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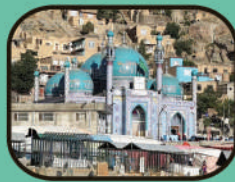
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DESTINATION **MONGOLIA**

An unusual **winter** in **Mongolia**

Article and Photos by
Graeme Edgerton & Tamar Valkenier,



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Freezing cold temperatures, extreme wilderness and the absence of luxury combined with incredible landscapes, clear blue sunny skies and a culture of nomads who are unbelievably strong and kind - these are the unique traits of Mongolia. In addition to that, eagle hunting, dogsledging, ice fishing, a camel festival and domesticated reindeer - that's what drew our attention to visit one of the most uninhabited countries in the world - in the heart of winter.

How do the nomads adapt to the extremes of the climate? And could we do it too? These were the thoughts crossing our minds.

We (Graeme and Tamar) met in Jordan where we walked 650 kilometers with a donkey (check out the story in Touriosity's Vol 8, Issue 4, Sept 2019), but were now off to an entirely different kind of adventure.

We prepared ourselves with wool, wool and more wool and set off to stay with a particular family of eagle hunters, who Tamar has grown quite close to over her

years of adventuring throughout Mongolia (check out the story in Touriosity's Vol 6, Issue 10, March 2018). This family lives in the Altai mountains with their herds of horses, camels, yaks, sheep and goats and carry on the ancient tradition of eagle hunting in the way they were taught by their fathers. This is a Kazakh custom and 90% of people in this westernmost region of the country are of Kazakh ethnicity.

In the summer, nomadic families in the region move high into the hills and set up their felt gers on the grassy stretches next to the river. Many families live side by side and share both pains and pleasures. It takes a while to find out which child belongs to whom, as they all run in and out of each other's gers.

The nomads move to different places in autumn and spring, but when winter falls most of them retreat to more fixed buildings either in the village or close by along the valley. That is where we were to spend most of our time.

The initial plan was to also visit a number

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1. Eagle hunting involves searching;
2. A 131 foot tall statue of Chingghis Khan;
3. Altai village from a distance;
4. The nomads exchange their gers for houses in the winter;
5. Tamar and the family where she feels at home.



DESTINATION MONGOLIA



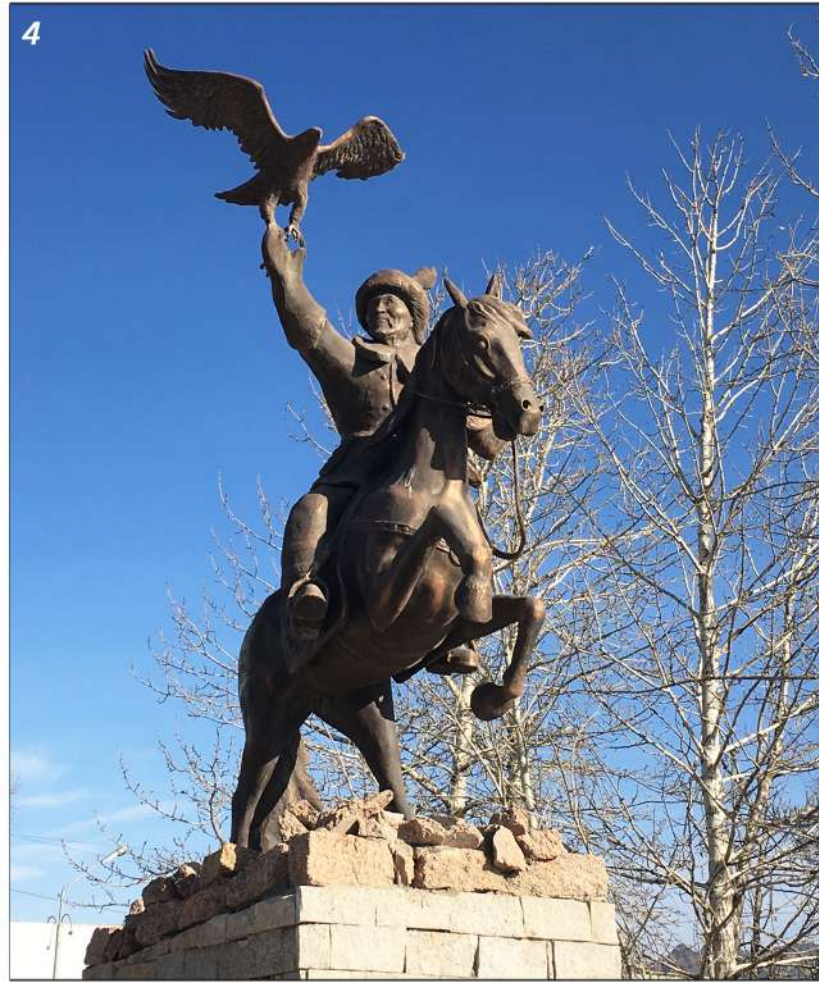
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of festivals in different parts of Mongolia that only take place during the winter. Each comes with its own unique attractions and characteristics. The Ice Festival at Lake Khovsgol, for instance, is famous for the horse sleigh race over the frozen surface of the lake. Locals show their skills in ice fishing, skating or sculpture. And for the braver Mongolians, there is the fascinating extreme sport of ice sumo. From

