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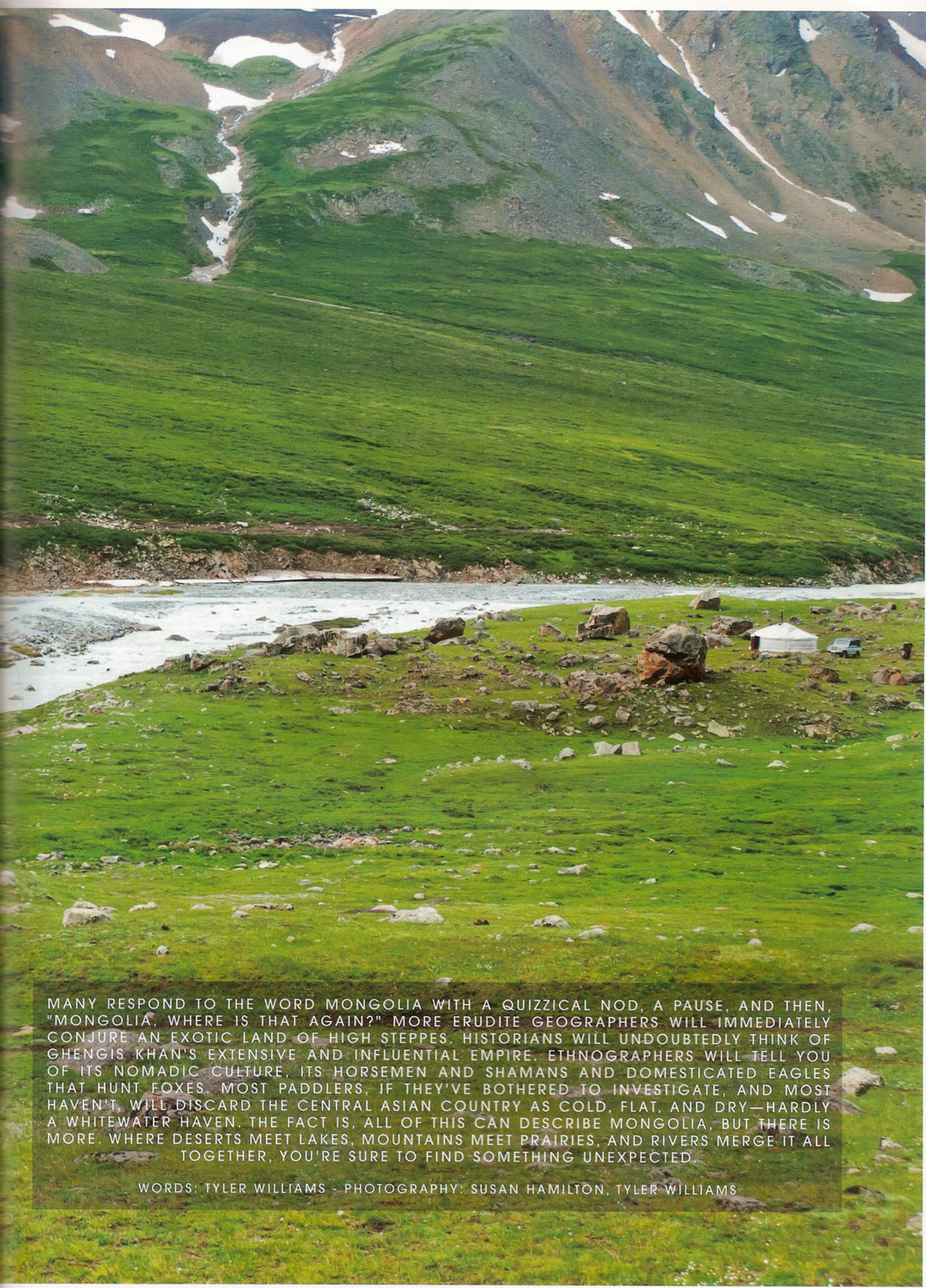


EXPLORE: MONGOLIA KAYAK SAFARI
MISSION: KARANGARUA RIVER, NEW ZEALAND
DESTINATION: KAYAKING IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC
DISCOVER: WATERFALLS OF THE CUMBERLAND PLATEAU
INTERVIEW: CAPO RETICO
PORTFOLIO

