

2015 Fly Fish Mongolia Journal

Michael Caranci

Thursday, June 11

The long travel day started early, awake at 3:30 am to get to the airport for my 5:40 am departure. The flight from Redding to SFO went smoothly, and by 7:30 am I was sitting down to a hot Yankee Pier breakfast and much needed cup of coffee. I had about 4 hours of layover, so wandered around the airport for a bit before finding my gate in the International terminal, where Larry was already waiting. We chatted for a bit, then found Bob and Cord, and before long we were all boarding the plane for the next leg of the journey.

The plane was full, but for a 12 hour flight it wasn't too horrible. Fortunately I had a slender Korean girl sitting in the middle seat next to me, so actually room to breathe. They fed us a couple of times, normal airplane food not tragic but not great either. Sustenance at least. I napped for about an hour, but that was it and spent the rest of the time reading up on the history, culture, and politics of Mongolia.

I have to admit that this trip just kind of happened, and Mongolia was never a place high on my angling radar. Sure, I'd heard about it, read about it, and the idea of catching a monster taimen was appealing. I knew that taimen were the largest salmonid on Earth, an ancient, slow-growing fish that lived up to 35 years or more and were the dominant predators in their ecosystem. But I didn't know much about Mongolia, except brief recollections from high school and college about Genghis Khan (Chingis Kahn to a Mongolian) conquering the known world hundreds of years ago.

The more I read, the more intrigued I became: the least densely populated country in the world; a dichotomy between two Mongolia's, the bustling capital city of Ulaanbaatar and the rest of the country preferring the nomadic herding lifestyle it has maintained for generations; no property ownership outside of UB; a rare progressive democracy bordered by China and Russia over a hundred years of recent history dominated by these larger Communist neighbors; and that pales into comparison to Shamanism, reindeer herders, and Eagle hunters. I was quickly becoming not only intrigued but enamored with this unique culture, almost unknown to most of the Western World.

Eventually, the plane touched down into the haze of Seoul, South Korea.

Friday, June 12

Apparently there's a MERS endemic right now in Korea, and people were wearing masks and we had to pass through several quarantine checkpoints scattered throughout the airport, where a person

sat next to what looked to be a video camera that displayed body heat on a monitor, looking for signs of fever. The airport had a sterile, almost “Total Recall” feel to it.

We remained in transit and our bags were checked all the way through. It took us a while to figure out where we needed to go, but the signs were all in both Korean and English so we figured it out. We had to go through one security checkpoint, but it was easy and before long we found our gate and settled in to wait. We found a nice upstairs area with a lot of comfortable lounge chairs, quiet areas where people were sprawled and sleeping, a couple of lounges, restaurants, and a small bar, and even an area where they have free showers. We grabbed a quick Heineken, and soon were ready to board the next flight.

After the 12 hour leg to South Korea, the 3 hour flight into Ulaanbaatar was quick and easy. We touched down smoothly, and in no time were disembarking the plane and working our way through Immigrations. Immigrations was just a matter of waiting in line, showing them a passport, then moving on through. From there we had to wait a long time to get our luggage, but fortunately it all came through. Customs was equally easy, consisting of two lines, each one leading to a young woman in uniform who either waved you right through or asked you to scan one or two of your bags through an X-ray machine.

We walked out into the terminal, where a horde of people was waiting, all carrying signs, some in Cyrillic with others in English. Right in front were a middle-aged man and a young woman, both in blue Nomadic Journeys shirts, with a sign with all four of our names on it. They waved us around and helped us with our bags as we walked out of the terminal and into the temperate Mongolian midnight. The woman introduced herself as Tseegii (pro-nounced “Tsi-ghee”); she would be our guide and interpreter during our time in UB. There were cars and people moving around everywhere as we made the short walk to the large white Nomadic Journeys van, loaded in our luggage, then climbed aboard for the 30 minute drive into town to the hotel.

It was by now just past midnight, yet the streets of Ulaanbaatar were busy with cars. They drive here like in so many other remote, second world nations: recklessly, cars ever within an inch or two of each other, heedless of any traffic lanes, signals, or even pedestrians. It's every vehicle for itself.

At night the UB skyline was lit up, and you could make out the blocky shape of communist-era construction. Yet the shadows of countless cranes scattered across the city hinted toward the future growth that marks the burgeoning growth of UB.

The driver turned off the busy main avenue down a series of narrow alleyways before pulling up to the Bayangol Hotel. The Bayangol was one of the first hotels in UB, built in 1964. The location is ideal, a short walk from Chinggis Kahn Square and dozens of restaurants and shops.

We followed Tseegii inside, where we were greeted by the clean, white hotel lobby and the warm friendly face of the hotel porter. We each showed our passport to the English-speaking reception desk attendant, and were quickly issued keys to our rooms. A quick ride up the elevator and a much-needed shower and firm mattress were very welcome. The room was moderately sized, aged but clean with decent beds (two twins) and everything one would need to be more than comfortable for a night or two.

Saturday, June 13

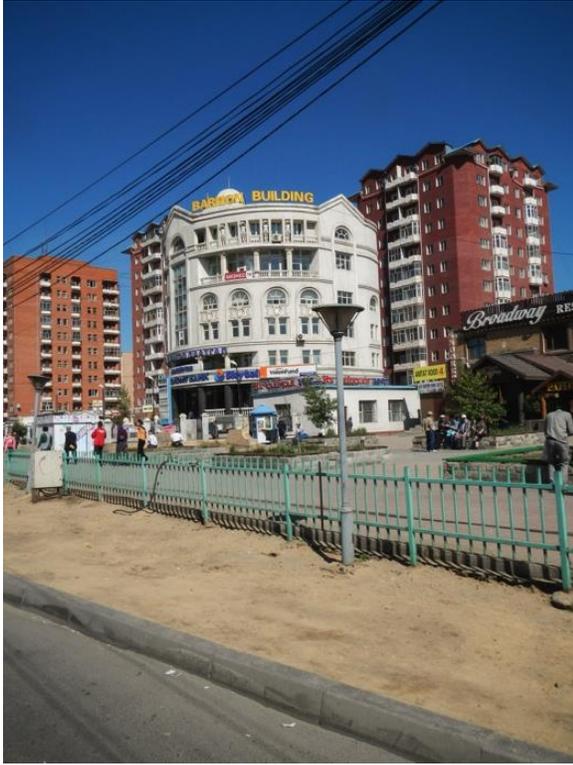
I blinked and four hours later it was morning and I was riding the elevator back down to the lobby to partake of the free buffet breakfast is included in the hotel package.

In the lobby, I exchanged some cash into Mongolian Tugriks, then joined Larry along with the three guys who had flown out a week before us to start their trip with a Camel Trek in the Gobi Desert.

Ron, Allan, and Bob W. were regaling Larry with the first of many stories from their recent adventures in the Gobi. They had started off on a train from UB, then a drive into the desert. They stayed in wonderful ger accommodations each night, and spent the days hiking and riding camels around the Gobi, where the highlights were wildlife sightings of gazelle, ibex, Argali sheep, and eagles. They met some locals, and perhaps the most memorable part was an opportunity to observe a small naadam festival in a local village. Naadams include horse races, wrestling matches, and performances, and everyone in the community, including young children, partake in everything. It sounded incredible. They raved about the entire experience, including the staff, food, and accommodations.

We had plans to meet Tseegii again at 10:00 to head out to meet a local family for lunch. By 10:00 we were all back in the hotel lobby, where we were also joined by Bob B. and Cord. Outside the hotel we boarded another Nomadic Journeys bus, this one a bit larger than the bus from last night. We had the same driver, and as soon as everyone was seated we pulled out into the UB traffic in anticipation of a 2 hour, 60 kilometer drive to a nomadic area outside of the hustle and bustle of UB.

The drive started with the intense traffic of UB, and we had a chance to see the city in the daylight for the first time. It is a busy city, yet indicative of the bipolar juxtaposition of Mongolian life, the big city with its skyscrapers and noise and construction and traffic and people everywhere, yet just a few hundred meters from the main busy street you could see the paved roads turn to dirt and hundreds of small houses and gers perched into the dirt hillsides that ring the city. Something like 70% of the population still live in these “Ger Districts.” The nomadic life remains, even here in the capital city.



