

EASTERN EMPIRES

YET ANOTHER TRAVELLER'S JOURNAL BY
MARTIN SMEDENDAHL

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by Martin Smedendahl

Eastern Empires

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What causes people to build empires? How can millions, billions of people from a multitude of different cultures work together under one patriotic umbrella? How do you go about keeping the incredibly vast expanses together? To find out, I decided to take a tour through the remnants of three of history's greatest empires: The Russian, the Mongolian and the Chinese. And honestly, after travelling such astronomical distances this trio covers, wouldn't you agree that one might as well pop over to South Korea, which is basically round the corner?

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PART I: RUSSIA



IN SOVIET RUSSIA, BOOK READS YOU

I know, its all back-asswards, isn't it? Leaving the ethereal beauty of one of the most amazingly awesome strips of land* during its most accomplished time of year?

Leaving friends while their activity lists are at their fullest without participating? Waving a goodbye to Sweden during its gorgeous summer with its almost never-ending daylight in favour of spending eight weeks in, you know, not Sweden?

Well, Swedish summer comes around every year, give or take. The opportunities to choo-choo through a lush Siberia and to gallop across the vast steppes of Mongolia while not freezing to death knock far more seldom.

* The West Coast of Sweden recently was voted the seventh most beautiful place in the world by a travel magazine

And as the two short flights from west to south to east were spartanly over with, I set foot in the former capital of one of the biggest empires, as well as superpowers, ever to have lost to Sweden in both hockey and war**. The officials call it Saint Petersburg, apparently the locals call it Leningrad. Let's just split the difference and call it Petrograd. Or, you know, Saint Leninburg.

** Not at the same time, though

In Soviet Russia, book reads you



Flying out

KEYS TO PARADISE

Splendour! A single word to epitomize the feel and look of Russia's second largest city. Far removed from the popular image of Soviet era concrete bunker buildage, Saint Petersburg displays a Tsarian aristocracy in its architecture, and indeed it should; as the port to the west, both figuratively and literally, the former capitol has always had a more European than Soviet Russian approach. That the very spark that set off the communist movement was ignited here makes for no surprise though, as the differences of the poor and the imperially rich were easily tangible. Sun and warmth welcomed what was by far the smallest crowd ever to grace a free walking tour, otherwise so vastly popular (for reasons easily explainable by the fact that the tours are free because the guides work for tips only and must thus do their very best for their hard-earned cash) throughout Europe.

The minuscule mob followed local cicerone Juliya

through streets and churches, across canals and plazas and ended up snacking on delicious savoury pies, known as pirozhki. Though St Petersburg is by no means small, the main points of interest are gathered in an area reasonably sized enough to get the stout of feet and brisque of breath a great walk whilst snapping the camera warm. Kazan Cathedral, Summer Gardens, Marsovo Pole and Palace Square all bathed in sun this first day of this odyssey. That was going to change, though.

Ah yes; with the rain came the museum visits for this avid traveller. The siege of Leningrad lasted almost 900 days between 1941 and 1944; an estimated 2 million men, women and children lost their lives due to the nazi blockade, but the Leningraders refused to surrender. Through the heroic contributions of those transporting goods and supplies across the frozen Lake Ladoga (known as 'The Road of Life') and the sheer stubbornness, Leningrad survived the siege, though not unscarred. And such the Blockade Museum tells.

Some might argue that no visit to Petersburg is complete without a while spent in the Hermitage and its Winter Palace. Some might argue that if you're not a hardcore fan of 16th-18th century portrait art it's basically a waste of money and, more importantly, time. An hour to get in, and then another half hour to purchase tickets. Add to that an utter lack of signs and directions and an utter presence of hordes of cruisers blocking every square metre. The few moments of pure awe (again, the awesomeness is due to splendour; the jade and gold, the marble halls, the crystal chandeliers) is hardly worth the effort. Unless you really, really, really, enjoy looking at pictures of dead counts and generals.



As the keeper of the sacred flame of Anor, it does make sense that Gandalf could wield automatic firearms. But why entrust Bilbo with such? Is it because he apparently now is a Jedi padawan?

Splendour is also the factor at play at Peterhof, or Petrodvorets as some Russians might call it. The lavish palace and its parks and gardens, modelled after Versailles, is well worth a visit. The time-effective tourist uses the boat from the docks behind the Hermitage; the money-weary traveller takes the metro and the bus for a tenth of the cost for double the travel time. Of course, the time-effective money-weary explorer such as yours truly do both.

And splish-sploshing through the puddles of the rain-soaked port to the Baltic, after having seen the curiosities at the Antropologii Muzeya, having my first ever proper Borstj, trying to get heads and tails of the Cyrillic captions at the train museum, learning a few useful Russian phrases from an American living in Petrograd for the last year, having had not one complimentary vodka and realising the striking difference between beef and sausage Stroganoff, I found myself in Moskovayska station, ready to embark on the first leg of my Trans-Siberian adventure. Or, you know, terrified that I wouldn't, due to some terrible ticket mix-up.

LISTENING TO THE WIND OF CHANGE

There were no terrible ticket mix-ups, and soon I was lulled to sleep on the overnight train to Moscow. Arriving at rush hour, at an unknown metropolis, with full backpack gear protruding from my person (giving me the appearance of a pregnant tortoise) with little to no knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet and a sense of direction best left uncommen-
ted-upon, I nevertheless declined the offers from the many taxi-drivers and set off to travel, lemming style, through the legendary underground system of Moscow. Yes, as rumours had it, the Moscow Metro would boast most Morian measurements, adding an extra dimension to the word underground. Maybe I missed the deepest pits of infrastructural stations, but depth-wise, the metro I experienced in St Petersburg was actually more impressive. Maybe not so when comparing interior design: even though the City

of Splendour do have their fair share of marble-and-crystal encrusted subway stops, Moscow Metro has it on grander scale, on more stations and of bigger variety to their impressiveness.

Also at the metro, the Russians proved to be quite the superstitious crowd. Whenever they get the chance, they invent some tradition, or old charter, or something, to turn their luck the right way. Touching the nose and paws at the statues of dogs at Ploshchad Revolyutsii metro station is one such.

The metro is, in and of itself, one of the many points of interest in the Russian capitol, though by no means the only one. After checking in I, as per ancient tradition, trodded off to one of those free walking tours that I frequent. Irina led a diverse group through the streets of Kitoy-Gorod (a cosy and at the same time busy neighbourhood, with steep and narrow streets lined with coffee-shops, bars, restaurants, banks, electronics-peddlers....), and down to the most well-known Moscovian site: The Red Square. Why red, one ponders? Is it paved with red bricks, perchance? Nope, black and grey sett. Is it surrounded by red buildings? Not so entirely; only on one side, and that wasn't always the case. Was there a number of horrible bloodbaths here in days of yore and recent? Negative. Does it refer to the traditional colour of the communism? 'Fraid not. Alas no, the Russian word for red, khrashny, also means beautiful. Whether the square is beautiful or not is entirely up to the beholder, but that's why it's called what it's called.



Moscow metro

At the end of Krasnaya Ploschad lies a cathedral most Swedes associate with the on breakfast tables found soured milk brand 'Kefir'. St Basil's cathedral is probably the most iconic building in Russia, with its colourful, onion-shaped domes and its red and white walls. Along a different side of the Red Square (which BTW isn't square at all, but rather elongated and rectangular) lies the mausoleum of one Vladimir Ilij Ulyanov, along with the final resting place of other prominent Soviet dignitaries, such as Brezhnev, Gagarin and indeed Stalin. Well, at least there's a statue of him. No cameras were allowed in the mausoleum or its surroundings, but my canine co-traveller made a spot-on impression of the deceased revolutionary.

And just outside the Beautiful Square lies the grave of the unknown soldier, and further away a shrine of sorts, in which Russian superstitions again come into play; toss a coin and make it land on top of a narrow ledge. Succeed, and your wish will come true. The more sceptical of us soon realise that the only wish you can make with a 100% success rate would be that the coin indeed lands on the ledge.

Many particularly touristy spots throughout Europe has their share of, for lack of better word, entertainers, trying to earn money by dressing up as Captain Jack Sparrow, Kung Fu Panda, Charlie Chaplin and Darth Vader or suchlike. Though you would never see Hitler or Merkel impersonators in Berlin, or Mussolini or Berlusconi ditto in Rome, in Moscow you can, for a nominal fee, get your photo taken with the likes of Stalin and Putin.

Close enough to the square and its faux-despots, there lies a theatre which I, and anyone who claims to be all cultural-like, hoped to spend an evening at.

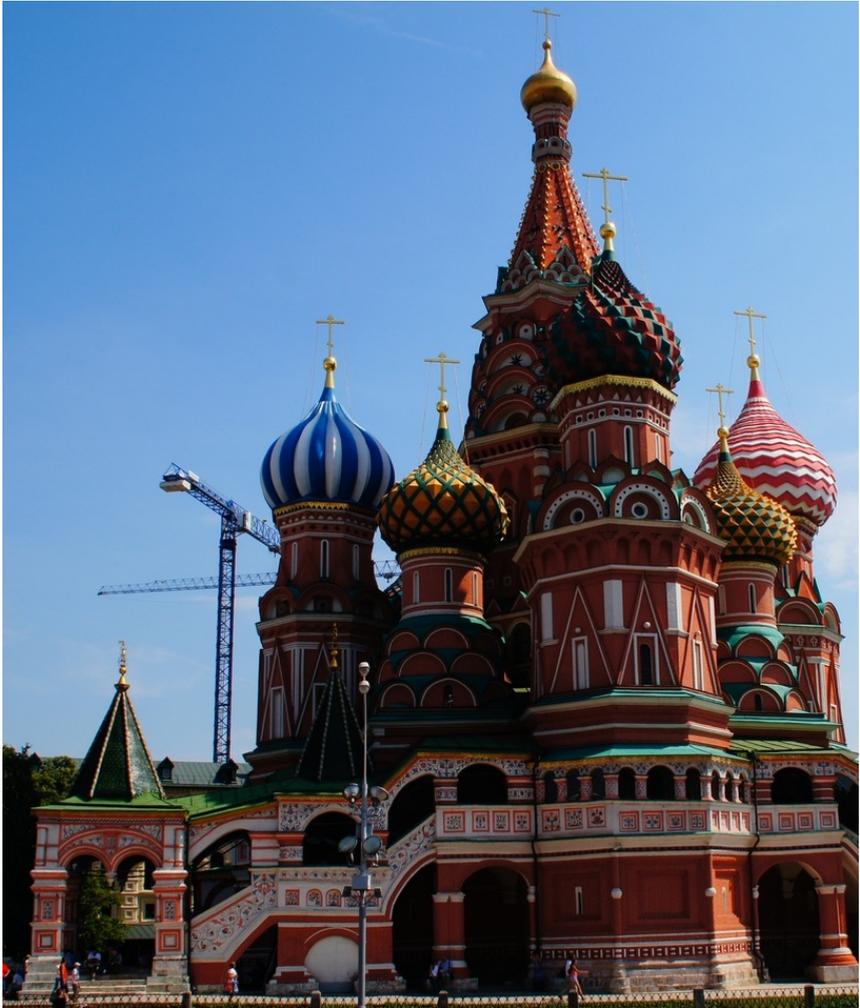
Unfortunately there were no tickets available for the two nights I had in Moscow, so my plans to see the

ballet at the Bolshoi theatre made their swan song, so to speak.

