GTMA 2020 Travel Writer Award

Entry #064

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Article 1

MONGOLIAN WANDERINGS

I'm lying in wait for a wolf – or, even better, a whole pack of wolves. The animals' den lies hidden among the boulders in a dusty wadi directly below me. Just one hour ago, my guide Nergui led me to the entrance, pointing out droppings, paw-prints and the recently butchered carcass of an ibex. Nobody was at home – Nergui's well-aimed stone established that much – so I'm now staking out the hideaway from the cliffs above, hoping the owners might return. My companions will be back to collect me at sunset.

Meanwhile I have the wilderness all to myself. I'm a tiny dot amid the arid wastes of Ikh Nart Nature Reserve, on the northern fringe of Mongolia's Gobi Desert. In a country famously wide and empty, no space comes wider or emptier than this one. For the last ten days, I've been largely on the move – as is fitting, in this land of nomads – but now, at last, I've come to a stop. It feels like a time for reflection; perhaps even a little Zen inspiration.

Somewhere over the horizon is my camp. We arrived yesterday after a long hike, tramping the gravel plains as our gear went ahead on a convoy of double-humped Bactrian camels. Despite the ominous litter of bleached bones underfoot, life was everywhere: Mongolian gazelles trotting away, big-horned argali sheep staring from escarpments and wheatears popping up on rock piles to rattle out their scratchy melody.

It’s too remote a place for humans, you’d think. Yet, on closer inspection, some of these rock piles were ancient grave sites. On one plain we found the ruins of a Buddhist temple complex that – along with most of Mongolia’s other sacred sites – was destroyed during the 1930s by the then Stalinist government. A thousand monks had once lived here, Nergui told me. Now we spotted the shards of shattered ceramics and, worse, scattered bullet casings. But we also saw a garland of prayer flags draped around a nearby sandstone buttress.

Our camp comprised half a dozen white gers arrayed like hat boxes across the desert floor. These temporary circular dwellings, better known to western festival-goers as yurts, are integral to the nomadic Mongolian way of life, traditionally built for dismantling and packing onto a yak cart in less than two hours. The interior of mine was faithful to tradition, with radial wooden spokes, felt lining and chimney vent. But the scatter cushions, wall hangings and wash basin were not what your average Mongolian herder might expect. Nor were the camp’s private loo and shower tents, or the restaurant ger where we enjoyed our excellent meals. The landscape may have been rough but I can hardly claim that we’d been roughing it.

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My introduction to Mongolia’s jaw-dropping landscapes had come ten days earlier in the Altai Mountains of the country’s far west. After a flight from the capital, Ulaanbataar, we transferred by road to the dusty settlement of Delun. I say ‘road’: in fact, our route was often little more than tyre tracks. With no settlements or signposts, we navigated by the horizon (a ridge here, a saddle there) and took cues from any gers we came across. ‘It’s Mongolian GPS,’ said my guide Batana. ‘Ger Positioning System!’ Meanwhile our driver Erdene kept up a keening tenor lament. ‘It’s about his mum,’ Batana added, seeing my curiosity. ‘He says she makes the best cup of tea in the morning.’

In the hills outside Delun we had a date with Yerbol, one of the region’s traditional Kazakh eagle-hunters. We arrived to find our man splendidly attired in purple robes and fox-fur hat, and bearing aloft Achtanik, his four-year-old female golden eagle. This formidable bird perched on its keeper’s thickly gloved wrist, occasionally beating its massive wings for balance. Today, fewer than 200 such hunters remain and Yerbol is something of a local legend. Mounted on his horse, before a backdrop of the snow-capped Altai, he certainly cut

an impressive dash. Donning the glove myself, and feeling the grip in those massive talons, I was unable to muster the same confidence.

The Altai is snow leopard country – and back in Delun we had learned about a local project to monitor these rare animals and mitigate conflict with local herders. The following day we bumped down nearby Chigertei valley towards the towering peaks on the Chinese border. Bugling demoiselle cranes took flight at our approach and a mounted herdsman and son drove their sheep down the valley in an irresistible chocolate-box tableau. In a pocket of forest, our National Parks guide Yelik stopped to check a camera trap mounted on a larch trunk.

At a nearby cluster of gers, we popped in to pay our respects and sample a salty cup of yak's butter tea. This homestead was erected just three days ago, when the family arrived for the summer grazing. Batana pointed out the particulars of the interior: how the male side is to the west and the female to the east, with possessions arranged accordingly. We seated ourselves on rugs and exchanged pleasantries, while assorted children peeped through the door in wide-eyed astonishment. I asked the grandmother – via Batana's translation – whether she had ever seen a snow leopard. She told us how local herders had once killed one of the cats and hung its pelt outside their ger; and how the very next night two more had descended from the mountains and killed 500 sheep. An apocryphal tale, perhaps, but its implicit moral seemed to offer some encouragement for this persecuted predator.

