Diary of a Trip to Sukhbaatar in Mongolia

(モンゴル・スフバートル日記)

July 24th - August 1st, 2002
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(Proof-read by Marc Perez)
July 24 (Wed), 2002  [Departure]
At 5:40 in the morning, I got out of my apartment and went down to the entrance floor. Mr. Khurelsukh, the Chairman of the Mongolian Agency for Standardization and Metrology (MASM), was waiting for me. We were going to go to Sukhbaatar aimag for a summer vacation with some of the MASM people. The participants of the tour got together at the MASM office, and started to go east at around 6 in the morning. Our group consisted of Khurelsukh family (Mr. and Mrs. Khurelsukh and their three children), Mr. and Mrs. Batsuri and their daughter, the driver and me, 10 people in total. We were squeezed into a Russian jeep. We got out of Ulaanbaatar City and went into the grassland.

In front of an Ovoo (*), we met government officers and their families. They were also going east on vacation. We walked around the Ovoo three times in a clockwise direction, and sprinkled some Arkhi on the Ovoo, then sipped some drops of Arkhi praying for the safety of our trip. We spent some time eating and drinking on a large sheet spread on the grass.

(* Ovoo  [From Wikipedia]
An Ovoo is a type of shamanistic cairn found in Mongolia, usually made from rocks or from wood. Ovoos are often found at the top of mountains and in high places, like mountain passes. They serve mainly as religious sites, used in worship of the mountains and the sky as well as in Buddhist ceremonies, but often are also landmarks. When travelling, it is custom to stop and circle an ovoo three times in clockwise direction, in order to have a safer journey. Usually, rocks are picked up from the ground and added to the pile. Also, one may leave offerings in the form of sweets, money, milk, or vodka.

The scene of the departure

After the ritual at the Ovoo, we embarked into the grassland. Our car was an eight-seat jeep, but 10 passengers were cramped into it awkwardly. Mr. Khurelsukh’s wife was a plump woman who needed almost two seats. She was so heavy that she could not get in the car by herself but needed to be pulled up by someone else. We had a lot of baggage, including tents, blankets, food, water, drinks, fruits, gasoline, etc., so we were all the more tight in the car. I was starting to worry about the journey.

There was no constructed road. The road was naturally formed by the traffic. Compared with the pasture grass in Japan, the grass in Mongolia is not so thick and verdant
because of the lack of rainfall. You can see the bare soil among the grass. As there was no rain for several weeks, the car blew up heavy dust. When there was a car ahead of us, our car had to either overtake the car ahead or swerve into the grass to avoid dust.

Our car suddenly stopped. I wondered what happened. There was a man in the way in front of us hunting a tarbagan (a marmot living in the grassland). Mr. Khurelsukh told me, we shouldn't disturb hunting in the grass, it's a kind of etiquette. The grassland stretched as far as the eye could see, no mountains, no trees, no houses at all.

As there was no shade from the strong sunshine, we had to have lunch in the grass under the scorching sun.

There was a mobile market on our way. That was the only civilization we saw on that day. I bought some sundry goods like some soap, shampoo, drinks and food.
The car continued running all day and at around 9 o'clock the sun set at the western far end of the grassland. Instead, the full moon appeared from the eastern sky. Khulan, the eldest daughter of Khurelsukh family, 21 years old, told me that the day was the 15th day of the lunar calendar. She was a university student studying medicine to become a doctor. She spoke English and helped me as an interpreter. Their younger daughter was about 15 years old. She was very beautiful, almost like a doll. She seemed to have been raised with her parent’s lavish affection. She was said to have been learning Japanese, but was very shy, and did not speak Japanese at all.

At around 10 o'clock at night we entered into Sukhbaatar aimag. We decided to lodge on the grassland. Each party built their tent. I had a small tent borrowed from the JICA Mongolian Office.

![Lodge on the grass field (The smallest tent is mine)](image)

**July 25 (Thu), 2002**

There was a ger, a private residence, near here. We were invited to have breakfast in the ger. I don't know why we were invited, but presumably, Mr. Khurelsukh gave some money to the owner of the house. Money seems very precious for nomadic people.