Follow the Moskva, down to Gorkij Park. I listened to no winds of change, but I did whistle a little diddy and had a nice relaxing stroll in the leisure centre of Moscow, before trying to find postcards and stamps. Easier said than done; Peddlers catering to tourists usually throw themselves at prospective customers with all sorts of trinkets and tidbits, including, but not in the least limited to, postcards. Not so in Russia. On my excursion to Moscow's only post office, and presumably the only place in Russia to buy stamps, I stumbled upon the biggest book store east of the Donau, and could there purchase the elusive printouts. The post office itself gave an almost Sovietian vibe, as it was hard to find, placed in a concrete building with no personality to speak of and staffed with people who could use some PR courses, and English ditto. Eventually I found what I was looking for.

Kremlin means fortress, and contrary to my preconceptions, it's not where the Duma is, nor is it where Putin lives. It is, however, the historical power centre of Russia, and as such is mostly built of churches, each with more golden domes than the next.

An interesting factoid about the orthodox cross: As is well-known, it has two smaller bonus beams; one over the main beam and one closer to the bottom. The lower one is tilted, and if you ever lose your direction in Moscow, look to the sky: you'll see the dome of an orthodox church, on top of which is a cross. The lower beams up-tilted end points to the north and the other, well, yeah, points to the south. Finally something useful to do with all these churches!



St Basil's cathedral, on the other side of the Red Square

Soviet union did participate in World War Two, and did indeed win. They also have a sense of grandeur, and thus Park Pobedy (Victory Park) was built. Impressive, to say the least. Being a product of the Swedish public school system, the only relationship I have with dioramas are those referenced in favourite TV shows *The Simpsons* and *Community*. But let me tell you right here and now: Those Russians can create dioramas! The main complex of Park Pobedy is a war museum, and it boasts military paraphernalia for even the most convinced pacifist to shudder and gasp at. But the diorama-rama is what makes it a top priority for anyone visiting Moscow. Especially the one depicting the siege of Leningrad is nothing short of breathtaking; it's as if you're there, right in the midst of the chaos and the terror and despair.

Being a huge city of roughly fifteen million people, Moscow still has the feel of a much smaller town, and during my stay it showed its most sunny side. Though light of wallet and heavy of feet, I once again took to the mainly non-morian metro of Moscow to Yarislavsky station, ready to embark on the first proper leg of my Trans-Siberian adventure. Or, you know, terrified that I wouldn't, due to some terrible ticket mix-up.

A RATTLE OF IRON

There were no terrible ticket mix-ups, and soon this avid traveller had made his home in the east-bound convoy of iron chariots, heading through the very heart of that vast land known as Siberia. In few ways lacking of forethought, I had stacked my packs with dry rations as well as the more wet kind; beer, the sourest of boxed merlots and of course that very life-water Russians love, vodka, accompanied the noodles and dry soups, ready for the ever-present hot water of the nearby samovar.

Stubbornly the locomotive dragged its dozen wheeled subjects leaving the Muscovite metropolis, aiming towards rural Russia.

It became clear that this part of the journey would be a pleasant, yet uneventful one; of the two other occupants of the four-berth, but one knew any English, and little at that. As a further obstacle to communications, the almost-anglian arrived at his destination a mere twelve hours after departure, thus leaving the four-berther with nothing but two inhabitants for the better part of the journey: a woman carrying the banner and colours of the town of Ulan-Ude, and yours

truly.

With my compartment companion, sweet as she were, the lack of a common tongue made conversations somewhat stifled, and where, in more fortunate circumstances, merriment and joyful drinking, laughing and games would be had, tranquillity and escape to the written word took its stead.

The relaxing ride was interspersed with conversations by means of facial expressions, body language and a, at the end, rather well-thumbed phrasebook. To say that I could master the Russian tongue after that would be far from *pravda*; barely knowing a handful of loosely connected words does not a conversationalist make.

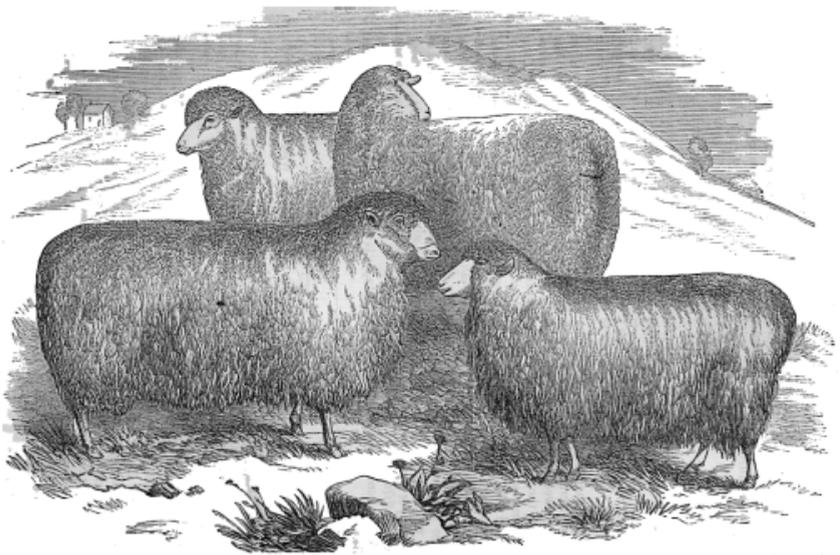
At some point, presumably borrowed from the Mongolian minstrels some compartments back, there appeared an instrument, its body black with a pick-protector of cream mother-of-pearl, its six nylon strings plucked upon by the homeward-bound Ulan-Udite. Songs were sung, in Russian, in Mongolian, in Swedish and in English, and the friendly musical competition ended in a draw; as vocals go, mine scored the highest praise, but the taming of the guitar strings were an easy match for the skilful Siberian.

The green-scaled metal serpent meandered through the lush landscape, ever east-bound. Fields of gold, forests of green, wooden villages of eras long forlorn and concrete cities of eras recent passed by the window. In the dead of night, so I was told, the southern tip of Lake Baikal was rounded, and when morning came, the train, with screeches and wheezings and puffs of smoke, came to a halt at Ulan-Ude station, and with that my trans-siberian railway journey had all but ended. Or, you know, not, if the buses to Mongolia were somehow fully booked.



The green-scaled metal serpent meandered through the lush landscape, ever east-bound.

PART II: MONGOLIA



NADAAM IT!

The buses to Ulaanbaator were somehow fully booked, as were the trains, and so I was stuck with a decision: Grab the one seat available on the bus next morning, thereby missing a much-awaited day-trip to lake Baikal*, or stay in Russia two-three days more than intended, thereby missing the start of my booked and paid-for overlanding tour. As the orange truck that was to be my home for the next six weeks would for certain be deep in the wilderness, with no means of communication, by the time I was to enter Mongolia I hardly had much of a choice: I set my alarm and boarded the south-bound bus next morning.

Luck favours the well prepared, it is said. I thought I was prepared enough, as all the talk on teh interwebs were clear on the easiness of getting a bus from Ulan-Ude to Ulaanbaator. However, as the vehicle closed in on the Mongolian capitol it became clear that there

* Fjodor Bajkalsjön?

was a reason for all the eagerness to travel here: Horns were honking, flags and banners flew from every car, people's faces were painted in the red-and-blue of the flag or the Mongolian sigil. The feast of Nadaam was about to kick off.

Nadaam is the annual celebration of the three national sports of Mongolia: Archery, horse-racing and wrestling. Everyone and their great-aunt pilgrimage to UB for the occasion, and there I was, bang in the middle of it. As such, I laid aside the vain attempts at visiting any of the many museums and other sites (bar a visit to the buddhist museum round the corner) and instead joined in on the festivities. A concert and massive disco at the main square, with a big-arse fireworks display as a finale and visiting two of the sports events: archery and horse-racing. The wrestling took place at the stadium and required extremely sold-out tickets to watch, but the others were free for all.

With the dust showered off and freshly stacked with bits and pieces for my next part of the journey, I joined the 21-man strong horde that was going to explore the utter wilderness of Mongolia for the next three weeks. Three weeks of hiking, horseback riding, bush-camping and socialising were right around the corner. Or, you know, right after the next dune, as there are basically no corners in Mongolia.



Nadaam archers

MONGOLIAN MOUNTAINS

Archie the Truck was ready to accommodate its 23 passengers. Apart from tour leader Gino from Spain and the two local Mongolian guides, I was the only one not to have English as native language. The rest of the surprisingly experienced, age-wise, group hailed from Canada, USA, Scotland, England, Australia and New Zealand.

The routines were explained, jobs were distributed, supplies and food were purchased and off on the bumpy road we went.

