Mongolia's Forgotten Reindeer Herders: The Tsaatan Nomads of Hovsgol Tour Report 2024

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by Inger Vandyke

Deep in the northern part of Mongolia, close to the Russian border and Lake Baikal, lies the Darkhad Depression, a stunning and vast valley dotted with lakes that are fed by high mountains on every side.

It is a region of boreal forest that is also known as the Taiga, the second largest biome on earth after our oceans.

The Darkhad is such a remote place that only hardy communities of Mongolian people live in tiny outposts such as Tsagaan Nuur, a hamlet of low slung buildings at the edge of Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur (or Great White) Lake.

Perhaps the most famous residents of this region are, however, the Tsaatan, one of the last remaining nomadic groups on earth whose lives solely revolve around reindeer. Their name means 'those who keep the reindeer' in Mongolian and while they don't eat any reindeer meat, their diet is heavily dependent on reindeer milk, out of which they make cheese, yoghurt and curds.

Not to be confused with Mongolian nomads, the Tsaatan are actually Inuit and they are closely related in culture to the Chukchi reindeer nomads over the border in Russia. Originally from the Lake Baikal region, a small community of Tsaatan now live in northern Mongolia where they divide their time between the summer higher altitude pastures and lower wintering areas where they move to seek much needed mosses and lichens for their reindeer herds.

Sadly their culture is extremely threatened. Climate change is affecting the Tsaatan as less snow means less water to sustain the mosses and lichens that their reindeer rely upon to survive. Life in their realm is also incredibly tough with winters bringing harsh snows and plummeting temperatures, forcing many Tsaatan to move towards towns where it is easier to obtain fuel, food and also send their children to school.

It is estimated that the number of surviving Tsaatan is only between 200 and 210, spread across around 30 households. Their culture is perhaps one of the most critically endangered in the world.

After visiting the Chukchi people of Russia more than a decade ago in eastern Russia, when the opportunity to lead the expedition to meet the Tsaatan of northern Mongolia arose, I jumped at the chance to meet these mystical reindeer nomads of the Taiga.

It took us three days to reach them, two by car and one by horse. Such is the incredibly remote nature of these people of the Taiga.

Uushig Deer Stones – A Relic from Mongolia's Ancient Past

Firstly, we left Mongolia's capital, Ulanbataar, on sealed roads and drove northwards to the city of Murun, stopping at the town of Erdenet for lunch. During our trip we crossed the Selenge River which flows into Lake Baikal around 500km north of the eastern Taiga in Mongolia.The following morning, faced with another long driving day, we left Murun early to visit the famous Uushig Deer Stones which are considered to be the most clearly depicted megaliths of their type in all of Mongolia.

Carved into large blocks of tetrahedral, rose coloured granite, some of the deer stones in Uushig date back to around 1000BC. Almost all of them depict various versions of flying reindeer with some of the earlier stones featuring more basic designs and the latter ones showing reindeer as flying through the air, rather than merely running on land. The antlers, sometimes appearing in pairs, have become extremely ornate, utilizing vast spiral designs that can encompass the entire deer. These antlers sometimes hold a sun disc or other sun-related image. Other artwork from the same period further emphasizes the connection between the reindeer and the sun, which is a very common association in Siberian shamanism.

We wandered around their north-south oriented site in a cool, brisk breeze, until we found the final stone which had a carved human face at its peak. Time and distance quickly became our enemy, however, so we jumped in our vehicle and headed north towards Russia.

The Long Journey North

We had been warned that the temperatures had dropped in the Taiga by the time we left and as we ventured further north we began to see gilt-toned, deciduous Dorian Larches growing across valleys nestled at the base of snow capped peaks. Wandering through these forests were large herds of Mongolian horses and we made a few stops to photograph them in the snow as they wandered through stands of yellow trees.

The road finally broke off onto an unsealed track and, upon cresting a mountain ridge in the snow, we decided to stop for a morning tea of fresh coffee and biscuits while we admired the view.

Next we traversed the 'Valley of 18 river crossings' which we had to make before lunch at the remote village of Toon Brigade. As we approached Toon we spotted a beautiful Ovoo site in the snow nearby. Dedicated to the Shamanic relationship with mountains, Ovoo sites are places of worship adorned by many prayer flags. In Mongolia, unlike in Tibet, these prayer flags are usually of the national sky blue colour so we stopped to admire it and take some photos before stopping at a local café for lunch.

That afternoon the clouds began to thicken and, after crossing a high mountain pass that required us to fit our car with snow chains, we descended into the Darkhad Depression on a slow series of switchbacks which we carefully navigated to avoid sliding in the ice.

Deep in the depression we stopped to photograph a yak herder taking his animals through the snow and also a large shamanic Ovoo site with numerous worship structures, welcoming us to northern Mongolia.

By the time of sunset we had entered Tengis Shishged National Park and our last light was over the Khoridol Saridag Mountains which separate the Darkhad from the town of Tsaagan Nuur.

