid that all animals are known to make. Oh, well, I survived!

As I walked up to this house made of mud, stones, rough lumber, I could see Canat talking to Aralbai (pronounced something that sounded like alibi). Aralbai is taller than most of the other Kazakhs I encountered. Canat introduced me to him. His piercing, but warm brown eyes sized me up. He put the cigarette that he was smoking into his mouth so he could give me a firm handshake. I pride myself on having a firm handshake, so I must have measured up a little to his standards. His eyes twinkled when he looked at my hat with the silver rabbit fur. That should have been a warning.

Near the corral sat a golden eagle on a pile of logs. A camel lying on its haunches chewed on hay. Beautiful children with rosy red cheeks surrounded us, shyly watching our every movement. We were honored guests. I have heard it said that nomadic people are the best people in the world to welcome a stranger into their midst. In the five days of our stay, not one thing could give a counter-argument. Families from miles around came to welcome these five Americans, all crowding inside this home made of mud, stones, and love. I don't know which was warmer: the heat from the wood-burning stove or the out-pouring of friendship from these wonderful people who had very few material possessions.

Aralbai and his wife Kazna have seven children, ranging from eight months to sixteen years. Of the seven, five are girls. The oldest daughter helps her mother with the baby and the household chores. Next in line is the eldest son, who is also learning to be an eagle hunter. He is 15. The next son is the third oldest, and is either 10 or 11. The younger girls range from about 4 to about 7 or 8, and then, of course, there is the 8-month old baby.



Aralbai and Kazna

It seemed to me to be an appropriate time to bring out the Polaroid camera during the introductions. In just about every trip I make, there is always some magical moment that is to be cherished. For this trip, this was that moment. I easily could have used all the Polaroid film, but I rationed two boxes for New Year's Eve. Seeing the gleam in the children's eyes as they looked at their photographs that had just popped out of the camera just a couple minutes earlier just made me happy. Even the adults wanted me to take their photographs.

Igul and the oldest daughter rolled out dough to make meat dumplings that were steamed and ready to eat about two hours later. Of all the meals we ate there, this was the best. Canat and BoBo asked us to go outside to take a familiarization ride on the camels and horses. So I rode this small but stout horse for a few minutes, wondering if I had made a mistake, because even though I was raised in Wyoming, I never have ridden horses very much. But I did OK. Then it was my turn to ride this nasty, spitting camel. I don't think she

wanted to be taken away from her meal. She just spit at me and everyone else, but I managed to stay out of her range. One of the boys held her while I climbed between her humps. I rode her about 200 yards, and afterwards was sure I didn't want to ride another one during the trip (although I did on two more occasions). To control the camel, one pulls on a rein, which is attached to a stick through its nose. I am sure a stick in my nose would be rather persuasive, even if I would rather eat dinner.



Sheryl jumped on the horses and camels much less intimidated than me. She would talk to them, and they acted as though they found her company much more pleasant than mine. I know Moshe also rode horses back in the States, but I don't remember if Diane and Michael did or did not.

Aralbai's camel

After everyone had his or her chance at riding, it was time to look at the eagle. Moshe asked me to use his camera and take a photo of him holding her. Aralbai gave Moshe a thick leather glove, placed the bird on Moshe's arm, and took off the eagle's hood. She was on a tether about five feet long. These eagles are trained to hunt for rabbit and fox. I knew that before I left. I even special ordered this silver hat lined with rabbit fur from New York before I left, to keep my head warm. DUMB me! I turned away from Moshe so I could take a good photograph. DUMB me! Guess I already said that. In less than ten feet, that tethered golden eagle gained enough momentum to completely knock me to the ground. It felt like I had been hit along side the head with a baseball bat. She didn't fly off with my hat, since it was next to me on the ground. I do not remember what happened to Moshe's camera during my self-nomination for the Darwin award. Her talons could have completely ripped my face apart, torn out my eyes. DUMB me! Canat previously had guided a National Geographic photographer to this area of Mongolia. The photographer had been at Aralbai's place a few months earlier for a day. On page 94 of the September, 1999 issue of National Geographic is a photo of an eagle's bloody talons. Canat told me that this was the same eagle that attacked me. So, if you are going to be attacked by an eagle, you might as well go first class and have the one that

appeared in National Geographic be the one that does the attacking. No second rate eagle for this kid. Several people witnessed this momentous event in my life, and they laughed at me. The things that one does in order to make people laugh! Tim Cash, a friend of mine in the States, told me I ought to have a shirt made that says, "The Eagle Has Landed - On My Head!"