Soon the road turned into a four lane freeway and traffic finally began to dissipate as we drove through an industrial area which soon opened up to the broad, vast, endless Mongolian countryside, miles upon miles of

open grassland and mountains, reminiscent of Wyoming or Montana. Gradually the four lanes turned to two, and we began to notice various shamanistic holy sites, some including small shrines but most simple, small posts with colored blue rags or "flags" sticking up out of piles of rocks. The Blue color in Shamanism is a holy color representing the sky. When you looked out across the step you would see these sites all over the place, especially near the tops of the hillsides. Cows, goats, sheep, and the famous Mongolian horses reined freely everywhere across the grassland.

Eventually we turned off the paved road and onto a dirt track that began leading up into the mountains. It was a rough road, but exhilarating to see the natural beauty of the landscape permeated by the herds of animals, and the occasional ger or solitary rider on horseback. As we wound up to the top of the mountain, we stopped to explore one of the larger shamanistic holy sites. The ritual is to walk around the cairn counterclockwise in three circles, throwing a rock on the pile and making a wish each time, for three good luck wishes.

We followed the tradition – in awe of the panoramic views – then continued down the hill into the expansive valley below. As we neared the valley floor, you could see the rocky mountainside to our right and the broad valley stretching out as far as you could see to the west, lined with the distinctive



green of a serpentine river against the far side and miles upon miles of green grassland. Amidst the sea of green were countless scattered white circles that were the gers of the nomads. Groups of livestock wandered free across the plains.

We hit the flatland and the dirt road turned to a two-lane track across the grass. The bus bumped and jolted along the uneven ground, then shuddered to a stop as its nose and undercarriage buried into a small soft muddy

mound. We were stuck. We climbed out to take a look, and you could see the back tires spinning in the low wet grass while the front of the bus was dug deep into a grassy knoll. Before long we were joined by several of the locals: one man rode up on horseback wearing a green T-shirt, blue sweat pants, and dirty white Crocs; another man pattered up on a small motorcycle in camo pants and a Michigan Wolverines sweater; and a family consisting of father, and two young boys pulled up in an SUV.

Between the bus driver, the seven of us, and the 3 other Mongolian men, there were a lot of ideas thrown out about how to get the bus unstuck. We spent the next half hour scrounging the grassy steppe for rocks to try and get under the tires for traction, but everything we tried was fruitless. The Mongolians left in SUV and motorcycle, returning with a couple of shovels and small jacks, plus some small tools and a short piece of light gage cable. We collectively spent another hour or more digging around the tires, with Cord and two of the Mongolians completely covering themselves in mud rolling and digging around the wheels to try and get some chunks of wood and rocks under the tires. None of it was anywhere remotely safe, with the Mongolians using the lugs on the tire to jack against (we were waiting for the heavy weight of the bus to shoot one of the lugs off and across the steppe like a bullet), the



driver at one point halfway under the bus with only his legs sticking out – if he'd been wearing striped stockings and ruby red slippers he could have passed for the Wicked Witch of the East in Wizard of Oz – while Cord and the other nomad worked with small jacks in the soft mud. If one of the jacks slipped, the driver would have been literally chopped in half. It was crazy. But also amazing to watch how effectively



Cord and the Mongols worked together, with no common language other than trying to get it done. Eventually, we had dug out a huge section of the mud and grass that the front of the bus was stuck in, raised the tires and gotten a good chunk of wood and rock underneath a few of the tires, and hooked up the cable to the SUV. The driver climbed in and fired up the bus and while we all pushed and pushed from the back and the SUV towed and the driver gunned the engine and the bus rocked up out of its muddy hole and bounced across the steppe, almost getting stuck in the next muddy hole but plowing through until a hundred feet away it rolled to a smooth stop in a section of solid ground, unstuck at last. What an adventure!



We thanked our new friends, then continued on, driving another 5 minutes across the steppe to a single, solitary ger. The man on the motorcycle led the way to show the driver the best route to avoid getting stuck again, and we soon learned that this man was also our host for lunch, along with his wife.

We pulled up to the ger and got off the bus, where we were greeted with a warm smile from an eloquently dressed Mongolian woman. She wore a full-length robe, shiny blue with stark white patterns and trim. She held in her hands a light blue ribbon of cloth wrapped around a small white bowl, which held fresh warm cow's milk that she offered to each of us as a sign of welcoming. After this lovely greeting, she welcomed us into her home. Guests upon entering a ger move to the left and

towards the back, with men sitting on the left side of the ger and women to the right. We all sat on either a small bed or low stools. Our hostess served us each a cup of warm milk tea with salt, followed by a plate of dried yogurt curds and small biscuit-like cookies, almost like miniature scones. Then she pulled a massive wok off the stove that was situated in the center of the ger, and served each of us a huge plate of a typical Mongolian meal, a



collection of noodles mixed with mutton, carrots, and potatoes. Finally, she served some fresh yogurt. I can't say that any of it was something I would eat or drink again, but it was incredible to experience it there, with these wonderfully gracious people, and foods fresh from their own livelihood right there in the wilds of the Mongolian steppe. And the ger itself was quite remarkable, a perfect circle and very spacious inside. It was adorned with colorful decorations, including depictions of flowers and animals, the 12 animals of the lunar calendar, blue and orange wooden spokes that made up the structure for the ceiling leading to the hole in the middle for the stovepipe, a large orange door in the front complete with small windows, a cozy couch and small bed, colorful rugs on the floor and against the wall for insulation and decoration, and, a small personal touch with a collection of family photos next to a solar-charged Deep Cycle battery and small TV.

This was how they lived, every day, moving their ger four times a year with the seasons. In fact, this is exactly how the vast majority of Mongolians live today, including many in the big city of UB. But out here on the steppe, it is a way of life, herding the animals and selling the meat and wool to make the famous Mongolian “Gobi” cashmere.

We bid farewell to our new friends and thanked them for their hospitality. The woman blessed our bus by scattering a few drops of fresh milk on each of the tires. Based on our drive in, we could use the good fortune! The man, mounted now on his horse, showed us the best way off the plain without getting stuck again.

We waved goodbye, and continued back up the mountain.



The bus started overheating halfway up the mountain, and we had to stop for a bit to let it cool. We continued, almost rolling the bus at one point when the driver took it across country to find a different dirt road up the mountain, but eventually we made it. As we neared the paved road, there were riders scattered frequently across the grassy hillsides, most of them young boys between 10 and 12 years old.

Back in town, we stopped by a Cashmere store to buy some souvenirs for home, then the huge State Department Store for more shopping before returning to the hotel. We cleaned up quickly, then met downstairs at the hotel bar for a quick Tiger beer before dinner. We were joined by Jan and Mark from Nomadic Journeys, and after a pint Mark led us out into UB for a short walk towards the main square and one of his favorite restaurants, the Grand Kahn Irish Pub. It was a surprisingly large restaurant, an obvious hangout for expats as well as locals, and we enjoyed a good meal, ranging from lamb to pork to sausage to steak to classic Mongolian buuz (steamed mutton-filled dumplings, kind of like pot stickers) and khuushuur (similar to a large empanada stuffed with beef or mutton). By now it was late and we were all tired from the day's adventures, so we were glad to return to the hotel to crash for the night.

Sunday, June 14

It was a slow relaxing morning: Bayangol buffet breakfast, free hotel WiFi, packing and re-packing bags to kill some time before the next leg of the journey. At 12:00 I headed back to the lobby with my luggage, storing one bag with the hotel for the duration of the float. Tseegii was there to meet us. We loaded our luggage into a smaller truck, then piled into back the white Nomadic Journeys bus. It was another beautiful sunny day as we drove across UB to the airport, though today cumulous clouds could be seen building all around the horizon.

At the airport Tseegii helped walk us through all of the flight and baggage check-ins. Once we were all checked in and had our tickets issued, we made our way to the VIP lounge, where we relaxed in style in cozy couches and enjoyed a couple of Golden Gobi complimentary beers.

They called us to start clearing security at a few minutes before 3:00. We walked out from the VIP lounge, then proceeded through a security checkpoint. They were very thorough, first finding and pulling out a pair of hemostats from Bob B's bag. When Cord's bag went through, however, they really threw a fit as they discovered an old .22 bullet buried in some deep pocket.

Cord didn't know it was there, left over from some past hunting trip at least five years before and having previously made it through US and South Korean security no problem. They were not happy to have found the bullet, and though he said they could keep it, they ended up calling in the police to talk to him before finally waving him through. The adventure continues!