Needless to say, no snow leopard appeared for our viewing pleasure. But that night, back at camp, Yelik fired up his laptop to take us through some images previously downloaded from the very camera trap we had visited. Among them was a stunning sequence of a female snow leopard and two cubs sniffing at the lens. I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

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As our journey continued, the surprises came thick and fast. A day's drive to the east, we found ourselves floating in the limpid waters of Lake Dorgon. This broad inland sea arrived as a shocking blue among the dusty desert flats and is ringed by an equally unexpected mini-Sahara of apricot-coloured sand dunes. There was a sense of unreality about our picnic, as Bactrian camels – legs grotesquely elongated in the heat-haze – wandered the shore and

terns wheeled over the lapping waves. The Altai Mountains still lined the horizon but their distant snow-capped peaks now seemed like some CGI fakery.

Each new day also reinforced the theme of movement that was coming to define my idea of Mongolia. Much of the wildlife we encountered was migratory, from rare saiga antelope that galloped away in plumes of dust to dapper bar-headed geese that had overflown the Himalayas to get here and breed. With no fence in sight, the livestock – camels, yaks, goats, horses – all wandered at will. And every landscape had its human travellers: distant figures on horseback or motorbike beetling across the vastness, and neat white gers materialising like spacecraft in the middle of nowhere. We stopped to greet one Clint-Eastwood-style lone rider, who narrowed his eyes at the skies and promised that the *kang* (drought) was coming to an end.

It all served to remind us what we'd learned at the national museum in Ulaanbataar on day one: that Mongolia was where humanity first perfected the art of wandering. It was here, after all, that the first pastoralists learned to herd livestock with the seasons, and ultimately where – under Genghis Khan – a culture built on horsemanship forged the greatest empire ever known, stretching from the Hungarian pusztas to the Sea of Japan.

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Sadly, my itinerary wasn't built around horsemanship or the changing seasons. It was by air that I returned to Ulaanbataar and thence, by 4x4, to the Gobi Desert, where Ikh Naart – our final destination – awaited.

En route, we spent two days at Hustai National Park. This reserve is home to a special horse, but one that not even a Mongolian would saddle. Known locally as *thaki*, the Przewalski's horse once teetered on the brink of extinction. Today, small family parties roam the park's boulder-strewn hillsides, taking their chances with the local wolves. At park HQ, our biologist guide Tsegii Tserendulam explained how *thakis* were reintroduced in 1992 from a captive breeding population in Poland and are now thriving. Later, in perfect evening light, we watched a small party drink at a roadside stream then gallop away over a ridge. Stockier than their domestic cousins, they appeared both familiar and somehow prehistoric.

The next day brought cinereous vultures, Himalayan marmots, red deer and other natural history highlights. And, again, the landscape proved to be equally rich in human history. Tsegii took us to a Bronze Age tomb, where radiating lines carved into the stone mimicked the internal structure of a ger, revealing that – internal combustion engine and smart phone notwithstanding – some things in Mongolia have changed little in the last 1,200 years.

It was such reflections that occupied my mind, three days later, on that final afternoon above the wolf den. As the shadows deepened, the rock stacks around me seemed to take on shapes: horse heads, owls, Genghis Khan on a camel. Finally – perhaps just as Nirvana beckoned – the distant note of an approaching vehicle broke the spell. I packed camera and water bottle, slipped on a fleece, and traipsed back to our meeting place.

Sadly, no wolf. That would perhaps have been too neat an end to my adventure. But as we rumbled back to camp in the twilight, a small, thick-tailed animal dashed across our track. '*Manul!*' shouted Nergui, braking hard. This is the local name for the Pallas's cat – a furry feline, not unlike a diminutive snow leopard but even more elusive. It was a high-five moment: even Nergui, who regularly saw wolves, hadn't laid eyes on one this year.

Back in camp, our *manul* encounter brought an air of celebration, and the story rolled back and forth over barbecued goat. Later, as my companions turned in, I sat out with a last cold beer. Soon all I could hear was the sighing wind and a methodical munching from a line of recumbent camels, silhouetted under the stars. It felt like a profound moment. Had Genghis Khan ever felt something similar? Who knows where inspiration for empires begins.