We arrived in the darkness and thankfully our lovely host not only greeted us with a warm meal but she ordered fires to be put on in our rooms, so that night we all slept soundly in the warmth.

A Journey on Horseback

The next morning, after a late breakfast, we spent much of the morning working with our horse team packing up our horses with the supplies we would need for the next five days with the Tsaatan. By the time we had loaded everything up, including ourselves, it was almost mid-afternoon.

We began riding to the forests, stopping with a nomadic Mongolian family for a late lunch of hot soup and dumplings where we organised for an extra horse guide to take us into the mountains of the Taiga. He arrived a little late, causing us all to have a somewhat hair raising and cold ride into the darkness to reach the Tsaatan. When we finally arrived in their community, the headman and principal shaman kindly invited us to settle into a tepee tent right next to his home and, after we put on the fire to keep us all warm, our crew of guides and us all slept together in the one tent to try and remain warm until the following day.

Of Children and Reindeers

We slept in a little the next morning in order to recover from our late arrival into camp the previous night. Our wonderful camp cook actually brought us breakfast to enjoy in our tepee which was really appreciated. Afterwards we went for a wander around and we chanced upon a group of Tsaatan kids riding their reindeer into camp so we stopped to take photos of them and their steeds. It was our first introduction to nomadic reindeer people in Mongolia and we were all in love!

We were kindly invited to the head man's home for tea and while we sat in the warmth we met one of the few female shamans, or Udgan, in the eastern Taiga, Tsegtseg. Through translators we spent some time chatting with our hosts while learning about the unique way of

life of the Tsaatan.

After a lunch of freshly caught lake fish, we went up to visit the home of a traditional Tsaatan lady to watch her milk her reindeers. When we arrived we all nearly died of a cuteness overload when we saw our first baby reindeer that had been born perhaps five or six months before our visit. It was curious to see the baby being led to the mother to get a few sips of milk, which in turn would encourage the mother to produce more milk for human consumption so after we learned a little about reindeer milk, its uses and production, we were kindly invited in for a warm cup of tea and some reindeer yoghurt flavoured with freshly crushed wild forest blueberries. It was delicious!

On our walk back to camp we were interrupted by a series of loud yelps and calls. As we turned we saw a family bringing around 20 reindeers back from their summer camp to join our own camp for the winter. We all stood surprised to see the speed at which they moved. Apparently this is done in cycles and sometimes herds of up to 500 or 600 reindeer can be moved at once! We were fascinated to learn that these migrations were done in cycles and it actually takes longer for them to be done by horse than it does by reindeer, such is the speed at which they move.

I've always loved foraging and on our walk back to camp I spotted the last of the summer blueberries still growing on their stunted bushes with red leaves. We stopped to try a few, and they were a small burst of sweetness that bettered any trail snack.

In the last light of day I asked if we could take some photos with the nomadic children we met earlier that day. My worries that they might need to skip their schooling quickly abated when we saw them emerge with their reindeers and proudly posing for photos with us.

Witnessing a Shamanic Ritual

That evening we were invited by our host, one of the most prominent Shamans of the eastern Taiga, to witness a shamanic ritual at his home. Almost all Mongolian shamans cover their eyes with a large mask which is adorned with its own eyes to see into the shaman spirits. Althought the light wasn't good enough for photography we all sat fascinated, our hearts beating to the shaman drums while we listened to our host talking in tongues to the night spirits.

The Tsaatan hold both animist and shamanistic beliefs so to witness this ceremony was truly a highlight of our trip so far.

The following morning we all had a wonderful pre-breakfast photo shoot with the matriarch of our tiny Tsaatan community. A known expert for her skills in surviving with the reindeer, she proudly showed us how she rode and herded her beautiful animals after the blush of dawn faded into wonderful golden light.

By this time our camp crew had set themselves up in a warm hut so we went off for breakfast of delicious banana pancakes and coffee which left us all amazed. Who knew that in such a remote place we would all eat such delicious food.

On our way back from our breakfast hut we noticed one of the nomad families had started to construct the tepee tent they would use to survive the harsh winters of the Taiga, so we stopped to take photos of them erecting the larch sapling poles and wrapping them carefully in heavy canvas. Afterwards we joined them for tea and took some photos inside their home.

As the morning wore on, so did the clouds and we decided that we would spend an afternoon visiting our reindeer milking friend again to see if we could get some more photos and try out milking reindeer ourselves. Sadly when we arrived at her home, we found out that she had taken her reindeer out to graze and wouldn't be until later in the afternoon. For a short time we just rested and waited in the local grasses, occasionally going over to photograph and pet the reindeer that she had left at her home. When she arrived we photographed her again before we sauntered back to our tent to relax.

Visiting the only female Shaman in the Eastern Taiga

En-route our guide mentioned that Tsegtseg was coming home. I had mentioned to him that I'd love to photograph her so that day, surprisingly, she kindly invited us to her home where we not only photographed her in her normal attire, she also dressed up in her shaman costume with her mask so we could photograph her at home, in the forest and at a nearby tepee. It was an experience that none of us expected and one we all cherished.

