

# Discovering the Land of Eternal Blue Sky:

## The Year-long Teaching Experience of a Lifetime

By

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To Ivan, Adrian, and Dan: Thank you!

Not one part of this book would have happened if it had not been for your loving support and enthusiastic encouragement before, during, and after, this exciting journey. As an added bonus for us both, Ivan's decision to take several months' leave of absence from his work, allowed us to share many wonderful adventures together.

Author's Note: When hearing of my upcoming plan for a year-long teaching assignment in Outer Mongolia, the interest of family and friends to stay in touch from across the globe set alight an idea. So, upon arrival, I began to generate weekly email messages in the form of an online blog that I named 'Steel Mongolia'. Considering my writing style, it should be obvious that this has been a "labour of love", and not by a professional writer, or with AI assistance. As the weeks passed, my blog readership increased in numbers. Encouraging responses from readers who looked forward to these posts were what motivated me to continue through the highs and lows of organizing into script, my weekly thoughts and "happenings". After returning to Canada, I received additional incentive from others, but this time, it was as inspiration to take my blog compilation to "the next level". Thus, after 18 years in the wings, here it is! This copy has not been written as a publication to be sold, but only for those who "couldn't wait" to read it again, as well as for others who wish to hear about my unique explorations in a far-away land. Thank you to everyone who offered your enthusiastic encouragement in this book-writing process! A very special thank you is given to my friend Molly Shannon who persevered in proofreading my manuscript. This was a tremendous help, and completed despite my request for her to ignore some aspects of my untrained style of writing!

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction

If anyone had suggested to me at the start of my teaching career in 1968 that nearly forty years later it would end in Outer Mongolia, I would have split my sides laughing in disbelief. What could I possibly have done in my life to deserve a punishment that would exile me from my supportive family to spend almost a year living at "the ends of the earth"?

Perhaps it was a persistent spirit of adventure that propelled me: from my first teaching post on an isolated First Nations reserve in Northwestern Ontario where my kindergarten students spoke only the Cree/Ojibwa language; then years later after my official retirement, applying and being accepted for a short-term assignment during an exceedingly hot July and August of 2004 at a buxiban (pronounced boo-she-ban) otherwise known as a "cram school" in Taiwan. And, of course, there were other Ontario teaching years in between.

Or maybe I should place the blame on a sleepless night, the click of a keyboard button, and the internet. Having turned sixty and retired from full-time teaching in my hometown of Hamilton, that persistent spirit of adventure led me to seek one more classroom experience in some distant land. I had applied for positions in Korea (I was too old), Dubai (too old, again) and the Czech Republic (that was not interested in my husband accompanying me). However, there had to be something out there in the wide and wild world for me. I just knew it.

In the middle of a sleep-deprived night in the dead of winter in 2006, I turned on my computer and searched for a site on the internet that advertised international teaching opportunities. An offer was found for a school to open soon in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Outer Mongolia. Not being certain that I knew where in the world this was located, I passed it by, but my interest was piqued. Still heavy-eyed with lack of sleep, I decided, "Well, why not?" and began to search the internet in hope of getting a glimpse of the way of life that might await me in Mongolia. After about an hour or so of investigation, I decided to take the plunge and email my résumé. I would have nothing to lose and, anyway, I was finally getting sleepy. I tapped the "Send" button.

The possibility of being accepted for this unique teaching opportunity lingered in the back of my mind, overshadowed by the fear of yet another rejection. Maybe it was self-preservation, or perhaps my thoughts were more grounded in the embrace of family and friends in my hometown of Hamilton, Ontario, also known as The Steel City.

Then, unexpectedly, a phone call came. The Canadian consultant for a Mongolian school reached out to me. What followed was a whirlwind of emails, phone calls, and an interview in Toronto. Before I knew it, I was holding a signed contract in my hands. My path was set and

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destiny was now leading me halfway around the world to the American School of Ulaanbaatar in Outer Mongolia.

It was no ordinary teaching gig. The school was brand new, and information about my role was scarce. All I knew was that my assignment would be with an elementary grade. Beyond that, the details were as mysterious as the land I was about to explore. Little did I know just how much this journey would ask of me when I arrived!

Throughout these decision-making and planning processes my husband and two sons were very supportive of my plans for this adventure, with the former being especially enthusiastic at the prospect of taking a leave-of-absence from his work to join me for part of my year away. During his stay with me in Ulaanbaatar, he was to become my very enthusiastic grocery shopper, chief cook, house keeper, fearless bodyguard, and most importantly a good-will ambassador to many.

This book began as a series of weekly email broadcasts on the internet, evolving naturally from my 'Steel Mongolia' blog. It flourished thanks to the encouragement of friends who eagerly awaited my updates from the "Land of the Eternal Blue Sky". With these entries having been written on a weekly basis, I've preserved their original context and present-tense narrative, in hope of capturing the immediacy of those moments as they unfolded.

## Chapter 2

# Preparing for Departure

The final date for travel was set for Monday, July 24 which was almost a week ahead of when I originally thought I would be leaving. The positive fragment of this earlier-than-expected departure would be that I would hopefully have ample time to: remove myself from the assumed zombie-like state that might apply at my arrival in a remote country; be able to acclimatize myself to a "new" culture and surroundings; and have sufficient time to create some lesson plans. I am definitely a person who feels a need for ample head space, so I tend not to excel if I have to "wing it".

Mid-June was a time for collecting personal and teaching materials to take with me and for "filling my drawers" (yes, really) with items that were not currently in use but which would be taken with me or by some means, sent to me at a later date. To replenish my no-longer-existent supply of teaching materials, I took delight in discovering weekend garage sales as well as in frequenting my favourite re-cycling stores. Shopping and spending goals were made to inexpensively collect school and personal items, perhaps not available in Ulaanbaatar, and which could otherwise have cost a small fortune if purchased new in Canada. Keeping this budget in mind, I knew that some of these purchases were destined to remain in Mongolia and I did not want to feel that I was leaving half my estate behind upon my final departure from that distant country. My primary shopping focus was on school supplies since I was told that the Language Arts materials in this new institution would be few and far between. I presume it would have been easier in a way just to fly-by-the-seat-of-my pants, but anyone who knows me will know that one of my middle names (other than "Perfection") is "Prepared".

By the evening of June 18, 2006 my flight itinerary to Mongolia was confirmed. Through many emails with school authorities concerning several dissimilar flight paths and payment plans, we finally and by mutual consent agreed that the trip routing and payment would be handled from the Mongolian side of the world, as originally specified in my teaching contract. In retrospect this was an error on my part due to their choice of the least expensive flight route, without forethought that it might not be the most humane itinerary from a traveller's perspective.

It was anticipated that my husband Ivan would be joining me in Ulaanbaatar from early October, 2006 until mid-March, 2007. Until his arrival he would be holding the fort in Hamilton and be missed by me, in Mongolia. As much as I was unhappy with the prospect of missing my two-year-old grandson during my long absence, I had to admit that a momentary

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impulse to take him along would not have been keenly looked upon by his mom and dad.

During this departure preparation, a valiant attempt was being made not to drive myself crazy in the process of making sure that I was "Organized" (another of my middle names). I challenged myself to take each day as it came, to make lists, and most importantly to relish before my departure, each moment that I had with family and friends, and with myself.

Prior to my final exodus from Canada it seemed only fitting that many memorable "Last Suppers" with friends and family were thoughtfully arranged and thoroughly enjoyed.

... And now my bags are packed, and the flight tickets are almost in my hand. What will I discover when I finally step off the plane? Will this be an experience to remember, or will it challenge me in ways I haven't prepared for? There is only one way to find out...

## Chapter 3

# Takeoff and Landing



On Monday, July 24 Ivan took me to Pearson Airport for an 8:00 a.m. flight that ended up leaving instead at 9:00 a.m., but did not jeopardize being able to catch my next flight to Beijing, due to the long interval between these flights. I managed to upgrade on the Toronto/Beijing flight to "Economy Plus" where the seating provided a bit more leg room. There were also two empty seats beside me in the middle section of the plane, but because I was in the first row of the section, the armrests did not fold up to give an opportunity to further stretch out. With this seat, I did not experience the claustrophobic feeling that I have had for past air travel, so this was a real bonus because at over 14 hours it was the longest flight that I had ever taken. After landing in Beijing, and suffering from being slightly, and to put it mildly, jet-lagged, I found my way to the taxi outside the airport building, only to have to return inside the airport to exchange some money to pay for the upcoming taxi fare. With the time between flights, and in order to have a few hours of sleep and a shower I had pre-booked a hotel room. Unfortunately the daily rate was not available so I had to pay for a full night's stay. This was somewhat disappointing, but compensated by the fact that I did not pay for either the overweight baggage (5 lb and 6 lb, at \$25 each) or for the seat upgrade for which I had expected to pay about \$75.

After being somewhat refreshed at the hotel, I returned to the airport, then had some difficulty to find where to check in for the MIAT (Mongolian Airlines) flight that left at 10:10 p.m. After having to pay \$4 US to a persistent man at an "Information" desk, I finally found the location, and checked in, along with a couple of groups of quite well-behaved kids who were carrying musical instruments. It was during this almost-two-hour flight to Ulaanbaatar that I realized I might be in some sort of difficulty, when feeling the onset of a major headache. This development was almost tolerable for me, due to the onboard Mr. Bean movie feature that was playing. It's amazing how this entertainment seemed to be enjoyed by most passengers (who were not sleeping), with Rowan Atkinson's on-screen non-verbal antics understandable, in any language. However, as the flight progressed, it ended up that I had developed a full-blown migraine headache by the time we landed at about 1:30 a.m. Luckily

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my bags were just about the first ones off the plane and the immigration process, although a little slow, was painless. What a relief that Frank, the school principal, was there to meet me, along with a van driver. They handled my luggage for me, and as I sat in the back seat of the van, Frank started to ask me questions. As gently as I could, I responded that I was not able to talk, thinking that if I had to talk, I would be sick. It then turned into a very quiet, and VERY bumpy 20-minute ride from the airport to the hotel, where I had to complete some registration forms. With my brain and stomach not co-operating, I filled in the forms as much as I could and Frank kindly finished the remainder. As my luggage was deposited in the room, and the door closed, leaving me alone, I headed to the bathroom. Enough said.

The hotel room that I have been assigned until completion of the teachers' residence is just fine. However, after the first night, I was told to move for two nights, because my assigned room had been previously booked by someone else. Last night, I was returned to my initial room and have been told that I won't have to move again. This room has three large windows on two sides, with its location on a corner of the building, and all the windows can be opened. This last detail is both a blessing and a curse. I am able to get plenty of fresh air, but with the windows open it can be quite noisy due to passing trains, car horns, and outside voices. It would seem to be the Mongolian belief that if you want to get ahead faster on the roads, a persistent horn honking gets results. I think not. Also noted is that with the arrival of police officers to direct traffic at intersections, their job entails the persistent use of a whistle and much waving of arms. Traffic is quite chaotic, both for driving and for pedestrians who are attempting to cross the streets.

I wasn't prepared for the number of cars on the road, or for the fact that traffic signals are not always obeyed. For self-preservation, I have taken to joining a group of Mongolian people (preferably women) for road-crossing adventures. There seems to be safety in numbers. The hotel staff have been quite helpful and friendly and several of them speak English very well. Breakfast is included and other meals are relatively inexpensive, at about \$5.00 for a full-course dinner. Anything in the way of repairs that I have asked for (hot water, leaky toilet, etc.) has been looked after very quickly. I really have no complaints about the hotel. The lower-level Karaoke lounge can produce some "thumpeta-thumpeta" sounds, but this does not seem to continue very long into the evening. Last night I had the "pleasure" of listening to a Korean/Japanese/Mongolian version of "My Way", and couldn't do much but laugh at the gusto with which the off-key singers were participating.

Frank has shepherded me around the city as an introduction to locations for buying the best items: groceries, dry goods, restaurants, and such, and this has been a great help. The

## Takeoff and Landing

restaurants look promising and would appear to be quite inexpensive. For such a large city, the major business areas are concentrated in a fairly small area. I purchased a map and have the comfort of knowing that I can hail a taxi quite easily and as long as I have the name of where I am going written in Mongolian, or if I can somehow put a Russian accent on that name, I can also reach my intended destination. At any rate, the hotel staff are very helpful with calling taxis for me, and I've also learned that taxi transportation can be a whole new adventure! When Frank and I were in need of a cab, he just stood on the street, held out his arm, and very quickly just about anyone driving by, seemed to be a taxi driver. We had one such driver yesterday for whom I was uttering under my breath, a "Ye-haw" as we motored along, sometimes on the wrong side of the road (for turning corners), or cutting in and out of traffic, all the while being serenaded with Mongolian rap. It was quite an experience.

Yesterday I did the touristy thing before meeting Frank for my tour of the Skye Department Store and for my initial visit to the school site. On my own, I walked the approximate 25 minutes to downtown and found the Canadian Consulate where I could officially register as a Canadian citizen currently living and working in Mongolia. It is comforting to know that my presence here, and specifically in Ulaanbaatar, has been officially recorded. After my consular visit I walked around and took a few pictures of the large public Sukhbaatar square. There, among other sights was a lady selling telephone calls, which is a common sight on many downtown streets. I'm not sure how it works, but there are many, many people using this convenience if they don't otherwise have either a landline or a cell phone. Later with Frank, I was shown the Skye Department store which I noted for a return visit. Our trip to the school site was made when Frank borrowed the school chairman's Mercedes and off we set, in very slow traffic.



The process of building the school is moving slowly and from my point of view, it is difficult to imagine that it will be ready for the start of school on September 1. When completed, it will be an amazing structure, in a very picturesque setting overlooking the city and the surrounding mountains. This construction process is not my responsibility, so I will not spend time worrying about its current incomplete status, but will just

## Takeoff and Landing

do what I'm asked to do as far as preparing myself for the start of teaching, as well as for giving suggestions, when asked, for educational matters. Now, with more of an idea of the living and working philosophy in my new environment, I know there will be many adaptations to be made on my part.

The school's temporary office is currently downtown, on the 5th floor of a department store called the UB Mart, and is next to a bank. Both of these businesses are owned and run by the school board Chairman and his wife Oyuna. An invitation has been given by Oyuna and her daughter to spend time with me this weekend, and I am really looking forward to it. This afternoon, 18-year-old Ariuna, who is currently in Mongolia on a summer holiday before returning to her university studies in Chicago, will be picking me up for a museum tour, and then on to a Mongolian folk concert. These are bound to be most interesting and exciting experiences. I also plan to ask Ariuna to translate for me the contents of a tetra pack of milk, which to me, tastes like drinking coffee cream. It has been difficult or downright impossible to find where to purchase skim milk, but I'm working on it. On Sunday, Oyuna will pick me up for a drive out to the edges of the city to see what the countryside looks like. She also agreed to take me somewhere to get a plant or two for my apartment or classroom, and we will also go out for supper. I'm most appreciative of the attention and the time this family is providing to me as I adjust to my new surroundings. Their consideration is especially helpful because as of yet, I am the only teacher at the hotel, and being otherwise on my own while there is no designated work commitment, the weekends especially, seem to be very long.

Sleeping patterns, until last evening, have not been the best, but with no current teaching responsibilities as yet, my lack of a good night's sleep has not been an issue. Last night, I turned off the lights at 11 p.m. and didn't get up until after 10 a.m. so I missed breakfast. This was not a problem, because I had some back-up food and juice in the mini-fridge.

Time is moving along, and I must get ready to go out. As well, because there is no internet access in, or anywhere near, my hotel room, I'm sure the patient office staff would appreciate it if I would finish writing my emails, and return their internet connection to them.

... City exploration and challenges with working are on hand for next week....

## Chapter 4

# Playing Tourist and Office Hours

Saturday, July 29, 2006

As I was finishing my email messages, a hotel manager came by and we had a conversation about how I liked Mongolia and what I thought about the food at the hotel restaurant. She asked me to let her know if there was anything else that I would like to see on the menu. This is just another example of how the hotel staff are really trying to help me feel comfortable. The hot water has been "fixed" so now it is just a few degrees above lukewarm, instead of being tepid. I'll have to continue working on my communication skills to get this situation remedied.

This afternoon and evening were a most incredible and enjoyable series of experiences. After meeting Ariuna at 2 p.m. we went to the Natural History Museum, having an admission of approximately \$2, where we viewed many diverse exhibits ranging from meteorites, geological samples, animals, plants, to dinosaurs from Mongolia. Ariuna is a delightful young woman who is very easy to talk to, and who didn't mind answering all my questions, including the one about the percentage of fat in my tetra pak of milk. It turns out that the 1.5% represents the amount of cream content in the milk, and would seem to be the lowest content that is available. Perhaps I'll have to transfer my attention to finding cheese or yoghurt but somehow it's doubtful if there's any to be found in the low-fat category.

After the Museum, we attended a folklore concert called "The Moonstone Ensemble" and what a show that was! The admission was around \$6 and it included coffee or water, or a soft drink and chips, and we also had cabaret-like seating. The Ensemble included a full orchestra, each wearing traditional Mongolian clothing, and playing traditional instruments. Performances included dancing, singing (long song, short song, and throat singing), as well as acrobats, and instrumental solos. The costumes were fabulous but I think that my absolute favourite performance was a male trio of throat singers. The musical sounds they were able to produce were so different from anything that I've ever heard, and their singing was accompanied with their traditional instruments. Each one of the men seemed to have a unique sound or sounds, as heard by their voices being able to produce more than one note at a time. The Ensemble was very professional and I'm hoping that I will be able to see this concert again.

We finished off our day with dinner at a Mongolian restaurant and I let Ariuna do the ordering. We started off with Mongolian tea which was very salty and contained cream and as I learned later, some small pieces of finely-ground meat. The next course was soup, made

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with small pieces of beef and onion, in broth. We also had a salad (egg, carrot, mayo, and ground peanuts) which I was told was not a standard Mongolian salad. For our main course, we shared a dish of four large pockets of meat, which was difficult to describe, but delicious to taste. After finishing dinner and on the way back to my hotel, Ariuna asked if I'd like to go up to the mountainside because the sunset would be lovely. Unfortunately, I really did not have the energy to do so, but hopefully we can do it another time. Ariuna has also invited me to attend the "Festival of Eurasia" this upcoming Monday afternoon. It is a celebration of "The Return of Chinggis Khaan after 800 Years". The setting is just outside Ulaanbaatar and includes a two-hour performance of 500 cavalrymen who will be demonstrating riding techniques and 13th century archery. Because of it being on Monday, and since I would have to leave the ASU office at noon, I'll have to make sure that it is acceptable with the school principal and office manager. I'm very flattered to have been asked to be included in this experience.

### Sunday, July 30, 2006

For my Sunday outing, Oyuna picked me up at the hotel at 3 p.m. for another exciting excursion. Our first stop was at a garden centre and not at all what one might expect find at such a retail establishment in Canada. The inventory consisted of many items for looking after plants, such as pots, watering cans, fertilizers, etc. but the plants themselves were either really expensive, or not very eye-catching. I bought a small and rather bedraggled begonia-type plant that I hope will make some sort of recovery with some TLC, as well as a hanging plant that looks quite green and full. Don't ask me what it is, though. As well, I purchased some small pots, a bag of soil, and one of peat moss. This weekend, I'll attempt to plant the seeds that I brought from Canada to see if they will germinate after having been subjected to the nasty X-ray machines at the airports.

After leaving the garden centre we drove to Oyuna's home to unload her groceries. She gave me a tour of her garden where she was growing tomatoes and cucumbers in a greenhouse, as well as potatoes, carrots, beets, and onions in her outdoor garden. Along with the garden, I had the pleasure of meeting her young son, Orgill, his cousin Tim, five new St. Bernard puppies, and the Chairman of the school, Mr. Zorigt, who is Oyuna's husband. The boys were invited to come with us for the rest of the day.

## Playing Tourist and Office Hours



Chinggis Khan Hotel accommodation gers

Over some rather rough, narrow roads with various types of unfenced livestock meandering across our route, we left the boundaries of the city and travelled to the Chinggis Khan Hotel, which was certainly not your ordinary hotel! There is an admission fee to enter, and the hotel is set up like a small city with a wall around the outside. It has gers (pronounced, “gairs”), which are round tents used as the hotel accommodation spaces, and are located inside the wall of the hotel property. We walked the wall perimeter of this complex, and Oyuna decided then that I needed to see the inside of one of the gers. Upon entry, it turned out to reveal a rather lavish bedroom complete with television and adjoining private bathroom. Being rather hot outside, I expected the interior temperature to be muggy and uncomfortable, but it actually felt pleasantly comfortable. I thought that I wouldn’t mind staying there, but I expect the cost would be rather prohibitive. Since there was no room to have a meal in the main restaurant, we went to the beach area at the river-side which was located behind the hotel, but still within the hotel grounds. It was possible to rent a ger for the day in this location, but these had all been previously reserved, much to the disappointment especially of the boys. We had a great time watching people playing volleyball and lounging on the beach beside the river. Some Mongolian food was ordered, and like last night, it was delicious. We had Mongolian tea, but this time it came in a bowl and contained dumplings and I really

## Playing Tourist and Office Hours

enjoyed it. Oyuna's eldest daughter also arrived, so I'm presuming that I've now met their whole family. She had bought an ice cream cake to share, so Oyuna and I picked away at it, then presented the leftovers to Orgill who was a very happy recipient.

After dropping the boys off at their house, and as I was being driven back to the hotel we had some car problems, so the Mercedes had to be left at the side of the road, and from there a taxi was taken for the remainder of the way, which was not too far. The car was later picked up by Oyuna's driver, and she was picked up at the hotel by Ariuna so eventually we all arrived safely to our respective residences.

### July 29 to August 6

Monday turned out to be an interesting day at the school office with quite a few parents arriving to ask questions or to enroll their children for school. I ended up having quite a long conversation with a lovely Korean lady who invited me to visit her home, even though I will not be teaching her daughter. When this invitation was supposed to occur is unknown. Considering how busy this day was turning out to be, I felt that my prior invitation to attend the "Festival of Eurasia" with Ariuna would not be a wise choice. So I opted instead, to stay at the office. Hopefully within the next few weeks, I will get another chance to attend this event.

Now that our work week has commenced, for each day I have headed off with my computer to this temporary school office location which is quite a distance from my hotel. Hopefully I'll be able to produce some concrete lesson plans, although I have already done a fair amount of this. After a few frustrating attempts at taking a taxi, due to drivers taking the "long route", I decided that making the trip on foot would be less stressful, and physically better for me. To this end, I was able to find a rather "quiet" route, along the main four lane road near the hotel, with the last little bit of my daily journey cutting through a park. For a few days, I was schlepping my computer back and forth, but for the latter part of the week, I found it much easier to leave it at the office. Since I'm able to hook up to a high-speed internet connection at my office desk, it is really handy for downloading files that are needed for teaching. As well, it comes in handy for catching up, and keeping up with my email. I've probably downloaded about as much teaching material as I need for the present time. Now I have to concentrate on how I'm going to pull it all together to create my lessons.

During the latter part of the week, it was decided that since there are not as yet any pupils signed up for Grade 3, that I would teach a split Grade 2-3, should any Grade 3 pupils register at this brand-new educational facility. Yikes! This was not terribly good news, but not unexpected under the circumstances.

## Playing Tourist and Office Hours

My weekdays are broken up with lunches out with Oko, the school office manager, and with Frank, or with both. We went to the Irish pub one day and decided that it was a “been there, done that” lunch: overpriced and over-ranked food. However, it seems like a popular spot with non-Asian visitors to Mongolia, but I can’t for the life of me understand why. Oko and I also went on a quest to purchase a coffee/espresso/cappuccino maker for the school. I was also able to open a bank account and was very pleased to be able to deposit the US dollars that I brought with me to carry me over until payday. The card that was issued with the bank account is a Visa debit card and the charge for withdrawals is the equivalent of about 10 cents, Canadian, which sounded like a great bargain to me.

Two of the American teachers, John and Alyssa, started working at the office this past week. It was a pleasure to meet them and I have a feeling they are going to be congenial colleagues. Both have been in Mongolia for a number of years and both speak fluent Mongolian. I’m impressed! On Friday, Alyssa gave me her phone number as she was leaving, and suggested that I call her so we could plan a way of getting together on the weekend. For this offer I was very appreciative.

As I was getting ready to leave the office on Friday, the school accountant, Migya, which may or may not be spelled correctly, asked me where I was going and I told him that I was returning to the hotel. He offered me a ride and I was most grateful, especially because of bringing my computer with me for the weekend. His car was spotless, and it had a right-hand-side steering wheel, as do many of the cars here. He said that he was going to visit his father and was heading in my direction anyway. It was so kind of him to offer me a lift!

### Saturday, August 5

Breakfast this morning was again spent in the company of Korean tourists in the hotel dining room. One man was the first to acknowledge my presence with a pleasant smile and a hello, and how nice is that as a way to start the day? A little later, I saw him sitting at his table, one shoe off, and the shoeless foot sitting flat on his chair along with his bottom. By itself, this was a rather unusual way to sit in a hotel dining room, but then I looked at his black dress sock and saw that it had toes! It was difficult not to stare, but I don’t think I had ever seen or heard of men’s socks with toes.

With breakfast finished, I walked to the Sky Department Store, and feeling rather adventurous, I meandered into some of the small shops along the way. I guess this wouldn’t be considered too daring if the signs were in English, but this was not the case because most are written in Mongolian Cyrillic script. This means that unless I am able to see what is inside a building it is difficult to know into what kind of establishment I am taking myself.

## Playing Tourist and Office Hours

At the department store, I successfully managed to get a bite to eat for lunch, a small fruit knife, and some aluminum pie plates for my plants. Now I will be able to plant my seeds without the water draining out the bottom of the pot and onto the floor. I'll have to mix the soil and peat moss in the garbage pail in my room.

After my long walk to the store, and realizing I felt rather pooped, I decided to return to my hotel to "regroup". This ended up to be about a five-hour journey from start to finish, but of course, it included many stops along the way, and as I found out later, a sunburn. Mongolia is after all, the Land of the Eternal Blue Sky!

Following a much-needed, but brief rest, I caught a taxi downtown to meet Alyssa for dinner, as we had arranged this morning. We took another taxi to a Chinese restaurant near where she is living, and had a nice dinner and a good conversation. I really appreciated the time to be able to get to know her a little, to find out more about life in Mongolia, and to hear what she particularly likes about the country. She also helped me to buy yet another phone card for calling home, so I hope this one will last a little longer than the previous one, and that the connection will not be subjected to the delay in voice transmission that has happened with previously purchased cards. Alyssa suggested that I go to the Central "Black" Market with her and her boyfriend tomorrow to see what can be found in the way of school supplies. After discussing the pros and cons of this outing with Alyssa I decided to decline the offer—for now. The main reason for my decision was that Oyuna suggested last week that I not go there because it was "dangerous". However, Alyssa promised to check what is available for school supplies, and will also look for a fly swatter for me. Where are the Dollarama stores when you need them?

As I sit here this evening, writing emails offline for sending later, the view from my window is a wonderful display of lightning, and a bit of a dust storm, as well as some rain: buckets of rain. Thankfully this happened at night, and not during the day when I was out on my trek. My task for the evening is to spend a bit of time prowling around my room in an attempt to dispose of any flies or mosquitoes that have joined me through the open windows and are just waiting to wake me up tonight.

### Sunday, August 06, 2006

This morning I treated myself to breakfast at the California Restaurant and on the advice of Alyssa, I also checked out the grocery store that is located beside it. The breakfast was good and the coffee was great! The grocery store yielded a supply of hangers! I was even able to buy a couple of plastic table cloths to be used for decorating my classroom bulletin boards. I also found a greeting card, in English! Seeing that I was close to the Mercury Market where

## Playing Tourist and Office Hours

Frank had taken me during my first week's orientation, I ventured in, and found that there were not only groceries for sale, but also clothing and just about anything you could imagine including fly swatters! Also, beside the market there is a laundry, where for a small sum you can leave your clothing and have it washed, dried, and ironed. I went in and found that it was quite a clean place and the young lady found me a brochure in English so I think I'll go back next week with a bag of clothing that needs to be laundered. The hotel prices for doing laundry are a bit too much for me to be using their services. With shopping bags in hand, I headed back to the hotel.

I took a bit of a break, and did some checking of city maps, then set off again for a "walkabout". For this trip I planned to walk to the Gandantegchilen, (Gandan) Monastery and then make a large circle around, eventually ending up back at the hotel. It was an interesting walk uphill to the monastery because on either side of the road there are many different types of housing from rather grand looking brick structures, to wooden houses, to gers, and all seeming to be enclosed with wooden fences. Chinggis Khan would definitely not be impressed with the fences, I'm sure. The monastery grounds were quite interesting, but I did not go into the temple itself.



Many types of housing are seen in the city.

Leaving the monastery, the descending view was really spectacular. I headed off on a street that I had not yet travelled, and found another market area very much like the Mercury

## Playing Tourist and Office Hours

Market. These markets consist of individual stalls inside large buildings and each stall sells many different products. Looking around while inside this particular market, I did not see any other non-Asian faces, so I decided to make an exit due to not knowing if it was a safe place for me to be walking on my own. The good thing about it was that although it was crowded, I wasn't getting jostled as has happened in other locations. It appears that in this busy city, both cars and pedestrians all seem to be looking out for themselves, with very few people stopping to give anyone else the right of way. An "excuse me", or a Mongolian equivalent, is definitely not a commonly used phrase. This is a rather new concept for me and I'm not sure that it is one that makes me feel comfortable.

After being on the go for about four hours, I finally arrived at the hotel. The weather is hot in the sun but as soon as you step into the shade, it is quite cool and now there is a lovely breeze blowing through my hotel room window. This is really nice!



A view from my hotel room

... Can't wait for this week's new arrivals...

## Chapter 5

# Meeting New Canadian Colleagues

Aug 7 to 11

Office hours this week were fairly regular, but without as much lesson planning as I'd hoped. With this school in the throes of opening its doors for the very first time, and apparently being the most experienced teacher on staff, I am expected to contribute more than I had anticipated. These contributions come in the form of suggestions for furniture and supplies needed in the Pre-school and for the Library. "Yikes!" As a result, I spend a great deal of my office time on internet searches, and attempting to find ideas and pictures to illustrate what items might be most useful.

Since arriving in Mongolia, and from ongoing email queries from in-coming Canadian teachers, I have been making forays to various retail outlets in the city centre to answer their questions regarding items which would be or would not be available for purchase in UB. In Canada we tend to take for granted that our wants and needs will be relatively easily found, but this entirely different culture has its own unique wants and needs!

The second group of Canadians arrived on Wednesday morning at 4:30 a.m., which was about 3 ½ hours later than expected. According to Frank's observation when picking them up from the airport at the ungodly hour of their landing, they were quite perky and enthusiastic upon touching down in UB (which is the name fondly used by ex-pats for Ulaanbaatar). This cheerfulness was in direct contrast to Frank's demeanour at that hour, and especially because for some unknown reason, the arrival time for the MIAT (Maybe It Arrives Today?) flight had not been checked ahead of time. This was most unfortunate because he had been waiting at the airport since about 1:30 a.m.

These late-night arrivals, John and Christina, seem to be a really pleasant couple who will be easy to get to know. Christina is an RN, hired as the school nurse, while John is a teacher. They were married only two months prior to leaving Canada, so I presume that this first introduction to Mongolia might be sort of an extended honeymoon, and what an adventure it will be for them! From now until August 30, the remainder of the Canadian teaching contingent will be landing, as well as several others from various points on the globe, including the USA and Australia. I do not envy the August 30 arrivals, since school starts on September 1! With these additional colleagues beginning to arrive, it is really comforting to know that there will finally be company for me at the same hotel to share meals, unlike the solitary ones that have been my fate for the past few weeks. Because our school is newly-established, the grade levels will range from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6 for this

## Meeting New Canadian Colleagues

year. It is anticipated that the number of school support and maintenance personnel will surely far exceed our total teaching component. However, plans are already in the works for eventual expansion to include all grades, to the end of high school.

On Thursday afternoon a tour of the school was organized for the teachers, and it was my observation that although there had been a degree of progress in the past couple of weeks since my initial visit, there remained more work to complete before its September 1st opening. And, it would appear that the teachers' apartments will not be available until September 20th. Although I'm quite comfortable at the hotel, it will be a long commute from hotel to school especially with our assigned 8:15 a.m. arrival. Taxi transportation will need to be arranged, and the hotel dining room's current opening hour for breakfast is well after we will have to leave for school. Some creative thinking around these issues will certainly be needed.

Returning to my hotel room on Friday afternoon, I noticed with great excitement that there were sprouts on all three of my potted plants! I have one nasturtium, one runner bean, and several blades of grass, not exactly a lawn, but it will do for now. This means that maybe the seeds I bought in Hamilton were not too damaged when subjected to airport X-ray.

### Saturday, August 12

At 11 a.m., twelve of us, including school owners and staff members, set off for a very well-planned "Festival of Eurasia" adventure, organized by Oyuna. It is the festival that her daughter asked me to attend with her on July 29 and that I had reluctantly declined. On this day's excursion, three cars were commandeered for the 1 1/2 hour drive into the countryside. After leaving the confines of the city, the ride itself was a real pleasure with passing scenery of large rolling hills and gers dotted here and there, and where livestock wandered over this unfenced landscape. A herd of yaks was even spotted! After experiencing today's travel, I've decided that there are few, if any, roads in Mongolia that are not desperately bumpy and the only comfortable means of transport would be to use a hovercraft. Unfortunately, I don't think this would be a feasible possibility.

Several stops were made en route, one being when we had to regroup our convoy. Our 1 p.m. early arrival at the venue, located in the middle of nowhere, meant that we had to wait for the admission gates to open. Once inside, there were: souvenir shops; several places to eat; a stage; costumes to try on (for a fee); archery; ger constructing demonstration; a golden eagle who could be coached by a trainer to perch on your arm; a shaman's tower; and at the far end, bleacher seats for a staged cavalry event. Our first order of business was to check out one of the restaurants, where everyone but me decided to have something to eat. Although the food smelled delicious, I was forced to decline due to some personal "plumbing difficulties"

## Meeting New Canadian Colleagues

probably caused by the extreme change of diet that I have been experiencing. Despite being hungry, there was no way that I wanted to affect the possibility of not enjoying the rest of the day. However, after my discovery of a clean washroom with flush toilets I breathed a big sigh of relief!

After lunch, and on the stage near the restaurant, we enjoyed a concert, consisting of music with traditional instruments, singers, dancers, contortionists, and throat singing which in the Mongolian language is known as “höömii” (whoomee). Later, and until the cavalry ride began, we all went our separate ways to view the many displays that were available. The cavalry ride was fantastic, and included thundering hooves, dust, and Mongol warriors in traditional dress. I was very happy that these people are now our friends, rather than as it was 800 years ago when Chinggis Khaan rode the earth. During this display of story-telling, and skill-testing, many different scenes were played out with the horses and their riders. It began as vaguely reminiscent of the RCMP musical ride. Then came various displays of individual horsemanship which included picking up a “lasso” from the ground while riding past at a full gallop and shooting a bow and arrow, again at full gallop. For the finale, the “prizes”, including a horse, a camel, a goat, and a lamb, were awarded to the best of the competitors. My seat of choice was the front row! Needless to say, I came away from this display covered in dust, but considered it to be more than a worthwhile sacrifice to cleanliness, while enabling me to take many incredible pictures and videos.



Festival of Eurasia: archery lesson for Pam; and feeling somewhat under-dressed.

Meeting New Canadian Colleagues



Cavalry arrived!



Battle begun!

## Meeting New Canadian Colleagues

At about 6 p.m. when this hour-and-a-half cavalry display was finished, we headed off for a barbecue supper, located only about a half hour's drive from the festival. The site for our picnic is called Manzushir Khiid and was established in 1733 as a monastery, which eventually became the largest in Mongolia. Sadly, in the 1930s it was destroyed, and many monks were killed. Our group very fortunately experienced this as a beautiful destination to visit, with many trees, and areas for camping and picnics. Oyuna had asked the staff at our hotel to prepare food for this picnic, so we really had a feast! The barbecued meat was delicious, as was the salad, cooked potatoes, carrots, sushi, fruit, and a variety of drinks. I tried the meat, potatoes and carrots, as well as a swig of "wodka" (Vodka) because I was told it would help my stomach. Did it? Who knows? After clearing up our picnic area, we walked up the steps to a couple of buildings on the property. One housed a museum which had a display and a picture showing the original monastery. What a tragedy for all the lives lost, and for the original building to be destroyed!



Picnic at the monastery with school owners and staff

## Meeting New Canadian Colleagues



At the picnic, Orgill picked some flowers for me.

### Sunday, August 13

This was a lovely morning when successfully able to speak with my whole family at home. I've discovered that if I use my calling card in the morning on a weekend, I can get a full two hours and 17 minutes of phone time for about \$5.50. This is a great deal!

And on a less positive note, because we had no hot water again, and in order to wash away the leftover dust from yesterday's excursion, I was forced to endure a tepid shower which was a true wake-up. Then, with senses at full capacity, I packed up my dirty laundry and hauled it to the downtown laundromat where, for one load of washing, drying, and ironing the cost is about \$12. Next week, I think I'll try using the hotel laundry because Oyuna informed us yesterday that during our stay the hotel laundry charge for resident teachers would be half the cost of paid guests. This was important information to keep in mind. Maybe I can wash small items by hand to save some money, and I'll make a point of comparing laundry costs between my two paid choices. Fortunately, the hotel stay includes regular bedding and towel changes, as well as free breakfasts! If my personal laundry were to be done at the hotel it would definitely be more convenient than carrying it in a bag through the downtown streets to the laundromat and back. It will be interesting to see what kind of job the laundromat does with my clothes this week. If it is a failure, I may have to purchase a whole new wardrobe? Somehow though, I doubt this will happen.

## Meeting New Canadian Colleagues

After walking a "circle tour" and negotiating an as-yet-unused route, I ended up at the California restaurant for lunch, and was witness to something right out of an Oliver Twist scene. In this particular area, there has been a young boy, maybe 11 years of age, who is continuously begging for food, money, or whatever. From the restaurant window as I saw him approaching, I noted that he was conversing with a man who was washing his car, and my assumption was that he would ask to wash his car for him for payment, but his offer was not accepted. He also came into the restaurant but was shooed out by a waiter, then left to check out some street vendors selling fruit. I think it was one of the vendors who handed him a grocery bag containing food of some kind. As the boy was walking away looking at a piece of paper that had been placed in the grocery bag, another boy approached him, then three bigger boys arrived on the scene. All five boys then ducked toward a building, threw the plastic bag away, and proceeded to dig into the food from the couple of containers in the bag. The smaller boy who had received the bag in the first place, managed to get some food but the rest of the gang probably ate most of it. In the end, he was left alone, looking at the paper that had been in the bag, and which he then slipped into his pocket. I wonder?...

...Onward now to the task of interviewing prospective staff...

## Interviewing Prospective Teacher's Aides

August 14 to 18

Another week at the office has begun, with requests for me to attend interviews and assist in evaluating prospective Teachers' Aides (TAs), and also for the school's Administrative Assistant. I found this process uncomfortable due to my inexperience in this area, and also because of being conscious of the candidates' obvious stress in the interview situation. Realizing how important these paid positions would mean for each, it was very difficult not to let my empathy cloud the judgment needed to assess their abilities and expertise. A total of 16 people were interviewed, most of whom had impressive qualifications. Because of the relatively low wages for teachers in Mongolia especially when compared to Canadian salaries, the TA applicants were opting to accept a lower-level position in order to obtain the higher salary being offered at this school. With this in mind, it could feel strange for Canadian teachers to end up working with a TA who very possibly had achieved a higher level of education. It is hoped that we will be able to work together as a collaborative team rather than as a teacher and assistant, despite the wide discrepancy in our salaries. With any diplomatic skill on behalf of both parties, it should turn out to be a non-issue for all.

This week has also been spent trying to put together some long-range plans for the Grade 2 class to correlate with long-range plans for Grade 3. Some headway is being made, but with all the unanticipated interruptions, there is still a long way to go. As yet, there haven't been any Grade 3 pupils registered, but that could change in the next few weeks.

On Friday afternoon, Frank drove Christina, John, and me to a language centre where the "Survival Mongolian" language classes are held. John and Christina are really keen to take this course, but by the afternoon, I was feeling slightly more than brain-dead and grumpy after missing my morning coffee. However, at the last minute my decision was made to include my name on the class list for these lessons which are held on a daily basis and will begin on Monday, August 21. To prepare myself ahead of time I decided to make an attempt to learn the Mongolian modified Cyrillic alphabet and its accompanying sounds by Monday. Fortunately I found applicable internet information to download on Friday before leaving the office. Saturday's task was to write these 35 letters, along with a phonetic English version of their individual pronunciation. After completion it did not seem to make any sense when looking at it, so I took each letter, equated it with the way our alphabet looks, and organized the whole list into alphabetical order. This alphabet contains two letter "A"s, one is pointy and says "u" as in "but" and the other has a square top and says "d". Then moving along

## Interviewing Prospective Teacher's Aides

to the "B"s, there are four different sounds and shapes. I'm now beginning to feel like I'm going to be in trouble! The course is supposed to have practice in listening and in speaking, using tapes and personal dialogue, so I'm hoping that this will help me to learn and to remember sounds, words, meanings, etc. Looking out my window now, I'm attempting to read the billboards that are in view and with all I can see now, learning this language may be hopeless, or somewhere close to it. Oh, Eureka! I can read the word, "XaaH BAHK", with the "b" having a forward-facing line at the top of the down stroke which makes it look like an incomplete capital B. "Whew!". I think this says Khan Bank, except I know that the X is a sound that comes from the back of the throat and sounds more like a breathless "h", so Khan becomes "Han". Another difficulty with reading signs is that some, especially on store-bought goods, are written in Russian script and I can't tell the difference between Russian and Mongolian. The Mongolian alphabet is somewhat like the Russian alphabet, or so I am told. Talk about a brain exercise! I think that Ivan will have to take this course too. He'd thrive on it I'm sure, especially after having opted to take Russian language classes in his early years at school in Croatia. Oko, our school manager, has likened the sound of her language to the way a couple of cats sound when they are fighting. Oh dear. I think she's right.

Another challenge I was given at the office was to review the teacher handbook from a rival international school and to record my thoughts. This was quite a lengthy process which also included looking into the current educational affiliations of that school and to see what ASU could do to help obtain an official educational designation. The already-established school is telling their prospective students' parents that they are the only accredited international school in UB. This is true, but what they neglect to say is that it took them ten years to achieve this status. My suggestion was that ASU needs to look into the accreditation process at this early date to plan curriculum and policies accordingly. Talk about a learning curve for me in the requests that are being made!

On Friday, it was decided that a second half-page newspaper advertisement for ASU would be published in both an English-speaking paper and a couple of Mongolian newspapers. A draft had been written and Frank asked me to help him refine it, but part way through this process, and for an unknown reason, he disappeared so I decided to finish it myself. When completed, I emailed my version to him and will ensure that I get a copy of the finalized document.

For lunch last week, Oko and I discovered a new place for lunch: a Mongolian restaurant close to our current office. From the outside, the building would not have been one I would

## Interviewing Prospective Teacher's Aides

have ventured into on my own, but with Oko I felt it to be homey and comfortable inside. It was full of locals enjoying the superb quality of the food and no doubt, appreciating the cost as well. We had a wonderful meal of Mongolian meatballs, two kinds of salad, lemon tea, and one steamed, not baked, bread roll, all for a total of roughly \$1.80. The portions left me feeling very full! I thought there must have been an error in calculating my bill, but apparently not. A group of us tried to go there later in the week but the restaurant's electricity had just gone out, so we were out of luck. As an alternate choice, we ended up at an outdoor patio with an attractive venue, but tricky pricing. When out for a meal with others, we usually calculate then try to remember our individual bill totals because it has been our experience to receive only one bill for everyone at the table. Interesting too, that some eating establishments charge tax on top of the listed prices, and some do not. At our hotel, we are given a 10% discount in the dining room, which is generous especially since the food is already reasonably priced and for the most part is quite tasty. Their vegetable soup is likely homemade, and is served in a very large bowl. Each time I've had it, there seem to be different ingredients included so it is probably concocted in-house.

### Saturday, August 19

Today, I tagged along with Christina and John as they went about their various errands. I almost purchased a laundry drying rack, but decided to wait until we move into our apartment. Since the winter atmosphere is so dry both inside and outside, to use racks for drying laundry in our individual apartments would add some much-needed humidity. Our afternoon had one disquieting occurrence when a young lad who was probably about nine or 10 years old, came up to us and was aggressively asking for, "money, money". His first target was John, then Christina, then me. When he started to invade my personal space, I was a little more than disconcerted and said, 'NO' in a voice that, as an echo in my ears, sounded too loud and too harsh. Learning how to deal with this type of encounter in a more effective manner is something I need to practice. Giving money to anybody on the street, makes us a target for others. News travels. As obvious foreigners it is difficult to know how to deal with these situations of begging, especially since most encounters are with children. The city has many homeless people who, in order to keep warm in the frigid winters, are actually living below ground in the tunnels and sewers that contain the city's central heating pipes! They may even have been nomads who had lived in the countryside but moved to the city, thinking they would have a better life.

In the evening, John, Christina and I attended the Moonstone Ensemble concert, which was a rerun for me. Added to our trio was Ubi, a church friend of John and Christina's who

## Interviewing Prospective Teacher's Aides

grew up in UB, but has been at university in Hawaii, and speaks perfect English. What a delightful person! She is actually not Mongolian, but of the Buryat ethnic minority with her homeland being north of the Mongolian border. During the USSR period, her people were persecuted with many of the younger generation not able to speak their own ethnic dialect with the fluency of their parents and grandparents. It was very interesting to hear her perspective on past and present life in UB. This second concert for me was as enjoyable as the first, and this time had a completely full house with people seated in the balcony, as well as downstairs where we were sitting. There were a few acts that I'd not previously seen, as well as some different performers, but essentially it was the same concert. After it ended, I purchased a pre-recorded DVD of the performance to enjoy at my leisure, and to bring it home to show others the marvelous talents of dancing, singing, contortionists, and musicians. Afterwards we all went out for cake and ice cream and had a great chat before heading back to the hotel before darkness had overtaken the streets. As we made our way to the hotel, we dodged a few disoriented souls who were weaving their way along the street to who knows where, but on the whole, they seemed quite harmless. In the company of John and Christina I felt very safe even with our 9:30 p.m. arrival which was the latest I had been out and about.

### Sunday, August 20

Sunday morning seems to be my time to get in touch with family by phone. It is wonderful to hear all their voices so loud and clear and almost like we're right next door to each other. However, I haven't been able to catch grandson Daniel when he's been in a talkative mood or when he's not been asleep. Hopefully when the move is made to our apartment residences, our internet hook-ups should allow the use of my webcam for easier communications. At least, that's my hope.

City maps of UB are to be trusted to a much lesser degree than are the south-facing doors of the gers that are dotted along many of the non-central city areas. Today before going out for a walk, I consulted my map, with my destination being a local milk company that I was told would sell skim milk upon request. I started off, map in hand in the predetermined direction, although I made a slight detour to climb to the top of a railway overpass to get the lay of the land. From that observation point, and having it all to myself, I was able to take advantage of the view to snap a few pictures. Having studied this map beforehand and along this current route, not only was the map appearing somewhat out of scale, but also its named streets are not corresponding to any corner street signs that I had seen. Every once in a while, but not often, there will be a street sign having the same name as the one on the map, which is marginally helpful. Continuing along and trying to keep the non-reliability of

## Interviewing Prospective Teacher's Aides

my map in mind, I found a main street where the map directed me to head left, and I did. Then, the map showed a slight jog in the street, after which it would then continue along in the same direction. About a half-hour of walking without finding the jog, I decided to head up a hill and found another main street on which I somehow reasoned that the milk company might be located. Turning right on this very busy thoroughfare, I saw many shops, but very few foreigners with pale complexions like mine. This was most definitely not the route that I was looking for, so I decided that the route I needed could be one main street up, or North? It was finally dawning on me that somehow, somewhere, I had missed a turn. "Ya think?" The operative word to describe my map, was most probably "untrustworthy", or was it, indeed, my map-reading? The sky was now looking rather threatening and there did not seem to be anywhere I could duck into if there was a sudden bucketing downpour, so I headed back to the hotel. Miraculously I discovered a new and quieter return route which could probably be used to get to language classes this week, but which also led me to the hotel. Another lesson learned. Keep track of where you are going, and where you've been and don't necessarily think that the map in your hand will give you the directions you need. True too is the absolute fact that doors to every ger, anywhere, are all facing south. This fact is only helpful if you happen to be passing a ger, or if you are also aware in which direction you want to be travelling.



Sunday morning market from hotel room window

... Language lessons will continue so "Баярай": (Goodbye for now)...

## Language Class and Hotel Frustrations

August 21-25

Where to start? Сайн байна уу (“Hello, how are you?”) as copied from my textbook, and one of the first phrases that I learned how to say, not how to spell using the Cyrillic script.

Language class seems to be the most logical point of departure into this week’s news edition. Although it is called a “Mongolian Language Survival Course”, I will transpose the title’s meaning to my own personal experience. For me, it is a course in which I’m trying to “Survive” while learning the “Language”, never mind being able to use it effectively. The experience can be likened to banging my head against a brick wall because it feels good when it stops. After our class break on the second day, I announced to the teacher and four classmates including Christina, John, and a couple from the USA, that I was not going to allow myself to feel inept at being unable to remember the letters, words, or sounds, but I would try my best. What I wanted them to know was “from whence I was coming”. They seemed to understand. My usual Jack Russell or Rottweiler personality has now taken hold, because I can say without any difficulty that I am definitely not enjoying this learning-a-second-language experience, but I will stick with it until completion.

Compiled in the first five days, my frustrations are as follows: 35 letters of the alphabet are very difficult to remember; when I think I have about one third “mastered” it is not always the same letters; pronunciation of the words and phrases are orally being hurled at us, at lightning speed; the class is conducted mostly in the auditory mode; I am definitely a visual learner, well, that’s my excuse; most of the time, I am able to repeat the words correctly the first time, when I’m really concentrating and watching the way our teacher’s mouth, tongue, throat, you name it, are moving; a split second after hearing most words, I have no idea what they mean; then I forget how to say them correctly; and, there are so many intonations and inflections, rolled “R”, sounds made at the back of the throat, or seemingly out the side of the mouth, that it would seem impossible to make oneself understood even if one could remember everything else. When first hearing Mongolian language with their slushy “L” sound which is difficult to describe, I thought I had landed in a nation of people with speech impediments. When I’ve mentioned this thought to several Mongolian women, they think it is terribly funny and we have all laughed together rather loudly.

As well as our very small class, there are quite a few other people taking this course, many of whom are associated with volunteer organizations or religious institutions. Some are

## Language Class and Hotel Frustrations

planning to study the language for a full two years before being launched into some sort of relief assignments, either in UB or in the countryside. At class break early this week, I met a rather frazzled Filipino lady who, after her second day of class, was unsure if she could handle not only learning a new language but also the current living situation for her allotted two-year commitment. She was having a great deal of difficulty with this new language challenge, and I certainly could empathize with her, and felt somewhat better, knowing that at least one other person was having similar difficulties to mine.

Some of these other students, mostly women, are currently living four to a room in a hostel with shared bathrooms and no hot water. Their monthly stipend is \$120, and I don't know how they can do it, but most are soldiering on, and seeming to view it as an interesting experience. Wow, that's dedication! Without apology, I can say that their idea of an experience would not be my cup of tea. On Friday, I was REALLY happy to see the end of the week. Only three more regular classes remain because we have to work at the school on Thursday and Friday next week, and will perhaps need to find a time to make up for the two missed classes. Maybe I'll skip the "make up" and just consider this experience to be an interesting challenge in my attempts to speak the language of this country.

It was a busy office this week, with more and more parents arriving to enroll their children in school, and the newly-hired TAs coming in to sign their contracts. Oko requested that I remain in the main office where she is working. My guess is that with proximity to her workspace, I could be of assistance if any parental questions needed to be answered. Meanwhile, my fortunate colleagues had been relocated to a larger space down the hall from the main office, which allowed them some relative solitude for their planning. During this week a couple of them commented that they didn't know how I managed to concentrate on what I was supposed to be doing, with all that was going on in the main office. Somehow I was able to get curriculum planning done, although inefficiently.

Along with everything else, it was decided by some government officials that a decision needed to be made about granting a permanent license for the school. This necessitated their need to see an outline of the student curriculum to be followed for each grade, and was a reasonable and logical request. Due to a rather recent and apparently unexpected change of school administrative personnel, follow-up on this request had been neglected and should have been dealt with months ago. Putting together the Ontario curriculum in English was a "piece of cake" for me, thanks to the internet, but then it had to be translated into Mongolian albeit in a condensed form. Translation was obviously something not assigned to me! Oko downloaded some information from another school board and thought it might be applicable

## Language Class and Hotel Frustrations

for ASU, but I could see some glaring differences. As a result, we cut and pasted, then enlisted the help of some of the TAs to translate. What a job they had! As far as I know, it was completed by Friday because it had to be submitted on Monday. Talk about last minute!

Mid-afternoon on Thursday, six of us living in the hotel were advised about having to relocate to accommodation that had two separate rooms with a shared bathroom. This was because a group of Korean tourists had made previous bookings. To accomplish our transition we were asked to leave work early. With this hotel room moving order, I sort of quietly "lost it" due to this week's stress at the office, language class, and curriculum planning. I've not been one to hide my feelings well, and this would have been an opportune time to do so, but I failed. All six of us were rather stunned with this request, and for us all it would most certainly be a "moving" experience, so to speak, but not in a positive sense. It was especially difficult for Denise, who arrived from Canada late last Sunday evening, and for Catherine, returning from Australia sometime during this week as well. Poor Oko could obviously see my distress, so during the day she disappeared from the office and I don't know where she went. Upon her return she informed us that after a phone call to the hotel manager, all but Frank and I had to comply with this request. Feeling somewhat guilty, yet personally relieved with the reversal of plans, I left school with the others to help move their belongings to new rooms. Then...upon our hotel arrival we were advised that everyone could stay in their current rooms, after all. This was a relief, at least until Denise and Catherine were once again told on Friday that it was their turn to move to the adjoining rooms with the shared bathroom. I have a feeling that this will not be the end of the "musical hotel room" challenge, because the teachers' apartments are nowhere near ready to be inhabited. That is, except by the current occupants, who seem to be the construction workers. Enough of this discourse. There's a line from the "Wizard of Oz" movie that refers to Dorothy's situation, "[Pamela], You're not in Kansas anymore." I'll do my best to keep reminding myself of this very fact when situations like this arise.