Article 2

Oman: a self-drive family tour

(NB: Family names changed)

Shovelling sand is hard work. Powerless to help, we watch as one load after another flies through the air to pile up behind the digger. With the mound steadily rising, my daughter Emily brushes the stray grains from her hair but stays put, transfixed. Behind her, in the pre-dawn murk, my wife and I join the semi-circle of spectators, all of us willing the job finished before sunrise breaks the spell.

This digger is a turtle. A female green turtle, to be precise. And the beach that she's excavating is Raz al Jinz, on Oman's Indian Ocean coast. The great reptile hauled herself out of the ocean during the small hours to lay her clutch of 90-plus soft-shelled eggs. We trooped down here at 4am – parents holding the hands of sleep-befuddled children in a pied piper column behind our guide's torch beam – and now we're watching her finish the job, one flipper swipe at a time.

It's a special moment. But, with children in our party, not an entirely silent one. Emily, aged 16, casts murderous glances at the younger gigglers, while our white-robed guide has a quiet word with certain parents. A little unruliness, however, seems a small price to pay for opening up this magic to children. The set-up is impressive: from the windowless ocean frontage of our research centre hostel, designed so that no artificial lights disorientate emerging turtle hatchlings, to our guide's whispered briefing, explaining the many challenges these giant ocean nomads face.

Job done, finally, our turtle levers her 300-pound bulk out of the hole and heads slowly for the surf. Her sticky tears – in reality, a means of shedding excess salt – serve to intensify the poignancy of the moment. She reaches the water's edge just as the rising sun clears the horizon, gilding the first waves that break over her massive, domed carapace. Seconds later, she's gone, reclaimed, leaving only her broad trail ploughed into the beach. Further along the shore are many more such trails; it's as though a flotilla of amphibious landing craft set out from here overnight. Now the wheeling, mewling gulls arrive: egg predators on the lookout for unburied treasure. We head back towards breakfast. Ours will be scrambled.

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The turtle vigil marked day five of our week's self-drive exploration of Oman. Our itinerary followed a north-eastern circuit, starting and ending in the capital Muscat, with each day bringing a new landscape. The first hint of the scenic drama in store had come from the air, our plane's in-flight camera zooming in on a tapestry of folded mountains, green irrigated wadis and rippled dune fields. Soon – courtesy of our rental vehicle and Oman's excellent road network – we found the terrain opening up beneath our wheels.

Raz al Jinz, with its restricted access and precious buried nests, is not your average holiday beach: no sun loungers here. Thankfully, we had already indulged our sand-based frolicking at our previous stop, in the Wahiba Sands. At ground level, those ripples we'd admired from the plane turned out to be a stirring panorama of dune ridges, snaking away to the horizon. And so – tyres deflated, as advised – off we went in search of a suitable spot from which to admire the desert sunset.

'It feels like I'm in a screen saver,' Emily yelled as, breathing hard, we crested an apricot-coloured summit to gasp at the sandscape of peaks and crescents beyond. This was desert with a capital D: the kind you'd find in an illustrated children's dictionary. It was awe-inspiring – though awe didn't prevent the three of us from hurtling down the pristine slope on the other side, shrieking in hilarity as our sinking strides through avalanching sand culminated in collapse at the bottom.

Wahiba, a 4,600-square-miles sea of sand, is best known in the west from Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*. Granted, the great explorer travelled in a Bedouin camel caravan, not a 4x4, and he did not have a tourist camp – complete with hot showers, breakfast buffet and wifi – just over the horizon. But it would be nice to think that, occasionally, perhaps when his faithful retainers weren't looking, he kicked off his sandals and galloped down the nearest dune.

Oman's wildernesses are not only sandy ones. Our first gasps at the country's immensity came on day two, in the Hajar Mountains, where a precipitous road zigzagged to the lip of Wadi Ghul, the 'Grand Canyon of Arabia'. This colossal fissure lies below Jebel Shams, Oman's highest peak. But we were looking down, not up, squinting through heat-haze over layers of strata and into the dizzying

depths. Two passing French geologists (what were the chances?) told us how this epic landscape comprised gazillions of sea creatures that were laid down on the seabed 90 million years ago then folded into mountains, courtesy of plate tectonics. Backpacks laden with rock samples, they were like kids in a sweet-shop.

We hiked the famous Balcony Trail, following a contour track for several miles beneath the canyon rim. Egyptian vultures soared over the ramparts while fearless goats, apparently kitted out with suction hooves, gambolled up and down impossible slopes. We unwrapped our lunch among the mud-brick ruins of an ancient abandoned village squeezed beneath a cliff overhang. Its former inhabitants must have been born without a vertigo gene. The views had us staring, slack-jawed – which was just what the goats were counting on as they snuck in for our sandwiches.

