

2017 Mongolia Travel Journal

Michael Caranci

Sunday, August 27, 2017 and Monday, August 28, 2017

The first flight of the long travel day took off early from Redding Municipal Airport, a few minutes before 5:50 am. 35 minutes later we were touching down in San Francisco. Allan and I grabbed breakfast and coffee, then found our way to the International Terminal to settle in and wait for our next flight.

We met Ross and Brandon at the gate. At about 10:00 they started boarding, and soon we were in the air for the long flight over the Pacific. The plane was nowhere near full, which enabled me to get a row to myself towards the back of the plane. What a difference it makes to be able to spread out and move on a long flight.

The flight was supposed to take 12.5 hours, but we touched down in a rainy, windy Seoul after only 11 hours. We followed the signs for transfers and found our next gate. Incheon International Airport is very user friendly, lots of signs, including in English, and small electronic kiosks everywhere that you could navigate to find your gate, with step by step instructions on how to get there. Airport staff was courteous and helpful as well.

We had time to kill, so we went upstairs and ate a quick meal in a cramped, busy food court area that had Taco Bell, Burger King, plus 4 different types of Asian foods. We all opted for varieties of Asian cuisine, mostly pointing at photos of food to order and guessing at what we actually ate...but it was all pretty tasty.



A couple of hours later, we were boarding the very full Korean Airways flight to Ulaanbaatar. This was a shorter flight (only 3 hours), but in a cramped, tight plane with horribly uncomfortable seats, so we were all missing the spacious trans-Pacific flight from earlier in the day. Fortunately we were exhausted from the long travel and time change, so we mostly slept through the flight, waking only as we started our descent into Mongolia.

Clearing immigration and customs was a breeze, and all of our bags arrived. We walked out of the baggage claim and were instantly met by smiling faces of two Mongolia River Outfitters staff. They led us outside into the brisk Mongolian night air, loaded the bags into the back of a Nomadic Journeys van, then drove us the 20 minutes into the city center to the Bayangol Hotel.

Nanna (our female guide), helped check us into our rooms. We each were given a single room, which was a nice treat. We said goodnight to Nanna, then settled in to clean up from the long travel day and hit the comfortable beds for a few hours of shuteye.

Tuesday, August 29, 2017

I slept hard, waking with the sunrise at 6:00 am. I spent the morning fiddling with my gear and starting to organize for the next leg of the journey, as we had to try to get our luggage down to 45 pounds, total, for the charter flight. Fortunately MRO had arranged a truck to drive into the camp with one of the guides, Tolga, so we were able to send an extra gear with the truck, taking only the essentials and fishing gear with us on the charter flight.

At 8:00 I headed downstairs to meet the rest of the group for the breakfast buffet. At 10:30 we met back downstairs at the lobby. We walked out the front door to meet Nanna and our driver. As soon as I stepped outside, I saw a familiar face walking down the street towards the hotel; it was Mark Portman, one of the MRO guides we fished with on the Delger two years before. We said hello, and agreed to meet up with him later in the evening. He was just coming off the Delger, getting ready to head home the next day.

We climbed into the van and started driving in the late morning city traffic. We weaved our way north east, and soon were pulling up in front of the Gandan Manastery. It is a real monastery where monks live, study, and pray. There were quite a few monks in colorful robes wandering around, each holding beads in their hands. There were also a surprising number of tour groups, a mixture of Koreans and northern Europeans.

We walked around the grounds, taking in the small shrines where many local Mongolians were praying and spinning rotating knobs that were supposed to bring good luck. We entered the main temple area where incense burned and a couple dozen monks sat in rows of benches chanting prayers and banging on cymbals. It was a hazy cacophony of noise, not at all harmonic as I would have expected as it seemed each monk was doing his own thing. We walked around the inside. Several Mongolians were paying cash to the monks in exchange for prayers. Very interesting.



We emerged from this small temple and walked up to the largest building at the monastery. Inside we found a huge, 90 foot tall gold statue of the Buddha. It was truly spectacular. Supposedly when it was made they put dirt from all corners of Mongolia inside so it would represent the entire country.

We left the giant Buddha and trekked back down to the micro bus. Although we hadn't planned it on our itinerary, Bruce had noticed on the city map that there was a dinosaur museum nearby, so we asked if we could go see it.

The Dinosaur Museum is brand new, open less than a year and still getting going with only a couple of exhibits open, but it was really cool. We were the only people there. Inside

were life-size models of a pair of dinosaurs, next to the complete skeletons of two different dinosaurs. One was a Tarbosaurus Bataar, which looks exactly like a Tyranosaurus Rex only about half the size. The other was a similar sized herbivorous dinosaur. There was a modest collection of other fossils, bones, skulls, dinosaur eggs, etc in the two large rooms of the new museum, all bones discovered there in Mongolia.



We left the museum and decided to head somewhere for lunch. Nanna took us to a Mongolian Barbecue place not too far away. We filled our bowls with a hodgepodge of meats, vegetables, and noodles, then watched as the grill-masters fired and chopped and cooked everything right there on the big hot griddle. The food was really good.



From there we drove back south past Sukkbataar Square and the parliament building, making our way through the congested traffic to the Winter Palace of the Bogd Kahn. This is an amazing building which was one of four palaces and worship places for the 8th Bogd, the religious ruler and king of Mongolia in the early 20th Century. It's an amazing collection of buildings with ornate designs, art, and artifacts all over the place, and the Winter Residence is now a museum with a lot of the collections of the Bogd Kahn.

Our final stop on the tour was the State Department Store, a relic of the communist era which is now a big seven-story mall. The top floor is a giant souvenir store, where we did our shopping with gifts to bring home to our respective loved ones.

It was a short drive back to the hotel from the State Department Store. We decided to relax for a couple of hours, then meet up again at 7 to head out for dinner. We took a short stroll down the block to the Grand Kahn Irish Pub, where we enjoyed a great dinner of a mixture of Mongolian and western fare ranging from Khuushuur (kind of like Mongolian empanadas), lamb stew, and steak.

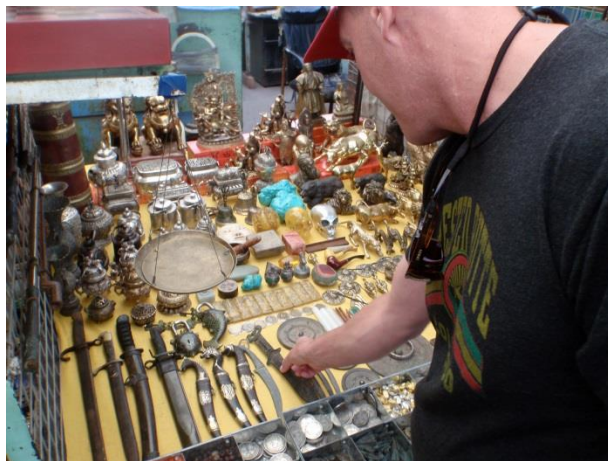
After dinner I said goodnight to the guides and walked a bit further west to try to meet up with the guides from the Delger, Mark Portmand and Jeff Foresee, who'd told me earlier in the day they'd be at a bar called rePUBlik. I found the bar no problem, but they weren't there. So I returned back to the Bayangol to settle in for the night.