Friday was moving day and this time, from our downtown work offices. It was also payday. We packed up the computers, newly-purchased school supplies, desks, tables, etc., at our location on the UB Mart's upper floors where our temporary school office has been located. Thank heavens it was arranged for movers to carry all the heavy articles downstairs and to load them onto pick-up trucks for transportation to the school. It was a toss-up whether the glass table-top would survive when sitting on top of a desk in the back of an open pick-up truck, but upon arrival it was miraculously still in one piece. For people transport, six of us travelled with Oyuna in her husband's very comfortable Lexus SUV. I say comfortable

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not only because of the lush seats, but also because of the air conditioning! It was a very hot day. In the last few weeks there has been obvious progress made in the school building's construction, but its readiness must be worrisome for the owners, with the upcoming official opening and first day of school on September 1. Or maybe the Mongolian way is not to worry. Who knows? Along with the office moving, we were able to take a self-guided tour of the school, and while there I was delighted to confirm the arrival of three of the four boxes in my supply shipment that had been sent on my behalf, and at the school's expense via air freight. I'm certain that the fourth box is hiding somewhere in the pile of boxes, and will look for it on Monday. Oh yes, I was also asked to put together a programme/invitation for these opening ceremonies, which I happily did because I love doing this sort of creative activity. From what we've now been told as teachers, our time with the children on September 1 will be brief, after the speeches, ribbon-cutting, entertainment, refreshments, etc.

After our school tour, and when crossing the 30 metres or so from the school to have another inside perusal of our eventual residence, we had to tread carefully because of the uneven ground between the buildings. Along this short route, I noticed with interest some non-human waste deposits on the ground. Denise informed me that during her school tour earlier in the week, there had been a herd of cows plodding through the school property. Now there's an interesting concept; a brand new, state-of-the-art school, directly in the path of migrating herds of cows. Mongolia is advertised as the "land without fences", and here are cow patties to prove it. Maybe we will be able to create a "Cow Patty Bingo" game?

The payday part of this day was relatively easy, with the operative word being "relatively". Expecting that our salaries would be deposited into our bank accounts, we were instead handed envelopes containing American dollars. After counting to make sure the amount was correct, a group of us headed from school to the downtown bank. What we didn't know was that our recent transportation to the school had left without us, so we set off on foot, and down the road to the bus stop. The bus ride promised to be a new experience for me, but it wouldn't be my last. However, Catherine was in a rush to get downtown so when a taxi was approaching our platoon of eight, we flagged it down and quickly decided who would go where and with whom. Catherine, Denise, and I chose the taxi because I was anxious to get my money to the bank before the weekend, not wanting to carry any amount of cash if I had to travel on a bus. The route back to the city was quite clogged with traffic, which meant I had plenty of time to take a picture of the Mahatma Gandhi statue located on a boulevard along the way.

Mongolian bank machines do not accept deposits which is not too convenient, but will

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have to do. For this banking excursion, as well as my own pay, I was carrying the pay for another teacher, who I call “California John”. He asked me for this favour, because he couldn’t get to the school site to pick up his pay envelope. He had an appointment with a seamstress to buy material for a suit, to be made for next Friday’s school opening. This left me carrying a month’s salary in cash for two people, which was a whole “chunk of change”, and for which I wasn’t feeling the least bit comfortable.

Getting back to California John’s seamstress: I recall him saying that the cost of the suit material was supposed to be about \$19 US, and to have the three-piece suit custom-made, he was charged about \$60, or for a two-piece suit it would have been \$50. Apparently, this seamstress also makes women’s clothing. “Hmmmm”, I’m getting some ideas. We told him that if we liked what we saw him wearing for the school opening, he could tell his seamstress that there could be more business coming her way. “Ivan, do you need a new suit, pants, etc.?”

On Friday evening, we chose to have dinner at the hotel and I was relieved not to go out because of the overly busy week it had been.

A very special visitor arrived in UB this week in the person of the Dalai Lama. Unfortunately, because of pressures of the fast-approaching school opening, I was not able to go to the outdoor stadium located near our school to hear him speak, not that I would have known what he was saying anyway. Although this would certainly have been an interesting experience. I think the government officials here were trying to keep this visit as low-key as possible, in order to avoid a potential political situation, but despite that, there were many welcoming billboards prominently erected throughout the city.



Busy downtown street with a welcoming billboard for the Dalai Lama

Saturday and Sunday, August 26 and 27

Waking up this morning, many Mongolian phrases that were repeated in our language class last week were running through my brain. Unfortunately, I couldn't remember the meaning for many of them. I guess the good news was that I had at least remembered some?

Well, I finally did it! Today, John, Christina, Denise and I trekked off to "The Central (Black) Market". For me, it was with much trepidation due to previous dire warnings, so as a precautionary measure I wore no jewellery, carried no purse, and only had minimal cash in a small front pocket of my jeans. I even wore sunglasses so nobody could see my hazel eyes and perhaps might not see me as a foreigner but I think the freckles and pale skin might have given me away. There is a whopping entry fee of 50 tugrik, as Mongolian money is called, which is worth about five cents, an amount we happily paid. It was a very interesting experience and one that I will certainly try again. For purchase we saw many and varied items on display: modern and traditional shoes and boots; furniture; material for making gers; modern and traditional clothing; electronics; school supplies; material; car parts; etc., etc., etc. And, it was crowded! Somehow, I can't get used to crowds where people push me out of the way with their hands, arms, or elbows, but this seems to be par for the course, and perhaps I'm being overly critical. Along with people on foot, many two-wheeled carts were being pushed along through the crowds, and heaven help you if you found yourself inadvertently in their path. The cart-pushers were not giving market visitors any time or space to move aside from their cart's trajectory. Despite all the chaos, I was able to make two purchases: a spiral binder to re-write my Mongolian language notes; and a small purse with four zippers, two of which don't work, as I discovered later. Obviously I didn't think to check it carefully before paying for it but will remember to do so next time. This purse, although defective, will nonetheless hold all I need to carry around, including my camera so I didn't entirely waste my \$4 purchase which also included the binder cost. Ivan was disappointed when I told him that I didn't do any bargaining for prices, but I was just so overwhelmed with the experience of being there that it was one extra thing I didn't need to deal with. Maybe next time.

John and Christina left the market early for another appointment so Denise and I finished shopping on our own, found our way out of the maze of stalls to the main road, and flagged a randomly-passing driver to return us to the hotel. Luckily, I remembered the Mongolian word for "straight", because that is the only direction in which we had to go. I was feeling so pleased with myself that when a quiet voice from the back seat said, "We just passed our hotel", I realized that I didn't know the word for stop. With a flurry of hand motions and backwards-pointing, our driver cut off two other cars then deposited us in front of a traffic

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policeman who was somewhat displeased with the sudden change of direction of our erstwhile taxi. Nevertheless, we had returned unscathed.

After dropping off our purchases, Denise and I set off again. We stopped at the California Restaurant for our lunch/dinner, then found our way to the State Circus to meet John, Christina and Ubi for the 4:30 p.m. performance of "The Great Shuteen". Usually, I don't enjoy circus performances, but Ubi told us last week that this was a special show which had been created for the celebration of the 800th Anniversary of the Great Mongolian Empire which is happening throughout 2006. The only animals involved in the various acts were horses, and that was quite evident the minute we stepped into the building which had a somewhat stronger "eau d'equine" than the horse palace at the CNE. The performances were outstanding! All the acts evolved around a story set in a time before Chinggis Khan was born, and included throat singing, horse-head fiddle music, dancing, contortionists, flaming arrows, and horseback riding. There was also an aerial artist who used in her act something that distinctly resembled a dream catcher. The riders on their very well-trained equines were truly incredible! Imagine watching a gymnastic performance of someone on a pommel horse, then imagine that it is a real horse galloping in circles while the rider is flipping around, on, off, running beside, and standing on the back of the galloping horse. It was absolutely amazing the way the riders, both men and women, made their skills look so easy, as well as obviously enjoying themselves. It is possible that this show will go on the road in the very near future and if so, it is hoped that it will attract a larger audience than for the performance this afternoon. The \$20 US charge for the ticket was worth every penny.

Following the show, we all headed to BD's Mongolian Barbeque for supper. Unfortunately, Denise and I were still full from our late lunch so we just watched and salivated while the others enjoyed their meals. At this restaurant, guests pick up a bowl, go to the buffet area to select the desired veggies, choose one of the meat selections, then include as many of the toppings as desired. The bowl with all contents is then taken to the large cooking area that resembles a five-foot diameter CD disc. The concoction is then stir-fried by the chefs, then returned to the guest on a plate. The cost of roughly \$5 will provide a whopping, delicious, and very filling meal. We could only drool about what the others were eating, but there will be a next time for us. This establishment is reported to be an American-owned restaurant and quite popular with tour bus patrons, so we learned that unless a reservation is booked ahead, it is usually difficult to get a table.

Sunday morning has arrived, along with a nice long chat with Ivan, but I have not yet been able to connect with our two sons. Possibly, this will happen later today when I'm

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planning to lay low and not do much except look for a location with internet connection to send and receive email. Tomorrow for our initial working day at the school, I'm considering leaving my laptop at the hotel because I would like to get an idea of where it will be used, not only due to internet availability, but also to find a spot with a flat surface where I'll be able to work efficiently. Hopefully we'll have access to our classrooms to start setting up, decorating, etc., etc., etc., which for many teachers are the "usual" week-before-school routines.

Denise and I went out this afternoon on a mission to purchase our upcoming-week's phone cards. It was quite a chore, but eventually after many dead ends, we learned where to find them more easily. We then decided to purchase some "North Face" winter jackets at \$35 each, from a street vendor who spoke very good English. He did not have jackets in our size with him, so negotiations took place and it was agreed that he would arrive at our hotel at 9 p.m. that evening, jackets in hand, and we would meet him at the front door. Denise has the exact same jacket at home, which is a small town in Ontario, and she says they are very warm. Sounds good to me! Soooooooo, we now await our rendezvous with "Batman" as he said his name is, because his Mongolian name is difficult for us "foreigners" to pronounce.



Waiting in stopped traffic: Ghandi's statue on the boulevard...

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...and a heavily laden truck full of raw cashmere

... The school opening is imminent, language lessons will continue, and apologies for spelling Баяртай incorrectly last week....

## Chapter 8

# American School of Ulaanbaatar Grand Opening

August 28 to August 31

It seems like an ice age since last Monday, which makes it difficult to remember exactly what happened during this past week. Monday to Wednesday were the most difficult days, with language classes from 9 a.m. to 12:20 p.m., as well as having the pressure of preparing for the school opening. Waking up late on Monday morning when my alarm clock did not ring put a challenging spin on the day. In language class, I couldn't remember my own name, let alone what we had been taught during the previous week, or indeed, what the teacher was trying to teach that day. After class, we rode the language school bus to the centre of town, had lunch, then hailed a taxi to the school site, arriving there about 2 p.m. The bus ride was slow because of horrendous traffic, the lunch service was slow, and the taxi to and from the school was slow! Who knows, maybe life is better in the slow lane?

Compared to Canadian expectations, restaurant meals in UB are experiences of slow processes: having our orders taken; waiting what seems like an eternity for meals to be served; waiting for the bill; and finally, spending time to figure out how much each one of our table companions owes. We are fortunate at the hotel to have a very nice young waitress who knows to keep our bills separate when Christina, John, and I eat together, or it will take us forever to calculate our separate payments. Lunches on Tuesday and Wednesday were enjoyed at the "Berlin Burger" fast food restaurant where I had a burger and I think it was a mutton burger rather than my anticipated burger with beef. Nonetheless, I enjoyed it and we were surprised and pleased when our food arrived quickly which meant an earlier-than-expected return to school. When language classes finished on Wednesday, it took a heavy weight off my shoulders, to then focus on lesson preparation. Despite my ongoing angst with the language course, I did manage to learn more than expected, and hope that after the flurry of opening day at school, I'll be able to return to practising what I remember. In the meantime, I continue to make an effort to read the street billboards and wording on the menus. I'm unable to read the street signs though, because there aren't any when needed.

On Monday, I officially met Doljinsuren, my TA! She asked me to call her Donna, but I just couldn't bring myself to do so because I wanted to call her by the same name as her friends use. Her nickname is Doogii, pronounced as "Doggy", so you'll be hearing more about her from now on. I am extremely fortunate that she has been selected as my assistant because of having a B.Ed. from Mongolia, spending some time studying in Sweden, speaking English very well, and, being fluent in Russian. She is a real "go-getter" as indicated during this

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week's classroom preparations. Whenever something needed to be done, she'd disappear, then re-appear after giving orders to whomever she had commandeered to do the requested task. I think I'm really going to enjoy working with her. She even offered to take me to the "Central (Black) Market" and I plan to follow up on this offer as soon as we figure out what else we need to purchase for our classroom. I'd feel much safer going with her than on my own, and I'm sure she'll be up to negotiating prices, as well as being a good person to elbow people out of the way for me.

For the first part of the week before school began, there was a possibility of: tripping over wires; walking through plaster dust; finding locked washrooms; or unlocked washrooms that didn't have any water; not having internet; and, no printer or photocopier access, etc. On Monday there was no water and although the washrooms were finished, they could not be used. Out of necessity Doogii escorted me to a field outside the school to the "long-drop" facility, gave me instructions to use it, then stood guard while I went through the tricky manoeuvres of getting my business completed. This small shack, looking somewhat like a door-less outhouse, was also used by people living in the gers located close by. Using it was not a comfortable experience for me, but I managed to get through the process without falling in. Long drop it was, literally, with two boards as the only bases on which to balance over a rather wide and deep hole. Now I can say, "Been there, done that, don't wish to repeat". Unless in a dire emergency, and even then....



No available washrooms in the school so the "long drop", in foreground, was the only option.

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On Monday our student desks and chairs had to be moved to our upstairs classrooms, but I was spared potential injury because much of this moving had been accomplished before my arrival. The TAs decided that the almost-five-meter-long whiteboards should also be moved, so five or six of them worked together to get that job done. I opted not to take part in the whiteboard moving because they were extremely heavy. The remaining chairs and tables still needing to be carried up the stairs were quite enough for me to help move. When our furniture-moving was finished Frank offered to drive me, along with our Canadian consultant, to our respective hotels. Consultant Gary is the person from Toronto who interviewed and hired me, and is now in UB for about a week to help organize the start of the school year, and to attend the school opening. He will also ensure that the school supplies sent from Canada have arrived safely and have been distributed correctly. This car ride “home” was an offer I couldn’t refuse, with it not being a stellar day on my calendar. The high point was meeting Doogii and working with her, and the second highest point happened on the drive back to the hotel, where, from the front seat of the car, I was able to take pictures of a truck immediately in front of us that was laden with raw goat fur which was destined for cashmere production. The low point of the last event was that we ended up in the usual chaotic traffic jam.

Throughout the week, we noticed on the school grounds, daily visits of a goat, who I named Gracie, and who seemed to prefer the greener pastures of the developing lawn areas rather than grass on the surrounding hills. Perhaps she just doesn’t much like to climb the hills, and prefers her own company rather than being part of a herd? I can understand that completely. With many gers in the area, maybe she belongs to one of these families and is destined at a later date for the dinner table. I’ll try not to dwell on that thought. In the meantime, I see her presenting herself as the unofficial ASU mascot, but I’m not confident about a positive reaction from school administration to this idea.

Without any assigned vehicle transportation from hotel to school and back, walking to and from the bus stops is going to be both cold and beautiful. Our bus route passes a statue of the Golden Buddha, whose presence seems to prevail over the city, and is an especially beautiful sight in the evening. The first bus experiences happened this week. Travel from school to downtown is quite easy and since the school is near the end of the route, finding seats is relatively easy because most other passengers have already departed. However, on our ride from hotel to school, it’s usually standing room only. The trick with the buses is not so much getting on, but getting off. For our initial ride, Christina, John and I were in a standing crowd, and had to disembark on the fly. John and I went first but were unsure if Christina had followed us when we leapt from the moving bus onto the sidewalk. We were hoping not

## American School of Ulaanbaatar Grand Opening

to catch a glimpse of her looking out the bus window and frantically waving at us as the bus careened off to the next unknown stop. Fortunately, we all managed to get off safely and in one piece. The buses run quite often but whether or not they have a regular schedule, is a good question. I am now able to read the route name well enough to select the correct vehicle for a return trip from downtown to the school, should I have to do so on my own. It is certainly an inexpensive mode of transport at 200 tugrik, about 20 cents per person.

### Friday, September 1

The big day has arrived! Dressed in our best, we had breakfast at the hotel and anticipated what the day might bring. What a surprise! We arrived at the school, in Frank's borrowed Mercedes, at about 9 a.m. and were amazed at the transformation that had taken place from the previous evening. It is presumed that Oyuna had commandeered everyone she knew, from busboys at her hotel, to cleaners at the UB Mart, and to relatives and friends, to assist with preparations for this event. Entering the school, we were treated to a peaceful atmosphere without having to listen to the buzz of machinery as we'd been used to. Please note that we now refer to our workplace as "ASU", a short-form for American School of Ulaanbaatar which can otherwise be a bit of a mouthful.

Above the front entrance hung an arch of balloons, as well as a large sign with the school's name and the Grand Opening date. People were still working frantically on the front steps to set up large speakers and microphones. Red carpets, obviously borrowed from our hotel's hallways, had been placed strategically at the outside entry. Inside the huge front lobby, a seven-foot Statue of Liberty had been placed. It is hoped that she will not take up permanent residence, as she is not a pretty sight. Perhaps a small Canadian flag, placed carefully on the book in her left hand, would improve her looks?

While we had time before the official proceedings began, Doogii and I worked in our classroom to make it as attractive as possible, then meandered outside to see what was going on. The Mongolian President's entourage arrived, looking like a version of the CIA, with their black suits, and ears wired with communication devices, ever watchful for anything amiss. Eventually the other teachers joined us, and we were all asked to stand on one of the red carpets. In the crowd of parents and new school students that had gathered, many men and boys wore suits, while the women and girls were in dressy clothing, some more so than others. Quite a few of the children were carrying fancy bouquets of flowers which I soon found out would be presented to the teachers. This day's formalities are not only done for new school openings, but also on September 1, the First Class Day, when the start of school is treated as a real celebration.

## American School of Ulaanbaatar Grand Opening

After speeches by the Mongolian President, Mr. N. Enkhbayar, the Chairman of the ASU Board, Mr. Zorigt, and our Canadian consultant, a performance of traditional Mongolian long-song, accompanied by a horse-head fiddle, took place. There were also fireworks interspersed between the speeches. Throughout the ceremony and with an inadvertent popping of some of the balloons, the President's guards were somewhat put on alert but thank heavens it was nothing more serious than a popped balloon.



Top: Families arrived for the celebration; Pam on the school steps waiting to be introduced;

Bottom left: two of the youngest students ringing the school bell for the first time;

Bottom right: inside our classroom, a few of the many flower bouquets received

When it was Frank's opportunity to speak, the teachers and TAs moved from the red carpets to the front steps to be introduced. Each teacher and teacher's aide stepped forward as their name and credentials were read, and when it was my turn to step back into the line-up, about six children rushed over to hand me their bouquets. This made it very difficult to hold back my astonishment, as well as my tears.

## American School of Ulaanbaatar Grand Opening

Enrolled at the school, is the son of a famous Mongolian pop singer, and as one of the last parts of the opening agenda, she sang one of her hit songs. I don't know her name but presumably, I'll find out before too long.

At the closing, two younger students rang the new school bell, and with that, the official ceremony had concluded. We were then asked to depart to our classrooms in preparation for the President's tour of the school. It was a somewhat intimidating experience when Mr. Enkhbayar arrived at our classroom with his bodyguards and an entourage of reporters. Through an interpreter I managed to answer his questions amid the snap of flash cameras, and fortunately I did not attempt any of my recently, partially-learned Mongolian language when responding to his queries. This classroom visit by dignitaries was totally unexpected, because we thought we were awaiting only parents and children. With "the suits" arriving at the door, I realized that once again, the final plan is never really the final plan.

Since teachers had not been informed about what was expected for the classroom visit after the official opening, we had to be creative when the parents and children crowded into our classroom. Anticipating a parent meeting of some kind, I had prepared an agenda of welcoming comments, which was not used. Instead, this meeting started as a series of questions asked by parents, with answers being individually dispensed. It was a relief when our Canadian consultant and an ASU Board of Directors member arrived, for the purpose of discussing the double-grade class situations for Grades 2-3 and Grades 4-5. This is an unheard-of occurrence in Mongolian schools, and because it would be happening without prior information being given to parents, it was bound to create concerns. They were wondering, how could it possibly work? During the first part of the discussion with our Canadian consultant, the air was becoming somewhat tense when a few parents began vocalizing fears about their child not getting enough individual attention in class. Fortunately, the board member's daughter is enrolled in our class and he very eloquently and calmly told his fellow parents how he felt about the situation. Since I had met him informally the previous day, he concluded his conversation by saying that after speaking with me, he was comfortable and confident that things would work out. The parents were not the only ones unaware of this split-grade situation. It was not until after we arrived in Mongolia that Kim and I were told that our assignments would each include two grades. "Ouch!" We shall do our best in this unexpected situation but I must say that my current main concern is not the double grades but the students' English language abilities, from none, to almost fluent. Yikes, this will be quite a challenge!

## American School of Ulaanbaatar Grand Opening

After the excitement was over and when all others had departed, a group of teachers decided to go for dinner to BD's Mongolian Barbeque. Before leaving though, I wanted to make sure that the school would be open on Saturday and that keys would be available from "Key Man" who lives in the ger next door to the school. Also, I felt it was important to find out if more than one computer in the now-up-and-running lab was hooked up to the printer, because I knew it would be needed for the next day. Yes, we work on Saturdays too, and quite often on Sundays as well.

### Saturday, September 2

Today I "bit the bullet" and decided that I needed a drying rack, as well as an iron and an ironing board. The process of clothes-washing was becoming quite expensive, even more so than in Canada. Compromising on prices for what was needed, I did my shopping at the more costly State Department Store. Previously, and near "Batman's" corner location, I had found a laundromat charging 2000 tugrik a load, so after using the laundromat, I'll be able to bring wet clothing back to my drying rack in the hotel room. Hopefully this will help not only with the laundry expense but also to improve the aridity of the indoor air. With all my purchases in hand, which proved to be an awkward load, I hopped into a taxi that was located at the front of the store. The driver announced the fare to be 2000 tugrik to my destination so I told him to stop, got out, and hauled my cargo out of the back seat. He then reduced the fare to 1500, but with resolve, I left the taxi and walked a block down the street where I hailed a private car for 500 tugrik. It was not so much the cost of the original trip that bugged me, as it was the principle of the matter because I knew the distance to the hotel and the cost of 250 tugrik per kilometre for the two or three kilometres that I was going, would not amount to 1500 tugrik. I must say though, that in my stubbornness, I almost ended up sailing away on that one-block trek because of the gusty winds, while balancing all my awkward purchases. On this same outing, and due to some obvious flaws that were not initially noticed, I spoke to "Batman" about exchanging the coat I had bought from him. After many apologies, he promised to deliver another coat to the hotel this upcoming Wednesday evening. For this next meeting, I plan to take the replacement coat into the hotel lobby to examine it very carefully in the light, before accepting it.

Safely returning with my purchases, I found that Christina and John had not left for school, so I was able to travel with them. We joined most of the other teachers, and didn't leave the building until about 7 p.m. It was a productive afternoon and partial evening. After some fiddling with outlets, I found that each classroom had its own functional internet hookup. "Eureka!" This makes lesson planning so much easier. While at the school, it was

## American School of Ulaanbaatar Grand Opening

rather astounding to find parents arriving at 6 pm, to enroll their children. We'll see how many others might also turn up on Sunday. After completing our tasks, six of us went out for dinner, and when returning to the hotel, I just about froze. I don't know what the actual temperature was, but my short-sleeved shirt and wind/rain coat just weren't warm enough. I'll take this as a lesson to know better next time, and will presume that summer is now over.

### Sunday, September 3

This morning, I plan to slip out for some very necessary food shopping. The school cafeteria is not yet in operation so we have to take lunch food with us for an undetermined length of time. Since it's uncertain how and when we'll be leaving the hotel for school tomorrow morning, I must also stock up my mini fridge for breakfast food if the hotel dining room is not open early enough. When shopping is finished, I'll head to school to spend the remainder of the day. Yes, I know it's Sunday, but there's still so much to organize and plan before our first official teaching day tomorrow. With no classroom shelving, all our materials are currently spread out on the children's desks and need to be relocated elsewhere. What to do with them is something I will have to figure out. Maybe, more importantly is the fact that I've been procrastinating about first day lesson planning. It's very difficult to know where and how to start, especially with having no prior knowledge of our students' abilities, or lack thereof.

... "Баяртай". Looking forward to the "Grand" start of a new school year...

## Chapter 9

# The Teaching Year Begins!

September 4 to 10

M<sup>onday</sup> arrived, not only as the first teaching day of school, but also as my birthday! It was my plan to purchase a cake or two for the staff and one for the class, but I had to opt for boxes of chocolates instead, because I was not able to find a store that sold paper plates or plastic forks, with which to serve the cake. When handing out the chocolates to our students in class, I told them that it was a special day for me, and needless to say, they were happy to get their chocolate treats, no questions asked. For the staff, I walked around the school at the end of the day to distribute the chocolates, and only one teacher, "California John", twigged in to what I was doing, and asked me if it was a special occasion. So, I told him. There's no doubt that all other staff members were in their "first day" mode and did not think of changing gears to wonder why I was handing out chocolates. This did not matter at all to me, because it made for an enjoyable and unique birthday. After receiving his chocolate, and knowing the reason why, John apparently made it his mission to spread my birthday news to the whole staff, so I ended up having an almost-week-long celebration!

The first unexpected event was Monday evening when five of us went out for dinner and my meal was paid for...a very thoughtful and appreciated gesture. Disappointment was expressed that I hadn't told them earlier about my birthday because they love birthday celebrations. After dinner, I was rather anxious to return to the hotel, due to expecting a call from Ivan, but who could not get through due to the unreliability of our phone lines. That night I couldn't contact him either, so that was a frustration for us both! On Tuesday, "California John" brought me some cookies that he made and which he is able to do because he's not residing in a hotel like the rest of us, but in a house that he's looking after for his friends. I must say that he makes great cookies! Tuesday evening saw the arrival of Christina at my hotel room door, with a bag of toiletries and a home-made birthday card, and she also stayed for a chat. I felt much better after our conversation because I had been feeling rather down, due to my inability to contact Ivan. Friday's event was an after-school staff meeting that ended with the delivery of two cakes, one birthday, and one cheesecake, along with some lovely roses for me. Everyone sang Happy Birthday and it was certainly a wonderful way to end the teaching week. On Friday evening nine of us went for dinner to a Chinese restaurant where the food was quite good. We're constantly finding new places to eat which sounds somewhat decadent but without kitchens of our own, we don't have much choice.

This has been a week of highs, as just described, as well as lows. Each time I feel some

## The Teaching Year Begins!

sort of frustration, I try to remember to glance out our classroom window at the prevailing view. This vantage point, even when sitting at my desk, looks directly out to the Russian memorial on Zaisan hill, which is a rather impressive site. Then, from the play area at ground level, there are views of rolling hills to enjoy. Sometimes we glimpse: a herd of cows grazing; from time to time in the distance, a flock of sheep or goats are being herded; and, on occasion, a “cowboy” on horseback can be seen riding through our line of vision.

This week we had our first snowfall! Seeing snow-covered mountains in the distance on the other side of the city was spectacular, but unfortunately I did not have my camera to capture this. The snow did not stay on the paving stones of the recess area, although it managed to remain on the low wall that surrounds the school. For any who have been teachers, you will appreciate the fact that on September 7 we had kids throwing snowballs at recess!!! Unlike supervising playgrounds in Canada, I did not take issue with the snowballs being thrown, but definitely had to do so when their method of collecting the snow was to enter into areas where I had asked them not to go. This was the case when a few decided that by leaning too far over the low wall of the front entrance area, they could reach the snow that had collected on the outside of that wall. It is supposed to warm up again as this week progresses, and I hope the weather predictions are correct, because I’m not quite ready for these wintry temperatures.



Recess with Doogii at front school entrance

## The Teaching Year Begins!

Along with this nippy weather, we had an interesting phenomenon in the hotel one morning when there was no COLD water from the bathtub taps, no matter which way we turned the faucet handle. This was despite the length of time that the water was left to run. I've never had this happen before! Anywhere. My original brief solution was that I would have to go to school without showering, and try to explain my "bad hair day". However, with some creativity, I managed to use a drinking glass to pour cold water from the bathroom sink onto my head to wash my hair. This seemed to work, at least for the time being.

It is of interest that the entire city of UB is centrally heated with underground pipes that run below the city streets. This means that the central city heating is not turned on ANYWHERE in the city until a predetermined date. Plug-in electric heaters for individual use, are one alternative. The ready-or-not-appointed date is usually September 15, but after a late shut-off last spring, it is not scheduled this year to be turned on until October 1. "Oh joy". My new little alarm clock has a built-in thermometer, and the readings for the last few mornings in my hotel room have been about 15 degrees Celsius, which is not an issue until I try to step out from under my duvet. Socks are kept handy because my lower extremities feel the coldest. Luckily my room is carpeted, but this isn't much help in allowing my feet and the rest of my body to stay at a constant and comfortable temperature. I've had to break into my winter suitcase to dig out some warmer clothing, as well as to continue wearing mittens, which I extracted and wore for two days last week. I'm beginning to realize that I might not have enough sweaters for this climate, and after some searching in the stores, I returned empty-handed. Where is Walmart or Zellers, or whatever, when needed? I can't even find a shop that sells sweatshirts.

Since our school building is still an active construction site, dust and noise have been an interesting factor when dealing with the everyday classroom and around-the-school activities. Due to the cold, most classrooms have been provided with electric heaters, which help to keep the room temperature at a tolerable level as long as the hallway door remains closed. If this were a Canadian school, I'm sure that the health and safety officials would not allow the children to attend school yet, but as I've said before, "We're not in Kansas. . . . ."

Early in the week my frustration extended to after-school time, with many of our children not leaving the building until close to 5 p.m., when dismissal is at 3 p.m. On Monday, workmen arrived to remove our fully functional classroom door, then after I left and returned to the room, I found a painter, complete with paint bucket and brush, sitting cross-legged at the front of the classroom. I'm not sure what he was doing, but his pose was reminiscent of him perhaps reliving his primary school days? As the week progressed, the children were

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being picked up earlier, and this was much appreciated. It's these after-school hours when I count heavily on having time for lesson preparation. Initially, with this expected time being interrupted, I spent first part of the week in a rather disorganized state, which is not my style, as anyone who knows me will be aware. However, as usual I shall survive!

On Tuesday the cafeteria became functional, complete with a catering service. Except for one day, the food was quite tasty, at least for my palate. Obviously, the culinary fare is usually Mongolian and is served hot, at a cost of 1000 tugrik (about \$1) per meal, so you really cannot beat that. Doogii looks after collecting the money from the kids, making sure they get the food they ordered, and that they carry it safely back to their table. One day, the caterers decided that the beverage "du jour" would be Coca Cola. What a treat? Not! I hope this will be the first and last time only.

"Little" things like non-flushing toilets, lack of toilet paper, empty or non-existent soap dispensers, intermittent power interruptions, etc. have been gradually taken care of this week, but there are so many other issues! There is no hot water at school, so washing and drying hands is an exercise in tolerance. I'll have to remember to keep a towel at school to dry my hands, because flapping them up and down is definitely not an effective drying method. There are still no windows in some areas of the building, namely in the gym, which significantly decreases inside temperatures elsewhere in the building. Without its windows, "speed bumps" have appeared on the gym floor. This is certainly an interesting concept, safety-wise and otherwise. I think the construction workers have tried to flatten them out at least once, but they just keep reappearing perhaps due to the cold temperatures and to the rain, and/or snow, that may be blowing into the gym and onto its wood flooring. I have heard that this weekend the problem will be addressed and I'm keeping my fingers crossed that it happens.

My students are charming, but their names have presented me with a series of tongue-twisters: Enkhdelgar; Oyindalam; Battylga; and Khulan (of whom there are two, one is a boy and the other a girl); Delgerzaya, Munkhbold, Munkhbayar, etc. Nobody has an English-sounding name, a fact for which I'm making no complaints except for my own inability to get around the correct pronunciations. It is not just the letters in each name that give me difficulties, but also the accents on the correct syllables and the throaty and slushy accompaniments to some of the letter combinations. For English lessons this week, we've been working very hard to learn, "STOP AND LISTEN!", with your ears and eyes. This will no doubt be a long and slow process, because they will follow this instruction for about one and one-half seconds, then go about doing what they consider to be more important. For the most part, they can be quite physically aggressive towards each other: a factor for which I was

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not quite prepared. Vehicles that transport individual children to the school parking lot are mostly very expensive models. One young man, who picked up one of our students asked how his young charge was doing. I responded and then told Doogii about that conversation. She informed me that the person with whom I had been speaking was not the father or brother, but the family chauffeur. Then I realized that there are several families in our class, who have drivers to pick up their children, because the parents could both be working or are out of the country on business. Wow, what a discrepancy in this country, between rich and poor, and from homeless underground dwellers, to those who can afford to have luxury cars and drivers!

Last night, as a group of us were out for dinner, there were a couple of television sets on the wall in the restaurant. I happened to glance up and was quite amazed to see a commercial for Canon digital cameras, which included one of my students with both his parents. I'll definitely follow up with Doogii about this, to get more information. This particular eating-out experience also brought about a "mass" protest. This dining establishment, BD's Mongolian Barbeque, had become one of our favourites, with its location relatively close to our hotel. After being seated, we were dismayed to be told that they no longer had the one-dish, stir-fried dinner. Now it is "all you can eat", and for the equivalent of over \$3 more than we'd paid in the past. We were really disappointed with this revelation, so two members of our group found and spoke with the manager, who told us that we could get the one-dish price, but only for this particular evening. After taking a vote, everyone got up and left without eating. Across the street was a "European" restaurant that turned out to offer food that was quite tasty. I had the Mongolian version of borscht and another interesting dish, which provided more food than I needed, so next time, I'll have only soup.

My newly-found laundromat worked out quite well this week. I was able to lug the laundry downtown in two bags and then do some shopping while it was washed. After the lady at the shop folded the damp clothing, I hailed a taxi for the return trip due to this load having an increased moisture content that made it heavier. My drying rack, also known as my "sail" from last week's purchasing excursion, has proved to work quite well. The drying clothing added a really fresh aroma to my hotel room, as was noticeable when I returned later in the afternoon after spending several productive hours at school.

Unfortunately, I don't get much practice with my Mongolian language, except for "straight", "left", "right" and "stop", which I use when directing taxis to my prescribed locations.

It looks like there are only two of us teaching souls in the school today and that's okay. There are many construction workers still plugging away both inside and outside the building. We can see daily advancement, but there's still a long way to go towards completion. When

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we leave today we may peek at the progress, or lack thereof in our apartments.

As a heads-up, Ivan will be taking a leave of absence from his work for several months to share my Mongolian adventure and I am very much looking forward to his October 6 arrival! He's also really looking forward this new and unique journey. Finally, I'll have a personal "Hector Protector"!



Our Class

... Upcoming thoughts on children not being the only ones who have a lot to learn. So do teachers! ...

## Time for the Teacher to Learn

September 11 to 15

Summer has returned! Or perhaps I should say that it is a reasonable facsimile of summer. In the mornings and evenings, there is a need for wearing coats. Daytime temperatures are for shorts and t-shirts, and not appropriate attire for classroom teaching. This weather situation has made for some active play-times at recess. Skipping ropes and hula hoops were brought out and it was interesting to see how the kids, even the boys, are proficient when using a skipping rope on their own, but how it is much more difficult when it comes to using one long rope with two “enders”. Not only is turning the rope a difficult process, but also the “running in”. With two skippers standing on either side of the rope, the enders turn the rope and after counting to three, the skippers run in. Whoever ends up on the “wrong” side of the rope as it swings over their head, has to take one of the rope ends. To stay as a jumper rather than an ender is proving to be a rather slow learning process, but they enjoy the challenge and I’m sure their two-ender jump-rope skills will improve with practice. With the hula hoops, it is an entirely different story. Everyone, but the teacher, is able to keep the hoop going. One of my students asked me to count her rotations and I counted up to 326 before her “swivel” gave out. It is fun to watch them enjoy this simple equipment while relishing the warm temperatures, and the beautiful hilly scenery as a backdrop.

Perhaps as a result of the cold weather last week, there is now evidence of the arrival of colours on the pale-yellow hillside trees. I am hoping to take some photos to capture these Mongolian fall colours, but somehow, I don’t think there will be any reds or oranges as in Canada.

During school days this week, I’ve been slowly getting organized. FINALLY, I managed to master remembering each child’s name, but that is only half the process, because I’m still quite abysmal with pronunciations! Also, with our curriculum I’m finding it tough to juggle teaching two grades, along with the wide variances of my pupils’ English language abilities. My many years of teaching experience are no match for this! It is going to be quite a challenge, especially at “Curriculum Night” when we have to explain to our students’ parents that curriculum content, and what is able to be taught, will be two different matters. This is an evening I’m not looking forward to, although I think I’ve met most of the parents and have had a chance to chat with them each day, if they feel so inclined to do so. During these impromptu parental encounters, Doogii has not only been a tactful interpreter, but also a referee for me on a couple of occasions. She is very skilled at being able to manoeuvre, in

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her diplomatic stride, through what could potentially be problematic encounters. As well, she has given me the sage advice that it is not important for me to know who the parents are (members of Parliament, pop singers, etc.) and for this guidance I am eternally grateful. Unfortunately for Doogii, she gave her cell phone number to some of the parents on September 1. Needless to say, good use of her number has been made by parents to phone her during school hours, and sometimes at the most inopportune times. Fortunately for me, I do not have a cell phone and am thinking that perhaps not having any kind of phone might be a good option for me, except for making weekly calls to Canada.

Bookshelves and lockers arrived for our classroom this week, which enabled better organization of our teaching materials. For the students, having these hallway lockers is a great addition, because now they don't have to contend with their school bags being parked beside their desks for everyone to trip over. As well, their coats can now be safely stored, and not hanging on the backs of their chairs.

The school is still a semi-major construction project, with jobs being completed, then ripped apart in order to re-do, which necessitates cleaning to be done twice. It is my earnest hope that the indoor play areas will be finished before the REALLY cold weather sets in. The school has one lovely atrium space that can be viewed from the library, but is not accessible at present. The material used for most hallway floors is marble, which is very slippery at the best of times and when wet, can be quite hazardous. After taking a self-guided tour of the unused, still-under-construction regions of the school, I am seriously considering the idea of hiring myself out as a consultant to whoever might be designing the next school that is destined for construction.

Lunches have been relatively interesting, generally quite tasty, and serve mainly Mongolian food. During this week's grocery shopping I made the wonderful discovery of finding a small jar of crunchy peanut butter! With this magical purchase, I was able to "borrow" a couple of slices of bread and a container of jam from the hotel breakfast buffet. The hotel restaurant has now opened earlier in the morning to provide us with breakfast before heading to school for the day. Added to these purchased grocery items was yoghurt, an apple, and some water, so voila: Lunch! In the cafeteria with students sitting around me, and telling me how much they like peanut butter, I didn't rise to the occasion to share. I know that if they were so inclined, they are capable of asking their parents to purchase it for them. Besides, who knows when or where I'll be able to find peanut butter again because I'm learning that grocery stores don't consistently carry the same products.

In the latter part of the week, "California John", of my birthday cookie fame, and who

## Time for the Teacher to Learn

is house-sitting for friends, asked how the “homeless” teachers living at the hotel would feel about coming to his house to cook dinner. I gave him my personal and enthusiastic approval to extend this offer to the other hotel dwellers, who readily accepted his invitation. This event was organized for Friday evening, after what turned out to be an unexpected staff meeting. The residence John is looking after is a two-storey building, which would not have been easily found if we all had not travelled with him from school by taxi. As you may recall from information given in a previous chapter, the roads, streets, alleys, etc. are not named. The trick to arriving successfully at a prescribed destination by taxi is to give the name of a well-known building that is in close proximity to where one is going, ask to be dropped off at that location, and then make the rest of the way on foot. Upon arrival at the fence of our host’s home, Stacey the cat greeted us and I was able to have a bit of a “cat fix” with her. She was especially pleased when I presented her with the drainage from tuna cans purchased for my supper creation. We were fortunate to find a supermarket close by the house so it was there where we were able to obtain ingredients for our upcoming feast. It would appear that our individual contributions were not well coordinated, due to all the main entrees containing pasta in some form or another, but to me this was of no concern. The only exceptions were a potato salad, for which I had been craving just a few days before, and chocolate chip cookies, which are my ongoing craving. With everyone having to cook at the same time, it was quite chaotic in the kitchen for a while. As a result, the dinner had a much later start than planned. After our meal we spent some time sitting around the table discussing school-related matters. Finally, to carry us back to the hotel, taxis were ordered by John, with his fluent Mongolian ability. Because the house location was down a rather bumpy, stony, and dark road, with open sewer holes (no exaggeration), I was finally able to make really good use of my flashlight. By the time we returned to the hotel it was after midnight and I was rather “wired” because of our lively before-and after-dinner discussions, so it was about 1 a.m. when I turned out the light for sleep. This was not good timing, because I had promised to call Ivan as early as possible on Friday evening, which would be Saturday morning, UB time. It meant that my alarm needed to be set as usual for 7 a.m., so there was no Saturday sleep in for me this week.



## Time for the Teacher to Learn

### Saturday, September 16

Of all the teachers at the hotel, everyone but me has had quite a bad head cold, as well as flu-like symptoms for the last week or two. However, when I woke up this morning with a sore throat, I knew that my time had come to succumb. I have been "doctoring" myself with nasal spray and cold tablets because I am really not fond of having a drippy nose, but who is?

Today was my day to get some planning done at school, but before I headed in that direction, I was able to finish a special quest downtown. Last week when I had my laundry done, I somehow left the laundromat with one less sock. This is something I did not find out until after my clothing dried on the drying rack, and matching my socks. Fortunately, the laundry lady remembered me and produced my wayward sock without any hesitation. This might seem like a trivial matter, but I am rather fond of this pair of socks and didn't want to lose half. It must be nice to have nothing else to worry about, other than a lost sock? As for most store openings here, and just because a sign advertises the open and closed times, it does not mean that this will actually be the case. As a result of what turned out to be my apparently early time of arrival at the laundromat, I had about a three-quarters of an hour wait past the posted opening time in order to accomplish my sock-retrieval. However, this was a somewhat productive waiting time, because as I was wandering around, I discovered a new place to purchase phone cards.

After leaving the laundry, I headed for the Zaisan bus stop, where the route would drop me off near the school. It was a rather crowded journey, during which I had to stand, but it was without incident. The cost of bus fare this time, made it worth dealing with the crowding. When I arrived at the school, "Key Man" was there, which proved to be a real plus, because he was able not only to open the entry door, but almost more importantly, to unlock a washroom, which meant that I wouldn't have to use the "long-drop" facilities if I was desperate. Being alone, with the exception of the construction workers, was a real pleasure! Nobody bothered me, so I was able to work without interruption, which meant that I accomplished a great deal for the weeks ahead. When Christina and John arrived during the afternoon, I chose to stay until they decided to leave so that I would have company for the return trip.

For dinner that night, John and Christina decided to order a pizza and watch a movie in their room, so along with their order I added one for myself: a Hawaiian pizza from "Daminos". Yes, that is the correct spelling for this particular pizzeria, and I have a picture of the box to prove it. Since I was feeling a little under the weather, I decided that once my pizza arrived, I would seclude myself in my own room to catch up on some email correspondence. With disappointment, we found out that Daminos makes a mediocre quality pizza with a cake-like

## Time for the Teacher to Learn

crust, lots of cheese, chunks of pineapple, and one lone piece of mango. I don't know how the latter ingredient sneaked in.

Sunday, September 17: Pancake Day!



On Friday, I purchased a package of pancake mix, as well as one egg that I very carefully transported back to the hotel, only to remember that eggs are available at the breakfast buffet. Oh well. I had arranged with the hotel staff to allow me to cook the pancakes at 10:30 a.m. for my teaching colleagues. The staff were very obliging of my request, and the teachers were very pleased to have this treat

to look forward to. Just before 10 a.m., in preparation for this singular occasion, I went to the hotel lobby to make the final culinary arrangements with the front desk staff. At that time, I was told to just let them know what I needed, and they would send someone out to make the purchases for us. This was an unexpected and generous gesture on their part, and I guess they thought that making pancakes was a complicated procedure. Since the two ingredients had already been purchased, I thankfully declined their offer, but I did remind them of the need for the cooking implements, which I had already specified. At the prescribed time we all gathered in the hotel dining room. True to my character of not pretending to be any sort of cook, I burned the first few pancakes, but in this case, I don't think it was due to my ineptitude, but rather due to an overheated cast iron frying pan. Well, maybe it was my incompetence. During this process, a few of the hotel staff were hanging around to see what was going on, so a sample was shared with each of them, which they seemed to enjoy. One of the waitresses was taking notes about what I was doing, (Oh dear!). She had even brought me an apron early in the process, after I'd already dusted the room, and myself, with the dry batter. The pancakes gradually became better as I got used to the frying pan and the heating procedure, and they were all consumed. Needless to say, the experiment was a success, and the whole process proved to be quite entertaining, too, for various reasons.

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At 1 p.m. this same afternoon, Doogii and I arranged to meet at the Central (Black) Market to have her help assist in the purchase of some school supplies. To get to the market on my own, I ended up having a somewhat disagreeable experience at the end of my ride in a private “taxi”. This type of unpleasantness had never happened to me on any of my many previous taxi trips, so it came as a bit of a revelation. What occurred was that when we reached the market, and I was told the cost of the ride, I told the driver he was a thief for what he was asking me to pay. Perhaps my response was not worded very tactfully? When I first refused to pay his vastly inflated fare, he locked the door and wouldn’t let me out until I gave him the amount of money he had demanded. Unfortunately, and in retrospect, I realized that for whatever reason, I had not negotiated the fare ahead of time when I got into the car. So I made a “note to self” not to let that happen again. Rather than let that incident spoil my day, I found my arranged meeting place with Doogii and gave her a big hug, telling her what had happened. She commiserated with me and assured me that if she had been with me that incident would not have happened. Her don’t-mess-with-me demeanour, is a fact of which I was already very aware.

The two of us trekked through the market and found some of the classroom supplies we needed. The covered containers I was looking for were too expensive and there does not seem to be a single pot of liquid paint for children’s art work, in the whole of Mongolia, so I gave up on painting supplies. Doogii took me through to an area where camel hair sweaters are sold, and after trying on many, I finally settled on one that she said looked good on me. I also purchased a small vest for my grandson, Daniel. Now all I have to do is figure out how to find some packaging material for mailing it to him.

After our shopping excursion we went to Doogii’s apartment where I met her husband and 11-year-old daughter. She gave me an apartment tour during which we compared cost-of-living prices in general, between our two countries. Needless to say, it was an interesting afternoon between one experience and the other. When our visit was over, she walked me to the main street, hailed a taxi, negotiated a price, and told the driver where to deliver me. For her assistance I will be eternally grateful.

Returning to the hotel, I was in for a rude shock. The hotel had pre-booked the rooms currently in use by teachers, as of September 20, because it had been anticipated that the school apartments would be ready by then. With completion estimates being continually pushed further and further ahead, we were now at “Plan X” of our apartment move-in. This time, I was told that I would have to relocate to semi-standard accommodation, which included a shared bathroom with either Kim and Dave, or with Christina and John. In my most polite

## Time for the Teacher to Learn

manner, I said that neither option was acceptable. Not to make this into a prolonged story, and after much discussion with the staff, I opted for a very small single room and hope that it doesn't give me claustrophobia. I also decided that I wanted to move immediately, so it didn't involve a school night. My new room will do for now, except for getting used to its minuscule size. There's no tub, but a nice shower stall. The view is certainly not what I had in my previous room, but it could present some interesting scenery at the rear entrances of the surrounding apartments. A busboy helped drag my belongings upstairs to room 407, so I guess I've come up in the world? And now it's time to put everything away. I haven't tried the bed and with any luck it will not be of the corduroy variety that I had in Room 208. When Ivan arrives on October 6, I'll have to make a decision about this room situation because it is WAAAAAY too small for two people! Later, I was told that "my" Room 208 would be again available, on October 2 and I responded that I did not wish to continue playing musical rooms, with all the other stresses going on in my life at this time. We'll see what happens.

... Stay tuned for the continuing saga ...

## Chapter 11

# Is it the Food?

September 18 to 24

It has been a hectic and frustrating week at school. During this seemingly endless period of time, I was plagued with stomach difficulties and an annoying cold. It was the continuing "dance" of school construction: one step forward and two steps back; experiencing no hot water or heat; times when there is no water at all; and for added interest, sometimes there is no electricity. It is helpful that the classroom windows are large enough to provide light and some heat... "Sigh".

Despite the cool and misty weather, Saturday turned out to be another wonderful day for teachers and TAs to tour the countryside, as organized by our school director. We travelled to Terelj National Park, which is about 80 kilometres from UB. Our arrival stirred the curiosity of three boys on horseback, and we even had a cow who wanted to join the volleyball game. As for our previous staff outings, vans had been chartered for transportation and gers were made available for our use. It was no surprise that we were all well fed with traditional Mongolian food, prepared by school support staff and the director's personal staff.



The curious young boys on horseback were checking out the park visitors.

Is it the Food?



Doogii enjoys mutton, much to the delight of her colleagues!



A roaming cow took interest in the pickup volleyball game.

And, on a more serious note, "Curriculum Night" takes place on Friday, September 29 which means a tremendously busy preparation time. My prediction for our specific classroom is that it will be a case of informing the parents about the curriculum: "This is what we're supposed to be doing, but in reality, this is what we are able to do." It will definitely be interesting to see how this information will be received. Thank heavens as usual, that Doogii will be by, at, and on my side!

...Never sure of what to expect as days go by...

## Chapter 12

# Changes at School and the Hotel

September 25 to 29

At the end of the school day on Monday, I found out at 4:57 p.m. that a van and driver had been arranged to start transporting teachers to and from school. This was great news! The downside was that the vehicle would be leaving at 5:00 p.m. which meant I had three minutes to scramble like crazy to get my belongings together, run to the parking lot, and hop on board. As it turned out, this was the same vehicle that had picked me up from the airport for my July arrival in Mongolia. It was a perfectly fine vehicle for transporting one or two people with their luggage, but not with nine of us, who now crammed into its first run from school to downtown. Since Christina and John had recently opted to move to a different hotel in the downtown area, they were the first to be dropped off, leaving the rest of us to be driven to our hotel which was some distance away. Somebody made the comparison that with all of us crowded into this tiny vehicle, it resembled one that is used in a circus act, where more and more clowns magically keep escaping. By Wednesday a small miracle happened and I can certainly understand the logic behind this phenomenon. It is in the form of a brand-new van that comfortably holds 12 people, including the driver. This welcome acquisition is much appreciated as a less stressful finish to our teaching day.

When we had to use the city bus to get back and forth to school, although inexpensive, it had been a real test of patience and endurance. There were two segments to this transportation, with the first leg only going part way “over the bridge” where we then had to hail another set of wheels to get to our final destination. These trips were made somewhat easier if several of us were travelling together to keep an eye on each other and our belongings, but if one had to go it alone, it was a somewhat daunting journey due to the crowded conditions. If I was on my own on the bus, I didn’t feel completely safe, especially if I happened to have a load of belongings with me, like my somewhat-bulky computer.

Because our homeward-bound, after-school transportation leaves at 5:00 p.m., it means I have to be well organized and able to do as much long-range planning at school as possible. I don’t want to depend on having to prepare evening lesson plans at the hotel on weeknights, because I am reluctant to transport my computer back and forth to be able to do the necessary online research. Even though our classes end at 3 p.m. it seems like there are so many interruptions of one kind or another, the two hours before departure go by very quickly. This doesn’t leave nearly as much time as I’d like for lesson preparation.

I’ve lost track of the number of times the Supply Room Lady has visited our classroom to

## Changes at School and the Hotel

count our textbooks, and it's unclear to me if she thinks I'm in the process of stealing them. Her English is about as good as my Mongolian, so we're not communicating very well, which makes me wonder why these books have to be repeatedly tallied. It could be that this task is her only mission in life at the school? Our photocopying must now be done by a non-teaching staff member, so we are not allowed to use this machine ourselves. In a way, it is a good idea, because it's a task we don't otherwise have to worry about, yet it is sometimes difficult to plan too far ahead in order to get the copies we want, when we want them. I'm making a concerted effort to get used to these protocols, but I really don't have a choice.

During the week I managed to find some cardboard boxes in which to store books and other classroom supplies, so this has been a huge help in making me feel a little more organized. It is amazing how a few boxes of well-arranged materials can make a world of difference in helping to maintain one's sanity. Throughout the week I was aware that the parents would visit us for Curriculum Night on Friday and therefore I wanted to at least look like I knew exactly where I am and what I am doing here.

One of my projects this week was to make a brave attempt to begin teaching the science units for both grades. Unfortunately, the topics are different, which will mean some very tricky planning. Thank goodness for Doogii being able to teach one grade, while I'm with the other! During the first lessons, I realized how much English language preparation was going to be needed with respect to the science vocabulary that will be used. As a result, in the span of five days we have not yet covered even the first lesson, which I thought had been planned so carefully. For one lesson and with the entire class, the weather was nice enough to go on a walk to collect some leaves for the Grade 2 "Air and Water" unit and to collect some soil samples for the Grade 3 "Soil" unit. The children seemed to enjoy this outing, although I was thinking as I walked along that if any Canadian board of education officials could see our route, they might have been somewhat horrified. There were no sidewalks for part of the way. Then we went into a grassy area not too far from a nearby river, where we had to watch for broken glass and other such non-scenic wonders. After a wise suggestion from Doogii, we decided to cross a field on our return trip to school. This worked well until we had to pass a pile of burning garbage on the right and an outhouse on the left. This made for some good conversation with the kids, especially one student who is fairly fluent in English and who can be a major motor mouth in informal situations.

