

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF

Andreas Hofer's latest extraordinary ski adventure takes him to Mongolia - the land of Kublai Khan

The ovoos - a shamanic cairn to protect travellers from evil spirits



The vastness of Mongolia is criss-crossed by migrating herders rather than strips of asphalt, and to ski the high peaks of the Altay ranges means travelling with the crawling speed and discomfort of a 19th century explorer.

The trappings of modern life - Facebook, Gucci, Adidas, Heineken and Starbucks - were all left behind in Ulaanbaatar, the sprawling metropolis of a country turbo-charged by resource-hungry China and international mining money. Beyond the city's slums begins an ocean of wilderness, vast and endless, unchanged since the times of the merchant Marco Polo and the court of

Kublai Khan.

George Schichl, my Austrian travelling companion and mountain guide, and I were speeding over dusty plains in relative comfort. Skis, spare tyres, saddles and

a portable oven rapped in blankets and tied to the roof rack, luggage, tents and sleeping bags neatly packed in the boot of the car. Heavy crates of food, water and our crew - a cook, a pathfinder, an interpreter and the paymaster - were travelling in a military-grey UAZ-van roaring ahead of us, obscuring the land with clouds of billowing dust and chasing off startled herds of sand-coloured antelopes.

It is not only roads which have no tradition in Mongolia. There are very few buildings outside the capital either. The Mongols were herders for the last few thousand years and horse-riding warriors, living in gers (felt-lined tents) rather than the mud houses used by Kazakhs or other local minorities. Occasionally a Buddhist monastery will appear in a lone valley, a Seljuk monolith or a shamanic stone cairn on wind-swept mountain passes and way crossings, but otherwise the steppe is void of any form of architecture. Only the Soviets imposed their concept of administrative centres on the land, every few hundred miles - building a small concrete town complete with hospital, school, library, cinema and a garage, all neatly arranged around a main square with a bed of dusty flowers and the crumbling monument to a red hero in the middle.

What makes Mongolia's expanses exotic and otherworldly are its soaring ridges of rock glowing in purple, ochre and vermillion; swaying landscapes of fluorescent reeds; endless fields of gravel in shades of brown and grey, unexpectedly changing into plains of shining, lizard-green grassland, roamed by herds of horses and puffy sheep.

So the village of Darvi we passed on our way to Sutay Uul (4090m), the first mountain we wanted to scale, was an unexpected sight. And a deeply disturbing one, for that matter: scattered in a wide radius around the

low-built mud huts were the carcasses of hundreds of sheep, killed by a gang of marauding wolves the night before. The sandy hillocks around the village were occupied by large groups of black vultures, solemnly watching over grim wastes of severed heads, picked clean, with the spines and rags of wool and skin strewn everywhere.

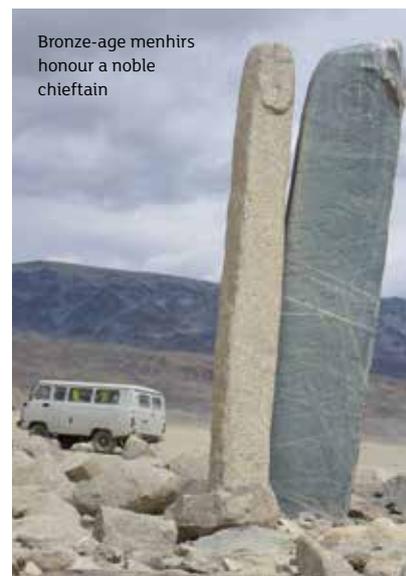
Approaching Mt. Tsambarav (4219m) and its twin peak Tsaast Uul (4193m) over moist, steep meadows, the heavy kitchen van had difficulties driving up to the rocks where we had already started to unroll our bright, yellow tents and put out the camping gear. Two eagles were drawing their circles high in the evening sky, and when we inspected the ravine above our camp, from where we wanted to climb the next morning, we happened on a flock of shaggy ibex fleeing with elegant speed to higher altitude. Coming back to the warming camp fire, we looked over a plain the size of Normandy, rimmed with the snow-covered teeth of the Altay Mountains - an endless string of cliffs and glaciers scintillating in the last beams of sunlight. A vast land without a trace of the human race: not a single house, no cattle - not even a lone eagle hunter crossing the plain.

We enjoyed continuous snow cover all the way to the top: corn snow at lower altitude, a glistening and hard surface up the bowl of the central glacier, and then powder along the high ridges and the final slope to the summit.

George tests his skis and skills on a sand dune



Bronze-age menhirs honour a noble chieftain



MARCO POLO



Our man on his way to the top of Tsambagarav Uul (4219m)



Struggling through fresh snow: Our Toyota Land Cruiser is not a camel!



It was with relief and great joy that we finally made our turns on real snow,

and not just sand. Speeding over the wide hollow of ice, with crevasses shimmering under the frozen surface, we eventually *wedeled* in neat turns through the narrow valley back to our camp, where our crew welcomed us with a standing ovation. Never having watched a skier before they had followed us all morning, eyes screwed to their binoculars.