We all boarded the flight, an old German Fokker 20 turbo prop, and a pretty full flight. The plane took off into a windy, bumpy Mongolian sky, and for the next hour and a half we bumped and

jostled our way over countless miles of open space, as far as the eye could see. We flew over a couple of rivers, but mostly it was brown grassland and mountains stretching on forever, with the occasional tiny white dot that indicated a nomad's ger.

Upon approaching Muron, we could see rain and thick patchy thunderheads, and the pilot alerted us that he was going to circle a couple of times to allow a rainstorm to pass the airport before landing. A few minutes later, we were touching down in the small town of Muron.

We walked across the tarmac and were met in the terminal by Nara and Sara (translates to moon and sun) a mother daughter team that were the Muron ground handlers for the operation. Also joining them were three Mongolian men who would handle our luggage and be our drivers for the afternoon. It took a long time for our bags to come out, but finally they did, we loaded them onto carts, and rolled out to the small parking area where three newish Land Cruisers were parked. We loaded in all the gear, then piled ourselves into the vehicles with 3 anglers and one driver per rig. At 5:45 pm, we took off down a two-lane dirt track circumventing the airport landing strip.



Before long the dirt track connected to a well-paved highway, and we were off. After only about 10 minutes, however, we were hammered with an intense storm, rain coming down in sheets and blowing sideways in a heavy wind, with lightning illuminating the mountainous skyline. It was



raining so hard at one point we were crawling a mere 5 miles an hour down the road. As we crawled through the blinding rain, you could see the occasional nomad on horseback or motorcycle sitting proud and tall in the rain, seemingly oblivious to the downpour around them. It continued on like this for about 20-30 minutes, then the rain stopped and the clouds quickly dissipated. An hour after we left the airport, the sun was out as we turned

left onto another two-lane dirt track. The first two hours of the dirt road weren't bad, as it was a fairly heavily used stretch of road winding through gradual planes and low hills. We came to call these stretches the “six-lane highways”, as there would literally be five or six “lanes” cut into the step, each a two-track cut by multiple vehicles driving over it, and the drivers would randomly switch lanes back and forth to try and find the smoothest track to follow. We passed a broad shallow lake, and thousands of acres of the most beautiful green pastureland I've ever seen in my life. We stopped once for a pee-and-stretch, but mostly powered down the road appreciating the suspension of the off-road trucks compared with the clunky bus from the day before. We saw several very large cranes wandering across the grass, some small ground squirrels, and the ubiquitous herds of cattle, sheep, and goats. Then suddenly we crossed over a rise and there in front of us were a herd of massive, shaggy-looking yaks. Some were midnight black, some black and white and grey, some brown. They looked like giant, very hairy cows. There were even some baby yaks frolicking in the grass.

Two hours into the drive we stopped in a small village, where we met one of the guides, Zolboo (Pronounced “Zole-boh”). We learned that one of the other vehicles had suffered a flat tire, so we waited there in the village with Zolboo, who spoke very good English, until they showed up after only about a 15 minute delay. Then back on the road.

An hour from the village, we stopped on a high rocky outcrop for a picnic lunch. Incredible panoramas encircled us in all directions. We continued on, and not long after our picnic we turned a corner in a narrow vale and there, marching across the steppe, were a dozen or more two-humped camels. Not long after that I spotted two large ducks in the grass, both the size of geese, and Allan recognized them as Shell Ducks, a species he'd seen before in New Zealand.



We continued bumping and jostling our way down the road, and the further we got the more rocky and mountainous it became, until soon it was a rough road winding up and down countless canyons. We summited dozens of rocky hillsides, each one followed with another and in the distance peaks seemed to jut up forever. It was finally starting to lose a little light when I finally fell asleep, despite the rough road, at about 11:00.

I was jostled awake an hour later when the Cruiser stopped, and outside it was finally night and cold. We had reached the military checkpoint, marking the entrance into the border zone with Russia. Although we had woken the guards up, they were very cordial explaining that they take their duty to

protect the border zone, and the Taimen Sanctuary, very seriously. They checked all of our passports, and even though Mark had actually written the law creating the Sanctuary with its regulations of catch and release, fly fishing only, they insisted on unpacking all of our bags and checking to make sure we only had artificial flies in our bags. Eventually they let us go, and we pounded back off the rocky road into the now dark Mongolian night.

About 40 minutes later, we descended into the camp, where we were met by what seemed to our weary minds to be an army of guides and staff, including the female camp manager, Handa. They helped us to our gers, then served a quick meal of creamy pea soup and tea, which really hit the spot. They gave us a quick layout of the camp in the dark, but we were all exhausted and at nearly 2:00 in the morning we stumbled in to bed in our respective gers.

It should be noted that this extremely late arrival is not normal operating procedure, and Nomadic Journeys went to great lengths to find an alternative. Normally there is a morning flight, which would have put us into camp around 6:00 instead of 1:00 am. But they learned a few days before our trip that the airline that operates the morning flight wasn't going to start it until the 15th of June, a day too late for us. So the plan then was to head into camp a day early on June 13 on the Aero Mongolia afternoon flight, stay a night in Moron and have all day to drive into camp at our leisure. Then Aero Mongolia cancelled that flight, and we were stuck with two options: drive 12 hours from UB to get into camp in the afternoon, or take the late afternoon flight that we ended up on and get into camp late. We opted for the latter option, which I still think was the right decision because 12 hours in a car really didn't sound good. And the adventure of it all was outstanding. I mean, seriously, a midnight military checkpoint searching our bags to make sure we're using flies to protect the taimen? You can't make that shit up.

Monday, June 15

Even with the long day and late arrival into camp, I was still up and wide awake at 6:00 am. One of the lady camp helpers came in about 6:30 to light a fire in my stove, and that was enough to get me moving and starting to organize my gear. I stepped out into the brisk Mongolian morning to welcome bright blue skies and my first glimpse of the upper camp.



We were situated in a narrow valley with high rocky outcrops on both sides of the canyon and a small stream just to the north of the camp. You could hear the larger river somewhere further down below. There were four guest gers for the 8 anglers, plus a large dining ger, a couple of smaller gers and large canvas tents for the staff, and a short walk away two canvas outhouses and a larger shower tent. Everything was spread out, so that while inside your ger you could barely make out the voices of people talking elsewhere around camp, just muted in the distance.



Inside the ger it was very spacious and cozy. There was a cot on either side, with OutCast landing pads and thick blankets and a pillow. Very comfortable. At the back end was a small table and two folding camp chairs. There were antler hooks (4 on each side, more than enough), towels, a small wash basin and tub of water plus soap for washing hands, and small folding tables next to each cot. In the center was the wood-burning



stove. A couple of rugs lay in front of each cot and the table, and a solar powered lamp hung from the spokes that consisted of the roof supports. The ground was bare grass. Through the hole in the roof you could see the mountain above and blue sky peering down in the early morning light. All in all, first rate and very comfortable.

At 7:30 Handa, the camp manager, came into my tent with a steaming cup of hot coffee. That really hit the spot. I wandered over to the dining ger, where everyone was beginning to gather in excitement for the first day of fishing.

Breakfast was served buffet style, and included fruit, fried eggs, sausage, and bread. After breakfast we all returned to our gers to start organizing our gear and preparing for the fishing. I rigged up three rods, an 8 weight TFS Spey rod with a 600 grain Skagit, 10 foot floating MOW, and a 7.5' 20# leader with a large Bish-a-Rat on the end; and a SALT 8 weight with a 9' 20# leader and a white Pole Dancer; and a 6 weight for grayling and lenok with a 9' 2X leader and a Chubby Chernobyl.



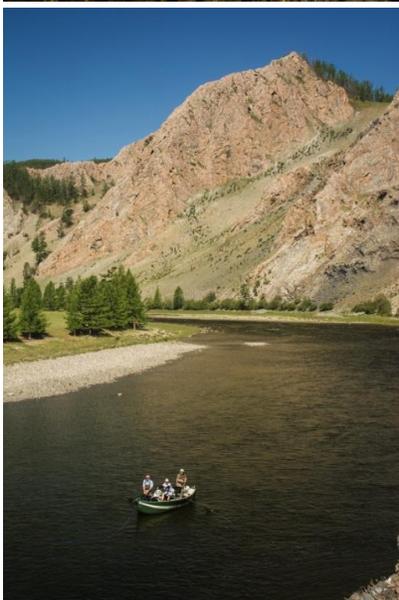
As soon as we were all waded up, we strolled down to the river. It is a medium-sized freestone river, about the same size and feel to the upper Klamath. Four green and cream colored NRS inflatable drift boats were pulled up along the shore, along with a small army of colorful rafts for the support team. These rafts were later referred to as the “Mongolian Navy” when the flotilla would start making its daily downriver float to the next camp.