![Nomadic people](image)
We started at about 9 o’clock in the morning. About 2 o’clock in the afternoon, we arrived in Baruun Ult, the capital of the Sukhbaatar aimag. It took 32 hours since we started Ulaanbaatar (UB). It was not such a big city; rather looked like a small town in Japan. The biggest building was the Government Office, a two-story-building, but it looked like a city hall in Japan. We headed to a big house and met Mr. Sanjaa. He has a beer belly like a sumo wrestler’s. I thought he must weigh 100 kg or more. Mr. Batsuri told me that Mr. Sanjaa is the richest business tycoon in this aimag, who owns a big coal mining company and other many enterprises. He was in a rich national outfit. It was because he was going to the Governor’s Office to be awarded a high ranking medal. Mr. Batsuri was personally acquainted with Mr. Sanjaa.

Mr. Khurelsukh and Mr. Batsuri went to the Governor’s Office to attend the award ceremony. Other members went to Mr. Sanjaa’s special gers located outside the city. We were treated with a nice meal there. Then, I thought, we would go to a hotel in the city to rest. However, I was surprised to see that they started to build the tents near Mr. Sanjaa’s ger. When I knew that we were going to stay there in the tents, I was so disappointed that I almost wanted to cry. How I wished I could take a bath and sleep in a bed!

Mr. Khurelsukh and Mr. Batsuri came back from the medal awarding ceremony. Then they went out to look over and size up Mr. Sanjaa’s horses. The tycoon owned some 150 horses. Ten horses, they said, were going to join the Naadam (*) race tomorrow. Mongolian people love horses very much.

(*) Naadam (наадам) (From Wikipedia)

Naadam is a traditional festival in Mongolia. The festival is also locally termed “the three games of men”. The games are Mongolian wrestling, horse racing and archery and are held throughout the country during midsummer. Women have started participating in the archery and girls in the horse-racing games, but not in Mongolian wrestling. In 2010, Naadam was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO. Naadam is the most widely watched festival among Mongols, and is believed to have existed for centuries in one fashion or another. Naadam has its origin in the activities, such as military parades and sporting competitions such as archery, horse riding and wrestling, that followed the celebration of various occasions, including weddings or spiritual gatherings. It later served as a way to train soldiers for battle. Now it formally commemorates the 1921 revolution when Mongolia declared itself a free country.
At night, the award celebrating party took place with a lot of distinguished guests. Mr. Sanjaa seated at the backmost center of the ger wearing the new medal. The party lasted very late into the night.

July 26 (Fri), 2002

I was told yesterday that we would go to the Nardam festival tomorrow at 10 o’clock. In Mongolia, schedules are always changing without legitimate reasons. In the morning, the Finance Minister and a senator came to Mr. Sanjaa’s ger to celebrate the occasion. There was fermented horse milk, Alkhi, beer, whiskey, brandy, vodka, juice, you name it. There was a big heviin boov (*) in front of the host. Visitors gave formal greeting first, then horse milk is filled to the brim by the host. The visitor drinks a little, then pours the milk to the brim, and returns it to the host. The horse milk, they say, is very good at this time of year when mares give birth.

I have tried this drink several times, but it was not to my liking. So, whenever I was asked about the taste of this drink, I always say honestly “It has a strange taste.” Having finished the milk drinking ritual, they start taking snuff. The host unwraps the purple crape and take out a snuff container made of crystal, and sniff a little by opening the stopper. Then he gives it to the next visitor. The visitor then takes a snuff and gives to the next visitor. It goes on and on.

(*) heviin boov (From a website)
On Tsagaan Sar days, in order to honor the oldest person in the home, large cookies called “heviin boov” are cooked and stacked on a platter with each layer of cookies symbolizing ten years of life. This can be arranged in patterns of three to a layer or five to a layer depending on your choice. Odd numbers are considered good luck. The direct translation of the name of the cookies means “footprints” – it is blessed as it means you are connected to this world through your footsteps – always walking forward never backwards – good luck will always come to you.
**July 27 (Sat.), 2002**
At 8 o’clock in the morning, Mr. Batsuri came to my tent and said “We are going to Naadam ground to see the horse race, so get ready in 10 minutes.”

We got in Mr. Sanjaa’s limousine and headed to the Naadam Center. The limousine had a special banner given to limited VIPs, so the car could enter into the site very close to the Center. The horse race is the most popular and important event of Naadam. The 670 horses, all four-year-old, joined the race. The area around the finishing line was very crowded. I thought all the residents of Sukhbaatar aimag must have come here. Although the land area of this aimag is as large as Hokkaido in Japan, its population was said to be only about 50,000. Mr. Sanjaa’s horse lost the championship, but his horses had won some good prizes.