there we would visit the reindeer herders and experience winter from a teepee.

Later we planned to attend the Thousand Camel Festival in the Gobi desert. For 20 years, nomads from the surrounding provinces have come together to celebrate the fantastic, gangly and (in winter) woolly two humped Bactrian camels. More than a thousand of these camels compete in a

15 kilometer race, with the fastest reaching average speeds of more than 30 kilometers per hour. Incredible, but what we were mostly looking forward to, was this: the camel beauty contest. How does someone go about judging such a thing? Is it the length of the lashes? The cheekiness of the grin? Or maybe the luxuriousness of the winter coat? It seemed likely that this would be an example of beauty being in the eye of



the beholder and we would happily join in on the judging.

Finally, we intended to visit the Golden Eagle festival, to celebrate the Kazakh people who train and use these majestic birds to hunt fox, marmot, rabbit, and sometimes wolf, their skins serving the purpose of warm winter clothing.

Though ready to rumble, our plans were suddenly upended by the coronavirus. When we left home, the virus was still contained within China, and the Mongolian government adopted early measures to address the risk of it spreading across the border. No entry from China was permitted. In addition, all festivals were cancelled, institutions closed, and a ban was put in place on visiting the Tsaatan reindeer herders to try to protect them from the virus.

It was still possible for us to get to Altai in western Mongolia though and so we pressed ahead. Initially disappointed with the change of plans, soon we realized it gave us a unique opportunity to spend the entire month with Tamar's family of eagle hunters. We would get to know them, the village and the surrounding mountains very well.

We entered Mongolia through the capital Ulaanbaatar, from where we boarded one of the last flights going west before the city went into lockdown. Officials checked our temperature before entering the country, before boarding the domestic flight and again once we were inside the plane and when we landed.

Our eagle hunters picked us up from the airport and a warm welcome with a delicious classic Kazakh dish of boiled meat,

potatoes and noodles was awaiting us when we arrived in Ölgii. Enormous shanks of camel and yak meat were piled onto a communal plate and carved by the man of the house. In Mongolia you eat with your

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1. Regular temperature check at the airport due to the Corona virus scare;
 2. Traditional embroidery being done by a hand machine by a lady;
 3. Choosing horse sausage to gift to the families we visit;
 4. An eagle hunter's statue in Ölgii;
 5. Traditional costumes of the hunters serve their purpose;
 6. These horses are well adapted to the cold and they grow a thick coat over winter;
 7. Delicious Mongolian meat dumplings (buuz) in the making;
 8. Kazakh meals are shared by all from the same plate;
 9. In winter a few yaks are kept close for milking.



An eagle hunter has a responsibility to his family and his community to keep alive a tradition that has withstood the changes that modern Mongolia has thrown at it. Eagle hunting is still done on horseback in wild regions of a country where it is now just as common to see someone driving a Russian van or riding a motorbike as it is to see someone riding a horse.

hands (after washing them thoroughly!) and no one is offended when you lick your fingers. Very different from where we are from.

The next day we filled our stomachs with buuz (Mongolian meat dumplings) and the car with Kaze, a kind of horse sausage our eagle hunters love. A drive that takes about five hours in summer only took us three, now that we could cross the frozen rivers and lakes by car.