Larry was the first to the river, and within a mere cast or two he had hooked up with a nice grayling. He caught 3 more while we waited for the rest of the group to arrive. Gradually everyone paired up with guides, loaded into boats, and started fishing.

I hiked upstream a short ways to where a bluff looked down on a deep pool below a cliff wall, hoping to spot a taimen. I did not, but it was a great visage and soon I was joined by Andy Parkinson and together we watched the boats all start casting out and floating down while talking about taimen and this beautiful river that he knows so well.

Andy started Fish Mongolia years ago, and sold it to Mark a few years back but had returned for a few weeks this year to guide the first couple of trips doing the headwaters float, which started even higher upriver with a two day Camel trek to get to the river, then ended right where we were fishing.



I hiked back to the boat once all the other boats had started working downriver, joining Mark and Zolboo. Zolboo pulled the boat out into the current and started floating down the broad shallow flat. I was just looking around for a bit because the water was only about 2 feet deep and everywhere was just so beautiful. Mark said from the back, "you should probably fish through this," and as I began to stand Zolboo spotted our first taimen of the trip, about a 3 foot long red shape in the water. I tried to throw an upstream cast at it but we'd already passed it and the moment was gone. Still, exciting to know that the fish are here!

I fished hard, casting long with the eight weight and large flies, starting with the Pole Dancer then moving to large natural colored grey/tan streamer that Zolboo had tied up, called the Chilean Goat after some of the Chileno guides who've been working on the river the past few years (but haven't shown up yet this summer). Halfway through a retrieve, using long, medium strips, a taimen rolled on the fly, but missed. I threw back out there and the fish turned and followed a second time, but no take. Then it disappeared.



We continued fishing down to a spot where we all met for lunch. There, while Zolboo and Jack (the other Mongolian guide) started a fire to cook a warm shore lunch, we learned how the morning fared for the rest of the group: Allan had landed the first taimen of the trip, a nice fish in the low 30s, Larry and Bob W. had both had big hits and missed, Bob B had a large fish move to his fly but never eat, and Cord had caught about a dozen trout and lenok. All in all, a great start to the day!



The shore lunch was outstanding, chicken kabobbs with rice, salad, and wine. We made a long affair of it, enjoying the incredible scenery of this remarkable place. All around were jagged rocky mountains permeated by green larch trees, under the visage of which this crystal clear river meandered and turned and wound

through an area filled with sheer beauty. We observed that it was reminiscent of fishing in Yosemite or Yellowstone National Park...except there's no one else here.

After lunch we resumed fishing, and just a few hundred feet below the lunch spot Bob W hooked into a nice taimen. I got out of our boat to go take some photos, and was able to see this beautiful 37" slate grey spotted with brilliant deep red tailed fish get released back to the river.







We continued fishing through the afternoon, changing flies occasionally between a large white tube fly and some topwater flies. I did have another large taimen (Mark guessed at upper 30s) roll on a white Puglisi popper, but again it missed and we couldn't raise it again. Late in the afternoon, I did manage to hook a small taimen, the fish crushing a white streamer right in front of a giant boulder. The fish shook his head and rolled on the surface, and about 4 seconds later the hook came out.

A short while later Mark did manage to hook and land a nice "small" taimen, maybe 28-30", which ate a fly of his own creation with a long purple body and a giant yellow popper head, upon which Mark was pleased to share he had drawn a smiley face. As the week would progress we would affectionately come to know this fly as the "Happy Meal".



We finally made it into camp at around 9:00 pm, still light like mid-afternoon. We unloaded the rafts, and checked in to see how the rest of the group fared. Collectively it was a great first day for the group, with Ron landing two taimen, Allan, Larry, and Bob all on the boards as well with their first taimen. I had 3 blowups, Bob B had the one fish follow, Cord caught a bunch of trout but no taimen. I think tomorrow will be the day for Bob and Cord. Everyone is still floating on cloud



nine, just seeing these massive fish in the river and appreciating the incredible landscape all around us.

The evening climate was so wonderful that the staff set the tables up outside and we dined in the fresh Mongolian mountain air. Dinner was sauteed potatoes, cole slaw, and some sort of steak and veggie stew. All delicious. We told stories, joked, laughed, and drank vodka tonics until it finally grew dark and we realized it was midnight. One by one the weary anglers retreated to their cozy gers for a few hours of shuteye. As I strolled to my own ger, I heard the approach of horses and saw the silhouette of two riders coming into the edge of camp. One of the camp staff strolled out to meet them, and I made my way to slumberland in continued awe of this marvelous, unique place.

Tuesday, June 16

Early the next morning I grabbed a hot cup of coffee and enjoyed the cool Mongolian morning. It was warming up fast, sign that today would be another spectacular day. Breakfast was served outside since the weather was so nice: doughboy pancakes, omelettes, bacon, meat and cheese and a bit of fruit.

After breakfast we all grabbed our gear and got ready for the day. I decided to skip waders, wearing shorts and a t-shirt and wet wading. Mark and I were fishing with "Jack", the guide who was featured in the River Monsters episode a few years back. Jack is very entertaining, speaks great English and is passionate about guiding and fishing. Sarcastic, snidey, and full of spunk, he was a fun personality to have both on the river and around camp.

I started with top-water flies again this morning, throwing the large Puglisi popper fly, but received no interest. Later in the morning Jack switched me up to a sink tip and we chucked a variety of streamers throughout the morning. We couldn't get any takers, but we did start to see a lot of fish. One run, in particular, I would guess we spotted 8 or 9 fish, mostly small (less than 30"), but a couple of big fish, too. In that run I did have one fish chase my fly, but he never ate it and we couldn't find him again on subsequent casts. In the next run down I did finally get a grab; as I stripped towards the end of my retrieve I felt the line come tight. I strip set three times but never the fly never stuck, and once the fish decided to move he gave one head shake and he was gone.

We pulled up to the lunch spot, a rocky knoll set under the shade of a small grove of larch trees overlooking a classic emerald-colored pool that would make any summer steelhead fisherman drool. I rigged up the two-handed rod, and stepped in to swing through the run with a Bish-a-Rat. Mark spotted a monster fish in the pool below me, big enough to get him to run up the gravel bar to let me know. He says it was over 50 inches, a real trophy taimen. That got my blood pumping as I skated the large rat fly across the run. At the end of the classic steelhead swing, as the fly skittered into the shallows of the riffle at the head of the deeper pool, a very large taimen, probably the same fish Mark had seen, rolled and ate my Bish-a-Rat with a giant explosion of water. Instead of the classic "toilet flushing" roll it was more like a bathtub exploding. I could feel the fish close its mouth around the fly. I set the hook hard and instantly felt connected to something solid and heavy. The fish shook his head violently while frothing at the surface in the shallow water, and in an instant the fly line went limp. The fish had broken the 20# leader like a big brown on 6X. And I was left shaking, in awe of the power of that river monster, a fish I know I will never forget.

Lunch was grilled pork chops and pasta salad, and we all chatted about the morning while relaxing in the shade of the larch trees. That morning Cord had landed two taimen, so he was on the board and only Bob B. and I remained fishless. A few other taimen had been hooked here and there, but most everyone reported seeing a lot of fish, but they just were not very grabby. Everyone also spent quite a bit of time casting the lighter trout rods for grayling and lenok, and really were having fun doing that. It was a nice diversion from casting the big rods for taimen all day, and of course always fun to have a hard fighting wild fish on the end of the line, regardless of size.

After lunch we returned to the river and fished hard but the action was pretty slow. Clouds had moved in and the wind picked up so we couldn't see any fish, and no one had much action in the afternoon. That is, until we pulled up to the camp. As Jack navigated our boat down the last bend and riffle against a tall granite bluff, we caught up to Allan as he was landing a nice fish. Mere minutes later, literally feet from the dining ger, Larry was hooked up and landed a nice taimen. Later into the evening, just before dinner was served, we heard some whooping and hollering downstream and Bob B had hooked his first taimen of the trip. One of the guides, Mark Portman, ran down to help him net it, taped at 80 cm (about 32 inches). An exciting finish to the day, and a reminder that with this kind of fishing you have to be always at the ready, and one special fish can change an entire day of fishing.