After the horse race was finished, we came back to Mr. Sanjaa’s ger and had a rest. The ger we were using was a special one, very big and sumptuous. It was sizzling hot outside, but was cool inside the ger. The ger has a heat resistant ceiling and walls. In summer time, the bottom edge of the wall is rolled up so that cool air can enter. There were two more gers for other purposes like cooking and storage. There was a big water tank lorry to provide water to 150 horses. People also use this water for cooking, drinking, laundry, and bathing. We washed our bodies ourselves on the grassland, but we needed other guy’s help with shampooing because there were no water faucets.

In the afternoon, we went to the central athletic field to watch Naadam matches. We entered the main building and went up to the spectator stands. There was a VIP box where high officials of the aimag, senators, and special guests were seated. Mr. Sanjaa and Mr.
Khurelsukh sat in the VIP box. We could also take the prestigious seats near the VIP box. This special treatment must have been by virtue of the tycoon’s influence. We watched the semifinals and the final match of the Mongol wrestling. There was a demonstration of Judo match. After that, the award ceremony was held. The highest prize was a Russian jeep to be awarded to the winner of the horse race. Other prizes like motor bike, ger tents, and etc. were awarded.

We came back to Mr. Sanjaa’s ger in the evening. Then the Naadam feast started again. I sneaked out of the ger and met Miss Khulan, Khurelsukh’s elder daughter. She told me about the life of the nomads: about their cattle, food, children’s education, etc. After talking with Khulan, I played with Batsuri’s 7 year old daughter. She is so smart that I could manage to communicate with her with my poor Mongolian.

Then I met Mr. Batsuri and asked some questions. One question was about my share of the burden for this trip: how much and to whom should I pay. The other one was if there was an institute for disabled people. I wanted to donate 200 USD for them. He gave me a vague answer and said he would let me know later.

Since there was no rain for many weeks, it was very hot and dusty.

**July 28 (Sun.), 2002**

I was told yesterday that we would start the next morning heading for Dariganga, a tourist spot. However, they were wining and dining with Mr. Sanjaa in the morning. The Japanese feel frustrated when a predetermined schedule is suspended or changed without any particular reason. But Mongolians seem to be quite magnanimous for sudden changes of the schedule.

Before noon, we put down our tents and started toward Dariganga. We were going to stay at a hotel there, so I was quite excited.

When we started the trip to Dariganga, we visited Mr. Tumurbaatar’s house. He was a friend of Mr. Batsuri’s, and was the president of an Arkhi company. Mr. and Mrs. Tumubaaatar offered us lunch, and then to drop us off at the border of the city. Then we started a feast again.

This time they began to sing songs. I unveiled my secret talent: singing and dancing of a Japanese *spring horse*. They looked surprised to see my dancing and gave me big round of applauses.

We said goodbyes to Mr. and Mrs. Tumurbaatar and drove on the grass fields. After a 50 km drive, we arrived in a small village. It was Mr. Batsuri's home town. We visited the house where he was born. His parents had already passed away, and his elder brother’s family was keeping the homestead.
They welcomed us by offering barbecue of a whole young goat. They started wining and dining again. How can they drink so often? I wondered. Whenever they started drinking, Mr. Batsuri was always saying “This is not an ordinary special day, but an extraordinary special day.”

There was a public shower facility in the village. We took a shower there and felt quite refreshed. We left the house at around 4 o’clock in the afternoon. The family of Mr. Batsuri’s brother came along to drop us off to the mountain pass. They started a farewell drinking party in front of an Ovoo.

We left the Ovoo at 8:10 in the evening. I couldn’t wait to stay at the hotel and relax. The land eventually became undulated, and we could see tall mountains ahead in the evening twilight. The tallest and most magnificent one is called Dariganga volcano. We were going to climb the volcano the next day.

About 9 p.m. we arrived at the Dariganga ger camp. Two ger houses were reserved in advance for us. These houses were what Mr. Khurelsukh had called “a hotel”. I was a bit disappointed, but it was far better than staying in my miserable small tent. There was no electricity because the Diesel engine generator was broken. We drank Danish vodka in the ger under the candle light. Before going to bed, I told Mr. Batsuri that I would like to go back to UB by plane on August 1st.

