

# THE GOBI DIARIES

A TALE OF SAND SURVIVAL AND ADVENTURE



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## **Disclaimer**

This book is a complete fabrication, stitched together from the scraps of imagination and questionable humor. Any resemblance to actual humans, zombies, or other sentient beings—living, dead, or somewhere in between—is purely accidental, or perhaps just really unfortunate for them.

All names have been changed, identities disguised, and alibis forged in triplicate to protect everyone involved—heroes, villains, and the clueless.

Special thanks to the marvelous folks of Mongolia for tolerating us, feeding us, and not banishing us to the steppes for our antics.

**Laugh responsibly!**

## Chapter One

### How Not to Start an Overland Adventure

Once upon a time, in a land not particularly far away, four wildly optimistic friends decided to travel from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, to Istanbul, Turkey. Overland. Yes, the slow way, because *adventure!*

The plan, if you could call it that, was to rendezvous in Ulaanbaatar on a randomly chosen day in May. Three were jetting in from various points in Australia. Me? I was starting my journey in a bucolic village 500 kilometres south of Paris, where I'd been doing very important things like staring at cows and marvelling at how rural life smells slightly fermented.

My journey began on what the French optimistically label a "fast train" to Paris. Once, French long-distance trains were the stuff of envy. Today, they're more like that one kid in gym class who *used* to be a sprinter but now spends most of their time on the bench eating crisps.

Halfway to Paris, the train screeched to an abrupt halt in the middle of a forest. A collective *sacré bleu* rippled through the carriage. Passengers clutched at their armrests, their baguettes, and their existential dread. The atmosphere shifted from "mildly inconvenienced" to "ready to riot" in under three minutes.

Then came the announcement. A rapid-fire burst of French filled the air. My French, which hovers around the level of a linguistically challenged toddler, picked up only the word *merde*. Judging by the groans and dramatic eye rolls around me, this wasn't just bad—it was French bad.

Soon, the passengers mobilized. Some stormed off to interrogate the conductor, others clutched their bags and muttered curses at the gods of rail travel. One group even attempted to escape into the forest through an open door. This plan was thwarted by train staff, who corralled the escapees back inside and slammed the doors shut.

Meanwhile, phone signals were as elusive as punctuality in this rail system. Desperate passengers paced the aisles, waving their phones in the air like modern-day shamans summoning WI-FI spirits. No dice.

The girl beside me, clearly fluent in the international language of charades, explained that a tree had taken out the power lines, paralyzing the entire north-south line. Well think that's what she said, she may well have said Aliens have landed on the roof and we are about to be kidnapped. Whatever the reason we were stuck. For hours. *Merde*, indeed.

The air conditioning promptly gave up, because why suffer a minor inconvenience when you can fully embrace Dante's Inferno? Opening the doors was a no-go—too many wannabe escape artists. The toilets, in solidarity with the AC, staged their own revolt, turning into fragrant cesspits of despair.

After what felt like a lifetime, the staff handed out rations: prepackaged meals that had perhaps been edible in another lifetime.

Nearly four hours later, the train lurched back to life. A ragged cheer rose from the passengers, though it was tinged with the kind of bitterness usually reserved for late-night customer service calls.

And so, I rolled into Paris, sweaty, smelly, and with a newfound appreciation for the phrase “getting there is half the fun.”

After my deeply scarring train journey to Paris — I finally dragged myself into the Latin Quarter. This was my turf, a familiar stomping ground where I could navigate the winding streets with the confidence of someone who's been lost here before. I needed three things to recover my equilibrium: a shower, food, and wine. Mostly wine.

Fortunately, salvation was close at hand in the form of a bistro conveniently located across the street from my hotel. This wasn't just any bistro; it was *my* bistro, a place I'd frequented for years. Walking in felt like slipping on a beloved pair of slippers: comforting, dependable, and forgiving of any personal dishevelment.

The waitress, seasoned in spotting the desperate, took one look at my wild-eyed, post-train trauma expression and wordlessly escorted me to a corner table. "Vin rouge?" she asked, more statement than question. I nodded weakly, emitting a hoarse "Oui," and within seconds, a carafe of red wine materialized at my elbow like a gift from Bacchus, the god of wine, himself. The menu appeared next, but I barely needed it; I was already committed to the sacred trinity of French bistro dining: steak, frites, and salad with an ocean of sauce poivre.

As I devoured my meal, I noticed my neighbor: an impeccably dressed elderly Frenchwoman, dining alone with the confidence of someone who's been doing it for decades. She was feasting on oysters and champagne, a combination so quintessentially chic that it made me want to sit up straighter and reconsider my sauce-stained napkin. We exchanged nods, the universal acknowledgment of lone diners, before she raised her flute in a subtle toast. "Salut," she mouthed, inclining her head slightly. I returned the gesture with my wine glass, silently mouthing my own "Salut" back. It was the sort of

moment that makes you feel momentarily sophisticated, even if you know deep down you're not fooling anyone.