Friday was a very long school day, from 8 a.m., and returning to the hotel after 10 p.m. It also seemed longer because an after-school meeting was called to discuss the progress of our apartments and a few other topics. This unexpected meeting was a tangible example

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of grasping cultural differences, namely that one cannot assume that anything planned is actually going to take place the way it has been intended. After the meeting ended, it was decided to order pizza for supper, thanks to the generosity of the director, which was a lovely idea. However, because our Curriculum Night programme was to start at 7 p.m. and with the pizza arriving at 6:45 p.m., it was not your basic relaxed meal. As the pizza was being consumed, it was found to contain a bolt from an errant piece of unknown machinery, which one of our teachers unfortunately and unwittingly bit into, because he thought it was an olive. Some olive!

After shoveling in a few pieces of pizza and drinking a can of pop to get me through the evening, I went upstairs to brush my teeth, where, in a school washroom I was initially unaware of being in full view of parents arriving at the auditorium. With teeth pearly white, I joined the seated crowd to await the principal's message to the parents. After this formal part of the evening, the parents went to their child's classroom. It was most impressive for me to see 16 of 19 parents, or their representatives, in attendance. In preparation for this event, I had written two letters to outline each grade's curriculum. Rather than standing, each adult opted to sit in the seat assigned to their child. I must say that they looked a little more than uncomfortable all folded up at these desks. This furniture is almost too small for the students, let alone to be accommodating adult occupants. The sight made me feel a little more comfortable because of seeing it as somewhat humorous. I wished I'd had a camera, but maybe picture-taking at this time would not have been a good idea. I spoke to my captive audience about a typical day in the classroom and about our curriculum, and then it was time for questions. Doogii did a marvelous job of translating and I tried to be very mindful not to ramble on too long with my answers, lest she forget what I had said. There were a few questions asked, but not anything negative as far as I could tell from the body language and tone of parental voices. My part of the evening was completed shortly after 9 p.m. and my next question-to-self was how we were going to get home. When descending to the school's front lobby, I learned that our reliable after-school driver and van were waiting for us. Despite this pending transportation it seemed that everyone except me wanted to chat about what had happened in their various classrooms during the evening. Since I was feeling a large dose of sensory overload, I went out to the van to join our driver Jack, who promptly fell asleep at the wheel. No, he was not driving at that time. Finally, at 10 p.m. the rest of the teachers wandered out and were standing at the door of the van, negotiating where to go out for drinks. All I wanted to do was get back to the hotel, and I guess that I somehow made my point of being a party-pooper, because everyone else ended up climbing into Frank's car

## Changes at School and the Hotel

instead of the van, to go out on the town. Oh, to be young again! I then had Jack and the van all to myself. Being exceedingly tired, I was very glad to arrive at the hotel where I was not obliged to try to carry on any sort of conversation.

Saturday, September 30

Denise knocked on my door in the morning to tell me that the time had changed, one hour back. It was fall after all, but who knew about this end-of-September time change? However, it's good that this happened on a weekend instead of a school day. After altering a few hotel and personal timepieces, I neglected to consider my home-for-the-weekend computer, which, on my part, caused some confusion later in the day. Actually, I never really knew during that day what was the actual time, but did it really matter? No.

Deciding that this was my day for curriculum planning, I asked the hotel front desk person to call a taxi for me. This worked well, but turned out to be a more costly trip to school than in the past. However, I arrived safely and without hassle, so I counted my blessings and went to work. Thankfully, the school's electrical power and internet were working, so I was able to accomplish a reasonable portion of what I'd set out to do. Later in the afternoon John, but not Christina, arrived. The internet connection in the computer lab then vanished, so I loaned him my machine to finish his work, while I puttered around with other things. Then came an epiphany, when, like a best before date, I knew it was past my time to leave the school. This was definitely the case when my brain would not allow me to find my flash drive. It put me almost in panic mode, sending me running from my classroom to the computer lab. Once there, it was found sitting comfortably in the USB port of the computer tower, just where I had left it after lending my computer to John. "Sheesh".

At departure time, John and I agreed to keep each other company for our return, which I reluctantly agreed would be by bus. However, since we now lived in two different hotels, when John left the bus at his stop, I still had a walk of about 25 minutes, after leaving the bus at the stop closest to my hotel. As I was walking along, I considered stopping for dinner, but it was near dusk, so I decided that it would be a rather unwise decision. Dinner was once again at the hotel, which is my go-to safe haven for solo dining. I had a fine evening of TV watching, along with a three-hour session of uploading photos for emailing. This took an unusually long time, because the wireless hotel connection kept disappearing on me, but I persevered and finally the task I'd set out to do was completed. While this was happening on the computer, there were a couple of good movies on TV, so it made the slow internet task much more bearable.

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Sunday, October 1

Today was my “play day”. After a phone conversation with Dan, who was in Hamilton to visit his dad and the rest of the family for the weekend, and also chatting with Ivan, I set off to have breakfast “out”. As I was on my way, and on the corner of a street close to the hotel, I saw an older gentleman, obviously a tourist, reading a map and something told me to ask if I could help him, so I did my best. He was actually trying to read the name of the street which was posted on the building that he was facing. It would appear that the name on the building’s wall and the name on the map did not match, which came as no surprise to me. He said that I was the first person, in his whole life, who had ever stopped to help him with directions! We had a bit of a chat, then he left, after I had hopefully pointed him toward his intended route. The California Restaurant was my breakfast destination, but by the time I arrived at around 11 a.m. they were disappointingly all out of waffles, so I had pancakes instead. From there, I found the beauty shop that Christina had previously recommended, and enjoyed a lovely manicure for about \$8. The banks are open on Sunday, so I was able to make a deposit. This Sunday opening is good to remember, with our salary still being paid in cash, and me being very anxious to get it deposited before the weekend. Banking done, I wandered into a few new areas of downtown and successfully found the place where it was suggested that I could find an additional flash drive. It had been arranged in the morning that I would meet Catherine at a French bakery at 3 p.m. for coffee, then she would take me across the street to get my hair cut. She told me about this place where she also goes, and where her hairstylist won a special award last year as “Stylist of the Year” for UB. Upon our arrival at the “Smile” hair salon, there was a note on the door which indicated that the salon had moved and the note included a very vague map, with all the wording written in Mongolian. Luckily, I had a few wits about me and was able to read the place name on the sign, which made it easier for Catherine to interpret the new location. After several shopping detours including three DVDs, purchased for about \$2 each, we found the current location of the salon. Catherine took me in and introduced me to the stylist who spoke no English, well almost no English except for, “Your hair, beautiful”. He was able to give me an appointment right away and by some hand motions we were able to communicate with each other about what I wanted done with my hair. Denise had joined us at the pastry shop, so she and Catherine waited and watched as my appointment progressed. I guess Catherine was a little nervous, because she told me later that she thought the stylist was going a little crazy with his hair thinning process. It turned out just fine and so far, seven hours later, I remain pleased with the results. The final telling will be when I wash it for the first time. It really

## Changes at School and the Hotel

needed to be cut, because I felt that I was going to lose my face somewhere in the mop of hair that was growing around it.

Returning to the hotel, I made arrangements with the front desk staff to begin my move to a larger room, which is an event that I have been assured will not happen again until our apartments are ready and heaven only knows when that will happen. I took my time to put things away in this larger room, because in less than a week Ivan will arrive and I wanted to give him space to store his belongings. Although the small room was cozy and had access to a wireless internet signal from who knows where, I am very happy to be back in a larger room with more storage. This accommodation is exactly above the one that I was in during the first of my many moves to different rooms at this hotel and it has a great view of the mountains.



My initial large hotel room on the left, was changed to a tiny, rather cramped room, but with some intermittent internet access.

...A new arrival to UB is in the air ...

## Chapter 13

# Ivan is Finally Here!

### October 2 to 6

Once again, this week seemed to slip by quickly with our school days broken into many segments: Language Arts; Math; Environmental Studies; ESL; Mongolian Language Class; recesses; lunch hour; gym, etc. Mongolian language classes finally began for Grade 3 students starting on Monday, although this does not mean a full teaching break without any students, because two Grade 2 students do not need ESL. These 40-minute ESL and Mongolian Language classes are held at the same time, with different teachers. With all but two of the students out in other classrooms, it means that I can devote more time to these more fluent English speakers, while attempting other tasks such as checking and marking homework. It continues to present a real challenge having to keep two grades on task at the same time, as well as to adapt to the diversity of their English language abilities. I think you've heard all that before, though. As always, Doogii is a tremendous support when it comes to picking up the pieces and filling in the blanks where needed.

The weather this week was cool in the mornings, but warmed up enough during the day that the children and teachers did not have to wear coats outside for recesses. However, on Friday, everything changed. I looked out the hotel window first thing in the morning and wondered why there were so many white papers littering the ground. Then I truly woke up and realized that what I was seeing was a dusting of snow. Even with that realization, it did not strike my still drowsy brain to take a winter coat to school in preparation for "yard guard" at recess.

This week, the children were running hot and cold in their listening skills, and all Doogii and I could do was to look at each other and roll our eyes. We can't seem to figure out what makes the difference in their varying abilities to focus on classroom activities. For their previous schooling experiences, they seem to have been reliant primarily on rote learning and not on doing activities that were generated to help them become independent and creative thinkers. It will take a lot of practice on their part, and patience on our part, in my stubborn attempt to try to swing them towards learning with understanding. Enough of the teacher talk!

On Monday evening, a group of us decided after school to be dropped off downtown rather than at our hotel, to have dinner together. After about two-and-a-half months here, I'm getting mighty tired of the food at the hotel, although it seems to be the most convenient and safest way of getting a meal! With much deliberation, we decided to dine "East Indian".

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It was a restaurant that some of the others had already tried, so we were assured of a good meal, and it was! The setting was very interesting, with a low table on a raised platform under a tent-like structure and with lots of large, brightly coloured lounging pillows around the edge. The setting for our “tent” was in a corner of the otherwise-ordinary-looking restaurant. After taking our shoes off, we entered our private little retreat. I’m not one for feeling too comfortable when seated on the floor, but I managed to sit, not cross legged, but by keeping my legs straight out in front of me, under the table. In this rather awkward position, instead of trying to lean over to eat, and almost doubling up in the process, I just filled my plate on the table and then lifted it up to my chin to enjoy the meal. Not too elegant, but it worked, with a minimum of mess on my part. It was getting up after dinner that was a challenge for me. Not only was I feeling abundantly full, but also my legs were quite stiff. Ah, to be young again!

When dinner was finished, everyone except me decided that it was time to find a travel agency to arrange October, or Christmas flights to take them home, or away on vacation. I was really tired at that point and just wanted to go back to the hotel. Catherine kindly and literally pointed me in a specific direction and tried to describe exactly where we were and where I was going. In my bewildered state, I just could not get the full picture of what she was conveying. Since it was dark, I wanted to get a precise picture of where I was heading on my own, and this image just wasn’t happening. What saved the day for me was that I kept walking with the group until they found the travel office, which ended up being closed. This gave everyone no choice, but to flag down a car to take us all “home”. As we stood on the side of the road trying to figure out which way we should be going, and it would appear that I was not the only directionally confused person, a van pulled up to offer us a ride. We piled in. As luck would have it, this van belonged to a travel group, and not only did they know where our hotel was located, but they also did not want to be paid once we were safely deposited at our front door. What a treat!

Friday finally arrived! Doogii went home right after our students left, because she was not feeling well, so this left me free to concentrate on getting next week’s lessons organized. I worked at a frantic pace until 5 p.m. when our driver, Jack, (as we’d been calling him for the sake of not getting both tongue and throat all mixed up, or Jadamba, as I recently found out was his actual Mongolian name), picked us up for the drive back to the hotel.

After dropping my heavy school bags at the hotel, I rushed off to purchase a few grocery items consisting of bread, Pepsi, hangers, etc. in preparation for Ivan’s arrival, and was also on a quest to find something to eat for supper. Initially I had felt the need to go to the bank,

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but was saved from that extra trip, because I was able to use my Mongolian Visa card in the grocery store and at the restaurant. My concern was not so much about the time it would take me to complete the tasks I had in mind, but it was about the fact that it now gets dark at about 7 p.m. and I didn't particularly wish to be out alone after dark. It was only about a fifteen-minute walk from the hotel to the store and the restaurant, but already at 5:45 on a Friday evening, I had to walk by two men in rather close proximity to each other, who had passed out on the sidewalk. Not a heartening sight! The weather had turned rather cold and I couldn't help but think, among other thoughts, that although these souls looked perfectly peaceful in their sleep, they were going to feel the chill in their bones sooner or later. At the store, one of the "regular" street kids was inside and presumably trying to warm up. The staff did not hustle him away as I expected, which impressed me. I bought an extra two buns and a bottle of orange juice to give him on my way out. My reward was a big smile. I wonder if he managed to keep the food for himself this time. He is the same lad I mentioned in a previous message, who had been part of the "Oliver Twist" scenario. I'm certain he is one of the children who live in the underground tunnels, as he is very dirty, but he does have a great smile.

Next door to the store was the restaurant where I ordered my food, then wolfed it down in such a hurry that later I had indigestion. The cause for this unease was that my table was facing the restaurant window and I could see that it was getting dark very quickly. The walk home was not as bad as I had expected, because I realized that in dusky twilight, people didn't seem to distinguish me from a native Mongolian until they got close, so I was not bothered by anyone. Maybe I'm paranoid, but being a former Girl Guide, my motto is "Be Prepared". There was only one inebriated person to step over on the way back, and who was one of the two whom I had passed on my way out. Feeling slightly more confident than I was expecting on this walk home, I was even daring enough to go into one of the little shops, when I saw that they had Pepsi, which is Ivan's favourite! It turns out that Pepsi is "Pepsi" in any language, so I had no difficulty asking the salesperson to take it off the shelf and dust it for me. This made me wonder if the dust was the result of Pepsi not being as popular a beverage in Mongolia as in North America, or if it was evidence of the creeping influence of the Gobi Desert into the city shops.

Back in my hotel room, I took a shower, then started lesson preparation. After about two and a half hours, I felt confident enough that this week's planning was adequate, and at that point, packed school things away to watch a bit of TV until it was time to go to the airport for Ivan's pickup. It had been carefully arranged that Jack would be my transport to

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the airport that night and that he would also check the arrival time of Ivan's MIAT flight.

On that same evening, a special trip had been arranged for the ASU staff to go out for dinner and then to a jazz club, but I chose to regretfully decline this invitation due to Ivan's arrival at 11:35 p.m. In addition, it had been my intention to complete as much lesson planning as possible in the evening hours, so I would be able to enjoy the entire weekend with him and not have to worry about school.

At 11:25 p.m., after not receiving a phone call from Jack, I went downstairs in great anticipation, only to be told by my least-favourite desk clerk that Jack had previously called the hotel to inform them that the plane would be arriving late, as in sometime after midnight! I asked the clerk as politely as possible if he thought it could be 2 a.m. or what time, and he said it might be 5 a.m. This was not a very helpful answer, so I was left walking away, mumbling to myself, and deciding that this particular clerk had just scored yet another strike as my "Least Favourite Hotel Staff Person". If he had called me when he first heard about the flight delay, I would probably have been able to get a few hours of sleep. As it was, I was up, dressed, and left wondering what I was going to do with myself from then until the wee hours of the morning. However, a phone call came to my room at 12:20 a.m. to say that I should come to the lobby in another hour, as the plane was now arriving, 2 1/4 hours late, at 1:40 a.m. Oh joy! MIAT was true to form, but at least it wasn't a 5 a.m. arrival!

It was exciting to see Ivan on closed-circuit TV as he walked off the plane. Then, even though I hadn't seen him face to face, at least I knew of his safe arrival. By the time he appeared at the gate with his baggage and with the 20-minute drive back to the hotel, it was about 3 a.m. Clearly, when finally deposited at the hotel, we were both quite wound up from our separate experiences of anticipation after our two and a half months apart. It was wonderful that we could now be together for about five months and that our future memories would be shared!

### Saturday, October 7

Fortunately, with bread, Pepsi, and leftover cheese in the fridge, it happened that a rather large mustachioed "mouse" seemed to have invaded the refrigerator at night, or what was left of the night after we went to bed. We had a terrible night of sleep, but it didn't matter. Ivan had found himself in heaven, not having to go outside for a smoke and a coffee as he does at home in Hamilton. Now, right outside our hotel room door is a couch, coffee table and ash tray just for him!.

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Having woken up earlier than Ivan, I decided to keep busy by going through some of the paperwork he had brought from home for my perusal. I had reset my alarm from 6:45 a.m. weekday time, to 10:45 a.m. weekend time, for that morning, but I'm sure he would have slept much later than that.

First thing in the morning, Ivan's initial sight of urban Mongolian life was when I unintentionally pointed out to him the lady, always in traditional dress, who sits at her post across the street and sells telephone calls. Unfortunately, it was her time for a bathroom break next to a bush in the park, in front of the hotel and in full view of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Although her traditional *deel* clothing

should have created a rather discreet cover for this act, it did not. I have now named her "Mrs. Double Full Moon". Every day, she sits faithfully at her sales location for 9 to 10 hours, so it's obvious that when she has to "go", the location will be wherever she can find it, discreet or not. It now gives me a greater appreciation for perhaps not choosing to sit down and relax on the grass near any bushes, should an occasion ever arise.

For our first big outing, we dropped off the laundry. It was certainly gratifying to have someone else to help me carry the bags and walk with me along the 20-minute route. With the laundry out of our hands, we went out for breakfast before taking Ivan on his first tour of a relatively small central area of UB in an attempt to show him where to find "everything". In Sukhbaatar Square there was an exhibition of some sort which we were happy to check out. It appeared to have been a demonstration of equipment, etc. by the army, and the police. Interpreting what was going on was impossible because, understandably, all signs were in

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Mongolian. As usual, we saw many spectators in traditional dress, and some gers that had been set up, so of course we had to step inside. For Ivan, to be less than a day in this country and already having access to see what a ger looks like inside was a real bonus!

After several hours, we collected the laundry and headed back to the hotel. I made the mistake of letting Ivan fall asleep, so I used the time to start my weekly message. It was dark when the phone rang, awakening Ivan. Kim was phoning to ask us if we wanted to go with them to the last evening of the Jazz Festival, which was partially sponsored by the Alberta Arts Council. The venue was not too far from our hotel. Ivan agreed. We had supper in our hotel dining room, and afterwards met the others in the lobby at 8 p.m. to head to the "White House Hotel" and the "Strings" nightclub. Andrew, one of our ASU teachers, was playing double bass with one of the participating musical groups at the nightclub. What made his group's performance unique is that he incorporated his talent to sing "höömii" (throat singing) into the jazz piece they were playing. It was amazing! What a marvelous way to end the day. Ivan was also able to meet several of the other ASU teachers and seemed to enjoy their company, as I know they enjoyed his.

### Sunday, October 08

Following another fitful night of attempting to sleep and Ivan getting up at 5 a.m. to make Turkish coffee, we made some phone calls home. It was wonderful, as usual, to hear everyone's voices. Phone cards continue to be a saving grace for our sojourn here. Breakfast this morning was served downstairs in the hotel. Ivan enjoyed it and even more so when he realized

that it was free. Catherine, Denise, Kim and Dave were all in the dining room with us, so we made our daily plans. Catherine, Ivan and I went to the school by taxi, with a detour to the laundry for Catherine. Ivan had a grand tour of the school building, and we were



## Ivan is Finally Here!

able to access the school roof for a better view of the surrounding area. After this tour, we went into the as-yet-unfinished-but-looking-promising apartments, and luckily a worker was there with a whole string of keys. With some arm waving, I was able to get my point across that we wanted to see the apartments on the fourth floor that are now locked. This is due to some furniture having already been moved in. If Ivan and I end up having one of these larger apartments, as promised, it should be quite comfortable! Included in the furniture so far is a bed, wardrobe, dressing table and stool, television, small fridge and stove, kitchen table and chairs, etc. We have been told that there is supposed to be an “official” apartment tour on Monday, or Tuesday of this week. The apartments look almost livable except for the lack of heat and hot water. After our tours we took the scenic route to make our way back to the city on foot. Jack unexpectedly drove by and picked us up, dropping us off in the downtown area to do more walking and to eventually find our way back to the hotel. This evening, a group of us will be meeting in the hotel lobby for our Thanksgiving dinner outing, sans turkey and/or pumpkin pie. I don’t think the idea of having turkey for dinner is well known in Mongolia. I’ve asked everyone I know in Canada to please have some extra turkey for me, preferably the dark meat, as well as a piece of pumpkin pie. I’m not sure where we are going this evening, but I know it will be another unique Mongolian experience. Turkey and pie will have to wait for another year.

... No kitchen is available for the arrival of the cook...

## Chapter 14

# The Chief Cook Arrives, Without a Kitchen

October 9 to 13

What a pleasure it was this week to have lunches made for me and not have to worry about getting groceries! Ivan was very happy to carry out these duties in conjunction with his daily explorations of the city while I was at work.

At school, I'm still in the process of trying to become somewhat more organized. There continues to be no heat or hot water, either at school, or in the unfinished apartments. On Tuesday after classes ended, the teaching staff trekked to the apartment building for a tour. It looks like Ivan and I will be residing in apartment 206, but it could be a while before our move takes place. This is the apartment where I stood, somewhat shell-shocked, in early August, surveying the damage done to the window in the bedroom, due to a fire that someone had set inside that room in order to provide some heat while they were working. Or maybe they'd actually be residing there too? It is also the room where there was a rather overwhelming toilet odor and this was definitely not of the "eau de toilette" variety. What a difference a couple of months have made, now there is furniture in place, the window almost fixed, painting completed, laminate floors laid, etc. I will reserve judgment about this possible new abode in anticipation of the heating being on and until I can truly determine what odor will accompany the otherwise pleasant décor.

Being transported back and forth each day to and from school in our own van, with a driver, continues to be a real relief! Jack is now beginning to speak a little English and also manages to smile every once in a while.

Our students are showing some progress in their comprehension for curriculum studies, as well as in English, although this is not always evident to us as their teachers. Doogii continues to be a real asset in our classroom by helping maintain discipline and translating when necessary.

We had our first school assembly on Friday, which required us to wear our coats due to the frigid temperatures in the auditorium. The purpose of this gathering was to hear speeches from Grade 6, 7, and 8 candidates who were running for school council offices. During these speeches, it was painfully evident that these young voices were not projecting much past the first rows of seats. Hopefully, there will soon be a sound system added to the school budget. Each grade was asked to select a class representative and, our class selected their two classmates by secret ballot. It was interesting that ten of our 19 students let their names stand for election, but there only needed to be a second ballot to select our representatives.

## The Chief Cook Arrives, Without a Kitchen

This exercise was a good learning process. The two girls who were elected looked quite pleased as they went on the stage when their names were called, and appeared not at all stage-struck. It's uncertain whether or not they will have much to do in their roles, but this experience could very well give them some exposure to the workings of student councils and who knows, one of them might run again in a student council office when they get to a higher grade! Or maybe even eventually for a government office? Who knows?

This particular Friday, we were expecting to receive the keys to our apartments, but it didn't happen. Fortunately, I have given up any effort to put my mind in a place where I'm optimistic enough to anticipate an upcoming event, especially when it comes to building completion. Oyuna's decision for another moving delay was because she knew that there is still too much to be done in the apartments. There are too many trades people going in and out, not only of the building itself, but also of each apartment. This would not create an ideal situation if we had been given our keys and were even thinking about starting to move our belongings. Doogii and I went to the building after school anyway and found "Key Man" who let us into Apartment 206. He must have thought I had a bit of a screw loose, because I got down on my hands and knees on the bedroom floor and sniffed around like a bloodhound. Since I had already warned Doogii that this was going to happen, she wasn't too surprised, although I really don't think she thought I would do it. Except for the unique odor in the hallways, possibly due to an errant welding torch, I couldn't detect any unpleasant smell in the apartment itself, and for that I was very thankful. The window that had previously been missing had been replaced, but the kitchen sink was nowhere to be seen, and the bathtub framework had just started, which was evidenced by the cigarette butt in the tub. The interesting thing to note was that the shower curtain was hanging. "Sigh." It will be a while, I'm sure, before the place is habitable and, in the meantime, I'm wisely not holding my breath.

On Friday evening a group of us went out for Indian food, which meant that Ivan was able to meet three more staff members. We definitely enjoyed the company of our dinner companions more than the food.

### Saturday, October 14

After having breakfast at the hotel, Ivan and I set out to do some errands which involved a tour of about six hours. Part of this time was spent going around in circles because "yours truly" didn't want to wait until the last minute to plan our December getaway to a warm climate. One of the main conveniences of UB is that the banks are open on Saturdays and, indeed, my bank seems to have an "Open 24 hours" sign. I've never tested this, but it is

## The Chief Cook Arrives, Without a Kitchen

definitely handy to know that banking hours are longer than at home! My bank was found without difficulty. When we finally stumbled across the Air Trans office, it was tricky to determine how to get the attention of a clerk without appearing to be Mr. and Mrs. Buttinsky. Ivan just sat down and let me do the talking. An opening finally came up, and upon speaking with the ticketing agent, we found that this office was only for air transport. So, on to Plan B, which is probably to book something online, unless some clever person can come up with a better suggestion. Along the way, we each bought a sweater and then stopped to have a sandwich and coffee before returning to the hotel. I was hoping to start volunteering at an orphanage from 4:00 to 5:30 p.m., but this did not happen.

A 6 p.m. dinner had been arranged for the teaching staff this evening at an ASU Board Member's home. Most of the teachers were in attendance at this gathering and it was a very comfortable and pleasant evening in a beautiful home. The food was excellent, plentiful, and homemade, except for the pizza that was delivered sometime during the evening. We had potato salad, chicken, green salad, buuz, which is the name of Mongolian steamed dumplings, and all sorts of munchies. Topping off the meal was a delicious cake.

Since this was also the home of Unukhishig, one of our students, I had some duties to perform, other than eating. Apparently she had told her classmates about this evening, so one of the other girls in our class arrived to see her teacher. We had a tour of Unukhishig bedroom (pink and white with a canopy bed), and I helped her with her homework. She's a sweetie and really tries hard. Both she and her brother serenaded us with piano solos, and she even beat Ivan at a game of checkers, although he said that there seemed to be a somewhat dubious move that she had made in order to win the game. At an appointed time, which was probably way past the time we should have departed, Unukhishig's father and mother drove us back to the hotel. We later learned that the father is Chairman of the Mongolian Information and Communications Technology Authority for the government, and the mother, a very attractive lady, is a former model and actress.

### Sunday, October 15

As usual, there was breakfast at the hotel, and this time, with Ivan making scrambled eggs. Then we headed to the "Third District" for shopping. This area is in the opposite direction to where we have usually done our shopping, but it had much more to offer in terms of clothing stores. Things don't seem to get going here on Sunday until about 11 a.m. and since we were a bit early, we found a bakery and had a coffee. I couldn't help but notice the sweets....YUM! Maybe next time.

## The Chief Cook Arrives, Without a Kitchen



It's intriguing about stores in this city that every one has different brands and styles of clothing, unlike North America where the malls seem to have all the same stores and clothing brands. The down-side of shopping in UB is that it is difficult to find apparel in my size. Ivan insists that I have lost weight and I tend to somewhat believe him, but all the clothes in the stores seem to be directed to "Barbie-sized" bodies. For men, the sizes are just about the opposite: L, XL, XXL, XXXL, etc. I can't figure this out. We finally found some running shoes for me, which I'll use at school once the speed bumps, as we have named them, are ironed out of the gym floor. In addition, I managed to purchase two more sweaters, a hat, and some socks, the latter for the equivalent of about 50 cents from a street vendor. The purchase of winter boots will be left for another time, and I also want to determine whether my Canadian winter coat will be sufficient to keep me warm enough throughout the Mongolian winter. After four hours of shopping and walking, we made our way back to the hotel where I spent a good three hours preparing lessons for next week.

Our communal dinner was in the hotel dining room, with Ivan and me eating from the Mongolian menu and the other teachers opting for the pizzas and pasta they had ordered for delivery. There were eight of us, including a new teacher, Tara, who arrived on Friday evening from Canada. She will be taking over the Grade 4 class that Kim had been teaching, as a split class with Grade 5. It had included 26 kids, which was more than a handful! Tara seems a little apprehensive about knowing what to expect in this new teaching environment and in a totally different country, but I'm sure with the support of the rest of us, she'll do just fine.

... Future plans are in the works ...

## Visa Extension and Trip Preparation

### October 16 to 21

It was just another week: still at the hotel; still without heat in the school. Classrooms are now rather cozy due to the addition of new electric heaters, but the hallways, washrooms, computer labs, cafeteria, and other functional and still non-functional areas of the school are another story. The gym floor continues to develop speed bumps, because installers have not realized that there needs to be breathing room around the edges of the boards to allow for expansion and contraction. Oh well.

Many other irritations arise due to the "growing pains" of our new school. At a staff meeting on Wednesday to discuss school discipline, we were able to establish some ground rules for recess and hallway behaviour for our students. The difference in cultural expectations and norms between teachers, TAs, and students is being made clearer as time passes. Our trusty TAs are gently guiding us along and helping us to understand our young "charges". What teachers perceive as noisy and disruptive behaviour, assistants and children see as the "norm" or, in some cases, better behaviour than in traditional Mongolian schools. "Sigh." This is truly a monumental learning experience for all involved in this new institution and it includes students, parents, teaching assistants, teachers, administrators, and support staff.

Thursday saw a full staff meeting planned, but I was spared the agony because the school's Administrative Assistant, Hishge, took Ivan and me to the Immigration Office to officially register Ivan and to extend his visa. After sailing back and forth between wickets, we found that he had to obtain another visa before obtaining an extension. At no point did I really even try to pretend to understand what was happening. We were told to return on October 24 to complete the process and since this would not be possible, Hishge said that she would do it for us. Thank heavens for Hishge!

The following week was our fall school break, for which I had been trying to convince Ivan to join a few of the teachers, who had made some inquiries about trips to the countryside. My reluctance to accompany him was due to the prospect of prearranged accommodation on a "communal" basis, which meant staying in gers with nomadic families and their various animals. I admit that this is one adventure I was not willing to take advantage of. So, on one of Ivan's daily trips to the city centre, he stopped at a tour company to investigate what they might be able to offer. He then brought that information to the hotel for me to peruse. This seems to be a rather roundabout way of explaining that, rather than diddling around trying to coordinate travel plans with others, Ivan, in his wisdom, rationalized that it would

## Visa Extension and Trip Preparation

cost the same amount of money for him to go alone on any trip he might choose, as it would be for us to go somewhere together. Since I am a rather practical person, I suggested that on our return to the hotel, after leaving the Immigration Office to collect Ivan's documents that Hishge had arranged, we could stop at the tour company he had previously visited. This meant that I could explain in person, my comfort level for camping, which, on a scale of 1 to 10, is minus five. Then we could talk about what kind of adventure they could plan for us. After some discussion with the travel agent, it was decided that with a driver and a guide we would go on a five-day trip to the Mongolian "wilds" from Sunday morning to Thursday evening. With fear and trepidation and wondering if I had made a wise decision, we left the office and returned to the hotel.

Friday began as a good day until I made the grave mistake of taking a peek at the apartments after school. Our proposed apartment now had a kitchen sink, but without taps. The telephone, internet and television cable outlets were in chaos, with the wires sticking out, in an obvious waiting mode for something to connect. There was no heating or hot water and the place was very dusty and dirty. The response from the apartment manager when I asked about the estimated completion time was "Maybe next Thursday...". At this point, I turned rather abruptly and left the building. When arriving at the hotel that evening, after having a rather abbreviated "celebration" of October staff birthdays at school, as well as taking a detour to the bank to deposit my pay, it was 7 p.m. I was so happy to see Ivan and to be able to unload my woes to him. What a marvelous job he is doing to keep me on an even keel and help me put things into perspective!

Saturday was a big Central Market shopping day! Realizing that we would be out in the cold for 5 days on our upcoming trip, Ivan and I knew that there were many things we needed to purchase: long johns; warm boots; warm mittens; a hat for Ivan; and some gifts in the event that we could meet a nomadic family along the way. Note to self: Saturday is NOT a good day to visit the market. It is very crowded, and also when the pickpockets are at their "best?" These young men usually work in groups of two or three and can be quite effective at relieving one of one's money or any other personal effects that might be "available". At a particular point in our shopping venture, Ivan and I were inching our way through a crowded and narrow area, with me in the lead. As I emerged from the crowd, I turned around and couldn't see Ivan anywhere. Just as I was about to panic, out he stepped. It turned out that he had been the target of a pickpocket-in-training who failed and whom Ivan had squarely punched in the snout after he felt a hand that was not his own, on his pocket for longer than seemed necessary. He was ready to go after the young man, but some older Mongolian men

## Visa Extension and Trip Preparation

were shouting in Ivan's defence and the foiled thief made a hasty exit. Ivan said that he thought that the men who helped him were rather embarrassed by the incident. With that little episode over, we continued our shopping and it left me wondering why I had not been targeted instead of Ivan. Later I learned that the perception seems to be that men carry all the money. In this case, it was entirely correct, and we thank heavens for Ivan's very acute powers of observation. In fact, he was laughing after the fact because he said that the pocket chosen to be picked was one for which he always had difficulty operating the zipper. After a very successful shopping trip we were pleased on the way back to get a private car for transportation, and one that did not ask for more money than the trip was worth.

Photos included this week are courtesy of Ivan, who finally received official permission from me to take our digital camera on his Friday jaunt around the city.



Street scenes: older part of the city, and young musicians on their way to or from a practice



Street sculptures depicting Mongolian life: and, note the Canadian flag?

Our evening was spent packing to prepare for our Sunday morning pickup.

... What are we getting ourselves into? ...

## Chapter 16

# A Trip to the Countryside

October 22 to 26

At precisely 10 a.m. on Sunday morning, a lovely young lady walked into the lobby of the Voyage Hotel and I instantly knew who she was. Her name was Oyunka and she would be our guide/interpreter for the next five days. One of my minor apprehensions about this upcoming trip was immediately dispelled with the confirmation that another woman would accompany us on this adventure. Waiting outside in his Mitsubishi four-wheel drive jeep was our driver, Batra, whose English was somewhat nonexistent, but who later proved to be an excellent, skilled driver as well as an incredible navigator. No GPS was needed for this trip.

With a stop for gas and a requisite pause for good luck, which included a three-time-clockwise trip on foot around an "ovoo" which is a shamanistic pile of stones decorated with blue silk scarves, we were on our way. Though it appeared we were not too far from the confines of the city, Batra suddenly veered off the road to the left. I thought he was just taking a detour to another paved highway, but this was not the case, and it was probably another 750 kilometres before we saw pavement again. This "road less travelled" seemed to me not much more than a lane-way with tire tracks which, every so often, strayed off in different directions at appointed locations. It had recently snowed and was quite chilly during the first part of our journey in a southerly direction, where our route took us over some snow-white terrain. Suddenly our vehicle slid off the track. When this unexpectedly occurred, Ivan and I simultaneously thought it was going to roll onto its side, but providentially this otherwise-calamity did not materialize. "Whew." Our route did not have much traffic, needless to say, but every once in a while, we passed a car travelling in the opposite direction. At about 12:30 p.m. we stopped for a picnic lunch in the snow. As our route took us farther south, the snow gradually disappeared. Snow or no snow, the landscape was constantly changing. Along today's route we were never far away from rolling mountains, where we were treated to glimpses of many birds: mostly hawks, and vultures, along with some eagles. As well, we passed flocks of sheep and goats that were wandering over the unfenced landscape. At one point, we spied a fox sneaking out of sight, trying not to be detected. Two hours of after-lunch driving found us in the countryside, where the snow had completely disappeared and the weather was noticeably warmer. This turned out to be a positive weather change, especially when our vehicle suddenly hit something, and with a bang, we found ourselves with a flat tire. With this warmer temperature, Batra was able to change the tire in no time, and we were extremely relieved to hear that there was one more spare tire in the back of his vehicle.

## A Trip to the Countryside

It is to be noted that there were no “rest stops” or repair centres anywhere near our remote location! At this unexpected tire-change stop, it felt amazing to step out of the car and enjoy our first whiff, but not our last, of sage. I’ve never experienced this before in the wild, and it was quite delightful: almost making me want to stop more often. As it was, Ivan was getting a little miffed when I was asking to stop to take a picture of every bird that came within my range of vision. Batra and Oyunka were very accommodating in this regard and as a result, I ended up with a more than adequate number of bird photos which, of course, did not do justice to the incredible real-life sights we were enjoying. On this first day, we continued to motor as far south as the northernmost reaches of the Gobi Desert. This area seemed to me rather unremarkable due to the sand being quite wet and not looking at all as I would have pictured a desert-like landscape.



Snow roads only, and a picnic lunch

In the early evening, after many hours of driving, Batra pulled off the track and onto a field near some rocky hills, which we later found out were named Zorgol Khairan. Since it is bad luck to say the name of a mountain while on site, it was only after our departure the next day that Oyunka would tell us the name of the place, where we’d just stayed the night. Before deciding on this as an acceptable overnight stop, Oyunka asked if this was an acceptable location for camping. Actually, and to be honest, the outdoors is not my ideal for an overnight sleep, because I do not, and never have, liked roughing it. So what could I say? Looking on the positive side, it was most evidently a beautiful, scenic location with many very interesting rock formations. Our supper in this nippy environment consisted of Mongolian-style spaghetti, which was cooked by Oyunka, over a propane stove beside the jeep. At 7 p.m. with darkness descending very quickly, Batra manipulated the seats of the

## A Trip to the Countryside

jeep into an almost flat position that turned out to be a little less than comfortable for Ivan and I, as our sleeping arrangements. Batra had also prepared sleeping bags for each of us, with blankets underneath and on top. Ivan and I tucked ourselves into the vehicle for the night, while Batra and Oyunka used a small tent for their sleeping quarters. However, before "jeeping down" for the night and much to the amusement of everyone except myself, my determination was that, darkness or not, I must take my daily pills, as well as brush and floss my teeth. This was quite a challenge in the dark and cold, but I managed!



First night for jeep sleeping

Once in our "jeep accommodation" Ivan and I proceeded to make ourselves as sleep-ready as possible and for me, this process was almost impossible. Preparing an optimal comfort zone for Ivan was to methodically verbalize his routine: getting into his sleeping bag; zipping it up; and, finding a comfortable position. Despite my difficulty with this sleeping arrangement and for some unknown reason, the situation seemed quite funny, which made us both begin to laugh rather loudly. The very best part of the night was that we could see millions of stars, some shooting stars, and one that I think must have exploded because it lit up the cloudless sky like lightning! Maybe I slept for a short while early on, but then woke up and couldn't

## A Trip to the Countryside

doze off again. That's when I began planning in my head what song I could sing if, along the way, we happened to visit a nomadic family and if a request was made for visitors to sing a song, as I've heard is often the case. After going through my limited repertoire of songs, I realized that not one was etched in my mind for which I knew all the words, except perhaps "Amazing Grace". How this rendering would be accepted in the middle of these wild steppes by a family who had no religion or followed Buddhist or shamanistic religious practices was not certain. During this thought process, and after glancing out the window, all I could see was white, so I reasoned that it had snowed during my brief snooze. However, soon enough I realized the possibility that instead of snow outside our vehicle, there was heavy ice build-up inside the windows. The next best part of the night was in the early morning, watching the sun rise over the horizon and studying the window ice melting, which made it obvious that there had been no overnight snow after all. Despite my nighttime activity and angst, I had survived and vowed that I could not do it again, so we would surely have to make other arrangements for night two?

After a chilly breakfast, prepared by Oyunka, we set off on our cross-country trek. Like yesterday, the landscape was constantly changing as we weaved our way between the mountains. Another stop was made today at a Buddhist stupa in order for Oyunka and Batra to pay their respects. Then we continued our expedition in search of a small village that might, possibly, have Pepsi to sell to my husband. We were somewhat successful in this quest, although the quality of Pepsi found in the second village was not up to Ivan's standards. Later, a man in traditional clothing who was riding his horse waved at us as we passed. Batra stopped his vehicle, and "we" had a "chat" that ended with each of us having a short horseback ride and taking a few pictures. This was all for the exchange of a few cigarettes, which was neither expected nor necessary, but as our new friend left us, we could see that he was very pleased.



## A Trip to the Countryside



Something I have not mentioned to this point on our journey is the toilet facilities en route, and this is because there were none. For everyone but me, there were many available sites, but nothing that met my privacy standards! I had to do a lot of planning ahead and look out the window for small hills, deep ditches, or large rocks that were close to our

tracks. I couldn't bring myself to try the Mongolian way of wrapping my coat around my waist and "doing my duty" in the middle of a flat backdrop. However, this inconvenience on my part proved to be more of an amusement to everyone else than a problem to me, especially after I developed an eye for an advantageous spot to find some "relief".

On this second day, we came across a herd of camels and stopped to take pictures. The camels, unlike the sheep, goats, and horses, stood their ground and watched with interest as we approached them on foot. I had visions of a conversation between two of these: "Oh Gertrude, we have guests, do you think we have any tea or goodies to offer them?" Ivan managed to get within close proximity to one of these two-humped wonders, but he stepped back rather briskly when realizing that he might end up being the target of some camel spit. "Never mind the tea, Gertrude."

Drinking water was on the day's list of needs, and when we found a village and the person in charge of the well, we had to wait, along with some thirsty cows. Once the key person returned with his key and opened the door, we received our water and were on our way again.



## A Trip to the Countryside

For this night's sleeping arrangement, I had been REALLY hoping for a venue other than another camping-in-a-jeep adventure. For whatever reason, this did not happen and I just resigned myself to the fact that it would probably be another uncomfortable, sleepless night for me. Ivan, on the other hand, was quite delighted and ended up sleeping very well. This location was called Bajan Ondor! The best part of the evening was a spectacular sunset, but it was VERY cold, probably about minus 20 degrees Celsius, and also very windy throughout the night. It was so windy that the jeep was actually rocking back and forth, but not enough to put me to sleep. In my stupor of sleeplessness, I was constantly sitting up to check if Batra and Oyunka's tent had blown away. Again, the windows of the jeep were frosted with ice. I couldn't see the outside landscape very well, so I spent a good part of the night trying to think of what Ivan and I could do if our driver and guide blew away, with the keys to the vehicle. Fortunately, this was not the case, as we discovered when the morning finally arrived. Needless to say, this was another very long and sleepless night for me. A very chilly breakfast was consumed, with three of us at a time, sitting in the two-person tent trying to keep warm. It was not the breakfast that was chilly, it was us. I was happy to get back in the car once again, with the heater on, and eventually to feel warm again. Oh yes, I managed to brush and floss my teeth again before going to sleep, but this time I prepared my gear before it got dark, so this dental process was not as big an issue, as it had been the previous night.

The stops on this day included my intermingling with a herd of yaks, that seemed even less interested in my presence than were the previous day's camels. They didn't even appear to be interested in whether or not they could offer any kind of hospitality as I approached, while they continued to munch on the brown grass that was at their disposal.

Surprisingly, we ended up on a smooth piece of paved road today as we continued to head in a westerly direction towards our next nightly stop of Khujirt where Oyunka was born, and is a popular location of hot springs and spas. We found the last room in a hotel for about \$30 US per night and insisted that our trusty guide and driver should share our accommodation with us. This "suite" consisted of a bedroom, a living room, a hallway, and a cavernous, but not fully functional bathroom. We were hoping to be able to have showers, because we had not washed in about two days, except for me and my teeth. However, the bathtub in our room was not connected to the water supply. After some investigation, Oyunka found that we could have showers downstairs after supper, for a price of about \$1. Showers during the day were reserved for "medicinal purposes" only. Our supper at the only place in town that served a meal, was filling and at a total cost of approximately \$7. With supper over, Oyunka and I then made our way down to the shower area. My concern was once again my privacy, and

## A Trip to the Countryside

this facility seemed to fit the bill, with private shower stalls. However, as I was just about to disrobe, a man appeared unexpectedly and startled me, said, “Ooohhh, hhheeellloo”. I’m not sure what he was doing, but he finally left and I was able to shower in the nice and hot shower stall. It really felt good. For sleeping arrangements, the single beds were OK, but not as uncomfortable as the jeep had been. The room was warm, almost too warm, and I was able to sleep a little better. Ivan said the next morning that his previous night’s sleep in the jeep had been a better one. Our travelling companions, who had slept in a pseudo-pull-out couch in the living room area, dragged the boxes of food and dishes from the jeep up to the room in the morning. We were able to enjoy a much warmer and more comfortable breakfast than the previous morning.

Shortly after the start of this day’s journey, our first stop was just on the edge of town to take pictures of some ancient fifth century burial circles, marked by jagged stones. Then after another very short drive, and with Batra attempting to propel his jeep up a rather steep and slippery hill, he gave up. We got out and walked the rest of the way. It was tough going, but I persevered and it was worth the effort. The view from the hilltop was rather marvelous, and afforded a much better view of the burial circles and of the town. On the summit was a large statue of a stag, appropriately “dressed” in the blue silk scarves that many people leave, to pay their respects at sacred Mongolian sites. As we looked back at where Batra had moved the jeep, we could see him seated on the grass at the bottom of the hill, alongside a yak herder who was, as we learned later, taking his herd to UB for sale. This would be about a five-day journey on horseback. Apparently yak meat is cheaper than mutton, because it has less fat and Mongolians seem to value their meat by the fat content. After sliding down the hill to rejoin Batra and his transport, we embarked once again on our journey, with the yak herders off on the distant right of our view, in that vast landscape.

It was our good fortune on this particular day that Batra knew of a family, who lived in a ger and that we would be able to pay them a visit. In preparation for this occasion, I felt a song coming on. As we arrived, the family’s belongings were in a bit of disarray, because they were in the process of moving their three gers to a “winter location” about five kilometres away. Wife and father were home, and we were warmly welcomed inside. As is the custom, a bowl of airag, which is fermented mare’s milk, was passed around. A pot of bread, large cookies, and apples was uncovered and offered to us. Since it is bad manners to refuse this hospitality, Ivan had to put the bowl of airag to his lips, but did not drink any. I tried several sips and it was actually quite good, with an interesting flavour, rather like sour yoghurt.

## A Trip to the Countryside



We were also offered home-made cream/butter to spread on the bread. This was a great treat for Ivan, as a reminder of food he had eaten in his early years growing up in Croatia. During our visit, several other men appeared, one of whom was the woman's husband, and they joined us, consuming very liberal gulps of airag in the course of preparing

to dismantle the ger. One of the traditionally-dressed men appeared to be very hung-over, probably from a previous night's imbibing. When the time came to share another round of airag, he perked right up and joined the conversation and the drinking. At an appointed moment, everyone went outside and I was able to stand at a distance to snap pictures one after the other, in an attempt to capture the steps for taking apart a ger. From start to finish, it was about a 20-minute procedure with six people working together, including our hung-over friend who ended up to be a "holder of things" rather than a "dismantler" or "carrier". This worked well, until it came time to load the various parts onto the truck, and in his uncoordinated state, the ger door fell on him. Not to worry though, as he suffered no obvious ill effects from this mishap. At the end of this take-down process, all their belongings were left sitting inside the circle that used to be the floor of a nomadic home, and what an efficient home it is. We were asked if we would like to travel with them to watch the re-construction, but we declined, not knowing how long this process would take, especially considering their frequent airag breaks. Our hosts graciously allowed me to take many pictures, both inside and outside their "mobile home", and of the moving process too. From the inside photos, our son, Dan, who was working on a Mechanical Engineering project involving the designing of an efficient and cost-effective heating and cooking stove for cold climates, was about to receive some photos of a prime example for his study. These included photos of the family's heating and cooking stove that uses animal dung as their free fuel.

## A Trip to the Countryside



Before outside dismantling...



...and now ready to move all belongings onto trucks!

Saying our farewells to this family, we headed off but stopped soon after, to see if a small monastery was open for viewing, but it was not. However, their “facilities” were “open” in the most literal sense of the word, so I once again had the dubious privilege of using a “long drop”.

## A Trip to the Countryside

My biggest fear with these is that when they are used, they will cause me to lose items from my pockets into the deep unknown, but again I was able to come away with everything intact. After leaving the monastery, we stopped to have lunch beside a lovely, little river. Since Ivan had enjoyed the homemade butter/cream so much, our nomadic hostess had presented him with a package before we left, and he was again able to taste this very rich spread. Batra and Oyunka found some small piles of snow and proceeded to have a snowball fight. For our lunch stops, when finding the best location to sit, we had to navigate our way gingerly through the various animal deposits. These were mainly from sheep and goats and were rather obvious and easy to detour around.

When this pleasant lunch stop was over, we headed to Kharkhorin, which was the ancient capital of Mongolia in 1220 AD. Although there are ruins of the city at this location, they are, according to Oyunka, rather unremarkable. Instead, we went to visit Erdene Zuu Khiid, the first Buddhist monastery in Mongolia. The original buildings were destroyed by invading Manchus in 1388, and various attempts have been made since that time to restore them. Many of the statues, masks, and scroll paintings were able to be saved from these various purges. As a result we were able to view some rather remarkable artifacts.

This night's accommodation was located very close to the temple. Since the ger camp, which is part of the hotel complex, was closed for the season, our rooms were located in the newer-looking hotel building. These comfortable rooms had very jazzy shower stalls with many shower heads, which proved to be nice to look at but non-functional. Despite no hot water "on tap", literally, Ivan decided to try his luck with the shower anyway. He came away uninjured after just about knocking the whole stall over when experiencing a jolt of icy water from the multi-shower heads. After the fact, it was discovered that the stall had not been properly attached to the walls or the floor. However, it was otherwise, a cozy and comfortable night.

The next day's breakfast was enjoyed in the warmth of Batra and Oyunka's room, after which we set off for our last day's adventure. Soon after our start, I requested a stop when we came across a flock of vultures quite intent on scavenging something, and rather oblivious to my camera-in-hand approach. I don't think they would have shared their meal with me though, and I certainly wasn't interested. They are ugly birds to look at, but they have a very comical way of bouncing clumsily along the ground when not in flight.

As we were making our way back to UB, we eventually came to the "main", "paved" highway, which seemed to have a number of dangerous potholes. Batra again chose to drive off-road and along a track that ran parallel to this so-called highway. I wasn't sure what was

## A Trip to the Countryside

worse, the potholed road, or the bumpy track. Along this route, there was an expanse of sand dunes, which stretched for about 80 kilometres and was not part of the Gobi Desert. We stopped there to hike up some of the soft, fine dunes. It was hard slogging but again, an interesting view at the top made the exertion more than worthwhile. Returning to the jeep, Batra had some difficulty reverting his vehicle to Terra firma, but he managed. We were again on our way with a couple of last-stops, one for lunch and another for a potty break for me. The former was at a restaurant where we had a nice meal and when I ordered water to drink, it came in a 1.5 litre bottle. This was what necessitated the second pause on my behalf before returning to the city. Batra made three attempts to find a suitable "private" place for me, but finally I was satisfied with a nice deep ditch and quite relieved, literally and figuratively, that I had insisted on this particular location. As we approached UB, the usual heavy traffic began. Before returning to our hotel our route took us to the tourist agency, presumably to let them know how we had fared and how our driver and guide had treated us. With these formalities completed, we were escorted to our hotel where sad and fond farewells were given to Batra and Oyunka. They had done an excellent job catering to the quirks of their Canadian/Croatian clients.

It had been a very memorable trip that tested me in many ways, well beyond my comfort limits. I'm not sure I could do it again, although I'm very happy that I listen to Ivan's convincing that this trip could work for us both. We were privileged to share this unforgettable memory with two very capable and personable Mongolian citizens.

... The saga of waiting for our completed apartments continues ...

## Two Weeks for the Price of One!

October 27 to November 12

Upon presenting myself to the hotel reception on our return from the trip, the first question I asked was whether any of the ASU teaching staff had moved to the apartments during our absence. With a negative answer echoing in my ears, I still did not believe that the on-again, off-again saga of our impending move was still in progress. I took some measure of comfort in believing that maybe my question had been misunderstood or if it had not been noticed that their longest-term guests had already left the building. However, I soon found out that the answer I was given was correct.

After a good night of sleep in a familiar bed, Ivan and I woke up the next morning and decided to head to school to see what was or was not happening with the apartments. In the school parking lot, we were met by Frank, who said that everything was ready and that he was moving the next day. Upon careful inspection of our apartment-to-be, we realized that this was not going to be a wise action for us to take anytime soon. What we found in our hoped-for abode was an inconvenient leak underneath the kitchen sink, a hole on the side of the bathtub, a questionable quality and quantity of running water, no heat, and several other major and minor inconveniences.

Despite warnings, several of the staff decided to make their respective moves on Saturday. Imagining that things might have changed from the previous day, we joined them in a convoy of two taxis and many suitcases and bags of the others' belongings, but minus our possessions. As it turned out, there was no water available in the building, so that was the end of the moving idea. The group of us who had convoyed out to the site then had a rather serious meeting with Oyuna. At the end of this meeting, Oyuna opted to give each of us 100,000 tugrik, about \$100 Canadian, which we could use to purchase the still needed apartment items. All the others decided to head to the Central Market to spend their money, but Ivan and I decided not to participate. The impromptu shopping trip and the market destination just didn't feel right to me, for whatever reason. Kim, Dave, and Tara ended up hauling all their paraphernalia back to the hotel before setting out again. Ivan and I went shopping, after all, but only for bed linen. We were told before leaving Canada that the bed provided in our apartment would be a double size, but the Mongolian and North American bed sizes ended up being very, very different! For example, what would be considered a Mongolian double-sized bed is the equivalent of what we know as a king-sized bed. Our double bed sheets, purchased in Canada and transported halfway across the world, were no longer of any

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use to us. Thankfully, when looking ahead at home to make this bedding purchase, I realized that the sheets were not going to be lugged home again, so I had not blown the budget to make this purchase. Thank goodness for Value Village and a good washing at home before they were packed. Also, at the end of this day, I was certainly glad that we had not been so hopeful about moving and were therefore spared the inconvenience and frustration, as had the others, of returning all our belongings to the hotel. What a shemozzle.