And then there was Altai. Colourful roofs on wooden or mudbrick houses stood out from the emptiness of the landscape sur-

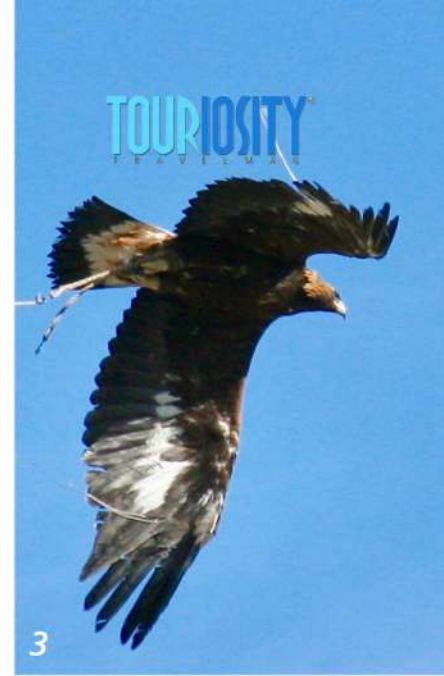
rounding it. With a population of about 5000 people it surprised us how soon we felt like we knew everybody. As the only foreigners in town, we were welcomed very warmly and included in a broad range of winter activities: iceskating, ice fishing, horse archery, lassoing yaks and so on. Every day people were out there enjoying the unique features a winter in a remote mountain landscape had to offer.

We couldn't have imagined a better place to be stranded.

Even in the depths of winter, everyone had a smile on their face. Young people

laughed as they rode their horses through the valley or played ice hockey on the frozen river with lengths of wood or pipe as sticks. These were people not rich in material possessions but rich in social spirit and skills, and willing to share with us.

On our second night in Altai, we were invited to a 33rd birthday party in 'the countryside'. This involved driving through the valley on barely perceptible trails. Dusk had already fallen and it took us about half an hour to reach a small house full of laughter, food and conversation. The party had been going on for some time when we arrived. We brought along a dombra – a traditional



two-stringed Kazakh instrument – and filled the room with music and dancing. This was to become a pattern when we were invited to people’s houses. Though Tamar speaks a bit of Kazakh and our eagle hunter a bit of English, there is no need for language when there is music with its amazing quality to bring people together no matter what nationality they have.

Another thing that requires no language skills is arm wrestling. Graeme bravely (or

perhaps foolishly) challenged all comers and was comprehensively beaten by a succession of Kazakh giants. Perhaps the vodka had something to do with this string of defeats, but it didn’t seem to impair the locals in the same way. All in all, we realized people are the same everywhere you go and we were grateful to be included in this intimate circle of friends.

Over the following days we would go out eagle hunting with dombra-playing-man, arm-wrestling-man, vodka-pouring-man

1. Eagle hunters of Altai;
2. Eagles resting on a day of hunting. A leather hood keeps them calm during hunting;
3. The eagle is set loose to return to the hunter’s call;
4. Hunters looking out over the vast wilderness for preys;
5. An expert Eagle hunter of Altai with his pride.



Eagle hunting is rarely a solo experience. While the eagles are well trained and are used to people, they are still a five or six kilogram raptor that needs to be treated with respect. These mountains are steep, rough and raw and therefore full of hazards to be negotiated.

and a few others that didn't attend the party.

Eagle hunting is a truly unique feature of this region and it is clear that everyone takes their responsibilities seriously. It may be noted that only a few hundred eagle hunters are left. They are the custodians of knowledge that has been passed down through generations and has survived the period of Soviet occupation of Mongolia. Only since a few decades the hunters are again allowed to do so.

Though incredibly strong, brave, and challenged, the general outlook on life of these eagle hunters seems to be light-hearted and fun. They are quick with a joke or a song and love playing around, whether it's with the kids or among friends. But when they pull on their thick coat, fox-skin hat and traditional embroidered pants, and slip the leather mitt over

their right hand to take an eagle on the arm, their demeanor changes. From that point, a range of interconnected responsibilities comes into play.

An eagle hunter has a responsibility to his family and his community to keep alive a tradition that has withstood the changes that modern Mongolia has thrown at it. Eagle hunting is still done on horseback in wild regions of a country where it is now just as common to see someone driving a Russian van or riding a motorbike as it is to see someone riding a horse.

He has a responsibility to the animals that come with him. His horse and his eagle must be fed and looked after. The health and wellbeing of both is vital and require vigilance.

And he also has a responsibility to look after the people that he takes into the

hills. Eagle hunting is rarely a solo experience. While the eagles are well trained and are used to people, they are still a five or six kilogram raptor that needs to be treated with respect. So is the terrain. These mountains are steep, rough and raw and therefore full of hazards to be negotiated.

For many days, we followed brave men into the mountains surrounding the village, Tamar riding her own horse Torat (the same she did a 5 month solo trek with) and Graeme on the back of Hornet. From the ridgelines, spectacular views emerged of snowcapped mountains, frozen rivers and hills displaying a broad palette from russet reds to yellows and greens.