Culture gave us some respite from gawping at huge views. Mind you, scale was also the theme at our first stop in Muscat: the Grand Mosque of Sultan Qaboos. Finished in 2001, this enormous edifice is home to the world's second-largest single-piece carpet, which weighs some 21 tons and covers 46,750 sq ft of the main *musalla*, or prayer hall. Overwhelmed by big, we focused on small, and Emily – dusting down last year's GCSE maths – did her best to explain the geometry of tessellations, as we marvelled at the intricate designs that covered the marbled interior.

It was at the Grand Mosque that Emily (our family not being Muslim) first came to terms with Oman's cultural dress code. Her challenge was taming a wayward headscarf. Mine was remembering where I'd left my shoes among the hundreds of others stuffed into cubby holes outside. Afterwards, we wandered the manicured grounds and gleaming, tiled walls. The whole expanse was intimidatingly clean, with staff on hand to sweep up any stray grass clipping or wipe away grubby tourist hand prints.

Each new stop brought more history and culture. At Jabreen Fort, we wandered a labyrinth of ancient passageways, down subterranean corridors and up gun turrets, visiting the Imam's tomb and disturbing bats from the damp walls of the date store. "Cool place for a party!" observed Emily, as we emerged on the ramparts. At the souk in nearby Nizwa, we sampled some of the dozens of date varieties – cardamom

the winner, by consensus. And at picture-book Misvat we saw how irrigation canals threaded through the village fed a palm-grove oasis among the desert crags.

It's this contrast of the lush with the barren that makes Oman so alluring. Nowhere more so than at Wadi Shad, just off the north coast road. Here, after a dusty clamber through the gorge, we found ourselves floating in the clear waters of a hidden pool, reflected light dancing off the sculpted rock walls while tiny fish nibbled our toes.

I say "hidden". In fact, Wadi Shad is a popular tourist attraction – and while the troops of visitors clutching picnics and swimwear couldn't diminish its grandeur, they took the edge off our sense of discovery. This, though, is where self-drive came into its own. Our week's itinerary was meticulously planned, but with our own wheels, an off-line navigation app and Emily's eclectic playlist to inspire us (both Gloria Gaynor and Radiohead will, henceforth, always be my sounds of the desert), we could improvise our own little deviations on a whim.

Thus, instead of the poolside buffet at our Nizwa hotel, we found a cheerful roadside café, where our mezze platters piled up while regulars watched Egyptian football on the big screen and a fellow diner told us about his visit to 'Shakespeare's Oxford'. And, tipped off by our guidebook, we ventured through a wild mountain pass to the tiny village of Umq, where Mohammed – a pilot home for the weekend from Muscat – gave us an impromptu personal tour. Over coffee and dates, he told us about 5,000-year-old graves on the plateau, and how herders here still lose their sheep to wolves. "They're not allowed to shoot them," he said, "but sometimes they do."

Our week would end at the Shangri-La hotel outside Muscat, where we returned our vehicle and enjoyed some final western-style beach R&R before the flight home – sun loungers included. The ultimate beach, however, came on our penultimate night when, armed only with GPS co-ordinates and instructions to "look for the yellow toilet tent", we rocked up on an empty shingle strip for a night's wild camping. While we wandered off for a spot of sunset beachcombing, our hosts, Victoria and Yussef, laid out rugs, cushions and a low dining table then got busy at the barbecue.

That night we sprawled like sultans beneath a canopy of stars, as dish after dish – lamb kebabs, fish fillets, samosas, stuffed aubergines – appeared by candlelight. “All for you,” said Victoria. In that moment, it felt that she meant the whole of Oman. The ocean sighed, we munched and somewhere out in the darkness, further down the coast, the beach diggers got back to work.

Article 3

Wild Wester Ross

“Stop,” says my wife. “A roadblock.” Our little rental car draws to a halt as five tiny lapwing chicks emerge from a tussock and, one-by-one, totter across the tarmac after their mother. Their father swoops overhead, his shrill *peeee-wit!* proclaiming that wildlife has right of way up here.

I love driving the west coast. Our journey always starts in Inverness, fresh off the sleeper from Euston, but it’s not until we turn left onto the Wester Ross Coastal Trail that the adventure really begins. Now the gentle farmland gives way to wilder heather hillsides and dark roadside lochans, the mountains loom closer and, as the road narrows to single track, I keep one eye on the bends and another on the ridges for eagles.