Wednesday, August 30, 2017

We met again around 8:00 am for breakfast in the hotel restaurant, this time joined by the newly arrived Chip, Chris, John, and Earl. We chatted and told stories for a couple of hours, then returned to our rooms to quickly grab a few things before meeting back down in the lobby for another day in UB.

Earl left before us, as he had arranged to go back and visit the family that he met last year when he was here. The rest of us met Nanna, climbed aboard a bright yellow Nomadic Journeys bus, and drove into the bustling late morning traffic.

The first stop was at the Black Market. The Market is a massive expanse of kiosks, essentially a giant flea market or outside bazaar, with a nearly limitless assortment of goods for purchase ranging from antiques to new shoes, leather goods to carpet, T-shirts and underwear, toys and school supplies to fishing rods and sports equipment. At one point I found a fishing kiosk that had a row of massive squirrel lures with giant treble hooks on them! We strolled the crowded aisles and corridors for a couple of hours, taking in the noise and commotion.



Eventually we were numb and hadn't even seen it all, yet found ourselves back at the bus ready to move on. We merged back into the traffic and headed back towards Sukhbataar Square and the National Museum. The National Museum is a must-see for anyone new to Mongolia, as it offers a comprehensive history of the region, the people, the culture, everything dating back to early man (6,000 BC) to modern times.

Freshly educated on Mongolian history, we found a place that served traditional Mongolian foods for lunch. It took a long time, but we all enjoyed the food, an assortment of buuz (dumplings), khuushuur (like empanadas), and various meat dishes. Soon we were stuffed and back in the bus.

It was already past 3, and we were tired so opted to skip the last temple and head back to the hotel. Someone had the bright idea to find a store to get some cigars, which seemed like a

great idea at the time and did make for a fun adventure seeking out a small Cuban lounge and wine bar that also had a humidor in it and was apparently the only place in all of UB where you can find cigars. The challenge was the traffic! With the schools starting this week, the traffic was abysmal, absolute gridlock. We should have walked back to the hotel, which probably would have taken 20 minutes; instead we spent an hour in the bus stuck in traffic.

We did finally pull into the hotel parking lot at 4:40, just enough time to run upstairs and drop off some things before meeting back in the lobby to walk over to Tumen Ekh for the performance.

I was able to meet briefly with Jan Wigsten, the owner/operator at Nomadic Journeys, and it was good to see him again and catch up. We were also joined by a man named Justin Mitchell who was just returning from his trip to the Headwaters Expedition on the Delger. He'd had a great trip and a great time in Mongolia.

We all walked across the street and around the corner to the Tumen Ekh performance hall. Soon we were met by Nanna, who bought our tickets and said goodbye for the evening as we walked inside and found seats.

The performance was every bit as amazing as I'd remembered it from two years ago, featuring the seemingly impossible traditional Mongolian throat-singing, plus a lot of beautiful musical ensembles, songs, dances, and a pair of contortionists. It was absolutely incredible.



Unfortunately, about halfway through I started getting the sweats and realizing that something I'd eaten wasn't agreeing with me. As soon as the performance was over I said goodnight to the rest of the guys and ran up to my room to puke my guts out before finishing up packing and crashing hard for the night.

Thursday, August 31, 2017

It was a rough night. Most of the night I spent talking to Ralph on the porcelain telephone. Eventually morning came, and I at least felt like the worst was over. I managed to get my bags downstairs, but no breakfast for me.

At 6:30 we were all in the lobby, checked out of the hotel, and Nanna was there to meet us. We loaded one set of bags into the truck that would drive into the river with Tolga, as we had to keep our other bags down to 45 pounds (not easy to do for 2 weeks in the river).

We drove the 20 minute drive to the airport, then Nanna helped us check in for the charter flight. It's strange that it's a charter flight, but we still had to check in at the counter and go through regular airport security (which is stringent in UB, no hemostats, nippers, fly rods or reels, etc).

Once we checked in and made it through security, we didn't have to wait long in the busy departures lounge before we were signaled to head out. We climbed into a van that also had all of the luggage in the back that we'd just had to check in at the counter, and drove out across the tarmac, down a long dirt road, before finally pulling up to a hangar with a nicely maintained Cessna Caravan parked out front. We loaded our gear -- and ourselves -- into the plane, and soon were taking off into the sunny Mongolian morning.

The flight lasted about an hour, and we were touching down on the grass landing strip at just past 9:00 am. Fortunately it was a smooth ride, as I don't think my stomach could have handled much more!

A plane only lands here a few times a year, so most of the village came out to see it off. We took our gear off the plane and loaded them into two land cruisers and a Russian van, then drove off-road for about 20 minutes to the river.



We pulled into a small clearing, where we met the guides. We waded up, rigged our rods, and by 10:00 am we were on the river fishing. The river was very high and off-color, but the guides (who had arrived a couple of days early) said it was dropping and clearing and should be in great shape in a few days, certainly fishable now to start.

Allan and I were with Zolbo, who we had fished with a couple of years before on the Delger River. The Onan is a very different river from the Delger. Low elevation, shallow slow currents with mud banks and panoramic views looking across the Mongolian Steppe. We hadn't been fishing long when Allan had a fish swirl on his purple streamer. He cast back out and the fish came back two more times, but never fully committed to eating, just swirled on the fly.

I bit further downstream I had a nice fish clobber my Pole Dancer. I strip struck and had him on for a few seconds, but like so many taimen I've hooked it came off. I did have one other small taimen follow the pole dancer, but not eat.

At lunch we caught up with everyone, and all were in good spirits after a decent first morning. Everyone had at least hooked a taimen, and a few small ones had been landed. Bruce also landed a really big lenok, about 5 or 6 pounds.

I tried to eat a bit of lunch, pre-made chicken sandwiches and a salad, but still was hurting from the night before so I laid down on the gravel bar and closed my eyes for a bit, which did help.

After lunch we returned to fishing, although the afternoon was pretty slow. We didn't move a fish until afternoon started turning to evening, when Allan had a nice fish roll on his fly, then attack it and miss on the next cast. We fished our way into the first camp, satisfied with a decent start to the trip, yet wanting more!

The first camp is laid out on a broad grass plain above the river. There is a kitchen ger, then a larger dining ger, followed by 4 gers for the guests. Behind these was a smaller tent for showers, and two outhouse tents.

The gers are the epitome of comfort camping, a round spacious abode with carpets lining the grass floor, two cots with blankets and pillows, chair, end table, lots of places to hang things, and a wood-burning stove in the middle.

Dinner was served at 7:30, starting with a tasty Borsch, then a traditional Mongolian meal of buuz, khuushuur, salad, dessert. I still wasn't up for eating much, but did finally get a little bit of food in my system.