Most of the guys opted for showers tonight. Most also opted for Chinggis Khan vodka tonics. The scenery from this camp was even more incredible than the past couple of camps. The gers were perched on a grassy bank looking onto a long gradual run on the river, and across was a dramatic series of granite peaks. It was like camping at the base of Half Dome. We ate outside again, staring in awe at the panoramic landscapes surrounding us. Dinner was green salad, steak with carrots, and garlic bread. Dessert was



some sort of apple fritter. Just after dinner a herd of yaks strolled into camp. Cord chased them around trying to get some hair for fly tying, but they were pretty spooky and although domesticated they were obviously not very accustomed to human contact. As dusk finally began to set in, just before midnight, the local ger family the yaks belonged to showed up and threw rocks at them to move them away out of our camp, and now that the party was over we turned in for the night.



Wednesday, June 17

I woke punctually at 6:30 again, as my fire was being lit for me. The same basic morning routine followed, organizing my gear and slurping coffee before heading down to breakfast. We dined outside again on another spectacular Mongolian morning. Breakfast today was pancakes, fried eggs, sausage, and watermelon.

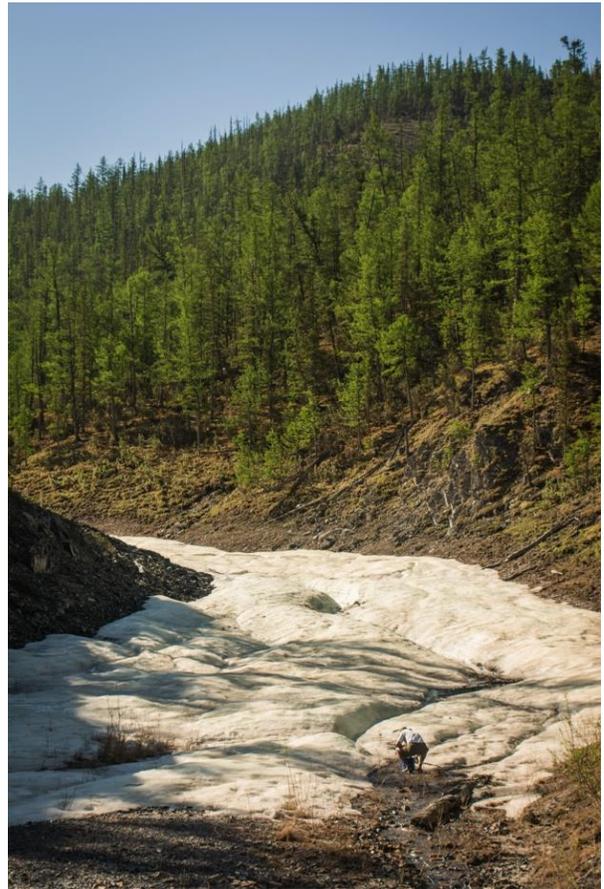
I changed strategy today, switching out the 8 weight SALT to a Sage Method 9 weight with an Outbound line and back to a Pole Dancer. The heavier rod and line did a better overall job casting the large flies, although the Method is so light it doesn't feel on your arm like you're chucking a 9 weight all day.

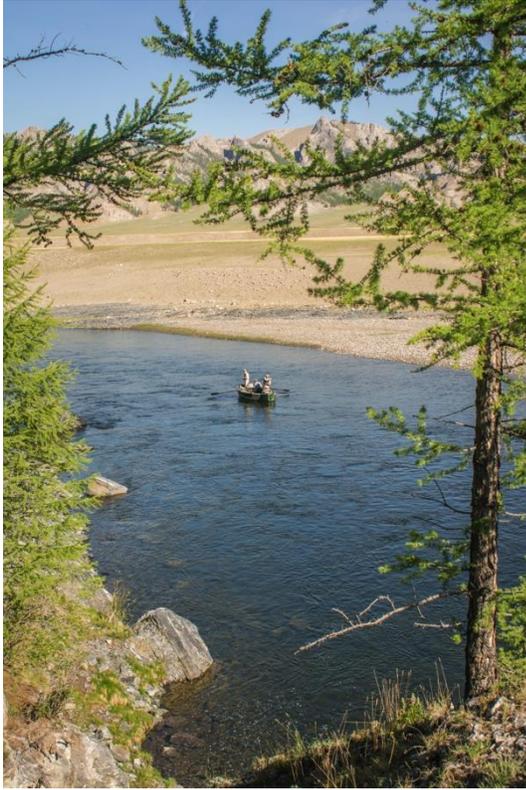


I loaded my gear into Peter Fong's boat, and we headed out for the day. We pushed down through the first run where Bob had caught his fish last night, then started fishing. No takers in the first run, but as we drifted through some riffly water and I wasn't paying attention with my fly dragging in the current, I got hit and was hooked up to a small taimen, which I actually managed to get in the net. It was only about 23 inches, but still my first landed taimen.

Just below that we came to a place where a small glacier was nestled in between two cliffs. We got out to collect ice to keep our drinks cold during the day.

We let the other boats pass, then pulled back out into the current and started fishing. A few runs later, we came upon a stretch of river with a large submerged rock in the middle running parallel with the river, creating two deep channels on either side. I cast to the far shore, and as my fly





was skittering across the far channel a taimen came up from the depths and swatted at it but did not connect. I let the fly keep swinging across, and when it went over the submerged rock face I could see the fish was no longer following the fly. But as soon as it started chugging across the near channel, a second taimen, this one larger than the first, came up and slashed at it on the surface but also missed. We stopped and made a series of casts towards both fish but could never get another interested look.

Later in the morning I had another good fish come up to the Pole Dancer, and this one I set the hook on. He was tight for about a second, then the line went limp, and when I brought it in the fly was gone. The leader had snapped.

As we continued on through the morning, we saw dozens of taimen, mostly holding in the shallow flats and tailouts. Mark had several explosions on his purple and yellow smiley face fly affectionately dubbed the “Happy Meal”, and had at least two fish hooked and on for several jumps before coming un-buttoned.





The river began to change here, dropping more gradient and churning through some large boulder gardens. After the first big rapid we pulled up to the lunch spot, where Zolboo and Jack were grilling up some steak kabobs. The kabobs were joined with cole slaw and other goodies, yet another tasty shore lunch.

Below the lunch spot was another boulder garden, and I hiked up a hillside to get a high-elevation vantage point to watch the boats go through. Allan

caught a taimen just across the river from the lunch spot, and both Larry and Bob said they moved a couple of fish wading the pocket water just below the rapids.

We fished hard for the rest of the day with a variety of topwater and streamers. I had a fish follow one fly right to the boat but never eat, and Mark had several more blowups on the Happy Meal. By the time the day was done we'd moved at least 10 fish to the fly today, and seen well over a dozen more. The fish are definitely here, we're just having a hard time in our boat connecting to them.

Late in the afternoon clouds built up, and before long a massive gust of wind erupted on the water and thunder rumbled all around the canyon. We hurried to put our waders and jackets on, although in the end only got a little drizzle.

We finally made it to camp, very tired and exhausted. I took my first shower of the trip, and it felt great. They have a big tent and they pour some heated water into a large bucket which they then hoist on a pulley system and has a shower head on the bottom. It works well and felt really great.

We shared more stories around the dinner table, actually dining inside tonight as it continued to drizzle outside. The group did land a couple of taimen today, along with lots of trout and grayling, but mostly we all experienced seeing a lot of fish and moving only a few. The fish just seem to be



acting funny, not quite committing to eat aggressively. Cord did briefly hook a real river monster, though. He got a good look at the tail, and said it was the size of two hands put together with fingers spread. He had in on for a few seconds before the hook slipped, and Jack confirmed that the glimpse he had of it, it was huge, well over 50 inches maybe more.

Dinner was some sort of grilled pork mixed with vegetables and french fries with a little gravy sauce on it, plus rice and cole slaw. It didn't look like much, but was absolutely delivious and almost everyone had seconds and even thirds. Dessert was a crepe with Nutella in it. All tasty. Everyone is exhausted tonight, and we all turned in early: 10:30 tonight, well before the sun went down.