Mongolia's weather in spring is still unsettled and it changes with unexpected suddenness. We entered the valley of Munkh Khairkhan (4204m), a debris-filled wasteland left by a retreating glacier tongue, in bright sunshine. Pools of melt-water sparkled sky blue, with plovers flitting here and there, and pairs of shelduck drifting over the surface. The children of a yak herder invited us into their ger, where we were offered butter cookies and cups of milk tea. It was already mid-day when we trudged, skis shouldered, to the bottom of the valley, staggering

with our boots over tussocks of grass and moist lumps of soil until we reached the edge of the snowfield.

At around 3400m, while we took pictures of the fresh tracks of a snow leopard, a fierce wind suddenly picked up, blowing thin feathers of cloud from the west. Just an hour later, a blinding blizzard raged on the mountain, and we struggled to find our way back to our waiting cars. The herders' tents, the valley of scree, the blue meanderings of the glacier river - all had disappeared in a wall of swirling white, with snow piling up at alarming speed. Escaping from the mountain, we finally emerged into sunshine again, and built our camp on a riverbank in a cove of poplars and willow trees - celebrating our escape with shots of vodka. What woke me in the morning was a sensation of utter silence. No wind blowing, no birds chirping, no rustling leaves. The daylight filtering through the canvas of my tent was dimmer than usual and when I crawled out through the flaps I saw our campsite was submerged in half a metre of freshly fallen powder. A caravan of Bactrian camels ploughed through the snow along the river, with bored, haughty faces and bridle bells tinkling, their

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A helpful Mongolian herdsman, and (left) camping at Tavan Bogd National Park. Right: A Buddhist mask and (below) a curious local outside the tiny monastery in Monhhayrhan.

► everywhere.

A diverse crowd queued to get in: young couples, children scolded by their grandmothers, herders and city folk. Yet out came a uniform band of identically smelling, combed and contented red faces. We skiers were no exception.

Of all the mountains we came to ski, such as Harhira Uul (4037m) and Tselgel Hayrhan Uul (3943m), we were all looking forward most to skiing the Tavan Bogd massif. Its Huyten Uul (4374m) is Mongolia's highest peak and most westerly point, rising at the junction of Russia, China and Mongolia. The foot of this mountain can only be reached by camels. The snow is so plentiful even in summer, that a car or even a horse can easily get stuck. When we arrived at the caravanserai, where our pack animals were supposed to be waiting, we saw only a car-park full of UAZ buses - but no camel. To our dismay we learnt that a group of French

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skiers had arrived the day before, and commandeered all transport available for the journey over the pass to Mt. Huyten. The drover, who should have catered for us, had no idea when they'd come back, or how long the animals would have to rest before their next journey. We were furious, but there was nothing we could do. Even our track leader Batla, a seasoned guide with the demeanour of a political commissar,

could not have conjured up any more pack animals. With the help of a herder we forded the river and drove up a grassy hill overlooking the valley, the central massif of Mount Huyten (4374m) and the Alexander glacier - an alpine spectacle of grand scale.

We built our camp behind a group of large granite boulders, to shelter us from the cold winds blowing from the 14km-long Botanin and Alexander glaciers. Batla, the people's commissar, took a gunny sack and started to collect yak droppings - the universally used heating fuel in Mongolia. It was the first time he'd done this and we understood that the torn wisps of grey clouds on the horizon were worrying him. Even we knew by now that bad weather was coming in.

For once the beaten cast iron stove we'd carried along on our roof rack - tied together with five saddles and a lavatory seat we'd never used - came into action. And not too soon: half an hour later the temperature dropped to minus 25 degrees, and wind and snow drifts rehearsed for the end of the world. Almost at once we were submerged knee-deep in powder. All we could do was take out our equipment and start to ski in earnest. George and I put

in some pretty good powder turns, hiking up approximately 800m to a ridge above our camp a few times - albeit with very limited visibility and no audience this time, as the crew was busy getting our camp organised. When everything got dark in the afternoon, and a wagtail and a hoopoe entered our kitchen tent for a warm up and some good company, we realised that maybe the French skiers and the

camels on the other side of the mountain pass had not had such a great time...

The next morning we did a last run in perfect powder and under a brilliant, blue sky, enjoying views over the mighty glaciers and rugged peaks of Huyten. Then we left the valley in a hurry. The camels were not back yet, and neither were the French, but the people's commissar predicted even worse weather to come in a few hours. Our second attempt to ski Mt. Tselgel was foiled too. Looking over sunny plains we saw in the distance a thick blanket of bad weather where our mountain should have been. There were blue skies everywhere else, yet Mt. Tselgel spirited away in a twister of black cloud. We drove on. The undulating hills, rolling far out of sight, were riddled with burrows of ground squirrels and fat-tailed marmots, hysterically whistling and racing for cover from our approaching cars. After 15 days and 3000km through untracked terrain we camped for the last time on the banks of a peaceful river, teeming with fish. Late at night, when the camp-fire had burned down to a heap of glowing ambers, our crew unpacked a strangely-shaped fiddle and a flute, and began to sing a long and epic tale - about heroes, warriors and some mighty skiers. ■

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