We finally wandered back to our camp for dinner, stopping on the way to photograph a set of reindeer antlers that had been hung in a Daurian Larch to appease the shamans. When we arrived at the trees of our camp, our final walk was serenaded by a small flock of birds that included both Grey-headed and Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers, Eurasian Nuthatches and Songar Willow Tits.

The following morning we were joined by an adorable little Tsaatan boy and his father for breakfast. We had met them briefly the day before but our team had invited them to join us to eat which we all loved. I had asked if he would mind us taking photos so his dad finally allowed us to spend some time with him and his young reindeer taking pics before we dined on a fantastic meal of Gambir, which is like a Mongolian version of fry bred, for breakfast.

After breakfast we wandered down to visit a gathering of the community who had brought some hand made souvenirs to sell at a pop-up market outside the home of our hosts. We were fascinated to learn that the Tsaatan have a surprising access to wild green stone, which they carved into pendants for sale. Amongst curios like a bear claw, reindeer teeth and green stone, there were some lovely carved reindeer antlers and pieces of antler with local motifs symbolising Tsaatan culture. We took the chance to buy a few souvenirs directly from our community which we all loved.

The sun had begun to shine so we filled our morning taking some intentional motion blurs of the deciduous Dorian Larches. I also suggested we head to the forest to see what was left of the summer foraging berries. I thought it would be nice to set up a still-life type image where we gathered things like blueberries, cranberries, green moss and white lichens – all items eaten by the Tsaatan and their reindeer, to sustain themselves. So we enjoyed that for a short time before enjoying our last lunch in the Taiga.

That afternoon we went wandering around the community visiting the Tsaatan. Firstly we met up with the little boy who posed for us for photos. He seemed a bit pre-occupied at his home that afternoon and wasn't so keen on getting photographed. So we visited their lovely neighbours instead, only to discover that the patriarch of the family was a lesser known shaman in the community. We all loved learning a little more about Tsaatan shamanism from him and his wife, while taking a few photographs. He showed us a tiny golden shaman that he said he was going to use to hypnotise all of us with the spirit of the Taiga, so we would promise we'd return. They were such a warm and lovely couple that we had a hard time saying goodbye.

During the trip one of my guests had asked if it was possible to ride a reindeer so after we returned to camp we went to visit our host who had just bought his reindeer in for grazing. He kindly let my two guests go for a ride on his reindeer! Sadly I was a bit too large and heavy to do the same so I simply posed for a photo with a reindeer as an alternative.

Over dinner that night, our last in the community, we all felt a little sad that our time with these special people was coming to an end.

The next morning, as our horses were being loaded up with our camp gear, we enjoyed some last early morning sunshine and photos with our hosts of the Taiga.

Needless to say the ride on horseback out of the community was not only easier due to the daylight. The snow had melted and that, combined with the fact that our hardy Mongolian horses like so many others across the world, simply wanted to go home. It took us just over an hour and a half to leave the forested hills after saying goodbye to our hosts.

We then rode out on to a vast plain, stopping to visit a family of Mongolian nomads for a traditional lunch of deep fried dumplings and hot coffee. Our host was a charming, elderly nomadic woman who kindly allowed us to take her photo inside her deeply traditional ger, complete with ancient nomadic storage boxes, meat drying racks and a special corner used for Buddhist devotion. It was a magical way to end our time in the wilds of northern Mongolia!

Our final stretch on horseback was relatively straightforward and lovely. Shortly before a river, we dismounted and said goodbye to both our horse guides and our horses.

The Mongolians don't usually name their animals but I had become attached to the horse I rode and jokingly called him "Morpheus". It had been quite some time since I had last ridden a horse and I have to admit, I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed it. Even though Morpheus was often more interested in stopping to graze than keep up with the group, I let him find his way, have a snack and then happily trot to catch up with everyone. In the end I stroked him and felt a little sad to say goodbye.

We crammed into a tight minibus for the very short drive back to our guest house in Tsaagan Nuur, where our first hot shower in five days and a warm bed awaited us.

Over the following three days, with the exception of the high mountain passes, our passage back to Ulanbataar was largely sped up by the fact all the snow and ice had melted from five days ago.

We enjoyed restaurant meals and lovely comfortable hotels. Above all we enjoyed the time on the road simply chatting about our experiences on the tour and making car jokes with our guide and driver on the way back.

Visiting the Tsaatan isn't for the faint hearted. You need patience for those roads and you need to feel confident with riding sturdy little Mongolian horses. Those things aside, I would love to return to them.

Wild Images is loosely planning another expedition to visit the Tsaatan in 2027. If you would like to join me on a truly once in a lifetime journey, please let me know! We would love to share the magic of the Taiga and the fascinating, warm Tsaatan people with you.