The background image is a full-page photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a lush green grassy field is dotted with small white flowers and larger grey rocks. Two riders on horseback are moving from left to right across this field. The horse in front is dark, and the rider is wearing a light-colored hat and jacket. The second horse is white, and its rider is also in similar attire. Both horses are carrying kayakers on their backs; the front horse has a bright orange kayak, and the white horse has a red one. In the middle ground, a wide, shallow river with white water rapids flows through the valley. The river is surrounded by green grass and scattered rocks. In the background, steep, rocky mountains rise, their slopes partially covered with patches of snow or light-colored rock. The overall scene is vibrant and adventurous.

MONGOLIA KAYAK SAFARI

FINDING WHITEWATER IN A LAND OF DREAMS



MANY RESPOND TO THE WORD MONGOLIA WITH A QUIZZICAL NOD, A PAUSE, AND THEN, "MONGOLIA, WHERE IS THAT AGAIN?" MORE ERUDITE GEOGRAPHERS WILL IMMEDIATELY CONJURE AN EXOTIC LAND OF HIGH STEPPES. HISTORIANS WILL UNDOUBTEDLY THINK OF GHENGIS KHAN'S EXTENSIVE AND INFLUENTIAL EMPIRE. ETHNOGRAPHERS WILL TELL YOU OF ITS NOMADIC CULTURE, ITS HORSEMEN AND SHAMANS AND DOMESTICATED EAGLES THAT HUNT FOXES. MOST PADDLERS, IF THEY'VE BOTHERED TO INVESTIGATE, AND MOST HAVEN'T, WILL DISCARD THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRY AS COLD, FLAT, AND DRY—HARDLY A WHITEWATER HAVEN. THE FACT IS, ALL OF THIS CAN DESCRIBE MONGOLIA, BUT THERE IS MORE. WHERE DESERTS MEET LAKES, MOUNTAINS MEET PRAIRIES, AND RIVERS MERGE IT ALL TOGETHER, YOU'RE SURE TO FIND SOMETHING UNEXPECTED.

WORDS: TYLER WILLIAMS - PHOTOGRAPHY: SUSAN HAMILTON, TYLER WILLIAMS



Paddlers Pat Phillips and Susan Hamilton run the Tsagaan Gol (Milk River) as yaks graze on shore beneath the striking Altai Range.

The countryside was green following recent rains, but both vans still trailed curls of dust as they tore along at 80 kilometers per hour. Each driver chose his own road, choosing from the six different dirt tracks that ran parallel down the valley. Two hours passed before we saw our first building, a roadside cafe located at a junction. The place was destitute.

This kind of paradise revealed is what keeps Pat Phillips returning to the land of Ghengis Khan season after season. His first time in the country, Phillips bought a cheap Russian motorcycle in the capital city of Ulaan Baatar, and spent the next six weeks tracing jeep trails and horse paths west to the Altai Mountains, a journey of nearly 3,000 miles (4,800 kilometers). Along the way, he was forced to cross dozens of streams (sometimes requiring two-day detours), many of

An empty vodka bottle sat upright in the dirt out front. A cardboard doormat led us inside. Pat and I and our three Mongolian friends took a seat at a table with a sticky and torn tablecloth. Forty minutes after ordering, our food had yet to arrive, and I thought about making the old joke about the cooks going out and killing the meat before serving it, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that they might actually be doing just that. Five big mutton dumplings finally came on a platter, and a pile of noodles with tough chunks of horse meat heaped over another plate. I breathed deep to subdue my days-old nausea as our friends chattered away in a language of which I knew exactly three words. Just then, it was really hard to be positive about Mongolia.

But as barren and raw and uncomfortable as Mongolia can be, there is always some reward around the next bend. After lunch, we rolled past snowy mountains capped in cloud, and across rich green valleys painted yellow with wildflowers. Two days later, we were launching our kayaks at the confluence of two perfectly U-shaped glacial valleys, dipping paddles into cold crystalline snowmelt that fizzed with the energy of whitewater.



