

# On the Steppes

By Andrew Gudgel

## WHY WE LIKE IT:

*We understand that long before the Internet overtook our lives there was something called the 'armchair traveller'. It refers to a devout and voracious reader of travel books—good ones like Lawrence Durrell's 'Bitter Lemons'—who in many cases couldn't afford to pack up and jump ship. How many people sit and read romantically, nostalgically, like this, today?*

*Well, we did with On the Steppes. We love the evocative word pictures the author paints---*

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*---and the fascinating details he presents about, what is for North Americans, an alien but exotic culture. The highest compliment we can pay this CNF travel piece is to say we feel we had the experience of being 'there'. The author wrote it many years after his trip and this may account for why his crafted prose is gilded with an aura of wistful reminiscence. And then there are lines like: When you've been married long enough, wordless conversations happen. Enjoy!*

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With one exception, the land around us was as treeless and manicured as an English baronet's lawn. Batzorig, our Mongolian guide, had the driver pull the Soviet-era minivan under the lone, hill-side copse, where we spread a blanket on the grass in the shade. For a moment I wondered where was the stream our group of tourists had driven an hour out of Karakorum to visit. But as I stepped down from the van, I got a glimpse of it forty-odd feet away; as wide as a driveway, as silent as a whisper.

It's been over thirty years, but these memories still glow like sunlight on the steppes: lunch was chunks of goat, cooked overnight in a stainless steel milk can between layers of hot rocks. To eat, one end of the chunk was seized between the teeth so a bite could be sliced off with a

pocketknife. Two large, silver-and-burlwood bowls appeared, filled with sour, gently fizzing *airag*--fermented mare's milk. After a finger-tip libation flicked to heaven and earth, the bowls passed hand to hand and were shared all around.

A chipped, white ceramic plate appeared on the blanket, mounded with a substance that looked like curls cut from a bar of soap but which tasted like sharp cheddar. We'd learned early on that the Mongolians were a laconic people, so no one asked its name. "It's a kind of milk food" was Batzorig's one answer to any question about the various butters, yogurts, curds, and cheeses we'd been consuming since we arrived several days ago.

Dessert was a hot, greasy rock to rub over our hands. "Protects your skin. Like lotion," Batzorig said. And it was, in fact, like lotion--goat-scented lotion.

Batzorig stood and pointed back up the road to a series of low hills we'd passed through on our way to the plain. "The local people say Genghis Khan is buried over there. Somewhere. No one knows where." And with that, he sat back down. I wondered idly if I'd just heard the Mongolian equivalent of "George Washington slept here."

After lunch, Batzorig and the others went to the minivan to get their fly-fishing gear. Neither my wife and I fish, so we walked a couple of hundred yards upstream instead. The water was so clear that rippling reflections of clouds were the only indication the stream bed wasn't empty. Thumb-sized rocks, rounded into tiny potatoes by friction and the current, paved the bottom.

When you've been married long enough, wordless conversations happen. My wife and I simply stopped walking. I looked at her, then at the stream. She shook her head. I shrugged, dropped my jacket and dusty, sweat-stained fedora on the bank beside me and began unbuttoning my shirt.

Naked, I stepped ankle-deep into the water. My feet tingled with cold, then lost all feeling. I half-lunged, half-waded to the middle of the stream. The water came up to the bottom of my rib cage. I braced my feet against the current until the feeling of pins and needles faded into numbness.

"Cold?" my wife asked.

I splashed a handful of water up and onto my right shoulder. "You should try it." She smiled, but didn't move. I can rarely fool her.

While my wife watched from the bank, I wandered up the stream bed, examining rocks beneath my feet. When the spirit moved me, I squatted down until my shoulders disappeared into the water, balanced the stone on the top of my right foot and raised it so that I could pluck it off, bring it to the surface. White quartz, black-and-gray-banded gneiss, greenish serpentine. Each different, none precious, all beautiful in their own way. A startled trout fled upstream and was gone.

The sun disappeared behind a cloud. I began shivering. Time to return to my wife and clothes. Back on the bank my thoughts turned to a warm chunk of goat and a hot, smelly rock and a small bowl of *airag*. As we started back to the minivan I thought about all the places George Washington might have slept and wondered if the spirits of some men are so great—so world-shaking--that they can't be tied down to a single place.

A knife-edge of light swept across the plain as the sun came back out. The grass blazed emerald all the way to the hills where the local people say Genghis Khan is buried. Somewhere over there. No one knows where.

END

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *While we were working overseas in the 1990s, my wife and I got a chance to spend a week out on the steppes in Mongolia. A live goat was tied to the fence surrounding our camp when we arrived. The ever-laconic Batzorig's only comment was, "Don't get attached. It's lunch." On the day our group went out to the river, his simple mention of Genghis Khan got me thinking about great people in history and their ties to a particular place or time. It was only much later, though, that I wrote this essay down. Where it lay buried during the in-between years is a mystery.*

*I've always loved essays, both reading and writing them. My influences are scattershot--Seneca, Montaigne, Bacon, David Quammen, Lewis Thomas, E.B. White, Dinty Moore, the Ming-Dynasty essayist Zhang Dai, and anyone and everyone who had (and has) a compelling story to tell.*

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** *Andrew Gudgel is a freelance writer and translator living in Maryland. His nonfiction and poetry have appeared at or are forthcoming in Under the Sun, Brevity Magazine's blog, Blueline, Lily Poetry Review, Speckled Trout Review, Transference and other publications. He's a graduate of both Johns Hopkins University's Science Writing program and the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop.*