Today, we’re on my favourite drive – and it’s a road to nowhere. Following the coast south of Gairloch, past the scenic bays of Shieldaig and Badachro, the tiny settlements peter out and the trees surrender to an ever bleaker-looking blanket of bog cotton. Ahead lies a dead end: not a promising prospect, you might think. But the excitement mounts as we rattle over the final cattle grid, because beyond that dead end lies not nowhere but Red Point, our ‘best beach in the world’.

We’ve been family-holidaying this wild corner of the Scottish coast for many years now. Sometimes it’s the May half-term, sometimes summer; sometimes a rented cottage, occasionally a hotel; sometimes with friends or cousins, sometimes just us. But every year a similar routine. And every year Red Point is a must.

Parking at the end of the track (*two* other vehicles today: an outrage!), we gather packed lunches, beach gear and binoculars and tramp out across the fields, over the dunes and down to that great

empty crescent of sand. At our backs are the glowering peaks of Torridon; across the bay to the southwest loom the craggy contours of Skye; and beyond that, the flat pastels of the distant Outer Hebrides. We dump our bags at the foot of the dunes. No footprints here yet, bar fresh otter tracks embroidered along the strandline. The piping of an oystercatcher carries across the water with breath-taking clarity.

In toddler days, Red Point meant sandcastles for my daughter and hand-held paddling in the limpid shallows. Now, mid-teens, and with a friend in tow, it's sprawling on a rug in the dunes or wandering out to the point, locked in earnest conversation. This is not the Riviera – those clouds might gather at any point – but the sand is better, the sun feels a personal gift and the surrounding wilderness guarantees enough exclusivity to trump any Caribbean hideaway.

Each of the stunning beaches in these parts has its own character – and, for us, its own history. At postcard-perfect Mellon Udrigle, looking back across Gruinard Bay, the firm sand means beach cricket and frisbees. A small cove to the south is also our traditional hunting ground for cowries, the whole family taking to hands and knees on the tideline as though searching for pearl earrings on a gravel path. Auntie Fiona is a dab hand.

And every beach means a walk. At Mellon Udrigle – worth mentioning again for the name alone – we generally meander up onto the headland to eat our sandwiches and scan for seals. One year, we found the bay detonating with diving gannets and watched a minke whale join the fishing party from below, its long gleaming body and hooked dorsal fin periodically breaking the surface.

That's the thing about wildlife in these parts: you just never know. A hike in the hills may produce red deer bounding up the slopes or a distant soaring golden eagle – or, for younger eyes focused at a lower level, newts in a trackside puddle or the undulating fur ball of an emperor moth caterpillar. But don't expect the wildlife to perform on demand. Once, hell-bent on finding eagles, I returned from a day's sweaty hike with nothing to show but bog-sodden trousers. Then at the village shop on the way home, arms full of bread rolls and breakfast cereal, I watched a huge white-tailed sea eagle drift straight overhead, heading back to where I'd just been. You're trying too hard, its brazen flypast seemed to suggest.

Wildlife or not, the walking is always superb. Each year, eschewing online options (wifi can be elusive), we fish out our dog-eared *Walking Wester Ross* and navigate our way around old favourites. Flowerdale, behind Gairloch, leads us upstream beside a stepped succession of cascades where dippers dash across the torrent; the Tollie Path crests a shoulder of mountain for stirring views of Loch Maree; the Fairy Lochs walk leads to three lonely lochans, where the wreckage of a

World War II Liberator bomber lies strewn across the bog and red-throated divers wail eerily from somewhere beyond.

But what about those notorious midges? Yes, you'll certainly make their acquaintance – but the beaches are generally fine; just make sure you avoid the treeline on windless days. And the weather? Yes, it can rain. But what's a British summer holiday without some indoors time? Cottages come with books, board games and a new kitchen in which to whip up something questionable. And last year, trapped by filthy weather at our cottage in Badachro, we watched a pine marten peering in at our rain-streaked window.

Besides, the bad weather is rarely relentless. What's more, summer days are long, so there's plenty of time to execute plan B, and even C, and still return to plan A when the sun comes out later. A rain-sodden morning can culminate in a glorious evening beach picnic and a sunset stroll along the headland. At 11pm, the local cuckoos and skylarks are still at it.

Who knows what 2019 will bring? For a couple of years now, we've been bracing ourselves for teenage reluctance – a forsaking of the annual west coast pilgrimage for rival plans back home – but it hasn't happened yet. Meanwhile, it's been two summers since I last saw an otter. There's always a new Munroe to tackle. And whatever happens, there'll be haddock and chips and a post-hike pint at the Badachro Inn. That's more than enough for me.