The destination of the day was Terelj national park high up in the mountains in the north-east of Mongolia. Before reaching our port of arrival, though, we visited what is arguably the country's national monument: A huge, stainless steel statue of a horse, on top of which rides the possibly most famous of the Khans:

Genghis. Inside there were a museum, another statue (that of a huge, richly decorated riding boot) and souvenir shops, the hollow structure hosted a horde of people, eager to get to the viewing platform atop the horse's head.

The landscape rushing past the windows started to change. Gradually the hills got steeper and taller and soon we were all alpine adventurers. The rain, that had been alternating between pouring and drizzling all day, began easing up, and by the time we had found a decent camp spot on top of a hill in the shadow of a mountain, the rain had stopped. After all and sundry had done their dedicated duties and the horse meat was put in the pressure cooker, I switched on my GPS-watch, put my running shoes on and went for a brisk jog in the stunning surroundings. It wasn't until I got back that I realized I had done the 5.2 km run at an altitude of nearly 1600 metres.

Specks of blue were visible in the otherwise grey skies, but even so, with the four-seasons-in-a-single-day climate, I packed my daypack with rain gear and a dry-bag before trotting off on the six hours hike to the local monastery that was on the agenda for the day. Rock-formation after cool-looking rock-formation was passed as we hiked through valley after stunning valley, over ridge after breathtaking ridge and among cow after docile cow. The waterproof equipment turned out to be unused, though, as the rain stayed away all day, and we even got some sun shining upon us.



Unfortunately for Martin and millions of photographers like him, just because something is in black and white, doesn't mean it's good!

The path up to the actual monastery was lined with signs, speaking words of wisdom. Well, what passes for wisdom if you believe in magical crystals, the existence of souls and seven hells. One of the gloomier ones was a gentle reminder that the amount of molten iron you have to drink in hell is larger than all the water in the oceans. The temple itself was slightly more upbeat, with a wheel of fortune pointing you to which of the 108 life rules you ought to follow.

A post hike beer was accompanied by one of the more exciting and trash-talky sessions of Jenga ever, outside of the professional circuit. After a delicious meal and some frisbee throwing night fell, and Gino brought out his laser pointer, showing some of the constellations on the amazingly starry sky. Soon enough I crept into my tent and my sleeping bag, atop my sleeping mat, Or, you know, sleeping tarp later at night, as it turned out to have a small and undetectable puncture.

STUCK IN THE MUDHOLE WITH YOU

Mongolia is incredibly vast and sparsely populated. Its climate during the wet season is unpredictable, with lots of rain one second and sunny heat the next. Its soil composition is mostly clay, silt or sand. Its road network consists mainly of trails laid out by vehicles that happen to go there. Sub-base, shoulders, pavement, drainage and such commodities are unheard of outside of the main towns.

And so, when a 16 ton truck try to tame the Mongolian steppes after a night of heavy rainstorm, it will get stuck. And stuck Archie got.

Stuck in the mudhole with you



Archie, stuck in sand

These were also the days when my stomach decided to turn on me. Whatever the cause, be it food poisoning, bacteria or just plain bad luck, I spent a couple of days helplessly watching some of the other travellers helping out digging out the half-sunken truck or scooping away the muddy waters, my mind eager but my body unable to pitch in properly.

Considering these were long driving days with no particular sights or hikes or activities, other than rescuing sunken trucks, I did however not miss out on anything overly important due to illness.

The weather gods were grumpy and all irrational-like, which was a good way of training us overlanders the proper way to make camp, raise tents and cook food in as diverse conditions as storms, sandstorms, rainstorms, thunderstorms and the occasional non-storm, making us all stronger for the experience.

However, after many days of driving in speeds more of the Driving Miss Daisy variety than Fast and Furious 5, and almost as many nights bush-camping in the outskirts of nowhere, with one night at a nice and shower-providing ger camp in between, we had cruised half the height of Mongolia into the very beginning of the Gobi desert, and the sand dunes rose far in the distance, marking another waypoint of this muddy march. Or, you know, wayridge.

DUNE, WHERE'S MY CAMEL?

The Gobi desert is mostly rocky soil with tufts of grass. Mostly. The picture one has of deserts, with the dunes of fine, yellow sand, endlessly undulating all the way to the horizon, is actually not the representative of your average desert. However, a small patch of the Gobi is indeed similar to Tatooine, and close enough to our ger camp, the majestic Khongoryn Els dunes rose, creating a distinct border between the rocky soil regular Gobi and the sandy, dunny bit.

The 200 metre ascent proved as tiresome as anticipated, or more. The sand acted a bit randomly; sometimes giving way for the feet, sometimes letting them rest, elf-like, on top, sometimes dragging the foot down just as you thought you were done. Different styles were employed: Criss-crossing the steep slopes proved more effective, as those opting for the straight-up, Gollum-style approach didn't reach the top until well after the first ones.



The ride was neither as seasickingly swaying, nor as sinusirritatingly smelly as expected

The perfect, sharp, 70 degree ridge made a distinct line, and after crossing it the view of the dune sea was no less than breathtaking.

Unfortunately, there were neither dune buggies, nor sand boards to keep us entertained at the sandstormy dune-top. However, the getting down part might well be some of the funniest things you can do: slalom style jumping, arse-sliding, running uncontrollably downhill, slo-mo baywatch fashion and every other possible way to descend is indeed the way to travel in style. The fact that the sand made farting sounds as you ran through it added to the amusement.

With sand deserts come camels, supposedly. Not far from the ger camp there lived a family of goat and camel herders, and they graciously invited us into their ger. Offering donutty bread, salty Mongolian tea and camels milk before we got between the humps of the ships of the desert, we rode caravan style on the camels back to camp. The ride was neither as seasickingly swaying, nor as sinusirritatingly smelly as expected, and yet another type of mount was checked.

The heart of the Gobi provided a well-needed, much-deserved break of pace from the previous days of long driving, stuck-in-the-mud business and late dinners.

Evenings were spent drinking, sitting around the bonfire, having a pub quiz. As roughly 95% of the questions were geography oriented, not my subject of choice, our team the Winos failed to claim the title, despite impressive knowledge from the Canadian camp, who proved to be quite the walking atlas. Second place was close enough though, and the winners, Quiz-in-my-pants, happily shared their trophy, a bottle of South African wine.

Part II: Mongolia

The long drives continued, and the desert went flat as a pancake, or Kansas even, but as we struggled on, in the thrilling average speed of 17.2 km/h, hills started to rise, livestock changed from camels and goats to sheep and cows and the patches of grass grew ever denser, thus pointing out that the desert was behind us. We had experienced the heart of the Gobi. Or, you know, since it oftentimes was quite hot, the hearth of the Gobi.



Bush camp with bush campers

ORKHON VALLEY

The time was nigh to aim north. With higher latitude and ever higher altitude, the heat of the days decreased. Or would do, but the weather was kind enough to change from rainy, overcast and sunny to mostly sunny, making even the 1600 metre altitude days more or less the perfect temperature. The lack of rain also helped making the driving less adventurous; what could have been an endless struggle of mud versus machine was instead a struggle of mechanical problems versus machine. The roads, as elsewhere in Mongolia, were not roads but trails, and bumpy doesn't even begin to describe it. Springs were broken a couple of times, and due to more or less subaquatic river crossings, the radiator and fan broke down completely at one point, causing an unplanned six hour stop at the river bank. The radiator proved to be repairable, due to the ingenuity of the crew to use, instead of the intended cotton wool, tampons along with grease to fix the broken parts. The fan, however, was beyond saving, and whilst we bush camped far further from our hoped-upon destination, a salvage mission managed to get a not exactly Mercedes brand fan as a replacement.



Orkhon Valley herder

We were now in the areas surrounding the beautifully meandering Orkhon river. Hills of green stretched as far as the eye could see, and herds of goat, sheep, cows, yaks, caks, yows and horses strutted, ran, trotted and galloped across the undulating fields. The river itself made its twisting way through the Orkhon valley, and upon reaching our ger camp the more sports prone of us went for a hike in the surrounding area. Crossing fields of scattered volcanic rocks we headed for the nearby national park. At the very entrance, the ranger invited us to his home-slash-office, and in addition to the obligatory bread stick we got to sample the traditional alcoholic beverage: fermented mare's milk. Feeling extra Dothraki, I downed the drink, which tasted a bit like fizzy yoghurt and had the strength of beer, alcohol-wise. To add to the feeling of being a part of a nomadic, horse-ridden warrior people, we got to try out the Mongolian way of archery.

Sports was not over, though. At the ger camp, somebody spotted, stacked away in the corner and yet brand new, a ping-pong table. Management was expecting a very important guest, none other than the Mongolian minister for tourism, so we got to take the table outside. We played as the sky grew ever darker, and at the end we were playing in head-torches.

It wasn't all serious athletic prowess at elite level, though; more or less voluntarily there were also fun and games: A few of the local children found the weird white guys extremely exciting, and soon enough I was covered by a litter of minis who stabbed me with their swords of grass, who eagerly tried to tickle me, and who laughing and shouting rode piggyback as I participated in a game of around the world round the ping-pong table. I named the littlest girl Nono, as all she knew in English was 'no, no', and consistently dubbed her presumed siblings Yesyes and Maybemaybe. In

between being attacked by playful kids, I managed to lose, by minimum margin, to Mungoo, one of our local guides. The shame of defeat was lessened by the fact that he has seen but 22-ish winters and has a father who used to play on the Mongolian national table tennis team.

Ever onwards the wounded truck staggered, and while we hiked through the beautifully lush pine-and-larch forest up to Tuvkhon monastery, the crew went about repairing Archie for the following days of alpine adventuring. The monastery itself wasn't much special, but located high upon a mountain, the view over Orkhon valley was spectacular. While actually scaling the steep cliffs to the very peak though, the mandatory misogyny of religions everywhere reared its ugly head. Not even buddhism, otherwise known to be the least intolerant of the major religions, has escaped the chauvinism: only men were allowed at the peak, with its excellent and breathtaking view of the area. Women were only allowed as high up as the Cave of the Womb, a level below.