Where there are few trees but many herds, dung is a primary fuel source.



MONGOLIA IS AN OLD SCHOOL PLACE, STILL TRAVERSED LARGELY BY HORSEBACK, STILL HONORING A TIME WHEN GHENGIS KHAN AND HIS DESCENDANTS RULED FROM GERMANY TO THE CHINA SEA.



In Mongolia, a single camel equals four horses in trade. They are also excellent kayak shuttlers.

which had never been paddled. The next year, Pat returned with his kayak, and got to exploring. He ran numerous rivers solo, and toured several more through his developing guide service—Mongolia River Adventures—but Pat had never been there with a shuttle driver and a class V companion during peak runoff. That's where I came in.

It took nearly a decade of convincing before I decided to set aside a summer for Mongolia because well, it doesn't exactly scream whitewater. Sitting squarely in the center of the Asian continent, Mongolia is mostly high elevation desert, frozen solid beneath a thin veneer of wind blown snow for half the year. In late summer, however, tendrils of the Asiatic monsoon wrap into the northern and eastern parts of the country, and each May and June a runoff season occurs in a handful of mountain ranges that break above the vast steppes for which the region is known.

The largest of those mountain ranges is the Altai, forming the border with Russia in the northwest, and China in the far west. Much of Phillips' probing has centered on the Altai, and my first two weeks in the country were spent there, on a rather exciting Mongolia River Adventures trip. But my true role was to accompany Pat on a journey to another massif that looked especially intriguing on his 1940s Soviet military map, labeled in Cyrillic. (Good maps are hard to find in Mongolia.) The place was called Kharkhiraa (Har hear ahh), a 13,300-foot (4,037 meters) summit that offered only vague pixelated resolution on Google Earth, but which appeared to hold glaciers, and presumably, rivers. As mysterious as the area was, one of Kharkhiraa's drainages had seen kayakers previously, at the hands of the

British Universities trip of 2006. Their report, along with a few tantalizing photos posted on Google Earth, was enough to make Kharkhiraa a priority.

We said goodbye to our friends and their two vans from the commercial trip in the town of Olgi, nexus of far western Mongolia. Culturally dissimilar from much of the country, Olgi's colorful Russia influenced rooftops filled a stark mountain basin. It's citizens spoke more Kazakh than Mongolian, and Islam was a bigger player than either Buddhism or Christianity. It's not uncommon to spot the occasional Western traveler in Olgi, but as with most of Mongolia, it's nice, even necessary, to have a bilingual contact. Ours was Jagaa, family man, ethnographer, and part-time tour operator. With boats on top of Jagaa's jeep, the three of us drove beyond the last cinder block structure of town, and into "the countryside" as the Mongolians say.

Three hours later, a wind swept lake opened before us, and we felt compelled to stop. The landscape seemed computer-generated, like some Pixar dreamscape out of a Hollywood movie. Beyond the blue lake, green plains led to rocky red foothills, backdropped by snowy white mountains. As we entered the facade, a few round white gers (gares), the ubiquitous wall tents of Mongolia, began to appear along small tumbling streams. The road degenerated, and Jagaa got out to query an old woman wearing a long woolen del, the traditional everything-smock of Mongolia. Apparently our turn was a couple creeks back, climbing onto round mountaintop steppes. At nearly 9,000 feet, we realized that we were off course, but it was too beautiful to turn around. Jagaa struck across the grassland toward the edge of a glacial valley that ran below us, stopping only when the snow dome of Kharkhiraa rose empress-like above the treeless plain.



The moraine gorge of the Tsagaan Gol is an angry, cold, raw place. It is also beautiful, powerful, and unique, in short—Mongolia.



Warm mare's milk tea and fresh yogurt are commonly offered inside hospitable gers sprinkled throughout the countryside.