Late Sunday afternoon, Tara, Denise, Kim and I decided to go for some sort of spa treatment, so we walked around the corner and up the street to the Baigal Spa, which is owned by the wife of one of our school board members. After much deliberation and translation, Tara, Kim, and I decided to try the Hawaiian hot stone massage. Denise declined, and instead she chose to wander around and wait until we emerged from our treatments, and as it turned out, with varying degrees of pain on our faces. Before the treatment began, I was in the bathroom trying to get the spa toilet to work. It was a fancy loo with a heated seat, water spray, etc., but it only worked if it was connected and if you could read the language written in the instructions. In addition, toilet paper was nowhere to be found in this rather compact bathroom area. While I was having my bathroom adventure, Tara and Kim were given the choice of what type of treatment they wished to have: light; medium; or meat grinder. Apparently, with me missing out on the options, I ended up with the last choice and it was quite reminiscent of my Taiwan massages in the summer of 2004. That is, except for the fact that the one I chose included hot stones, which were at times a little too hot. "Oh, the pain!" For some reason, I was not sore, burned, or whatever the next day and seemed quite relaxed, possibly due to the deep concentration that I had to exert during my spa endurance test. I emerged later than the other two, probably due to the more severe beating that I had received. Nevertheless, whatever happened during this treatment seemed to work to help me relax. I think that I'd go again, but would opt for a lighter treatment. The cost of each of our 1 3/4-hour spa treatments ended up around \$25, and it is thought that maybe we received a special discount?

Monday was a Professional Activity Day, with part of our morning spent in separate groups of teaching assistants and teachers. Afterwards, we all met to discuss cross-cultural issues. More than one person verbalized that this was something that should have been discussed much earlier in our teaching year. These group sessions were very interesting and helpful to us all. In the afternoon, I stayed at school to work on lesson planning, since I had not accomplished anything along these lines during our countryside visit. It happened that I was rather oblivious to time and space during this afternoon, because it was not until it was

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too late when I realized that everyone else had left the building. This was not an issue in itself, but it was a bit of a concern. I was then forced to take the bus back to the city on my own, with my computer. It was something I was not enjoying, not only for the sake of the computer being a little on the heavy side, but also because of the safety issue of travelling on the bus alone. My concerns proved to be unfounded after I arrived downtown without incident and with my wits and belongings intact. For this, I am truly thankful.

After jumping off the bus downtown, I decided to walk back to the hotel. The next day, October 31, was Halloween and I had been putting off the idea of wearing some sort of costume to school, even though it had been announced before the break that this would be a dress-up day with costume judging. You may probably imagine that there are not many Halloween items to be purchased in UB stores, and I was personally discovering this. During my walk, I was frantically trying to think about how I could improvise some kind of costume and decided that if I went to the Good Price store along my route, some creative idea might jump out at me. OK, so it didn't jump out at me, but I managed to figure out how to dress up as a Christmas tree, complete with a Christmas tablecloth draped over me, a Piñata-like star on my head, a light bulb necklace, and some green ribbon on my glasses. On the 31st and after my costume was put together, it was not my good fortune to actually confront myself in a mirror to see how I looked. However, one of the bright little lights in our classroom said that she wasn't sure, but she thought I looked like a Christmas tree. At that point I could have kissed her, but I didn't. My star kept slipping off, and the plastic table cloth was unnecessarily warm with the school's heat AND hot water being finally turned on during our time away. As a result of my discomfort, by the time the costume judging took place, I had gradually slipped away to remove everything "Christmassy" except for the green ribbon on my glasses. Our students were quite disappointed that I didn't show up on stage with the rest of the dressed-up teachers and TAs, even though I was missing about 99% of my costume. Hopefully they will forgive me before the year is over. Unfortunately, Doogii's religious beliefs prohibited her from participating fully in Hallowe'en, so we didn't have a back-up, costumed teacher to take part in the judging. I was quite surprised at the costumes that the children wore, but perhaps with parents' business or vacation trips outside the country, they were able to purchase these in China or elsewhere. There were only a couple of our students who didn't have any special garb. They didn't seem to mind too much, because they were still able to participate in the costume parade and receive the Hallowe'en candy along with everyone else. At the end of the day, the assembly was a lot of fun, although the need for an auditorium sound system was very evident! It suited me very well that Wednesday brought a return to

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normal school routines.

The time and date decision for making the move from hotel to apartment had been left to Ivan. He used Wednesday to find his way to the apartment building and was able to do some cleaning while I was teaching. It will be wonderful to make this long-awaited transition and to have our living quarters and the school in such close proximity! How fortunate I am to be living with and married to such a loving, reliable, willing, and multi-talented husband! With cleaning accomplished, it was resolved that on Wednesday evening we would pack our belongings and take them to the hotel's front lobby. This was completed for Jack to include in his daily taxi trip to school the next morning. It meant that on Thursday morning it was not only the teachers for this weekday pickup, but also Ivan, along with all our belongings. With the move successfully accomplished and while I was working that day, Ivan was able to undertake more cleaning. It was with trepidation and excitement that I took a surveillance walk to the apartment at noon. I was pleasantly surprised at how clean Ivan had managed to get our new living quarters, especially the floors! After school that evening, I rushed "home" and managed to completely unpack and put away, a year's worth of clothing and personal items! What an incredible feeling it was to finally be in an apartment of our own and out of the hotel! In addition, we now have our own landline and phone number!

On Friday morning, because I no longer had to depend on the time needed for our daily taxi, I was able to sleep in for an extra 45 minutes, with only a short walk of about three minutes from our apartment building to our classroom. This proximity has also given me the luxury of coming home for lunch each day. Friday evening was spent at Kim and Dave's apartment, directly above ours, where we eventually played the original Trivial Pursuit game. I gave up around 1 a.m. and came home, even though when I left, our team had been winning the game. Apparently there will be a rematch.

For Saturday, we decided that it was our time to make the Black Market run with the money Oyuna had allowed us for apartment supplies. We were able to purchase quite a few items: electric kettle, plastic stand for bathroom toiletries, salt and pepper shakers, plastic containers for leftovers, etc.

### Monday, November 6 to Sunday, November 12

It has been a real pleasure this week to be able to spend the lunch half-hour at home before returning to school for the afternoon! Ivan has continued to clean like mad, buy groceries, run interference for any apartment difficulties, and cook! I am SO lucky!

Early in the week, Doogii informed me that the parents of one of our students had invited us to their home for dinner, so after some discussion, it was decided that Wednesday evening,

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November 8, would be the most convenient date. Pickup was arranged for 5:30 p.m. at school. Doogii and I were both rather apprehensive about the motive for this invitation, but the hospitality we were shown quickly eased our concerns. The parents were very happy and impressed with the progress made by their daughter. "Whew." As an extended family, the grandparents also live in their beautiful home, and this evening, grandmother was the cook for our delicious meal. Along with traditional Mongolian fare of mutton ribs, delicious salads, vodka, wine, fruit juice, etc., we were invited to have pizza. Perhaps it was included in case "yours truly" didn't like Mongolian food, but this was not the case. It was a lovely evening, ending with Doogii and me being driven to our respective homes at about 8:30 p.m.

On Wednesday, Ivan took advantage of the unseasonably warm temperatures to hike to the top of the mountain area that rises behind our school. He said it was absolutely beautiful at the top and was only disappointed when the battery on our camera ran low. Therefore, he was only able to get a few snaps of the building in the valley below, which we later discovered was the Presidential Palace. Until Ivan's hike, we hadn't realized what was tucked away in an otherwise unseen location on the far side of this mountain, at the rear of the school property.

In our classroom, we created a contest during October and beyond, to see which desk row could earn the most stickers for completed homework and good behaviour. A few weeks ago, and in a moment of revelation, I had an idea that the "prize" for this contest would be a lunch with "Mrs. and Mr. K." in their apartment. As our inaugural event, lunch happened on Thursday. However, one of the girls in the winning row had left school, deciding that learning English was too stressful for her. That left Tserendorj and Enkhdelger as our guests. Before leaving for our lunch, it was an unexpected surprise when Tserendorj's driver arrived with a bouquet of white roses for me and Enkhdelger presented me with a lovely leather sculpture of a Mongolian girl in traditional dress. Chef Ivan made a lunch of: peanut butter and banana, and peanut butter and jam sandwiches: apple juice; cheese; sliced ham; hard-boiled eggs; and, cookies for dessert. The two students seemed to really enjoy their meal, as we enjoyed having them. Tserendorj is a real chatterbox who speaks fluent English, so he did most of the talking, and also did some translating for Enkhdelger, who is very shy and a real sweetheart.

Thursday afternoon saw Frank arrive in the classroom looking rather frazzled, and asking me if I minded if he cancelled our meeting for later in the day. Equally frazzled, I asked, "What meeting?" It was then my clue that somehow I had been left out of the communication loop, when it was decided that this was the afternoon for my principal's observation. Since it doesn't matter to me in the least when he arrives, I agreed that next Wednesday would be an acceptable alternative, even though it's the day our report cards are due.

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Now, the report cards. They are another story. We didn't receive the final template until Thursday and since it was in PDF format, it could not be used to insert comments. Frank offered a program to remedy this. However, it did not work. Our reports for each student have been copied, with names, days absent, and times late, but the PDF format will not allow me or, for that matter, anyone else on staff, to add comments. We will see what happens tomorrow.

Thursday evening after school, the staff had our first "Sports Night" session in the gym, since the speed bumps seem to have been ironed out of the floor, at least for now. I joined them for a short while to take pictures, then to have several games of ping pong with one of the TAs. Ivan was there for the duration, being the goalkeeper for a soccer game. Everyone seemed to have a great time.

When I arrived at our apartment with my computer and Ethernet cable on Thursday, voila! The internet finally worked! I quickly got busy setting up our webcam, and we've subsequently had connections for three days in a row with Ivan's two sisters in Canada. It is wonderful to have this connection, as it gives us the feeling that we are not far from our family at home. This is even though the camera motion is a bit jerky. Now we can just access our computer or pick up the phone to feel closer together. We connect by phone with our sons each week, or more often if we wish, and always have an extra phone card handy in case of running out of our allotted minutes.

On both Saturday and Sunday this weekend, I spent time at school preparing report card comments, and for lesson planning. It is marvelous not to have to go far when feeling the need to do schoolwork. Even so, it doesn't seem that close, because our windows face the mountain and not the school. Quite often when we're sitting having a meal, we can see people leading herds of sheep, goats, or cows, across the landscape. I've also heard that in the past few days there was even a rather pleased-looking, lone camel wandering around our area. With winter weather looming, preparation is underway for an ice rink on the still incomplete soccer field. Today, Sunday morning, as we looked out our window, we were entertained by a person who was collecting dung for fuel by lobbing his collection into his wheelbarrow in a Michael Jordan-like manner.

Ivan and I went to the city for more household purchases on Saturday afternoon. We decided to buy a microwave oven, along with other needs like a tablecloth, some small plates, more plastic containers, and a garbage pail. This week Ivan will try to create a stand for our new appliance, because right now it is placed inconveniently high, on top of the refrigerator. When I left school on Saturday evening and entered our second-floor hallway, I sensed the

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wonderful aroma of roast beef. However, it ended up not being beef, but roast pork, but it sure tasted like beef to me! This was Ivan's first experience with our "Easy Bake" oven and he was happy with the results, but not too happy with the cooking process. Since written instructions for this appliance with its oven and two-burner stove top were not provided, it was a trial-and-error procedure. In this case more trial and more error than desired. However, the results were favourable, and the roast tasted delicious!

In just over a week since being in our new home, there have been a few small annoyances. They mostly included the water situation: no water at all; hot water only; sand in the water; cold water only; tap water not drinkable, etc. However, these trifling events seem to be dissipating. The reader may wonder why my anxiety had been steadily growing with respect to the occupancy date of our teachers' residence. From my UB arrival on July 24 to our apartment move-in date, there had been a span of almost four months of hotel living. Yes, staying in a hotel can have its perks, but there comes a time when plusses turn to minuses. These stresses of living in a country where customs and language are so very different from those at home, were complicating our lives in such a way that we were more than past due to getting settled in a home-like atmosphere. Finally, we could start cooking for ourselves!



Dining area, kitchen, bedroom, TV room

... Report cards, mealtime gatherings, and outdoor experiences ...

## Chapter 18

# Communal Supper and Hiking

### November 13 to 19

The weeks are flying by. This is good news for weekdays, but not so good for weekends! In the first part of the week, the process for preparing report cards was ongoing. Since we hadn't received the report card template on the promised date, we were not able to get a head start on this time-consuming task. Our hopes rose when informed that the Adobe template was finally "ready to go", then dashed when it was found to be not fully operational. In an attempt to expedite a solution for this issue, a couple of us spent several hours each fiddling around with the program, and between us, we were successful! Overall, this had been a frustrating experience, but on the plus side for me, I was able to learn more about the Adobe program and have subsequently used it for lesson planning.

Wednesday morning at entry time in the school's front lobby, the students and I were met by Frank who accompanied us to our classroom, where he completed a one-hour teaching observation. It was not terribly stressful, because I had nothing to lose, except maybe my pride if I received a negative evaluation. This first thing in the morning timing was advantageous, rather than taking place later in the day when our schedule tended to become rather chaotic, with gym class and covering two science units at the same time, for our two different grade levels.

### November 13 to 19

Thursday saw a regularly scheduled staff meeting come and go. Teachers' concerns were expressed during the last half-hour, when it was announced that the school would no longer be open for long hours as it had been, to work on lesson preparations. After a rather heated discussion, there were some compromises between teaching and administrative staff. We'll wait to see how this newly agreed upon arrangement will work. One of the highlights of the meeting, for Oyuna, was to announce that another shoe polisher would arrive for the school's front lobby. As someone later said, "It was kind of difficult to feel enthusiastic about a new shoe polisher, after just hearing that the school building suddenly became inconveniently less available." Please note that a new shoe polisher has also been installed in our apartment building. "Whoa!"

With the report cards finally completed on Thursday evening, on Friday after school, I went to the computer lab to print them, using my personal computer, but it was all in vain. My laptop template was different from the one on the school computers, which meant that not all the wording on my computer's template was showing on the printed reports from

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the school's computers. Thinking very quickly, I grabbed my computer and rushed down to Frank's office. He allowed me to hook up my computer directly to his printer, and it was such a relief to have the first report roll off the printer intact! What a release I felt when the last report slid out of the printer, which then allowed time to go to our upstairs classroom to start our weekly lesson outlines. Throughout this week, with report cards looming and all the problems involved to churn out these documents, I was thinking: "Why am I doing this?" I thought I had seen the last of the dreaded report card cycles 10 years ago when I retired from teaching in Canada.

Andrew, our school music teacher, had a gig on Friday evening and asked some of us to attend. Since it had been such a busy week and because I felt tired, old, and crotchety, I declined, but Ivan joined Kim, Dave, Denise, and Tara for this evening out. They ended up not making it in time to see Andrew perform and I don't know why. Instead, they had an opportunity to visit Catherine's new accommodation. It is a very large downtown apartment, shared with a couple of her Aussie friends. After this stopover, they all went "clubbing", with Ivan arriving home about 2 a.m. He had a great time and it is wonderful that these much younger teaching colleagues are treating us both as if we were their peers, rather than their parents. At least that's the way we see it, and we greatly appreciate their acceptance of our age differences.

Late in the week, Ivan decided that he was going to make chili and invite all the teachers to our apartment for dinner on Saturday evening. We were not sure, up until the last minute, exactly how many people had been invited, so it turned out to be a surprise.



Since some of them were still bashing away at their reports, and a couple were not feeling too well, perhaps as a result of the previous evening, we ended up with a "party of 10". However, it worked out really well, because Kim and Dave brought their table and chairs,

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and various other people brought bowls and other eating implements. This gave us enough of everything, as well as some leftover food. The chili was delicious! We even had appetizers of chips and dip and, amazingly, Ivan found celery somewhere on his shopping trips. Adding to the celery, we had a container of unknown contents in our fridge which vaguely resembled sour cream. On our Saturday shopping excursion into downtown, I discovered what looked like a dill-type powder. We put "sour cream" and "dill" together, and it appeared that it could be used as a good dip for celery. This must have been the case because at the end of our meal there was nothing left!

Backtracking somewhat: On Saturday, in preparation for our dinner party, Ivan and I took a bus downtown to buy some last-minute groceries, not remembering that noon was not an ideal time for bus travel due to overcrowding. As the route continued along its course, more and more people sandwiched inside. Ivan was fortunate to have secured seats for us, right at the beginning of our trip, so we were not part of the sandwiches. When on a crowded bus, it is really interesting that there seems to be no consideration of other passengers, when it comes to squishing, purse-bashing on the head, elbowing in the back, etc., etc. Yet, if a foot is inadvertently stepped on, it is horribly impolite not to shake hands. Need I say that this formality was somewhat difficult to understand, and to get used to? At our designated stop, we managed to elbow our way off the bus and I was very happy that Ivan was with me for that particular trip. With our grocery shopping completed, Ivan hopped on the bus again, leaving me downtown to purchase other items that were not needed for cooking.

It's my way of thinking that there is a fine art of lining up to wait my turn in line, but it does not seem to be the case here. I'm learning that I must be aggressive in any waiting situation and, as a result of my newly found certainty, I ended up having an altercation with a young lady about access to a washroom stall. I won. Living in our apartment which is in a much less congested area, I had not been in the city centre for a while. As a result, during my latest solo downtown shopping trip I was almost in a panic, and had the sudden thought that a "Beam me up, Scottie" thingy would come in handy. After each of my four shopping bags of various purchases were filled, I carefully tied the tops, and there was a reason for this. Last week, Tara had an incident in which she was surrounded by some street kids who proceeded to grab the groceries from her shopping bags and run off. She was saved by an older man, who brought the kids back, by the hair, and made them give back what they had taken. Initially she was rather distressed, to say the least, but very pleased to have her food returned. Hence, from Tara's situation I decided that my idea of tying the tops of each bag seemed like a good plan to help thwart any opportunistic events of the pilfering variety that

might come my way.

Arriving safely by bus, to our apartment, I went to the school in hope of getting some bottled water, but the containers were empty. I ended up walking to the little store near us, where I could pick up some litre bottles of water. Once again, I had to practice my assertive behaviour about being the next in line. Just because I'm short doesn't mean I'm a doormat. Ivan says that I'll have to watch this newly found behaviour of mine when I get back to Canada. Oh dear. At this point, it must be mentioned that yes, although we can now cook in our new apartment, we cannot drink water from the taps, or use it for cooking!

Our Saturday dinner was especially enjoyed because Denise's birthday was the next day so to celebrate, Christina made two cakes from scratch! She also found some birthday candles, and once we established how old our birthday girl was, the candles were affixed. Christina did a wonderful job of baking the cakes, but managed to put one of the candles upside down, which of course made it impossible to light.

This morning we were delighted to find our son Adrian, along with Kathleen and Daniel on the other end of our home webcam in Hamilton! It was wonderful to see them all and to be able to catch up face-to-face with family news. During this conversation, Daniel, at two years old, was finally enticed to stop running in and out of the computer room where the webcam was located, when it was eventually remembered that there was a toy box in the closet. Once the toys came out of hiding, they kept him busy for quite a while, and then the adults were able to enjoy watching him play and hearing his ever-growing vocabulary. The preparations for this chat had been facilitated by Julie, our next-door neighbour at 245 Bay, who is so kindly taking care of our apartment and our cat, Dot. When online, we noticed on two different mornings that our home computer was logged into MS Messenger, so we took advantage of those opportunities to chat with Julie too. This morning, we were also able to connect via landline with Dan, in Montreal, and very much enjoyed hearing his updates.

After lunch, Ivan and I hiked up Khan Uul, which is the mountain we can see from our apartment window. It was a beautiful day, so I thought that the time was right for this trek, because as the days rush by, we predict that the weather will begin to get miserably cold. As yet, it has not. At the top, it was quite windy, but if we kept just below the ridge, there was no wind at all. Ivan had already been, but I really wanted to go and to see for myself the "Presidential Palace" that is just on the other side of the mountain from the school. To climb the steep slope, I had to zigzag instead of trying a straight climb. It took a longer time and was a longer distance, but at least I did not end up with a heart attack.

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Hilltop views with blue-roofed school, and orange and white-roofed government homes

After descent from our expedition, I spent about four hours at school preparing for next week's lessons and a visit, and observation, by our school's Canadian consultant. I would have spent this time in preparation anyway, despite the prospect of a second classroom observation in two weeks. The following week, we have parent interviews. "Oh joy." This will be a very interesting experience, as almost all parents do not speak English. Doogii will definitely have her work cut out for her!

Ivan again made a wonderful Sunday supper. Then as a grand finale to our meal and to the weekend, as we were finishing washing the dishes and letting out the water, the bottom fell out of the sink. How in the world could this ever happen! Obviously, there was water

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everywhere! After several phone calls to others in our building, we discovered that no one we knew had a screwdriver: “A screwdriver. A screwdriver. Our kingdom for a screwdriver”. We would not have been handed a screwdriver on loan by the maintenance people, because they are experts and do not lend tools, or so we’ve been told. In desperation, I went downstairs to the apartment manager’s office and found a young man, who did not speak any English, but nevertheless I dragged him to our apartment and within 15 minutes our sink was fixed. For now. This week, Ivan’s task is to find a few inexpensive and basic tools to buy should we have another emergency.

... So much to do, so little time ...

## School Days and Weeks Continue to Zip By!

Parent interviews began last Thursday, and except for one, they were quite cordial. The odd one was a humdinger, but I gave thanks once again to Doogii, who was able to calm this disgruntled mother. Problems with this parent seem to have arisen from the fact that a particular teacher, namely me, is not influenced in giving higher marks to a student, because of the status of the parent. This student's father happens to be a Mongolian Member of Parliament. Well, I didn't know that, and frankly it wouldn't have made any difference to my student evaluation. To date we still have two more nights of interviews and then we hope we are done, literally, but with any luck, not too done, figuratively!

I've been making an effort to get more organized. Is that possible? Realizing what planning is needed for the next set of reports in mid-February, I've been busy creating many different types of tracking sheets, and have already started filling them in with evaluations. Look out world! Please know that there is nothing on the tracking sheets that indicates the parental occupation of any student. However, I know that Mrs. Choi owns a restaurant.

It's no surprise that Ivan continues to be a real gem! He is totally in charge of our apartment, with preparing meals, cleaning, washing clothes, etc. It's SO nice to be able to come home for lunch and to know that I have a friendly face waiting for me, with food prepared. We have started a new weekly routine, and that is for Doogii to have lunch on Fridays with Ivan in our apartment. So each Friday we're switching lunchtime places, from Doogii being relieved as our class lunchroom supervisor, and with me supervising lunch and doing yard duty afterwards. I don't mind being outside, because even though the weather has started to turn quite chilly, as long as the sun is out, the front of the school where we have our recesses is quite comfortable, temperature-wise. In addition, it is wonderful to know that Doogii and Ivan seem to enjoy each other's company, and having many discussions along with their lunch.

For interest, I felt that it behooves me to include a couple of photos of the most recent acquisitions for apartment and school, one of which is more welcome to some than the other. Can you guess which one? It's actually the shoe polisher located now in the entrance to our apartment building, BUT there are also two more in the front entrance to the school. Ivan noted that when he got off the bus one day, the first thing one of his fellow passengers did was to take out a handkerchief and wipe off their shoes, although this didn't include an offer to wipe Ivan's shoes as well. It seems to be a practice here that having clean shoes is an indication of status. I rarely use the shoe polisher, so heaven knows what people think of

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me with my obviously dusty footwear! Regarding the newly installed water dispenser: Ivan and his back; and me and my arms, which feel about a foot longer, are extremely thankful. We no longer have to buy and transport large containers of bottled water from the store! Having a potable water supply now located in the hallway outside our apartment certainly feels like a luxury! These dispensers are connected to a well and are on a filtration system, which seems to work quite effectively. As yet, nobody has succumbed to drinking this filtered city water. Our new hallway water dispenser is the only one of our two water systems in the building that seems to work well: the second system is for the tap water in our kitchen and bathroom. I have yet to get used to flushing the toilet with hot water and washing my hands under the tap in the sink, in rapid bursts of speed so I'm not scalded. The other part of our water story is the evidence of a daily build-up of moisture starting to show in the corners of our bedroom. Ivan has discovered that if he opens the bedroom window for a while, the insides of the glass will either de-fog and/or de-ice, depending on the outside temperature. In addition, we observe that the walls eventually dry up, but not without continuing to have some mould settling in the corners of our bedroom.



Shoe polisher and water dispenser

During the latter part of the week, our school administrative assistant asked for our passports to apply for exit/entry visas for our trip out of the country at Christmas. "Oh yes, a Christmas trip!" We'd forgotten about it, so after that wake-up call, Ivan and I decided to get

## School Days and Weeks Continue to Zip By!

busy and decide where to go, and even more importantly, to find a flight to take us wherever we might wish to be going. To facilitate this, Oko offered to contact a flight agent for us. After a couple of days, and with no flights seemingly available, it looked like we might have to either take an extremely long hike, or hire a car in order to leave Mongolia for who knows where. However, a flight schedule was finally arranged: leaving on December 19 and returning on December 31. Our plans are to fly, via Beijing and Bangkok, to Koh Samui, Thailand. Since our flight to Bangkok will land after midnight and because we rationalized that it would be exciting to spend some time exploring that city, we booked a hotel in Bangkok for 4 nights, before our departure to Koh Samui, our final destination. This is a small island off the Thai coast in the Gulf of Thailand, which is directly across from Vietnam. Once the Bangkok hotel was booked, we spent quite a while on the internet looking for suitable accommodation on the island of Koh Samui. It was finally secured! "Whew." Perhaps we could have waited until our arrival on the island on December 23 to book our hotel, but this would have been an uncomfortable prospect for me. Our island stay of seven nights will be in the delightful Thai-sounding hotel named "Bill Resort". Bill Resort? Where on earth did that name come from? We may or may not find out.

Over the weekend, I spent hours upon hours planning lessons, both at school and in our apartment. The Grade 2 and Grade 3 Science units have now been completed so it's time to find a Social Studies unit. On the internet I discovered a combined Grade 2-3 unit, thanks to a Separate School Board with online curriculum ideas. It is called "Traditions and Celebrations", and the entire premise is based either on a multicultural society, or on the comparison of a pioneer community with a current functioning community. You might only begin to imagine how much adaptation has to be done in order make this topic relevant to Mongolian children. However, I think it will be interesting and I'm trying to adjust the activities and outcomes to Mongolian traditions and celebrations. With this unit I expect to learn as much as the children and maybe more.

On Sunday, I felt a little burned out, so Ivan and I went downtown by bus and wandered around most of the afternoon. Our first stop was Sukhbaatar Square, where there seemed to be something special going on. Our first clue as we debarked the bus was the hordes of young people, who were marching in the opposite direction as we were going, and all of them were carrying little flags. We later learned that it was Mongolian Independence Day and that if it were not a weekend, it might have been a school holiday. After dodging around the marchers and being the recipients of a couple of the flags, as shown in the picture on the next page...

School Days and Weeks Continue to Zip By!



Mongolian Independence Day

...we ventured further into the square and watched some sort of official program being held on a stage, complete with performers dressed in colourful costumes. Since we managed to arrive at the end of the ceremony, we did not have the pleasure of seeing the presentation the performers were supposed to have given. On the opposite side of the square, the parliament buildings had finally lost their green mesh renovation covering, which had been evident since my July arrival. What an impressive sight to now see a HUGE statue of Chinggis Khan seated in a chair and looking rather reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln's pose at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. We both said that it was a shame we hadn't taken our camera, but that photo op will have to wait for another time. We did a bit of shopping, but it was more window-shopping than purchasing. I was hoping to get some warm slippers, but the store where I wanted to make my purchase was closed on Sunday. I'll have to leave that until next week.

We had our weekend online visits with our boys. Dan is quite easy to contact in Montreal via his cell phone, if he's not indisposed at a hockey game, or out and about somewhere else. This weekend, our Hamilton connection proved to be a little more complicated. Since our internet had been out for a couple of days, we had to wait until Sunday evening to make this anticipated webcam call to Adrian, Kathleen, and Daniel. It was after 11 p.m. our time when we had to regretfully take our leave, but not before watching Daniel enjoy Nana and Dida's toy box being put to good use, and with him offering us some "tea". He is really growing and we were able to hear him count quite clearly to 10 or maybe it was 11. His second birthday is December 13, so I think he's doing very well. Isn't a nana supposed to brag about her grandson?

## School Days and Weeks Continue to Zip By!

Ivan managed to pick up a nasty cold, or some other bug on the weekend. Maybe it was due to our Sunday stroll downtown? As well, I was also experiencing the cold, but it was because of my cold feet, not Ivan's current bug. I'm really hoping he will not be kind enough to pass along what he has to me and that he will get better very soon! Would Doogii ever forgive me if I were to be off work because of illness?

Tomorrow evening, we're heading downtown early to have dinner and then attend a concert. Christina arranged this outing through her friend Ubi. I haven't seen Ubi in a while, and I know that Ivan will enjoy meeting this most delightful person. We both look forward to the experience of dinner, concert, and company. The main instrument to be used in the concert will be the Morin Khuur, which is a traditional Mongolian instrument.

Believe it or not, we're able to listen to K-Lite FM radio in Hamilton. Amazing! They were actually talking about Christmas, and Hwy 403, and traffic on York Boulevard! It is incredible to be able to have yet another unexpected, constant, and close connection to home.

... Thoughts of UB life from a Canadian with an almost frozen nose ...

## Chapter 20

# Mongolia Reflections: In No Particular Order

November 29 to December 11

1. Under the thin layer of dry snow, there is a thick layer of bone-dry dust.
2. Snow and dust will mix, creating a rather messy underfoot concoction.
3. Electric shoe polishers do indeed come in handy.
4. Women dress in a very stylish and fashionable manner despite the cold temperatures and #1 above.
5. Women tend to wear pointy shoes or boots with high heels, despite #2 above.
6. Women support staff at school are better-dressed than some of the women and men teachers.
7. Canadian women (namely me) feel rather unfashionably dressed, most of the time.
8. Women's clothing sizes are mostly Size 0 to -3.
9. Canadian women (namely me) wear a size XL or XXL and hope to be lucky enough to find a garment to purchase in these gargantuan proportions.
10. There are many, many beauty shops in UB where one can get anything from a tattoo, to a Thai body massage (No thank you).
11. "Regular" back and neck massages are far from relaxing and can be quite painful.
12. RMT is an acronym that has not been evident here (despite #10 and #11).
13. A 40-minute back, neck and head massage will set you back about \$9, U.S.
14. Men are able to get good haircuts in beauty salons for about \$9.
15. Don't count on the telephone reception always being available, due to the possibility of the attachment wires being stolen during the night.
16. Cell phones have a distinct advantage over land lines, at times (see #15).

Mongolia Reflections: In No Particular Order

17. Telephone service may not return quickly after interruptions, with it being almost week since our #15 happened.
18. Dogs run freely throughout the city and in the environs.
19. Ensure you are properly introduced to a dog by its owner before attempting any canine interaction.
20. One must make a large detour around dogs running loose, or must pretend to pick up a rock to throw at it in order to avoid being attacked.
21. Dogs on the loose always look like they have a mission: somewhere to go and something important to do.
22. A dog does not walk with its ears down or with tail between its legs.
23. Don't get drunk on a bus, or before getting on a bus, or you will likely be physically thrown off the bus and onto the street, along with your bags and whatever else you may be carrying.
24. If you are drunk and ride a bus, do not sit in the doorway, sit quietly in a seat and pretend to be asleep.
25. When ordering a recognizable-sounding food in a restaurant, try to think of it as an adventure, rather than as an expectation of something familiar.
26. Watch when walking on downtown streets that you don't slip on the spit spots.
27. Don't approach someone unexpectedly from the rear, in case they may be in the process of producing the spots as in #26.
28. Keep your eyes downcast at all times especially in the countryside, in order to avoid unpleasant experiences such as walking through a cow patty or a pile of manure belonging to another beast of unknown origin.
29. When walking on a route with no sidewalks, make sure to walk on the extreme side of the road, due to cars not tending to give pedestrians a wide berth.

Mongolia Reflections: In No Particular Order

30. When walking in the wintertime, if you are able, climb to higher ground as a vehicle approaches in either direction, due to the roads and highways not being sanded, salted, or plowed.
31. Wear layered clothing during the winter months, for peeling off successive wardrobe layers to keep from melting while perusing indoor shops.
32. When crossing roads, look both ways, even if it's one of the few one-way thoroughfares.
33. Cross the busiest streets with a herd of other brave souls, to take advantage of pedestrian safety in numbers.
34. Just because the little green man on the crosswalk sign indicates that it is safe to perambulate, do not get too anxious to walk, since there might be a car making a legal turn at exactly the same instant as you are making your crossing.
35. Stash your money in your inside pocket, or wear your purse inside your coat.
36. Men carry purses which actually belong to their girlfriends.
37. Don't assume in a country with a Christian population of about 6%, that Christmas commercialism will be overlooked because, at least in UB, it seems that, if it is popular in the West, it must be a good thing.
38. Even though there is no written record of someone's appearance from 800 years ago, doesn't mean that a ginormous statue can't be erected in his honour.
39. Frequent baths or showers are necessary, not because one is dirty, but because one smells of smoke (coal, wood, dung, etc.), especially in the wintertime, and particularly from walking in the downtown area.
40. Distant haze over the mountains is not necessarily an indicator of snow, fog or rain.
41. The more formal the occasion, the shorter the notice to prepare for it.
42. Traffic jams are complex and commonplace.
43. Road rage is non-existent.
44. Honking horns will not, despite persistence and volume, move the car ahead, behind, or beside you, any faster or farther.

Mongolia Reflections: In No Particular Order

45. If you feel a shoulder, fist, elbow, or whole body pushing against you, don't assume it is an act of affection...indeed, push back, as it can be quite satisfying.
46. Don't be surprised if you are offered a seat on the bus by a younger person.
47. Walking is best under cover of darkness if one is Caucasian and self-conscious about being stared at.
48. A Caucasian face can be an indicator of extreme wealth, and an indication to an astute taxi driver, of being able to take advantage of such a situation by overcharging a fare.
49. A "Charlie Brown" Christmas tree and some felt wise men on camels can make the season seem a little more festive.
50. AND, unique experiences when extremely far from home or in exotic locations, do not in any way diminish one's homesickness, especially at Christmas time, so "Beam me home, Scotty!?"



Christmas apartment decorations: daytime and nighttime



Sukhbaatar Square parliament building, with Chinggis Khan flanked by horsemen



Sukhbaatar Square telephone seller at her post, and statue of Damdiny Sukhbaatar

... Much to accomplish before the holidays begin ...

## Finishing Work Before the Winter Break

December 12 to 18

It was quite a procedure to prepare the students for our first “annual” ASU Winter Wonderland Talent Show. Any teacher past or present can attest to the hustle and bustle on the part of teachers, students, and parents, that goes hand in hand with a major school-wide production such as this.

During the past two weeks, in addition to preparing for our class performance on stage, time was spent decorating our classroom, as well as with special Christmas activities being planned and implemented. It had come as a surprise to me that Christmas in UB was celebrated at all, but I eventually realized that for the vast majority of the UB population, the festivities focus only on the commercial side of this season.

Since it was to be the first attempt at staging this sort of school event, the administration was very concerned for everything to run smoothly, which of course would most probably be next to impossible. Before the night’s festivities began, and right down to the last minute, the auditorium was being prepared with: decorations; a sound system; which was moved at least once; lighting, etc. On this night, all but one of the five boys in our class were wearing suits (one of whom needed help with his tie) and most of the girls (three of whom had an impromptu knot-tying lesson), were dressed in ball gowns, the likes of which left me shaking my head in wonder. And, in addition I felt totally out of the fashion scene. At this stage of my life, I don’t own a dress nearly as fancy as most of

the girls were wearing. Before this gala event, it was difficult for me to even visualize what might be the appropriate attire. Remember Chapter 20? At any rate, during class time, no suggestions or hints about clothing were mentioned, the children just appeared as Cinderellas and handsome coachmen dressed for a ball. For our class performance, our students were able



## Finishing Work Before the Winter Break

to learn a very lovely song and because of its length, there were a large number of English lyrics to memorize. They did a wonderful job with words and timing of the song, although being slightly off-key with the melody. Looking back on last Thursday evening, things went as expected, and parents appeared to be quite satisfied with their children's performances.

Doogii, Ivan and I went on a scavenger hunt last Saturday to help me find a coat that would replace my "Old, Russian Woman" pink coat, as Doogii has so aptly described it. This search took a very long time, because most of the coats that we saw and were anywhere remotely interesting to me, were too small. We finally taxied to the "Third District" and wandered through the mazes of outlets along that boulevard. Without too much more trouble, we finally found a shop selling sheepskin coats and although the cost was considerably higher than I was expecting to pay, it was a done deal. The consensus was that looks quite nice. Please, see the accompanying picture and decide for yourself, although the colours and textures don't do it justice. Doogii kindly offered to sew the on buttons for me, and I've worn it several times, feeling almost stylish in this new coat, and a hat that was purchased the same day. Needless to say, the coat keeps me toasty warm.



Easy-Bake cooking & winter attire

## Finishing Work Before the Winter Break

This past Wednesday evening, Christina invited me to attend a women's group at her church for which they had planned a cookie exchange and a special Mongolian dance lesson. I don't know which part of this meeting caused me the most grief, but I know which was the most fun, and it wasn't the cookies. I was rather embarrassed to enter a room full of women I did not know, with my bag of store-bought cookies in tow, but I was not about to apologize. In addition to not having the time, ingredients, or implements to make any kind of cookies, our apartment ovens are not equipped for cookie-making. The dancing was a lot of fun and I was just as happy not to be facing a window. I therefore, could not see my reflection as I lumbered along after our very petite and graceful Mongolian dance instructor! Some of the footwork and hand movements I could replicate, but shaking my shoulders as was demonstrated, or moving my shoulders at all, just wasn't happening. Therefore, when it came to coordinating feet, hands, and shoulders, I was a total failure. Perhaps a lot more practice will be needed? Luckily, nobody else in the room was an expert, and we were all continually laughing at our individual ineptitude. Maybe on another occasion I could be the instructor teaching the Highland Fling? I found the well-travelled women in the group to be very friendly and I hope to attend another meeting again. It was a remarkably enjoyable evening!

We had a class party in the morning on Friday, but being my organized self, our first item of business for the children was to clean out their desks and what a task that was! Once completed, we were able to get down to the serious business of eating. One of the girls donated three pizzas and we ended up with more food than we really needed, including four cakes. It was no surprise at the end of the day when everyone was a little wired. Doogii and I were very happy to see our last student leave the building, or so we thought. It was Yurii who appeared at school again well after her bus had left, and it was my understanding that her unexpected return was because she had "barfed on the bus". However, what actually happened was that someone else near her on the bus had "barfed" and that made her not feel well. This meant that family from home had to be called to pick her up. She was rather perturbed and impatient to find her teacher with her coat on and ready to leave, so there we sat together while she awaited a ride home. Oh well.

Friday evening arrived, with Ivan and I opting not to attend the ASU Gala Christmas party for teachers and support staff. We instead decided to invite Doogii's family to join us for dinner at a restaurant. Their religion does not permit, among other things, celebrations relating to religious events. So Doogii, her husband, and daughter joined Ivan and me to experience a special treat of our own. For our transportation, Ivan and I mistakenly took

## Finishing Work Before the Winter Break

the bus into town and it was so crowded that we didn't have to hold onto anything to stay upright. Not being comfortable in crowded situations, I had to have a serious conversation with myself during the whole route to overcome my extreme claustrophobic feeling. If Ivan hadn't been standing near me, I undoubtedly would have clawed my way out of the crowd, kicking and screaming and, heaven forbid, might have stepped on a few feet on the way out the door. Please remind me of this experience if I ever indicate that I am planning to travel to Tokyo, which I hear is well known for its crowded transportation systems. Nevertheless, our bus ride was perhaps worth the angst, because we all enjoyed a lovely dinner together at a superb restaurant. This is despite the fact that I was feeling so tired at about 8:30 p.m., I almost ended up face first on my dinner plate. However, it could also have been due to my indulging in a glass of wine at dinner.

Ivan and I went downtown on Saturday, taking the infamous bus once more, but since it was during off-hours it was not crowded at all. Our quest was to find a pair of winter boots for me. We had both been getting a little weary of seeing me wearing my shiny, brown, New Balance running shoes, bought in Montreal last spring. Admittedly though, they had served their purpose in keeping my feet warm. At our first stop, we found a very comfortable pair of boots to purchase, then headed to our 24-hour bank! Along the way, we stopped at a computer centre that may have potential for later purchases, if we do not find cheaper supplies during our upcoming Christmas trip to Thailand. After having a relaxing supper at the UB Delicatessen, we headed home.

Christina and John were our Sunday evening dinner guests. The four of us are about the last of the teachers remaining in our building. Other colleagues had already journeyed off to Canada, Indonesia, Dubai, and Kazakhstan. Why the latter exotic country? Our colleague, Andrew, was looking to purchase a particular instrument to add to his collection. As we were awaiting our supper to be cooked, George, who was en route to Dubai, "Skyped" us from Seoul. It was fun for us all to be able to converse with him, even though he accused us of having a party without him. He had taken his computer and webcam with him so we could not only hear him, but also see him, his wife and his young son. Being familiar with the South Korean capital, Christina and John were able to provide him with ideas about the sights to see in Seoul. Another Skype event took place the following Friday evening, when several of us took the time to get our holiday addresses coordinated, for corresponding with one another while in different parts of the world. However, for us, this will not happen until we return to our apartment on December 31, because of my decision that it will be too much hassle and perhaps not safe to take my computer with us.

## Finishing Work Before the Winter Break

It is Monday and I am still having great difficulty unwinding from my Teacher Mode: not being able to sleep; feeling physically crummy; and having a deep desire for a shower at 3 a.m. on Sunday morning. The latter action was somewhat forced on me when beginning to identify somewhat as a homeless person after not showering for about four days. This is because our "hot" water is not by any stretch of the imagination "hot". "Tepid" water just does not do it for me when it comes to bathing. This morning we made many phone calls home and abroad, because we were unsure of the telephone situation in Bangkok or on the island of Koh Samui where we'll be for Christmas Day.

For tomorrow's departure, we've laid our belongings on the bed, the suitcase is open, and a taxi has been ordered for 9:30 a.m., which seems a rather "civilized" hour to begin our travel. Airline options for this trip were not what we would have otherwise selected, but due to our destinations, as well as the time of year, we were somewhat limited. So we're relying on Air China and Bangkok Air to carry us safely. However, there is some trepidation in using Air China, because of Ivan not having a Chinese visa for our required on-route layover in Beijing. Therefore, our itinerary could end up having a bit of an unplanned glitch. We'll see what happens. Depending on this or other unforeseen circumstances, our arrival in Bangkok is scheduled for 12:30 a.m. on Wednesday morning.

... New horizons to experience for Christmas ...

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

### BANGKOK

December 19 to January 1

The airport taxi showed up early to our apartment just as I was returning from taking my computer to my school locker for safe keeping, so off we drove. Upon arrival at the Chinggis Khan airport in UB, I was amazed at how I now saw this air terminal in an altogether different light, from how I'd experienced it during my initial July arrival. It is amazing how a migraine headache will negatively flavour an event, and in this case it was very true. The airport is now observed in a much more positive light as being quite modern, AND with our plane leaving on time.

Upon our Air China approach to Beijing Capital International Airport, we were greeted with an overhead view of the terrible smoggy conditions that blanket this city. Our immediate thoughts were projected forward to the 2008 Summer Olympics to be held here, and our hope is that something can and will be done to improve this air quality between now and then. Not only is there difficulty with this atmospheric pollution, but also it appears that there are current confusions that await the arriving and departing foreign travellers to this ultra-modern facility. Ivan indicated to me that even since his experience when coming through this airport in October, on his way to Mongolia, some protocols had changed for passengers in transit. Fortunately, the rules for passengers who do not need a Chinese visa remained the same. This was on the understanding that they did not leave the transit area, which was Ivan's only option. Before his Canadian departure to Mongolia, via Beijing, he had been either too frugal, or did not have enough pertinent information to know that he would need to purchase, well in advance, a multiple entry visa from the Chinese Embassy, in Toronto.

After shopping and lunch at the airport, we set off again and on time for the Beijing-to-Bangkok leg of our journey. Although not a particularly long flight in hours, at about 5½, it seemed to take a lifetime to travel this distance. Perhaps it was partially due to the fact that it was once again an Air China flight. We had exactly the same meal as on the UB to Beijing flight, but at least this time there were in-flight movies. We should have anticipated, but didn't, that the movie dialogue would be in Chinese. Although there were English subtitles, I didn't bother to partake of this entertainment. Our plane landed at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport which is a spectacular new facility and very efficiently run.

Choosing to use an airport limousine to transport us to the Royal Hotel, in central Bangkok, we arrived there about 1:30 a.m. I was convinced that it was not the right hotel

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

because it looked very grand, considering our accommodation charge for four nights. However, my concern was unjustified, and we were escorted to our room, which was facing the street and had a balcony. It was about 3 a.m. before we retired: I can't say that I went to sleep, because I was more or less wired, and the pillow was rather lumpy. In the morning, we learned why the room was not as quiet at night, as we would have hoped. This was due to the fact that in the darkness of our late arrival, we hadn't realized that it was facing a total of 12 lanes of traffic. Cars were racing past at all hours of the night and day, in many different directions, with horns blaring, and most of them were in their respective roadway lanes.

Despite our lack of sleep this first night, we were up about 9 a.m. and almost missed the breakfast that was included with the cost of our room. It was a welcoming spread with many different types of tasty food. Once breakfast was over, Ivan decided that he would like to get the "lay of the land" so we set off on foot, only to be greeted by many questions as we left the hotel: "Where are you going?"; and, "Taxi?". During our stay in Thailand, many of these types of questions were directed our way and we finally found that for the first question we'd been asked, an answer of, "crazy", seemed to stop anyone from persistently following us down the street. During this inaugural walk, we did something we should not have done, that is, we "talked to a stranger". With this stranger, we ended up touring a "lucky" Buddhist temple, going on a "tuk-tuk" ride to a jewellery store, and buying a lovely ring for "yours truly". It was an early gift from my dear husband for our upcoming 30th wedding anniversary! More about this purchase will be provided later. After being returned to the downtown area, we continued walking an almost grand circle tour, then finding our way back to the hotel to regroup. Before starting our Thailand trip, our search on the internet had provided a list of places of interest to visit. From this we found Khao San Road, which is an area of street vendors of all types and was within walking distance of our hotel. We had a supper of spring rolls and chicken on a stick, as we walked along with the many, many other tourists, who were shopping and experiencing the nightlife in Bangkok. When the crowds started to get rather thick, we headed back to the hotel. The most difficult part of this foot tour was trying to cross all the traffic lanes, but as you can tell because you're reading this now, we remained unscathed, although probably with a few more grey hairs.

Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia



Downtown Bangkok: courtyard entrance; Ivan and tuk tuk driver; outside the Grand Palace

For our second day, we decided to take ourselves to the Grand Palace which was a pleasant walk from our hotel. Upon our entrance, I wandered into a building that turned out to be a police headquarters of some sort. On the wall there was a sign that indicated very strongly that tourists should NOT speak to strangers who might want to take you to a “lucky Buddha” temple then for a tuk-tuk ride to a jewellery store. A rather sick feeling arose in my stomach after reading this sign several times. We had methodically completed all

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

of these transgressions on our first day of arrival in Bangkok! It was very difficult to remove negative thoughts about that ill-advised tour from my mind. I knew that if nothing else, a lesson had been learned, and hopefully not too expensive a lesson. After our return to Canada we'll get a better idea of the cost, when we arrange a jewellery appraisal for my ring, and if necessary, could possibly take further action. What this could be, I really don't know.

Rather than be obsessed by our previous day's naive error, we chose instead to enjoy the many photo opportunities on the palace grounds of the spectacular buildings with their gold domes and detailed mosaic work. Thank heaven for digital cameras! After this tour, we returned to the hotel to change shoes, have lunch, and arrange a Friday day

trip. Other items on the list of things to do in Bangkok, included: taking a ferry on the Praya River; a ride on the Skytrain; and visits to downtown shopping plazas.

Continuing our day, we strolled to the river, found and boarded the ferry leaving from Pier 13, and motored along to the Central Pier. There we were able to locate the Skytrain station and managed to navigate to Siam Station, where we took a short tour of the Siam Paragon Shopping Centre. "No, Ivan, you definitely may NOT buy the Ferrari!" Once he'd had as much admiring of this automobile as he could endure, we left the shopping centre. Using a handy map, we finally arrived at the Pantip Plaza, which is a multi-level complex, selling everything pertaining to computer and camera equipment. I was almost in heaven, except for the fact that Ivan and I were definitely not on the same shopping wavelength. Our next stop was the Platinum Fashion Mall, with many different small clothing stores and most definitely catering to the Asian body, that is: sizes that are WAY too small for me! How distressing! Leaving there, we began our return walk to the hotel until the sole of Ivan's shoe decided to give him more grief than he could deal with. We then hailed a tuk-tuk for transport to our hotel, and an early bedtime, as our day trip would start at 7:20 a.m. the next morning.



## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

After an early wake-up we enjoyed a fortifying breakfast, then awaited the tour pick-up. Our first stop was the at the WWII Kanchanaburi cemetery. It is well maintained by the Thai people and contains the graves of nearly 7,000 Commonwealth servicemen, who died due to illness or maltreatment, as Japanese prisoners of war. While there and with great interest, I came across several Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders' graves. It was a very impressive place for several reasons, one of them being that during WWII my father had been a reservist in the Hamilton Argylls.



Kanchanaburi Cemetery & River Kwai bridge

Leaving that sobering site, we were escorted to the “Bridge on the River Kwai”. The original bridge was built by POWs during 1942 and 1943, then destroyed by allied air attacks between December 1944 and June 1945, and has since been restored. The river was originally called Mae Klong but was renamed Kwai Yai River in 1960. From here, our tour continued to a train station to await an unexpected train ride, which meant that a trip over the Kwai bridge, on the so-called Death Railway would not be happening. The history of building that railway had again involved Allied Prisoners of War and Asian labourers, who worked under the imperial Japanese army to construct part of this 415 km long Burma-Thailand railway, during WWII. Most of the labourers were Australian, Dutch, and British. Before departure on this upcoming train, we were informed that our fellow passengers would include groups of local school children, and it meant that many seats would already be taken, so we might have to stand for a while.

This proved to be partially true. There were a large number of children, but they very kindly shared their seats with us, then proceeded to frantically run up and down the aisle, in an attempt to obtain as many autographs as possible, from all the travelling strangers. What a wonderful and well-behaved group of children they were!

Our tour then continued with lunch on a river barge, after which we left for our elephant adventure! Ivan had said that he wanted to ride an elephant, so we did. It was a rather slow, lumbering meander, and I am glad we weren't in a hurry to get anywhere. At one point on our walk, our elephant's driver saw a coin on the ground and proceeded to direct our ponderous pachyderm to pick it up, with his trunk. This turned out to be a laborious process, but was somewhat helped by the driver of a second elephant on tour. When the trunk and the coin finally connected, the trunk was swung back toward our driver and the coin was released into the driver's hand. What an experience this was for us to be part of. It should be noted that elephant hair is very bristly.

Next on our agenda was a tiger encounter that took us to the Tiger Temple. Without exaggeration, it was distressing to witness these magnificent cats chained on rather short fetters. Most of them appeared quite docile and were kept this way, most probably because of being drugged. It was to these animals that we were led to sit beside them, and have our pictures taken by our guide, with our own camera. It was quite surprising to feel the coarseness of the tiger's coat. Our guide informed us that a new enclosure was in the process of being built, where the tigers could have more freedom. I hope this is true and that it will happen soon! This being our last stop on the tour of the day, we headed off for a very long bus ride to our hotel, where we arrived about 7 p.m. Due to an extremely early air departure to Koh Samui the next day, our dinner at the hotel's coffee shop was eaten hastily. With our meal consumed, it was off to our room to pack for the next leg of our journey. The airport taxi pick-up time was set for 3:45 a.m.!





### KOH SAMUI ISLAND

At the airport we were pleasantly surprised to be directed to a private lounge area for our Bangkok Air pre-boarding experience to Koh Samui. It included complimentary coffee, juice, cake, peanut brittle, and free internet access. This early morning flight in a "prop job" lasted only 1½ hours, giving us a very early arrival on the island, so it was not anticipated that our accommodation would be available to us this early. Accelerating our delivery to the hotel even further, a very efficient airport taxi service deposited us at "Bill Resort", at 9 a.m. It would certainly be interesting to find out where this hotel name came from. What a relief to discover that even with our premature arrival, a villa had already been prepared for us. Thank heavens! Our little abode consisted of an outside porch with a bench, a large room with two beds, a wardrobe, a window seat, a dresser, and a private bathroom. At first glance, this seemed like an ordinary hotel set-up, but it didn't take us long to notice that there were only six hangers in the wardrobe and absolutely no drawer space. Also, the entire bathroom floor was designated as the shower area. In addition to these initial discoveries for us to creatively adapt to, we were more than happy to see that our accommodation was very clean and it even had a TV! Out of necessity, we found very quickly that there would be more than one daily physical workout to complete. This was because we were located at the top of a steep hill that led to the hotel restaurant, pool, and beach. However, the descending and ascending workouts were well worth the effort to enjoy the restaurant that served excellent food and had a million-dollar view of Lamai Beach on the Gulf of Thailand.



Breakfast at the beach & The Gulf of Thailand

After indulging ourselves in the restaurant for lunch, we set off along the sandy beach to explore the main part of the town of Lamai. Upon arrival, we found the streets crowded with cars, scooters, tourists, and sales people who were selling everything from custom-made suits, to tattoos, to massages and to heaven-knows-what else. We did not participate in any of the sales pressuring, but instead made very important purchases of a hat for me and for Ivan, flip-flops to replace his sandals, one of which was still in the process of losing its sole. After our tour and purchases, an afternoon nap seemed to beckon us, so we headed back to our hotel. For supper, we decided to return to town, where we consumed our meal beside a noisy road. Although it was very early in our stay on Koh Samui Island, I found it quite disconcerting and troublesome to see so many young Thai women with older Caucasian men, who were quite obviously not their spouses.