And with skins brown from dust rather than tanning, we climbed aboard Archie the newly fanned truck, with Gino's words of warning echoing: The worst driving days are yet to come. Or, you know, best, if the weather gods were kind.

SPRING BREAK

The itinerary on overland tours is sometimes, if not oftentimes, a vision rather than a secured schedule. We had lost lots of time on our many unfortunate encounters with nature and lack of infrastructure, and even though the rain had kept to itself, thus leaving the trails reasonably mud-free, the unevenness and the potholes remained. One too many bumps turned out to be the metaphorical straw that broke the metaphorical camel's back; Archie the truck had now broken the front right set of springs completely, three layers of 12 mm steel snapped right off.

Sunset was approaching, and even though the GPS informed us of a measly 14 km, as the crow flies, to our intended ger camp, it looked like yet another bush camp. Slow and steady may not win the race, but it might finish it, and as the sun vanished beneath the grassy hills, with coughing and rattling and all sorts of sounds, symptomatic of a not entirely healthy truck, the Orange Overlander against all odds came to a halt outside the ger camp of Tshenker Hot Springs.



A deel's a deel

The next couple of days were filled with activities of differing grades of relaxation. Obviously, as the name suggest, there were hot pools to soak in. Pool on a snooker table for the more physical, and another ping-pong table for the even more eager to sweat. This time I got my revenge on Mungoo, and beat him in straight sets.

I also had time to fix my sleeping mat and was looking forward to testing it on the next bush camp, but alas; Archie was now beyond what repair can be done in the wild, and as such, the truck and its passenger had to go separate ways. On our new transport there was no room for any camping equipment, and from now on, it was ger camps and no cooking for the whole enchilada.

Surrounded by lush green hills, patches of forest and common but not devastatingly so rainfalls, the area around Tshenker hot springs provide ample conditions for wildlife and farming alike. Kites, buzzards and other birds of prey circled the skies, a gazillion ground squirrels skipped around just about everywhere and wolves could be heard howling in the night. Sheep, horses and cows roamed the fields, and a trip to a nearby family showed us, again, the famous Mongolian hospitality. After having the vodka curd and the mare's milk, I got to try on a traditional deel, and just as I was posing for the pictures, the man of the family surprised me with a bit of Mongolian wrestling. Of course, in Mongolia they just call it wrestling.

Perhaps it was the wolf pack that got him. Perhaps it was the Mongolian hospitality that made him want to stay.



Last seen in Tshenker, Mongolia, my canine co-traveller is now MIA. Oh and the mutton was boiled by means of fire-hot rocks in an old milk jug

Perhaps the ever so cute barmaid, who had been giving me shy smiles and stolen glances since day one, had taken care of him as a way to remember me by. Whatever the reason, since that day in the hot springs, my canine co-traveller, my hound helper, my muttly mascot has not been seen. Snoopy is MIA, and we might never see him again, sneakily posing among exotic food and drink, jestingly obstructing the view of amazing city- and landscape panoramas or cleverly peeking out of hidden crevasses. Fare thee well! And I shall never give up hope of seeing you again!

Whatever caused Snoopy to go AWOL, it probably wasn't the same thing that had hit 75% of the passengers. We had already ruled out the whole sheep, stewed with veggies and fire heated rocks in an old milk pot, as the culprit, seeing that even the vegetarians had it. But as the bus set forth north, it was seldom the need for bush-pees that made the crowd call out for stop. All and sundry's stomachs had turned on them, one by one falling out of the race, Final Destination style, and the only ones reasonably fit were those who had been sick earlier on the tour, myself included.

Nevertheless, leaving Tshenker behind us and heading to Ogi Lake, we stopped at the old capitol of Kharkhorin and its Erden Zuu, the first buddhist monastery in Mongolia.

The lake provided this trip's first proper swim, and also a nice change from all the mutton we've been eating: Time for some fish!

With the end of the trip growing ever closer, most, if not all, compadres were back on their feet in order to experience the wonder of our last stop before heading back to UB: Khustain National Park.



In Khustain national park there are roughly 270 equines running wild, and we managed to spot 10 percent (or as close as makes no matter) of the world's population

There were at one point, some thirty years ago, zero Przewalskys horses left in the wild. That's the wild horse that all modern domestic horses descend from, and it has only survived in captivity until recently. Known as takhi in its native Mongolia, it has been re-introduced into the wild in Khustain national park, and now there are roughly 270 equines running wild in the world. The chances of seeing one were slim, but the watering hole some hour's march into the park had been the sight of a few examples the last couple of days, so on we went. And lo and behold: No less than four adults and a foal was there, and silently filling our memory cards we regarded the rare specimen. But that wasn't enough. Up on the hillside five more horses could be seen, and indeed, if not 12-14 more were coming over the ridge far off. Almost ten percent of the world's Przewalskys population were there for us to behold.

The loop was coming to an end, and with lots of moments, memories and mutton dinners we set course back to Ulaanbaator. Or, you know, UB, as us more or less locals call it.

ULAANBAATOR ALLEZ ALLEZ!

The circle was complete, and we were back where it all had started, some three weeks earlier. UB offers little in way of points-of-interest per capita, but the Mongolian metropolis still has its own, very non-superficial, charm.

Sukhbaator Square serves as the hub from which all else spreads. The gigantic flat paved rectangle is sometimes packed to the brim with people, sometimes so empty you'd expect some tumble-weed to come floating by any minute, but almost always there are a bunch of kids riding the wee RC cars.

Wandering willy-nilly through the city, we took in its special city planning and architecture. Contrary to other megacities in slightly poorer countries, UB doesn't have a city centre of posh new, well-kept buildings, neighboured by a picturesque Olde Town with narrow alleyways and historical houses, sur-

rounded by blocks of ever-fading levels of exclusiveness, from decent office- and shop buildings down to downright slum.

No, in UB new sits right next to old, steel-and-glass next to stone-and-wood and lavish next to rustique, all in its typical architectural style of greyish-squarish.

Zainsan monument, a Soviet era concrete structure commemorating Mongolia's aiding the Red Army during WWII, lies atop a hill some 5 km outside the city proper, and offers a good hike to get there and a nice view of the skyline once you're there. On the way back, the Winter Palace of Boghd Khan was well worth a visit, with its ger made from the fleece of 150 snow leopards amongst other curiosities exhibited. Other sites that were visited were the National History Museum and the vast Black Market, home of the cheap Ray-Ban knock-offs, clothes, kitchenware and all you would need to build a ger.

These were days for relaxation and for catching up on lost internet time. But these were also days for good-byes, as our gang were to split up. Only five of us were to take the train to Beijing, with a sixth rejoining us there, and the rest of the group were on their merry way home. A night at the opera, in which an amazing showcase of Mongolian cultural traditions (including, but not limited to, a contortionist, throat-singing and playing of the horse fiddle), followed by a farewell dinner. An after party at Archie the truck to finish all the leftover booze concluded our time together.

And so, after a bit too many days in UB, five Drago-manners took a minivan to the train station, boarding the train to China. Or, you know, getting stopped at the border due to some terrible visa mix-up.

Part II: Mongolia



'So.... Back in the USSR?'

PART III: CHINA



A LIFTING OF CARRIAGES

The train sauntered on, ever southwards. Knowing the signs, it was easy enough to spot how the landscape changed to ever more deserty conditions. The five of us were split in a 4+1 combination, leaving our silver Aussie the odd one out. Therefore, to keep the gang reasonably intact, I split my waking hours between the two neighbouring compartments, thus getting to know a Singaporean documentary film-maker in the process.

The border crossing took some four hours, and it was quite the experience; 30 minutes before each station they lock the bathrooms, and I received an urgent call from nature about 28 minutes before we reached the border, leaving me in the not so favourable position of begging the train attendant for access to the staff loo. Eventually, she obliged, and that was quite the relief.

The main reason the border crossing took that much time was the slight difference in width between the Mongolian tracks and the Chinese.



Hutong lanterns

A few carriages at a time had to be lifted some 1,5 metres up, and the entire wheelbase changed to fit the Chinese standards. Eventually, though, all 18 wagons had brand new wheels, and on we rolled, into China.

At 14:00 we rolled into Beijing central station, to be greeted by our local Chinese guide, who had taken the western name Claire. Backpacks sticking out everywhere, we annoyed the locals by taking a more than crowded metro through the bustling city. With just about a day and a half to explore the Chinese capitol, we wasted no time, and with haste set out for sight-seeing.

Hutongs are the traditional way of city planning, with small square yards, lined with narrow alleyways. Thirty minutes east of our hotels lies the largest and most lively hutong district, and that's where we perused the corner shops, the souvenir stalls and the busy streets the afternoon before the pre-departure meeting.

A decidedly younger group, the Beijing-Xi'an gang turned out to be more international as well. In addition to the native English speakers we had representatives of the Netherlands and Switzerland, and of course me, Martin, from Sweden. Peking duck was on the menu for the evening, and cheap Chinese beer.

One can't really claim to have visited Beijing without a tour of the Forbidden city and Tiananmen Square, so that's where we headed next morning.

The splendour of the palace is impressive, with titillating and poetic names such as Hall of Supreme Harmony, Palace of Heavenly Purity and Hall of Mental Cultivation. The GPS-oriented automatic audio guide helps explain the history and symbolism of the place, and is well worth the extra money. A word to the wise, though: Try going when it's reasonably cool and little to no risk of rain if you want to see anything and keep

your eyes from being poked out. If I disliked umbrellas before, I now hate them with every atom of my body. Asians seem to think that they have the right to obstruct other's views and gouge out everyone's eyes as soon as the mercury hits twenty just because they apparently don't know what sunscreen and hats are. A pox on Umberto Umbrella and his house! A pox, I tells ya!

Right south of the moated city lies Tiananmen Square, or the Square of Heavenly Peace*, supposedly the largest town square in the world. Despite being, at the time, visited by thousands of people, it was nowhere near crowded due to its vast size.