I was exhausted, and turned in right after dinner for an early bedtime, hoping that a good night's sleep will return me to the land of the living tomorrow.



Friday, September 1, 2017

I had a great sleep, and woke feeling alive again after such a rough day yesterday. It's good to be back!

I woke about 6 am when the ladies came into the ger to light the morning fire. We had a couple of hours till breakfast, so plenty of time to organize gear and pack up the bag. Before long the ladies delivered hot coffee to our ger. What service!

It was a beautiful morning, and we watched the sun rise over the hill on the far side of the river. Breakfast was served at 8 am, a hot omelet plus fresh breads, meats, and fruit. After breakfast we gathered our gear and headed down to the boats.

It was already warming up, so most of us opted for wet wading today. I was fishing with Bruce, in Tolga's boat. I started out with a big streamer, my Bad Attitude Baitfish in tan, and it looked really good in the water. The morning started out slow without much action, but a couple of hours in I cast into a slow eddy on the left side of the river and I saw a big taimen turn and eat the fly. I had a belly in the line from the current so I stripped hard and long several times until I finally came tight to the fish, then the hook slipped out. Dang! It was a big one, well over 30 inches.

We continued fishing, and just before lunch Bruce hooked into a small fish that we thought was a taimen until he got it into the net and Tolga saw it was actually a fish called an asp. The asp looks almost like a shad, but with a bright red tail similar to a taimen.

We had lunch on a high bank. The guides grilled some delicious chicken kabobs, accompanied by a bean and cucumber salad that was quite tasty. Most everyone had a similar morning, not a ton of action but a few fish here and there. The fishing so far isn't red hot, but enough action certainly to keep everyone happy.





After lunch the river forked into two channels. We took the right side, which proved good for Bruce who had 4 or 5 taimen chase his streamer but was unsuccessful in connecting with any of them. I tried a variety of flies including a big Happy Meal, Pole Dancer, and mouse, but never moved a fish. As we passed other boats, though, they each had some luck with a few taimen here and there. Allan landed a nice fish taped at 33 inches, and Chris managed to get some photos holding a 36" fish he'd released earlier in the day!

We pulled into camp a bit after 5 o'clock. This camp was very different, nestled into a grove of small trees. We settled into our respective gers, and the ladies made up some nice hot showers which really hit the spot.



We enjoyed the comfortable evening and great conversation until dinner was served. The evening meal started with a delicious chicken soup, followed by a main course of roasted beef with potatoes and a broccoli salad. Dessert was also scrumptious. After dinner we all settled in for a bonfire at the river's edge, then one by one disappeared into our respective gers for the night.



Saturday, September 2, 2017

Today Earl and I were going to fish together, with Dan, to try to break our streak. Earl went fishless last year on the Delger, and I have consistently struggled to land taimen, only getting one decent fish on the Delger myself. And so far on this trip we were the only two to have not landed a taimen. So we paired up to give it a go and try to change our luck.

Since everyone in our group is up early, they pushed breakfast up to 7:30 for us. Soon we were on the water, casting and stripping in search of taimen.

We fished hard all morning, changing up between streamers and top water, light and dark, big and small. Finally right before lunch Earl had a fish come clear out of the water to eat his mouse pattern. He had it hooked, and we thought the streak was ended...but the fish came unbuttoned before we could get it into the net.

We kept fishing, but saw no other action before lunch. For lunch we stopped at a high bank with an incredible panoramic view of the broad valley and rolling hills in the background. We ate pork kabobs with vegetables and a cuscus side. We ate our fill, enjoyed the view for a while, and learned that everyone else had had a similarly slow morning as well, a few fish hooked but only Allan and Bruce landed taimen (3 to the net for their boat, all in the same run!).

We pulled back into the current after lunch determined to make some magic this afternoon. About an hour after lunch, we pulled into a narrow slough and Earl had a nice pike attack his streamer. He was hooked up for a second, then the fly came loose.

We continued fishing. Then suddenly Earl's line came tight and he was hooked up again. He strip struck, and the fish stayed connected. After a brief battle, the fish was coming up to the net. Dan reached out with the net, and just as the fish's head was starting to slide into the net we all saw the fly come out. Dan reached and snagged the fish midair. Success at last, Earl's first, well-earned taimen in the net!



We snapped a few photos and high fived each other, elated that his curse was finally broken!

Soon after I cast a Pole Dancer tight to the bank and as the fly twitched downstream I saw a head come up and porpoise on the fly. I set the hook and was tied up to a small taimen for a few seconds, then the hook slipped out. Again.

We continued on downstream, and Dan rowed us down a narrow side channel. Tight up against the bank, just next to a small overhanging tree, I had a nice taimen turn and eat the fly. I strip struck and was tight for just a second, when again the hook came out. I was dejected. Dan suggested we pull over and rest the spot then give the fish another shot. We opted to smoke a celebratory cigar for Earl's fish, which was a great idea! As we puffed away, we saw the taimen I missed roll again several more times. In the same spot. He was still there! We also spotted two other taimen rolling just downstream in this same small side channel.

Once we finished the smoke, I hopped out of the boat and wet waded up in the shallow but swift water to try to get a few casts into the fish. On my second cast, still about 15 feet above the fish, a different taimen came out and attacked the fly. I set hard and the line came tight. There was no way I was letting this fish get any slack so with the rod still down I started running upriver to keep it tight. When I was sure it was a solid connection, I finally raised the tip and started fighting the fish, hard and fast and worked him as quick as I could towards Dan who was ready with the net. We got him! My first taimen of the trip on the Onan. Not a big fish, about 25 inches, but in the net and a huge relief!

We realized that was a different fish, so I made a few more casts in the area where the original fish was, and it did turn on the fly once but didn't eat. We opted to rest it a bit longer and try

again in a bit. In the meantime, Earl waded out and fished to the other fish we'd seen rolling further down in the channel, and soon he was hooked up with another taimen. He landed this one as well, his second fish of the day. This one was also in that mid 20 inch range. We tried a few more times for the original fish but couldn't get it to move a third time. Still, an amazing fishing session and we were all absolutely elated.

I took a turn on the oars and let Dan fish the rest of the way back to the camp. The skies were dark and it was drizzling, but we hardly noticed we were so ecstatic to have finally broken the curse. We didn't move any more fish, but we did spot a huge fish roll in a big back eddy. By the size of the splash, it could have been one of those mythical 50+ inch fish. We rowed over and made a bunch of casts in that eddy, but never moved the big fish.

We didn't get into camp till after 7, so we quickly changed out of our wet clothes and made our way to the dining tent. It was starting to rain. Dinner was another delicious onion soup, then Shepherd's Pie with vegetables and a tasty salad, followed by grilled pineapples for dessert. Allan and Bruce had had a decent afternoon with a couple more fish hooked, while most of the other's had had a tough day overall. Day three, and everyone was tired so it was an early bedtime for all.

Sunday, September 3, 2017

We woke again to the sounds and smells of a fresh fire burning in the ger stove, accompanied by the pitter patter of light drizzle on the roof of the ger. It had rained off and on through the night, but not a hard downpour so we were hopeful that the already high river wouldn't start coming back up.