My brief Parisian sojourn wasn't purely about steak and wistful nodding. I was en route to Mongolia but had decided to spend a couple of days reacquainting myself with the City of Light. High on my list was Versailles, the palace of opulence, decadence, and queues so long they could make you question your life choices.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny—a cruel trick, as I would soon discover—and I set off for Versailles by train, armed with my golden ticket: the “skip the queue” pass. Arriving at the palace forecourt, I saw a line of people so massive it resembled the opening scene of a dystopian movie. Hundreds—no, thousands—of weary tourists shuffled forward in grim determination, clutching their tickets and water bottles as though preparing for a siege.

I, on the other hand, swept past them with the arrogance of someone who's prepaid for privilege. Waving my special pass like a VIP, I breezed through the entrance and the security checks. For a fleeting moment, I felt like royalty—until I entered the palace and was promptly swallowed by the mob inside.

If the forecourt line had been bad, the interior of Versailles was its own circle of hell. Crowds surged through the gilded halls, a seething mass of humanity jostling for position. Progress was not walking but shuffling, a slow and reluctant tide driven by the whims of the Instagram elite. Every so often, the flow ground to a complete halt, invariably caused by an “influencer” striking a pose. These weren't casual photos; these were full productions, with hair flips, elaborate gowns, and exaggerated pouts aimed at the heavens.

The Hall of Mirrors was the pinnacle of absurdity. People contorted themselves into bizarre shapes, attempting to outdo one another in the quest for the perfect selfie. One man balanced precariously on one leg in a yoga pose while holding a selfie stick aloft like a torch. Another woman flung her scarf dramatically with every pose, whipping it around so vigorously that anyone within range got an unwanted fashion statement to the face.

I tried to admire the historical significance of the space, but it was impossible to see the hall for the hordes. By this point, my patience had evaporated. Spying a side door, I made a break for it and found myself in the gardens.

The gardens of Versailles were a revelation. Unlike the palace, which had apparently decided to host half of Europe that day, the gardens were blissfully empty. The manicured lawns, fountains, and flowerbeds stretched out before me in serene silence, as if to say, “We know the palace is awful; you’re safe here.”

I wandered aimlessly, marveling at the symmetry and tranquility. Occasionally, I passed a gardener, but for the most part, I had the sprawling grounds to myself. I could only conclude that the Instagram crowd had deemed the gardens insufficiently glamorous—no chandeliers, no mirrors, just centuries of painstaking horticulture. Their loss was my gain.

Eventually, I made my way back to the train station, grateful to leave the madness of Versailles behind. Back in Paris, I returned to my corner table at the bistro, where the waitress greeted me with a knowing smile and another carafe of wine.

The next morning, Paris revealed its other personality: cold, wet, and utterly joyless. Rain poured relentlessly, the kind of rain that makes

umbrellas useless and spirits damp. The thought of sightseeing, likely alongside the same heaving crowds from Versailles, held zero appeal.

Instead, I lingered over coffee at a charming café, watching Parisians navigate the downpour with their trademark blend of disdain and resignation. Later, I ventured to the Vietnamese quarter for a steaming bowl of pho—a life-affirming experience in such weather.

With the rain showing no sign of relenting, I retreated to the cinema, where I spent a blissful couple of hours immersed in someone else's drama. By the time the credits rolled, I knew I was done with Paris. The city had offered its best and worst, and now I was ready for Mongolia, where the landscapes were vast, the crowds nonexistent, and the only influencers were the nomads tending their herds.

With my bags packed and my sanity (mostly) intact, I bid adieu to the City of Light and set off for my next adventure. If Versailles had taught me anything, it was this: sometimes the best escape isn't just through a side door—it's out of the country entirely.

So, it was time. Time to fling myself halfway across the world, laden with an overstuffed backpack and the kind of optimism that only a seasoned traveler with a penchant for chaos can muster. Destination: Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

The day began with the usual French hotel breakfast: croissants, yoghurt, and coffee so dire it could double as paint stripper. Thus fortified, I embarked on a trek to the Metro station with my trusty backpack—"trusty" being shorthand for "grotesquely heavy." Seriously, how do those smug minimalist travelers manage with a toothbrush and a spare pair of undies? Wizards, all of them.



The Aeroflot flight from Paris to Moscow went suspiciously well. I sipped a nice cup of tea and admired the smoothness of it all, blissfully unaware that the travel gods were merely winding up for a pitch. Three hours in Moscow seemed like a good chance to explore Russian airport cuisine, so I treated myself to a hamburger. Things remained uneventful—until they weren't.

As I lined up to board my connecting flight to Ulaanbaatar, the gate display casually updated. Departure: 6 PM became Departure: 6 AM. Tomorrow. Confused, I asked the man next to me if I was hallucinating. He confirmed that no, I wasn't, and yes, this was indeed a nightmare. Moments later, the gate staff evaporated, leaving a motley crew of bewildered passengers stranded.

We gathered like lost ducklings at an information desk where we learned a storm had shut down Mongolia's airport. Mongolians and Russian locals were dismissed to their homes. The rest of us—a ragtag international squad—received meal vouchers and were told to wait two hours. Because why not?