The metro system is, as the case often be, very efficient. However, the process of ticket buying could easily be improved. The price is but 2 yuan, but you can't pay with notes, only with the much rarer coins, and you can only buy one ticket at a time, and it's only valid starting at the station of purchase. Nevertheless, once your ticket is in your hand, the rest is easy as.

All signs are translated to English, the line maps on-board tells your position, direction and all the stations in real time, and they have advert TV in the tunnels, timing the speed of the train.

Tranquillity can be found even in the bustling city of Beijing. At the cypress gardens surrounding the Temple of Heaven, one can find peace and quiet and a lack of other people, bar the occasional Tai Chi-performing oldster. The actual temples are however filled with tourists.

* Där det mejades....



Night market in Beijing

Houhai and Qianhai are the districts on either side of the lakes, and are both filled with restaurants, bars and cafés with nice lakeside views. I managed to squeeze in a stroll in the area before heading out for dinner at the night market. Most of the food offered were in fact dead before cooking, but the scorpions were put in the deep fryer still moving and wriggling about. Starfish, spiders, grasshoppers, centipedes, seahorse, lizards, snakes and silkworms could be bought on a stick, for quite the expense; a tarantula would set you back 80 yuan. I settled for a scorpion and a grasshopper for starters, and mystery meat (presumably pork) on a stick for main course.

Before leaving Beijing I took the chance of getting up at ridiculous o'clock to stand in line for about an hour with tens of thousands ahead of us and many more behind, to see the tomb of Mao. Though not a sight in and of itself, the experience and watching the amount of respect the Chinese pay to their deceased chairman is worth the early morning. And true to this trip's tradition of visiting resting places of forgone communist leaders, of course I had to check out Mao's mausoleum. Or, you know, Maosoleum.

THE GREAT WALLS OF CHINA

In China there are walls. Some of them are great. The loosely connected network of walls, barriers and watchtowers is called the Great Wall of China.

There are many places you can visit the Great Wall of China, and three hours drive from Beijing lies Jinshanling, a one-horse-town that's refreshingly devoid of tourists, both on and off the wall. We took a hike up to the enforcements, and with rucksacks on our backs and cameras at hand we spent a few hours hiking up and down the stretch, ever so often posing for silly pictures. A group of older ladies followed us, being friendly and helpful. Despite being told repeatedly that we wouldn't buy anything, they persisted in their fruitless pursuit.

The rucksacks of the well prepared contained snacks and drinks, because the wall is a great place to relax, have a beer and enjoy the sunset. Which we did. Too bad the cloudy, hazy sky didn't provide the best conditions for sunset photos.



The Great Walls of China

Next stop on the route through northern China was the summer retreat of the old emperors, the sleepy little hamlet (only about 400 000 inhabitants) of Chengde. As an imperial town, along with the empire's strive to accommodate all forms of buddhism, there are a great many temples in the area, all lined up from east to west. The most important ones are Puning temple, with the world's largest wooden buddha, and Potalaka temple, both copies of the originals in Tibet. Most of us opted to follow Claire to Potalaka. If you're really into temples or if you have seen or intend to see the original in Tibet, by all means, go. Else, save your 80 yuan. Definitely save your 40 yuan on the audio guide; the accent is tough to understand, and the GPS that's supposed to automatically inform you on precisely what you're standing in front of, works randomly, if at all.

The highlight of Chengde for those all templed out is the summer resort of emperors of yore. Walled away from the bustling city noises, it contains no less than eight connected lakes, along with parks, pagodas, tea houses, gers (or possibly yurts) and a forest area with deer and rabbit. After taking a spinning session (only without the overly enthusiastic instructor) in the form of a paddle boat tour, the rest of the park was explored on foot.

Prices were high for the well-needed water and ice-cream, but still happily paid for, even for the pea-flavoured ice-cream.

The town itself is a happy balance of big and small, lively traffic and calm parks, modern malls and street side fish markets. The river banks provide a nice strolling area, were the locals sit down to play chess, checkers and all sorts of tile games and the river itself provides fishing for those so inclined and equipped. Though both lively and cosy, Chengde has little to of-

fer in ways of what would be called traditional restaurants. Hole-in-the-wall style eateries come aplenty, though, and at the local market one can, by pointing and making hand gestures fill the stomach with all sorts of street food.

A heavy thunderstorm on the last night in Chengde dampened not only the streets but also the spirits, and post dinner drinks was off the agenda. As such, the group was well-rested for the long drive the following day, once again to see snippets of the wall, but this time from afar. By the way, it cannot, despite popular belief, be seen from outer space with the naked eye. Because it's too small and you're too far away or, you know, if your eyes were naked in outer space, you'd die.

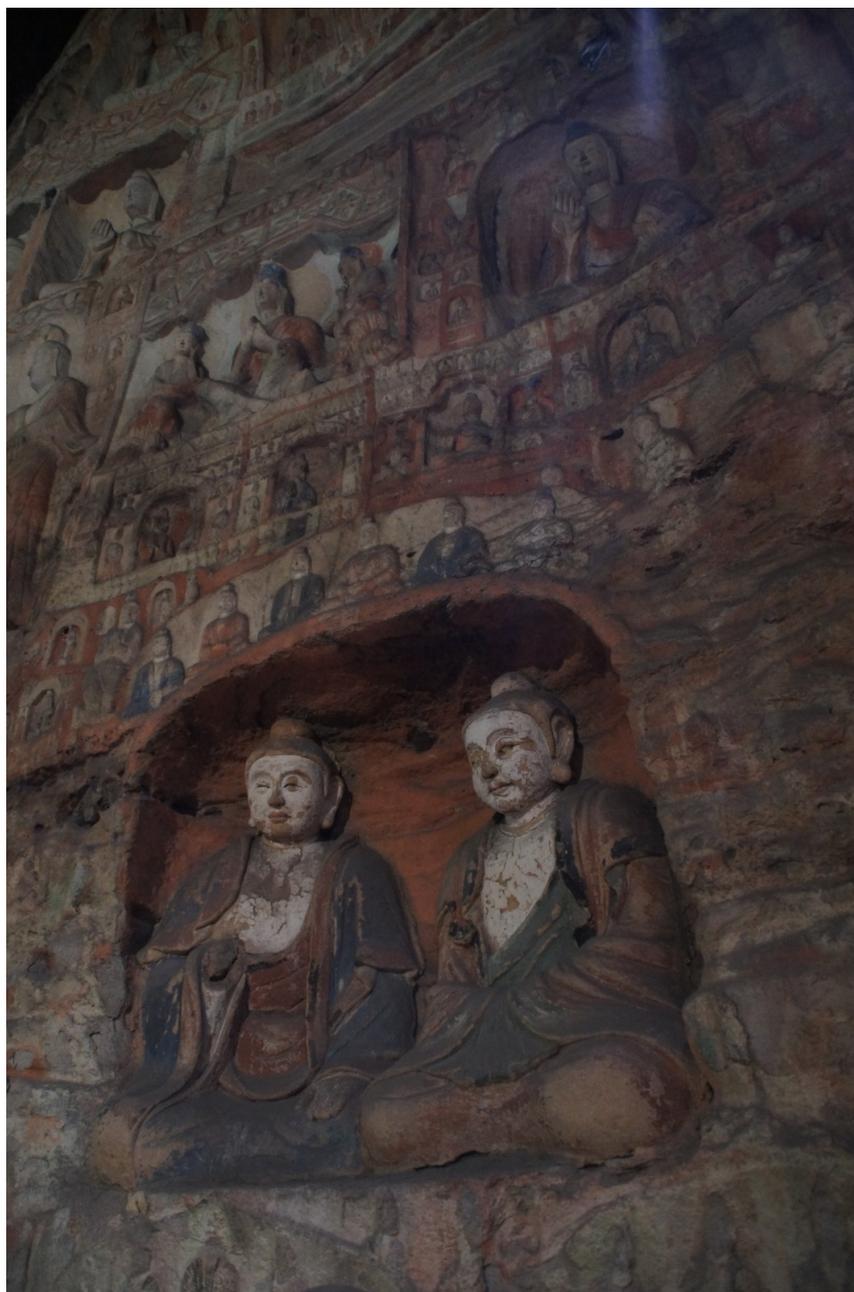


Locals playing Mah-Jong in Chengde

CAVES, SMELLS AND PHOTOSHOOTS

Datong is a city of contrasts, of new and old, of slums and high-end living and of aromas pleasant and ripe. It is also the town closest to the Yungang grottoes, one of the world's largest collection of man-made caves for buddhist purposes.

Paying 150 yuan, split five ways, for a personal guide was well worth the money, as we got some background info and history on the 2500-year old temple complex. Over 50 000 statues can be found in the 45 caves and crevasses, most of them portraying buddhas, but also some of the principal emperors ordering the constructions. The impressive stonework have withstood the rain, sun, storm and erosion for thousands of years, bar a few fallen down walls and ceilings. Time will tell how well they'll withstand the trampling of tourist feet and scratching of ditto hands. The area is also home to a lush park, a cultural centre and a modern style museum depicting the history of the Ming dynasty.



Yungang grottoes, home of a gazillion buddhas

The display of glittering glass loti and the fluorescent buddha wall paper in the museum makes it well worth the free entrance. While in China, one should not miss out on the opportunity to catch a shadow play and puppet show. Since it was in Mandarin, with subtitles in, I'm assuming, Cantonese, the plot was a little hard to follow. My guess is that an evil witch queen denied some poor farmer much needed help, but he was in fact a warlock, and so they met on the battlefield, ever so often magically transform to different demons, animals, giants and so on, fighting each other with equal strength. Who won, I can't really tell, but suddenly a young beautiful empress flew in on a cloud and said something inspiring, and then a real-life man entered the stage and performed an elegant dance with an equally elegant porcelain puppet, clad in flowing silk.

When caves aren't an option, one can always hang monasteries from the vertical cliff walls. The hanging monasteries just outside of Datong do just that, and the construction is impressive. Even with today's technology it's difficult to hang entire buildings from cliff walls, and since these have hung there for 1400 years it makes it even more impressive.

Once a walled city, the city centre of Datong is still within the repaired and well-kept walls, but major renovations are constantly changing the townscape.