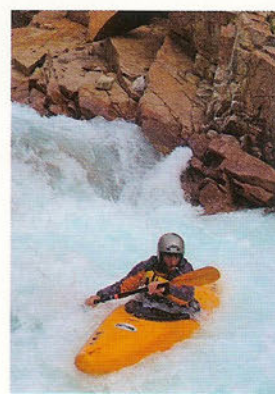
An hour-long downhill approach had us standing at the confluence of two scoured alpine valleys, with Mongolia's hardest whitewater below. This was the Khargatiin (Har gaa teen), 300 cfs of sparkling snowmelt spilling through granite. At a long complex rapid leading into a low gorge, we made a quick scout, agreeing it looked good. From the water, it didn't seem so easy. Still, we agreed on the move—split the boulders, first high left, then high right. I got too aggressive at the first move and my bow stalled on the pillow, flushing me downstream backwards. A submerged rock flipped me, and I was scraping over a bed of boulders waiting for a chance to roll when everything stopped. Bedrock squashed me onto the front deck, and I resolved to punch out, if I ever got the chance. Seconds later there was a shift, and my opportunity came. I surfaced standing chest deep in a marginal eddy. Pat came sluicing over the final drop backwards as I yelled to him, "my paddle!" Hefting my boat onto shore, I watched him chase the runaway blade and javelin throw it to shore before eddying out. From two hundred yards, we exchanged the all-okay signal.

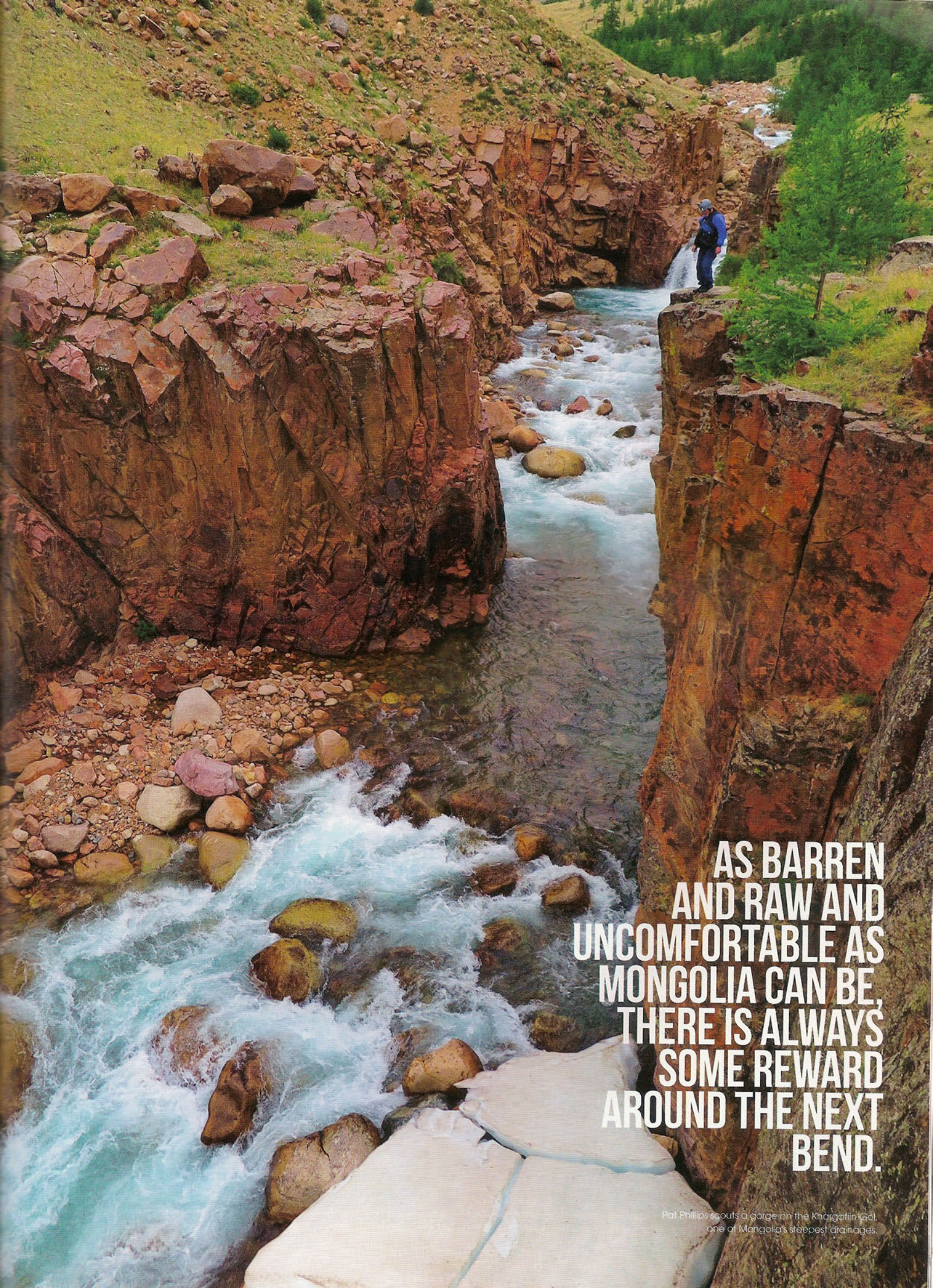
The river volume doubled on day two, as the Khargatiin became the Shiver Gol, stair-stepping through round boulders in a string of perfect class IV drops. Sinuous vertical walls closed in as the whitewater lessened, and then we were out of the mountains, sliding along on a class III roller coaster of snowmelt, desert scrub blurring into waves of heat beyond our moving oasis. When the river braided into multiple channels, there was Jagaa, standing in the smoke of a dung fire to keep the horseflies at bay. We sipped river chilled beers in the shade of the jeep before embarking on another hours-long drive to the range's namesake river, the Kharkhiraa.