**July 29 (Mon), 2002**

I lodged in a ger with Khurelsukh family. There were five beds for the six members. I wondered how they could manage the shortage of the bed. Anyway, I took one of the beds and slept soundly.

I was awakened by the sound of pouring rain hitting the roof of the ger. I found Khurelsukh’s two daughters were sleeping in the same bed.

We waited for the rain to let up until 10 o’clock in the morning. Eventually, the rain eased off, and we headed off to the Mt. Dariganga. The mountains were located around the huge ancient crater. On top of the tallest mountain, there was a big Stupa building. We saw a golden colored steeple on top of the Stupa in the misty rain.

Women are not allowed to come to this part of the mountain. They go separately to the women’s mountain, located on the other side of the crater. We stacked some pebbles on the Ovoo, attached a Khadag (blue cloth) around the pole, and drank some Arkhi.
Our next destination was the Lake Ganga, but it began to rain again, and therefore, we returned back to the camp.

There was a telephone office in the town. I had a favor to ask for from the landlord of my apartment. However there was only one telephone line to UB, and it was always busy. I gave up waiting, but Mr. Batsuri managed to call his friend in Baruun Ult, and asked him to purchase my plane ticket.

The rain has let up in the evening. We left the ger at 6:20. The Lake Ganga was not so far. The lake's diameter was about 2 km wide. Some people were bathing in the water. Mr. Batsuri took all of his clothes off and got in the water. I could not bathe because I had a cold. I watched many small fish swimming in groups. I washed my underclothes at the lake and hung them in my tent. Then I wrote my diary for the past several days. After that, I had nothing to do, so I slept early. I heard the sound of thunder from a distance.

At night, I woke up at the sound of thunder and pouring rain hitting my tent. The zipper of my tent could not shut tightly. The rain flooded into my tent and everything got soaked. I had a cold and was shivering. I could not bear it anymore, so I ran into the jeep leaving everything behind. Khurelsukh family were also staying in the jeep.

After the storm had gone, I went out of the jeep and brought my small suitcase. The clothes in the suitcase were not wet, and I could change my underwear. My passport and wallet were also safe, but other things that were not in the suitcase got drenched. We returned back to the camp. Unfortunately, gers were all occupied. We visited some of the gers and asked to share them for the night. They never refuse this way of asking because it is their cultural tradition.

**July 30 (Tue), 2002**

In the morning, Mr. Sukhbaatar, the head of the Standardization and Metrology Center of Sukhbaatar aimag came to the camp to help us. We tried to hang our wet clothes out, but soon, it started raining again. At 10:45, we left the camp, and headed for the Shiliin Bogd Mountain, our final destination. Mr. Sukhbaatar had a big tent in his car. On our way, we built his tent in the rain, and ate mutton and Chinese *ramen* in it for lunch. He heated pebbles by an oil burner, then put them in the deep pot with mutton meat. Mutton baked this way was very delicious.
At about 5 o’clock in the evening, we arrived at the foot of the Shiliin Bogd, the holy mountain. The other side of the mountain is Chinese territory. We had to climb it on foot. Cold wind was blowing. Because I had a bad cold, I did not climb the mountain but stayed in the car. It was a shame that I could not make the last 500m trek to the final destination after an 800 km trip from UB. However, it was a consolation for me that Mr. Khurelsukh said “You will have the same god bless staying here. The 500m will make no difference.”

On our way back, we came to the entrance of a deep cave. We did not enter the cave. Instead, they started an evening feast at the Ovoo near the cave. Mr. Sukhbaatar’s driver had hit a tarbagan and cooked it there. I didn’t like the smell of it, so I didn’t eat it.

Other group wearing a camouflage came to the Ovoo and joined us. They were said to be members of a military band. They took out an electronic piano from their truck and played it. They sang many Mongolian songs together. We left there at 10:30 at night. We were going to stay at Mr. Batsuri’s brother’s house. It will take another four or five hours to reach there: I thought. I never understood what they were thinking about. They sang songs in the car for a while, but soon they got tired and dosed off.
We arrived in the village at four o'clock in the morning. The whole village was asleep.
I saw a faint dawn light in the east sky.
Mr. Batsuri knocked on the door of the house where his brother’s family was asleep.
It seemed everything can be excusable during the Naadam season.
We slept in the same room. There was another room next to it, but it was a stable.
I wondered where the family moved to in this wee hour.
There were a lot of flies in the room because the next door was a stable. I covered my face
with my shirt to avoid flies. But it was too hot to keep the shirt on my face. Mongolian
people seemed all right with flies. Some were snoring loudly. I could not sleep at all that
night.