Aralbai's Golden Eagle

After dinner, I went outside to where a group of 8 -10 men sat smoking. They sent for Canat to translate. We asked each other many questions. I was asked what I did, and told them that I worked on the space program. Aralbai asked my age, and I told him 53. Then I asked his age, and he said, "43". I laughed and said, "Oh, you're just a baby". Everyone laughed, but I was worried that once again my big mouth had said the wrong thing. The next day, I was introduced to Aralbai's father. He asked me my age, and after I told him, grinned at me, and said, "Baby!". Canat told me that these people have a good sense of humor.

That night, when it came time for bed, the five Americans, the three Mongolians with us, and Aralbai's family of nine all stayed in this one room house. The family had beds along the wall that were about two feet wide. The rest of us spread out our sleeping bags. I used the comforter that I had brought with me as my mattress on the wooden floor, and used my sleeping bag as a blanket. When the fire in the wood stove died, the cold snuck in like a thief to make for a long night. I would have been warmer in the sleeping bag, but hate the feeling of confinement. Besides, I would have had to wake up enough to have enough sense to zip up the bag. Like I said earlier, "Dumb me!"

December 30, 1999

By the time we started stirring, Kazna had the fire burning. We rolled up the sleeping bags as Igul prepared breakfast, consisting of bread and cheese. As a culture exchange, we introduced peanut butter and jelly to Aralbai's family. While tea or milk tea generally was the preferred drink, I did give into my indulgence of coffee, using the boiling water for my coffee bags that I had brought with me. Abalbai quickly poured out the cup of black coffee I made for him, and started drinking tea again.



Old smoker at Aralbai's house



About 10 AM we all met outside and started the process of mounting horses and camels. I felt like I was on a Dude Ranch, as one of Abalbai's sons always wanted to help me mount or dismount the animals. Actually, during the three times I rode the camel, I didn't mind. On this particular day I started off by wearing the deel, but after the first hour or so, decided that I was not cut out to wear a long coat. As we prepared for our excursion, one old man pulled out a long pipe from his boot and had a smoke.

Like I said earlier, horse riding is not one of those things I do very often. However, I felt more comfortable on these smaller Mongolian horses than I do on Western horses. My technique is not nearly as smooth as the Kazakhs. Aralbai mounted his horse so effortlessly and gracefully, with his eagle perched on his arm. I had traded my rabbit hat for another one that didn't appeal much to the eagle.



Matt, the world famous horse and camel rider, and eagle target! Camel photo by Diane Louie



Aralbai and his eagle (above), and his brother with his eagle (below)

Several Kazakhs, Canat, BoBo, and the five of us with Boojum Expeditions rode in a Southerly direction (I think) across the rolling paddocks to the White Stone warrior in the desert, which had been there before Ghennis Khan. We stopped there for photographs, and then proceeded to the base of a hill about a mile further. Two of the Kazakhs stayed with the horses; the rest of us hiked up the hill. Aralbai's brother also has an eagle. My favorite photo of the entire trip is the one on the cover page, with Aralbai holding his own eagle, with his brother's eagle near his feet.



Once the eagles had their blinders and tethers removed, they soared over to adjacent hills. We all chit-chatted and took photographs; I hadn't even noticed Aralbai leaving the hill. A few minutes later I saw him about walking back towards us from a distance of about 100 yards carrying a rabbit. I completely missed the eagle attacking the rabbit. I don't know if the eagle had killed the rabbit, or if she just attacked it, and Aralbai finished it off with

the ancient .22 rifle with the white weather worn stock that he always had slung over his back. While we waited for Aralbai, the eagles flew back to Aralbai's son and brother.

Shortly afterwards we descended the hill and climbed to the top of another one through a rocky ravine. We rested and took photographs while Aralbai's son retrieved the horses. By this time my day's allotment of film ran out, so Diane gave me a roll of black and white. No shots of this roll came out; I think it was due to the number of times I allowed my camera bag to be sent through airport X-ray machines. I should have had the security personnel personally examine my film. And I know better. Oh, well.

As we rode back towards the house, the eagles were allowed to fly. I don't know their training methods, but it seemed to me that all Aralbai had to do was stick out his gloved arm and his eagle would land on it. It may have been that the eagle liked the idea of every evening being brought into the house and given fresh meat (that looked like entrails).

Moshe wanted to sit on Aralbai's horse and have his photograph taken while holding the eagle. Well, if he could do it, so could I. Sheryl sent me a couple of slides of Matt Nelson, the Eagle Target, holding the same Eagle that coveted my silver rabbit hat the night before. There I was, just inches away from her open mouth. Although I wasn't wearing the same hat, I still felt uneasy. It didn't bother me at all that she wore her blinders.