Thursday, June 18

It was the normal morning routine this morning with the wakeup fire in the ger followed by breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and scrambled eggs. It was still drizzly and overcast in the morning, so I put the waders on.

Mark and I joined Mark Portman in the boat, the young man who was a fellow alumnus from the University of Puget Sound and is now working on his Masters in aquaculture at University of Miami. As everyone prepped the boats for the day I wandered downstream with the spey rod and in the first run below camp rose two fish to the Bish-a-Rat. Both were smaller fish, both hooked briefly then gone.

The sun came out as Mark came down in the boat to pick me up, and we continued fishing. I had both an 8 weight rigged up with a 200 grain sink tip and large weighted streamer for dredging the deep holes, and the 9 weight with the Pole Dancer for top-water action. We were determined to catch a taimen today!

As we floated down river, casting and stripping, we rose fish after fish. They would come up and attack the surface flies in an explosion of water, we would set the hook and feel tension briefly before the line would go limp, again and again. By lunchtime I had 9 fish come to the fly, all of them hooked and lost. Mark, too, had several solid hookups and the hook just kept slipping out.

Lunch was pork kabobbs and potato salad. We caught up with the rest of the group, and everyone was having a good day. The fish were much more aggressive today than they had been the day before, our guess was that it was related to a drop in water temperature related to the cool weather and even rain the night before. Almost everyone had landed a taimen by lunch, some more than one.

The wind picked up big time after lunch, howling upriver and making casting a challenge. Still, we cast hard and fished harder, determined to break the relatively fishless slump in our boat. Mark had several more fish, two of them really big, that were legitimately hooked, on, jumping and rolling and running, then gone. I had a slower afternoon, but as the sun got low I was pulling the Pole Dancer across a deep pool and a massive fish came up out of nowhere and hammered it. He was on, line tight and I set the hook, then nothing; that fish, too, had slipped the hook.

At one point we caught up to Bob W and Larry fishing with Peter Fong, just as Larry was landing a nice taimen. The wind was howling upriver as he released a nice 35" fish back into the river.

Finally we turned the corner and could see the camp well below us just before a bend in the river. It was 9:00, literally a 12 hour fishing day, casting hard and long all day long. But it wasn't over yet, as right downstream from the boat about 30 feet away I had yet another large taimen hit my fly. I



strip-set hard and felt it connect. The fish shook his head and I set the hook hard again, and again. The fish was still tight and I thought, "this is the one!," and for good measure started to strip set one more time when the line went limp. Gone again.

Less than a minute later, Mark was hooked up. It was a solid hookup, head shake head shake, taking out line, then nothing. Camp was getting closer and closer, and in between curses flung at the river we kept casting, stripping, casting, stripping, striving with every ounce to try and land just one fish. Again, another big fish, this one perhaps the biggest of the day and easily in the 40 inch range or larger, attacked Mark's Happy Meal. He set hard, and was hooked up. This fish was on, without a doubt. It jumped, rolled and thrashed on the surface with vicious headshakes, jumped again, then started tearing off line downstream. Then nothing.

We drifted the final 100 feet into camp with an odd feeling mixed with both euphoria and dejection. We had just experienced one of the best days of fishing without landing a single fish one could almost imagine: all told 17 fish hooked, several of them really large with at least two visibly confirmed at well over 40 inches, but nothing brought to hand. Both Marks said they'd never experienced a day like that, with as much action and as little success. Mark Johnstad, who had first floated this river in the mid-90s, has never seen so many fish come un-buttoned. Mark Portman said he figures a normal catch rate is about one in every 3 fish landed, which actually matched up really closely with how the rest of the group was faring.

And indeed, everyone else in the group landed fish today, some multiple fish. Cord was one for one, Ron was one for five, Larry and Bob and Allan all landed multiple fish. Bob landed at least one before lunch and I didn't hear how his afternoon was.

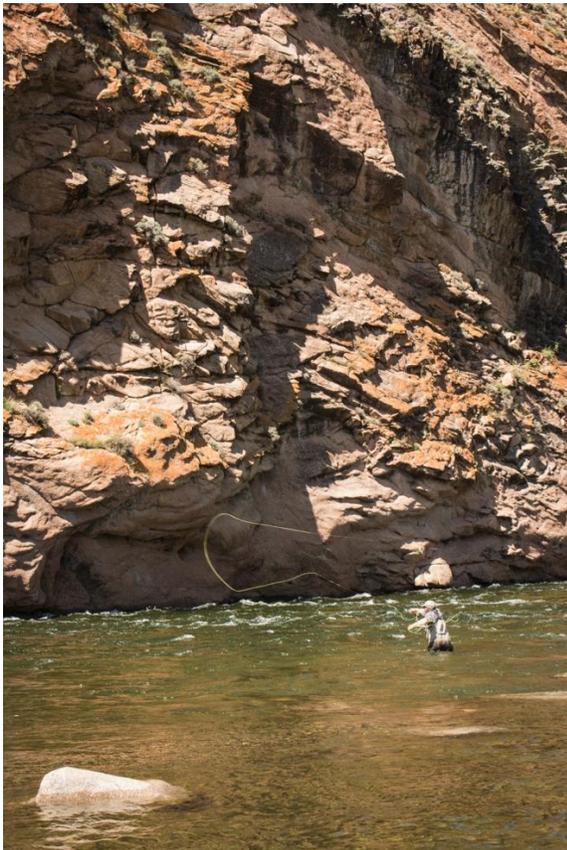


Dinner was late because we came in so late, but it was still nice enough to eat outside. We enjoyed soup, Mongolian lasagna, salad, followed by chocolate cake. I had so many emotions running through me and so much adrenaline from the intense fishing day I couldn't sleep right away, so enjoyed the evening and finally made it to bed a bit after midnight, just as the sun was beginning to set.

Friday, June 19

After the normal morning routine and breakfast of omelets, doughboys, sausage, I threw on my wet wading socks and boots and hiked upstream a quarter mile to fish back through that last run that we'd hooked those three big fish in the night before. Swinging the large rat on the spey rod I covered the water quickly, watching as the other boats each slowly pulled out and started drifting downstream. Almost back to camp, a huge fish, almost surely the same one Mark had hooked the night before, rolled on the fly, but missed. I kept the fly swinging and the fish went after it again, but when I went to set the hook there was nothing there. By the size of the tail and head, I'd say the fish was easily over 40 inches. A big one. I took a couple of steps upstream and swung back through. Nothing. Again. Nothing. Again. Nothing. One more time, and there he was again, hammering at the fly as it swung across the current. I felt him on for a second this time, then once again the curse continued and the fish was gone.

I took a few more steps upstream and kept casting. As I worked back downriver through the run and neared the boat, at the end of the swing I had a hard take and set the hook, hard. The fish was still there, shaking its head, so I hit it again, and the fish started moving directly towards me. I knew I needed to keep the tension on it so as I set a third time I started stumbling backwards up the rocks to keep the line tight. The fish kept coming, and I kept walking backwards, stumbling awkwardly over the river rocks as I stripped in line to stay tight to the fish until finally it slowed enough for me to strip it in. It pulled and tossed its head and turned, and Zolboo ran in with the net and netted it. It wasn't the big fish that had attacked the fly several times further up the run, but a different one and still a nice specimen. We taped it out at 29 1/2", took a quick photo and released it into the water. The curse had finally lifted!



We climbed into the boat and started drifting, and in the next run below camp I rose another fish to the Pole Dancer but he missed the fly. A half second later, literally, Mark was hooked up to a small taimen, which he was able to get in the net and Zolboo taped it at 24". If my fish hadn't missed the fly it would have been a double.

We fished hard the rest of the morning. The sun was out, another incredibly beautiful day in this remarkable landscape. The downside to the nice weather was the building high pressure and by 10 am the wind was up from the south, coming upriver right in our face, and it never relented, all day long.

Eventually we made it into lunch to join the group. Lunch was glass noodles with beef and vegetables. It was another nice spot just below a rapids looking at a red and brown cliff wall jutting straight up from the far side of the river below the rapids.

After lunch, right off the bat Cord landed two taimen below us while we watched. We pulled out and started fishing behind everyone, and in that same pool at the bottom Mark hooked a nice taimen. It fought hard, coming out of the water several times before we were able to get him into the net. Zolboo taped it at 35". We took some photos, then let it swim back to the depths of the river.