Breakfast was pancakes, a fried egg, plus toast, fruit, meats, and cheese. By the time breakfast was over, the rain had stopped and the clouds were beginning to break. With the cloud cover the night before it was already warm, and we knew if the weather broke it would be a warm, beautiful day. We had a hard time deciding if we should wear waders or not...most of us opted to pack our waders and wear shorts, which ended up the right decision as it didn't take long for the sun to pop out.

Allan and I were fishing together again today, with Daniel. I started off fishing streamers, Allan started with a Pole Dancer. It was probably less than an hour into the day when he had his first fish take the fly. He set hard, and soon had a small taimen in the net. We continued fishing, but without much action for the next while. Allan decided to switch to a sink tip in the hopes of finding a pike in one of the sloughs, so I switched up to a Happy Meal to make some commotion and hope that something big would come eat the monster surface popper. I fished it all morning though, without moving a fish.

Late into the morning the river forked into two broad channels. Two boats split up down each channel. We went right. Allan switched back to a Pole Dancer, and I went back to a streamer. As we drifted down one narrow part of the channel I looked down and spotted a fish holding in

the shallows near on a sandy bottom. Then another just a few meters below. Daniel rowed us back up and we made some casts, but never moved the fish again. As we started drifting downstream we drifted over a third fish. There were loaded in there, just didn't want to eat!

Just around the corner in a back eddie behind a big sweeper, Allan got hammered by a big taimen. The fish was well into the mid 30 inch range, and he had a good hook set on it and fought it right to the boat, where it slipped the hook just before Daniel could get the net below it.

Just below that we stopped for lunch. Tsoylo (the enthusiastic young camp helper) cooked up some chicken and rice in a Dutch oven. Then back to fishing.

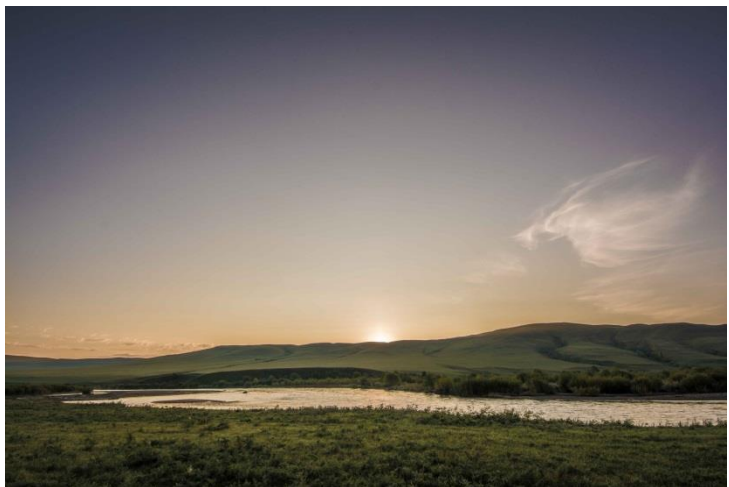
I switched over to the Pole Dancer, and it didn't take long to have my first fish of the day come clear out of the water to eat the fly. I thought I had it hooked...but of course it came off the line before I could land it. I'm still cursed!

Allan tried fishing a sinking line and streamer all afternoon, which never did elicit a strike. I stuck to the Pole Dancer, and in a small backeddie behind a big bush I got a hard hit and this time managed to land a fish, about 26 inches, my largest taimen so far.

We continued fishing our way downstream, past the confluence with the other channel. I did have another small taimen come clear out of the water to try to eat the fly but miss completely, then later another small taimen swipe and miss as well. That was it for our afternoon action though.

Still, it was a spectacularly beautiful day. The scenery is stunning, and the fall colors are just beginning to change, the greens starting to shift to a range of yellows, oranges, and deep reds. If the river would only drop into shape so the fishing could turn on a bit better!

Camp 5 is another spectacular place, a broad plain on a high bank overlooking a bend in the river, framed by dramatic hills and rocky peaks on all sides. Each camp just keeps getting better and better.



Soon dinner was served: another delicious soup, roasted pork that was so tender you could eat it with a fork, and potato salad, followed by fresh fruit for dessert. After dinner we begged Daniel to get his guitar out, and he strummed away some beautiful songs around the campfire, illuminated by the nearly full moon rising over the hills beyond camp. One by one we drifted off to our respective gers for a hard night's sleep.

Monday, September 04, 2017

Today was one of those days you simply cannot predict. We woke up to a bright sky and a beautiful morning, the sun rising over the hill beyond camp. By the time we'd finished our French Toast breakfast, we came back outside and the skies were beginning to darken with clouds. Still, it was warm and we all assumed it would be another balmy day like the ones we'd seen so far, so we all started off in shorts and light shirts, no waders, prepared for another beautiful day.



We hadn't made it a few hundred yard downs river, however, when we heard thunder in the distance and the skies got really dark really fast. I was fishing with Brandon today, in Peter's boat, and we scrambled to put our waders and rain jackets on.

Prepared for the worst, we kept fishing. We came upon a side channel where Allan and Earl hooked a couple of fish, and below that where the side channel came back together I had a good tug and was hooked up to a fish. As it got it to the side of the boat I got a good look at it and saw that it wasn't a taimen, but rather a small Amur pike. I had it right at the side of the boat ready to come in, but before Peter could get the net out the hook slipped out. No photo, but otherwise my first pike on a fly.

Just a few more yards down that same spot Brandon had a small taimen blow up on his top water fly, but he trout set and the fish was gone.

We continued fishing downstream, and soon Brandon had another fish blow up on his fly, this one a decent taimen close to 30 inches. It was hooked for a second, but came off.

We kept fishing, and in the next run I had a hard hit on my streamer and soon landed my first taimen of the day, another small fish in the low 20's.

As we worked our way downstream, it started to rain harder and harder. Brandon had another good hit and this time landed his fish, a small taimen in the net. The weather really moved in then, and by the time we pulled into lunch it was pouring down rain and a really hard, cold wind blowing.

Lunch was miserable. They tried to rig up a tarp but the wind just whipped the tarp violently and everyone was saturated and cold. Earl, in particular, was still wearing only shorts and he was shaking and borderline hypothermic at this point. Hot soup helped, as did red wine and vodka. The hot beef kabobs really helped, too, but still everyone was suffering and as soon as lunch was over 3 of the 4 boats opted to row back to camp to get warm and dry.

Fortunately, Brandon wanted to keep fishing, so our boat stayed out and toughed out the lousy conditions. It was worth it, easily the most productive session of fishing of the trip so far. During the course of the afternoon we each had 3 or 4 fish -- enough that we lost count -- attack our top water flies. Brandon did put one more taimen in the net, and I landed a decent Amur pike. We rowed into camp as the weather finally cleared, happy with our decision to keep fishing.