Some of Pat's contacts back in Ulaan Baatar told him it was "rocky and swift," thus moving it up a notch on the priority list. Gaining good information on Mongolia's rivers is no easy task, so wherever Phillips goes he asks the locals, "When is the water highest? Is it swift? Are there big rocks?" It's an old school approach, but it works here because Mongolia is an old school place, still traversed largely by horseback, still honoring a time when Ghengis Khan and his descendants ruled from Germany to the China Sea.

A few dicey river crossings in Jagaa's jeep got us several kilometers up the Kharkhiraa—a river of light glacial blue running over a broad cobble floodplain. On-the-fly surf waves were the name of the game before we took out at a small diversion dam above town. A few local men tossed large cobbles into the river, enhancing their agricultural diversion.

By evening we were at the Turgen River, spilling out of a craggy canyon reminiscent of Idaho's Middle Fork of the Salmon. The hike-in access demanded more time than we had just then, so we rattled onward; over high passes of purple wildflowers and grazing cows, past flocks of griffon vultures that soared away on 9-foot wingspans, and down past sand dunes surrounding big blue lakes. Along the way Jagaa mentioned a river near Olgii that he thought we might like, so after a warm shower beneath a precarious dangling spigot at the best hotel in town, we re-convened with our friend Akhtilek and his tough Furgan van for a drive up the Khatu (Ha too) River.