We continued pounding hard in the headwind all afternoon with little success. At one point we stopped below a rapids at a place called the "Minnow Trap", where taimen pin schools of baitfish against the rapids later in the summer and there's "always" a fish there. Sure enough Zolboo caught a fish in just a few casts on Mark's rod and the infamous Happy Meal.

After a few more hours of flailing around in the wind we pulled into camp. I took a quick shower, then joined the guys for a vodka tonic and listened to stories of their day. It was another productive day for the group, with everyone landing fish. The average tally per boat was 4 fish to hand, most in the mid 20s to mid 30s. Still nothing over 40 inches yet, though I know in our boat we've hooked a few that size and just haven't landed them. Everyone in the group remains euphorically happy. In a place as spectacularly beautiful as this, if you're not happy

there's something wrong with you.

Dinner was mushroom soup followed by a main course of rice with a beef and mushroom and vegetable stew. After dinner we sat around drinking vodka tonics, smoking cigars, and telling stories until the sun went down at midnight and it was time to crash for the night.

Saturday, June 20

I barely blinked and I could hear the lady coming into my ger to light my stove fire at 6:30 this morning. My right hand felt numb and stiff, and I could barely open it from fighting the wind all day with the nine weight. I changed out the nine weight setup for an eight weight in the hopes that I'd be able to fish through the pain with a longer rod, and by the time that project was done breakfast was served: pancakes, bacon, omelets with fresh wild onions handpicked from the riverbanks the day before.

I finished getting my gear ready while Mark made me one of his "famous" "Happy Meal" flies to fish today. He carved the yellow foam into a popper head and tied a long purple rabbit strip tail below the tube, and let me pick my color of Sharpie to make my own smiley face on it. I chose blue to go with the yellow in honor of the Golden State Warriors, who I learned yesterday on a sat-phone call home had won the NBA championship. Go Dubs!

Finally ready to go, we loaded into our boat with Jack and started floating down behind everyone. We fished hard all morning, two smiley face flies chugging across the current. I had a couple of very small taimen follow the fly and peck at it, and missed two larger fish swatting at the fly but not convincingly. Mark did hook and land one small taimen, taped at 24 inches. Just a bit before lunch I had a good hook-up, the fish rolling on the yellow and purple popper and I set the hook and he was on. Then the fish ran right at the boat and I couldn't strip fast enough. I leaned the rod all the way back but it wasn't enough, and then the line wrapped around the rod tip and I grabbed the line with the fish directly connected to it while the fish skulked under the boat. I held tight to the fish like a handline while trying to unwrap the rod, and in the midst of the chaos the fly finally came loose.

We fished our way down to lunch. At one point I looked up to the hillside and saw a couple of brown shapes, which turned out to be a feral camel and her young calf. We pulled over so that I could take a quick picture, and they took off running downriver. They were very spooky, and obviously not used to being around people.



Soon we met up with everyone for lunch, though they'd already gorged themselves from the beef stew served in the dutch oven, and after we quickly ate everyone was ready to hit the water again.



We sat and waited while they went down ahead of us. I decided it was a good time to try to catch a lenok and a grayling. I rigged up my 6 weight with a small hopper and a beaded prince nymph dropper, and started casting in the shallow pockets along the river's edge. In a few minutes I had a fish slap at the hopper, set the hook, and landed a small grayling. Five minutes later I was releasing a small lenok. I may have struggled to land taimen during the week, but the trout and grayling were willing sports

and I could see why the rest of the group was having so much fun devoting at least a part of each day playing with these fun and aggressive fish.

By now the rest of the group was well below us and we climbed into the boat and started fishing our way down. Just then the weather started to change and we got hit with a huge wall of intense wind blowing straight upriver. We decided rather than fight it we'd pull over and drink a Tiger beer and smoke a cigar and wait it out.

A half hour later the wind had subsided, and we started fishing again. We fished our way down, pounding every riffle, pocket, pool, and run. Few and far between we'd have a fish look at our fly, but nothing serious. Then, in a deep pool at the base of a massive rock face any rock climber would yearn to ascend, I had a taimen come up and hit the Happy Meal. I set the hook, and after a big jump and a short fight we had the fish in the shallows in the net, taped at 28 inches. Not a huge fish, but it was nice to get one to hand after a long day.

We fished the final quarter mile into camp, then joined everyone for a Chinghis Kahn and tonic. Everyone hooked fish today, but the roles reversed and we were actually the only boat to land a fish.

Dinner started with some sort of creamy potato soup, followed by khuushuur, a classic Mongolian food that is similar to an empanada, stuffed with ground beef and in this case fresh picked wild onions then fried in dough. They were very tasty, especially accompanied by delicious cucumber and tomato salad. Dessert was some sort of coconut-ish dish, tasty and good. Everyone was tired tonight, so after dinner we all started to make our way to bed. It was about 10:30, but still light as day and the earliest we'd gone to bed so far on the trip.



Sunday, June 21

Today was the last day of the float, always a bittersweet moment. Everyone was up early, in time for an earlier breakfast (7:30) to maximize fishing time on the last day. While waiting for the boats to go out, I got out my trout rod with a Chubby Chernobyl and caught a nice lenok about 18 inches. It rarely seemed to take long to catch a trout when trying, and they're often surface oriented and a lot of fun on light tackle. So much emphasis of course is put on working hard for the bigger taimen, but the fun of the trout fishing here should not be overlooked.

Once the boats were all downriver we pulled out into the current and started fishing, casting and stripping hard with two Happy Meals. After a couple of fruitless hours without seeing or raising a fish, Peter convinced me to switch to the 200 grain sink tip and white Andino Deceiver. Almost right away I had a hard hit



and hooked up to a fish, which turned out to be a small taimen of about 20 inches. Not big, but in the net and a good start. We continued fishing our way down, and just before lunch I hooked and landed another taimen, this one a bit larger at 27 inches.



We met up for lunch in a grove of poplar trees, just downstream from where a local herder was running his horses across the river. Lunch was Dutch Oven beef stew, rice, accompanied by beet salad. Fishing for the group was a bit better than yesterday, with a few fish landed by Allan and everyone else at least moving a fish or two.

Just after lunch we stopped at a spot with Tibetan writing on the cliff wall, a sacred spot likely dating back to 1920s when the Soviets tried to kill all the Buddhists and they had priests and shamans living in hiding all over the country.

We continued fishing as clouds and big wind moved in, and I had another solid grab on the streamer right below the boat and landed another small taimen, 24 inches. Mark finally had a huge fish blow up on his Happy Meal but missed the set and the fish was gone.



We finally pulled into camp about 8:00 pm, just in time for a special feast. Handa had purchased a sheep from the ger keeper family at the last camp, and we were to enjoy a Khorkhog, a traditional Mongolian barbecue. For a khorkhog, the sheep is killed, chopped up, then placed in an old metal milk jug along with some potatoes and carrots and layered with hot round rocks, then placed in the fire to cook. The meat was well done, very fatty and greasy but tasty and a real cultural treat.

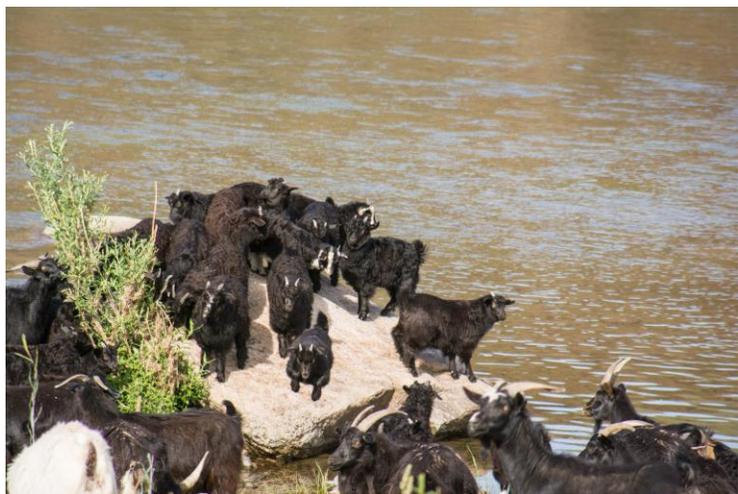
After dinner we learned the details for the flight tomorrow, which we had been changed to a 5 pm departure. Late in the day, so we would have time in the morning to relax before heading in to Muron. I did a bit of organizing and initial packing, then fell quickly to sleep.