A distinct change of, well, everything, happens as soon as you step through the gates; no more city noise, hardly any traffic, no high-rise buildings, but instead the remnants of old China. And by old, I don't mean feudal. I mean old, run-down brick huts from early to mid-1900s, surrounded by narrow, non-paved alleyways and open sewers. But lo and, indeed, behold:



There are nine million bicycles in Beijing. And at least one, scruffy-looking one, in Datong.

Around a random corner, new China appears, with broad pedestrian streets and brand new houses, built in faux-feudal style of intricately carved and ornate wood. As we strolled on, we found ourselves in what was the fashion centre of Datong, the haunt of the fashionable and hip. There was what appeared to be a fashion photoshoot, with beautiful ladies in as beautiful gowns posing, and an army of, presumably, interns. After overcoming their initial shyness, they finally worked up the courage to ask for getting a photo with what, in their eyes, must have been the most exotic and dashing quartet of tall strangers they ever did see. Covered by a gang of giggling girls and dress-wearing dames alike, we posed for group photos, and portraits, and I doubt I'll ever be in that many selfies in a day again. And so, the tourists become the attraction. How meta.

The default dinner of ordering a bunch of different dishes and sharing brotherly and sisterly finally got a nice change, as there was time for a barbecue of leg-of-lamb. Carving the succulent meat straight from the still-roasting bones made for a fine eating, and it was nice to use knife and fork again, which, when the chips are down, are superior to chopsticks. Or, you know, even sporks.



How excited were these ladies to be on photo with a group of tall, exotic westerners?

MUNCHING WITH MONKS

The steep mountains rose tall and majestic as we drove into the stunning alpine landscape surrounding Wutai shan. The town is surrounded by four significant peaks, in the south, east, north and west, with a central peak in the middle, each with its own temple. But those are far from the only temples in the area; Wutai Shan is buddhist centre, China, and the pagoda prone and stupa seeking travellers will get their money's worth.

Saving the piousness for bright and early next morning, we had a spirit-loosening truck party upon arrival in the little town, with special guests from the north-east-going Dragoman truck. Beer flowed like wine, wine flowed like firewater and firewater flowed from a half dozen bottles, each more vile than the last. Good times were had by all, and the sing-along and improvised dance from Mike and me to Pulp's Disco 2000 left no British heart untouched.



83% of all buddhists monks are unable to grow any facial hair whatsoever. Therefore, this one (let's name him Gan-Dalf) is highly revered. And I totally did not make up those figures.

108 is not just the sum of the magical numbers in *Lost*, but also a magical number in buddhism. Obviously ten times that digit is even more magical, and thus there are 1080 steps leading up to Dailuo Terrace. Devout buddhists pilgrimage to the temple at the top, stopping every three steps to bow and pray, making the climb even more strenuous. Working up quite a sweat, we reached the peak and made loose plans for the remains of the day.

Aiming for one of the cave temples, an octet of us boarded the free bus to take us there, but got off one stop too early. No drama, since there was another temple, and we timed that well. Not only did we see and hear the monks and nuns (yes, there are buddhist nuns) do their chanting and walking in procession*, but at eleven we were all eagerly invited, ushered even, into a great hall. Ladies to the left, gentlemen to the right, we were served a delicious meal with the monks and the nuns, thus partaking in one of their daily routines. There is no such thing as a free lunch, but apparently there is such a thing as a free elevenses.

Our quest for the Wenshu cave continued, but once again we found ourselves in a different temple, this one containing an enthusiastic and ever-smiling woman who, by means of hand gestures and charades took on the role of tour guide. Perhaps not so much thanks to her as to the ever-shuttling buses, we eventually found ourselves in the right direction. Implied was that we ought to hike through the forest, but that turned out to be a dud. Having to cross a brook, we eventually found a road, and not having any idea of how far the walk would be, we got offered a ride on the back of a local coaler's tractor.

* While not smashing holy books on their foreheads



*Ask not for whom the gong tolls;
It tolls for free lunch!*

Once at the top, the cave was not much to blog about, but the thousands of multicoloured prayer ribbons were. There were thousands of them, and they were prayer ribbons, who were multicoloured.

Struggling ever on, in yet another temple (this one with drumming monks), Dani made a sad discovery: Her camera was no longer with her. Hoping that the pilgrim-prone tourists were decent people we promptly decided to go back to where she last remembered having it. They proved to be, and when Mike handed the camera back to her, after initially faking failure, Dani shed a tear of joy.

As the end of this eventful day draw nearer, we had a shared meal at Hometown restaurant, and that was not the best meal ever. Au contraire, Fred Astaire. Or, you know, not at all, Sean Paul.

ASS MEANS DONKEY

Once one of the biggest towns in China, Pingyao is now a small, but vibrant town with cosy narrow stone-paved alleyways within its Han dynasty walls. The architecture within gives a distinct Tintin feel, especially Blue Lotus. Participating in the traditional Chinese custom of getting their morning workout in the park, a few of us went up at six in the morning and kicked some local arse in badminton. Others gave the choreographed dancing a go, and as per tradition, or old charter, or something, we walked backwards.

The first ever bank in China was located in Pingyao, and even though it went out of business in 1932, the buildings still remain and have now been turned into a museum. The bank was part of our guided city walk, along with a Confucian temple, with very graphic statues depicting what's to be expected in hell, and the local government building. Housing all manners of administrative buildings, temples and an opera, it

also contains the corrective facilities: Court rooms, torture chambers and prison.

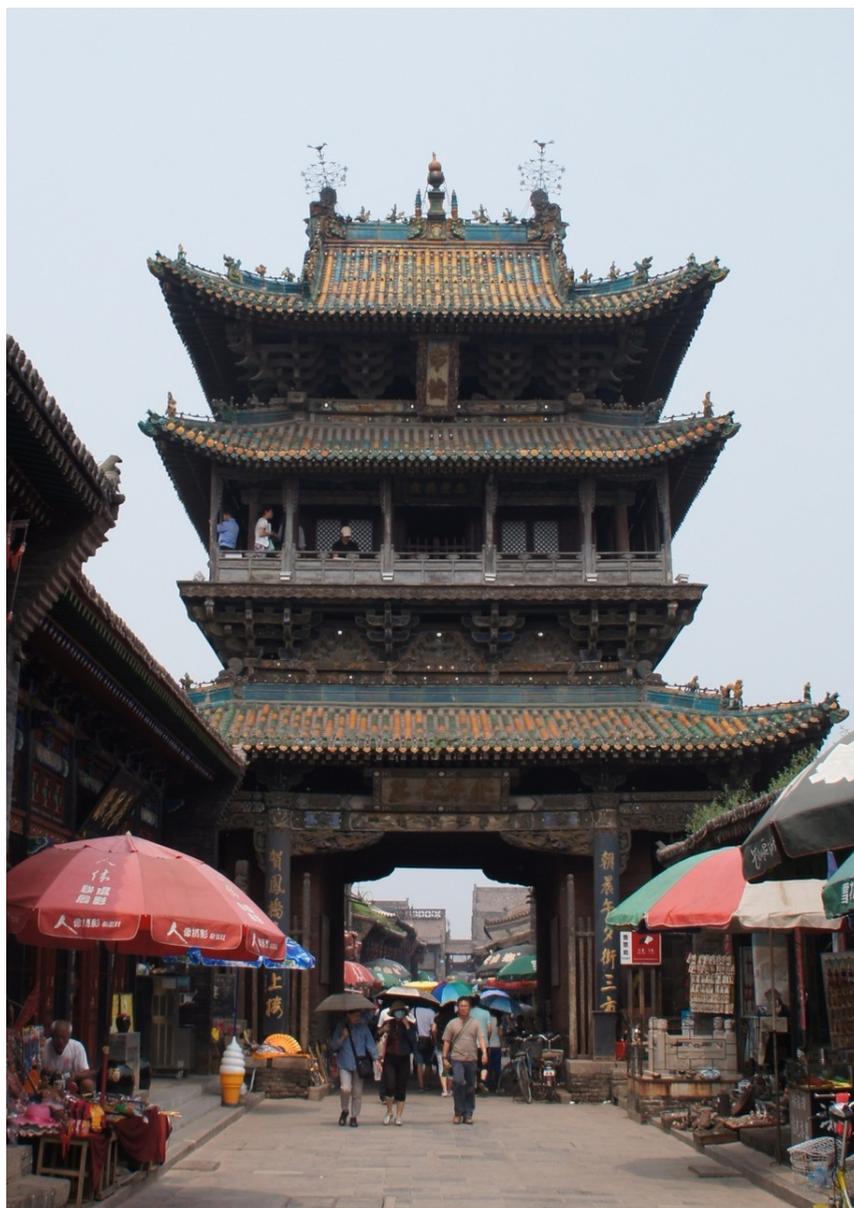
The horrific means by which they tortured back in the olden days (that is, up to the early 20:th century) were described. And with all punishments, be they prison, torture, isolation or public humiliation, the sentence could be lessened if the culprit had enough of coin. As such, the last of the three courtrooms was called the Corruption court.

Her grandfather was an opera singer and her father and sister are both musicians, and so it makes sense that Claire has a great singing voice, and was therefore more than excited about the evening's event: KTV. After dinner, and a few rounds of firewater by the truck, we headed to one of the local karaoke bars, where a private room awaited. Most had a go with the mike, and Claire proved to be as skilful a singer as her constant humming had implied.

Not too eagerly, but still managing, most of us joined in on a day trip next morning. The Zhangbi Ancient castle was built some 1400 years ago, and it is more or less underground. A maze* of winding tunnels joins below the surface, in three levels, with occasional communication holes between the caves and the open air, with flood discharge facilities, stables for livestock, storage for grains, housing for soldiers and with lookout spots upon the valley walls, to spot approaching enemies.

Back in Pingyao, we walked atop the city wall, covering half its circumference before being cut off by reconstruction work. From the view of a civil engineer, it is notable that the wall is constructed from soil, paved by bricks and stone on the outer side, but mostly uncovered on the inner. The soil had an amazing fall angle, the slope being 4:1 or steeper still.