Here I am on Aralbai's horse, with my old friend the silver rabbit hat stealer! Photo by Sheryl Shapiro

Canat asked me to ride with him, while everybody else headed back to the house. Igul, his wife, had grown up in this region. Her grandfather apparently had been a wealthy man, which cost him his life. He fell victim to Stalin's purges in 1938. Canat took me to a small graveyard where the man was buried. The different gravesites had a much different architecture than seen in Western graveyards. The photos I took were on the same roll that Diane had given me, so I don't have them. On the way back to the house, Canat told me that he had previously worked in a satellite data center in Moscow during the Cold War. He knew I worked with NASA, and had Wintered-over in Antarctica tracking satellites. We agreed that we are glad the Cold War days are behind us, for now we can be friends. That was about the extent of that conversation, because we both knew that there are some things neither one of us can ever talk about.



Canat (left) with a Kazakh

Our conversation drifted towards me flying in the Russian-built AN-2 bi-wing airplane once I traveled back to Ulaan Baatar. I think this is when the idea started brewing between Canat and me to expand that into a future Boojum Expeditions trip, where ten pilots would each have the chance to fly the AN-2 for approximately four hours all over Mongolia.

Later that evening, some of the Kazakh men tried to see what effects vodka would have on me, but I just pretended to drink from the soup bowl they kept handing me. Neither one of us could speak the other's language, except the universal language of laughter, and that was good enough for several rounds of the soup bowl passing from the vodka pourer to the drinker, back to the pourer (often the drinker), and on to another drinker (or drunker).

Either Sheryl or Diane had the idea for all of the Boojum group to learn a Mongolia song for us to sing on New Year's Eve. Sheryl copied the phonic sounds that Diane told her, with help from BoBo and Igul. Aralbai and Canat left for the nearest town, about 15 miles away (probably just had to leave all these tourists!). All the rest of the people who lived nearby were with us. One of the younger Kazakh men played the two-string dombro, and we had us a songfest. Now, as anyone who knows me can attest, I do not sing well at all. So I masqueraded singing while the others really make the music. The children's red cheeks glowed in the candlelight, old women laughed with us or at us, but they were happy, so it doesn't matter. Most of the songs were performed by the Kazakhs. By far, the best singer was a boy about eleven named Begu. I thought he was Aralbai's son, but I guess he is a nephew. That kid has the best singing voice that I ever have heard from a boy in his age group. Since there is

no electricity, the family is not contaminated by TV. So at night they sing. From the sounds that came out of that house, they sing often, and they sing well.

For a while, we played Charades. I acted like a man drinking vodka, becoming very drunk. In fact, I acted so well that when I fell over, the old woman sitting next to me absolutely cracked up, once she realized I wasn't hurt. Others acted out other scenes, which I have forgotten, but I acted out another scene of me being attacked by the eagle. But, I didn't do it well, so most of the people didn't catch on.



Inside Aralbai's home. On lower right photo, BoBo is on the left, Canat on the right

Then it became time for the Americans to sing. We started off with the song that we had practiced, much to the delight of the Kazakhs. After that, the songs that we kept coming up with usually originated from American TV. Then, while asking each of us what songs could we remember, Sheryl said, "Let's do 'Old MacDonald had a Farm'." BoBo translated, and we tailored the song to include camels and eagles. WOW! What a sensation. They all just loved it. That one song was a gift to these people that they treasured. After that, we were often asked to perform. On the last night we were there, Diane sat patiently teaching one of the Kazakhs the song as he played his dombro. She counted

the octaves on her fingers, which he understood, and then asked, “Do, Rae, Me?” The adults wanted to hear that song as much, in not more, than the children. By the time we left, the Kazakhs had the song memorized in their own language!



Ramazal and BoBo

New Year's Eve, 1999

Our day started much like the previous one. We gradually rolled out of our sleeping bags, packed them up, ate breakfast, and headed for the hills. But there was one bit of difference for me: In this land of no electricity, no running water except for the river, and no plumbing, there are still certain things one must do that are unavoidable. I had expected to find an outhouse; I didn't expect the entire outdoors! So I ambled off into the bushes to where I could not see the house, and found a spot away from the long thorns of the bushes. That might have been a big OUCH! There is something rather invigorating of having parts of your body exposed to temperatures hovering around zero that are not ever exposed outdoors. As the eddies of cold wind swirled their way through that narrow canyon we are all born with, I quickly realized that while I might be in the land where National Geographic photographers roam, I did not need to linger long enough to read a story from that great magazine!

I had to laugh when I went back into the house just prior to riding out. The kids had unrolled our sleeping bags and were playing on them. They sure had a guilty look on their faces when I went inside.