The next day after a good night's sleep, we carefully aimed ourselves downhill to enjoy a wonderful buffet breakfast, which was included with our accommodation! We discovered that in the hotel internet room there were computers available for guests' usage, and which provided a welcome way to catch up with family and friends. Most of our day was spent sitting by the pool, reading, and dozing. For dinner "Nana almost got run over by a scooter, going out to dinner Christmas Eve", and you can add the actual tune to my words. Vehicles in Thailand drive on the "wrong" side of the road, and many tourists rent these various modes of transportation, then manoeuvre through traffic and pedestrians with varying degrees of precision. It was my good fortune to be half a step away from being the traffic statistic

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

of one rookie driver. All I received from this incident was a look from the scooter driver, indicating that she believed me to be responsible for being in her path. With the noise and commotion in the downtown area, it was hardly a relaxing or elegant Christmas Eve dinner, but it was outside, it was warm, and the food was good. Our ability to sleep was slightly later to arrive this night due to nearby fireworks which started after 11 p.m. and continued until after midnight.

December 25 was very different from any previous Christmas and it made me realize how much I missed our family and friends in Canada. The hotel internet room provided us with time to view online Christmas cards and to catch up on correspondence with loved ones. It was a very lazy day with dips in the ocean and pool, people watching, dozing, lunch, and dinner at the hotel. For our Christmas Day dinner location an easy choice was made when we remembered our Christmas Eve outing, and rationalized that the town location was not nearly as picturesque as our own hotel. Instead of a traditional turkey dinner, I had barracuda (without cranberry sauce), but with veggies, a baked potato, and deep-fried ice cream for dessert. After dinner we were able to use the hotel phone in an attempt to call Adrian and family in Canada, but there was no answer. All we could do was leave an answering machine message instead of enjoying some face time with them. How disappointing was that?



Island Tour#1

OK, enough sitting around! It was my understanding that Ivan had previously indicated that he would go out and about on Boxing Day, so to that end my mind was made up for a shopping excursion. However, Ivan decided at breakfast that what I thought he had said didn't have a specified day attached, or a year for that matter. Undaunted and deciding

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

that this would be an outing day for me, I set about arranging transportation to Chaweng, which is a large beach area located about a 20-minute drive from Lamai. At the hotel front desk, I was informed that a taxi to this location would cost 400 baht, approximately \$10. Since this seemed like a rather steep price to me, I decided to walk to the main road and try, Mongolian style, to catch some form of transportation for myself. My hunch was right. It turned out that I didn't have to do anything, because in rather short order, a taxi appeared. After negotiating a fare of 200 baht, I felt quite pleased with myself. The driver deposited me in the middle of the busy Chaweng shopping area that runs parallel to the beach, and off I strolled. After walking a long distance, I made several purchases, one of which was a lovely canvas cross-stitched purse. There were countless offers of "Hello madam, we have something to fit", and I thought "Yes, of course you do, in a large or an extra large size". Having endured more than enough of these sales pitches, I decided it was time to find my way back to the hotel. Unlike Boxing Day in North America, I discovered that Thailand did not follow the same tradition of Boxing Day sale prices. And why should they? For my return ride, my Mongolian method of finding transportation was successful, and this time it was by scooter taxi, which I found to be quite pleasant. That is, except for the fact that in the back of my mind I was saying to myself that if I were to fall off, I would be toast. But I managed to hang on and arrived safely at Bill Resort. Lunch and dinner were again at the hotel and after our late dinner we made another attempt to call Canada. This time we were successful and thoroughly enjoyed our conversation with Adrian, Kathleen, and Daniel.

One of the purchases I made that day was Elephant Glue to fix Ivan's sandal. The glue worked really well to bond the shoe sole, and it was equally efficient in bonding my fingers to the glue tube. However, I managed to quickly extricate two thumbs and an index finger from the tube and then promptly threw the rest of the glue in the garbage. It took several days for the feeling to return in my fingers, but the sandal is almost as good as new.

After another delicious breakfast, I once again tried the hotel internet, but it was not working and I learned later that this was due to damage done to the cables from earthquakes that had taken place in Taiwan or China or somewhere in between. For Ivan, one dip, one snooze, one book, "The Time Machine", and one lunch later, he decided that he needed some t-shirts. We then walked beach-side to Lamai which took us about 10 minutes. Two t-shirts were purchased for Ivan and a money exchange was made for US dollars, then it was time to head back to the hotel. Deciding to try something different for dinner, we headed down the beach to an Austrian restaurant nearby, and had a lovely, quiet, beach-side dinner with very hospitable restaurant hosts.

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

On December 28, I decided that a new place was needed to relax and it would be with Ivan on the beach, rather than at the pool. As it turned out, this was somewhat of a mistake. Even though I'd been sitting in the shade under an umbrella all the time, my legs ended up with uncomfortable splotchy sunburns. I had forgotten to put any sunblock on them that morning. Silly me! Having been quite warm on the beach, it was time to take a dip in the pool to cool off. Ivan remained on the beach to chat with two Australians, who were originally from Bosnia and Serbia. This meant that I was in the pool on my own, and after diving in and puddling around in the water a bit, I climbed the ladder to get out. Then I noticed that someone had arrived, poolside, with a new baby, so I just had to inspect this little creature. But what was wrong? Everything I looked at was rather blurry. It didn't take long to discover that my glasses, which had been lodged in their correct location on the bridge of my nose prior to diving, had apparently dislodged during my plunge. I could see them lying on the bottom of the pool, but when I dove in again to retrieve them, I couldn't see clearly enough to be able to pick them up by hand. It was time to get creative. Positioning myself close enough to their supposed location, I used my feet to eventually lift them to the surface so I could then place them on my face. Needless to say, it took all the composure I could muster not to start laughing like a loon as I climbed out of the pool. By the way, the baby was cute. Dinner was again at the Austrian restaurant, mostly because an announcement had been made the previous night that there would be a barbecue dinner. As before, the food was really tasty.

Today was another full day of adventure for me. Another "moving experience" was calling! The time seemed right to go to Nathon, which is the main docking area for mainland ferries and where I could explore points of interest and do more shopping. Ivan almost came with me, but quickly decided that he would be more content with relaxing at the pool. So I was on my own to head up the hill from our villa and onto the main road. After some hiking in what I presumed to be the correct direction, according to my map, I finally decided it was time to seek some sort of transport. The first vehicle to arrive was a scooter taxi and after negotiating a price, we were on our way. The road traversed the island, but it was nonetheless quite scenic. Near the main wharf where the ferry takes passengers to the Thai mainland, I ended my ride. From there I began to wander the main streets, poking my head into the shops, of which there were many. It was not as crowded here, and there seemed to be a more relaxed atmosphere than the previous days of shopping in Lamai or Chaweng.

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia



Island Tour#2

When I'd had enough wandering, poking, and shopping, I meandered back to the dock area to look for return-trip transportation to the hotel. For this passage I selected a truck-type vehicle. This particular conveyance required its passengers to climb into the back of a covered pick-up truck and to ring a bell at a determined location to debark. Before clambering onto this vehicle, I showed the driver my map to indicate where I would like to get off. It is fortunate that I did, because when he finally stopped at the place I had indicated, the scenery did not look familiar but I took my leave anyway. Once I figuratively hit the ground and looked around, I realized that he had, after all, deposited me as requested. On the last leg of this day's adventure, it had started to rain, but by the time I left the truck taxi, the rain had stopped. This was fortunate because it was still a bit of a hike from the main road to our hotel villa.

For our last day in Koh Samui, we had almost all day to sit and relax. The entertainment of the day was watching the decorations being built and/or installed for the New Year's Eve celebrations taking place the next day. Since checkout time was at noon, our belongings were left at the hotel office. This allowed us to conveniently change into travel clothes in the lobby washroom later in the day. With the hotel library out of English books, any idea of passing the time by reading was out of the question, unless one was fluent in German. The few dips I had in the pool, this time intentionally without my glasses on, were quite refreshing. After changing and gathering our belongings, at 6 p.m. the hotel van transported us to the airport. Our arrival was very early, relative to our flight time, and since there were so many flights to the mainland, we managed to book an earlier departure to Bangkok. This provided us with much less waiting time at the airport for our uneventful flight.

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

Once in the Bangkok airport, we were disappointed to find on the departure board that our 1:30 a.m. flight to Beijing had been delayed and would be leaving instead at 2:50 a.m.! "Oh joy!" Not only is this a terrible time to take any flight, but it also put our connecting flight to UB in jeopardy. Between our flights, there would be only about a two-hour window of time. When we were finally able to check in to get our boarding passes, the young lady at the counter decided to give us some grief over our Mongolian Entry/Exit visas. Why this was of concern to her is beyond our comprehension. After several phone calls on her part, and much explanation on our part as to why our passports contained more than one of these Entry/Exit visas, she finally allowed us our boarding passes. We were fortunate to be assigned seats close to the exit doors to allow a quick exit for our next flight. Having a window seat, I immediately put the thankfully offered pillow to good use. I was so tired that I missed the takeoff. Imagine that! Me, the queen of light sleepers! I must have dozed on and off for most of the journey, because this flight did not seem to take as long as it had for our Beijing to Bangkok arrival.

Snow greeted us on the ground in Beijing. We hustled off the plane and hurried to connect with our next flight. It happened that we had one half-hour to spare before boarding, then another three-quarters of an hour delay for late-arriving passengers, and plane de-icing. Our seats were located in the emergency exit row and therefore had ample leg room, which was very comfortable.

### ULAANBAATAR

In UB we were expecting to be greeted by Doogii at the airport arrivals area, but it turned out that she had gone to Beijing and instead had sent her younger brother to meet us. It was a pleasure to see a friendly face as we ran the usual gauntlet of taxi drivers who wanted us to use their services.

Entering our apartment at about noon, there were some essential duties to fulfill: watering the plants; retrieving my computer from school; and, changing into heavier shirts and long johns. Also, since it was New Year's Eve and a big night for the Mongolian people, I thought it would be prudent to buy essential and much needed groceries, as early in the day as possible. Hence, off we went to the bus stop where we waited for a few minutes until an unknown, large vehicle pulled up and asked if we wanted a ride. We thought the occupants were only talking to the Mongolian gentleman at the bus stop with us, but it turned out that they were talking to us all, so we all climbed into the Hummer and were driven directly to the UB Mart. Our driver spoke English rather fluently. When I told her that I was a teacher at ASU, she indicated that she would be sending her two-year-old son there, when he was of school age.

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

At the UB Mart, we ran into Oyuna, her husband, and son. We had a brief chat and then went our separate shopping ways. As I was waiting for Ivan, who was at the checkout counter with our groceries, I noticed Oyuna talking to the checkout clerk. Ivan told me a few minutes later that she was talking to "her people". Since she owns this store, she wanted to make sure that her employees made a special effort to help us whenever we came to shop. This was an appreciated gesture! Returning to our apartment, we had an early dinner. I went to bed about 7 p.m., because I didn't feel like I was functioning on all cylinders after our marathon return trip from Thailand. Ivan stayed awake and managed to ring in the Hamilton New Year on our web cam with Adrian. He informed me the next day that from his "smoking room" balcony at our apartment building, he could see midnight fireworks that lit up the UB sky. These were apparently part of the traditional Mongolian New Year celebrations. It's unfortunate that I missed both his online chat with Adrian and the fireworks, but I definitely would not have been coherent company if I had tried to stay awake until midnight.



Our mouldy greeting when returning to UB

## Thailand Christmas, New Year's Mongolia

On New Year's Day Ivan and I had a very moving experience, of the furniture kind. Knowing that our apartment has a dampness and mould issue, we realized that since it had not been inhabited during our 12-day absence, the situation would be worse than usual. We were correct. Not only was the north-east corner of our bedroom damp and mouldy, but also I discovered that the area behind the headboard of the bed had the same problem. We moved the bed as well as the very large bedroom wardrobe, to locations other than on outside walls. This was quite a feat, because both pieces of furniture are especially substantial in size and in weight. Once the walls appeared to be dry, we wiped them with a cloth, which ended up removing the paint and only some of the mould. I'm sure the situation will improve now that we are home and can open the bedroom window each day, to let some of the cold, dry air into the room. Other than completing a first-day-of-the-year laundry upstairs, I did not set foot out of the apartment.

... And so 2007 begins, with new and unique experiences ...

## Last Week of Holidays, First Week of School

January 2 to 8, last week of holidays

It was absolutely wonderful to have this stretch of time to recover and regroup from our Christmas travel. This was a week of overseas chat with family and friends, shopping and enjoying some meals in downtown restaurants, as well as watching DVD movies on the computer. Marvelous! In fact, this whole Mongolian experience would be even more wonderful if I didn't have to work for a living, but it comes with the great bonus of knowing that I love the children.

During this week of rest, we disassembled our Christmas decorations, which was a task that took about 10 minutes. It was definitely not the same production as at home, with our large boxes of holiday adornments. Those always took hours and hours to set up, then not long after, to pack up again for storage. For this year's decorations, it was so much easier to take one strand of plastic lights from around our living room and bathroom door frames, which was the only place they would fit, and to remove 20 felt Mongolian-style ornaments from the branches of our Christmas twig-tree-in-a-bottle. Since we have yet to put any pictures or other homey-type effects on most of our stark white walls, our Christmas tree creation added an interesting holiday atmosphere to our kitchen-dining area. In addition, these somewhat sparse decorations also look festive in the window when viewed from the outside of our apartment building. Would I ever think about not decorating for Christmas? Never.

Along with the minor production of removing decorations, and to attempt some closure with our mould problem, I wiped down the unsightly-appearing, unhealthy-looking patches on our bedroom walls with a bleach solution. We now have bi-coloured walls because the bleach removed more of the paint than it did of the mould, which makes me question the quality of the paint.

A Mongolian neighbour, who lives in our building, has been preparing for the next local holiday, which is called Tsaagan Tsar or White Moon. In anticipation for this event, and for whatever it is, she has been cooking up a storm. We currently see the fruits of her labours, her buzz creations, set out for freezing on the small balcony at the end of our hallway. This balcony now appears to be in use as her own private food repository and it could be a practical situation for refrigeration. However, what she might not know is that it's also Ivan's smoking balcony. The ravens have discovered her stash of goodies and have taken great delight in the delicacies that are provided there. If ravens had lips, they would certainly be smacking

## Last Week of Holidays, First Week of School

them in anticipation of continuing to sample this new food resource. As well, they're possibly looking forward to what might be served up next on the menu. It should be mentioned that it is now obvious that the ASU teachers are not the only ones living in this building. It came as a surprise to us when we started to notice people, other than teachers, who occupy apartments that are not otherwise in use this year.



Mongolian buuz (steamed dumplings) on the balcony

While we were away, the number of emails grew exponentially, and with this time between returning from holiday and resuming work, I was able to catch up with most of them. Along with responding to personal mail, I also deleted the many unwanted ads for everything, which I have never in my life wanted. This was also an ideal time to enjoy continued online chat or video conversations with relatives and friends. Ivan is finally coming to the realization that maybe, after all, the computer is more useful than he'd previously thought.

## Last Week of Holidays, First Week of School

Planning lessons was another task on my to-do list, and I chose Thursday for this job. As happens on occasion, my best laid plan was not to be, due to a power outage at school and in our apartment building. Despite this inconvenience, I was able to finish most of what I wanted to accomplish, by taking advantage of the battery-only laptop feature. In addition, once power was restored, another partial day was spent at school to make use of the printer and photocopier. School access was important to Ivan as well, for his wish to use the library for borrowing two new books. To date, during his stay, he has read or is in the process of reading almost 30 books!

By the end of the week, some of the other teachers had been returning to UB from various parts of the world. With my extra preparation completed, I felt much more relaxed for the next round of teaching. Maybe it was this feeling of relaxation that caused me to recall one night that I might have lost my Mongolian work permit, since I hadn't come across it in a while. In an attempt to rid my angst regarding this possibly missing document, Ivan and I spent a considerably frantic amount of time looking everywhere for it, but to no avail. However, another teacher, who has been a long-time resident in Mongolia, assured me that if misplaced, it would not be a problem. On that note, I went to bed feeling very relieved. The following morning, I arose, went straight to my passport in the dresser, and what do you know, there it sat, stuck neatly in the middle, right where I had so carefully placed it.

Since Ivan had not yet made the trek to the Sky Department Store, we decided to take the bus downtown then walk the two or three kilometres the rest of the way. Along our route, we unexpectedly found the shop of an optometrist, who had been recommended to us by another teacher. We popped in to inquire about purchasing new glasses for Ivan. His eyes had not been checked for five years or so and because he was having headaches, probably from the amount of book reading he was now doing, he thought it prudent to have his vision looked after professionally. We were stunned at the charge for his eye examination which was the equivalent of about \$2, and the cheapest frames were about \$5. So without trying to appear too astonished at the unbelievably low cost for frames, Ivan casually remarked that the more expensive ones looked really nice. That's what he chose to buy. One half hour later, and about \$63 US lighter, Ivan had his new glasses. His eyes had been tested, frames purchased, and lenses installed on the spot. He has been very pleased with his new spectacles, although he still has some headaches, but we now think that these could very well be caused by changes in barometric pressure at our UB altitude of 4,429-feet.

In same area of the city we decided to check out a Ukrainian restaurant for lunch. The décor and staff costumes were wonderful, although it looked more than unusual to see

## Last Week of Holidays, First Week of School

Mongolian people dressed in Ukrainian folk costumes. The restrooms were excellent, which was a real plus in my books, but the food was not the best. Let's just say that we had an interesting lunchtime adventure.

Thinking that with mid-March approaching when Ivan would depart for home, it was time to start the rounds of visiting some of the city's museums. Our first stop was the Choijin Lama Temple Museum, which was built between 1904-1908. It was a very interesting site to see. Regrettably, we had not dressed warm enough, especially since the entire tour took place, walking outside from one unheated building to another. Who knew? But, we are in Mongolia after all. By the time we arrived at the gift shop ger, we were just about frozen, but not frozen enough to skip this part of the tour to purchase a few souvenirs. For our next stop, we hobbled painfully to the Mongolian Costumes Museum, only to find it closed. Although we were hardly able to feel our feet and faces by this time, we bravely continued to Millie's restaurant for coffee, but it was also closed. Gritting our teeth, we made our way to the UB Delicatessen to share an order of American khuushuur along with a cappuccino each, and attempted to thaw every cell of our almost frozen bodies.

We did end up making a quick stop that day at the Sky Department store. It was not the highlight of our day, unless we chose to count the unusual sight of "free-range" cattle strolling along a riverbank located under a bridge near the store.

After arriving home that evening, and not having anything better to think about, I was establishing in my mind, a conveniently inexpensive way for Ivan to contact his sisters in Croatia. Up to this point, the time difference between our countries had not coincided with the good rates on our phone card. Several of the other teachers have been using "Skype Out" as a way to connect with the rest of the world. For the one-time cost of \$14, Canadian, the charge for connecting from our computer to a landline in Canada, is just over two cents per minute, and about four cents per minute for Croatia. This sounded like a good deal, so after signing up for this service, Ivan was able to use it successfully to converse with one of his sisters, although for this first attempt the sound quality was not entirely satisfactory.

On the last day of our holiday, I went to the school since Doogii let me know that the TAs would be meeting there and she asked if I would be coming in as well. I hadn't been planning to do so, but I agreed. Doogii had been to Beijing with her family for the holidays and told me that she had a gift for me. I was absolutely blown away, when she presented me with a four-piece outfit in lovely embossed chocolate-brown corduroy, complete with jacket, pants, skirt, and lace blouse. Then and there, she wanted me to try on some of the pieces, so after carefully locking the classroom door, the pants were first. They fit! Not only did she

## Last Week of Holidays, First Week of School

do a wonderful job selecting the colour and the size, but also the style. No more would I look like an “old Russian woman”, as she has teasingly told me several times. This generous gift was such an unexpected surprise that I wanted to share her kindness with Ivan. Off we trotted to our apartment. Putting together the whole outfit, this time with the skirt, both she and I were really thrilled with its classy looks and just-right fit. After the fashion show, she stayed with us for soup, then rejoined her colleagues at school.

Ivan and I had another mission to accomplish that last day. There’s a favourite DVD store where we have made many purchases. Every once in a while, one of our purchases does not work correctly and we’ve learned that if the defective DVD is returned, the store will allow a substitution. After completing this transaction, we did a rerun to the Costumes Museum which was once again closed. However, on the way there, we were poking in and out of various stores and by chance, we walked into one, where there was a whole display of just about every type of cooking implement one might need. Before this discovery, we had been trying, in vain, to find some sort of reasonably priced dish to use in our microwave. Then after some searching in this new store, we discovered what we were looking for. Other items were also collected, including a knife sharpener and a roasting pan that looks more like a cake pan, but it will work just fine in our oven.

For another errand on our outing, we took a slip of post office paper that had been sent to the school with no name included. The paper was given to Ivan on the off-chance that it had originally been addressed to him. School officials knew that a long lost eight-pound package of Turkish coffee, which had been mailed to Ivan by his sister in mid-November, had not arrived. It was sincerely hoped that the presentation of this document at the post office would indicate that it had something to do with Ivan’s missing mail. Unfortunately, this was not to be, which was a huge disappointment, since Ivan’s current Turkish coffee supply is almost depleted. So it was time to leave that building. It makes us think that the package had actually arrived, but had deliberately not been forwarded to its intended recipient. What we picked up instead were three packages for other school staff. With the Post Office packages for others, and our cooking items in tow, we hailed a return ride to our apartment. It should be explained that unfortunately, mail delivery is not available for our apartment building. An option for staff to receive personal mail was supposed to exist, by being addressed to teaching staff, via the school mailing address. Even with this option, the hope of receiving mail from home has been almost nonexistent.

Arriving home, we were pleasantly surprised to see that the long-awaited television cable was being strung to our building. That was good news. The bad news was that each

## Last Week of Holidays, First Week of School

apartment was only provided with a five-metre length of interior cable. Since our TV and outlet would be located in two different rooms, this shorter cable length was something we would have to consider before rearranging our furniture.

Our new kitchen purchases now allowed us to be more adventurous in our meal planning. I was now able to create my “world famous” tuna casserole for supper that evening, and we were both extremely pleased with the way this meal turned out. Our day had definitely ended on a positive note!

That evening, after first adjusting my computer microphone, I made a phone call to Canada and had a perfectly delightful conversation with a friend. She said that it sounded like my head was in a box, but what else is new for me, or for the computer? Even with wonky sound being the case this time, it was more easily understandable, than during our previous connections. As a result of this success, in finding a new method of communication to the "outside world", our twice weekly searches to find kiosks downtown that sell our favourite phone cards will now be a thing of the past. This works very well for us!

Kim and Dave returned from their Christmas visit with their families, in Canada and were delighted to find that the school skating rink was ready to use. Despite the bitter cold weather, they bundled up and tried their skates on the new outdoor ice surface. It looked like fun, but since I don't have skates, I opted to go outside to take a few pictures, before my camera froze, along with the rest of me.



The skating rink is open

## Last Week of Holidays, First Week of School

### January 9 to 14-first week back at school

School has started again and the children seemed quite happy to have returned. It is amazing to see the joy that the Grade 2 & 3 students still have, when it comes to attending school, and the "Wow" that they are still able to feel and say, when something exceptional happens. Today was also a special personal day, because by some miracle we received, by mail, five Christmas cards! Perhaps they may have been on vacation somewhere and didn't feel like being delivered? That's my theory anyway. I have it on good authority that they were sent in plenty of time to arrive for Christmas. Our school secretary handed them to me, at the end of the school day. It was uplifting to read the notes that were included and to enjoy the enclosed pictures. The cards have been ensconced on our window sill, although somewhat out of date, but nonetheless, very much welcomed and appreciated.

While I was at school during the day and then enjoying an evening out, Ivan had been doing a massive cleaning to eliminate the dust that was created after we finally relented and asked the school maintenance people to remove "Mt. Everest" from our bedroom floor. No, it was not snow, but a mountain of flooring that had slowly grown in size because the installers did not seem to have mastered the fine art of laminate floor installation. Presumably, the gym floor "speed bump" issue had not been a lesson learned about flooring installation? "Sigh". Between the dust that was created from the saw and the dust that was dislodged from the flooring, things were quite a mess. Again, I am reminded of how fortunate I am to have Ivan's expertise and relative patience with the many and diverse chores in and around our apartment that need to be taken care of! On that first evening, Christina and I went out to attend a women's group meeting at her church. This time, it was in the form of a presentation given by a church member, who is a medical doctor. He provided many helpful tips on staying safe while in UB. Many of these ideas were not new to me, but were definitely reinforcements of the precautions that I have already been following. One pertinent point mentioned was to maintain eye contact with passers-by to dissuade would-be pickpockets. It works!

A new student arrived on Wednesday. She is in Grade 3 but is much smaller than our other girls in the same grade. Not realizing her size ahead of time, I had decided for her to be paired with two of the tallest girls in our class. Oh well. With very few girls in Grade 3, that's the way it is and that's the way it will have to stay for now. She didn't seem to mind the height difference at all.

One of our teachers, from Australia, has a friend who is working to create English-language programmes for Mongolian television. He arrived at the school, and later to our apartment building, to do some recording. Along with several other teachers, Ivan and I agreed to take

## Last Week of Holidays, First Week of School

part in this. We had the “difficult” role of acting out the last line of the Hokey Pokey song. I sang and the two of us danced in a circle. How effective we were in our short-lived acting career will probably never be known. At least by us.

It was lunch day on Thursday, for those earning points in Room 303’s, December Sticker Contest. This time, the recipients were three of our five Grade 3 girls. They seemed to enjoy themselves, as did Ivan enjoy their company.

After dinner that night, Christina and I took another trip downtown, and this time it was to see a seamstress about the possibility of having some clothing made for us. Christina is looking for a mix-and-match outfit and I am just looking for a couple of cotton blouses, so I don’t melt in our overly-warm school atmosphere. Because of our respective sizes: me, short and rotund, and her, very tall and thin, we both have difficulty purchasing clothing in this city. With the help of another teacher, who had recommended the seamstress, we found her shop/apartment and had no communication difficulties. Christina’s family ancestry made it relatively easy for her to converse in German with the seamstress, who had lived in Germany for several years. I was relegated to speaking English with the daughter. We spent time looking through style catalogues. After some discussion, a decision was made to meet again next week to purchase at a nearby market, the material needed for our new duds.

Due to my busy previous evening, the next day’s lessons were not as well organized as I would have liked. It was for me, an unusual day of ad-libbing, and it worked well. I even improvised a game for our gym class, which the kids really enjoyed. Tara, Ivan, and I went downtown for supper, with the intention of enjoying some Turkish food. Since the anticipated belly dancers were not in attendance, and had probably only been at the restaurant for December, we decided instead, to try a new restaurant called Picaso. Yes, this is the correct spelling. This establishment had a selection of Korean and Western dishes and we were pleasantly surprised that our meals were not only quite tasty, but also filling and relatively inexpensive.

On Saturday morning we tried our Skype account once again and had a great conversation with Dan, in Montreal. John, Christina, Ivan, and I then headed downtown in an attempt to remedy our too-short television cable difficulty. After dropping Christina off on another errand, three of us continued along, until we decided that we would brave the cold and the pickpockets and head to the “Market”. We had a successful buying spree, finding 20 metres of cable each, at about 30 cents a metre as opposed to 900 to 2000 cents per metre elsewhere. There were also a few other finds, including a plastic stool that I was very happy to carry for John. I used it as my means of protection, while negotiating the market crowds. Once

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we were back in the city, John and Ivan sort of disowned me, when I put the stool on my head as a more convenient way of carrying it. After that, I had to behave if any help was needed from either of my two companions. We had a great lunch, purchased a few more items including a longer LAN cable for my computer, at 25 cents a metre and 20 cents for each end. Unfortunately, on this outing, I didn't find any suitable cotton material for use by the seamstress to make my blouse. After returning to our apartment, Ivan hooked up our cable. The TV is now working quite well with 50 channels, but I'm not sure how many are in English. This evening was a really important event. We were making our debut on Channel 34, the Mongolian National Broadcasting channel, at 6:30 p.m. Since Ivan was already helping Christina and John to set up their cable, at the appointed hour, I joined them in their apartment, so we could watch the programme together. Our Hokey Pokey debut was at the very end of the half-hour show. It was worth the wait, to see quite a few of the school kids, teachers, and of course, ourselves on television. Now I guess all we have to do is sit back and wait for the royalties?

Skype came in handy this Sunday morning when we had a long conversation with Adrian. In the late morning, I decided to go to school to complete my weekly plans but first I had to find a guard, because the school door was locked: strange thing for a Sunday morning don't you think? Right in the middle of composing my weekly plan sheet the power went off, but I had saved my work quite often, so my efforts were not in vain. For the afternoon, Ivan and I were thinking about going to an art gallery downtown. We decided against that excursion, because from where we live, it was difficult to see the city, due to the air pollution from smoke and smog. It was not a pleasant sight. Instead, we opted to walk around our own area and bundled up well to keep warm. As we set off cross-country, we were surprised to see a sledding/skiing hill not too far from where we live. While walking we initially couldn't see where the rental sleds were housed. Eventually we came across them, logically located at the bottom of the hill. We later discovered that this location was visible from our kitchen window. It was an interesting walk, and with the bright sunlight the temperature did not seem to me, as cold as it might actually have been. Ivan, on the other hand, has an obvious indicator of the frigid temperature, when his moustache freezes. I am not very bothered by the cold, except for my nose, which at times feels like it is going to shatter and fall off my face. It has been said that this is a mild Mongolian winter. "Really"?

... Our days, weeks, and months in UB continue to fly, faster and faster...

## Chapter 24

# Halfway Point to End of School Year!

January 15 to 30

It must be the weather, or so I've been told, but lately I have been feeling really tired, especially when I come home from school. My chief cook and bottle washer continues to do an outstanding job of keeping me fed, wearing clean clothes, and living in a clean, tidy apartment. In the cooking sector, Ivan has somehow managed to find many of the ingredients for his and my favourite recipes. He is learning not to pass up the opportunity to buy something the first time he sees it, because it might not be there the second time in the same store. Been there, done that.



Snow angels at recess

As part of a Social Studies unit that we are currently attempting to cover, Ivan was coerced by me, to accompany our class on a walk around the perimeter of Zaisan, which is a memorial built on a nearby hill. It is clearly visible from our classroom windows. On the hilltop is a structure called the Zaisan Memorial, which was built by the Russians as a

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memorial for Russian soldiers, who were killed during WWII. Our outing ended up being a rather chilly walk. The students seemed to enjoy it, even those for whom parental notes were received, saying that their children "don't want to go outside for recess, so they must stay in the classroom". Good heavens, you'd think that we were in Mongolia or somewhere else very cold, the way they worry about the weather. Personally, I love to get out and be on yard-guard in the constantly sunny conditions that we seem to be having. The solution? One must dress warmly.

Christina and I had our second date with the seamstress to purchase material for our new clothing: Christina's suit; and my blouse. After two taxi rides, one to the seamstress's apartment and the other to the fabric store, we arrived. What a chaotic place! It was a rather small and crowded establishment, with many layers of cloth lining all the walls. There seemed to be some sort of order, as to how the types of material were displayed, so that was somewhat helpful for making our selections. In cramped situations such as this, I do not fare very well. After receiving some help to make my difficult selection from not a great choice of cotton material, I just stepped to the side to watch the others. Christina was also having difficulty finding her material, but finally made a choice after receiving some helpful advice. Once back on the street, Christina, the seamstress, her daughter, and I proceeded to hail a return taxi. Suddenly and out of nowhere, a young man appeared and attempted to grab the daughter's purse, just as we were about to enter the taxi. With the way he was grinning, Christina and I thought that the two knew each other. This was not the case. Her scream caused him to beetle off down the street, with a funny smirk on his face. This left us standing there wondering what had just happened. Left without an answer, we piled into our taxi and drove away from the scene of the almost-crime.

Scheduled that same busy evening was a parent meeting at school that was supposed to be a start for the creation of a Parent/Teacher Association. Christina and I arrived just in time, looking somewhat disheveled after our several taxi rides, and our "Close Encounter with Crime". It would appear that many of the parent arrivals had misinterpreted the purpose of the meeting. This was rather unfortunate for Doogii and me, when it turned into a mini-interview evening. How unprepared was I? Quite a lot, I would venture to say! Despite the diverse and hectic events of this evening, it ended on a high note with an after-eight-p.m. supper, consisting of a delicious pork roast, potatoes, squash, and a cabbage salad, "YUM, YUM". Thank you, Ivan!

During these two weeks, an incident at school that resulted in missing money made life quite interesting. It would appear that one of our female students had helped herself to some

## Halfway Point to End of School Year!

money from home and was generously distributing it to her classmates. After several phone calls between Doogii and the girl's family, the problem was resolved, with some consternation on several levels.

An unexpected shopping opportunity occurred in our apartment building one evening, when Christina, through a friend of a friend, was on a door-to-door sales promotion. This is not an activity usually found within her comfort zone. She was most apologetic about offering to sell genuine Mongolian cashmere sweaters for about \$30, and angora sweaters for \$15. "Oh dear, how awful?" said I. Needless to say, I used the opportunity to purchase cashmere. Even better, it fit me perfectly! It was the best part of that day, considering the fact that we had no hot water in our apartment. Again.

Friday was "crazy clothes day" which I saw as a good excuse to wear jeans, a sweatshirt inside-out, and a peaked cap inside-out and backwards. If you can picture that, then imagine me trying to look serious, while attempting to make a convincing argument to the principal (no problem), the school manager (no problem), and the managing director (big problem). The issue was about the absolute necessity to have a qualified lifeguard/swimming instructor working with our students during their weekly swim lessons, which had not yet begun. My bottom line was a flat out refusal to be responsible for taking on the role of swimming instructor for our students. Anyway, I think my inside-out appeal helped bring about a change in administrative thinking, because a week later a swimming instructor was hired. My pool pitch was perhaps the last of many others that had, in the past several months, been emphatically directed to school administration, over the lack of safety in our pool. With an instructor now hired, we will finally start our swim classes on Friday! The same day at noon, some bovine visitors came cruising by our apartment, when I was home for lunch. Since I do not speak the cow dialect in any language, I was unable to get them to stop by to join us for a bite to eat. Our Friday evening supper turned out to be a rather impromptu trip to the American Ger'll Pub, located not too far from where we live. The food was great and the company was even better. After our meal, Ivan continued his evening with a visit to Meal'ody to see colleague, Andrew and his group, who have put together a "höömii and jazz" repertoire. This is quite a combination of sounds, for sure. However, I chose not to accompany Ivan and the others because of feeling completely pooped. Any thought of taking a little nap in a restaurant, either on the table or under it, did not appeal to me, so home I went. As well, since Ivan loves to talk to people I knew how difficult it would be to drag him away, in order to accompany me home.

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Lunchtime visitors right underneath our kitchen window

What a pleasure the next morning to use Skype for a long chat with a former Hamilton colleague living in Stoney Creek, Ontario. We had taught together on several occasions throughout my teaching career. In addition, Ivan and I were also able to make several other calls to our sons. These relatively easy and inexpensive forms of online communication continue to provide us with considerable comfort.

With family and friend connections taken care of, I spent time preparing schoolwork to keep ahead of seemingly endless lesson planning tasks. Later in the day, Ivan and I decided to take an art gallery tour, which led us to visit a special exhibit by G. Odon, a famous Mongolian artist. It was a small gallery with interesting pictures, and no admission charge. After leaving the gallery we cruised past the Mongolian Costumes Museum once again, and tried the door. Lo and behold it was open! A private tour was provided for us by a very friendly matron who gave her speech in Mongolian, Russian, and English, which enabled us to get the general idea of her dialogue content. What an interesting inventory of ethnic costumes and accessories they had on display!

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Returning to our apartment, we could see quite a few people other than parents and school kids, who were taking advantage of the skating rink located behind our building. In the audience for this activity, and most probably trying to figure out where his or her skates had been packed, was a cow. This bovine appeared to be quite perplexed with the large sheet of ice where there had previously been a well-worn dirt path. With no way for him or her to cross safely and no ice skates available, was there an option to continue his or her journey?

It came to our attention that my picture has been published in the MIAT in-flight magazine. Ivan thinks it is a good picture, but in my opinion I look like an old lady. Now, if this picture insertion had happened in North America, my presumption is that the “picturee” would have sued the “picturer” for “picturing” without permission. However, that is not the way things happen here. Looking ahead, I will have to get Ivan to sneak a copy of this magazine from his seat on the plane, when he flies home in March. Apparently megabucks were spent to take out two sets of two-page spreads in this magazine to advertise the American School of Ulaanbaatar: one set in Mongolian; and, the other in English. Now, I guess I will just have to sit back and wait for the autograph seekers, royalties, or whatever comes with fame and fortune!

On Sunday of this weekend, I was suffering from a major headache, but fortunately I was able to sleep in later than usual. As a possible diversion and to clear my aching noggin, I decided to do some schoolwork, not only at home, but also at school. Need I say that this did little to alleviate the pain, so my next thought was that a walk and some shopping might help. That’s what Ivan and I decided to do, so off downtown we went by bus. Perhaps this took my mind away from my aching head, but it did little to sharpen my wits. Later, and to cap off the day, I somehow messed up my email address book. This provided me with the dubious pleasure of making the necessary corrections. The good news is that a successful outcome was the result.

The Monday version of our classroom 303 had all students in Out-to-Lunch mode, all day! We don’t know what they were doing over the weekend, but it felt as if we could have been talking to a herd of cows. Along with our own students appearing to be OTL, Doogii and I finally surmised that one of the Grade 1 students, from a classroom down the hall, was spending quite a bit of time in our next-door washroom, this particular morning. Later, it was discovered that he had pinworm, which is apparently quite common here, especially for people who live in, or travel regularly to, the countryside. At the time of this detection, we had to alter the focus of our lessons to include hygiene. This tactic seems to have been effective, with nobody in our classroom, being similarly afflicted. What a relief!

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Our first painting lesson of the year started out quite nicely on Tuesday, but ended up looking like the work of a surrealist painter, with the artistry evident on the floor, walls, and clothing. When the lesson was over, and I was leading the class back to our classroom, darling Doogii was left on clean-up duty, so that we would not be banished forever from the school's Art Studio. After-the-fact, it was a relief that not one parent complained about the additional colours that had been added to their child's clothing. For me, one of the day's highlights was during our outdoor recess. Tsedu and Min Jeong, two of our Grade 3 students, walked over to me with very serious looks on their faces, and asked me why I had such big nose holes. It was very difficult not to laugh so I didn't try. Don't ask me what my answer was, because I was too flabbergasted at the question to remember my response. I guess their English is improving?

Wednesday after school was desk-moving time. The class was still in the throes of being OTL so Doogii and I decided that a change of seating was overdue. In addition, on this day we learned that our proposed trip to the National Museum of Mongolian History was approved by the school administration. Now came the task of preparing students and parents for our visit, which will take place next week.

With money from the ASU Student Council, coupled with funds that had been donated from Canada, Ivan set off, camera in hand, on Thursday afternoon. He joined ASU Student Council members and various other school officials, who were on hand to donate specially purchased school supplies to local children in need. Ivan said afterwards that it was a really interesting experience, watching the recipient children waiting patiently with their parents, and then signing for their gifts. They appeared to be very happy with their new school materials.

This week's Staff Sports Evening took place on Thursday. Ivan met me in the school lobby and we scouted around to find everyone. Usual participants include quite a few school employees, from teachers to cleaning staff, but this week there were only a few people. Four of them were in the now-operational swimming pool. To join them, Christina let us in through a side door, then Ivan decided he would like to "take a plunge". Back he went to our apartment to get his trunks and other necessities. This included my orange bathing cap in which he looked rather charming, although he didn't agree. Needless to say, this head gear is mandatory for pool swimming, but somehow he had not thought to include it when packing for his Mongolian adventure. This was probably because he has never before been required to wear anything on his head when in for a swim.

An upcoming and unexpected change to our class swim schedule was met with frustration

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because our class trip had been planned for a particular Friday, which would also be our swim class. In an attempt not to cram these two activities into the same day, I moved the date of the trip to Thursday. This switch was easily accomplished with a few strokes of the computer keys and with a sign of relief that letters to parents about our upcoming excursion had not already been sent. We also had a class music lesson that went along swimmingly until it was completely swept out to sea by a student, who decided to become hysterical right in the middle of it. Because I'd not seen this outburst coming I felt as if I'd been hit on the side of the head by an unseen snowball. Doogii then took charge and marched to the front of the room for a 10-to-15-minute discourse with the children, in their own language. After her "vent" she marched to the back again and sat down. Stunned, I gathered my wits about me and said in my most polite voice: "Could someone please tell me what just happened?" Apparently, there had been a verbal altercation among some of our girls, and the timing of their rather delayed response had just occurred. My problem then was how to turn the lesson around and get back on track. Was I successful? Who knows.

The American Ger'll Pub once again saw a gang of us arrive for supper on Friday. We sat, ate and talked for about three hours, after which we parted ways, some going downtown and others walking back to our apartments. It was not too cold, which made it a lovely evening for walking, albeit on the usual ice-covered roads and sidewalks. Gosh, the weeks go by so fast!

On Saturday morning it was a delight to see Adrian and grandson, Daniel on our webcam. We had a great online visit with them, during which we were treated to a diaper change without being exposed to the possibility of the accompanying aroma.

It was clothing try-on day for Christina and I, so we taxied downtown with our respective spouses. All at once, and not too far from our departure point, a startling realization hit us all at the same time, when we spotted the taxi meter. Horrified, we yelled in unison, a word that sounded like a word from a Dr. Seuss story: "Zocks!", which I think means "Stop!" in Mongolian. Finally we had become aware that the taxi meter was going WAY too fast. After piling out of the car, we went our separate ways, the guys planning some serious shopping, while the girls were involving ourselves in some serious clothing fittings. After meeting our spouses again after our respective errands were complete, we enjoyed a lovely lunch together. Ivan and I then headed to the History Museum for a sneak preview of next week's class trip, so that I could look somewhat informed before escorting the students on this upcoming excursion. At the completion of our tour, Ivan discovered that he had lost one of his special Newfoundland mittens. This would not do at all! Without much thought, I raced back up the

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stairs, not realizing that the end of the tour meant that we had “closed” the museum and that all the lights were off. As I rushed by, the coat-clad museum ladies were saying something to me in Mongolian. I was responding frantically in English, but I continued pressing on. They seemed to realize that I wasn’t going to give up my quest, whatever it was. The lights were being turned on again, although rather too slowly for my safety. I continued to dash through the deserted and darkened museum rooms, even in the almost-pitch-black. Then I heard the word “Find,” which seemed to be aimed in my direction, so I bumped back down several flights of stairs and saw that Ivan had his mitten. A guard had found it somewhere along our route. And I was out of breath.

On Sunday, my lesson planning turned into a real struggle. It is very difficult to get motivated, when you don’t feel like doing something. Nevertheless, I somehow managed to complete what I’d set out to do, and only because Ivan was involved in cooking our Sunday evening potluck supper, with our upstairs neighbours. It is so nice to be able to enjoy a meal with friends without removing our bedroom slippers for our walk up a flight of stairs. Small comforts. Ivan made a spinach salad, using a combination of mandarin orange slices, mushrooms, real strawberries that came in a box, pistachios, and several other delightful ingredients. It did not include, as the recipe called for, sunflower seeds, which for an earlier meal this week had to be painstakingly shelled, because the seeds had since then been devoured. The pièce de résistance was the strawberry vinaigrette dressing that Ivan put together. Raspberries were nowhere to be found, so strawberries had to suffice and they did very well. It was a wonderful meal.

Sleep on Sunday night was marred by my bad dream about school and as could be imagined, this does not bode well for a good start to the upcoming day ahead, which was the case at least for part of the day. Just as the school day began, two familiar, but very disgruntled faces appeared at the window in our classroom door. What happened was that the ESL teaching schedule had been changed, but the school administration had not officially informed the teachers about this update. I left the classroom duties in Doogii’s capable hands, to take care of calming these unhappy language instructors. There had been some forewarning about this change, but follow up communication was evidently lacking for us all. Returning to the classroom, while spiralling around in circles trying to wrap my head around this altered teaching schedule, I caught a glimpse of a man coming up the stairs with a basket of red roses. I wondered whose birthday it might be and when I returned to the classroom, I found that Doogii and I were the recipients! Along with the roses was a chocolate bar and a card. Our only Korean student Min Jeong, bless her heart, had written the card and apologized for

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having missed "Presents Day". It was difficult for us to keep straight faces, because neither of us had any clue about this special day that we had inadvertently missed. It was a very sweet gesture. However, it did nothing to soothe my exasperation, when Min Jeong announced shortly after our gifts arrived that she had forgotten most of her schoolwork at home. What does a teacher do in a situation like that? I wrote her a thank-you note for the gifts.

Today, Tuesday, was DVD Day. For our Social Studies unit, a special programme had been planned. Ivan and I had purchased the "The Cave of the Yellow Dog" video: and it applied directly to a subject we are discussing in class. I was really excited to be able to provide this viewing experience for the students. That is, until close to the classroom entrance, the TV cart, procured from the library, lost two of its four wheels as I transported it along the hallway. As luck would have it, one of the Grade 8 girls was close by, and helped with this cart-moving procedure. Fearing that the TV was going to launch itself over the third-floor balcony railing, I sent my Grade 8 helper to our classroom for Doogii's help. Before she got too far another Grade 8 student rushed up to assist. Meanwhile, I was trying to balance the cart, TV, DVD player, and various other pieces of equipment to avoid an imminent disaster. Between the two girls, they were able to carry the TV into our classroom. Then Doogii and I spent some time: first trying to take the rather useless wheels off the cart, so we could set the TV on it for better viewing; and second, finding a location in the classroom where the strong sunlight coming in from the windows would not take away from the quality of the picture. With Cart #1 not being a safe choice as a TV viewing stand, Doogii headed to the school library to retrieve Cart #2, which had wheels not much better than Cart #1. This second cart-fetching was done to prepare a relatively safer perch for the TV, as well as to provide as optimal as possible, a clear, crisp view of the TV screen. Cart location was important because of having to take into consideration the total lack of classroom window coverings. That was just the start of our problems because then there was the question of how to correctly hook up the pieces of equipment, to actually play the DVD. After a grand attempt to get things running myself and in doing so, finding that I was losing patience, Doogii and I opted to ask our next-door classroom teacher for assistance. Between us all, we finally managed to get the movie going, but not before the realization that we would not be able to watch it entirely before the end of the school day. Reminder to self: have all components available well in advance: ensure that all equipment is usable; and be well-versed in equipment operation!

... Interesting upcoming events are in the works...

## Five New "Events"

January 31 to February 9

It is amazing what one can achieve while waiting for the bathroom water to reach a sufficiently tolerable temperature to have a shower. This does not include the toilet tank water, which has more often than not been almost hot enough to hard-boil an egg. On these waiting-for-hot-water occasions: I can get caught up with answering all my email messages: or possibly to make a return trip to Canada. Then, without a warning or an explanation given, there are times when there is no hot water at all. These issues make for fairly interesting bathing and dish-washing routines.



Our class was finally able to experience the National Museum of Mongolian History outing. Since no parents volunteered to accompany us, I volunteered Ivan to help chaperone. He came along quite willingly, although it was a bit of a rerun of our previous lost mitten visit. There was certainly a new dimension to this second trip that we experienced through the eyes of the kids. They are still young enough to "ooh" and "aah" about some of the historical items that were on display. For the grand finale of the tour, we were taken to the children's room where there were many different types of traditional clothing to try on and various activities to do. Everyone in our group, including Ivan, Doogii, and myself, took advantage of the costume try-on. Some enjoyed playing the traditional games,

including one using sheep's ankle bones, which they seemed to have played before.

With the swimming pool in full operation, I finally took advantage of the opportunity to try it out for Thursday's weekly, sports night. Ivan opted not to swim this time, leaving our

## Five New "Events"

family bathing cap for me to use. The only people in the pool this evening were two of our TAs, who had received lessons from our swimming instructor. With the landlocked location of this country, and very few bodies of water in close proximity, most of the population has not had the opportunity, or a reason, to learn to swim. Propelling myself the length of the pool was not difficult, considering its diminutive size and depth. I remembered with amazement, my first view of this space, last August. At that time it was only a partially dug hole, with a shovel stuck in the earth beside it. It is amazing what can be accomplished with the calculated determination of a school owner, and possibly being able to by-pass building codes that may or may not exist. This was first evident when the inaugural opening of the school building took place before it was fully ready to be used for its intended purpose. With building codes to adhere to in Canada, this premature opening would probably not have happened, but who knows?

Our students have now been swimming for several weeks and they seem to enjoy this aquatic experience. With being able to wangle the Friday afternoon time, it creates a more relaxing way to finish the school week. Well, relaxing may be a bit of an exaggeration. The after-swim portion of showering and changing into street clothes before heading home, can be a bit of a challenge, time-wise, for both students and teachers. However, this process is hurried along somewhat, if it happens that there is no hot water available for showers. As of February 12, there has been a revision in school hours, which now end one-half hour earlier. It means a shorter swim time but does not appear to have fazed the children. For Doogii and me it is a relief. Now, with less time in the pool area, there are fewer blue-lipped, shivering children who, despite their goose bumps, find it difficult to leave their watery playground.

Friday, February 2nd was Teacher's Day and apparently this is a yearly event. From our students' parents, Doogii and I received many beautiful gifts, ranging from flowers to Pavarotti CDs. We were even sought out by one parent, while supervising in the pool area, and each presented with a gorgeous bouquet of roses. Any bouquets that are fashioned in UB, not only include the flowers, but they are also bedecked with added bows, colourful mesh, and crepe-type paper wrapping. The resulting effects make any type of bouquet look quite spectacular. Doogii immediately left the pool in search of containers of water for our beautiful roses. We both love flowers, and were really touched by the generosity of the parents on this special day. For me, it was certainly an unexpected occasion!

Christina and I now have the finished products from our seamstress, and we are quite happy with the results. After we picked up our items, Ivan and I met downtown for dinner, and had a lovely meal at the Veranda restaurant. Christina and John had other plans,

## Five New "Events"

and went their own way in another direction. After leaving the restaurant, we caught the #7 Zaisan bus home. This ride was a very special experience when encountering a fellow passenger, wearing very ornate traditional clothing with red, gold, and blue embroidery. He looked like he had come straight from the countryside, garbed in the most ornate deel that I had seen to date, especially on a man. You never know who will be on the bus and what they might be wearing, from western-type to traditional clothing. We have come to the observable conclusion that whenever and wherever people in traditional clothing cross our paths, they are never dressed in this manner as a costume to be worn, but as their everyday attire.

And speaking of bus rides, it can be said that sometimes it is wiser to opt for a bus or taxi ride, rather than walking. While I was at school one day, Ivan went for a stroll and was accosted by an inebriated man who was determined to pick a fight, but my husband managed to escape safely without any entanglement. Adventures, always adventures.

Throughout this year, Oyuna has thoughtfully organized interesting activities for our school staff. For this next outing, she decided that teachers, teaching assistants, and all support staff were in need of a bonding experience, so a winter picnic would be in order. This sounded like a great idea, even though it was coming up to report card time again and the teachers' minds were drifting off in that direction. On the appointed day, we all met at the Voyage Hotel and hopped on a school bus that was smaller than school buses at home, and off we went to our destination. After about a one-hour trip outside the city, we veered off-road and headed along a snow-covered trail to the Bumbot Ger Camp. It appeared at first that we were going to have to go to Plan B for our picnic location, when a rather elderly and unhappy looking deel-wearing woman emerged from her ger. She informed us that nobody had let the camp know about our arrival. That was when I decided to go for a little walk and let others figure out what to do. Nobody in our group appeared to be in a flap about this unexpected turn of events. On returning from my stroll, I was not surprised to see that there was already one ger beginning to get warmed up, using a wood and coal stove. Another ger was on its way to becoming "habitable". Lunch consisted of horse meat (which was actually quite tasty), pickles, and open-faced sandwiches with ham, cucumber, and tomato. As usual, on the campgrounds, unfettered cows wandered the area and appeared to take more interest in our before-lunch downhill sledding than the soccer game, which took place after our meal. Maybe the bovines didn't have their soccer shoes available?

I'm always afraid to drink too many liquids of any variety on these excursions due to the toilet situation, especially when visiting the countryside. I knew that I needed to keep up with my fluid intake, so I took advantage of the bottled water and a glass of white wine.

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I found later that the "facilities" consisted of either the great and cold outdoors, or of an outhouse that was on a bit of a lean and looked inside like it was either full or frozen over. I'm getting pretty good at improvising in situations such as this so don't ask how I managed this time.

The camp had sleds for rent at 1000 tugrik per hour. Most of us had a go at this activity, although the snow-cover was sparse, and there were grass patches along our downward slope. Christina is very tall, and I of diminutive stature, trudged up the hill and folded ourselves onto one of these too-small sleds. We then proceeded to travel a very short distance down the slope, only to make an unplanned 45 degree turn and fall off rather unceremoniously. Undaunted, we scrunched onto the sled again and, for our second run, arrived without incident at the bottom of the hill. Others had spills similar to those we had, but some were more spectacular than others. One adventurous twosome ran into an obvious pile of dirt and I don't know why they didn't change course in mid slide. Another pair managed to ram their sled headlong into a ger. Luckily, it was not a brick wall. Almost everyone, including Ivan, had a snowy face-washing. This was painful as well as cold, because of the bits of grit and sand that were in the hands-full of snow being rubbed on unsuspecting faces. Some also, had snow forcefully dumped down their backs or fronts. Mongolian culture tends to be very physical, so nobody seemed to take offence during these activities. Be that as it may, I am glad it was not me on the receiving end of the "fun"! Maybe in this case, age had its privilege?

Because it was a rather cold day, I decided to wear my Buryat snow boots. This was a good choice for warmth, but a poor choice for grip in the snow. Although I had taken other boots with me, I chose to stick with these warmer ones and only fell three times due to the slippery soles. The first time I hurt my shoulder, which had caused me some grief, in past years at home, before a welcome cortisone injection. My second fall happened when I was on a solo walk and during that episode I hurt my knee, but it only hurt briefly. The third fall was the one that undid me. It was definitely not a case of "Third Time Lucky".