*Or possibly a labyrinth



East tower, Pingyao

What the Chinese have in technical prowess, they lack in linguistic, at least when it comes to translating menus. Or maybe they do it on purpose, for surely there can't, by pure chance, be so many dishes with names such as 'Mushroom rape', 'Mobil oil eggplant', 'Clear cooks the bull's penis', or my own personal favourite, 'Speculation is shifting'. They say the best meat in heaven is dragon, and the best meat on Earth is donkey. With heaven and dragons being all fictitious, I decided to give Eee-ore a chance. The priciest item on the menu, I was surprised to be served what looked suspiciously like spam, and nothing like the picture. Nevertheless, when in Rome, I dug in on the equine edibles, and not to my surprise, it tasted a bit like ham. Or, you know, ass.



Fancy fancy food?

CAVES, ARTS AND SPIRIT

Some 550 years ago, the people of the mountainous regions around Lijiashan realized there was living potential in the natural caves perforating the steep sandstone walls. The mighty Yellow river cuts dramatically through the landscape, and its banks are covered with reinforcement steel, concrete, excavation machines and lots of manpower; the region is being quickly urbanised.

Not so much so some way uphill. Modern China has scarcely reached the little cave village, and the climb up the winding mountain path in the steaming heat provided a stunning view of a terraced Chinese version of Hobbiton. As we drew ever closer to our host family, the numbers of aspiring artists increased; here was a perfect place for getting your sketchbooks or your canvas out, and start applying coal, watercolour

or oil. The landscape and architecture was indeed stunning and wonderfully rustique at once, and it took not long for some of us, myself included, to follow suit.

I put ink to paper in a feeble attempt at recreating a particular home across the narrow valley, bathing in the rays of the setting sun. Tom proved to have a hidden talent with watercolours, and Shane successfully added coal to paper. Cosiness and calmness interspersed the occasional bout of badminton, and after a delicious home-cooked meal, the couples went into the couple-cave, the men went into the man-cave, and the girls went into the cavette, I should wager. I stayed back and finished writing some postcards, but soon crawled into the big shared bed inside.

Heading back to more modern civilisation, we set course for Yan'an, whose claim to fame is that here's where China's communist party originated, and where its headquarters were situated, before declaring the People's Republic of China in 1949 and moving to Beijing. To commemorate this glorious era in recent history, including the events that led up to CCP's eventual victory, a bombastic museum has been erected close to the actual headquarters, the grounds of which also have been turned into a museum. The political conflict with Kuomintang and, more importantly, the invading forces of Japan called for national unity, and Mao and his communist party provided just that, boosted by the so-called Yan'an spirit, which is basically being hard-working, loyal and of correct political mind. The exhibits and impressive* dioramas informed with no uncertainty how the Yan'an spirit and the CCP single-handedly united China, defeated the Japanese and put an end to World War II,

* Though not nearly as impressive as those in Park Pobedy



Sketchy

ever so often by mopping up the enemy's rear area, or so the not too professionally translated information signs declared. And with rear areas came the lame and slightly immature puns: I want to see the rear area of Yan'an, I don't need to see the sun go down on ya nan, Tom doesn't like the big-ass peachy holes in ya nan, but Dani'll go for it. An undefined city it is, with both wide boulevards and narrow streets, shopping malls and street markets, all the while with the one-sided shadow of Mao's rear area looming over it. It is a city that doesn't necessarily invite comprehension. Or, you know, I don't want to grab ya nan.

GOLEM! GOLEM!

On a long journey it's kind of impossible to be a hundred percent all the time, and on our way to our last China destination, Xi'an, I started to get a cold and a slight fever. Not too bad, but enough to opt for some rest and reading at the AC'ed hotel rather than aimlessly exploring yet another ancient walled city in the steaming heat. Nevertheless, as there were group dinners coming up and our band of merry travellers were to split up in all kinds of directions, I mustered the strength to join in on a hotpot party. With two bubbling, boiling canisters in the middle of the table, one spicy and one really spicy, meat and veggies were added and cooked where we sat. Instead of a salad bar, there was a sauce bar, where people could mix and match however they desired to make the tastiest dipping sauce. Not to brag, but my sesame oil/chilli oil/mushroom sauce/vinegar/salt/peanut kernel combo was probably the most exquisitely wonderful sauce in the history of cuisine. Ever.



Terracotta warriors

The year 1974, though in the Western world most notorious for me being born and Abba winning the Eurovision song contest, is in the Xi'an area most famed for the discovery of a bunch of clay men. While digging for water, a local farmer discovered what looked like a clay representation of a soldier, and the rest is, you know History, with a big H.

The site of the Terracotta Warriors is the biggest tourist attraction in China after Beijing and the great walls. Thousands upon thousands of umbrella-wielding Chinese tourists gather around the approximately 8000 pottery people and ponies every day, and upon spotting the impressive array of warriors it's easy to see why. The warriors are life-size representations of what the real imperial army would look like, in terms of clothing, weaponry and hairstyles. In addition, all of them have their own personality and facial features. There are no two warriors who are alike. Unless they happened to be identical twins, I suppose.

The two most important men behind this dizzying display were millennia apart; Emperor Qin Shi Huang (circa 200 BC), who ordered the creation of the warriors*, and the unnamed farmer who struck, eh, clay that day in 1974. An old man was signing a book on the discovery at the very day we were there. Whether that was the real discoverer or someone else completely is much like that traditional Chinese dish: Speculation is shifting.

Time had not been kind to the mudmen; all but one were already shattered upon detection and had to be repaired. Time also takes its toll on this traveller; After some two weeks in the Middle Kingdom, I arranged a taxi to the airport. A big breakfast was consumed, big because it was so good, big because I couldn't really

* And being responsible for some 700 000 poor workers dying while building his army and tomb

know when my next meal would be, and big because I wanted a long time at the breakfast table in order to get the chance of timing to say so long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, goodnight! to all and sundry. And with that, I boarded the plane, ready to visit Seoul and of course, excited to see Cholong. Or, you know, terrified that I wouldn't, due to some horrible time/date mix-ups.



Farewell dinner with hotpot

PART IV: KOREA



HEART....

There were no horrible time/date mix-ups. My fellow traveller from overlanding in South America some years ago, as well as my friendly neighbourhood Korean, was eagerly awaiting at the arrival hall at Incheon Intl. With no hassle the direct railway transported me and mine to what I hoped would be my single room accommodation for the remains of my journey. However, upon reaching my booked hostel, and accessing its Wi-Fi, I received two emails from the establishments. One saying that my reservation hadn't gone through, and one saying that they could offer me a bed in a dorm. Those e-mails were sent upon my day of arrival, so it did not give me decent time to arrange alternative accommodation. However, hunger and thirst took precedence, and so I took the dorm offer for the night and after a delicious dinner and a few brews, I managed to book another room in another hostel in the same neighbourhood. Not only because I'm lazy and didn't want to drag my backpacks all over town, but because Hongdae is a really cool area, with vibrant night-life, lots of bars, shops, restaurants, cafés and young, hip people.



King Sejong the Great

Freshly checked in to my new home, I met up with Cholong and we set off to explore the Korean capitol. A military training delayed our approach from the subway to the main square, Gwanghwamun, but that only meant that after ten minutes wait it was refreshingly lacking tourist crowds. At the end of the square lies Gyeongbokgung, the palace of kings of yore. It is well worth a stroll, especially with the nice park, the ten-beaster (the more beasts guarding the roof, the more important the building. Note that the emperor's building in the forbidden city in Beijing had 11 beasts, and no house in China was allowed to have the same or more) and the culture museum, included in the ticket. Along with a performance of folk music, traditions of Korea were on display, and elaborated upon with the help of Cholong. While in the neighbourhood, we checked out the traditional architecture and city planning of Namsangol Honok village, as well as a trip to the president's residence.



Beer, Cholong, sunset and Cheonggyecheon

Heading over to the fashion and night-life district of Myeongdong, with some cool beers in the sunset by Cheonggyecheon, a stream that runs through Seoul, and the best dumplings, well, ever, at a local eatery. Easily spotted from Myeongdong is the hill known as Namsan, with its N Tower atop.

Greater view of Seoul can't be found, and the place is the number 1 tourist spot in the city. It is also the number 1 dating spot, and they know how to make a coin from it, with photo-shopped couple pictures, a teddy bear museum and a heavily suggested way of sending love letters from what they claim is the highest level post office in the world. Ignoring the lovey-dovey stuff, the view from the observation deck is quite impressive, and the hill upon which the tower stands is a nice park area with bars, cafés, gazebos and of course cable cars. Eventually it was sleeping time, but not before I had checked how to get to the DMZ. Or, you know, the HMZ, as it would turn out.

NSDMZ

It's ironic, in an Alanis Morrissettean way, that the two-plus-two kilometre wide land strip along the border between North and South Korea is called the DeMilitarized Zone. No border on earth is more jam-packed with soldiers, barbed wire, watchtowers and land mines. An estimated half million men marches the north side, and roughly 150,000 on the south. Had China had that kind of man and fire-power back when the Mongolians were a threat, there'd be no need for any great walls. And thus, I suppose, one less point of interest for me on this odyssey.

Once the minivan had wriggled its way out of the bustling urban clutter of Seoul traffic, the trip to DMZ was quite quick and pleasant. As Hangang splits in two, with the Imjin being a tributary, one could see North Korea on the far side. The difference in landscape is far more striking than one would imagine; whereas the rolling hills on the south side are covered in trees and bushes, the northern ones are as bald as Patrick Stewart.



So, DeMilitarized, eh?

North Korea lacks energy sources and technology such as wind, solar, oil, water and coal, and must therefore rely on wood for heating and cooking. Naïvely, they nevertheless think they can impress the civilized world, and along the riverbanks fake villages are built, in order to show off their immense wealth.