Cold, I opted for a warm shower which, coupled



with a vodka tonic, really hit the spot. Dinner was beef and potatoes. Even though most had the afternoon to relax and rest up, still everyone hit the sack early tonight. The harsh weather just really took it out of us.

Tuesday, September 5, 2017

The sun was out and there was a light layer of frost on the ground this morning. Not a cloud in the sky to remind us of the storm the day before. We had breakfast, then donned our waders as a light downstream breeze began to blow. John and I were to fish with Zolboo.



The storm yesterday had colored the river up. There was only about a foot of visibility, and it was a bit higher as well. Not a good sign. The fish didn't seem happy today either, as we fished hard all morning, changing flies and trying all sorts of things. We even tried trout fishing for a while without success.

We pulled into the lunch spot just upstream of the Dadal Bridge. Most of the other boats had similar slow fishing, with the exception of Brandon who landed a monster, 43 inch taimen. Fitting, as it was his last day on the river, and everyone was super excited for him. Tolga, on his day off, rolled into camp with a story of a 46 inch fish as well. So while the action overall was slow, we had our first hints of big fish on the trip.

We kept fishing after lunch, but John was feeling feverish and rested in the back of the boat for most of the afternoon. I did hook a fish on Zolboo's giant muskrat fly, but after a few seconds the hook came out, as it so often does.

We did make one interesting stop late in the afternoon, pulling over to a high bank where a grove of wild marijuana plants were growing. Zolboo explained that the locals don't really smoke it, most don't even know what it is.

We rolled into camp early after a largely unsuccessful day. Earl did land one this afternoon, Chip rolled a fish and Bruce rose one fish. Hopefully tomorrow the fish will settle back down and start eating.

Dinner was a traditional khorkhog, steamed mutton with potatoes. After dinner we enjoyed a fire, and Chip entertained us all by showing up to the campfire wearing a unicorn costume, in honor of the Mongolian horse culture of the nomads.

Wednesday, September 6, 2017



We woke to a crisp morning, blue skies all around and all signs towards another beautiful day. John was still under the weather, so he opted to stay back in camp and sleep a bit more while waiting for the new guest to arrive. We said goodbye to Brandon after breakfast as he headed to the plane.

The first three boats started fishing. I was in Zolboo's boat again, fishing with Bruce. It was another tough morning. Bruce did have one fish attack his streamer but he wasn't able to connect. We even cast to trout for a bit, and although I didn't have any success Bruce did land a nice 19 inch lenok on a hopper.

As we pulled into the lunch spot Allan hooked a taimen right in front of everyone, landing his second fish of the morning. His first had been 34 inches, this second 27. A good morning for him, although the rest of us were fruitless.

We enjoyed another tasty kabob lunch,

and spent some time wandering around collecting really cool rocks. Geologically the gravel bars on this river are the most interesting assortment of rocks and stones I've ever encountered on a river. My bag is going to be overweight on the way home just with the rocks I pick up each day!

It was another slow afternoon, a lot of casting. Bruce did move a couple more small taimen but was again unable to tighten up. I didn't move a fish all day.

In the evening we got to settle into our first non-ger camp. Since they can't drive into these more remote camps in the canyon section of the river (plus much of it is in a national park, though no one seems to fully know where the park boundaries actually are), they have to pack everything in and out and instead of gers we'll now be sleeping in tent tipis. The tipis are actually quite comfortable, not quite as big as the gers but still enough room for two cots, a couple of chairs, and room to spread out our gear. The only real bummer is no stove! There are still two big tents for kitchen and dining, plus a shower tent and two outhouse tents.



Dinner was maybe the best of the trip so far, a delicious dumpling soup to start, followed by Dutch oven lasagna. Everyone was exhausted from the long day of casting. We met our new angler, Basil from South Africa. He was on his third trip to Mongolia.

We watched the full moon rise over the ridge on the far side of the river, then wandered off to bed. That's when the real adventure began.

In the middle of the night, almost exactly at the stroke of midnight, suddenly I awoke to a loud, hard, gusting wind. The side of the tipi was slapping against my head, even though it had been several feet away when I went to sleep. Worried about my laundry on the line, I scrambled to throw on some clothes and head outside to check on it. As I reached for the zipper of the tent, a big gust hit and in an instant the tent was gone, blown clear of its stakes. I turned on my head lamp and looked around, seeing other lights popping up where the other tents were supposed to be. The wind had obliterated our camp.

Mayhem ensued as everyone scrambled to find their various items and throw them haphazardly into our dry bags as the wind screamed all around us. Then it started to rain. As the first few drops came down, the army of Mongolian staff ran to and fro grabbing cots and blankets and bags and in the blackness of the night somehow all of our gear and beds ended up in the dining tent before getting too saturated. They were able to get Basil and Bruce's tipi back up, so they returned to their tent to sleep, while the rest of us bunked up together in the dining tent. There was a giant pile of waterproof duffel bags in the middle, and 6 cots lined up against the sides. For a group notorious for snoring, it was a surprisingly quiet rest of the night.

Thursday, September 7, 2017

We were all slow to move out of our cramped sleeping quarters this morning, still in awe at the dramatic events of midnight. By the time we had moved all of our stuff out of the dining tent and started tracking down things hurriedly grabbed in the stormy night, the sun was rising to give birth to a seemingly beautiful day, almost like the midnight storm had never happened. Amazingly, nothing was broken or lost in the chaotic night.

We slowly gathered our gear, laughing about the craziness of just a few hours before. Eventually the cots were moved back out of the dining tent and breakfast was served, fried eggs and toast. Soon we were on the river.



I was fishing in Dan's boat today, with Basil, the new guest from South Africa. We both started with streamers. I was on a black Bad Attitude Baitfish. About $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way down the first run, one of those nondescript willow-lined runs we'd been fishing unsuccessfully all week, I saw a big flash behind my fly. I kept stripping and the flash returned, this time showing itself as a big taimen, well over 30 inches. The fish

kept following, swiping at the fly several times but not quite eating it. I ran out of room to strip, the leader at the tip of the rod and the fly just a few feet away from me in front of the boat. The fish was still there. I started twitching the fly by moving the rod tip, and saw the fish open his mouth and slowly inhale the fly. I didn't have room to strip strike, so I set with the rod tip, and was connected to a big taimen. The fish rolled and thrashed his head, and I felt like I had a good connection, but as so often happens with taimen fishing the hook came out. Damn!

We continued moving downriver, soon approaching a run where Dan had caught a 50 inch taimen two years before. We started fishing it on the left bank, another of those nondescript banks. I saw a really big taimen swirl on Basil's white streamer. Then again, following the fly. Then, right next to the boat, I watched the fish, well over 40 inches long, gobble up Basil's fly. He tried to set the hook, but it came out. That fish was the biggest I'd seen so far on this trip. Dan rowed us back up and we stopped and anchored to rest the fish. Ten minutes later we pulled back out and tried again. In the same spot, the fish moved again, this time to my fly. He swatted at it, but didn't quite eat the fly. We rested the pool again, changed flies, and tried two more times but couldn't move that fish again.