Monday, June 22

The Land Cruisers arrived at 7:00 am. We were in no rush, so it was a leisurely morning, enjoying the last wonderful view of the river and landscape while packing up, drinking steaming mugs of coffee, and eventually eating breakfast. We took photos with the staff, and thanked everyone for a fantastic experience. The crew was hard at work packing up all of the boats and camp equipment into a big Russian truck to haul back up to the upper camp to start with the next group in a couple of days.



While we waited, a couple of locals randomly decided to cross the river with their motorcycle. The challenge was that the river where they decided to cross was swift and fairly deep, and the motorcycle was mostly submerged during the crossing. Once on the other side they simply tipped it up to drain water out of the exhaust, removed and dried out the spark plug, and five minutes later the bike was running and they were motoring off up the mountain, disappearing over a ridge as if nothing at ever happened.



A few minutes after that a young woman herded her goats right past camp. Yet another example of how incredibly unexpected and random this place is.

At 10:30 we left camp in the Land Cruisers. It was about a two hour drive to Muron, although we stopped along the way to visit a site called Uusggiin uvur that had ancient deer stones, carved stone memorials and burial grounds dating back thousands of years.



In Muron, Jack, who had come along to see us to the airport and bring the next group out, led us to a restaurant where we had lunch, an assortment of meat dishes. After lunch we headed out to the airport to check in for the flight. Security was tight again, and they confiscated another two more pairs of hemostats, one from each Bob. We waited in the terminal until the AeroMongolia flight landed, and by 5:00 we were on the plane and in the air. There was only the seven of us on the plane, plus a German woman returning from two weeks living with the reindeer herders. Within minutes of takeoff we were all asleep.

We woke as the plane touched down in Ulaanbaatar, and after collecting our bags we were met by the same driver we'd had the week before and a different young girl from Nomadic Journeys. They loaded our bags into the bag truck, and we piled into the mini bus; thirty minutes later we were pulling up to the hotel.

We showered then met back in the hotel lounge for a round of tall, cold Tigers. It's amazing how exceptional a cold beer can taste after a week in the wilderness without refrigeration. Everyone was tired and hungry, so we decided to order food there at the bar and restaurant. Between the seven of us we had everything from steak to hamburgers to bangers and mash to chicken and rice, and more. And everyone was raved about how good it all was.

After dinner we said our goodbyes to Bob and Cord and Bob who were flying out in the morning, then headed off to bed.

Tuesday, June 23

I slept in this morning, finally waking up at 8:00. Downstairs in the restaurant I met up with Larry and Ron who were finishing their breakfast. They were joined by another man that we had met in the bar the night before who had come in a day early for his own trip heading out to Fly Fish Mongolia. We met back in the lobby at 10:00, where we were met by our new tour guide, Tamir, a young student who'd just graduated and was getting ready to go back to school to get his law degree. We loaded up into a different bus with a new driver, then drove off into the busy UB traffic. It was only a short drive south on the main, Peace Ave, to the Bogd Khaan Palace Museum. Historically the Bogds (kings") had four palaces, all within a few kilometers of each other, and one for each season. Three of them were destroyed by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s, leaving only the Winter Palace, also known as the Green Palace.



It was a short tour but a very interesting one. The buildings were incredible works of art in their own right, with ornate drawings and carvings all around. Inside were colorful tapestries, paintings, and collections of things like tools and writing materials and musical instruments. Very interesting, especially the significance of influences from all over the world, from sea shells to Polish dishes to Tibetan buddhist idols.

From the Palace museum we continued south a few kilometers more to a Russian WWII monument built on the top of a hill on the outskirts of town. It was a steep hike to the top, but afforded spectacular panoramic views of the entire sprawling city of Ulaanbaatar. Apartment complexes and houses were under construction everywhere, indicative of the growth of the city; yet on the edges you could also see the ger districts, where 70% of the population still lives in gers on the outskirts of the main city.



We descended the steps, boarded the bus, then drove back into the center to find a restaurant for lunch. Tamir took us to a place

on the third floor of a large modern building, call Bull Hot Pot. The table had small electric burners in front of each seat, and you ordered a type of soup, an appetizer, a type of meat and a type of vegetable and noodles or dumplings, and they brought it all out on the table. You turned on your burner to put the soup to a boil right there in front of you, then added the meats and vegetables and dumplings to cook in the soup while munching on the appetizers. In the end, it was quite an adventure of a meal and very tasty.

It was a short drive from there to the National Museum, which is located just across from the main square, called Chinggis Khan Square; the square was only recently renamed Chinggis Khan, so many locals still refer to it by the old name of Sukhbaatar Square. Ron and Allan had already done the museum tour so they walked back to the hotel to rest. Larry, myself, and our new friend Justin joined Tamir for a quick tour of the museum. It is a very interesting museum, and helps put into perspective all of the things we'd seen and learned and experienced on the trip. Starting with the prehistoric age and the bronze age and all of the incredible tools and weapons, and building up through the liberation from China and following Communist days under the Bolsheviks, finally to freedom and democracy in 1990.

The bus took Larry and Justin back to the hotel, and I opted to walk over and check out the square and walk back to the hotel. From there it was a matter of re-packing bags and preparing for the long travel day ahead.

At 5:30 we met downstairs again, where we were met by Tamir and soon were back in the bus for the short, 10 minute drive to Tumen Ekh, the Mongolian National Song and Dance Ensemble. It was 20,000 Tugregs to get in, and another 20,000 if you wanted to take video or pictures. At roughly 1,800 Tugregs to the dollar, that equated to about \$11. We entered into a medium sized room set up like a small indoor arena, with a square center stage surrounded by a series of built in bleachers on one side with thin pillows for sitting on. We were able to get a front row seat. Soon the performance began, and it was incredible. It started with a short song sung by a middle-aged Mongolian woman in a colorful traditional robe and hat, and soon followed by a series of unforgettable songs and dance. The dances were vibrant and fun with colorful costumes, emulating riding horses across the steppe. The singing and music, however, was really out of this world. The



throat singing is indescribable, starting with a low guttural sound and building into a high pitched tone like someone playing a flute. Towards the end a contortionist came out, balancing on one hand



and bending into all sorts of painful-looking positions. The show concluded with a dramatic shamanistic dance with masked warrior dancers and the full ensemble singing and playing traditional instruments. It was an exceptional performance, and a wonderful way to wrap up the trip.

After the show we returned the hotel briefly to drop off cameras then walked down the street to the Genghis Khan Grand Irish Pub for our final dinner. Ron skipped dinner with a slight GI problem, one

I'd felt earlier in the day but a couple of Peptos seemed to cure. Dinner was great, a couple of Chinghis Dark beers, a massive cheeseburger for me, Irish beef goulash for Allan, and fried chicken for Larry. Soon we were joined by Jan from Nomadic Journeys, and enjoyed some nice conversation before we finally said farewell and strolled back to the hotel to call it a night.

Wednesday, June 24

My alarm went off at 5:30 am, and after a quick breakfast downstairs we were in the lobby, checked, out, and ready to go by 6:30 when Tamir showed up with the van to give us a lift to the airport. Surprisingly there was little traffic during what should have been commute time, and we were at the airport a little before 7, way too early to check in. We waited until 7:30 when they announced that we can check in for our flight, and walked got in line to have our passport checked so that we could go through to the area where we could check in for our flight. We checked in, checked our bags all the way through to Redding but were told we couldn't get a boarding pass there for anything except the MIAT flight from UB into Seoul.

That boarding pass in hand we went through security, then proceeded to the main international terminal to wait. An hour later they called our plane, we boarded, and were soon in the air. 3 hours later, back on the ground in Seoul. We followed the signs for the transfer area and made our way to the gate, but there was no one there yet as we had a 3+ hour layover. An hour before departure time someone showed up and we checked in to get our boarding passes, no problem. We waited some more, then finally boarded the flight home. We had about an hour delay on the tarmac when the air conditioning broke and they had to fix it, but I was so tired I slept through it anyway. Then of course woke up when we finally took off and couldn't sleep the rest of the 10 hour flight. They made up time in the air, however, so we landed right on time in SFO. Immigration and Customs was quick and easy, but our flight into Redding was delayed by about a half hour. Still, not bad, and by 4:00 we were landed home in the sweltering heat of Redding. Exhausted, but a wonderful trip.



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