Our ride on this day was longer and a little more difficult. Diane chose to ride a camel. Near the river some of us split up. The ones riding near the river had the task of rousting out the foxes or rabbits, and this group consisted of Diane, Sheryl, and Moshe, plus a couple of Kazakhs. Canat and I were riding

together, following Michel and Aralbai, his son and brother. At one point Michel's horse came running towards Canat and me, without Michel. Canat had me hold his horse, and then he managed to grab the reins of Michel's horse. Michel was in the process of dismounting, when he spooked the horse. The horse actually kicked him in the chest, but he said he wasn't really hurt, just had his wind knocked out. He was lucky, because he just managed to free his foot from the saddle. Otherwise, he may have been dragged.



Upper: Aralbai's son and eagle
Bottom: Caravan with a Kazakh, Sheryl, Moshe and BoBo,
and Diane on the camel

Upper: Aralbai's eagle in flight
Bottom: Aralbai's brother and eagle

Eventually, both groups met. One of the Kazakhs that had gone with Aralbai showed us a fox head. He placed it inside of his coat, and then he put a

cigarette into the fox's mouth. I took a photo, but once again the airport X-ray machines made the image disappear from the negative.

If I remember correctly, Moshe fell from his horse twice this day, but wasn't hurt, either. I had my doubts of my ability to stay on when the horse wanted to gallop on the way back to the house. I made it safely there, but as I dismounted, the saddle rolled, and I fell a short distance. I am not much of a horseman. I certainly would have been had I been raised with the Kazakhs. They are masters. Riding in Western Mongolia in this day and age is what riding in the Western United States must have been like one hundred years ago. We rode for miles without crossing any barbed wire fences. Some day, some bureaucrat will decide that the land needs to be fenced, and people like Aralbai will lose some of their freedom to ride anywhere they want.

But this was not the day to worry about that. This was New Year's Eve for the new Millennium (even if officially it doesn't happen for another year). We didn't worry about that, either. I purposely chose to be in Mongolia for this day, as opposed to staying in Bacliff, Texas and watching the ball drop at Times Square on TV, or going to Sydney, where there would be many more people than I wanted to be around. I wanted to be some place remote, without too many people, but still be able to welcome the New Millennium. I had my wish.

The rest of the local Kazakhs wanted to celebrate New Years with us, since we were the guests of honor. Aralbai's home was packed. The gathering started about 4 PM, as did the vodka drinking. I became good at pretending to drink it. We had cheese, bread, peanuts, cookies, etc. I guess we ate dinner that night, but I don't remember what we ate, or if I just snacked my way through the evening. Somebody stirred packets of hot chocolate into water for the children. I don't think they had ever had it before. Their eyes shined as they each drank from the same bowl, and they made sure that they shared with the other children. (During our entire five day stay, I only witnessed one minor "It's mine" "No, it's mine" argument. All of the children were very well behaved.)

As the evening progressed, so did the singing. The young boy entertained us again with his beautiful singing voice; Old MacDonald's Kazakh's Farm had everyone laughing. Sheryl's idea for that song will always be remembered. She gave us all another gift, that of being able to do a throaty "Cockle-doodle-doo" rooster imitation. Everybody was in stitches. Moshe is a big man with a big heart. He adored the children, and they adored him. Diane even played the dombro very well, even though I think it was her first time to play it. The children were given balloons, and I dug out the Polaroid camera.

BoBo had brought a surprise for the five of us Americans. We were each given one of the china bowls for eating/drinking, a small doll-like figure about 3 inches high of a Mongolia child, and one of the round hats that men wear

inside the houses. My hat is dark green with gold trim. I am wearing it in the photo of me cutting up the food.

Around 9 PM, Aralbai gave us all a toast of vodka. I couldn't fake it this time, because instead of pouring it into a bowl, he filled a shot glass, and gave it to me. For the first time in my life, I tasted vodka. But he said he would only ask us to take one drink, and I figured I could handle one shot. Every one knew that I had been faking it previously when I started coughing and sputtering. Then I gave Aralbai a special toast, which either BoBo or Canat translated. Prior to leaving Houston I bought some space shuttle mission decals, a couple of patches from the Apollo 11 moon mission, and a Swiss Army knife for myself, since I had just lost the Buck knife that I had carried for twenty-nine years. This is roughly what I said: "I would like to give a toast to Aralbai, a man that I respect very much. Thirty years ago, Americans first walked on the moon. The Apollo 11 crew carried this patch for their mission, upon which is our national bird, the American eagle flying over the surface of the moon. In its claws is an olive branch, a symbol of peace. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin left a plaque on the moon that said, 'We came in peace for all mankind.'" I gave him the patch, and the Swiss Army knife. He said simply, "Arokman", which means thank you. He didn't say anything more, but Sheryl and Diane said that they saw him looking carefully at the patch, and the next morning I saw him closely examining the blades of the knife. Even though I gave some of the shuttle mission decals away when I left, I am glad that I did not give anyone else the other Apollo 11 patch, because it would have cheapened my gift to Aralbai.