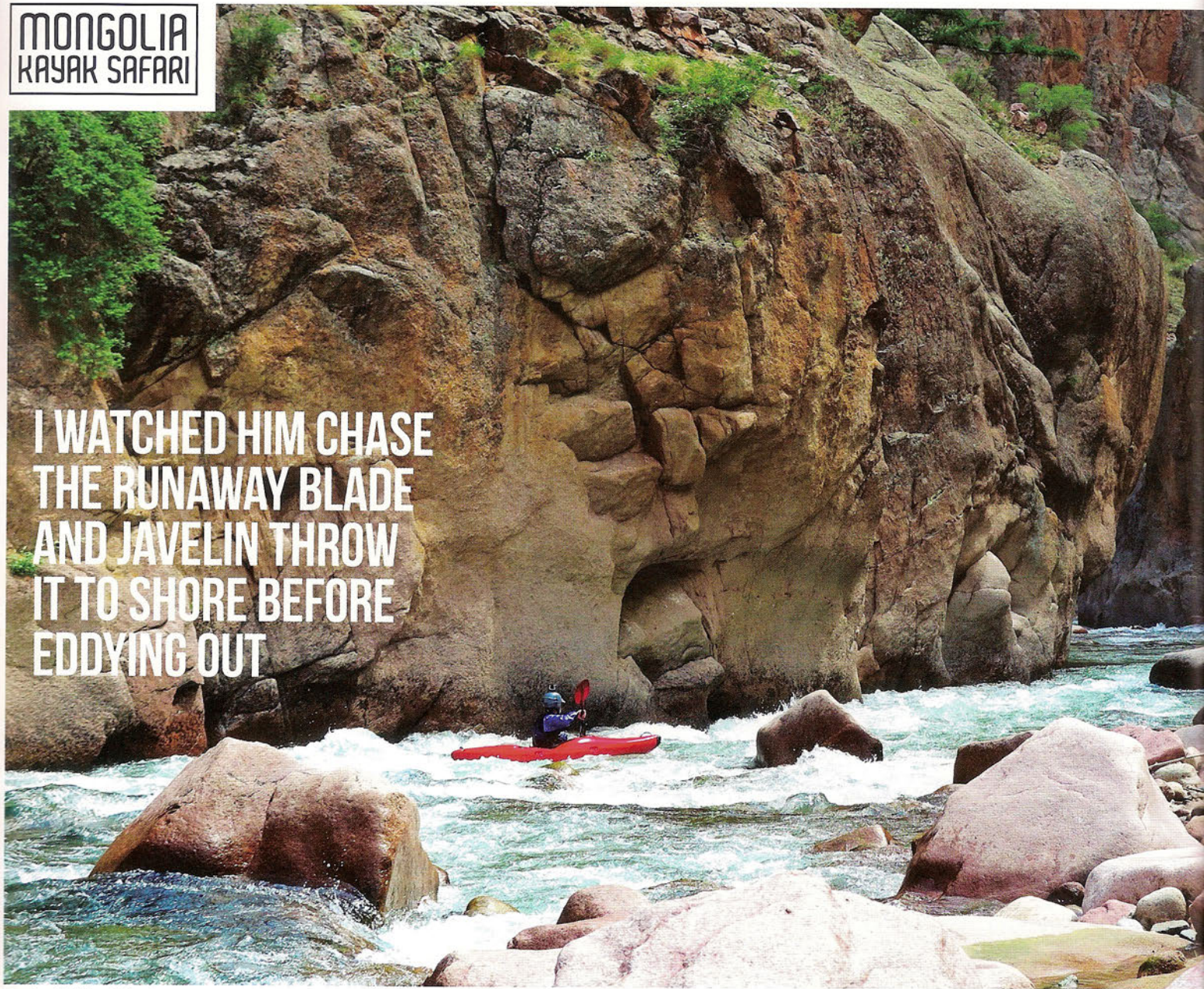




**AS BARREN
AND RAW AND
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MONGOLIA CAN BE,
THERE IS ALWAYS
SOME REWARD
AROUND THE NEXT
BEND.**

Pat Phillips scouts a gorge on the Khargatin Gol,
one of Mongolia's steepest drainages.

I WATCHED HIM CHASE THE RUNAWAY BLADE AND JAVELIN THROW IT TO SHORE BEFORE EDDYING OUT



The class IV Shiver Gol cuts an unexpected gorge through the front range of the Kharkhiraa Mountains.

The route up the green Khatu Valley ended at an encroaching mountainside. We stood there stymied while a black thunderstorm gathered overhead, and our day of paddling seemed to be slipping away when a lone horseman came galloping toward us from across the river. He carefully steered his steed into the belly-deep water, emerging before us with a wide grin. He and Akhtilek discussed route options, and minutes later I was grasping for my pfd inside the van as we drove down a class III rapid. Once safely back on the steppes, the horseman tossed his saddle among our paddling gear and jumped into the front seat. His horse waited, stoic and alone amid the wide valley as we drove away.