Proper wealth is found, however, on the south side. The land is rich, the soil is fertile and the lack of industries and heavy traffic means no pollution and therefore excellent farming opportunities. Some claim the best rice in Korea, or the world even, is grown here. Apart from the soldiers, including a small American garrison, the only people allowed to live in, and thereby farm, the area are those that have lived here for generations. With the wealth of the land and the few people sharing it, the average income is about thrice that of the rest of South Korea.

Stopping by a newly built, but almost as newly cancelled, train station that once served the Seoul-Pyongyang line, we headed off to a viewing platform, from where the northern neighbour could be seen, in all its baldness, through surprisingly cheap binoculars. When Seoul was awarded to host the 1988 Olympics, national pride entered, and one way it showed was to erect a tall flagpole, hoisting the white and red-and-blue for northerners to see.

However, the wounded northern pride quickly resulted in North Korea building a slightly taller pole, after which South retaliated with an even bigger, and so on and so forth etc etc. The flag pole pissing contest was eventually won by the North, who could, rightfully for once, finally boast about something: That they had the tallest flagpole in the world.

Innocent pole wars aside, the enmity between the two nations certainly has a darker side. Even though the fighting stopped in 1953, the Korean war is technic-

ally still on. The North has, and probably will again, tried to invade South Korea. As Kim Jong-Il seized power, his devious plans took form. According to a deflected military engineer, Kim ordered his twenty divisions to build one tunnel each, thereby planning to undetected launch his army on the unsuspecting southrons. And he would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for those darn kids: While digging the tunnel, hunger set in and the North Korean troops built a fire for cooking rice where they sat, underground. South Koreans noticed the smoke from the ground, and the first infiltration tunnel was discovered in 1974. Another tunnel was found in 1975, yet another in 1978 and the hitherto last one as late as 1991. Should the words of the deflected engineer carry the truth, there should be at least sixteen more infiltration tunnels, spanning the border all across the peninsula.

Searches go on daily, with water filled sample pipes indicating underground explosive action, and circle search patterns, should one pipe indicate as such. There is a standing reward of a million dollars to anyone finding a confirmed tunnel. The third infiltration tunnel is open for public, and so we descended the 73 metres underground, cheerfully wearing yellow safety helmets and sneakily producing cameras when soldiers and CCTV wasn't around.

There is still some trading going on between the quarrelling siblings. In fact, some South Korean companies have placed their factories across the border, thereby getting the immensely cheaper labour of the north. At Unification Village, which is little more than a souvenir shop, one can buy a few North Korean items, mostly of the fermented or distilled kind.



Third infiltration tunnel

As the case sometimes are with group tours in Asia, this one was partly sponsored by some jewellery provider or other, and so the last stop of the DMZ tour was at their shop. One could easily be stuck there for hours. Or, you know, minutes, if the mostly Scandinavian group is smart enough not to fall for such cheap tricks.

...AND SEOUL

There is hardly a bad word to be uttered about Seoul. It is vibrant, yet gentle. It is modern, yet traditional. It is vast, yet compact. With a cornucopia of things to do and see and eat and feel, there is something for anybody's taste. Museums, shopping, parks, theatres, sporting venues, restaurants Korean and international, amusement parks and so on and so forth etc etc. But most importantly Seoul has Korean people. One should never generalize, but Koreans might just be one of the friendliest, nicest, most helpful people in the world, and not so in a smarmy fashion.

One of them of course being Cholong, who continued to join me on my tourist escapades and taking me to traditional eateries. SeMA, Seoul Museum of Art, had some weird-ass video instalment exhibition going, and the works of two of Korea's more famed contemporary artists: The master of painting intriguing eyes, Chun Kyung-ja, and the diverse multi-artist Kim Ku-lim.



Over the edge; Starting line; Stealing stuff; Dance my little puppets; I want to suck your blaahd; It's pronounced Fochghugh; Forced perspective; Camera, action, light!; Cartoonish Sméagol; Fag break; Present twilfit for a king; Classic pissing contest; How washing machines work; OMG is that a mummy?

With the pretentiousness out of the way we ventured for the hilariously corny Trick World, in which the visitor interacts with props and paintings, creating illusions ready to be captured on camera. Oh how we laughed. Oh how we laughed when Cholong was not only dangerously close, but actually across the edge of a skyscraper. How we laughed when I seemingly made water in the same urn as Michelangelo's David. How we laughed when the forced perspective caused the pint-sized Korean to tower over the reasonably tall* Swede.

Shits and giggles would continue, as we entered Myeongdong Theatre to see the vastly popular and critically acclaimed musical performance 'Nanta', a lively show with a loose plot of the antics of a trio of restaurant chefs. As the owner hires his untalented nephew in a high position in the cooking crew, hilarity ensues. With little to no dialogue, but with plenty of dancing, acrobatics, magic tricks**, martial arts and, above all, drumming on everything but drums with everything but drumsticks, using kitchenware, cleaning utensils, food, and so on and so forth etc etc in their stead. The show was good fun, and quite impressive in parts.

* At least compared to the average Asian

** Illusions, Michael....



Martin in Myeongdong

One of the evenings there was also time to follow suit, and do what the local young and, presumably, hip do: Strolling along the south river-walk, with freshly bought pot noodles and beer, some of them in 1,5 litre PET bottles, sitting down wherever looks nice and consume said refreshments while viewing the river, the people and the occasional little fireworks. Of course, a full urban river experience should also include a river cruise, and so we went slightly marine for a while, watching the city lights shimmer in the water, and checking out the many bridges crossing the Hangang.

A late morning, due to some much needed internetting, airport transport arranging and repacking, started the last full day of this odyssey, and I happened to walk out of my hostel just as the initiation celebrations was in full bloom at my neighbouring Hongik University. I was on my way to round off the day, and by that the entire trip, with a visit to the national museum of Korea. It was well worth the visit, especially the exhibitions on ancient Korean history, and the museum building and its surrounding park area are grand on a non-bragging scale.

Passing by Gangnam, I made my way to the Jamsil area in South-east Seoul. A farewell dinner of sorts, with Cholong and some friends of hers. Traditional Korean barbecue, where they fry it up at a hot stone slab in the middle of the table, was enjoyed along with conversations in somewhat broken English. I believe I tried all that was put to the fire, including the mystery intestines and the pigskin, and the, hm, interesting method of adding a shot of some 25% booze in the beer. But proper beers were to be found at the bar across the street; a self service system with several fridges, stacked with beer from near and far, including Beerlao dark, Smithwicks, Young's Double Chocolate Stout and more. And with that, I took my leave, say-

ing a fond farewell to my local cicerone and headed home, getting ready for an early start. It turned out that 05:30 is not necessarily early in Seoul; it might just as well be just slightly late evening, as the streets and alleyways were filled with still-partying youngsters, locals and foreigners alike. And just like that, I found myself in a subway station, waiting for the cheap and quick airport train that would mark the end of this journey. Or, you know, the beginning of the next.

PART V: THE BACKPACKS



THE BACKPACKS

To summarize, I have a tradition of handing out awards in different categories. The Backpack recipients of 2013 are:

The Cotton backpack for best accommodation

Tingyuàn style guest-house, Pingyao. Quiet and cosy, yet one step outside the sheltered little courtyard lay the night-life of Pingyao ready

The Plush backpack for best transport

The Trans-Siberian Railway. Train is travelling in style!

The Glass backpack for best hang

By the riverbanks of Hangang, Seoul. Especially com-

bined with the 1.5 litres the locals keep bringing.

The Brick backpack for best city

Seoul

The Granite backpack for best landscape

Terej National Park, with Gobi Desert a close second

The Terry backpack for best swim

Hot Springs in Schenker. To be fair, there weren't many other opportunities for swimming, but the hot pools were really relaxing

The Fur backpack for best nature experience

Przewalskys horses, or rather takhi, at Khustain National Park.

The Khaki backpack for best guide

The locals; Dashka and Mungoo in Mongolia, Claire in China, and of course Cholong in Korea

The Silver backpack for best eating

I'd like to fill this backpack with Russian garlic-and-dill bread from the Idiot, Leopard's Horse Stew and the dumplings in Seoul

The Malt backpack for best drink

Khar Khorum; finding dark lager so far from the UK was a surprise, and a pleasant one at that

The Gunpowder backpack for best fireworks

Interestingly, the home of fireworks, China, failed to display. Russia, however did, and thus this trip's best display was the Beliye Nochi (White Nights) Firework in St Petersburg

The Celluloid backpack for best photo

The Mongolian emptiness provided settings for some dramatic photography, with “Bush camp with bush campers” narrowly beating “The Gobi in all its stochastic weatherly glory”.

The Jade backpack for best cultural experience

Though it did stumble my plans a bit, I wouldn't have wanted to miss Nadaam in all its festival spirit

The Nylon backpack for best backpack

My day pack

The Velour backpack for softest experience

Painting, photographing, relaxing, and drawing in and around the caves of Lijiashan.

The Calico backpack for best surprise

So... one of my co-traveller's bestest buds is the co-founder of my favourite brewery? Cool. Cool cool cool.

The Magma backpack for hottest chick

The ever so cute barmaid in Tshenker, who may or may not be in possession of my life-long travel mascot.

The Vinyl backpack for song of the tour

Disco 2000

And last, but not least....

The Gold backpack for best experience in total

To pinpoint the best experience is always a chore, and the answer may differ depending on what time of the day the question is posed, whether I've eaten or no, or any other seemingly insignificant detail that might tip the scales. But I knew, immediately upon leaving, where I had spent too little time. The atmosphere, the culture, the weather, the whole feel of it was nothing short of awesome, and it made me want more, which in this case at least is a sure-fire sign of quality. Therefore the **Gold backpack** of 2013 goes to:

South Korea

What causes people to build empires? How can millions, billions of people from a multitude of different cultures work together under one patriotic umbrella?

Those, and other questions (such as why do all Asians and their aunts use umbrellas all the time, everywhere, unaware of the hazards they pose?) triggered culture-nerdy civil engineer and self-proclaimed globetrotter Martin to once again pack his backpack and fly away. Though the flight was shorter this time around; more distance was to be covered on ground, as the vast expanses of the former Eastern Empires were to be explored: Russia, Mongolia, China and as an added bonus, South Korea.