We kept fishing through the morning, and each moved another small taimen. A great morning overall. As we caught up with the other boats at lunch, most everyone else also had a good morning, with a decent number of big taimen moved and hooked, and a couple of smaller fish landed. Spirits were high again!

Lunch was good, another tasty soup and kabobs. Then back to fishing. The afternoon started off slow. I switched to a pole dancer, but still nothing. Late into the afternoon, however, the fish started getting active again. Basil missed two small fish, then moved another one. I threw in there and the fish came back to my fly, and this time I connected and we managed to get it into the net. Not a big fish, taped at 25 inches, but in the net.

We kept fishing, and Basil moved another fish. Then I connected, a nice fish in the high 20s, probably close to 30, on the end of the line fighting and well hooked. As I got it near the boat, however, the hook slipped out. Just as I started stripping the fly back in, frustrated, a different fish (this one smaller), ate the fly! Two fish on one cast. I got this second fish into the net, two landed for me today!



We pulled into camp and spirits were high, everyone moved a few more fish and although not many found the net it was exciting to be getting some action again.

Dinner was roast beef and potatoes, and before long we were all back in our tents asleep, hoping for an uneventful night.

Friday, September 8, 2017

We woke to another blue sky morning. Cold, with a thin layer of frost on the tents, but warming up quickly with the rising sun. We enjoyed breakfast of French toast, pancakes, and sausage, and soon were loaded into the boats and ready to fish. Allan and I were with Daniel today.

We rowed downstream from camp a ways, then started fishing to the right where the river pushed into a rock wall at a left hand turn. Allan spotted a fish roll at the tail out above the pool. When we got to the spot where he'd seen the fish, I got a hard hit on my black Bad Attitude Baitfish. But missed. I threw back in a second time, and the fish came back for the fly. This time I connected. As we got the fish in the net, Daniel realized it was not a taimen, but one of the rare and elusive Amur trout. It was about 21 inches, fat, a beautiful fish colored like a brown trout with lots of dark black spots.



We continued fishing, and at the bottom off the rock wall there was a large boulder with a smaller submerged rock behind it. I landed a cast right against the big boulder and as the fly moved downstream a nice taimen appeared above the second rock and took the fly. I strip-struck and thought I had him, but the fly came loose. Daniel tried to slow the boat in the heavy current and I shot another cast in there. The fish came back and ate again. Again I set the hook and thought I had him...then nothing. I threw in again, and the fish came back a third time. Set, hooked...gone. Daniel pulled over to the far side of the river to rest the fish for a minute and row back up to the top so we could give it one last shot. We rowed back over, I put another cast against the big rock, and for a fourth time the fish came out and ate the fly. This time I connected solidly enough that the fish stayed on the line. After a brief fight, we had a taimen in the net. We took a photo, taped him at a healthy 27 inches, and released him back to the river.



We kept fishing through the morning. Late into the morning the river was joined by a major tributary: the Bolge. We fished the confluence hard without success, but not far below where a slough came in I had a huge pike attack the fly. I had him hooked for a couple of seconds, but the hook came out. We tried a few more casts, and I did get the pike to come back and roll on the fly a second

time, but again I missed him. Dang, he was well over 30 inches, a big pike. We kept trying for the pike, when Allan connected to a fish. We thought it was the pike until it jumped and spit the hook, when we had a good look at a decent-sized taimen.

We kept fishing, and Allan moved another small taimen before lunch. Lunch was a new treat, chicken and sweet onions with potato and bacon soup. Then back to fishing.

I had switched to a massive, 8 inch long black and red pike fly that Dave Gallenberger had tied up for me, hoping it would entice a monster taimen. Not long into the afternoon, the monster fly did move a taimen, but I missed the first strike. I threw it back in there, and the fish did come back a second time. This time I got a solid strike, and soon we had another 26 inch taimen in the net. It was surprising that such a large fly was hit by a not particularly large fish, a testament to the super-aggressive nature of these fish.

Continuing downriver, we went for a while without a strike. Then Allan moved a couple of small fish but they were only swiping at his black streamer. We approached the head of a big island and could see Tolga netting a fish for Earl. Just upstream of them, above the island, we had a flurry of activity as we moved three different taimen in a series of casts. The third fish was well hooked by Allan, who got his first taimen of the day into the net.

We fished through the afternoon, Allan moving one more small fish before we pulled into the camp. It was a good day overall for our boat, a lot of fish moved and 3 taimen plus an Amur trout in the net, and if I'd landed that big pike it would have made for an Onon Slam. The other boats had mixed success, but John did manage to land a 32 inch fish, the biggest of the day for the group and putting him into the 30 inch club.

This camp is the most beautiful so far. The tipis are spread out over a sweeping gravel bar littered with elk tracks. The river is right there, a beautiful classic steelhead run, with a dramatic granite cliff wall on the opposite side of the river. Simply spectacular.

We enjoyed a great dinner, breaded and lightly fried chicken breast with a spicy tomato salad and French onion soup. Then some great conversation as one by one we drifted off to our tipis. The only disruption in the night was the sound of elks bugling far off in the distance, accompanied by the howling of wolves. One of my goals for this trip was to hear a wolf: mission accomplished!



Saturday, September 9, 2017

It was another brisk morning, with a thin layer of clouds. We had breakfast and were soon in the boats ready to fish. I was with Tolga today, fishing with Chip. We started off with a good start. I was fishing the giant red and black pike fly that Dave had tied for me and had been so effective the day before. Right off the back I moved a small taimen, and missed him.

As we came up to a slough entering the river, I had a big pike come clear out of the water to eat the fly. I had him hooked for a moment, then gone. We kept trying in that area, and I missed a taimen. Then the pike came back for a second shot, and I had him well hooked and soon in the net. Tolga taped him at exactly 30 inches.

We continued fishing into the morning. I moved a couple more taimen, missing them both, before finally landing a small fish (mid 20 inch range) right at the lunch spot.

At lunch we learned that the other boats were also having a good morning, with taimen landed in every boat including a couple over 30 inches.

We kept fishing after lunch, as the river descended into a glorious canyon, defined by dramatic red rock cliffs dropping straight into the river, and punctuated by the brilliant fall colors on the trees, the dark green of the Siberian pine juxtaposed against flaming red bushes and the golden-hued leaves of aspen trees.

The fishing in the canyon was spectacular for the group. Our boat failed to land any fish, although we moved at least 10 to the fly, several of these fish eating the fly four or five times. We just couldn't keep them on the end of the line long enough to get the net out. Allan and Basil landed 9 in their boat, while John and Bruce went 8 fish landed for 23 hooked. Earl and Chris landed 4 taimen and an asp. Overall, a lot of action all afternoon! And several of the fish landed were over 30 inches, with several of the fish hooked and lost estimated in the 40s. This is what a normal day on the Onon is supposed to be like!

Dinner was roasted chicken with rice, and split pea soup followed by a tasty chocolate dessert. Everyone was very tired from the long intense day of fishing, and camp quieted down early tonight.