New Year's Eve Bonfire

After that, we all went outside to have a bonfire. Away from the lights of the fire, the stars in the Milky Way brightly lit up the dark sky. Since there are no streetlights, light pollution is almost non-existent. It was cold that night. The fire warmed our bodies, and warmed our hearts. Most everyone danced, including myself, which is not one of those things I normally do. Once, I asked one of the old women to dance with me, but she laughingly said no. Then, I asked another lady about age 40 to dance, and she accepted. So we spun once around the bonfire, and that was it. After the fire burned out, we all went inside the house, and just waited for midnight to come. By that time the mood was subdued, because everyone seemed tired, so there wasn't much hooting and hollering. Shortly afterwards, everyone left and we all rolled out the sleeping bags again.

I had been cold the previous night, so I used the deel for an extra blanket, which made for better sleeping. Happy New Year, Happy Millennium, and Happy 2000! At that moment in time, none of us seemed to worry too much about the affects of Y2K. We were all content to be with this warm group of people whose heritage and simple lifestyle had probably not altered much from the last Millennium change to the beginning of the new one.

New Year's Day, 2000

Traditionally, at noon on New Year's Day the Kazakhs play games on horses at the White Stone. One of the games is having a woman chasing a man while both are riding horses. If she catches him, she is allowed to whip him, but it's all in fun, and after watching a demonstration, I don't think the man was hurt too badly, based upon his broad grin. We all had wandered to the stone, some riding and some walking. The woman riding the horse was the same one whom I had danced with the previous night. When she saw me, she grabbed my hand and spun me around, then ran off chasing that other man. The heart is so fickle!



White Stone, which has been in the desert before Ghennis Khan

Our time there was cut short after Diane fell from her horse, hitting her head. She and Canat had ridden out to the starting point so she could chase him. Fortunately, she didn't suffer a concussion, but she did have a little short-term memory loss. We all dispersed back to the house, as Moshe and Sheryl walked with Diane. She kept saying she was OK, but she sure shook up all of us. Like the trooper she is, the next day she was back on a horse.

Sheryl and I rode together out to the stone. She told me that she is a very good photographer, which is true statement. Since our return, she has sent me a number of her photographs, which are very beautiful and very powerful. I shoot good landscapes, while she seems to concentrate on people. I am really impressed by the emotions and expressions she captures.

NOTE: You may want to skip the next page if you have a weak stomach.

Nothing up to this point had prepared me for what was to happen between eight and ten times between that afternoon and the next evening. At mealtime when we sat down on the floor around the small table, Kazna brought a huge aluminum bowl (perhaps two feet wide) filled with a sheep's head, a goat's head, and horsemeat. Since I was the eldest of the honored guests, it became my duty to carve the meat out away from the skull of these animals, cut it up, and pass small portions around for everyone to eat. It is amazing to me how much meat is actually left on a boiled skull. Of course, I had also had to eat this meat, but I became adept at picking pieces without too much fat. Once, I had some horsemeat that really tasted good. The worst tasting food was that of a sausage made from horse intestine, and sheep's brain, which left a fatty aftertaste. I think Diane ate a sheep's eyeball, but I didn't give it to her. After I cut up on a head for a while, I was told to give it to the Kazakh women. They would clean the meat off better than me. In one house I had to cut off the ear of a goat and give it to a child. Usually, there would be a Kazakh man on the other side of the bowl cutting and handing out the meat along with me. In addition to the meat, there was bread, cheese, and in some cases, kurd soup, which tasted sour. Just as it is traditional in the United States to eat turkey on Thanksgiving Day, a New Year's Day feast for the Kazakhs consists of the above-mentioned food.



Here I am cutting up dinner; Moshe is in the background.

While going into a house the next day, none of the Americans wanted to eat anymore of this honored guest food, so we ignored the food. After a few minutes, we were asked why didn't we eat. Realizing we would be insulting the family if we didn't, I took my designated cutter position and started handing out more chunks. The tension went out of the room. That same night, after thinking we were all through with this honored food, another one of Aralbai's brother invited us into his home, because he had been gone while we ate at the other houses. Aralbai said we were all tired, but once again, it would have hurt his brother's feelings had we not gone, so we all agreed to go. At this house I was given more vodka, which I actually drank about a half cup. Sheryl doesn't drink, and told me to be careful, since I had taken enough for the group. Later, we

were talking about these meals, and good ole Diane said she had learned from her travels that when you are the honored guest, you just can't make a face, but just have to "Smile and slurp". Aralbai once made the comment that Americans eat like goats, while the Kazakhs eat like wolves.

