

Mongolia's river adventures

By Patrick Phillips

Travel in Mongolia is unique. Add the ingredient of whitewater rafting 130 kilometers through one of the most isolated and breath-taking canyons in the Hangay Mountains, and it reaches a new level. That is exactly what four intrepid wanderers did this past week with the travel adventure company 'Mongolian River Adventures.' They descended the Orkhon River by raft through a road-less, wilderness canyon in Bulgan Aimag, about 300 kilometers north-west of Ulaanbaatar. The following account captures their experiences and encounters with Mongolia's famous landscape and wildlife.

In the spirit of cultural experience, our group used public transportation to reach the aimag center of Bulgan. Jostling and bouncing along in the crowded Russian bus, we observed the herds of grazing animals, the surreal ninja mining camps, the stone patterns of ancient burial sites, and realized along the way that as budget travelers we were placing an unexpected burden on the already-strained Mongolian public transportation system and countryside population relying on it. The stoic, good-hearted Mongolians didn't seem to mind, but chalk one up to experience- we won't do that again.

We hired a truck in Bulgan to travel the last 100 kilometers to the river, aiming for a point just south of Saikhan, a region of Mongolia famed for its tasty fermented mares milk (airig). Our pleasant, chatty driver told us his name was "Jarín-Gurav", or 'Sixty-Three', in honor of the Russian automobile he had been born in! We amused ourselves in the truck discussing which make of automobile we would have preferred to be born in... In the end, our savings in travel expenses seemed to be balanced by the 16 hours spent getting to the 'put-in', and we were happy to rest our weary bodies as the rising moon broke through the clouds.

We awoke the next morning to thundering hooves as a herd of horses emerged from the river. Leaving our tents we took in the picture-postcard view at the head of a dramatic canyon.

Breakfast was complimented by fresh yoghurt from the local herders and then we inflated and loaded the sturdy raft. We pushed off into the current feeling the tingling excitement of new adventure, but with confidence in our experienced river guide.

Within the first hour we were completely cut off from the surrounding landscape by rising cliffs on both sides of the river. The Orkhon Gol is an old stream that was well entrenched long before the Hangay Mountains spewed lava across the landscape in five separate episodes beginning 800,000 years ago, and ending 20,000 years in the past. Basalt columns that form the canyon walls display elaborate designs from different cooling rates when the lava poured into the ancestral waters of the river.

The raft weaved between the rocks, as we laughed at each other during the harmless collisions with large river rocks. Later that day we smelled, then spied, a large dead wild boar decaying at the waters edge, a victim of higher water that spring. Paddling to shore just before the canyon walls closed in and became sheer, we built a cozy campfire to prepare dinner. There we found a large antler left behind years before by a red deer, a sign that we were exactly where we needed to be.

The following day we entered the deepest part of the canyon and negotiated technical, boulder-choked stretches of river. The raft and crew handled themselves well, but judging by the high-water line on both banks, it was clear that at flood levels the river features would be much more challenging. We moved more slowly through this stretch, but by lunchtime the ominous, 200-meter canyon walls began to descend, the river channel widened, and we knew we were safely past the most dangerous part of our journey. By evening we were admiring roving herds of horses that followed our progress along the river bank in galloping dashes, then stopped to nod their heads in greeting as we passed.

Our last day on the water was a bonanza of scenery and wildlife. We enjoyed the early morning tranquility as we floated by waterfowl surprised by our presence. Baby ducklings and goslings, too young to fly, sped ahead of us while concerned parents tried



Rafting between the hard places.



Ready to move again



Orkhon Gol Canyon Valley

to distract our attention by flapping lamely in the opposite direction. Movement on the shore turned out to be a curious fox, and later we twice spotted badgers. All other wildlife sightings were eclipsed, however, when Bulгаа with his trained hunter's eye, excitedly sputtered "Wolf! Look! Over there!" And sure enough, the unmistakable animal was running upslope away from us, eventually only turning back to look and confirm we were out of range.

It is hard to describe how blessed I felt by this very auspicious occurrence. Only last year I saw my first wolf in the wild after a lifetime of wilderness travel. That time I had been alone on the Chuluut Gol, also in the Hangay Mountains, and when I told my Mongolian friends of the experience they assured me of my good fortune. Two in as many years seemed too much to ask, and I can only hope I am so lucky ever again.

As we meandered downstream, weaving our way through small rapids and paddling through peaceful pools, we shared the landscape with various birds of prey, including a golden falcon, Mongolia's national symbol, and watched a fish eagle barrel roll in aerial combat with a pair of marauding smaller birds. We stopped to investigate some ruins on the north side of the river, and ambled through the huge complex of an old abandoned Soviet military base. We learned later it was positioned there to defend the Erdenet copper mine from southern invaders (i.e. Chinese). When the Soviet troops and their families pulled out in the late 1980's, the nearby town of Orkhon fell on extremely hard times and nearly relocated itself to the empty complex, but instead the recently unemployed Mongolian workers simply scavenged whatever useful materials they could in order to survive. We found some empty shell casings, tell-tale epaulettes emblazoned with "CA" (Soviet Army), and a handsome snake with a suspiciously arrow shaped, pit-viper head.

We camped our final night two kilometers upstream of the bridge where we would catch the passing bus in the morning. As we snuggled into our sleeping bags that night, visions of wild lands and the gentle pattering of rain on our tents lulled us to sleep.

Patrick Phillips is a professional whitewater rafting guide who for 20 years has rafted and kayaked on rivers around the globe. Since 2007 he has been exploring the rivers of Mongolia, and can provide river adventures and custom itineraries to suit any interest. See the advertisement in this week's Mongol Messenger, and check out the website at: mongolriveradventures.com