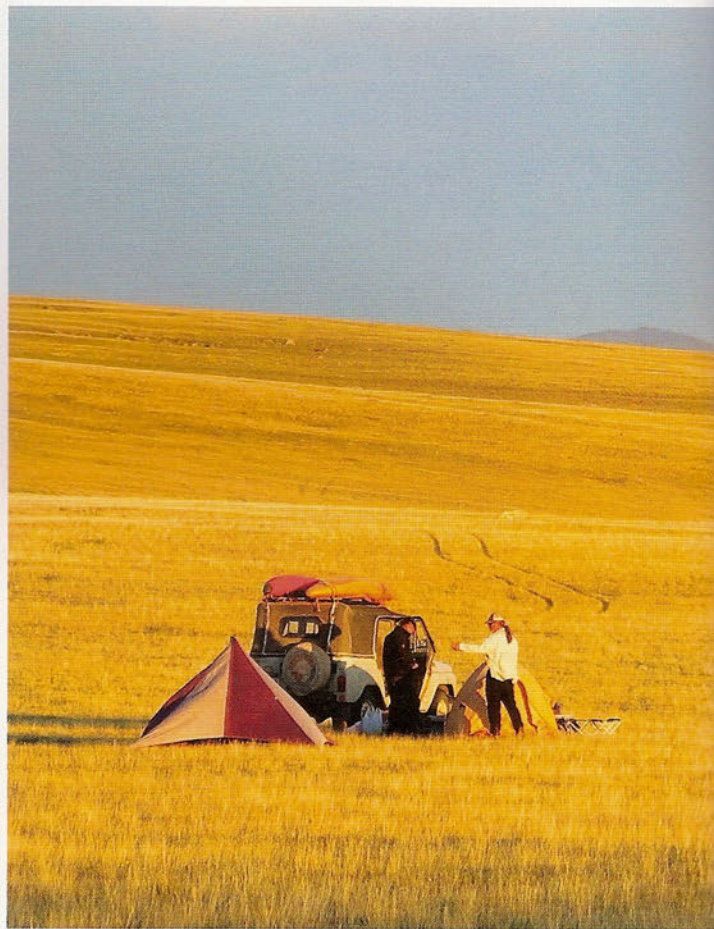
After all that, the put-in was somewhat anti-climatic. Nonetheless, we were pleasantly surprised to find class III-IV bedrock rapids leading into easier gravel bar drops, all beneath striking treeless peaks. The Khatu was a random discovery borne of local knowledge, hardly a common destination. Our next destination, the Tsagaan Gol, is a different story. Home to Tavaan Bogd (Tav an bode) National Park and the highest peaks of the Altai, it's on the radar of most western Mongolia travelers.

Pat had been here several times before, always wondering if any paddlers had entered the intriguing moraine gorge of the upper Tsagaan Gol. When we arrived—Akhtilek again at the wheel and our friend Susan fresh from the States after 18 hours of airplane travel—we promptly asked the chief park

ranger, Gana, if he knew of any other paddlers that had been here. From beneath his worn purple hood, Gana reported that indeed some Canadians were here just weeks ago, with a raft. And they had run the river. Our first descent glory dashed, we grudgingly made arrangements for a shuttle to the top of the gorge. Two horses and a camel would arrive at 8 am. The horses were for the Mongolians. The camel was for the kayakers. We would walk.

I scrambled out to rocky promontories as a light mist fell, scouting for any problem spots. At a stomping class V with sketchy portage options, I asked Gana through our translator Nurca, "Did the Canadians run this?" His explanation clarified things, as much as anything can be clarified in Mongolia, through the language barrier and an even more formidable cultural communication gap. The Canadians, it seemed, were in a double inflatable kayak, and they had run the lower river, not the gorge. Now that made sense. Around the next bend was an exit eddy above the gnar. Onward we went.

At the put-in, it was dumping big fat snowflakes. We launched amid the blizzard on a small stream of silty gray glacial effluent. Susan took pictures from the rim, lasting three bends before making a forced march back to camp to stave off hypothermia. Pat and I sucked on numb fingers, and relished the two up-and-out-and-back-in portages, because the effort warmed us. Eddies, we learned, were to be avoided, because most held lurking rocks that pin-balled us back into the current.



At 49° latitude, evenings are long on the high steppes of central Asia.



Although horses are still widely used for transportation, four-wheel-drive vans, flat-bed trucks, and motorcycles are valuable vehicles in the sparsely inhabited countryside.