Sunday, September 10, 2017

It was sunny and clear out again this morning, but by the time we'd finished breakfast the wind was starting to howl. Chris and I were fishing with Peter, him struggling against the wind and us flailing away trying to get our flies into the water without hooking ourselves. As the river curved from bend to bend, we'd switch from upstream blowing wind to downstream blowing wind. Frustrating and miserable, and it didn't matter if you were in the front of the boat or the back, the wind was brutal.

Still, we worked hard and managed to each move a fish to our streamers in the morning. Both fish were way in tight to either a snag or in the willows, very hard to reach. We had them on for a couple of seconds, and I almost got mine to the boat before the hook came out.

Lunch was a quiet affair. Kabobs and tomato soup, but everyone was just beat up from the wind. Several spread out on the expansive gravel bar to get out of the wind and napped. Eventually we got moving again, another tough afternoon in the wind. Somehow Chris and I each moved a fish again in the afternoon, although again we were unable to get either of them into the net.

The other boats all fared similarly. Bruce did land 2, one of them 30 inches. Basil landed one, and Allan landed one.

Dinner was delicious, spaghetti carbonara. It didn't take long till after dinner for everyone to head to bed. Hoping, praying for better weather on the morrow.

Monday, September 11, 2017

The day started out sunny, cold, and calm. John and I were fishing with Peter, but soon into the morning the winds started to pick up again. Nonetheless we had a pretty good morning, at least John did. He started off moving a fish and missing it, a small one, then a few minutes later landed a small taimen in the mid 20s. Then we hit a small slough coming back into the river and along a narrow sand bar dropping off into the main river a big taimen, mid to upper 30s, attacked his fly. He missed the set on the first chance, but the fish came back a second, then a third time. Still no connection. As the wind blew the boat too far below the fish for John to reach I cast in there and the fish came for my fly, missed, then again, and this time I could see the fly in the fish's mouth but as hard and fast as I could strip he was swimming towards the boat and I never was able to connect with a good set and the fly was spit out. We rowed across the river and I walked the boat upstream about 200 yards, high enough for Peter to row back over and give us another shot. Just below where we'd hooked it the first time, it came back to John's fly and this time he got a good solid set on it. This fish fought hard, running downstream and pulling line off the reel. John kept him connected and started working him back towards the boat. When the fish was about 15 feet away...the fly came out. Damn!



We kept fishing, and John moved another big fish, this one also probably over 30 inches. The wind blew us past the spot too quickly to get a second shot, so Peter pulled over and we got out and walked up and tried to cast to the fish from the shore, but couldn't get the fish to move again.

Back in the boat, we fished on down and soon after John hooked up to another fish, another small taimen in the net. Then nothing else until lunch.

Lunch was a somber affair as most had had a slow morning and the wind was beating everyone down. Bruce did land a big Amur trout, and Allan had landed a small taimen.

The afternoon was really slow in our boat, not a single fish moved. Pretty much the same in the other boats, although the good news was that Chip finally landed a fish, a nice taimen taped at 30 inches, the first he'd landed in several days.

We pulled into our last camp, another ger camp so a bit more luxury for our last few nights. We would spend 3 nights in this camp. Dinner was another khorkhog, sheep ribs with salad and potatoes. Everyone again was exhausted from the bitter windy day, so soon snores emanated from the various gers.

Tuesday, September 12, 2017

Our last day floating, after two weeks and nearly 200 miles. Spirits were low but hopeful, low from the last two days struggling in the wind, hopeful because the sun was out and the wind wasn't howling yet, and we all knew the lore of the last day of taimen fishing. For some reason, more big fish come on the last day than any other time.

We were also excited to be fishing a new section of river, a float they've only ever done once before that would take us right to the Russian border. In fact, we had to be careful to pick the right channel, as the left channel towards the end took off into Russia.

Allan and I were fishing with Tolga today. The morning started out cool and crisp. There had been frost on the tents and our boots left outside were frozen. But without the wind howling downriver, it was warming up quickly.

The river started out broad and wide, but as we worked our way downstream it began braiding out into numerous channels, creating a lot of wonderful taimen habitat and a lot more manageable river in terms of finding places to target hunting fish. We'd had a few days now without rain so the river was finally starting to drop and clear, too. We had about 3 feet of visibility, the most since we'd made our first cast into the river two weeks ago.

In one such place, where a small braid took off to the right with a logjam on the near side of it, I managed to pull a small taimen out from the logs to attack a pole dancer. I missed him on the first two takes, but the next cast in he came again and this time I got a solid hook set on him, and managed to land our first fish of the day. It was a smaller fish, 24 inches, but in the net and a great start to the day.

A few bends further down the river, Allan cast his white Chilean Goat streamer into a set of logs and snags a few feet off the bank. He hung up and thought he had a snag, but as Tolga rowed over to try to get it out we saw that the line was moving. It wasn't a snag! Then we saw the fish in the water, a really big taimen. About then it turned and shook its head and spit the hook. Tolga pulled hard on the oars to get us back into position and Allan put a new cast back into the snag. One strip, and the fish was there again. He strip-set hard and was connected. The fish pulled hard and headed downstream, getting him onto the reel. Allan slowly worked the big fish back toward the boat as Tolga maneuvered over to a narrow weedbed that was just shallow enough for him to get out of the boat to land the fish as Allan weaved it in and out of the snags and led it into the net. It was huge! Tolga got out the tape measure, and the fish stretched out at 41 inches! We snapped some photos, then released the taimen back into the river.

What a great start to the day! We continued fishing until lunch, without moving another fish in our boat, though the other boats, when we saw them, were frequently hooked up to taimen. It was shaping up to be a great last day!



After another kabob lunch, we hit the river for the final row. We were literally paralleling the Russian border, and you could see a Russian town in the distance, the Russian watchtowers on the hilltops, and we passed the Mongolian border guard station. We had to be careful to stick to the channels to the right, as some of the left hand braids went over into Russia.

We had a long lull after lunch without much action. I had switched to a black Bad Attitude Baitfish, while Allan tried the Pole Dancer for a while then returned to the white goat. Soon he moved a fish, and was landing a small taimen in the 24 inch range.

The afternoon was spectacular, warm with only a light breeze. With the fall colors in near full glory, it was a beautiful float.



We were casting into a deep channel along the willows, when a small taimen came out and attacked my fly. I set and had it on for a second, then it was gone. I cast back in there, it ate again and again it came off. A third cast, nothing. One more time, this time as the fly swing

below the boat a much larger fish emerged and ate the fly. I strip set hard, again, and had him stuck. The fish started pulling out line, and I turned him and was leading him back towards the boat as Tolga was moving to find a place to net it, when the hook came out. We had a good look at the fish, easily in the mid 30 inch range. I was devastated. Last day, possibly the last chance at a trophy fish.