On each outing, we would explore a different area with new ravines and gullies where foxes might hide. This was no English fox-hunt with an avalanche of aristocrats and hounds conducted only for sport.



Eagles are apex predators but this is by no means a one sided contest. During the first seven days of riding, we saw only three foxes. Despite the skill of the hunters and the swiftness of their eagles, none of these foxes were caught. Nevertheless, the eagles once set free would return at the hunter's call.

On the eighth day of riding, we were joined by the master eagle hunter of the village and two others. This time, they were successful and finally managed to capture a fox. But there was a struggle between the bird and the beast. No sooner had the eagle grabbed the muzzle of the fox, than one of the hunters galloped down the hill to its side and put

the handle of his whip between the fox's jaws. This was necessary to free the eagle's talon from between the fox's teeth. He was joined soon after by the master who tied the muzzle of the fox to prevent it from biting. Both the eagle and the fox had been injured in the encounter. When the hunters saw that this was a female fox, they made the decision to release it again, once its injuries had healed. This time of the year was close to mating season and the fox would be set free to maintain the population.

During this period, Tamar also took control of the eagle a few days. She had done this before on previous visits and it was a sign of the trust and respect that

1. The giant bird is almost as heavy as the young girl;
2. Young eagle huntresses;
3. The extremely photogenic eagle hunters are posing for a photo;
4. Tamar is well prepared for a cold day of eagle hunting;
5. Tamar after becoming a horse archery champion;
6. The eagle returns to the meat in Tamar's hand and Tamar looks away as it lands;
7. Graeme is developing a connection with the eagle.



DESTINAT

GOLIA



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the hunters placed in her that they were willing to allow her to carry this prized possession. At the end of one day's riding, she removed the eagle's hood and placed the eagle on the top of the hill. The huge bird waited patiently while we rode into the valley and then, in response to a call, it launched itself into the air, circled us in broad arcs, and then swooped down to land on Tamar's arm.

Eventually, the time came for us to leave Altai. The quarantine was being lifted and, although we felt part of the family, we were also conscious of not overstaying our welcome.

We returned to Ulaanbaatar to visit an-

other couple that Tamar knew well. They had a chubby nine-month old boy who was well insulated against the Mongolian winter. The five of us drove north to the Terelj national park.

The countryside here was very different from the Altai mountains. There was more snow on the ground and many more trees. The hills were filled with huge boulders in strange shapes that sparked imaginative interpretations – one was a turtle, another a person reading a book.

Inside the park we found a campsite where we could stay in a ger. Although the weather was very cold overnight, once the wood stove in the middle of the

ger was roaring, it was enough to keep us warm until morning.

A real highlight of our time here was going dogsledding. Each sled is pulled by a team of eight or ten dogs, usually all from the same family with similar colours and markings. A striking feature of some of the dogs was having two different eye colours – one brown and one ice-blue.

Although these are working dogs, they were surprisingly friendly and were all keen for pats and hugs! And when the time to pull the sled came they didn't need any encouragement. These dogs love to run and, if anything, it was an effort to get them to slow down. It is an amazing feeling gliding



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across the snow behind a team of hounds that are sprinting and straining with joy of being alive.

Sadly, our journey into winter eventually had to end. We were keeping an eye on global developments and realized that it was important to return home as more borders started to close and flights were being disrupted.

This was an adventure that turned out very differently from the way we had planned, but it was an adventure much improved as a result. The big festivals will return once the current crisis is over and no doubt draw us back to search for the most beautiful camel in the land. And the

call of the Tsaatan reindeer herders in the north will also be answered.

This winter, instead, we had a very personal experience with a nomadic mountain family who took us into their home and also into their lives.

Our collection of woolen clothing protected us from the elements. But the thing that really kept us warm in this harsh environment was the love and friendship of the people we met.

Our readers who would like to join Tamar on an adventure to Mongolia or elsewhere in future may check out her website www.tamarvalkenier.com

1. Finally, the eagle hunters were able to catch a fox;
2. The eagle's sharp beak is easily able to penetrate the skin and its eyes are much sharper than that of humans;
3. Bactrian camels roam freely in the mountains of Mongolia;
4. Mongolian Ice Hockey;
5. Improvised sleds on icy rivers during winter in Mongolia;
6. Sledding dogs often have one blue and one brown eye;
7. A souvenir photo during a few days of dogsledding in the country.