For me, being invited into the homes of these people to eat with them was in itself an honor. They were all very gracious and friendly. Although the homes were primitive, they were also spotless on the inside. Persian rugs adorned the walls. Suitcases were stacked near a wall in each house, indicative of their nomadic life in the summer time. Canat often translated my words and the Kazakh men. One was my age, and had served in the Mongolia army in 1965, which was the same time that I was in the army. These people live a simple but proud lifestyle, and it is because of being invited in to share a meal of sheep and goat heads that I was able to appreciate their culture, and
t h e i r h u m a n i t y .



There is no such thing as an old folks' home in Western Mongolia (Probably not in Eastern Mongolia, either). The old men and women are very much part of the family, just as the babies are. The old woman in the upper left is Aralbai's mother, and she is shown again with his father in the lower right. I don't know who the woman in the upper right is.

This is a younger woman, but looks rather old, probably due to her harsh life style.



Upper: Inside Aralbai's brother's home
 Left: Inside one of the homes.
 Right: Aralbai's oldest and youngest daughters



Aralbai's oldest daughter had dropped out of school to help with the younger children. Our activity on New Year's Day slackened, as we just relaxed in Aralbai's home later that afternoon. It gave me a chance to talk with Aralbai's father, a retired eagle hunter himself. He asked about my job, and about America. We conversed for about an hour.

January 2, 2000

On this day I rode a camel as we visited the other homes. Sitting between the two humps, my legs were warm against her furry hair. Camels are generally considered as a desert animal, so it seemed strange to be riding one while crossing the ice on the river, en route to another home. Upon arrival, we visited a blacksmith making a horseshoe inside a ger, one of the round tents that collapse easily and are used during the summer nomadic journeys.

This was a day for games. As mentioned before, the Kazakhs are excellent horsemen. They demonstrated their skill by trying to pull each other off horses, riding with one foot out of the stirrups. Then the kids grabbed a horse dropping to play hockey on the frozen river. Nobody had any skates, but that didn't matter, anyway. Then there was a tug-of-war on the ice, some jump roping (I even participated, and managed to clear the rope three times, probably three times longer than any other time in my life!). For another game, two teams were formed, with the objective of everyone holding hands while facing the other team. Someone would run towards the other team, and if he or she succeeded in breaking the opposing team's line, a captive would be taken

back to the other side. If the line wasn't broken, the person had to stay on the other side.



Blacksmith making horseshoe

Perhaps our most interesting host was Ramazal, who met us outside his home near the blacksmith's ger, proudly wearing medals from forty years of Mongolian public service. A lively old man, he entertained us by singing songs and playing tunes on his dombro as he sat next to his neighbor Kudtiayn. He even danced what looked like an Irish jig for us. The sad part is that while he performed, his wife asked Diane if she had any medicine, because he hadn't eaten for twenty days, and was probably dying of a liver disease. His face didn't seem yellow, so I don't know if he had Hepatitis or not.

We had a farewell party that night. One of the homes near Aralbai had an electric generator, which was brought over and used to power one light bulb outside. The idea was to have a dance outside in the freezing temperatures, but the portable tape player wouldn't drive the tapes Canat supplied from his van. We tried different methods of making it work, including wrapping chemical hand warmers around it, to no avail. I was just as glad that it didn't work, because by this time I was coming down with one heck of a cold that turned into pneumonia by the time I arrived home. I think Moshe had the same thing, because neither of us felt very well, and both of us had the same symptoms.

January 3, 2000

One last night on the wooden floor, and then it was time to pack up and leave. By this time I think the novelty of Americans was wearing thin, and the Kazakhs were probably glad to see us leave. Aralbai's children helped us pack. By now, the kids made more eye contact with us, smiled more, and it wasn't just



Upper: Ramazal and family
Right: Ramazal and his medals for forty years of
Mongolian service
Bottom: Kudtiayn and Ramazal



because of the token gifts we gave them. They could see as other human beings that fell off horses, had colds, made mistakes, and could laugh with them. At some point during our stay, Diane had imitated the sounds of sleeping

in a one-room house with seventeen people: Waa, Waa (baby on left side), Snore, Snore (right side old guys - maybe she meant me), Waa, Snore, Waa, Snore, Snore!

She really made a positive impression with everyone. Each morning she awoke earlier than the rest of us, helped Kazna chop wood, start the fire, and hauled water from the river (after breaking a hole in the ice) in five gallon buckets. The children clung to her side; sometimes she helped with the baby. I think it was on New Year's Eve that Aralbai gave her a fox pelt. We teased her and called her Aralbai's second wife, which she took in good stride.