For our second picnic activity, it was decided that a soccer game would be just right, and almost everyone joined it except me and a couple of other timid souls. After a short time of being a spectator and not being able to stand by and watch everyone having so much fun, I decided to participate. Maybe I could just stand in goal with Catherine and stick my foot out to block the ball if it passed by. Ivan was playing defence, and I knew he would be vigilant to keep the ball from coming my way too often. The time arrived when Catherine decided to move out onto the field where the action was, so I was left on my own, playing goalie. How ill advised was that on my part? Changing ends took place during the game, not due to game

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rules or regulations, but because one of the teams was complaining that it was not fair that they had to constantly shoot uphill. Shortly after I had relocated to this new goal end, a ball was coming towards me. Taking a mighty swipe with my foot, I missed the ball, had fall number three, and landed heavily on my wrist. While I was outside in the cold it didn't feel too painful, but after going into the warmth of the ger, it started to swell and was rather uncomfortable.



It was a cold day for sledding & outdoor soccer.

After the soccer game, we had a dinner of mutton and boiled potatoes and carrots. Several of the staff, including Oyuna, have February birthdays, and they were acknowledged with

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gifts and the birthday song. Ivan, in the meantime, was giving me "the look" across the ger, indicating that there would be BIG trouble if I said anything about his February 11th birthday. I didn't, but I felt like doing so. After some singing and many toasts, which I thought might never come to an end, we hopped on the bus for our return journey. Thankfully, the driver brought us back to the apartment, rather than dropping us off at our hotel departure point.

The night of the picnic, I was up with a stomach that was not cooperating with the rest of my body, and I was feeling rather faint. It took me a while to muster the stability to get some ice for my wrist. In doing so, I spilled ice cubes on the couch, where I had escaped to be closer to the bathroom, in case of an "emergency". It was quite a night. In the morning, after letting her know of my ailments, Christina put her much-appreciated nursing skills to use and kindly brought me a Tensor™ bandage which made my arm feel much more secure and protected, but did not do much to reduce the pain.

Monday arrived and my arm was not feeling any better, still swollen and bruised, so Doogii said she would take me to have it X-rayed at the hospital, where her mother is an X-ray technician. School was out at 3 p.m. and, like a flash, she commandeered the family driver of one of our students to transport us to the hospital. As Ivan and I sprinted along the antiquated-looking hospital corridors after her, Doogii discovered that her mother had left work for the day. Nevertheless, she was able to catch someone else that she knew, who could come to our aid. Before we knew it, with Ivan accompanying me, I had two X-rays taken on my hand without being given the usual protective lead apron, and with Ivan and Doogii remaining in the X-ray room. During this short period of time, I had also seen two doctors who read the radiographs and proclaimed that there did not seem to be a fracture. Nobody even touched me to see where it hurt, or whatever is usually done in these situations. I was very grateful not only for this medical attention, which lasted about 15 minutes in total, but also for knowing that my hand would not fall off if I moved it in the wrong direction. There was no charge for my hospital visit! Was this another wonder accomplished by Doogii? At the hospital exit, we parted ways with countless thanks to Doogii, and started off towards our bus to return home. The next thing we knew, an SUV pulled up beside us and offered a ride. This unexpected transportation happened, again from Doogii coming to our rescue. When leaving us at the hospital, she had spotted one of our students and her driver. They were on their way back to school, because the student had forgotten a book that she needed to complete her homework. It goes without saying, that this unexpected ride home was more than welcome. It was also not an out-of-the-way request for the driver, with our apartment location being next door to the school, so it worked perfectly.

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A new student enrolled in our class, and arrived on February 6. Thankfully he speaks English quite well. The boys in our class are thrilled to have another male classmate, and he seems to fit in quite well. Our Grade 2/3 class is now at the full capacity of 20 students for a split grade.

A representative of the Embassy of Canada in Beijing visited the school to meet our Canadian teachers one morning. Although we'd already experienced months of being in residence here, it was a very helpful gathering. The lady was able to answer some of our questions about residing in Mongolia. Her information helped us feel that in an emergency we would have backup assistance, even though she only makes bi-monthly trips from Beijing to UB.

Report card time has again come and gone. Only two more sets to go before the end of the year and always a busy time for teachers. The next school event will be parent-teacher interviews, scheduled to take place next week.

We have been informed that our Australian colleague, Catherine, has given her notice at ASU and will leave Mongolia at the end of February. After a recent death in her family, she felt a calling to be with them at this time. It will be very sad to see her leave!

For Oyuna's birthday, we were all invited to the Irish Pub to help celebrate her special day. When choosing our seating at the table, she insisted that Ivan sit beside her during dinner, so that they could talk. And chat, they did. With Oyuna's limited English and Ivan's limited knowledge of the Russian language, they seemed to be able to converse adequately. So, all of a sudden, I'm chopped liver? Anyway, it was a great meal, except for the attempted theft of Denise's money, which had been left in her coat pocket, hanging on the back of her chair. Dave saw what was happening, and took off after the woman who had taken the money, and thankfully he was able to retrieve it. I never carry money in my coat pockets and very rarely will I even carry a purse when I'm out and about. It seems the safest way to travel in the city and so far I have not been a target for anyone with "light fingers".

### February 10 to 15

We had our usual weekend conversations with family at home, on Google Talk, Skype, or Messenger. Skype seems to have been giving us difficulties lately, so we are turning more often to the other two online communication resources.

The nearby Tuul River is frozen, allowing Ivan and I to take a Sunday stroll right down its middle. We saw many other examples of uses for this frozen river, including a well-worn car track and various animal tracks. As we ambled along, taking advantage of the sun on our faces, from the riverside bushes a small herd of cows emerged, followed by their

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owner prodding them along. Our return plod was not pleasant due to the rather frigid wind blowing in our faces. Along the way, we scavenged a couple of branches: one to prop up my beanstalk-that-refuses-to-die; and, the other as an apartment decoration to place in a pop bottle. Intended use for the latter, is its appearance of being some sort of willow branch, and we're hoping to see it grow roots or to find out if it will actually sprout. Ivan's birthday was this week, but we did nothing special, not even a cake, which was his wish. Since he had gone into the city a few days earlier and bought a couple of cashmere sweaters for himself, we counted those as his birthday gifts. At least that's my side of the story.

For Valentine's Day, which is also celebrated here, we worked on Valentine's activities all day at school. One girl kindly brought Doogii and me gifts of flowers, chocolates, and beaded jewellery to celebrate the day. What a surprise! For dinner that evening, Christina, John, Ivan, and I enjoyed a tasty meal at a nearby restaurant. We rode the bus there, then strolled home together on this lovely evening. All of us were well bundled up, and not the least bit cold on our return.

### February 16 to 19

We were pleased to learn that the "White Moon" Tsagaan Sar Festival, involved a four-day holiday! Friday evening was spent having dinner with Doogii and her family at their apartment, the location of which required us to take the bus downtown. From our bus stop exit, our instructions were to walk to a predetermined meeting point. Doogii met us there, to provide an escort through the maze of alleyways from the main street to her apartment building. We had a lovely visit that included dinner, conversation, touring their apartment, and looking at family photos. When it was time to leave, Doogii and her husband walked us back to the main street, hailed a taxi and negotiated the price for us. Then we were on our way, arriving at our apartment about 10:30 p.m.

Saturday was Wrestling Palace Day! Catherine managed to find someone to purchase a group of tickets, for us to experience this second-most important wrestling event in Mongolia. The ultimate wrestling event is the Naadam Festival, which takes place annually in July. Since our seats were not assigned, we arranged to arrive early to get a place in the entrance line. Right. Forming a line in Mongolia? While waiting for the others to arrive, Ivan and I discovered that the entry door was at the back of the building. Around we went, and were quite surprised to see that indeed there was a line-up after all. However, as the time approached for the doors to open, there was a sudden forward surge of people. The former line, now mostly consisting of a large crowd of men, was then met by a rather intrepid-looking band of police. I backed right away from that scene, preferring to stand aside from the crowd. All

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the while I was trying to make a decision, as to whether or not I was even willing to attempt entry into the building. Ivan finally joined my out-of-the way location, when he realized that I was not still standing beside him. As the crowd became progressively more aggressive, additional police reinforcements were brought in, and Tasers were beginning to be used for crowd control. I felt fortunate not to be part of that surging throng. It was a scary scene from my perspective. Finally, taking a deep breath and seeing that the crush was abating and there were no tasering police in sight, Ivan and I walked into the building without difficulty. Our group had entered well before us, so we assumed that a happy meeting would not ensue, but we were wrong. At a concession table outside the actual arena, we met John and Christina, who were stocking up on snacks at a concession table. They described our seating location so we easily found our friends, and wedged ourselves into these smaller-than-average-sized seats.

Where else but here, could you go to a wrestling match to experience the following: an aggressive line-up of Taser-dazed spectators; wrestlers changing their clothes in the stands; wrestling costumes consisting of Speedo-type trunks and pink, maroon, or blue half-shirts; wrestling match winners throwing cookies wrapped in coloured foil into the crowd; a match being stopped because of a broken finger nail; an ongoing twosome taking their battle through an arena exit then being shoved back into the ring by their referees; a match crashing into the trophy stand and demolishing at least one of the awards; Buddhist monks accidentally ending up on the bottom of a skirmish; and, referees in their 70's moving the gargantuan wrestlers around the wrestling circle as easily as if they were moving feathers? The latter happened most often! It was a fascinating spectacle with many matches happening in the arena all at once. This made it very difficult to follow the progress of any "favourites" we might have chosen to cheer on to victory. There were probably well over 100 wrestlers who started the events in stages, amid much pomp and circumstance, and chanting monks. We managed to hang on for six hours: one for "The Line to be Admitted"; and five in our seats for the wrestling events. Our seats were so narrow and uncomfortable, that try as we might, Ivan and I were just not physically able to remain to the very end. Making our way to the exit, we gingerly stepped over people sitting on the steps inside the arena. We then headed towards our bus stop and decided to have supper before returning to our apartment. It was soon evident that due to Tsagaan Sar, many restaurants were closed, except for the Irish Pub, which was open but almost empty of customers. This was even better for us, not only because it was not crowded, but also because the final wrestling events of the day were being shown live on a big screen. This allowed us to view the ending matches in relative comfort while eating our wonderful meal. For the final match, we were able to watch a rerun wrestling video

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of the upset win by "The Tower", who overtook "Boob", who had won the top wrestling award at last July's Naadam Festival.



The Wrestling Palace, opening ceremony, and a few of the events

## Five New "Events"

Despite being invited to a farewell party in downtown for Catherine, neither Ivan nor I thought we would be very good company for the rest of that wrestling evening. It was a long and tiring day, so we headed home.

A Sunday morning webcam chat with Daniel, Adrian, and Kathleen was made more lively when Daniel discovered the microphone echo of his voice. This caused him to become progressively louder and more persistent in his conversation. We found it very difficult to end what had been an amusing and rather one-sided dialogue.

We experienced our own Tsagaan Sar supper with Denise, Christina, John, Ivan, and me on Saturday evening. Christina did a wonderful job of cooking a delicious meal of beef roast and veggies in their Easy Bake oven. She also made a delicious cake for our dessert. It was a lovely evening.

Christina issued an invitation to Ivan and I, through her friend Ubi, to join them at a traditional Tsagaan Sar meal. It was hosted at Ubi's aunt and uncle's home, where she is living. We promptly accepted this invitation, taking place at 11 a.m. on Monday. The apartment is not very far from where we live, so we opted for a 200 tugrik bus ride. Upon entering the apartment, we followed the tradition for guests to greet the host and hostess, seated and wearing hats, and having blue Buddhist scarves draped across their hands. It was quickly determined that Ivan and I were the eldest in attendance at this special celebration. With that unexpected distinction, there were certain holiday protocols to follow for which we were unprepared. It soon became our turn to sit at the place of honour, where our hosts had been seated when we arrived. Since we did not have the necessary head coverings, Ivan wore a hat belonging to Ubi's uncle and I borrowed Christina's hat. The younger people came and gave us gifts of money. There was supposed to be an exchange of snuff, but it turned out to be a one-sided affair, because we did not have any snuff to reciprocate. I wonder why? I thought the snuff ritual was only for men, but apparently not. A toast was given with vodka. Since very few of us were drinking, we were shown the correct way to dip our fingers into the glasses, flick the liquid in four directions, then touch our forehead. I was confused with this process and managed to spill the vodka onto my food plate. I also got the order of the flicking directions mixed up, except for the forehead part. I think it might have been easier for me just to down the drink, and be done with it. The food was delicious: different types of salads; deviled eggs; mutton; buuz; Mongolian tea, but without the tea, only with milk and hot water; and an orange beverage. In the centre of the table was a large pyramid of breads that appeared to be used only as decoration.

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Tsagaan Sar as unexpected guests of honour, sniffing the snuff, and our hosts

When our meal was finished, leaving us feeling very, very full, Ubi's uncle played the guitar and sang for us. He used to be a clown in the Mongolian circus and has a wonderful voice. Another tradition was followed when we were invited to light some special candles to signify a prosperous and healthy new year. Ubi has a very interesting background of being raised by her grandfather, who had been an ambassador to Bulgaria, and was a well-respected Mongolian during his working years. Both this aunt and uncle spoke some Russian, but no English, so Ivan

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was able to converse with them in a somewhat limited way. At some point, they disappeared from the room, and returned with gifts for Ivan and me: a scarf, nylons, and chocolates for me; and socks, chocolates, and cigarettes for Ivan. It was a very emotional time for us both to realize that these kind and generous folk, whom we had never met, had accepted us into their home as if we were part of their family. What an extraordinary occasion, that we were thrilled to have been part of! With this wonderful and unique experience left for us to cherish, we took our leave with many thanks to our host and hostess. The four of us spent some time to plan for our next special holiday, which will be International Women's Day, on March 8. On this day, apparently, men are supposed to do everything for women, including making meals. Sounds like a great idea to me. Ivan and John have promised to get together early that day to prepare a home-cooked meal. We'll see what happens. I think the day is also a school holiday. All right!

Afterwards, Christina and I walked downtown in a vain attempt to see if we could get our hair done and to purchase some pancake mix and sausages. We didn't accomplish the haircuts due to a short-staff situation in the salon, but we managed to make appointments for the following day. I'm going to splurge and have my nails done as well as a hair trim. I hope. The pancake mix was easy to find, but many stores were still closed due to the holiday so Ivan is going tomorrow morning to search for sausages. These grocery items are being planned for use on Shrove Tuesday for a pancake supper with our friends.

Ivan and John climbed the mountain on the far side of our valley while Christina and I were downtown. They hiked for about three hours and I think Ivan is now completely pooped. So am I, and I wasn't even on that hike!

... A colleague exits the country, but leaves behind a legacy ...



## Chapter 26

# World Vision Ger Project

February 19 to March 1

Our wonderful four-day Tsagaan Sar weekend was capped off for me, with a relaxing break at the "Charming Beauty Salon" with Christina. I chose to have a complete trim of my hair, while Christina decided that she only needed her "fringe" cut. We both had manicures. The bill for my items totalled between \$17 and \$18. However, before leaving the salon and after putting on my coat, a few of my polished nails were smushed, even though I'd sat with my hands in a drier for 20 minutes. This meant that I had to return twice, for repairs. Once the corrections were completed, I left the store without gloves and with one thumb on one hand and my pointer finger on the other hand stuck at odd angles to avoid repeating the nail polish mishap. Fortunately, the weather was not too freezing cold, which meant that my uncovered hands didn't suffer any frostbite.

Just because one is in Mongolia, it doesn't mean that one cannot enjoy pancakes on Shrove Tuesday. Ivan just about drove me and himself crazy, because of being unable to find any sausages to go along with our pancakes. It was in part, due to still-closed stores for the Tsagaan Sar holiday. Instead, and as an ever-resourceful and inventive cook, he purchased some ground beef and made his own sausages that tasted delicious, but looked a little like hamburger torpedoes. The accompanying pancakes were well received. Our only available guests that evening were John and Christina. It is just as well, because the four of us gobbled up a good number of these goodies. They were even more enjoyed with the addition of Canadian maple syrup that Ivan had brought with him, from Ontario. Happily, after we had all satisfied our hunger, there were enough leftovers to last Ivan and me for several lunches and one breakfast.

We have recently been informed by our son Dan that he has accepted a position with an environmental engineering firm, in Vancouver. The starting date has yet to be determined, but it will presumably be sometime in August. He had planned to visit me in Mongolia after his final exams in April. However, after experiencing a May French immersion course in Quebec, and following his university convocation at the end of May, he changed his mind. Now, he is planning to head off to surf in Peru. "ARGHHHHHH!" You would think that when your offspring grow up and are on their own, there would be less to worry about, but perhaps this is the time when new reasons arise to cause more worry?

My request to be supplied with a metre stick for our classroom, was misunderstood as asking for a one-meter long stick with no markings. Not finding an appropriate response to

this misinterpretation, I couldn't do anything but laugh and chalk up the experience to lack of adequate, specific details being communicated. Doogii resourcefully took the blank stick home and made the necessary numbered additions. I think my original request was for three metre sticks, but I don't dare request another two because of not knowing what might be delivered. In addition, someone had worked hard to measure, cut, and sand the wood for the original stick, so we're going to treat it with respect!

Last week, after a three-day work week, I forgot to attend a Friday afternoon staff meeting. "Oops". However, I heard that it had been rather stressful, so I'm glad I missed it. My regrets were sent, in some way, to the appropriate administrative personnel and all is well.

Ivan and I decided to take the half-hour walk to the American Ger'll restaurant for dinner on Friday evening. What happened to the usually good food is a mystery, but on that particular night my food was cold and the chicken looked underdone. Instead of taking a chance with the under-cooked chicken, I asked for a doggy bag and was content to watch Ivan chow down on his meal, as I tried not to drool on my sleeve. If memory serves me correctly, I reheated the contents of my bag in our microwave much later that evening, and then enjoyed a hot meal rather than a cold plate. We scratched that dining establishment off our restaurant list, but it does have great espresso coffee, according to Ivan's palate.

Doogii invited us to her mother's apartment on Saturday, to partake of yet another Tsagaan Sar meal. We eagerly accepted the invitation and met Doogii and her daughter at the downtown post office. A taxi was then hailed to take us to the Third District, where her mother's apartment is located. Since we felt we had to take something as a hostess gift and with Doogii suggesting a chocolate bar, we exited the taxi early. We were then led to a grocery store, and found some boxes of chocolates that seemed to better serve as a more substantial hostess gift than a single chocolate bar. It was a lovely evening. Doogii's husband and brother, who had met us at the airport on our return from Christmas in Thailand, were also present for dinner. The food was delicious: buuzz; salad; mutton; pickles; milk tea; etc. When we were leaving, we mentioned that we needed to make some purchases in the area, so Mom, daughter, Ivan, and I set off to shop. Completing that quest, we said our thank-yous and farewells, parted company, then walked back to the bus stop. It was a long walk, with the route chosen by Ivan taking us through some back alleys that I would otherwise not have travelled on my own. An unpleasant aspect of this return experience was the lingering odour of coal in our hair and clothing after arriving at our apartment. This unwanted odour originated partially from the cooking fires in the gers that we passed along the way. Unfortunately, UB city with its districts, as well as for individual household heating, relies heavily on domestically

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produced coal. In comparison, nomadic people living in the countryside, use freely-available animal dung as their main fuel source.

After four years of living in Mongolia and as a generous departing gesture, our Australian colleague, Catherine, determined that she wanted to give something back to the country that had provided her with such a unique life experience. She issued a plea to friends and family to participate in a World Vision project that donates homes to needy families. Ivan and I were very happy to be part of this mission. Once donations had been gathered, which was enough to provide housing for four families, we asked Catherine if we could join the group, when gers would be delivered to two of the four families. What an experience this was!



Truck loaded with all needed to construct two gers

The pictures probably tell a lot of the story. As the delivery day evolved, and when arriving at the first address, the intended recipients were out collecting bottles and cans. It is the only income for a widowed father of four young children. Since they were not home, we then drove by caravan to the second location: one car; one van; and one slightly lopsided truck loaded with ger material. Negotiating these mazes of roads, or what could loosely be called roads, it was a wonder how any specified family could be found. There were no street numbers, names, or markings of any sort. However, this second site was successfully located, the gate was

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opened, truck unloaded, and the construction began. An hour or so later, a young mother and her disabled son had a new home of their own and she no longer had to endure the abuse of her ex-husband. It was a wonderful sight to see her looking so happy to now have her own home.



Catherine and the happy ger recipient

With this first task completed, we headed off with only half the original load, for a return trip to the the first family's location. This time we were greeted with the wonderful smiles of a father and his older daughter, who we were told was intellectually challenged. The supplies were unloaded from the truck, but due to tight timing, the World Vision people were unable to stay and help with construction. It was assured by the father that his neighbours would come to their aid to complete their new home. As the materials were unloaded, the father rushed into his house to get his snuff to exchange. His daughter hung around Catherine and me and gave us heartwarming hugs. We were both ready to take her home with us. What a beautiful smile she had! Leaving this family, we were dropped off downtown to have a farewell lunch with Catherine and the World Vision Marketing Coordinator for National Resources Development.



No time to erect the ger, but nonetheless help is promised...

Ivan's departure date now looms rather ominously, at least in my way of thinking. With this in mind, we set off after lunch on Sunday with Catherine, to purchase as many souvenirs as possible for us to carry and for Ivan to pack. A list of gift recipients had previously been made, so we were systematically looking for, and finding, the desired items to check off the list. Our chosen shopping location was the very large State Department Store, with a one-stop souvenir shop on the 5th, or top floor. There, many Mongolian-made items, sold at reasonable prices were available for purchase. After walking through the various display areas and satisfying ourselves that the mission was accomplished, it was satisfying to finally return home, and unload our purchases.

Catherine will be leaving Mongolia in the very near future, and as a good-bye event

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to recognize her contributions to our school, last Thursday an after-school pizza party was organized. Her actual day of exodus was scheduled for February 28, but our last communication was that the plane had been snowed in at the UB Airport. Yes, we had snow, wet snow, in the Land of the Eternal Blue Sky! It is now presumed that Catherine's flight eventually took off, because nothing to the contrary was heard. We trust that she is now, or soon will be, safely home in Australia.

School ended at noon on Monday and Tuesday this week, allowing parent-teacher interviews to be scheduled for the afternoon. This arrangement worked very well and was especially appreciated by the teachers, rather than having to complete them after school. We met with 11 of 20 parents. I say "we" loosely, because Doogii did about 99% of the conversing. These two days of parent interviews went relatively smoothly, although the first afternoon had a rather painful start. On his noon-hour bus ride home, Khulan, one of our little dears, for some unknown reason, decided to jump out the door of his moving school bus. This mishap was not discovered by Doogii or I until we returned to school after lunch. We were not particularly surprised at this turn of events because of his rather happy-go-lucky and impish nature. When arriving at school and hearing what had happened, we found nurse Christina mopping up Khulan after his three-point landing on the side of his face, his hand, and his torso. Despite this mishap, Khulan's mother arrived for our interview after having made a 1½ hour journey, presumably by bus. Poor mother. Poor kid. But we were very impressed with Mom's determination to attend the interview and the fact that Khulan was being so stoic about his misadventure.

Monday was John's 30th birthday, so Christina had reserved a dinner table downtown at BD's, for a surprise celebration. At her request, and after having received from a very insistent Christina, about four times the amount of money needed, Ivan and I left our apartment early to purchase John's birthday cake. We carried it with us to the restaurant. It was a lovely meal, with congenial company, 13 of us, and what a positive way to begin the week.

The weather has been extremely unpredictable, with temperatures reaching 10 degrees Celsius on Tuesday, then snow arriving on Wednesday and Thursday.

In preparation for Ivan's leave-taking on March 14, our friends have been planning dinner dates with us! "Yum!" Last night we were invited to Kim & Dave's apartment for a hot-pot. In terms of food and company, it was a really enjoyable evening.

I started reading books again and realized that indeed, there is life after school is out.

... There is one more exodus to plan and to ponder...

## Preparing for Ivan's Departure

March 2 to 11

The American Ger'll restaurant, as of this evening, has returned to our list of eating establishments, but only when our friends suggested it as a convenient starting point, for a multi-activity, Friday night escapade. This particular occasion included a special event for our dinner companions, who departed after our meal to find the location of, and to participate in, a heavy-duty trivia contest. However, Ivan and I felt less adventurous and decided to brave the cold night air to walk back to our apartment. It is not just the nippy air above, but the slippery footing below, that definitely makes walking more challenging. Snow has continued to fall and is accumulating as ice underfoot and on the roads. It is not very safe to walk or drive, especially since no sand or salt are used on these thoroughfares. Along our way this evening, Ivan was almost swept off his feet by a bus at our corner bus stop. The erratic driver was barrelling down the road without taking into account either the road conditions, or the bald bus tires. He then missed a left turn that put the bus nicely onto the oncoming rocky field. By some swift manoeuvring of the steering wheel, he was able to swing the cumbersome vehicle back on the road without mishap. This was all accomplished without hitting Ivan, who I am sure was more than willing and able to leap out of the way at a moment's notice.

For the completion of our combined Grades 2/3 Traditions and Celebrations Social Studies unit, and in my enthusiasm for the possibilities that it could deliver, it was decided to create a special event for the unit's finale. With this in mind, a class lunch has been organized, which will hopefully include family members to join us. The plan is to ask for pot-luck donations of food, too. The other request was for the children to wear their traditional clothing. Since this unit was initially set up for multicultural North American classrooms, I knew that it would not have the same implications here, as it would have in Canada. Nonetheless, Doogii and I assumed that we had managed to get the concept of what would be done, and why, across to the children. Setting a date for this event was the easy part: March 7, the day before International Women's Day. Additional details for this celebration presented more of a challenge. In further discussions about our plans for this event, Doogii discovered that the children thought they were supposed to bring traditional clothing to give away. We managed to straighten out this misconception. When the "morning of" dawned and the children arrived, I was pleased to see so many of them in their beautiful traditional Mongolian clothing, along with one student in her gorgeous, traditional Korean dress. With some consternation, I noted a rather pathetic pile of food that had so far arrived for our lunch. In class, our students

## Preparing for Ivan's Departure

had worked on some table decorations which needed cultural translations. Explanation was needed for the use of a placemat, and even then, some of the children did not "get it". We also decorated some containers with the netting, foil, ribbon, etc., that had originally been wrapped around the bouquets that Doogii and I have received from parents, during the year. These had been kept for such an occasion as this. A valiant attempt was also made to create some tissue paper flowers. Happily, on my own, I was able to find some actual tissue paper. We therefore didn't have to use the toilet paper that was erroneously purchased, after I'd ordered tissue paper for one of our science units. Once ensconced in the Art Room, which we had previously deemed as being the right size, with the appropriate number of tables, we began to decorate. With the kids being rather over-excited about this special event, this part of the preparation did not go as smoothly as I would have hoped.



By noon, the parents started arriving, and along with them, enough food to feed the whole school. Ivan had been commandeered to make a pot of chili, so a western flavour had been added to the buffet table. We ended up with a delicious assortment of goodies, including food dishes from Min Jeong's mother's restaurant. My initial fears of a meagre lunch were unfounded. While still waiting for family members to arrive on "Mongolian time", I gave a little welcoming speech, leaving once in mid-sentence to admonish two middle school students, who thought that the hallway

right outside the Art classroom was a good place for a down-for-the-count wrestling match. Doogii knows me well enough by now to be able to finish my sentences, so she did just that. Between us I don't think we missed a beat in our welcoming address. A slide presentation of all the pictures that I had taken of the class from the beginning of the year was then shown. This seemed to go over well, thanks to Ivan who had made this suggestion. In the end, I think it was a satisfactory event, with many additional pictures being taken.

## Preparing for Ivan's Departure

Ivan's farewell proceedings have continued with a series of final events, mostly dinner gatherings. I don't know who will be sadder to see him go, me or my colleagues. We have had an incredible relationship with everyone on the ASU staff, and Ivan has been a big part of the quality time we have spent with each other. Even with our age differences, compared to the others, it's like we are like Mom and Pop to them, especially for our Canadian contingent. Another final and recurring activity has been several treks to a driving range and these are not dependent-on-the-weather outings. The outdoor range is a modern facility with scenic views, and where Ivan has returned several times on his own. On International Women's Day last week, we had a holiday from school, so Christina and I accompanied our husbands as official picture-takers. It appears that Korean entrepreneurs have built this facility and in the warmer weather it would presumably be quite crowded, but for our use this winter, it's not been the case. Despite the still cold temperatures, from our apartment building to the driving range, it is a rather easy walk over the frozen river. Once the river ice melts, it will definitely be a different story, because the bridge-building, which would allow easy access from our side of the river, has not been completed. Small details.



Outdoor Driving Range in March

## Preparing for Ivan's Departure

Due to a week-long April holiday, and contemplating an excursion to Beijing in April with Doogii, I have taken the first stab at starting the Mongolian Entry-Exit visa process. For this I need help due to the language barrier and bumbling bureaucracy. The first snag has already arisen, because it would appear that the most efficient method for me to attain this would be to get a double entry-exit visa, that would be valid for three months. If the timing works, this would include my return trip to Canada in early July. Whether or not this type of visa is easily available has yet to be discovered. Doogii and I are currently uncertain about the accessibility of train tickets from UB to Beijing. Oyuna has assured us that she has spoken to a friend about the possibility of finding available passage for us on a train from Moscow to Beijing. Hopefully we will have a response by next week, with that piece of information helping to mark the start date of my three-month visa. At the end of this timeline, my colleague, Alyssa has still not been able to secure with her fiance's Lama, a date for her July wedding. The hope is to arrange it for July 7 or 9, so I am thinking that likely, and unfortunately, I will have to miss this special event. Plans for upcoming travel between now and the end of June are contingent, not only on visa restrictions, but also on knowing what will be expected of us at the end of June when our contract concludes. The actual teaching schedule ends on June 22, but until now we have not been informed about our duties after that, although some have already begun plans for their last-week-of-June departure. My decision is to wait to make any travel arrangements until we are officially notified of our expected obligations for that last week, since the termination of our contract is also the date up to which we are being paid. Adding to the complication of the dilemma about leaving, is the question of how long we will be allowed to stay in our apartments after our contract ends, especially if we, the "Royal We", do not have plans to return for the next school year.

It was so pleasant to have a holiday in the middle of the week, and since we had enough leftover chili from our special school event, we needed company to share it with us. Happily, Tara and Denise took us up on our offer. George also arrived to discuss with Ivan, his upcoming overnight layover in Seoul, on his way home. I was exhausted and as soon as our company left, I went to bed and had my best night's sleep in ages!

Part of my interrupted sleeping pattern has to do with the situation of our significantly under-sized bedding, unfit for a king-sized bed. In UB, sheets to fit this bed are nowhere to be found. In fact, it is very difficult to explain to any sales person what a fitted, bottom sheet actually is. Denise's fiancée will be coming for a visit and has been requested by me, via Denise, to PLEASE include in his luggage, a king-sized sheet for me. He will be arriving in a few weeks, and Denise has assured me that he will do just that. I can't wait.

## Preparing for Ivan's Departure

With ongoing preparations for Ivan's departure, I've checked all the desk and dresser drawers, to ensure that nothing is left that he should carry home. On his flight to Mongolia, he brought some school supplies for me, but presumably they had less volume than the newly-purchased souvenirs. Because these extras are currently spread all over our apartment, it is difficult to get an idea of how much space they will take up. It will be interesting to find out how much, if any, room they all will need in his suitcases. We'll see, all too soon.

Last Friday evening, a group of ASU staff members had dinner at a newly-discovered downtown restaurant. This not entirely happy occasion was to mark the final day of working with one of our well-respected teaching assistants. There were about 20 of us in attendance and the food was quite good. Not long after dinner, a very loud band started playing and the atmosphere was getting more and more smoky from indoor cigarette use, so we, or should I say "I" decided that it was time for a retreat. My stuffy nose was not working very well inside the restaurant and I was hoping for easier breathing as we ventured out into the cold night air. This was definitely a false hope. Once outside the smoky restaurant, I took a really deep breath of....coal smoke! "Oh my!". With our apartment located a distance away from the city centre, it's difficult to remember that UB's central heating is provided by coal-fired furnaces. In wintertime, fumes from the furnaces are continually spewing pollution throughout the entire city. We were able to share a return taxi with Tara and Denise, so the trip ended up being quick and painless, with more breathable air at the end of the journey, when we reached our apartment.

Saturday evening dinner was an order-in affair at Kim and Dave's apartment. East Indian food was the choice du jour. Phoning in the food order was not too difficult, because the person on the other end of the phone spoke reasonably good English. We let Kim take care of that detail. After about four repeat phone calls regarding our location, the food finally arrived. It was nice to be able to enjoy a meal in the comfort of familiar surroundings, with relaxed friends.

We seem to be having eating-out experiences more than what might be thought of as normal, but restaurant food continues to be relatively inexpensive and most of the time it definitely beats having to cook something ourselves, or trying to come up with an idea of what to cook. Since Ivan's arrival, I've not had the dubious "pleasure" of cooking for myself or figuring out what to cook. I am sure it will be a rude awakening after he leaves on Wednesday.

Preparing for Ivan's Departure



Final evening, and meal together with Canadian teachers

This evening, Sunday, we're off upstairs again, and this time, to have supper with Christina and John. When will this round of dinners ever end? Never, I hope.

... Last minute goodbyes and get-togethers...

## Ivan Has Left the Building. . .

March 12 to 18

At the start of the week, the miserable cold that I have developed continues to hang on despite valiant attempts to keep it at bay. However, I'm alive and this is what counts.

Our Canadian consultant flew in this week for contract talks with ASU teachers. My meeting time with him was scheduled for Tuesday afternoon, and resulted in the offer of a position next year as the Primary School Coordinator. In addition, I would also have regular classroom duties with one grade. After due consideration and in consultation with Ivan, my first response to this offer was that I would not be returning for another year. It appeared that my answer was not the desired response, so I was asked to reconsider my thinking. I did just that and, after two more days of deliberation, my decision remained unchanged. It has been an interesting few days.

Midweek and before Ivan's take-off there was a flurry of activity in our apartment, with Ivan shopping for more gifts and for groceries. The latter was not only so I wouldn't starve after he's gone, but also for me to have food readily available in our apartment, rather than having to straight away go out shopping. This, I very much appreciated! One of the culinary highlights of this part of the week was that he finally got around to cooking two of the three birds that were given to us, feathers and all, by Oyuna. I don't know what kind of birds these were, except that they were wild and small. The internet did nothing to help us find a "brand name" for them, which is just as well, because I would much rather have seen them on the wing than in the oven. However, they were quite tasty, thanks to Ivan's cooking skills, as well as to the internet for providing us with a quail recipe. This was as close as we could find for the birds' species. The recipe was modified to suit the cooking of our unnamed, now-featherless dinner fare, but it seemed to work out well in the Taste Buds Department. They had the texture of liver, which is good for me, because I love liver. With that particular cooking adventure over, the last and largest bird is left for me to deal with on my own. Currently it is in the freezer, minus feathers. Maybe it will cook like chicken?

Ivan did the "manly" thing and left his packing for the last day. He waited for me to finish school, so I could help with zipping up his stuffed suitcases. Thank heavens for George donating to Ivan some of his duct tape, not purchased in UB. It came in very handy to help secure the bags' continual closure. Fortunately, most of this packing task was done in the early evening hours, because in the later evening, until after 11 p.m., we had a steady stream of good-bye visitors.

## Ivan Has Left the Building . . .

On Wednesday morning, I arose at 6 a.m. to bid Ivan a sad farewell. Doogii had arranged for a friend to pick up Ivan and drive him to the airport. This ended up being a family affair with Doogii coming along, as well as her husband, who continued on to the airport with Ivan and their driver friend. This meant that Doogii and I had each other for breakfast company, which I appreciated. She had also stayed for supper with us on Tuesday evening. I know she will miss Ivan and their frequent Friday lunches, along with the interesting discussions that for the last several months, they had enjoyed together.

A group of us, on Wednesday evening, took the school bus to the American Ger'll to discuss our teaching contracts. Deciding to be on the safe side with ordering my food, I chose a hamburger, which was not very adventurous for me. When it arrived, I ate half, asked for, and expected the other half to be packed up for me to take home for lunch the next day. No such luck. Either the garbage ate it, someone else in the immediate vicinity was hungry, or my communication skills were lacking. After our previous experience at this location, this was for me a strike two for this eating establishment.

As if one dinner out during the week were not enough, Christina arranged to have dinner with our Canadian consultant before his leaving Mongolia, on Friday morning. We went out for East Indian food, to a restaurant located behind the Wrestling Palace. It was a new dining experience for me: the decor was interesting and the food was good. However, during the night, my stomach decided that perhaps the food was not as tasty, as my brain and taste buds had originally experienced. Realizing that teaching on Friday would be a rather uncomfortable experience due to my stomach upset, I decided to stay home that day and try to get my body back to normal. It was a day of dragging myself from the couch to bed and snoozing a lot. The best parts of the day were Ivan and I touching base via MS Messenger, and conversing with Dan in Montreal via Google-Talk.

What a relief to know that Ivan has safely arrived home. He's already complaining that he misses the sunshine here in the Land of the Eternal Blue Sky. Sleep comes to him at very inopportune times, due to the 12-hour time difference between our two countries. When he is supposed to be sleeping, he's awake, and during the day when everyone wants to connect with him or hear from him, he's sleepy. Hopefully, his jetlag will not last too long. We had an extended internet session together yesterday, and as he opened all the accumulated mail from Canada Post, I was able to suggest some long-distance instructions for disposal, or otherwise.

On Saturday, I made my first-in-a-long-time solo foray downtown. I could have asked someone to accompany me, but it was my choice to paddle along at my own pace. Several weeks ago, an announcement was made in one of the English-language newspapers, that

## Ivan Has Left the Building . . .

there would be a camel parade in Sukhbaatar Square. Thinking that it was this date, I was armed with my camera in the hope of seeing an interesting spectacle. It was not to be. Instead, the square was filled with people watching a military display of some kind. How disappointing, at least for me. Wandering along some of the city centre back streets, I ventured into Computerland to check out their electronic goods. From there it was off to my favourite video store, where I bought two more DVDs to keep me entertained in the evenings. Among other purchases, were some groceries which turned out to be a heavier load than anticipated. I am well aware of this fact today because my right shoulder is sore from carrying the grocery bag. It's my own fault for not hailing a taxi after making my purchases. I was just not interested in taxi transport on my own, especially after having been spoiled with a personal bodyguard accompanying my city trips, for five and a half months.

It's really interesting that in a city with a population of about a million, there's a high probability in the downtown core area, of seeing familiar faces. This never ceases to amaze me, although because the size of this area is not expansive, it seems that almost everyone I know ends up here, especially on weekends. As an example, yesterday I encountered Alyssa, Tara, and John, as they were going about their respective Saturday business. These familiar and friendly faces are always a welcome sight, in a city so far from home. In addition, as colleagues and friends, they are some of the few who don't stare at a white face as it passes. I try to ignore this part of life in the big city, but it's not easy.

... At first, it's difficult when thoughts and words don't come easily, but then . . .

## Nothing-Special-Hence-the-Delay

March 23 to April 1

Woo-Hoo! I cooked my first solo roast! The fact that it was cooked by me, on my own, without Ivan is what I am very happy about. Well, actually it was without any help from anyone except Ivan who had, before taking his Mongolian leave, given me precise instructions. As a first impression, this might not sound like such a big deal, but you must remember that we are not dealing with any ordinary oven. This is an Easy Bake Oven that has some very distinct peculiarities: when the oven is in use, only one top burner is available; the oven's maximum temperature is 300 degrees Celsius; and any combination of high and low settings can be used for the top and bottom oven elements. Putting all of these factors together makes for a rather tricky baking or roasting experience, especially for me, who would much rather eat than cook. As its name implies, the oven is fairly small. Roasting a 15-pound turkey in it would definitely not be an option. However, mine was only a small roast, so I planned ahead about how to cook it, after a day of teaching. With school and apartment being so close, I was able to come home directly after school in the afternoon, prepare the roast, preheat the oven, pop the roast inside and turn down the oven temperature. With this accomplished, I went back to school for a couple of hours of lesson planning, before returning home. As I walked down the hallway, a wonderful aroma of roast met me before I reached the door. I also added some veggies to the feast. It was a wonderful supper!

Now that Ivan is home, I continue to be grateful for technology. It gives me a soothing feeling to be able, in just a few keystrokes, to see him sitting, still jet-lagged, half a world away. We've been able to chat every day, but when he returns to work on Monday, it will be more difficult to coordinate our time schedules. The 12-hour difference between countries is easy enough to remember. However, it would appear that Mongolia has arbitrarily decided this year, not to participate in daylight saving time. Something forgot to inform my computer about this, so I had to set it straight. Knowing that the clock is now on its correct time, I'm finding it very satisfying to get up for school in the sunny morning light and to still have daylight at 7 p.m. This makes for easier after-school trips to and from the city centre, which means that I don't have to be anxious about coming home alone in the evening after dark.

Doogii was away one day from school, and it was certainly interesting, not having my very much appreciated partner assisting in her many competent ways. While flying solo for the day, lesson "Plan B" was put into action. It was Environmental Week, so I found a National Geographic DVD about the rainforest that I thought would be interesting for the students.

## Nothing-Special-Hence-the-Delay

Lunchtime was as whole new experience for me, to take the children to the cafeteria, assist with ordering their food, as well as carrying it back to their tables, then to supervise them in the cafeteria. Since this is usually Doogii's responsibility, and to help facilitate the process of picking up the food orders, I enlisted the help of another teaching assistant, for the class to successfully receive their lunches. Needless to say, it was a very long start-to-finish day, to manage our class without any breaks. Fortunately, right next to our classroom is a bathroom! The high point of this day, other than surviving it, was travelling to the city centre with John and Christina for groceries. Maybe this would seem to be an exaggeration, but for me it was far less stressful in the company of friends when the groceries were purchased, and to know that I would have company on the return journey. With this in mind I was able to purchase a few more items than usual. After our shopping, I agreed to join my companions for supper at BD's, which was another highlight. It was also the day for my cleaning lady to start! She charges the "exorbitant" fee of 3000 tugrik per hour, which would be the equivalent of approximately \$3, and she stays for two hours. I can afford this! Perhaps she'd consider commuting to Hamilton after I'm home? With the departure of Ivan as my former chief cook and bottle washer, it was so nice to return from school to a clean apartment! It's not that it ever needed major cleaning, but the interior dust builds up very quickly, regardless of open or closed windows.

Looking further ahead, and since our end-of-year contract commitments have finally been clarified, it is official. I have booked a flight from UB to Seoul, Korea, on June 27 and will remain there for four nights, before flying directly to Toronto and landing in the evening of Canada Day. How appropriate! This pause will, optimistically, be an interesting diversion to break up the otherwise lengthy journey home. The overnight layovers will allow some time to tour the city prior to the start of the next leg of my journey. In addition, I've heard that Korean Airlines is a comfortable airline with which to travel. I count on this fact since it is a nonstop flight, of just over 13 hours, so it beats booking with another carrier and having a stopover in Chicago. It is anticipated that my choice of airline will provide a less stressful flight experience, especially with all the luggage that will accompany me.

For swimming class on Friday afternoon, we had what I would call a classic Mongolian event. Without forewarning, and in the middle of class, someone decided that it was time to empty the smaller play pool. At first, I thought I was seeing things as the water was draining, so it took me a while to react to the fact that the thermometer, previously underwater, was now substantially above the water line. Thinking that this pool had sprung a gigantic leak, I asked Doogii to check with the swimming teacher, who does not speak English, about

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what was happening. Yes, of the two pools, the small one was being intentionally emptied while our class was still supposed to be in progress. During this same lesson, I ended up as the only adult in the pool area with the kids, and I was not a happy camper. Wherever it was that the swimming instructor went is unknown. However, and fortunately, nobody drowned under my watch. The larger of the two pools was not deep at all, and even with being vertically challenged, in a lifeguard-like emergency, I had the ability to touch the pool bottom everywhere. It was more like a gigantic hot tub. Mongolia is a landlocked country, so logic perhaps dictates that pool construction, and learning to swim, have not been high priorities here.

Last Saturday was the first three-on-three student basketball tournament. I agreed to help, but on the understanding that my assistance would not include anything that required too much brain power. As a result, I was put in charge of keeping track of the official scores for each team, as well as blowing the whistle to start and end the 10-minute games. In my enthusiasm for this last task and during almost every enthusiastic blow, the pea inside the whistle became lodged somewhere in its innards. Instead of sounding authoritative, it emitted a rather pathetic chirp. Where is the Fox 40 whistle when needed?



John, Alyssa and I getting ready for basketball 3-on-3

After the basketball tournament, I took a bus to the city to talk to a software vendor about a program that I had purchased from him. It was not working as it should have.

## Nothing-Special-Hence-the-Delay

Thinking I had plenty of time to spare, before meeting Doogii at 3 p.m. at the Wrestling Palace, I first took my time with a few other errands. This included connecting with the software vendor but he was not in the location where we were supposed to meet. He then had to be contacted at his office, which was located relatively close to his store, where I was waiting. After finally appearing, he discovered that he could not get the program to work either, so I was driven back to his office. He was a very nice man, but a typical computer person, who focuses so intently on a task that they lose all track of time. "Been there, done that". I was well aware that my meeting time for Doogii was coming and then going, and finally I had to put my foot down. Falling a little short of being angry, I had to state more emphatically than previously that I HAD to leave. On the way out, I asked him if he could tell me what I should say to a taxi driver to get me to the Wrestling Palace, as quickly as possible. It appeared that "Wrestling Palace" was not within his otherwise broad English vocabulary. He motioned for me to get in his car so he could drive me, although neither of us was sure where we were going. After a short ride and some further translation attempts on my part, he finally understood what I was attempting to convey. He then gave me the Mongolian name for the Wrestling Palace, which I promptly forgot. With being so late in arriving at our meeting place, Doogii was nowhere to be found. Undaunted, I set off through back alleys in an effort to find her apartment myself, but was unsuccessful. This had been an exasperating experience. I still had to get home, and somehow found my way to the UB Mart, bought some groceries, and returned home by bus. An unfortunate lesson was learned! No, I still refuse to have a cell phone, but it would certainly have helped in this situation! Yes, I will carry a relevant phone number, namely Doogii's, with me each time I go out. When profusely apologizing to Doogii the next day, and after describing to her my wandering search route the afternoon before, she told me that I had actually been right at her apartment building. Since it was in a rather large maze of buildings, I did not recognize it. Good grief!

Computer Man arranged to meet me at the school on Sunday to install the program for me, at no extra charge. It was not that I didn't know what I was doing with the program itself, but that the disk he sold me was not working. Since this fiddling had been such an exhaustive process, I decided that an afternoon nap was in order. I slept for 2½ hours, and missed Christina's phone call about going to the opera, which was okay. It turned out that only one extra ticket had been found, rather than the two that were expected. In that case, I would not have been going to see Carmen that evening anyway. Instead, in the early evening Tara, Denise and I went to the city to run some errands and have dinner.

Midway through a not-so-good week, I decided that I needed a real change. This

## Nothing-Special-Hence-the-Delay

transformation was to come in the form of a haircut, and booked for Wednesday evening. Afterwards, Tara and I met at the Grand Khan Irish Pub for supper. Yes, that is what it is called. Then we returned home on a beautiful evening, with me feeling lighter by about 10 pounds, not kilograms, with my much shorter hair.

George, our Science Teacher, will be leaving Mongolia soon. We'll miss him as a voice of reason and as a fluent Mongolian language speaker, in our otherwise somewhat chaotic school world. Friday will be his last teaching day, as well as the last school day of the month. This presented an opportunity in the afternoon to say a special farewell to him at our monthly pizza party/cake eating meeting, to celebrate March birthdays. Additionally, the T.A.'s had planned a goodbye get-together at a downtown restaurant, with karaoke afterwards. Due to pizza and cake after school, I didn't feel much like eating dinner, so a bottle of water was my dinner. Well, actually, there were two glasses of wine to go along with the water. Oyunaa was having a dinner party elsewhere in the same restaurant, so she breezed by our table to say hello and give a toast. She also left several bottles of wine for the 18 of us out for our "Goodbye George" celebration. After the meal, most of us headed to the karaoke location.



Karaoke evening

This experience was new and interesting for me, to be in a small room with only our group of people, and singing songs chosen from a book. It was a time when I was feeling

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rather old, considering that many of the selected English songs were ones that I had no hope of recognizing. When our Mongolian contingent completely took over the singing, with their own popular songs, was when I had no further need to feel old. It was also the signal for Christina, John, and me to take an early leave. We arrived at our residence about 11 p.m., just in time for me to talk with Adrian and Ivan on MS Messenger. What a great way to end the day!

Yesterday, Doogii issued me a rerun invitation for our missed lunch at her home last week. After running some errands, I met her on time and made an accurate memo about the location of her apartment building, it's entry door, which floor, etc. For our meal, she made buuz of a special kind with a more poofy dough and a larger size than the Tsagaan Sar buuz we'd previously enjoyed elsewhere. Doogii suggested that we make this Saturday lunch together a weekly event. My thought is that if this happens, by the time I return home, I'll look like a Sumo contender. Lunch was delicious! Afterwards, we had time to chat about our impending trip to Beijing. I'm trying to feel comfortable about leaving the travel and lodging arrangements in her hands, even though I'm well aware of her super powers of competency. Yikes! It has come to our attention that we won't find out until next Friday about the possibility of having a "Luxe" sleeping compartment, on the Trans-Mongolian Railway. This rail line starts as the Trans-Siberian Railway, from Moscow to UB, then continues on to Vladivostok. Our Trans-Mongolian train heads from UB to Beijing, as an overnight journey. Doogii is of the opinion that we do not need a hotel reservation. It's not my preferred option to travel without advance reservations, so this will definitely be an interesting "Mongolian Style" adventure.

After yesterday's aborted attempt to withdraw money from the bank due to crowds and chaos, I decided that perhaps mañana would be a good alternative date. Taking an early afternoon bus, I went directly to my 24/7 bank and found only one other person. My hunch about the possibility of fewer bank customers proved correct. Now I have money to pay for the added cost of my rerouted flight to Seoul, rather than my original flight involving a change of airlines and a stopover in the middle of the journey. Money for the Beijing trip with Doogii has also been safely put away.

Since it was such a beautiful day and with the wind on my back, I decided to walk to the apartment from downtown. Ordinarily, it would have taken about an hour. For this jaunt there were a few detours: a souvenir shop where I purchased a beautiful blue jacket with black and silver trim; found a new shopping centre with western-type Esprit, Swarovski, and Swatch stores, and with western prices; the Gobi Cashmere Factory which was closed; and

the Jetro Supermarket.

The last 100 yards across school property were the most difficult. I was adopted by a small black puppy, estimated to be about eight weeks of age that looked very forlorn. Two larger dogs had been staring at it, as it sat on the side of the road. When I stopped to check if it was okay, it came wobbling over to me. My mistake was bending down to pat it, so of course when I started on my way again, it kept right at my heels. Christina and John happened along at that same time, and John made my same dog-patting error. Trying to lose our new furry friend, we rushed up the large flight of steps, hoping that he or she would not be big enough or have the strength to follow us. The puppy was so determined that we were unable to outrun it, even when it fell through a grate into a shallow ditch and promptly hauled itself out. I felt so hard-hearted! One of our maintenance men picked it up, then after cuddling it for a few minutes, proceeded to deposit it just outside our apartment entrance doors. Oh dear. A short while later, I just had to go down to investigate where it had gone. The maintenance man had apparently brought it in, given it a few crackers, and it was then having a snooze on the floor, in the lower area of our building. How was it possible to resist this sad little face and nervous, wagging tail? Later, I found out that Tara had taken charge and temporarily “adopted” it.



Tara's puppy has grown, and now adopted by a student!

Looking ahead, we have our third set of reports that will be due early in the week after our return from Beijing next Sunday. It will definitely be a very busy couple of weeks.

Meanwhile, in Hamilton our friends had a welcome-home dinner for Ivan and invited Adrian, Kathleen, and Daniel to join them, at Karolina's Polish Restaurant. Unfortunately, Kathleen was unable to switch shifts, which left Adrian and Daniel (wearing Mongolian boots and Taiwan pants) to accept this invitation. By all accounts it sounds like it was a wonderful evening for all, including a hungry 2-year-old who had the Polish restaurant ladies taking care of him in royal fashion.

And here are a few additional facts about Ivan's MIAT flight home. He had apparently forgotten about the ASU ad in the in-flight magazine. It was therefore a surprise when looking through it, he found in a collage, my photo included in a classroom setting, with another teacher and some students. The bottom pictures are of a few interior areas of the school. To save us a copy for posterity, Ivan conveniently "forgot" to return it to the seat back upon exiting the plane, and it now safely resides in a Hamilton dresser drawer. Not seen in this picture, but in the background on another page of the advertisement is an imposing figure of the Statue of Liberty, dominating a corner of the school's front lobby. As Canadian teachers, we were surprised to see it so predominantly located. Although its presence corresponds to the school's name, for this

year most teachers are Canadian, hired to use the Ontario, Canada curriculum guidelines in our teaching assignments. Needless to say, we found the presence of the statue to be rather curious. Lady Liberty continues as a fixture in the school lobby, minus the small Canadian flag placed on her arm (by me), just before school started in September.

... Now it's off on another adventure, this time with another travelling companion...

## Chapter 30

# Beijing: From Luxe to Starbucks

### April 2 to April 7

Well, “Plan B” is now finalized for my flight home. Having been wait-listed for the July 1st flight from Seoul to Toronto, I’ve chosen to remain in Seoul for a couple of extra days after being able to cancel July 1 and book a confirmed flight for July 3. Currently, that’s the plan, and I trust it is the final one because I have already received my flight tickets and reserved the hotel for six nights. These additional Seoul days spent as a tourist will presumably provide a fitting end to my 2006-2007 sojourn in Asia.

The other major weekly highlight was when Denise’s fiancée arrived from Canada and presented me with a king-sized fitted sheet that I had pleadingly requested. What a difference it makes in my sleeping patterns! No more bed sheets that fold up underneath me in the middle of the night. For quite some time, I had been feeling a bit like the main character in the story, “The Princess and the Pea”. Now I feel more like a bug in an eggplant, with the fitted purple sheet and greenish top sheets. This is not the best colour combination, but it’s of no importance now that I have a bottom sheet that fits!