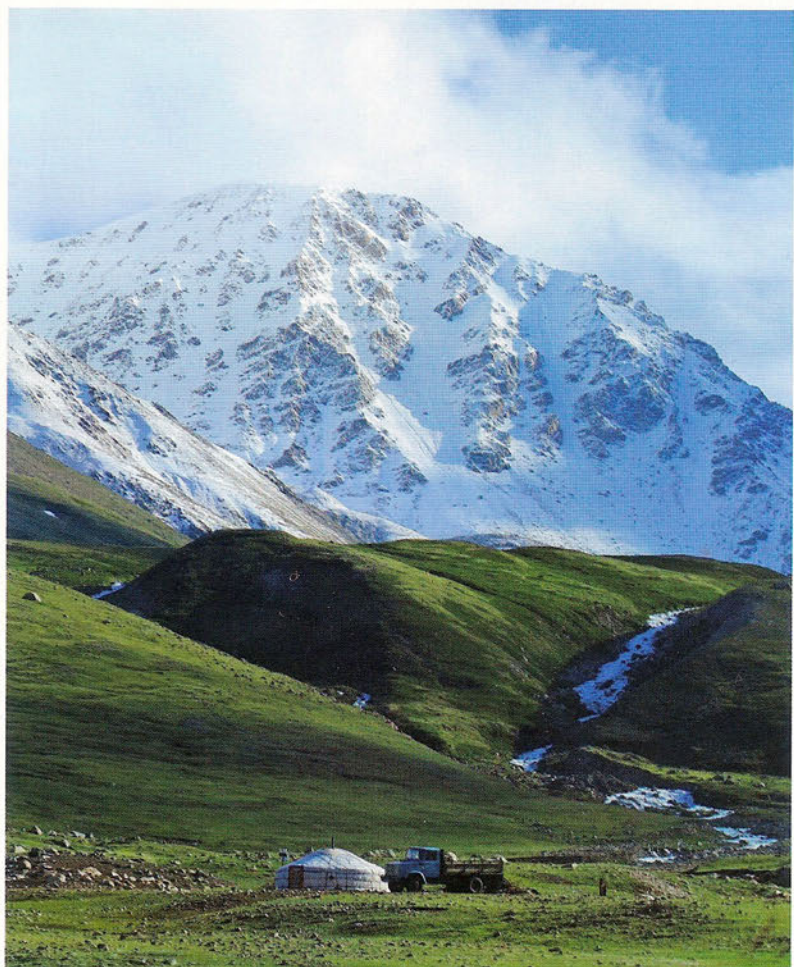


Get psyched: Williams pretends that he is ready to launch on a glacial stream at 9,000 feet in a July 5th snowstorm.

AT THE PUT-IN, IT WAS DUMPING BIG FAT SNOWFLAKES. WE LAUNCHED AMID THE BLIZZARD ON A SMALL STREAM OF SILTY, GRAY GLACIAL EFFLUENT.

Despite all this, I was having a blast. Maybe it was because it was my birthday. At one rapid, I hit an unexpected rock and got launched straight into a calm eddy. At another, I nearly sluiced backwards into a horrible slot but instead pivoted around a rock to safety. We were both glad to reach the class III run-out, and see the snowstorm abating. Families poured out of their gers to watch us pass, and one small boy ran to waters' edge. Pat, sporting a thick graying beard, pulled over and shook his stunned little hand, as if Santa Claus had randomly dropped by for a visit.

Buzzing from the long-sought descent, the vodka poured freely for both paddlers and our support team, who shared in the completion of the endeavor. A fraternity of van drivers and translators from various groups drifted between camps throughout the festive night. Pat, Susan, and I felt strangely at home, seeing the scene's similarity to an impromptu campsite gathering of boatmen in Grand Canyon, where we work. For many, that place is as foreign as Mongolia was to us, but on this particular night all the overwhelming exoticism of central Asia was forgotten. We were simply camped beside the river's roar, with one thrilling episode behind us, and undoubtedly another yet ahead.



The ger is the standard shelter of Mongolian nomads. Deconstructed within a day, these mobile structures are normally moved 4 times a year as families follow the seasons with their herds of sheep, goat, yak, horse, camel, and cow.