Upper Left: Aralbai's home
 Lower Left: Aralbai's parents home, with ger in background
 Upper Right: Begu's Family
 Bottom Right: Mountains, as seen from Aralbai's home

Once more the cameras clicked as group photographs were taken. The van was packed, which Canat drove to the White Stone. The rest of us rode camels and horses one last time. The mountains glistened in the distance. This time I rode the camel again. Goodbyes were said, and I left with the memories of a very fine group of people. I feel that if I make it back there again I will be genuinely welcome.



Aralbai and Kazna's family



Boojum Group with Aralbai's family

BoBo is upper row, left; don't know other names of other people

Bottom Row (L-R): Igul, Sheryl, Moshe, Michel, Aralbai, his daughter, Matt, Diane

Two of Aralbai's young daughters rode with us to the town, which was about 15 miles away. They had school to attend. This was Monday; they would

be there until Friday, when Aralbai would go by horseback to pick them up. It was very cold and windy when we opened the van to drop them off at the schoolhouse. My silver rabbit hat flew away, but I was able to retrieve it just before a small goat unsuccessfully made a try for it. Boy, does that hat attract animals that want it. Writing about that goat made me think of the time one just wandered into Aralbai's house one morning. Such is life in the big city!

About half way back to Ulgii we picked up a Mongolian hitchhiker. He may have heard us coming, or the grapevine announced our presence. About thirty minute later the van had another flat tire. Diane helped, the hitchhiker helped, and I feel guilty that I stayed in the van with the others, with a warm blanket covering my legs. Sorry, Diane. Our ride back was about two hours shorter than the day we rode to Aralbai's place. We didn't stop and take photographs all the time, and I managed not to have an upset stomach.

As soon as we hit Ulgii, we went straight to the hotel. Moshe wanted a room with a hot shower, which worked for him, but the water in the tub didn't drain for several hours, so I just waited until the next night to take my shower at the hotel in Ulaan Baatar. I'm sure we all smelled just swell! Sheryl and Diane went to the market bazaar again, but I stayed at the hotel and read a book while Moshe slept. Later that night all of us but Moshe went back to Canat's house for dinner. During our trip, Sheryl and Diane had often mentioned eating ice cream. Sure enough, Iglu gave us ice cream bars after dinner.

January 4, 2000

Sleeping in a bed instead of on a wooden floor is definitely more comfortable. I really slept well. Canat picked us up again at the hotel and took us back to his house for breakfast. BoBo and I went with him to take our luggage to the airport. We returned for the others, said goodbye to Canat's family, then proceed to the airport for our noon flight back to Ulaan Baatar.

Sheryl had BoBo tell the pilot of the AN-24 that I would like to go into the cockpit since I am a pilot. BoBo told him that I am a famous American pilot. I wish she hadn't told him that, but it worked. BoBo also was allowed there, because the co-pilot needed a translator. We were in there for about an hour. Once again, I was asked many questions, and in all fairness, did my share of asking. The pilot looked like he ate Americans for breakfast with his stocky physique and shaved head. He reminds me of Odd Job, from the movie, "Goldfinger". The co-pilot has his own company in Ulaan Baatar called "RADAR". I sent them all some space shuttle memorabilia after I returned home. We landed at the same town that we had on the way out to Ulgii for refueling. They allowed me to be in the cockpit for take off. After we leveled off at 4500 meters (16,000 feet), I took my seat back in the coach section. At the U. B. airport, a frozen sheep carcass traveled around the luggage conveyor belt.

That night at the Bayangol Hotel I had my own room. It was wonderful not to have to share my room with anyone else. I took a well-deserved shower, and then met the group that evening for a fantastic dinner at a Japanese restaurant.

January 5, 2000

Diane left for Shanghai in the morning. Sheryl and her and I all shared breakfast for the last time on this trip. Sheryl and Michel had plans to see some other horses in Mongolia, so they soon left. BoBo came back to the hotel later and met Moshe and me for lunch. By that time, my pneumonia had kicked in. I knew I did not feel good, but it wasn't until after I arrived home and Karoline took me to the doctor did I know that I had pneumonia.

This was the day that I had wanted to fly in the AN-2. I felt bad enough that not flying did not bother me. BoBo supplied a car and a driver, so after lunch we went around the city to find something for Moshe. I stayed with the driver, but neither knew the other's language, so it was a quiet wait. Then we all went to a shop that sold Mongolia Cashmere sweaters, and to a souvenir shop across the street.

We told BoBo to spend some time with her daughter, and not to worry about our dinner. She made arrangements for us to eat in the hotel's dining room, and promised to take us to the train the next morning.