This week, we not only said hello to Tara’s mom and Denise’s fiancée, who arrived in UB for visits, but also a “see you later” to George’s family, who left for permanent residence in the United States. This move will be a huge lifestyle change for George’s Mongolian wife and young son. In addition, we met George’s temporary teaching replacement, Helen, from New Zealand, and whose husband is working with World Vision in Mongolia.

At school, I was busy preparing report card installment three of four, and managed to complete five on Thursday night. The due date is April 18, but I didn’t want to leave them to finish until after our vacation week, unless it was absolutely necessary. On Friday, Doogii and I learned that our train, originating in Moscow, would not depart until Sunday morning, rather than Saturday. This was a relief, at least for me, although it means spending a day less in Beijing.

Teachers, who had not already left for our week-long break, were invited to Oyuna’s house for dinner on Friday evening. Her townhouse-style home has an open concept design with large rooms, high ceilings, and ultra-modern fixtures and decor. So much food, so little room in my stomach! I think I consumed enough to last me a week. Of course, also included was the usual assortment of alcoholic beverages and some homemade juice. It was a lovely evening!



Tara and I are enjoying the feast

Saturday was a satisfying day, when I finished writing my part for all our report cards! With that duty completed, I decided to reward myself with an online catch-up of all the "For Better or For Worse" comic strips, that I had missed from July 2006 to April 2007. This took forever, but it was worth it to be able to read them one after the other, rather than having to wait until the arrival of the next day's newspaper to see what would happen. Oh yes, I also packed for our Beijing adventure.

#### April 8 to April 15: Trip to Beijing

At the 6 a.m. alarm on Sunday, I leaped out of bed to finish final preparations for departure. Then, as I was having a pleasant webcam chat with my family, including Dan who was in Hamilton for the Easter weekend, the telephone rang. In nontraditional fashion it was Doogii, who had arrived about 20 minutes early to inform me that she was waiting downstairs in a taxi. It should be mentioned that Doogii and her family have travelled this route to Beijing many times in the past, usually for brief stays to purchase goods that are not available in UB. On their 29 1/2 hour overnight passages, they have always booked seats only, therefore not experiencing the comfort of a separate compartment with beds, as we will now enjoy. So, yikes, does she have a special reason to be eager to begin this trip, or what?

## Beijing: From Luxe to Starbucks

Our train left the UB station at 8:05 a.m. with Doogii and me ensconced in Carriage #8, Compartment II, the "Luxe", not "Deluxe", accommodation. It consisted of an upper and lower berth and an extra single seat. With the upper berth that Doogii appropriated, already in "sleeping mode", I could still sit comfortably on the lower berth, or the extra seat, to enjoy as much as possible the passing scenery, through the incredibly dusty windows. We shared, with the adjacent compartment, an adjoining shower room with a sink, which was a very convenient and unexpected feature. What about the ability to take a shower? Well, that was a little dicey, because I couldn't figure out how to lock the shower room door and we were constantly aware of our neighbours, who only spoke Korean. It was a day, to take it easy and enjoy the passing sights. Doogii had set up the lower bunk for me in a rather motherly fashion, which, when feeling so inclined, provided the opportunity to close my eyes and feel the motion of the train. Along with our sitting, sleeping, and shower room amenities, our compartment also contained a small table with a white linen cloth. Shortly after departure, we were served a tasty and substantial breakfast which had possibly been lunch from the previous day? Although I had already eaten that morning, I ate again. On a trip like this, one never knows when, or from where, the next meal will arrive. Between snoozes and the dust on the windows, I managed to catch glimpses of herds of camels and horses as the train chugged along. Also spotted was a rather confused-looking herd of deer, that had found themselves on the wrong side of the fence, from where they wanted to be. As the train passed, they were frantically trying to find a portal to the open-range side of the tracks. In addition, a rather long-legged bird seemed to be grazing and was also on the "wrong" side of the fence. Quite a few stops were made along the way, where we were allowed to briefly alight, and where beside our idling train, we found vendors selling a variety of food and drinks. Back on board, and when she was awake, I was constantly asking Doogii if we were crossing the Gobi Desert yet. However, as our approach neared the desert, this was a question for which I didn't need an answer. Even when reclining on my berth, evidence of proximity to the Gobi was all around us: inside, through, under, between, etc. The amount of accumulating dust and sand was incredible, making it imperative to close our compartment window. This made for a rather stuffy, but somewhat less dusty environment, or so we thought. With daylight fading, I was thrilled to experience my once-in-a-lifetime sunset over the Gobi Desert! Our train trip on the Trans-Mongolian Railway provided a completely different Easter Sunday for me!

Beijing: From Luxe to Starbucks



Trans Mongolian railway: Doogii in our sleeper, dining car, stops along the way, and one for a wheel gauge change

## Beijing: From Luxe to Starbucks

Border crossings tended to be rather tedious. At the Mongolia/China border, we had about a two-hour wait while our visas and passports were taken by Mongolian officials, to a station office, checked, then returned to us. Around midnight, there was another lengthy layover, for the process of changing the train wheels from the wider gauge, Mongolian/Russian wheels, to the narrower Chinese gauge. Once this rather bumpy wheel exchange was completed, while I somehow managed to doze through some of this process, we were shuttled over to a railway station. Again, a passport and visa check process took place. This time it was with the Chinese authorities. These procedures would not have been as much of a disruption, if they had happened at a reasonable hour. However, by the time the Chinese officials finished their passenger inspection, it was at least 1:30 a.m.

Despite all the border crossing activity, I managed to sleep quite well afterwards. My bed was fairly comfortable, and except for the amount of dust that I had inhaled, I felt relatively refreshed in the morning. A porter arrived to deliver our daily meal tickets for breakfast and lunch. Surprise! With breakfast scheduled from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m., and since Doogii thought her watch was reading 8 a.m., we rushed around to get washed and dressed. We then lurched down to the dining car, which had changed from the lovely wood-panelled Mongolian style, to a totally different car with rather drab Chinese décor. But hey, it was a “free” meal. Upon arrival, we quickly found out that Doogii had misread her watch, because it was only 7 a.m. Instead of being late, we arrived well on time for our hard-boiled eggs, bread, butter, jam, and jasmine tea.

The Chinese scenery passed by, although obviously not as speedily as a bullet train. This flat landscape appeared to be managed without the use of modern equipment, but rather by people, horses, donkeys, etc. Some of the plantings were starting to show green, as evidenced by onions popping up in the fields. We also saw emerging leaves and blossoms on the trees. After a very brief stop at the Great Wall, “been there, seen that”, we hopped back on the train. It was then lunchtime, and for our lurch back to the dining car, only to be greeted by a full house. After some waiting time, we saw available seats open up beside a young man and his mother. The young man and Doogii had gone to school together, and his mother is the sister of Oko, our school manager. Interesting! It’s a small world, no matter where we go.

Our arrival in Beijing occurred in the early afternoon. The first order of business for me was to locate a bank for a currency exchange, which was accomplished without any difficulty. Then we continued on, my suitcase in hand, to find the International Hotel, for arranging our return train journey. Doogii had heard that it was a good place to buy our train tickets. It was, and we did. With that accomplished, we headed off, this time on a main thoroughfare

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to find the hotel, where Doogii had decided we should stay. Unfortunately, there was "No Room at the Inn" for that night. It was suggested that we could stay elsewhere for one night, then move to this location for the duration of our Beijing stay. This did not appeal to my sense of "nesting" so that idea was out of the question. However, a Mongolian contact at this hotel, then offered to take us to an area where we might find accommodation for all nights. Taking him up on his offer, and when we arrived, the building appeared to be a condominium apartment complex. We found the entrance, as well as an apartment owner, and inquired about the possibility of available accommodation for all nights. The answer was affirmative! It was absolutely perfect: having two beds; large windows; central air, which we didn't use or need; a four-piece private bath; away from traffic noise; and, with our own entrance. It gave us the impression that it was part of a much larger apartment. The price was more than reasonable, at about \$37 US per night so I told Doogii that I'd be very comfortable staying there, and she agreed. While the room was being made up for us, we went out to eat and to buy some groceries. At our return, we each had a shower during which we divested ourselves of the Gobi sand, down the tub's drain. Since it was still early, we decided to do some shopping. Good heavens, what a difference since the last time I was here, which was about 20 years ago! I now saw signs for McDonald's, KFC, Starbucks, TCBY, to name only a few. Talk about a free-market economy and westernization! We walked up the street to the Pearl Market, which was an absolute madhouse of vendors trying to sell everything and anything. Because I was in no way prepared and quite overwhelmed by the aggressiveness of the salespeople, I didn't make any purchases. That night I went to bed dreaming of having my arm grabbed and "Ladywhatyouneedcomeinlookielookie" shouted in my ear.

Doogii had never heard of Starbucks. Now she has! From this epiphany, each morning in Beijing she suggested that we kick-start the day with a jolt of java, which very soon expanded to include a pastry. It was a hit for me, too. Our decision for the day was that Doogii would take me to some of her favourite shopping locations. The first stop was a wholesale complex, where we had to peek through curtains to catch glimpses of what was for sale inside. It meant that Doogii's face could be viewed by the store clerks. They would initially appear horrified, thinking that she was a Chinese spy, who would steal their clothing designs. She took all this in her stride, ignored their looks, and immediately started speaking to them in Russian. Upon hearing that language, they knew that their designs were "safe" from theft. It was usual to ask when we ventured into one of these enclosures if they would sell just one item. More often than not, the answer was negative. Only sample clothing was available, thus not depleting their wholesale market stock. Clothing was very interesting in style and for anything that

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was available as a single item, the price was very low. However, the sizes were mainly for tiny Asian figures, so I was mostly out of luck. In one place, I almost bought a dressy outfit, but couldn't justify when or where I would be able to wear it. I declined the purchase, but later wish I hadn't. The cost would have been less than \$20 US. What was I thinking?



One of the highlights of this day happened at another location, where tea, among other things, was being sold. We found a tea vendor, then waited our turn to sit down for some "tea tasting". The purpose of this experience was because Doogii had been given money by several people in UB to purchase tea for them. I lost track of the number of different teas we sampled. After 45 minutes or more, and with our bags full of tea, and candies that the vendors threw into our bags as a bonus, we continued to shop in this building. After our 45 minutes of tea sampling, it was a relief for me to notice that a washroom was conveniently located on each floor. That being said, and on the subject of washrooms: during my time away, I have learned that when I'm out and about anywhere, there's a necessity to carry Kleenex. Toilet paper, is not always available, even if washrooms are. Feeling a mite peckish by this time, we decided that lunch

would be a good idea and somehow landed in a Russian restaurant. After eating, we left, still feeling rather peckish. Scratch that establishment off our list. It was time to return to our accommodation, which will now be referred to as our hotel, and to drop off our rather heavy

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purchases. Then without much deliberation, we set off to shop again, stopping only for a soup supper, and afterwards, for more shopping. According to our calculations, we must have been on the move for about eight hours this day. For me especially, being so long on the move, somewhat compensated for the relative inactivity of the previous two days on the train.

With our long, first arrival day on Monday, followed by shopping on Tuesday, it's not surprising that on Wednesday we slept in. Once on our feet and ready to get the day started, it was time for our Starbucks fix. After that we took the subway to a different shopping area. This was an interesting experience, with the "subway monitors" attempting to herd the passengers into organized lines, before the train arrived. It seemed to be working, until the train pulled into the station, then the lines went into chaos mode. However, it didn't seem to be any different from similar situations in Mongolia, so I did not think too much about it. This new shopping area was a rather crowded and noisy market, something similar to what we had experienced on our first night. As always, in a congested situation such as this, I was too overwhelmed to buy anything. Even if I had wanted to, the salespeople would not let anyone try anything on, not even a jacket. I found this out the hard way, after being reprimanded for attempting a try-on at a previous location. Enough of this. We left that chaos and walked to a Japanese department store. It was less crowded so I found it more bearable than the previous venue, but it had nothing in my size that was not "old lady style". When it came to clothing, Doogii seemed able to pick up anything she wanted, and it was always a good fit. No, I'm not going on a diet because it wouldn't help. It's not just weight that needs to be adjusted, but also my entire body shape. We had lunch at the store, then bought some groceries in the basement, before taking the subway to our hotel. Leaving the underground, we realized that the correct direction for our walk back, had been miscalculated. We then hailed a taxi and informed the driver of the hotel address. It was a welcome relief to be deposited at our doorstep and to have the door opened by the trusty doorman. We watched a bit of TV that had only one English channel, and Doogii fell asleep early. I'm assuming that I'd worn her out?

It was an early morning wake-up on this damp day, and after having sushi for breakfast, in our room, we set off for Starbucks. Today was computer store day. Doogii had been given a little booklet with information about the location of many different shopping areas in the city. One of them happened to be in the Computer District. Braving the subway system first, we then took a taxi the rest of the way to our destination. I was really impressed with the taxi fare system, which charges by distance, rather than time. Our charge was relatively inexpensive and if we had not used this form of transportation, we would not otherwise have

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found the area, even with a map. Deposited at the door of one of the many large buildings, the driver swept his hand across the windshield, indicating that our destination was not one structure, but many. And quite a few of the buildings were multi-storied. I was in heaven. Finally, I was shopping for something where a purchase wouldn't have anything to do with how it would fit my body size. This initial impression ended up to not be the case, for an entirely different reason. What I was looking for was a cooling pad for my laptop, due to its habit of becoming overly heated, when in use for an extended period of time. I can't afford to have it heat up to a point when it becomes non-functional. Losing my computer files is definitely not something I want to happen, and it could happen, even with regular back-ups. This day's search turned out to be an interesting one. Not only did very few of the salespeople speak English, but also, cooling pads were almost non-existent. We continued our search into several other buildings, before returning to the second store that offered to find us what we were looking for. Unfortunately, during our initial visit and after waiting for quite a long time, we left before the salesperson returned from his (or maybe it was her) search. For all we knew, the store could have been awaiting a shipment from Mongolia. Our decision to return was successful, so after the several more hours it took to finally locate a cooling pad for me, along with a flash drive for Doogii, we departed by taxi. In her wisdom Doogii decided that the difficulty with my clothes shopping lay in the fact that we had been frequenting Asian stores. Now it was time to find stores where Russian women bought their clothing. "OY!" I didn't know quite how to take this, but it seemed that it might possibly make sense. "Ya Show" was the next shop-stop and it appeared that Doogii had been correct. I finally made some clothing purchases! "Yesssss!" After this successful venture, we were off to find another store catering to the Russian woman's figure. Don't ask me what we found there, because by this time, everything was becoming a blur. And thus ended our day's shopping. It was dumplings for supper and then on the walk back to our hotel, we took advantage of what TCBY had to offer. Arrival at our lodging, was the time to try on my newly-purchased clothing again. This was as much of a delight for me, as was the TCBY.

Our last day in Beijing saw us buy breakfast from a street vendor: a pancake-type food, with a boiled egg in the middle, and it was quite tasty. It was eaten "on the hoof". This manner of purchasing and eating was our attempt to live as locals, rather than as tourists. Of course, it had to be topped up a short time later with our daily Starbucks' coffee fix. Then we headed for Tiananmen Square in hopes of taking a tour through the Forbidden City, which Doogii and her family have yet to experience. Our self-guided idea ended up not being as straightforward as expected. Heading in our presumed correct direction, we walked along a

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very pleasant pathway away from traffic. There, I saw an entrance, thinking it could be the main attraction, but it wasn't. Instead, we ended up in a type of art gallery featuring works by an Italian artist. It also included some Chinese relics, which didn't look terribly exciting, especially without a guide to explain their relevance. Completing our tour of this museum, we discovered another gate, presuming that it would lead to the Forbidden City. I think it is now called the Palace Museum. This space was very crowded, but what were we expecting? And it was hot, although temperature was not an issue. Hoping this time that we were in the correct zone to find the tickets we were looking for, we ended up purchasing the wrong ones. By the time we realized that we had the wrong tickets, we decided to at least find out what it was that we'd paid admission for. It was the Tower Museum, so we decided to check it out. Since we'd neglected to leave our small parcels in a specified location beforehand as required, we were refused entry. Looking at each other in exasperation, Doogii then took our tickets and the next thing I knew, she was striding back towards the main entrance, where she sold our tickets to an "innocent bystander". Enough of that. I then presented her with our Beijing map and suggested that she show her husband and daughter, where on the map we had almost visited. No doubt she and her family will be returning to Beijing multiple times in the future. The map will perhaps come in handy if she decides to play tourist again. Prior to this journey, I had been on a guided trip to Beijing, with visits to many major tourist attractions. Today's missed opportunity was a disappointment only for Doogii's sake. For me, this current adventure has been on the same high level of enjoyment as my previous guided tour. This time, however, I was able to explore the city The Mongolian Way!

Before and after today's misguided attempt to find the Forbidden City, we wandered through a couple of shopping streets that looked quite interesting. Doogii had not previously been to these areas, so she made a mental note to return some time in the future. On these streets there were many souvenir shops, but I was unable to find a small Olympic t-shirt to purchase for Daniel. Now I know that I'm not the only one unable to find the correct sizes, small enough, or large enough. After lunch at McDonald's, and yes, I broke down for this meal, combined with more shopping, we taxied back to our hotel. I took a bath and rested a bit, until I heard someone unwinding large amounts of some sort of tape in the hallway outside our room. Hmmmm? As I found out a short time later, a hotel neighbour had heard that we were leaving for UB the next day and asked if we would take a parcel with us. I would have declined had I been on my own. However, after initially giving him a hard time, Doogii relented with the understanding that "because it was heavy", he could transport us to the train station and carry it right to our train compartment. Done! Doogii is certainly a

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negotiator extraordinaire. With this small business transaction completed, off we went again. This time it was not to shop. My legs were aching.

We found a 24-hour beauty salon nearby where Doogii had her hair cut, and I had mine washed and set. With both of us looking quite beautiful, we left the salon to have dinner in an adjacent restaurant, where we had previously eaten. Do you ever get a feeling when you are out somewhere, that you are going to meet someone you recognize or know? It had been my feeling all week, and for Doogii this has now happened twice! This time, it was a student from ASU with her parents, in the same restaurant as we were, and we also found out that they were staying in the same building. Again, it's a small world. Returning to our hotel, we packed our belongings in preparation for an early morning pick-up and train departure.



The Great Wall of China from the train on our return trip

It turned into a hot and dusty night in our compartment. The Chinese berth was so narrow that I could not lie comfortably on my back with both arms at my sides. This was definitely another size-related problem for me and had nothing to do with clothing. During the night and in their infinite wisdom, the lady porters had thoughtfully turned off the music in the sleeping cars, but had turned up the heat. Despite being too warm and cramped, I managed to

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stay prone until 9 a.m. At that time, I made use of the hot water and my recently purchased coffee, a couple of buns, and some meat of questionable quality that we had purchased at a daytime stop. Doogii continued to sleep throughout my meal preparation. It felt like a really loooooong train trip!

Arriving at the UB station about 1:30 p.m., we were met by Doogii's husband, as well as the man who picked up "The Package from Beijing". I was assured it contained protein powder for someone interested in bodybuilding. After taking a taxi directly back to my apartment, I couldn't wait to take a shower to once again divest myself of Gobi sand and dust. I have nothing against the desert itself, but I don't particularly like to wear or to inhale it. What an awesome relief it was, to be able to shave the sand off my teeth. Since we did not have our own sink on this returning train, I had not brushed or flossed my teeth for one and a half days. What was I thinking? So, it was now a welcome return to my dental routine.

The remainder of Sunday was spent socializing with other teachers, who had returned from their adventures, webcam chatting with Ivan, and organizing the trip information on my flash drive. I'd had an incredible experience in Beijing, although it was also good to be back in familiar surroundings and eating familiar foods, such as a hot dog and a cucumber sandwich. "Woo hoo!" However, morning stops at Starbucks with Doogii are something I will definitely miss.

While absent for a week, it was someone's idea that our fourth-floor laundry room needed air conditioning, or a fan, or some ventilation, or whatever. As a result and to our ultimate dismay, we found this essential room to be very dusty and in total disarray. To have this happen, at a time when many of us had been away and were returning with our multiple loads of dirty laundry, was rather unthinkable. It was obvious that no one had the foresight to cover washing machines, drying racks, irons, vacuum, etc. before this messy work started. Our relatively new laundry room equipment now includes a vacuum that poufs out dusty air, and one of our previously new washing machine that is now out of order.

### April 16 to 22

Monday was a Professional Activity Day and included a staff meeting. We were also provided time to work on our reports. Since I still had information needed from other teachers, I did only what I could. With Chinese money left in my pocket, I decided to venture into the city to deposit it into my bank account. All would have gone well, if I had remembered to take my bank card with me. However, not all was lost, as I was able to do some grocery shopping, have supper out, then brave a solo taxi back to the apartment. Since Ivan left, I've been reluctant to travel alone by taxi, but all went well for this ride.

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Tuesday, with reports due the following morning, we had no water, no electricity, and no internet for most of the day. I did not panic. During the afternoon, all systems were up and running, which meant that I was able to complete, as well as print, the reports. This leaves only one more set to go!

While many of us were away for the week, our colleague, Alyssa, and her fiancé made their marriage plans official. That is, she and her Mongolian husband-to-be had submitted their marriage papers. To celebrate this occasion, on Wednesday evening a dinner outing was planned for the last night of Alyssa's "single-hood". This was to be a dinner/dancing/whatever evening, and because it was a school night and with my advancing years, I opted to participate only in the dinner. The venue was in a new restaurant to me, and I will definitely return because the food, the prices, and the décor were rather to my liking.

With Friday being Denise's fiancé's departure date, a group of us gathered for dinner at BD's on Thursday evening. I had no complaints that it was two nights in a row for eating out! It meant two nights in a row that I didn't have to plan a meal, or cook, which I saw as a big plus!

On Saturday at noon, I decided to wash my precious fitted sheet, and hoped that it would be dry enough to use on the bed that night. I don't know if it was the washing machine's spin cycle or the sheet material, but once it was draped over our drying rack, it was dry in about a half-hour. There's something to be said for the arid Mongolian climate. However, I have not been as lucky with my camel sweater, two hats, gloves, and mitts, which have not taken advantage of this climate to the same quick-dry extent, as my fitted sheet. This is probably because I had to hand-wash them and was not able to adequately wring them out. I don't know if it was due to the sweater or the gloves, but the wash water was a rather unlovely grey colour when I finished that laundry job.

During the afternoon hours, Denise and I went downtown to do some errands. I took a deep breath, figuratively, before deciding to go to the bank, expecting it to be chaotic on a Saturday afternoon. It wasn't, which meant that I didn't have to make a return trip on Sunday morning, when I'd be certain it would not be busy. We had a late lunch, purchased some groceries, then headed home. Apparently, it was "free day", when I received a free DVD and free ice cream with my grocery purchases! A highlight find at the Mercury Market was a package of Voortman's cookies, exported from Bloomington, California. I did a double-take because Voortman's is a Canadian company with a bakery in Burlington, Ontario, so I am very familiar with their cookies. I instantly picked up a package to purchase: one whose contents didn't look too broken. YUMMY! Our returning taxi driver had a sense of humour

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and was teasing us about dropping us off at a nearby ger instead of our apartment. I gave him a newly purchased ice cream on a stick, and he seemed surprised at my gesture.

On a final note, as I was sitting in our kitchen area at my computer, watching small flakes of snow drift by the window, I looked over the soccer field/ice rink, wondering if we had a new garbage pickup service, that we hadn't been told about. Next to the brick fence, there was a pile of bags, but, looking as closely as I could from my vantage point, the pile seemed to include a baseball cap. Then something moved in the pile. Ouch! Several people then arrived on the scene, including an older, stooped lady wearing a deel and a headscarf. They all stopped at the "pile". It was then I realized, that what was sitting next to the fence was actually a person with many different types and colours of bags draped around him or her. It took one of the new arrivals to help the "pile" stand up and leave with the rest of the group. They also carried bags, but not as many as the "pile" person.

I'll never get tired of the fact that, while on the other side of the earth from home, it's possible to contact family and friends via webcam. It's not just to be able to hear their voices, but also from Hamilton Ontario to Fort St. John BC, to see their faces!

Amazing things can be seen from this kitchen window, as well as through internet technology!

... Enjoying a rooftop view, and no traffic in the city centre...

## Rooftop Rendezvous & Sukhbaatar Soiree

April 23 to May 7

Another round of parent interviews has been completed and I hope that they, along with one final set of report cards, will be the last of my teaching career!

This week at school, not one, but two days in a row, brought power and water outages for most of both days. This resulted in a lot of inconvenience, especially when it was time for washroom breaks. Despite irritations, it did not put a halt to the planning of another evening "on the town". Tara's mom's return to Canada has been scheduled, which, of course, provides another excuse, as if we needed one, for a farewell dinner. So, with her impending departure, it was back to the American Ger'll by city bus. This is always an adventure, and within a relatively easy commute from our apartments.

On a positive note this week, a special reward of their choosing was given to a group of five students. It was their decision to hike up the 612 steps to the top of the Zaisan monument. This was definitely their idea not mine, at least for the physical exertion of the climb, that it would mean for me. Before we set out on this after-school trek, I was secretly hoping that at their tender ages of eight and nine, they might become rather pooped half way up. This was not to be the case, which I quickly learned when, at the bottom step, they raced up waaaaay ahead of me. Even with my laboured climb, we all had an awesome time together. Two of the girls took my hands and proceeded to converse more in English, than they had spoken to me individually, or in the classroom, all year. This was a tremendous delight for me and more than compensated for the exertion that I had experienced on my Zaisan ascent. We returned to school just in time for all five to be picked up by their drivers and for me to attend another staff meeting. "Oh joy".

On the home front, my kitchen sink tap was becoming mighty loose and in danger of falling off. Just in case we were to have a constant supply of water, I decided that it needed to be fixed. There was no telling what interesting event might occur if it were to pop off. So, with Ivan now unavailable for this project, I contacted the building maintenance person. He arrived, and completed the task efficiently I hope, so there will be no worry about a gushing "Old Faithful", at least for now.

As the year progresses and with each Friday's arrival, I'm feeling more and more pooped. Spring seems to have arrived, with the entire school building feeling uncomfortably warm, because of the heating not as yet turned off. Apparently, Mongolian officials, who control the timing for central heating, do not seem to agree with the weather forecasts. This excessive

## Rooftop Rendezvous & Sukhbaatar Soiree

heat does not do much for one's energy level. In addition, open windows bring in much unwanted dust, which I've heard is normal for this time of year. The excess dust is now being augmented by the large pit being dug directly beside the school. Presumably, this excavation will end up being a monstrous apartment building, or whatever. Construction trucks hauling dirt, do not seem to have drivers who realize that if their vehicles were to slow down just a tad, the dust clouds could be considerably smaller.

Saturday the 28th saw me doing a morning marathon of school planning and laundry. There are still only two of the three washing machines that are operational. The third has a large warning sign on it: "DO NOT TOUCH", so of course this just makes it even more provocative, to give it a whack as one passes. We've been told that it will be fixed, but we did not ask which year. In the afternoon I ventured into town to have lunch and to buy groceries. For the latter errand, I felt very energetic and bought a whole load of stuff, completely disregarding its bulk and weight. Most of it was able to be put into the cloth bags that I had taken, but I had to add a few extra plastic bags as well. Because of "flying solo", it felt like my grocery bags were actually great company, as I sat in restaurant enjoying a lovely salmon salad lunch. However, this feeling was rather short-lived when I finished eating and had to drag myself and the heavy groceries out of the restaurant, and to the curb. By good luck, I was quickly able to hail a taxi for drop-off at our apartment building. For these rides on my own, I never know what the driver is saying, when I ask about the total fare. I just hand them 2000 tugrik and most of the time they look rather pleased. Kim and Dave decided that since Saturday was another lovely day, and the apartment roof was such a scenic location, a barbecue was in order. Because I just had lunch, I was able to focus on enjoying the company, and the view, rather than eating, which wasn't difficult. From our vantage point we watched the sheep, goats, and people arriving home from their daily outings. In some cases, it looked rather obvious that the sheep and goats scored more points in their contest to navigate successfully home, than the people accompanying them. After roof-topping it for about 2½ hours I decided to call it a day.



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Goats running the gauntlet ahead of the herder



Rooftop view

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It had been such a warm day that I chose to open the apartment windows. This was definitely a big mistake! My nice clean apartment, so carefully scrubbed by Gantuya on Friday, had quickly accumulated a layer of dust on the window sills. It was also clinging to other horizontal surfaces, to which it could easily attach itself, and of course that included the floor! I used my broom in an attempt to sweep it up, and talk about a “fine mess”. You would have to see the broom and dustpan that I used, to appreciate the difficulty of this chore. I think the broom was built for a short person, and I mean VERY SHORT. By the time I had completed this task, I felt like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. As I looked behind me, I could still see small piles of dust that I had missed. It would have been much easier to use a vacuum, if this communally used appliance had been available. It has been AWOL for quite some time now, probably out of sheer embarrassment for not knowing whether to suck up the dust or to puff it out. It had lately been doing the latter, and with great gusto. Repairs have been promised to have it sucking instead of blowing. We’ll have to wait and see if and when.

Looking out the window on Sunday, it was difficult to determine if it was a cloudy or dusty day, but it didn’t matter, because it was “No Traffic in the City Centre Day”. I persuaded Tara to go with me, and this turned out to be a wonderful experience for us both. Arriving downtown, we were greeted with no honking, rushing, or chaotic traffic on the main streets. It was a true pleasure to stroll easily on foot from the bus stop, to Sukhbaatar Square. This area was now fully alive with many spectators and dancing groups. We joined the crowd to enjoy what was going on, not only with the entertainment but also with the bystanders. Having a front-row view for this event did not necessarily mean that one would keep that special spot, because people were continually moving about in all directions. An individual, who might have been sitting on the ground in front of you, could suddenly end up standing in front of you with total disregard, of who might be behind. The only person, who noticed my attempts to take pictures in this difficult situation, was a telephone call seller. He took great interest in seeing the pictures that I was taking. When his partner’s head intruded into one of my shots, he gave her a soft whack on the noggin. As a result, my next picture was clear of any unwanted back-of-the-head close-ups. Another, older gentleman seemed quite anxious that Tara and I should be able to have an optimal view of the dancing, so he took great pains to successfully shove other spectators out of the way. This action enabled him to then push us both into the tight vantage points that he had generated. We once more had better viewing of the proceedings! After his deed was done for us, he walked away, looking quite pleased with himself. We were thrilled, although somewhat stunned by his actions on our behalf.

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No Cars Day downtown, with crowds enjoying a spectacular show of dancing

When the dancing ended, we enjoyed walking safely and easily down the centre of Peace Avenue. Then it was off to the FPMT Buddhist Centre, to determine if they had any Buddhist appliqués for my dear friend Sister Tinh Quang, in Hamilton. They didn't, but there was a café in the building, so we stopped for a quiet coffee and sweet treat, before continuing our outing. On the return route to our bus stop, we decided to try our luck once again for something that I was looking for at the Choijin Lama Monastery gift shop. Wonder of wonders, it was finally open. In this shop, which was actually a ger inside the Monastery Museum, we both putzed around looking at this and that. I had in my mind that a Kazakh wall hanging was a must-have. The poor gift-shop owner had almost every hanging in her stock, piled up in a heap on the floor, after I had examined one after the other. My preferred choice was more expensive than the money I had with me. We left with the promise that I would be back to pick it up, in the middle of the next week. However, I did not keep this promise, after concluding that it was way overpriced. Unique, but overpriced. After this detour, we first thought about returning to the apartment by bus. Due to the downtown crowds, it appeared that we might have to wait forever, so we hailed a taxi instead. By this time, I was feeling a bit rushed, because I had been invited to Christina and John's apartment for supper and the arrival hour had come and gone. Being ever-patient people, John and Christina didn't seem to mind that I was a bit late. As well, they graciously included Tara. We had delicious lasagna, a tomato and cucumber salad, and a wonderful cake for dessert. Christina can do wonders with her Easy-Bake! Even to the point of melting the handle off the oven when using the broiler.

On Monday and feeling quite energetic after school, I returned to town. It was certainly a vastly different scene from the previous peaceful day, now with its usual mind-boggling traffic to contend with. I wandered around various souvenir shops looking for wall hangings, just to confirm my feelings about the excessive price for the one I had seen, the previous day. In fact, I confirmed that this was the case. Returning home by bus, there was standing room only, but a nice young lady, who was seated beside where I was standing, offered me her seat. I was about to decline, when the ticket seller motioned very severely to me that I must sit down. So I did. This was not an offer, it was an order! There are some merits to appearing in public with greying hair. Older Mongolians simply tap younger people on the shoulder, or give them an unceremonious shove to obtain a bus seat for themselves. Somehow, I've not had the wherewithal to try that technique.

The past few weeks have brought about frequent power, water, and internet outages. I don't know what is more exasperating: not having hot water, or no water at all; not taking

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showers, or having a "sponge bath" with a washcloth, as my mother used to say; not having power for mealtimes, which can always be rectified by trekking to the nearest restaurant, if indeed, their power is not out as well; or last but definitely not least, not being able to contact family and friends at home, due to an internet outage. These too shall pass? "Like kidney stones"?

Things have been less than calm at school, with the kids seeming to sense that the end of the year is on the horizon. As a result, Doogii and I have not quite been our usual scintillating selves in the classroom. This was evident one day at recess. I was rather put in my place, when one of our charges decided to apologize to me, for having thrown a minor tantrum after not receiving a skipping rope at recess. Instead of just coming over to me to verbally offer her apologies, she was very seriously kneeling in front of my feet like a Muslim at prayer time. What else could I do but laugh? It was also embarrassing. Lesson learned?

The worst dinner I have ever cooked happened last Friday: blood sausages, hot cakes, and tomato and cucumber salad. The blood sausages contained chunks of fat that were the consistency of pencil erasers and somewhat less tasty. The hot cakes were just that, sort of like cake and not at all with the pancake taste that I was expecting. Also, I don't have the proper pancake lifter, or a measuring cup. By the time I finished with hot cake #2, it looked like an accordion and probably tasted not much better. Most of this culinary disaster ended up in the garbage. Anyone who knows me well knows that food has to taste pretty awful for me to even consider throwing it out. One redeeming feature of this dinner was the salad, and it was delicious!

For our Saturday grocery shopping, Tara, Denise and I travelled together. However, beforehand, we dropped by Milli's for lunch and I had a wonderful, large, strong cup of American coffee and an equally superb bowl of carrot and ginger soup. This culinary delight allowed us to begin our quest to find a DHL company. We're considering the possibility of sending some of our belongings home in advance, due to excess bulk. This "bulk" is not referring to us, physically, but to the volume of purchases accumulated since our arrival in UB. It's entirely possible though, that this company's delivery charges will prove costly. We finally found the DHL office after going around in a few circles, and of course it was closed. At least now we know where to find it. After Ivan not receiving by mail his Turkish coffee from Canada, I don't trust the postal system here so this alternate method of transporting our packages would be totally out of the question. Leaving this closed location on a sunny, windy, and dusty 26-degree day, we headed to the nearby UB Hotel. My next mission was to purchase a "Discover Mongolia" DVD that I had seen advertised in an English newspaper.

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With a successful purchase in hand, we were now on our way for groceries. The rule for grocery shopping is that when completed, it is mandatory to negotiate a taxi ride and not to take the return trip by bus. This, we did. Arriving home and feeling hot, sweaty, and dusty, there was no hot water.

Since our new science teacher, Andrew, was having a birthday, a group of us decided to go out for supper. However, we inadvertently ended up in two groups at two different restaurants. It was no big deal, at least I don't think it was. John, Christina, Ubi, with a friend, and I, found a Greek restaurant where we'd never been, but where we will definitely return. The food was wonderful, the prices were very reasonable and the atmosphere was pleasant. And it is centrally located. Below this second-floor Greek restaurant, is a Mongolian restaurant, that also appears to be worth visiting, on another occasion. Our arrival home, in the darkness of 10 p.m., made the flames of the days old fire on the mountainside clearly visible. What a shame! It is so hot and dry here that it is a small wonder there aren't more grass fires.

Meanwhile, at our Bay Street apartment, Adrian and Daniel had been very patiently awaiting my online arrival for a webcam conversation. This had not been planned, so I was surprised, and more than delighted to find them at the other end of the camera, when I arrived home.

Sunday's lunch was partially made up for, after a disastrous Friday dinner, when I decided to cook a roast and also to microwave some scalloped potatoes. After layering the scalloped potato ingredients in the pot, I reread the online recipe, only to discover that the potatoes were supposed to be precooked. Undaunted, I decided instead, to set the microwave timer for twice as long. It worked! Scalloped potatoes have obviously not been my forte. I often forget to include an important ingredient, like milk. But today both dishes turned out REALLY well and when I tried to find someone to help me eat them, it was to no avail. Too bad. However, it left me with some yummy leftovers.

In the late afternoon, Denise and I decided to go for a hike, which ended up being about eight or ten kilometres. We continued so far along the road by the river, and past the Presidential residences, that the pavement ended. It had been our goal to find the monastery that someone had told us would be at the end of the road. Instead, we were somewhat amused, to find a field with two billboards that promised the building of a fancy hotel, which would include a tourist-type facility of some sort. No indication was given for the construction start date, but it certainly didn't look like it would be anytime soon. Having a fine time in this empty field, were grazing horses that did not seem to mind the hotel construction delay.

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Another promising sign, in that vicinity, indicated that perhaps the monastery was another 2.3 kilometres ahead. With any plans to walk farther, it was a toss-up for who might have to carry whom, on our return. With this possibility in mind, we agreed that it was best to head back. As we approached our apartment, we passed a dump located in the ger area. We also stopped at a small store to purchase, at a cost of about 15 cents each, two chocolate ice creams on sticks to fortify us until reaching home. Entering my apartment, I discovered that my jeans were dusty, right up to the knees, and that there was no hot water. Again.



A lovely long walk with Denise

## Rooftop Rendezvous & Sukhbaatar Soiree

After checking with a few people in our building about the water situation, Kim called our building manager. By mid evening, we had hot water again, albeit temporarily. Feeling like a very large dust bunny, I quickly jumped at the opportunity to take a hot shower, because it is never certain when hot water will be consistently available.

Please, take note: on Monday, May 7, 2007 it rained! Not hard and not long, but it was definitely raining. Yep. For the first time this year, as far as my weary brain can remember, we had indoor recess. Good heavens, it's about time for this rain, because with it comes a very welcome relief from the dust.

Ivan let me know that our son, Dan, arrived safely in Quebec City, on Sunday, after biking from Montreal. He will now be taking a five-week French immersion course, at Laval University. His McGill convocation takes place on May 29. Although Ivan and perhaps another family member will make the trek to Montreal to attend the ceremony, I am definitely sad to be missing it! Adrian has a new job in Toronto for the time being and continues to do very well with the welding courses he is taking.

It is just over seven weeks until my return to Canada. Meanwhile, I am trying to make the most of my time here with friends, my work, and being immersed, to some extent, in the unique Mongolian culture.

... Downtown concert, homeward goats, and a final epic school trip...

## Chapter 32

# Mongolian Culture Past & Present

May 8 to 23

Now that the clock is ticking at an even greater pace, there seems to be yet another sequence of "Last Events" taking place. It is somewhat *déjà vu* of my July 2006 departure from Canada to Mongolia, Ivan's exodus from Mongolia, and various other farewells to colleagues here, as they left for lives elsewhere.

One of these current occasions, provided the pleasure of accompanying Christina to her church, for making baby blankets for donation to a local hospital. There were only five women in attendance, and it was just as well. Two of the three sewing machines, that had been gathered for our use, decided for their own mechanical reasons to be nonfunctional. Since my sewing skills are just a tad above non-existent, I self-delegated to the tasks of pinning and ironing the blankets. It was a very pleasant evening, especially considering that the reward for our labours was a dessert that looked and tasted like a fruit crisp, with some really creamy ice cream on the side. What a delightful surprise!

On a different note, it looks like the idea of shipping homeward bound excess baggage is not going to be an option. To reach a decision about the feasibility of this strategy, Doogii and I took the school bus into the city one afternoon to the DHL office. Our goal was to obtain some pertinent shipping information in writing, and for her to ask relevant questions about the costs and procedures. As anticipated, the expense would be prohibitive, even though the method would be reliable. With this "Shipping Plan A" task completed, we then walked to the Post Office, to obtain the same information for costs and procedures, for a "Shipping Plan B". After a few dead ends, in our search for someone to answer our questions, we were finally pointed in the direction of information about International Parcel Delivery. The only rate that appeared feasible would have been the "slow boat from Mongolia" route. Since my faith in the Mongolian postal system continues to be several points below zero, and we are not talking about temperature, I resolved that Plan B would also not work. Today's on-foot research hit home, in helping me recognize that there will have to be major considerations, about how to weed out some of the presumed excess from my take-home luggage. The business end of today was complete and it was now time for another highlight of the day. This was a dinner invitation. Doogii decided that I needed to go to her place for dinner and I readily accepted. After several phone calls home, she was finally able to reach her husband, to let him know about their additional dinner guest. Since he's the chief cook, this was an important contact to make. It was the second time this year that I could admit that a cell phone might come in

handy from time to time. After our delicious home-cooked meal, Doogii in her usual effective manner, walked me down the street near her home and plopped me into one of the unofficial UB taxis. Initially, I don't think the driver had any intention of picking up a passenger, but Doogii somehow made him decide that he had no choice. As the taxi drew closer to our apartment building, I noticed a new construction, in the form of a ger. It was in the middle of the road, behind the large stone blocks that had been placed just past our apartment entrance. It continues to be a source of amazement to me that, anywhere and everywhere, gers can spring up, or be dismantled, in the blink of an eye. Eventually, it was learned that these new neighbours are the workers Oyunaa hired to landscape the school property, but this is another story.

The days are a mixture of warm, sunny, cloudless skies, along with damp, slightly rainy, and overcast (horrors!) weather. Although it may be cloudy and raining for one minute, it might be sunny a few minutes later. For our clothing choices, layering seems to be most prudent.

"Woo, hoo", John, Christina, and I saw a garage sale ad and thought it would be a rather fine idea to check it out. However, when we arrived at the location 20 minutes after it had opened, there was nothing left except clothing. With my concern about the size and weight of my luggage capacity, I really don't know what I was expecting to buy, but you never know. I miss Canadian garage sales at this time of year. I'll just have to wait until I get home to see if there are any inexpensive items that I need but don't have to dust! I admit that some of my best school supplies purchased before I left Canada, for this Mongolian adventure, were found at garage sales. We were somewhat stunned by this experience of the almost-total garage sale sell out, so we wandered around for a while, trying to decide what else to do with our day. In our wandering, we came across and toured "The Victims of Political Persecution Memorial Museum". It was no surprise that we found it to be rather depressing and confusing. Moving through the various display rooms, fewer and fewer of the signs contained English translations. This didn't help us to fully appreciate the history behind the creation of this exhibition. Sometime during this not-so-productive outing, I was feeling a strong need to return to my apartment, gather my wits, and prepare for the next part of our day. This evening, eight of us were planning to attend a concert downtown and, in true style, nobody seemed to know what time it started, or where, or when, we were going to meet. It turned out that the concert did not start at 6 p.m. as some had thought, but at 8 p.m. This was a very welcome relief for me, because with these extra two hours, I was able to "regroup", clean up, and take a bit of a relaxation break before heading out again.

It was not until the day after the concert when I realized, that the performance we attended was not the one I thought we were heading to, but don't ask me what I was expecting. This night's plans all started with Tara, who determined that a Degi concert would be a lovely way to spend a Saturday evening. Through her teaching assistant, she had arranged to buy tickets for us. In the meantime, Oko had sent an email asking if anyone wanted to go to the Wrestling Palace to see a Long Song concert. There hadn't been any follow-up about this second invitation. As I had said, "Yes", for both occasions, I was confused as to where I was supposed to be going this evening, but not more confused than normal, I guess. Degi, I saw, and it was a wonderful evening with front row seats. It began with classical music played with a conventional violin. It ended with an electric violin fused with the accompaniment of traditional Mongolian folk music, dancing, and contortionists. The fireworks finale was quite a surprise, especially with our front-row seating. Due to the length of this concert, it was good that I had made a side trip to the washroom, before the opening act. "Long Song" at the Wrestling Palace is long gone and with me not in attendance. I haven't heard from Oko about not receiving a follow-up after her Wrestling Palace concert suggestion. "Oh well".

There is no longer a ger in view from my kitchen window. As is quite often the case, on Sunday I found out that it had been dismantled and moved to goodness knows where. This was the day for Doogii and I to meet in the city centre to do some shopping. We walked to Gandan Monastery, with me still looking for Buddhist appliqués for my friend. As previously, I had no luck. From there we walked to the "Third District" where I wanted to find some slacks. After several hours of searching, during which I'm sure I was driving Doogii crazy, by some miracle, I found a replacement pair of blue jeans for the ones I will not be taking home with me. As usual, due to my height and because I don't want to appear as Popeye's Sweet Pea, I will have to shorten the pant legs. Considerably! Today was hot and sunny, and with all the walking we did, the sunburned back of my neck was very aware of this, as were the muscles throughout the rest of my body.

At school one day, when I complimented Min Jeong on the beautiful dress she was wearing, she told me that her mom had bought it for her in Korea. Then she proceeded to give me some wise advice: that her mom was fatter than me, so she knew where to get clothes in Mongolia to fit her. Min Jeong minces no words. After I stopped laughing, I took serious note of this fashion fact for fat ladies and will follow her lead to find this store before leaving the city for home.

## Mongolian Culture Past & Present

Our final school excursion of the year was a tour to the XIII Century National Park.

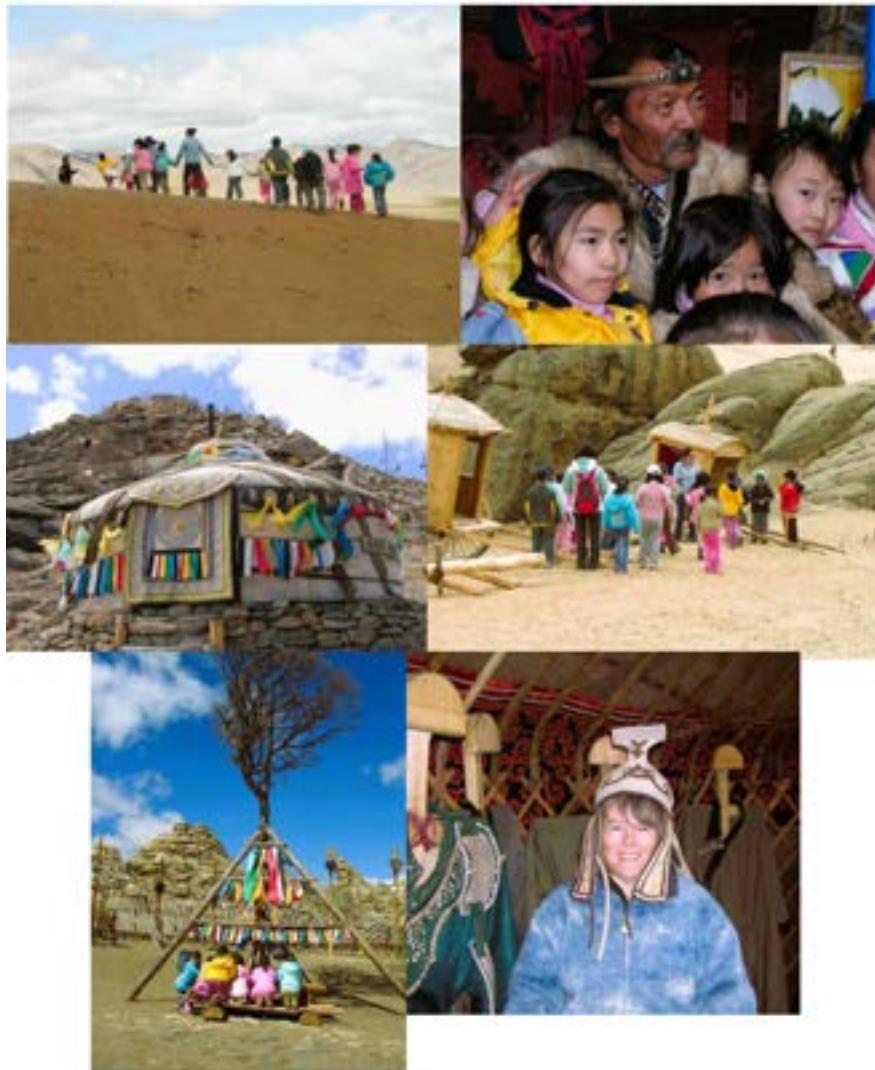


Arrival at the Park

The location was breathtaking, with many interesting sites to visit throughout the park. The two-hour drive with 17 junk-eating children, across very bumpy terrain, was a major endurance test for me. Along our route, we only had one barf stop, but at least three bathroom breaks. My first indication as to how the day might possibly go was when Doogii pointed out, that I had under-charged the kids for the trip, by 800 tugrik each. I was mortified! Somehow though, she managed to get this error straightened out, after rereading the park brochure several times, then understanding that if there were more than 20 children, one admission ended up being free. Since the Grade 4 class was also on their way in a separate vehicle from ours, it meant that we were entitled to this free offer. After my angst with the supposed accounting error disappeared, we all ended up having a perfectly awesome experience. At the end of our day, and when returning to school, we realized that our arrival time would be about two hours ahead of schedule. My arrival/departure information had been gleaned from other teachers, who had previously taken their students on this same outing. I had not taken into account the differences in our time of year visits. Theirs were during winter weather with icy and snowy roads and park conditions, as well as minus 40-degree temperatures. Okay, it is now the third time that I have to amend my previous negative declarations about cell phones. Before now, my thoughts have turned towards, "For what reason might an eight-year-old, or nine-year-old need to bring a cell phone to school?" Well with this unplanned early arrival

## Mongolian Culture Past & Present

home, it was the perfect reason! Many of our students were carrying their phones and they were put to very good use to contact parents, drivers, etc. to inform them about our earlier than expected arrival. Despite many calls with many phones, there remained one child whose family could not be contacted. I ended up having to wait at school until just after 7 p.m. for her to be picked up. This made for a very long day for us both. When I finally returned to my apartment, I discovered that the total number of pictures taken was well over 200. With these visual reminders, I continue to marvel at the exciting experiences we all had and, for me, it was having my first camel ride!



Touring the park

## Mongolian Culture Past & Present



A delicious lunch was served!



First-time camel rides

On one of my jaunts to the city, I unexpectedly met the mother and brother of one of our students. The mom said that she would like to meet me privately in a café or somewhere and asked me to name a convenient date. I concluded that the day after the class trip would be just right. She ended up including Doogii too, and this invitation was not just to a café, but for a dinner. I now have a new restaurant, on my list to revisit! It is located on the 12th floor of a downtown hotel with million-dollar views of an extensive part of the city. The food was excellent and the price was not much different from the less scenic eating establishments. It was a lovely 2½ hour evening with Munkhbayar, her mother, brother, sister, Doogii, and me enjoying each other's company, and taking advantage of the spectacular city views.

With the big open skies here, and even with the mountains somewhat blocking the rising sun, daylight is now appearing extremely early. What could I do to make it easier for me to sleep past 4:30 a.m.? Aluminum foil has been the answer. I just hope that those looking from the outside do not assume that there is a "Grow Op" happening on the second floor of the teachers' apartment building. As a result of the bedroom window taping and foiling event on Friday night, I was able to sleep until 10 a.m. on Saturday morning. This was a rare occurrence for me, but is no more, due to subsequent mornings continuing to allow for no more "crack of dawn" awakenings. This aluminum foil treatment is an inexpensive and impermanent way to create indoor darkness and most importantly, for me, in a bedroom. Also, with the temperature rising and a reminder to close the bedroom door during the day, this room is probably about 10 degrees cooler than the rest of the apartment. Windows are only opened during the evening hours due to blowing dust, which occurs mainly during the day.

This same Friday "foiling" evening I also entertained myself, by inadvertently causing the beginnings of a swimming pool, in the fourth-floor laundry room. With repair of the third washer finally completed, all washing machines are now in working order. However, during their spin cycles, all three seem to seriously contemplate an escape from their cheerless chamber. Consequently, they start an energetic hop across the floor. Unfortunately, someone forgot to tell them that not only are they plugged into electrical wall outlets but also that their hoses are funneled into drain pipes on the wall. This particular evening and as a precaution before starting my wash, I pushed the very heavy machines closer to the wall, as best I could, then jammed their hoses further down into their respective drains. Apparently, these precautions were in vain. One machine with its plug still in the socket had hopped around, and dislodged the drain hose, causing my wash/rinse water to pool out across the floor. This meant that Kim and Dave's apartment, directly below the laundry room, would have another

peeling wet spot on their bedroom ceiling. Without a proper floor drain, removing water on the floor was not possible. It was unfortunate that I was unable to devise any other plan to remedy this situation, because of not having enough towels to soak up the water. I decided to let it sit to dry where it was, and relay the news to the plumbers the next day.

As I write this in my apartment, I'm watching the goats return home from their daily pasture location on the hills. Oops, they almost made a wrong turn into an adjoining field, but abruptly did a 90-degree jump, in order to run the gauntlet between the fences. Seeing their quick manoeuvres, it could be either a response to voice commands, or perhaps the throwing of stones by the goat herder.

For 8½ hours on Saturday, our electricity, water and internet were nonfunctional. Once again. Unfortunately, for that day, all tasks that I'd planned were dependent on these utilities. However, I was very grateful that my laundry had been completed the previous night. But what do I do today? Never one to sit still and relax, regardless of circumstances, all I could think of was to provide myself with a "moving" experience, so that's what I did. Now I have a new configuration of kitchen and living room furniture. The bedroom would have been next on my list, except for the prohibitive weight of the extra-large pieces of furniture and for the fact that I was expecting the dresser mirror to fall off, if I had made any attempt to push it across the floor. This would have not had a happy ending.

Since no one was able to cook, a group of us went out for brunch, then into the city for groceries. Upon our return, the power continued to be AWOL. Several phone calls to the apartment manager produced several different responses. Apparently, the cause was an "accident". We were warned that the power might go out again on Sunday and wondered who was going to manufacture a second "accident". Just as we were standing in the hallway discussing this issue, the lights came on, scattering us like flies on a horse's back, to complete our respective tasks before the power deserted us again.