Still, we had more river left to fish and maybe an hour of daylight, so we kept at it. In the next run, also a deep slot adjacent to the willows, a huge wake charged out after my fly, and a big taimen came clear out of the water. It was one of those takes where they jump and then try to eat on the way down, but it missed. I kept the fly out there and the fish came back and hit it this time, but I missed the set. I could see it following still, but then it disappeared. Tolga pulled hard on the oars to move us back up a few feet, and I cast back into the same spot. This time the fish came back, and attacked the fly with a vengeance, like he was pissed off it had gotten away from him the first time. I got a solid hook set in, then set again 2 more times just in case. This was another big fish, and it started pulling off line downstream. Soon I was on the reel, slowly working him across the current as Tolga rowed to the other side of the river to find a place to land it. He anchored in the shallows and hopped out, diving at the fish to get it in the net as I pulled it close. We taped it at 36 inches, the biggest taimen I've ever landed. We snapped some photos and celebrated with hugs and cheers all around, then released the fish back into Mother Onan.



Our day was made, but it wasn't quite over. Allan moved another fish that missed the fly. Then, at the last spot of the day at the head of another braided channel, both of our flies were swinging across the tailout above the channel. Allan had a small taimen hit his fly and he was on, and a half second later a second fish hit my fly. A double hookup! Unfortunately mine came off, and though I got him to take two more times while Allan was landing his fish we never were able to seal the deal on the double. Still, an exciting way to end the day's float.



We rowed down to the takeout, where the trucks and trailers were waiting. The guides and drivers loaded all the boats onto the trailers, while the guests and our gear piled into a 4x4 van. The sun was setting while we pulled away for the 50 minute drive overland to the camp.

Everyone had a good day, with numerous

taimen landed. We were exhausted from everything, and after a quick dinner and toasts all around, we hit the sack early.

Wednesday, September 13, 2017

We woke early again to another sunny morning. We had breakfast, then said our goodbyes to the guides as they loaded up their gear and the boats for the full day drive back up to the top of the float, where they would meet the next group coming in tomorrow to start it all over again.

A few of the guys opted to relax in camp and enjoy a leisurely last day. John, Allan, Earl, Basil, and myself all decided to fish for a bit. The drivers, plus Zolboo and Soyol, helped load one of the rafts into the back of a truck, while one of the vans drove us the short 5 minute drive upstream to the broad gravel bar across from the mouth of the tributary that we'd passed two nights before.

John and I stayed on the gravel bar to swing flies with our Spey rods for a few hours, figuring we'd brought the long rods all the way to Mongolia and we might as well use them. The others hopped in the raft, rowed across the river, and started hiking up the tributary.

We had fun working on our casts, and while the water we were in looked good, we were mostly unsuccessful. John did get one quick tug, but the fish never came back. I didn't move anything.

At 2 o'clock, the van showed up and we hitched a ride back to camp to organize our gear and enjoy one of the nicest afternoons we'd had in over a week.

The others returned around 5 in the raft, having hooked a couple of lenok and a couple of small taimen but nothing noteworthy. We sat around in the warm afternoon sun until it was dinner time. Dinner was roasted mutton with vegetables and rice and a delicious egg and tomato salad, followed by chocolate pudding for dessert.

After dinner we had a great bonfire, gazing upon the Milky Way and millions of stars. Late into the evening, Zolboo, Soyol, Oggie, and the other two ladies in camp all serenaded us with three traditional Mongolian songs. We sang, listened to music, and laughed together with our new Mongolian friends until one by one we turned into our gers for a few hours' shuteye.

Thursday, September 14, 2017

We had an early wake up call this morning, 5:30 am. Breakfast was at 6, and by 7 all of our gear was loaded into the back of one of the vans. We piled into the other van, and started off for the 2.5 hour drive across country to the "landing strip" where we would meet the airplane.



It was a beautiful drive, with the sun out and fall colors brilliant in all their glory. Eventually we pulled into a broad, grassy valley with a long straightaway. In the distance to one side a pair of Mongolians were running an ancient tractor to cut hay. On the other side of the valley two horsemen were herding cattle. You could see just about forever in every direction.

The staff and drivers "built" the runway. We watched as they set up a wind sock on a tall pole, then laid out red flags to mark the length and width of the runway in the grass. Then the two vans drove back and forth as fast as they could to tamp down the grass and make the landing area semi-smooth.

We heard the plane at about 10:45. It flew overhead, circled the runway, then did a low pass to take a better look before circling back and coming in to land. We gave big hugs to our friends, said our goodbyes, loaded everything into the plane, then turned around and took off over the Mongolian Steppe.



The flight lasted 1 hour 45 minutes. But it was the first 45 minutes that was the most spectacular, flying over the Onan River Valley that we'd just spent two weeks floating down, nearly 200 miles of river. We could see many of the memorable places where we'd caught and lost fish, had our camps, and built memories that would last us a lifetime. With the river finally starting to clear up, we could see gravel bars that weren't there a few days before, and I'm sure the next group floating down the river would have some really great fishing.

Before we knew it we were touching down in UB. We gathered our gear, and met Nanna and the Nomadic Journeys bus for the 20 minute drive back into the city. We checked back into the Bayangol Hotel, then settled into our rooms to pack and organize gear.

At 6 we met up downstairs. We had heard that the bar/restaurant where I had tried to meet up with Mark Portman and Jeff Forsee a couple of weeks ago served great wings and burgers, and that the other Mongolian guide Jack even worked there in the wintertime, so we decided to head there. It turns out Jack was in town, as Earl had connected with him via Facebook earlier in the day and he stopped by the hotel and agreed to meet us there for dinner.

We walked the 20 minutes down Seoul Avenue to RePUBlik, and settled in. None of us had had lunch, so we were starved, and started with some chicken wings, onion rings, and pizza appetizers, then big old burgers all around for dinner. Stuffed, we walked back to the hotel to

get a few hours of sleep before our early departure in the morning. Earl and I met in the bar for one last cocktail and some great conversation, then we, too, headed off to bed.

Friday, September 15, 2017

Travel home was long but relatively smooth. We met Nanna in the morning at 6:30 am after a quick breakfast. After breakfast, I went back to the room to grab my luggage and on the CNN newsfeed learned that North Korea had just launched another missile over the Sea of Japan, right where we'd be flying in a few hours. Great!

The ride to the airport was quick, and soon we were all checked in for the flight. There was a sign after passport control showing fishing rods as not allowed in carryon...but still everyone with rod tubes made it through without a problem. We'd learned to check our reels when checking in for the charter flight a couple of weeks before.

Soon we were boarding the MIAT, 3 hour flight to Seoul. It was packed, but a smooth flight. In Seoul we had no problem navigating through the transit area to our gate, where we had a couple of hours to wait, not a long layover. Before we knew it we were back in the air, dodging North Korean missiles on our way across the Pacific. I had moved seats at the last minute to get an empty seat next to me, so I was able to spread out and grab a few hours of shuteye on the 9 hour, 40 minute flight to San Francisco.

In SFO we waltzed through Immigration and Customs, cleared security again, had a quick lunch, and only had another hour to wait before the final, 35 minute flight home to Redding, where our loved ones were waiting for us with big hugs.