January 6, 2000

BoBo had bought Moshe and me tickets on the train that is part of the Trans-Siberian Express. I think she bought them at the Mongolian rate instead of the American rate, because they cost \$110 versus \$180. The Trans-Siberian runs from Moscow to Vladivostok, or from Moscow to Beijing via Ulaan Baatar. The train turns south for Beijing at Lake Baikal. We were in a very nice two-person cabin, with an upper and lower bunk. The train left around 9 AM.

Once we arrived back in U. B. we were in the land of ice and snow. As we headed South during the course of the day, thousands of some type of antelope ran from the train. I think they were white, so that they blended in with the snow, but that may be a wrong memory. Between taking flu medicine and not feeling well, the details of the thirty-one hours we rode on the train are not clear. Moshe is a good person to have as a travel companion, but neither of us felt like talking much. At one time I tried some beef noodle soup in the dining car, which tasted very good.

About midnight we stopped at the China border so that the wheels could be exchanged on the carriages. The Mongolians use a different gauge railroad than the Chinese, reported to be for the purpose of keeping the Chinese from invading by rail. I don't know if they change wheels at the Russian border or not.

It took about three hours for the entire process. Except for a few bumps, overall it was a smooth operation. As near as I could tell, the work on each car is done separately by having a crew remove the bolts, use a crane to lift the carriage over to the new wheels which are on a parallel track, and reinsert the bolts. The idea of having two different gauges must work - I have never heard of the Mongolians being invaded by the Chinese on the railroad.

January 7, 2000

I slept restlessly that night on the upper bunk. I had hardly eaten anything since Tuesday night at the Japanese restaurant, and this was Friday. Eventually, I forced myself to go back to the dining car. After crossing into China, the menu changed, as did the manners of the waitresses. Some type of beef was listed on the menu, but the snarling waitress said they were out of it. So I asked for chicken. What she brought made me wish I were the honored guest again in Mongolia. It was like chicken McNuggets™, only with the bones still intact, only cut in half, as if by a meat cleaver. They tasted extremely greasy, so after three or four, I had eaten enough.



Great Wall

Hopefully, I will go back to China sometime, and when I write that story I will describe the landscape and villages better. What I do remember clearly is seeing the Great Wall, about eighty kilometers north of Beijing. I did manage to snap a couple of good shots with my trusty old Pentax Spotmatic camera (bought in 1967). Finally, we arrived in Beijing at 4 PM. Moshe and I shook hands, and I took a taxi back to the Lido Holiday Inn. The driver was lucky: I paid the entire fare without quibbling.

I called United Airlines to see if I could wait another day to leave, but was told that if I did not take the flight the next day I would have to wait another week. My ears were a mess, and I wasn't sure what to do. The hotel is big enough that it has a clinic, so I managed to talk to a doctor. He gave me antibiotics, which helped me enough that I did take the flight the next day. I went back to the same restaurant that I had a steak a couple of weeks earlier. Anyone who knows me will find it almost unbelievable when I say I only ordered a small steak, and didn't finish all of it. I simply had no appetite. If Matt Nelson stops eating steak you know he must really be sick. But there is always a bright side: The Chinese waiters wearing Stetsons, jeans, and cowboy boots reminded me of seeing Bonanza on Japanese TV back in the Sixties, with Hoss Cartwright speaking Japanese. I couldn't help but grin. I was in bed by 8 PM that night.

January 8, 2000

The lady working for United Airlines at the check-in counter gave me a Business Class upgrade to Tokyo, which I certainly didn't mind. There is sure a difference in the way you are treated there as opposed to coach. After a long five-hour wait in the Tokyo airport the plane for Chicago was called. Ten hours after take off we landed. I just filled out the "Go Ahead and Check Me" box on the U. S. Customs form. I figured they would want to examine the "bird nest" I brought back with me. On our final day at the Eagle Hunter's place, Aralbai's father gave me this thing he called a bird's nest, with a hard chunk of white kurd (a type of cheese) inside. By boiling the nest, and drinking the residue water, you can rid yourself of kidney stones. I certainly am not going to argue with the concept from an old man who seemed very healthy. However, I am not real eager to try it, either. The Customs man looked it over, and had a good laugh when I told him about the eagle attacking my silver rabbit hat.

I had planned on visiting my mother and my sister Karen, because they live 200 miles from Chicago, but decided that I better not. It was a wise decision. I flew on to Houston that night, where Karoline and Cheri met me. I was glad to be home.

I thank God for giving me a safe trip, Karoline, Michelle, and Cheri for letting me go, and the staff of Boojum Expeditions for taking me. I have stayed in contact with Sheryl, Diane, and Moshe, and I thank them for their good friendship. It was a fantastic trip!