Stewing meat, and I don't know if it was pork or beef, had been taken out of the fridge in the hope that something could be made of it. Thankfully, during webcam conversations with Ivan, he was able to give me his expert recipe. I had started cooking the onions and meat the previous evening, but had not continued the process. What was there, having been dumped into a pot, was a slightly-crispy-because-I-got-side-tracked-during-cooking, stew starter. Since I'd had no food since brunch, I decided that it behooved me to finish creating the stew. With our water having been turned off for so long the previous day, my dishes had not been washed. This was not a problem except that I wanted to use the wooden spatula, to finish the stew. Taking the spatula out of the previously used frying pan, I plopped it into my stewing pot

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and gave it a vigorous stir. I had not immediately noticed, or remembered, that although the dishes had not been washed, I had put dish soap in the pan, to help loosen the burned bits. So now I had a dab or more of this soap in my stew. The thought of inviting someone to share it with me was now completely out of the question. Despite the burn and the soap, but by including a potato, and an onion, along with some rather disheveled carrots, the finished culinary product turned out to be rather delicious. However, next time I will try to remember not to include dish soap in that particular recipe.

Not the sun, but construction sounds, awakened me on Sunday morning. There is no day of rest on Sunday here. It was a “Walk to the Ger Camp” day for Denise, Tara, Kim, and me. What a beautiful, warm, and sunny day for a stroll along the side of the mountain! There are actually trees there, and once we arrived, we detected a scent that reminded us of the trees in northern Ontario. We were quickly brought back to reality though, when coming upon a camel grazing contentedly on the grass. A restaurant at this site, gave us some hope to have something to eat. It is a lovely restaurant with tablecloths on the tables, ample space, and it is nicely decorated. Thinking that we would start with a cold drink, because it was a hot day, we were informed by the less than enthusiastic waitress that for anything cold to drink, there was zip: no water; no soft drinks; nada. After our mouths closed from this rather amazing revelation and the way in which the information had been relayed to us, we left without eating or drinking anything. I decided that it must be like the no-white-shoes-before May 24 thing, in Canada. That is, the serving of cold drinks in Mongolia takes place only after a certain yearly date. Perhaps it is rather like how the UB city heating on/off dates are decided. On our very dry and thirsty walk back, we smelled something really fragrant and stopped to determine if we could find the source. It seemed to come from a low-growing green plant, but not satisfied with knowing more about this plant, I had to check other low-growing greenery. NOBODY TOLD ME ABOUT THE NETTLES! Luckily, I was only attacked on the index finger of my left hand, but boy did it hurt! Our walk back, via a bus route, turned out to be a mistake, when I was at the wrong end of target practice. Suddenly, I felt something hit my side and suspected that it had come from a nail gun, being used by construction workers at the apartment building, to our left. By the grins on their faces, it was evident that aiming their nail guns at passing tourists was funny. But it was not! Fortunately, I sustained no damage.



It was a beautiful day for a walk with Tara, Denise, and Kim

This week of school has been somewhat uneventful. I have decided not to let myself become stressed about schoolwork that I think must be completed, before year-end. Last evening John injured his ankle playing floor hockey, so Doogii escorted him to the hospital for an X-ray the next morning. This meant that they were both absent for the noon hour. John's teaching assistant took over his class. I was left with the choice of implementing which of the lesson plans B, C, D, or E, to use with our class. We ended up discussing the features of ostriches (Plan C). Only 21 more teaching days to go!

Now for school landscaping news. Well, this involves instructions for the workers, who reside in "The Ger in the Middle of the Street". Soil on the property is being sifted, then there's a laying down of sand, with an addition of something that looks like topsoil on the very top. This may seem like a plan to remove the bare, ugly, and stony ground around the school property. However, with the prolonged velocity of the wind that we are lately experiencing, it might be logical to conclude that half the material in the piles of relocated substances, has

already blown from here to Beijing. In addition, an answer needs to be found for replacement of the originally planted and now deceased, maple and pine trees in the school's front yard. For any new plantings, some rethinking will be needed to choose specific flora that will thrive in this climate zone, and with its available soil, or lack thereof. Watering the heck out of dead trees will not bring them back to life, but who am I to say? When the leaves turned crispy and remained on the maple branches during the fall and winter, the signs were not good for said-trees to survive either a Mongolian winter, or a scarceness of water during the rest of the year. Fortunately, this is a conundrum for somebody else to deal with.

My dinner is now ready with ham, baked potato, and squash or pumpkin on the menu. There are times when I'm never completely sure what I'm buying in the way of groceries. "OH, my queendom for a sharp knife"! Part of tonight's dinner that is dependent on a can of pineapple chunks, has been traded for the sewing of a ripped pair of shorts, for our new science teacher. This sounded like a good exchange to me. Now all I have to do is open the can, because I don't have a can opener. "OH, my queendom for a can opener"!

... Last report cards and preparations for yet another departure...

## Chapter 33

# Seoul Plane Here I Come

May 24 to June 23

This chapter is written in anticipation that sometime in the near future our internet will be available. It has been unavailable since Friday and it is now Sunday. The good news is that the power is on, but oops, I have probably jinxed this current situation. Also, the 10-day hot water shutoff, planned for June 15-25, has not occurred. Yet. It has been a busy time, with reports, planning school events, and dining outings. I'll miss this last category of busyness, when I return to Canada!

There is a new view from my kitchen window of workers preparing the school soccer field, formerly used as the ice rink. This project could be interesting to watch except that it has included the continued dumping of truckloads of rocks and sand, not too far from my apartment windows. And because of the intermittent, strong, and sometimes howling winds, a good portion of this sand has found its way inside, even through closed windows. Adding to the noise and airborne debris, a cement mixer is now parked below my bedroom window. With all that is going on here, there is some consolation in the fact that the workers don't continue their labours much past 9:30 p.m., when it gets dark. Their morning start-ups do not happen too early. Small mercies. Together with the dump trucks and cement mixer in close proximity, a small herd of goats has discovered this landscaping site and is persistently taking the opportunity to check out the work being done. On another side of our building, a Taj Mahal-like edifice being built across from the front entrance area of our school, seems to be under construction 24/7. Since I'm at the opposite end of our building, this has not affected the interior of my apartment in the form of dust and dirt, but the constant pounding and grinding is definitely audible for quite a distance. This construction crew seems to be moving along quickly, and I'm thinking that the finished product could possibly consist of a complex of high-end apartments. It's still at a stage of being difficult to figure out its exact purpose, but regardless of this, it will certainly ruin the previously perfect perspective of the hilly countryside. It's construction season, at least in our location!

On the last Friday of May, I decided to use the second of my ten allotted sick days to take a mental health break. This was a welcome respite and I even had company for part of the day. My cleaning lady, Gantuya, arrived about 11 a.m. and my only duty was to stay out of her way. Before she left, I asked if she knew someone who could shorten a pair of jeans for me. She did indeed know someone. This saves me the bother of taking them downtown, were I would have to find a seamstress or tailor, who understood enough English to tell him or her

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what I wanted. Before Gantuya left she took the appropriate pant length measurements and, for lack of proper seamstress tools, she marked the hems with packing tape. She also shared with me that the person who would be doing the sewing was blind and asked if this was OK. Since I did not have much choice in the matter and because I trusted her judgment, I agreed to this somewhat unique arrangement. We must be trusting in situations such as this.

It was a gloomy, damp, and somewhat chilly Saturday when Christina popped in to ask if I would like to help her church group clean up the garbage that was littering the Zaisan monument. I agreed and stayed for about an hour to do my little bit. I didn't see the need to remain longer due to a very large group of volunteers, who had already collected enough garbage to fill at least three trucks! Needless to say, the monument area was a bit of a mess to begin with, but looked quite amazing when the cleanup was finished. Hopefully it will stay that way for a while. In the evening, we attended a performance by the Brigham Young University-Hawaii Concert Choir. It was excellent. The first part of the evening featured classical music, then switched to multicultural songs. The packed audience consisted mainly of Mongolians, who seemed to especially appreciate Polynesian music and showed great enthusiasm with their responses. This event was even more special, because four of the choir members are Mongolian, including one young man, who is the son of one of our school's teaching assistants.

On Sunday, the day after the concert, Tara and I treated ourselves to a manicure, pedicure, and supper downtown. It was such a relaxing way to spend the day that we're planning a repeat outing, with Kim, on June 26, before we all leave for our respective Canadian homes.

At school closing one day, Christina, John, and I caught the 4 p.m. school bus, with our destination downtown being another visit to the seamstress. This time, I had two jackets and a skirt to modify. In addition, the cotton blouse she made for me had shrunk. Yes, I know I was not supposed to wash it in hot water, but there is no cold water setting on our washing machines. What can one do in a situation like this? Also, I had purchased two wonderful Mongolian-style jackets that were too large for me, which was rather unbelievable. I bought them anyway, not knowing if another opportunity would arise before leaving Mongolia. I might never again come across items of clothing that I liked and that I knew could be made to fit. I also took the shrunken blouse back to see if anything could be done in the way of damage control. Being her ever cheerful self, the seamstress pinned me up, then off we went. Joining some of the other teachers, we were in search of a new restaurant for supper. It was a rather interesting experience. The restaurant, recently opened, was not very well organized, and had a staff, who spoke very little English. I had to order three different meals, because

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the first two were not available. A surprising feature of the evening meal was that we were served free glasses of water without even having to ask! This year we have not taken the availability of water for granted, especially in a UB restaurant. Being an overthinker and already having experienced issues with water quality this year, I began to have concerns in the back of my mind. Was this perhaps just tap water, and who knows if it had been tested for bacteria? Later, I happily came to the conclusion that my fears were unjustified, because nobody in our group developed any stomach problems. Returning to my apartment that evening, an interesting sight greeted me, outside my kitchen window. Someone had tied a horse to the fence, within our property boundaries. This horse was patiently waiting for its owner and did not pay too much attention to me, as I took its picture. How often do you find a horse tied to a fence next to your apartment? Maybe more often in western Canada? Or indeed, in many, many locations here!



The end of May was approaching, so the time came for me to start looking for books that I had borrowed from the school library and also for those I had brought with me from Canada. The search is in preparation for the tedious year-end inventory day. Luckily, I began early, because this process took several weeks to complete. Between Doogii, our students, and me, we found all but one of the previously AWOL books, along with other items needing inclusion in this inventory.

Tuesday, May 29 was a very special personal occasion! It was Dan's convocation at McGill University. After some internet investigation, I discovered that it would be broadcast in "real" time. This was such an exciting and unexpected opportunity for me, that I could hardly contain myself. I even went so far as to call Ivan, my brother-in-law, and sister-in-law, who would all be travelling together, to attend Dan's convocation in person. My request

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to them was that if they saw an official-looking video camera set up at any location, to please jump up and down and wave, so I might be able to catch them online. Ivan took my request seriously and as a result, I'm sure there were a few people in Montreal, who wondered who these people were and why were they leaping and waving their arms in front of every camera they saw. I really appreciated that they agreed to my request, but in the end, I was unable to catch any of their hand and arm waving from my side of the world. As for the convocation itself, what a wonderful idea to broadcast it IN REAL TIME! Imagine that Mom is half-way around the world watching her son officially receive his Mechanical Engineering degree! However, my initial excitement at the prospect of being part of this event lasted very briefly. As a reminder, the real time was wonderful, but with the 12-hour time difference, I ended up staying awake well into the wee hours of the next morning. It was quite evident during the first part of the proceedings that the broadcast was not going to go as smoothly as I had anticipated. Either the video froze, or the audio continued without the video, or both audio and video skipped chunks of the proceedings. As a result, after one hour, 28 minutes, and 20 seconds, when Dan "Kovahcheek" arrived on stage, I was in quite a state. Prior to his on-stage entry, I had been wondering when and if the internet on my end was going to be cooperative enough to let me catch his shining moment. However, I did catch his stage entrance, complete with our last name being totally mispronounced, but I am not sure if I actually saw his document being handed to him. The next day on the internet, the entire convocation was available for downloading, so, I started the procedure in the morning before school, and found it completed by lunch. Now I have the whole event on my computer, without interruptions! Wonderful! It was certainly a proud experience for Dad, Mom, Teta Zdenka and Tetak Zvonimir. Dan, on the other hand, would have happily skipped all the pomp and ceremony without any difficulty. However, he graciously agreed to attend, if for no other reason than our pleading. He is now in Costa Rica observing three-toed sloths, monkeys, toucans, and trying to avoid alligators.

Friday, June 1 was marked as a special holiday. According to our school calendar, it was my understanding that it was specifically to celebrate Mother's Day, but this was not entirely the case. Apparently, it was for Children's Day, as announced in LARGE LETTERS, and Mother's Day, in small letters. Somehow I missed the significance of the letter size, and no one told me otherwise, so instead, we spent time and effort to prepare for MOTHER'S DAY. The children had each been given a coleus cutting to plant, which would eventually be a gift for their mothers. This was a relatively simple class activity, because coleus plants root very well and can be easily potted. Not only that, but their leaves are colourful. They

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seemed quite happy with this activity, and no one offered to correct my mistake of calling it Mother's Day, rather than Children's Day. On the last day of May, the plant pots, in the form of yoghurt containers, were decorated, and gift cards were created. At the end of the day, everyone left for home with plants and cards in hand. At least one mom let us know about her delight for her gift, when she called Doogii to say how much she appreciated her lovely plant.

For the Friday holiday, Doogii invited me to spend the day at her mother's summer house. The original offer was for me to stay overnight, but I respectfully declined. This was basically because of not knowing what lay at the other end of the journey, especially for sleeping arrangements, and washroom facilities. Since Doogii and her family had already departed for the countryside, her non-English-speaking younger brother, whose name I either could not pronounce, or totally forgot, was to be my guide for our journey. At an agreed-upon time, I met him downtown at the Post Office and we walked to the bus stop for the first leg of our journey. This involved taking a "regular" city bus in a northerly direction as far as the edge of the city. At a specific stop, we debarked and found a "meeker" which was a micro-bus or minivan-type of vehicle, that was travelling in our intended direction. Knowing full well how these vans can get quite cramped, he manoeuvred us into the front seat beside the driver. This location gave me a great vantage point to see the countryside as we travelled along. There were no organized stops on our route, just a passenger pick-up or drop-off as requested. How convenient. After many of these stops, it was our turn to depart. The last leg of the journey was on foot, along a deeply-rutted path/roadway to the summer house, which was not a ger. It was a comfortable little home with a hallway, kitchen, living room and bedroom. When Doogii's mom is on vacation from her hospital work, as is now the case, she spends all her time here. In this particular area of rolling hills and forests, the houses are not crammed on top of one another, leaving a comfortable distance between each one.

After some initial preparation, and because of the wind, it was decided to take our picnic barbeque to the woods. Here the wind would be less bothersome. We all picked up a bag or two of supplies, and started our hike. Mercifully we didn't have to walk too far up the hill, and soon found an ideal picnic spot in a semi-clearing. Depositing everything on the ground, Doogii, her mom, and I set off to hike further uphill. It was a beautiful area with many trees and flowers. Doogii's husband and brother stayed behind to prepare the barbeque. The meat was delicious, cooked as shish-ka-bobs over a rather ingenious, collapsible barbeque. There was enough meat to feed a small army, along with salads, water, etc.

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Doogii's youngest sister eventually arrived with her pet rabbit, which kept us entertained with its explorations of the local flora. It took special notice of the salad plate.



A lovely picnic day in the countryside with Doogii's family

When it came time to depart, Doogii's brother was once more my escort. As luck would have it, a neighbour, who is also a cousin of Doogii's mom, had previously arrived at his summer

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house by car. We were able to catch a ride with him into the city. After departing his vehicle and when I thought I was comfortable enough to know where I was, I managed to get the message across to Doogii's brother, that I could find my bus on my own. He adamantly declined my suggestion, and stuck with me until we reached the bus stop for Zaisan. For this, I will be eternally grateful to him, because of finding the downtown area to be a mass of humanity, all out celebrating Children's Day or Mother's Day. I've never seen it so busy, nor spied among the crowds, so many young men, who looked like they were up to no good. After waiting a while for the bus, I decided that it might be better to take a "taxi". Doogii's brother flagged one down after a somewhat longer wait than usual, due to the throngs of people. He negotiated the price of the fare per kilometre with the driver, told him where to take me, and I was off with a sigh of relief and a big thank you to my hero of the day.

Traffic was horrendous the closer we got to Zaisan and I think we must have been sitting in this gridlock for close to an hour, before my driver was finally able to deposit me at my apartment building. I paid him more fare than he had asked for, because of the extra length of time it had taken. In retrospect for this trip from city to apartment, I considered what this same ride would have been like, if I'd stubbornly refused help and ended up on an overly crowded city bus. This made me even more thankful that I had listened to my instincts, and to Doogii's caring brother, when it came to having a safe return. Arriving home, I was so tired! I hopped into the shower, and turning on the tap, thought that we'd lost access to the hot water yet again. This was not the case, because in my fatigued state, I had merely neglected to move the tap from "cold" to "hot". It took me a while to figure this out.

Throughout this year, my experience has been that, in so many cases, being introduced to people by name, did not seem to be important, almost like a taboo? This is why, more often than not, I have referred to people as being related to somebody whose name I know, or who has a particular job, or title. It is especially evident in the previous paragraphs, where I neglected to include the names of Doogii's family members, because they hadn't been given to me. Perhaps even if they had been introduced by name, I might not have been able to pronounce them correctly or even to remember them. This is something I regret.

An open house for the school was held on Saturday, June 9, complete with preceding TV ads and huge billboard displays throughout the city. I'm not sure about its success, because many people go to their summer houses on weekends. For this event, there did not appear to be many people in attendance, considering all the publicity. However, we were told that there had been new student registrations, so perhaps it was a good sign and somewhat compensated for the lack of attendees. Another reason for the relatively low numbers could have been that

## Seoul Plane Here I Come

it was a very hot 35 degree day, but believe it or not, there had already been temperatures above 37. We're talking Celsius, here.

In preparation for our “First Annual Crazy Olympics” to be held on Friday, June 15, the staff had many after-school planning sessions to keep us occupied. It was also determined by the school administration that as an end to this day, there would be a picnic. Planning the activities and the picnic on their own would appear not to be too problematic, but the location of each needed some thought. With landscaping continuing to be a work in progress, there would be no usable grassy areas on site to support either of these activities. In addition, if an off-site, but close-to-school venue were to be considered, it was a well-known fact that for sanitary reasons, any meadow-like area in the immediate surrounding countryside would not be suitable for a picnic. These meadows are continuously fertilized not only by human passersby, but also by herds of animals. For this year, it was determined that the best location for activities would be the outdoor paved basketball courts.



First the games...

## Seoul Plane Here I Come

This made the most logical setting for the picnic to be on the large outside patio, at the front entrance of the school. My personal goal for this day was to end with everyone having fun and with nobody getting hurt. I think the latter was a success since there were no potential patients, needing Christina's special attention. However, a particularly interesting incident occurred, when an uninvited and unaccompanied herd of goats arrived to join our activities. Despite the presence of children, the yelling, and the high temperature, the goats appeared to have sensed the opportunity for greener pastures, on our school property. What they saw that was so attractive is anybody's guess. When they ventured into our activity areas, they were hastily ushered out with no invitations to participate in games or food. In hindsight, for the activities, the older students, who tend to be very competitive, found the games, which were judged on teamwork criteria only, to be not as challenging as they would have preferred. Perhaps another year, with some student input, they would take on the challenge of suggesting more exciting activities, at least for the older students. As a school staff, we were all relieved after this inaugural "Playday" was successfully, and uneventfully completed, as well as being injury free.



...then the barbecue

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That evening, Oyunaa arranged a staff dinner at BD's. Heading down the road on foot to attend this event, we passed the wandering neighbourhood pigs and a small herd of goats. There is never a dull moment to be had here, even when involved in such a mundane activity as walking to a bus stop. Our dinner was a really enjoyable and relaxing occasion, with the usual toasts, although there did not seem to be as many as for previous events. After eating, a time was set aside for gifts to be given to departing teachers, including most of our Canadian contingent. The exceptions were Christina and John, who had made the decision to stay for another year, after first returning home for the summer. During dinner I sat with some of the cleaning and maintenance staff and we ended the evening with helping each other to read the restaurant menu: me in Mongolian and them in English. Shamefully for me, their mastery of English was much better than mine, of their language.

Glancing out the classroom window a week ago, I saw two, four-legged pinkish creatures with ears flopping, that were ambling confidently down the road, towards the school. Then with a right and left turn, they headed into the school parking lot. These were pigs that had escaped from a pen behind a neighbouring house. I don't blame them for liberating themselves, especially after frequently seeing the small size of their abode, as we walked past. They do not look like the sort of pigs found in Canada, probably because they are subjected to living outdoors in very cold, winter temperatures. As a result, they appeared to have more bristly coats than those normally seen in Canada. One porcine even wore a mohawk-shaped hairdo on his back. The most humorous part of this scene was watching our school security personnel, as they attempted to evict them from school property. Doogii and I stood at the window for a while, so mesmerized by the spectacle that we were totally oblivious to the goings-on of our students.

The last set of report cards has been completed and distributed. Doogii helped me immensely with calculating the evaluation scores, which made it so much easier to create comments, and to determine final marks. During the early stages of this process, as I sat at home with my computer, I was distracted and highly entertained with the goings-on of some nearby construction workers. They were involved in impromptu wrestling matches. Thankfully, these actions were taking place at ground level and not on the roof of one of the buildings being erected in our area. Personal safety on a job site does not always appear to be a priority here. Examples of this include the sight of on-the-job workers, who are not wearing hard hats or using safety harnesses. These are just two of many observable examples of unsafe construction practices that would optimistically not be acceptable in Canada, or in many other countries.

## Seoul Plane Here I Come

Some of the potholes are now being fixed on the roads that lead to and from our school to the downtown area. This is good news. However, it's interesting to observe, that in the process of these repairs, the trucks and workers involved in this middle-of-the-road procedure, do not have anyone directing traffic around them. There are also no other safety measures set up to advise oncoming traffic. When passing this road construction, cars, trucks, and buses must cross the median and drive into the oncoming traffic lane. I've been a nervous passenger on a bus, and a taxi in locations such as this, and all I can do is close my eyes and hold on. It would be interesting to know how many accidents occur in these situations.

Leaving the country, has become increasingly obvious to me. My Mongolian bank account has been closed by a very nice man at the "Card Centre". He kindly allowed those of us who use that bank, to bypass the usual 45-day waiting period for closing our accounts. Instead, he completed the task for us right on the spot. This was a great relief for us all!

Let it be known that on Tuesday, June 19 and for the first and apparently the last time, I slept in and was late for school. I obviously have a clock issue. At my arrival time, Doogii had already taken the kids to the classroom, and no one batted an eye when I walked into school, coffee in hand, and without a late slip. Well, I was only five minutes late, although definitely a little disheveled and somewhat sleepy.

The final day of class was bittersweet and I was feeling sad about seeing the children for the last time. They have been a great group of kids and I enjoyed getting to know them. At the end of the day, we had a very large and impromptu group hug that I thought was literally going to knock me off my feet. Even some of the boys individually came over and hugged me. Some really positive comments from parents and grandparents were received, and valued more than any other gift that could have been given. This positive feedback was especially appreciated due to the parents' major first-of-the-year fear that their children were to be part of a split-grade class. So, apparently Doogii and I were successful in addressing those initial concerns.

Saturday was inventory day at school, which is another interesting story, but not worth wasting words! In the afternoon, Doogii and her husband took me out for a delicious Chinese meal, along with some significant conversation. When it was time to leave, Doogii did her usual negotiations for my return taxi. The evening was spent with Kim, Dave, Tara, and Andrew. Great company and good wine.

"Leavings" have begun, with two colleagues, flying out on Saturday and another, on Sunday afternoon. John and Christina are setting out for a trip to the countryside on Sunday evening, and will not return until after the rest of us are already home. It will be at various

## Seoul Plane Here I Come

times on Wednesday, when Kim, Dave, Tara, and I head off into the wild blue yonder. We're thankful for the internet to help us keep in touch after we return to our respective homes.

The difficult task of sorting, packing, and pitching has started, with the plan for its completion by Tuesday evening. My beloved friend and colleague Doogii, told me that she will see me again for my departure on Wednesday, to say goodbye. It will be a very sad farewell!

... Taking leave from UB, experiencing Seoul, and home...

## Seoul Adventure and, Ahhh, Home at Last!

June 25 to July 4...Was it all a dream?

For the last few days in UB I was busy figuring out how and what to carry home with me and saying my goodbyes. I found the latter to be the more difficult of these two tasks, especially when it involved Doogii.

Along with suitcase-packing, I had been putting together “Doogii Bags” of all apartment items that I couldn’t possibly bring back to Canada: sheets, towels, dishes, electrical power bars, clothing, etc. This task was made somewhat easier when I knew that these bits and pieces of my Mongolian life were going to a good home. Doogii, as well as her mother, kept some of my clothing, which pleased me to no end to think that perhaps some of it was not as much of the matronly style as I had envisioned. A bag of clothing was also donated to a couple of neighbouring families. All their belongings had been lost in a fire, on June 15, that had destroyed their gers. Christina and John, through one of their church contacts, organized this project. A considerable number of articles donated for this purpose came from “retiring” teachers, as well as other donors. In this particular bag, among other items, I lovingly left behind, my pink winter coat, after it had served to keep me warm, except for my nose, for most of the bitter Mongolian winter.

The last Monday in the city, the mother of one of my students invited me for an excursion. After some negotiating, we decided to visit the Intellectual Museum. This was not because I wished to obtain some extra grey matter before leaving UB, but because I had heard that it was a really interesting place to visit. Along with Munkhbayar and her mother, came her two, much older brothers. They were possibly wondering ahead of time, just what kind of day they were in for, with their sister’s Grade 2 teacher. As stated previously, when it comes to people’s names, those of Munkhbayar’s brothers, and their mother, were not provided. The museum visit was a huge success and we thoroughly enjoyed this first-class facility! Afterwards, I was treated to a lovely supper and then it was time to say farewell to this very generous and thoughtful family.

The “Please Knock” sign on my apartment door, written in both English and Mongolian, finally met its match! For one recent workman, instead of the sign being a total deterrent for casually ambling uninvited through an unlocked door, he knocked first, then walked in uninvited. Luckily, I was dressed, as was not the case when the same thing happened to Ivan, during the pre-sign times. It had not crossed my mind that the sign could possibly be construed as a welcoming invitation, but after all I was not in Canada. Apparently, when

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approaching a ger in the countryside, one does not knock on the door but simply indicates his or her presence by asking if the dogs are tied up. Obviously, I was grateful that unexpected people had not previously entered my apartment, with me being present. I ended up removing the sign. From then on, I made sure to lock the door, when I was inside and also when I was out. There were renovations happening in the apartment building when I left. On the second floor, a wall was being knocked out to create another larger apartment. It was a noisy procedure that, thankfully, was not nonstop 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as the other construction projects in our vicinity continued to be.

Tara, Kim and I decided to have collective manicures and pedicures for our last day together in UB. This did not happen as expected. Since we had not made appointments, there were not enough personnel to take care of our wishes. "Oops". As a result, my regular young man cut my hair and did not do his usual very best cut, because he seemed to be in a hurry. Kim had her hair washed and set, and Tara had a manicure and pedicure. At least two of the three of us looked beautiful for our Mongolian exit! During this last downtown tour, and after the frantic realization that my suitcases were not going to hold all my homeward bound items, I decided that another computer bag was needed. I say "another" because there are already at least two of these, uselessly sitting in a closet in Hamilton. Fortunately, I found an expanding bag that looked like it would hold a lot of bits and pieces, so the excitement of this find somewhat side-tracked my haircut disappointment.

Since our last day had been very busy downtown and with us all at different stages of packing, we decided not to go out for dinner, as originally planned. Instead, we opted to "order-in". Since the food finally arrived later than expected, because the driver had a problem locating our apartment building, we did not even have time to enjoy each other's company for supper. The exceptions to this were Tara and me. We ate relatively quickly, then resumed our desperate last-minute suitcase cramming. It was an even more frenetic evening for the others, due to their flight via Beijing leaving at 6 a.m. the following morning. They had arranged for an airport pick-up at 4 am. This early morning pickup did not happen, but that is another story. The good news is that they arrived at the airport on time to board their flight.

Tserendorj, our Grade 2 student along with his "sister" Anujin, who in Canadian families might be called a cousin, knocked on my apartment door this night. Fortunately, I was organized as usual, and able to spend time with them to enjoy their company. This very unexpected get-together took place because apparently Tserendorj was reluctant to say goodbye. Hence, came this last minute, three-hour visit. It seemed to be difficult for some of students to realize that I was leaving the country, and would not be returning. Perhaps this

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leave-taking would have been more emotional for me if not already anticipating the return to family and friends after almost a year away. There was also the intervening travel break in Seoul for me to look forward to. Tserendorj said goodbye at least 15 times, as he repeatedly ran back up the hall past my door to continue his farewells. For one instant, before finally saying his last goodbye, I thought I might have to slip him into my suitcase and take him with me.

On Wednesday morning at about 10 a.m., Doogii, her daughter and her mom, arrived at my apartment door to say their final goodbyes. Then at 11:15 a.m. Jack arrived to drive Doogii and me to the airport. It was a very emotional goodbye to Doogii, and at one point I thought I might have to pack her in my luggage too. I miss her already.

With my flight itinerary being revised from UB-Beijing-Chicago-Toronto to UB-Seoul-Toronto, it would appear that baggage rules also had revisions. As a result, I had to pay \$130 US for my overweight luggage, but since I had mentally prepared for this possibility, I did not have a meltdown. Instead, I only allowed myself some major under-my-breath mutterings.

The UB-to-Seoul flight not only took off, but also touched down on time, and that was the good news. The not-so-pleasant news was that it was a very bumpy 3½ hour flight with the onboard washrooms closed for most of our time in the air. "YIKES!" After landing in Seoul, and feeling somewhat like a milkshake, I gathered all my possessions rather than leaving a few of the heavier pieces in an expensive storage locker, until returning to the airport for my flight to Toronto. It had been discussed beforehand with school colleagues, who had previously visited Seoul, that upon landing, instead of using a taxi service all the way to the hotel, I should take the airport bus to a specific stop in the city. This location would be in close proximity to my accommodation, and from there I could hire a taxi for the rest of the way. It sounded like a reasonable, and economic idea, but perhaps not too practical, considering the size and weight of what I was hauling along. Finding the bus into the city was not a problem, and in the process, I met a very pleasant Taiwanese woman, who spoke excellent English. She gave me many good pointers about what to see and do during my stay in Seoul.

After leaving her company, a few difficulties arose upon my exit from the bus. There I was with two very large and heavy main suitcases, as well as two heavy carry-on bags. I was standing on a curb, which was located in the bus-only middle of a wide city roadway. There were cars whizzing by at breakneck speed. Despite finding myself in this situation I didn't visibly panic. I stood there with what could probably be construed as a perplexed look on my face, like, "how am I going to get from here to there?" It must have looked sincere, because a

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very nice young lady grabbed my two big bags and started to wheel them to the crosswalk, so I followed along carrying everything else. "Whew." After depositing them on the sidewalk for me, she headed off, but I pointed in the other direction to show her that there was a taxi sitting at the curb. The kind lady then commandeered the driver to give me a lift. At first, he left us struggling to put the bags into his car ourselves, until he realized that it might be an all-nighter if he didn't lift his posterior to assist. With belongings finally loaded, I then showed him my hotel address, which was written in Korean. He didn't seem to have a clue where it was or how to get there. Need I say that this was not a comforting realization? During this perplexing communication breakdown on the part of us both, a couple of men happened along and attempted to clarify the hotel directions to the driver. However, he, in the meantime, had put one of my bags on the front passenger seat, and finally did something constructive, when he dug out his cell phone. By some wireless miracle it provided him with the much-needed directions to the hotel. Driving to the hotel should have taken only a few minutes, but it took much longer. This was because his taxi, although being the closest to the bus stop, had been in a lane that was heading in the opposite direction from the hotel. Well, what did I know?

Once in my hotel room, the first order of business was to set up my laptop.



There was actually a desktop computer in my room, but I chose to use my own to contact Ivan through MS Messenger, using the fast and easy-access hotel connection. With my emotional needs met after conversing with Ivan, I discovered something perplexing about the bed linen. It did not seem to include any sheets. All I saw were pillows with tied covers, a quilt-like thing that covered the mattress, and a bedspread on top. Never having

been to Korea, I didn't know if this was normal bedding, or if my room had been missed in the daily laundry change. On my way downstairs to the lobby to inquire about this, I noticed a pile of bedding in the stairwell and assumed that at least something in it might be destined for my little room. There was one sheet, but not two, which I assumed should have been

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provided. One of the suggestions, that my Taiwanese bus companion had pointed out along the airport-to-city bus route, was a chain of all-night kimbab (sushi) restaurants. So after my comforting online conversation with Ivan and my query about the bedsheets at the hotel front desk, I ventured out. A kimbab eatery, was easily found right across the street from the hotel alleyway, and my purchase served as a late supper, along with aloe juice, from a nearby 7-Eleven store. I was very pleased that following my front desk inquiry, the missing sheet was installed on my bed while I was out. "Yessss!" Food to eat, a bed with sheets, and pillows on which to lay my head!

Once I was awake this morning, it took me a while to get in gear for my first full day in Seoul. In some ways, it was difficult to find the energy or motivation to leave my little cocoon of a room and to venture once more into a strange new world. Not feeling too daring at first, but being a mite peckish, I decided to check out the hotel restaurant breakfast menu. The waitress was an older woman, who did not speak English. It took no time to realize that I might be in a bit of trouble to correctly order my desired menu choice. I did this by pointing on the menu to a specific food picture, with words included in English and Korean, but she still had difficulty understanding my request. With some help from another lady in the dining room, I was able to enjoy my American breakfast. Giving an impromptu smile to the waitress later, she left me an unexpected bonus of a couple of pieces of watermelon.

My first short jaunt after breakfast and into the outside world was to exchange some money and I felt fortunate to spot a bank close to the hotel. Then I returned to my room to gather my thoughts. Once feeling somewhat confident, I set off with the intention of just walking a few blocks to get an idea of what was located where. During this little jaunt, I quickly discovered that what I needed was a city map. In English. Returning to the hotel I found a helpful young lady at the front desk, who gave me what I was looking for. So it was back to my room, to contemplate the map for a while and to plot my next move. This "while" ended up being longer than anticipated, due to my continuing hesitancy to venture out alone in a large, busy, unknown city. Finally, after taking a deep breath and with map in hand, I set off to explore the wilds of Seoul. My goal was to find Seoul City Hall and for whatever reason, I failed. Among the sites along my route was the popular Namdaemun Market area, as well as the Seoul train station complex. Since this day was more for sightseeing and bearing-creating, and because I was not interested in making any purchases, due to being on suitcase weight and space overload, I chose to forego any shopping urges. It was lunchtime, and feeling less than courageous to sample Korean food again, after having sampled some very spicy dishes on several occasions in Mongolia, I picked out a familiar restaurant: Pizza Hut! This decision,

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I realize, is entirely against my resolve to avoid chain restaurants, when on tour. A concession had to be made though, because I was hungry. After Pizza Hut, with my stomach full and having an increasingly sore throat, I successfully made my way back to the hotel, on foot. As a familiar bearing, keeping the Seoul Tower as close in view as possible, and on my left, was a great help.

Seoul day number two began very well after a webcam conversation with Ivan, Adrian and Daniel. I decided to forego the hotel breakfast, since it had taken me so long to get my buns in gear for the day. As a first meal, I purchased breakfast on the hoof from a street vendor. Well, I was on the hoof, not the breakfast. This food consisted of a very greasy, yet tasty, and edible item on a stick but don't ask what it was, because I don't know, except that it wasn't spicy.



Busy city street with Seoul tower in the hazy distance, and a market area

With this morning meal consumed, I headed to the Dongdaemun market, with its maze of shopping streets and buildings full of everything one may have ever thought, or not ever thought, of purchasing. In one complex I purchased a shrimp burger at a "Lotteria" restaurant, which overlooked a baseball park. There I sat at a window seat and watched a baseball game going on below, while enjoying my burger. With my stomach somewhat satisfied, I headed off to continue sightseeing along the Cheonggyecheon Stream, but first I needed an umbrella! With a reasonably priced brolly in hand, it was time to head downstream, where I

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thoroughly enjoyed a rather damp, but scenic stroll along the water. After what felt like a lengthy distance, I headed back up the steps from the water to the city streets, in an attempt to find my return route to the hotel. This proved to be more difficult than I had imagined. It was a distance too far to walk and I couldn't easily see a subway stop in the immediate vicinity. Yes, I know that I could have taken a taxi, but I didn't wish to do so. After another long walk, and by following the directions on subway signs, I finally saw what I was looking for. However, once underground, I wasn't sure what to do or where to go. A ticket person gave me the subway map which listed all 13 lines, then a helpful young man pointed me in the direction of the line I was looking for. As well, he showed me how to get through the turnstile which was a necessary manoeuvre to learn. I successfully made the transition from one subway line to another and voilà, once emerging from the depths, found myself in a recognizable area. Still not wishing to brave the challenge of inadvertently ordering a spicy Korean food dish, I again opted for a restaurant chain, or two. This time it was The Outback which was located near my hotel. For dessert I picked my way carefully across the six or eight lane roadway, when I heard Baskin Robbins calling. After the ice cream purchase, I headed to the kimbab and 7-Eleven establishments to get my take-out breakfast for the next day. During this lengthy outing, I also found a pharmacy, where a nice man, who spoke English, was able to direct me to purchase some medication for my increasingly tender throat.

It was a relief to return to the hotel, and for face-time with Ivan. During our online conversation, and much to my extreme consternation, I somehow thought Adrian's 28th birthday, on June 29th had come and gone. "Yikes!" Was I that preoccupied? Attempting to make up for this unforgivable error, I made a hasty Skype call to Hamilton. However, once connected, I found out that since it was still early in the day in Seoul, I had actually not missed the 29th of June, in Hamilton. There's something positive to be said about sizable time differences between distant parts of the world, especially when one is an absent-minded mother. In any case, Adrian forgave me for almost missing his birthday and we had a good chat.

On this third day in Seoul, and with increased self-confidence due to my previous day's roaming success without getting lost, I felt more brave. This was the day for the city bus tour, which allowed me to get on and off at predetermined stops, throughout the city.

Since many of the sites recommended to me by ASU colleague, Dave, were listed on this tour, I decided to select the ones that were farthest away from my hotel. Some other locations would be within walking distance. The National Museum of Korea was my first stop. It was very interesting, both inside and outside, and I spent several hours there.

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Leaving that location, I hopped on the bus again, to visit the National Folk Museum, located at the far end of the route. Arriving there, I also discovered adjoining grounds for the Gyeongbokgung Palace, and a small take-out restaurant which provided time to sit outside and enjoy my spice-avoidance selections of a tuna sandwich and some apple juice. After wandering

ing around these two very interesting museums, I felt that I'd had almost all the Korean culture I could handle for one day. With closing time approaching, I hopped back on the tour bus and was successfully deposited, as desired, at the Seoul Train Station.

Feeling like I had some stamina, and with early-evening upon us, I concluded that it would be an ideal time to visit the Seoul Tower, rather than to merely view it from afar.

With the tower in sight, I wandered uphill in the direction that I guessed might be the cable car's base. Because of the steepness of the hill and because of it being a very hot and humid evening, this hill-climbing even before reaching the cable car base, was not an easy task. With the effort made thus far, and seeing a long line-up of people waiting, I wondered whether or not I was going to faint, either before I was able to step into the car, or after I arrived at the top. Thankfully the line moved quicker than anticipated. It was so swift that I had not yet made up my mind whether to purchase a one-way or a round-trip ticket, by the time I reached the ticket booth.

Hastily I agreed to a one-way ride. After a short waiting period, a group of us were crammed into the cable car. We were off, and gliding up the hill. Some of the women, considering the ride to be exciting, decided to scream each time we passed a cable support post. This experience was not what I would consider "scream-worthy", but since I had secured a standing location with great city view, the ride was well worth it.

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Dusk and nighttime views from, and of, the Seoul Tower

Once on the mountaintop, it was time to consider whether or not to brave the heights to the summit of the tower itself. A speedy decision was made for the negative category. The first, last, and only time I ascended to lofty heights, other than for air travel, happened when on an elevator, to the top of Toronto's CN Tower. After this experience I was plagued with some lasting nightmares. My current views from the Seoul Tower base, were lovely, and especially so, since it was just dusk and the city lights were appearing below. For returning to the hotel, I reasoned that instead of taking a bus to the bottom of the hill, and not knowing where it would drop me off, I would walk down. It was a much less strenuous exercise than walking up. Five kilometres later, after having passed many other people with children, on their way up the mountain on foot, it appeared that I was in a residential area. After being offered directional assistance, by a somewhat inebriated gentleman, I decided to stick to

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streets that were as populated as possible. The concept of following my nose to find my way this evening, was working very well indeed. The decline eventually became flat and I was actually able to recognize where I was. Wonder of wonders!

By this time, I was REALLY pooped but what do I see in front of me but a KFC! "Oh my". Food-wise, it turned out to be the wrong move, but company-wise, it was an interesting experience. Another "foreign" lady was also in the restaurant, so I took advantage of this opportunity to ask if I could join her for a meal. She seemed as delighted as I was with our chance encounter, and we ended up having a great conversation. In the course of our time together, I learned that she was an artist from Richmond, Virginia, who was in the city for a multicultural art exhibit. Also, we both had something in common. We did not particularly like KFC, and as an example for why not, the chicken in this particular establishment was quite undercooked. After leaving my dinner companion, it was only a short walk to my hotel, where I arrived at about 10:30 p.m. It had been a 12-hour day with a lot of walking, and I was relatively tired. No kidding.

Seoul Day Four saw me heading to an electronics market at Yongsan Station. After consulting my city map and deciding that the location was within walking distance, I headed in that direction, not so much to buy electronics, but to see what they had to offer. There were certainly many interesting items, but I didn't need anything and, of course, had no room in my luggage. Then, not feeling the urge to splurge, I was quite satisfied to find a Japanese restaurant for breakfast and to top it off with a Starbucks' coffee! From there I walked to the Korean War Museum and spent a few hours wandering through its many exhibits. Since it had started to rain quite heavily, I was happy to find this interesting museum, where I could be under cover and still be a tourist, but a relatively dry one. By the time I was ready to leave, the rain had almost abated, so I took advantage of this break to walk back to my hotel. Obviously, it had been a busy couple of days and since I was really weary, I thought it would be wise to take a nap, which turned into more of a sleep-of-the-dead. It was quite late by the time I woke up and put myself in gear, and this time it was in search of supper. After several failed attempts and with Pizza Hut closed for the evening, "Oh darn", I settled for a Lotteria take-out place, to purchase a meal for eating in my hotel room. That hour would normally have been considered far too late to eat, but I was hungry.

For the last full day in Seoul, Holly's Coffee Shop close to the hotel was calling my name for coffee and a sandwich. The time still did not feel right, to try a real Korean meal. From Holly's, I was willing and able to walk to the Itaewon shopping area, which was only a look-but-not-buy stop. Leaving there, I went by subway to the Seoul World Cup stadium.

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At this location, a nice gentleman, who spoke very good English, gave me a personal tour of this impressive facility. Feeling quite confident with the subway system by now, and after consulting my map, I plunged into the depths of Seoul, with my goal to experience the sights, sounds, and smells of the Myeongdong shopping area. This time, I made a purchase: two pairs of socks! Surely to goodness I could find enough suitcase room for these, or if not, I could wear them both on the plane. It was now time to try a traditional Korean meal before leaving the country! So I took a deep breath, and after much searching, I found a restaurant that had a menu written in both Korean and English, as well as having pictures of the food. The waitstaff spoke some English and were very helpful in pointing out the dishes that could be spicy, or not. What I ended up choosing was tasty, and I was definitely full when, or even before, the food was completely consumed. However, this experience confirmed what I had discovered in Mongolia, that Korean food is not high on my list of favourite ethnic dishes. Christina's advice was that it sort of grows on you, but after almost a year away from home, I do not have the time or motivation to wait. From Myeongdong I returned on foot to the Namdaemun shopping area. It was getting dark and I thought it might present a completely different picture in the evening than during the day. It did. Now it was a case of "Been there done that" so it was time to leave. I returned to the hotel, but had difficulty dozing off. Perhaps it was the anticipation of knowing that I would be leaving for home the next day?

First thing in the morning on departure day, I chose to spend some time juggling the weight in my suitcases, to hopefully not have any additional overweight baggage fees. Once completed and with all bags packed, I made two trips to the hotel lobby to park my belongings. My flight was not scheduled to leave until 9 p.m. and the hotel check-out was noon. This arrangement allowed for some final tours around the city. After ensuring security for my suitcases, I headed off on my second attempt to find Seoul City Hall.

However, this time I opted to take the subway and found a stop labelled, "The City Hall". It seemed like a logical exit point, and it was. When emerging from the underground, it was difficult to figure out which way to turn. The type of building I was looking for did not seem to be in view.

After spotting signs in English indicating the direction to take, I eventually found what I'd been looking for. The new and modern building I'd been anticipating was instead, a very sedate-looking structure, having in front of it a beautiful green space, with fountains. After viewing these city hall grounds, I noticed an interesting gate, located across many traffic lanes. It looked worthy of investigation. The safest place to cross these busy streets is via underground tunnels, which lead not only to the subway system, but also to shopping

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areas. To ensure a successful underground crossing, one must first get one's bearings above ground, before descending into the depths. This plan hopefully increases the probability of emerging on the intended side of the street. To date, I had managed to complete these crossings successfully, and this time was no exception when surprisingly finding myself at the front gate of the Toksugung Palace.



Seoul city hall and grounds

With half a day still ahead of me, I decided to take in the sights of this oasis in the heart of the city. Once inside the palace grounds, it was interesting to experience how peaceful it was, compared to the noise of vehicle and pedestrian traffic outside. Well, it was not entirely peaceful. An elderly lady accompanied by a little girl, who was perhaps her granddaughter, seemed to be taking exception to something that the palace personnel had said to her. She was carrying on verbally like someone possessed, but no one responded to her shouts except to look at her in wonderment. Prior to this commotion, I had seated myself in the shade to relax, but with all the shouting, I decided to move on. This was a very interesting palace area with many different buildings, none of which were furnished. The contrast between the rooftops of these buildings and the background skyscrapers, was quite unique. As I finished my self-guided tour, I heard some music being played from near the front entrance, and my timing could not have been better. It was the changing of the guard ceremony, not a Buckingham Palace type event of the same name, but that's not what I was looking for, anyway. These guards were wearing very colourful traditional clothing and playing instruments that had sounds which could be described as not being very easy on the ears. It was the combination of these sights and sounds that, for sure, provided a wonderful finale for my palace tour.

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Changing of the guard, was an unexpected experience

It was shortly after noon when I was on my way again and realized that the time was right to end my stint as a tourist, but I was hungry. Returning to the hotel, I heard my stomach calling for a nice steak, so I paid another visit to the Outback restaurant and had a delicious meal that I hoped would sustain me until drop-off time at the Seoul Airport.

Arriving at the hotel earlier than anticipated, I retrieved my belongings and headed to the airport earlier than originally planned. When I asked the front desk lady to please call a taxi to take me to the airport bus, she suggested that I just take my bags out onto the street and wait for a taxi to come along. With her response ringing in my ears, and after picking up my fractured jaw from the floor, I informed her as politely as possible, that I was not able to take my luggage anywhere on my own, let alone out to the street. Relenting, she called a cab for me, and it eventually arrived. I had already been to the Seoul Station to purchase the bus ticket, thus saving the equivalent of about \$2. The taxi driver very kindly and efficiently took me directly to the Korean Airways bus stop. His assistance was very helpful and much

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appreciated. A young man at this bus stop was waiting to secure tags on my luggage and to move them onto the bus for me. Happily, I did not have to wait long for it to arrive and was able to get a seat right behind the driver, which allowed a great view of passing sights for the hour-long drive to Incheon Airport.

At the airport, my luggage was removed from the bus for me, and I located a luggage cart which was FREE: Pearson Airport, please take note. With help, I then made my way to the long check-in line. It was difficult to believe that all these people would be on the same flight as me. After all, my airport arrival was 3½ hours early! However, there were also travellers from different flights waiting in this area, and thankfully the line moved along fairly quickly. After some discussion with the ticket agent, I managed to get an aisle seat, which helps me feel less claustrophobic than being scrunched in a middle seat, or at a window seat. He didn't seem to realize that the plane on which I would be travelling, was supposed to include a configuration of two seats together, not just formations of three and four seats. For the luggage drop-off, I was thankfully not charged for overweight baggage, so this was very good news. It was a huge relief to have these two large bags out of my hands, until Toronto. As I left this area, I saw a pharmacy sign and checked to see if they had anything to help me to sleep or relax, for the upcoming 13-hour flight. They did, so I made the purchase and headed to the security area.

Here, my story gets interesting. At security, I was asked to open both of my bags: computer, and carry-on. The security lady found a small jar of face cream, a tiny bottle of nail polish, and a computer wrist rest filled with gel and in the shape of a pig. With some quizzical looks at this last item, she put all three items in a Ziplock bag and allowed me to return them to my carry-on. From this point, it was about a 10-metre jaunt to the Immigration person. Arriving there, he specified that I had not received either my boarding pass, or my plane ticket. I stepped out of line, went back to the security area and unsuccessfully scoured my belongings for these important documents. As well, I returned to the security lady to ask if she had them. Her answer was that she did not. She was not very fluent in English and I was unsure if she understood me, or if she pretended not to understand me. Off I went again to Immigration, to explain that I could not find the necessary documents. He kindly siphoned me off to the nearby Korean Air transit desk. To make this long, painful story as short as possible, for the next two hours I frantically walked back and forth from the Transit desk to the Information desk. From this latter location, a loud speaker request for my lost documents was finally broadcast, but only in Korean, not in English. The ladies at the transit desk stated that I would not be able to board the flight, without the necessary documents and

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suggested casually that I would have to purchase another airline ticket. I told them I didn't think that this would be happening. Hauling myself and my bags to a quiet area, I sat on the floor and picked extremely carefully through all my belongings once again, but to no avail. By this point, I was literally sweating buckets, but trying to remember what Tom Hanks' character had done, when he got stuck in the airport, in the "Terminal Man" movie. Finally, I gave up on the transit ladies and the information lady, and made my way to the departure gate to see what I could accomplish from there. A very busy young lady took time to help me, and after making a few inquiries, kindly informed me that the security people had "found" my documents and that they would be delivered to the departure gate. Somewhat relieved, I continued waiting for another forty-five minutes. It was not that I was overly impatient after having been given positive news, but time was passing, and THE FLIGHT WAS BOARDING, so I asked again, as casually as I was able, about my documents' whereabouts. They were finally handed to me by a Korean Air person, fifteen minutes before take-off.

Even after receiving my papers, I was in quite a state, and it is just as well that I was alone, because if I had been with anyone else, I could have very possibly blown them off the planet with my frustration. Once on the plane and safely plunked down in my aisle seat, second to last row, I was able to breathe a sigh of relief. It was a very long flight, but the attendants were wonderful, the food was delicious, and the washrooms were open, and right nearby. I couldn't see the movie screens, but the Gravol I'd purchased made me feel somewhat mellow and sleepy, which was just what I needed then. Incheon Airport is said to have the reputation of the "Best Airport in the World", for two years in a row. "Hmmmm." After my experience, I wonder how that honour came about?

It is a good thing that on arrival in the baggage area in Toronto, I had a toonie tucked away. What must newcomers to Canada, via Toronto, think of this airport and of our country, if they have to pay for the use of a baggage cart? How many of these visitors would just happen to have a toonie hanging around in their pockets?

Ivan, Adrian, Kathleen, and Daniel, plus two beautiful bouquets of flowers, were awaiting my exit from the baggage area. What a wonderful way to end my almost-year-long sojourn in Mongolia. It was incredibly fine to see these happy faces! Life is good!

And now, with my loving and understanding family by my side, I'm allowed in my own time to slowly readjust to Canadian culture and the Hamilton time zone.

... So, here concludes my Far Eastern adventures....



## About the Author



Pam was born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario. Married for nearly 48 years, Ivan and I are proud parents of two adult sons, and grandparents to three wonderful grandchildren.

From high school, I began a "POTS" (Physio and Occupational Therapy) degree at the University of Toronto. It took almost a year to realize that this direction was not the one for me. Returning home, I opted to take business college courses in Hamilton. Upon completion, a position was accepted as the Secretary to the Secretary of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at McMaster University.

Still feeling another career resting on the horizon, and after a movie outing to see "To Sir with Love", I decided to apply, and was accepted at Hamilton Teachers College. Upon graduation, my initial elementary school teaching assignments were located in various parts of Ontario, including the remote areas of Sandy Lake and Moose Factory Island. When a teaching position was offered in Hamilton, I continued my career on home turf. However, in 1997 after almost 30 years of teaching, my decision to take an early retirement did not signal an end to employment prospects.

Through my church affiliation, an interesting opportunity arose as the part-time administrative assistant for Oikocredit Canada, a non-profit organization supporting Oikocredit International, which is based in The Netherlands. At the same time, and always ready for new experiences, I elected to start a business of my own which offered, mostly to seniors, in-home computer tutoring. As well, I was working part-time as a service representative for Lifeline systems, Canada.

Deciding to return to night school as a student in 1999, I completed a series of computer courses from Mohawk College, to earn a Business Internet Skills Certificate. It was certainly an interesting and enjoyable experience for various reasons, to be on the learning side of the spectrum. In 2000 when a federal election rolled around, I took a position as Revision Supervisor for Elections Canada.

After almost seven years post retirement from teaching, I decided to try my hand again. This time it was to teach basic computer courses to adult students, and again with the Hamilton Wentworth District School board. When this year ended, I accepted a two-month summer posting to teach English at a school in Taiwan. Returning to Hamilton after the summer, my HWDSB teaching resumed until my departure to Mongolia.

Just able to catch my breath after returning from Mongolia, a friend notified Paul Wilson from the Hamilton Spectator, of my epic experience. After our interview, Paul wrote and published an article about my adventure, and from that article came another employment opportunity. This time it was as the office administrator at Melrose United Church. There I stayed, not for a few months, as was originally expected, but for a couple of weeks short of 10 years!

*Looking back over the years, I've been blessed in many ways for the opportunities that life has allowed me.*