July 31 (Wed), 2002
It became a fine day. We took out our wet clothes and belongings, and spread them on the
grass field near the house.

I had given 50,000 TG to Mr. Batsuri yesterday. I gave additional 50,000 TG so that he
could give some gratuity to his brother. The 100,000 TG is nearly equal to 10,000 Japanese
Yen, but it is about 10 times worth in Mongolia than in Japan.

Mr. Batsuri’s wife suddenly asked me to tell her more about Solongo Funds. I was
surprised and asked back why she knew about Solongo Funds. She said, “You told me
about it the other day when we saw a beautiful rainbow in the sky.” Solongo is the name of
a young female singer working in both Mongolia and Japan. The word “solongo” literally
means “rainbow.” Solongo and her friend, Ms. Sato, established the Solongo Funds based
in Mongolia to aid those with walking disability by offering artificial legs made in Japan. I
knew this fact through an NHK radio program while I was in Japan. I did not remember
what I had told her, maybe because I was drunk at that time.
She said that her eldest son hurt his backbone and is not able to walk anymore. They
wanted to take him to a hospital in Japan but they didn’t have funds. She said, if possible,
she wants to be helped by the Solongo Funds. I told her that the Funds are for artificial
legs, so I didn’t know if they would offer money for her son. But I said, I would find their
telephone number later and let her know.

Her story reminded me of my intention to donate some money for the disabled. I told her
about it, and added, “I told this to Mr. Batsuri, but he was drunk at that time, so I don’t
think he remembers it now.”
She said, “He remembers that, and he said he was quite moved by your intention.”
I knew later that there is no such an institute in this aimag.
I said to her, “I will then use my money for your son.”
She said she would tell her husband about it and then they would decide if they will receive
the money from me.

We left Mr. Batsuri’s hometown at around three in the afternoon and headed for Baruu Ulg,
the capital of the aimag.
We visited Mr. Tumurbaatar’s house at about 4 o’clock p.m. Their homestead was very
large. We were treated in the air conditioned room. There were no flies in the room and
was very comfortable.
Mr. Tumurbaatar had bought an airplane ticket for me. I returned 72 USD for the ticket.
He eagerly urged me to stay overnight with his family, but I declined it politely saying, “I
would really like to experience staying at a hotel in this city.” To be honest, I wanted to be
alone and to have my own time.

We gathered at an Ovoo to hold a last party. Mr. and Mrs. Sanjaa, Mr. and Mrs.
Tumurbaatar, Mr. and Mrs. Sukhbaatar joined us. About 20 people started the drinking
spree. I sang the last song, and danced the last dance.
We finished the party at around 8. The group from UB shook hands and hugged with local
people, and said good byes in Mongolian, and have finally gone leaving me behind. Mr. Khurelsukh told me just before he left, “There is no water at the hotel.” I could not understand what he was saying. Mr. Tumurbaatar took me to the only hotel in this city. At last, I could stay alone in a hotel room. A hotel page brought a bottle of drinking water and a bucket full of water for the toilet. There was a flushing toilet but was no flushing water. I understood what Mr. Khurelsukh had told me.

**August 1 (Thu), 2002**

It was difficult to communicate with hotel employees because no one spoke English. Mr. Tumurbaatar came to the hotel with a lady who can speak English. She said she works for the aimag government. With her aid, I was able to finish my breakfast and check out from the hotel.

I asked them if they could take me to a museum. They took me to the aimag museum. There were exhibitions of nature, history, and life. They told me that the museum was constructed several years ago, financed by the Japanese government. I dropped 10,000 TG to the donation box, and left the place.

Mr. Tumurbaatar invited me to his house for lunch. I rested in the air conditioned room for some time. Then they sent me to the airport. He gave me a finest bottle of Arkhi, produced in his company. The plane was a Russian AK-48, which is very common in Mongolia.

In one and half hour, the plane landed at UB Airport. I came back to my apartment and relaxed, thinking that the other group members were still driving on the dusty grass land.

Although the trip has been very hard and strenuous, it was a valuable experience for me. We visited many unusual places, enjoyed the Naadam event, was welcomed by many hospitable people, and enjoyed singing and dancing together.

I will never forget this precious experience.

THE END