After a perfunctory Russian snack, we reconvened to be shuttled to an airport hotel. But first, we had to clear customs. Four. Separate. Times. Each customs officer enthusiastically stamped my boarding pass while I prayed they wouldn't touch my Russian visa, which I needed intact for a future trip. Stress levels: nuclear.

Tensions boiled over in the queue when someone dared to “push in,” sparking a verbal skirmish so heated I half-expected a duel to break out. Meanwhile, I stood back, marveling at how people believed yelling would somehow accelerate Russian bureaucracy.

Finally, at the hotel, I was greeted by an unexpected feast. Plates piled high with glorious Russian dishes, and I, ravenous from the

day's absurdity, demolished every morsel. Post-meal, we were shuffled to our rooms, but not without a surreal detour.

As we waited in the hallway to be assigned rooms, a fellow traveler regaled us with a story that perfectly encapsulated the Soviet vibes of the evening. Back in the 1960s, she explained, she'd lived in a hippie commune in Kabul, Afghanistan, and occasionally chaperoned girls to Moscow for medical treatment. In those days, Soviet security was so tight it bordered on omniscient. Once, in her Moscow hotel room, she casually mentioned to a friend, "We need more toilet paper." Five minutes later, there was a knock at the door, and a maid appeared with—yes—toilet paper.

I somehow think she was embellishing the facts just a little—I mean, what were the Soviets doing, bugging the loo?—but it was such a jolly good story that we all played along. By the time she finished, we were glancing nervously around the hallway, half expecting someone to pop out of the shadows with fresh towels and a knowing smirk.

Finally, after much waiting, room keys were handed out. My roommate—a kind-hearted Scottish girl—offered me toothpaste and a spare pair of knickers. I graciously accepted the toothpaste, politely declined the knickers, and collapsed into bed, my paranoia fading just enough for sleep to take over.

At 4:30 AM, a loud bang on the door signaled it was time to return to the airport. Bleary-eyed but determined, we boarded the flight to Ulaanbaatar. As the plane soared over the endless Russian wilderness, I reflected on the surreal chain of events. If this had been Australia or Europe, I'd probably have been curled up on a grimy airport floor, subsisting on vending machine snacks. But here in

Russia? I'd been fed, housed, and treated to an impromptu history lesson about Soviet-era surveillance.

By the time we touched down in Ulaanbaatar, I was equal parts exhausted and exhilarated. The adventure had barely begun, and already, Mongolia felt worth the chaos. Let's do this!

## Chapter Two

### To the Edge of Nowhere: The Journey Begins

The plane landed in Ulaanbaatar with a dramatic *thump*, as if it had lost an argument with gravity. A plume of red dust billowed up around us, momentarily engulfing the view from my window. My fellow passengers nodded and grinned at one another, looking oddly pleased to have arrived. I couldn't tell if they were genuinely happy to be here or just relieved the aircraft hadn't disintegrated upon impact. From my seat, I could see endless plains stretching to the horizon, the aftermath of yesterday's sandstorm still visible in the form of lingering, ominous clouds. It was like arriving on Mars but with fewer aliens and more camels.

Customs was surprisingly efficient, so much so that it left me suspicious. Where were the long queues and the surly officials? Before I could dwell on this anomaly, I retrieved my bag and wandered out into the arrivals hall. There stood my driver, holding a sign with my name scrawled in a font that seemed to have been inspired by both hieroglyphics and a kindergartener's handwriting. He smiled, nodded, and whisked me away in a car that seemed held together with hope and duct tape, and we plunged straight into the chaos of Ulaanbaatar, or U.B, as the cool kids and lazy writers call it.

U.B is not a city for the faint of heart. It's a sprawling, dusty, and unapologetically raw metropolis that feels more like a frontier town than a national capital. Huge Soviet-era factories belch smoke into the air, while cars dart about in an anarchic free-for-all that makes *The Wacky Races* look tame. Road rules, if they exist, are considered more of a gentle suggestion than a law. Drivers honked, swerved, and competed for the title of "Least Likely to Yield," while

pedestrians crossed with the confidence of those who'd made peace with their gods.

As we careened through the streets, narrowly avoiding collisions every few seconds, I began to understand why my driver wore a seat belt and a look of mild resignation.

Eventually, we arrived at the Golden Gobi Guesthouse, our lodging in U.B. The car itself seemed to sigh with relief as it came to a stop. I stepped out and took a deep breath—an unfortunate decision, as the air was a pungent cocktail of car exhaust, smoke, and something distinctly barnyard-esque.

Inside, I fully expected to see my travel companions—Brian, Doug, and Lin—lounging in the lobby. But alas, they were nowhere to be found. It seemed the same storm that had delayed me in Moscow had trapped them in Beijing, where they were enduring the twin tortures of cold dumplings and tepid tea in a fluorescent-lit airport lounge. Meanwhile, I had feasted on Russian cuisine and slept in a proper bed. For once, fate had been on my side.

When they finally arrived, our reunion was sweet but brief. After some grumbling about their airport purgatory, we checked into two private rooms overlooking a small, tree-lined park. The accommodations were modest but welcoming, offering a sense of quiet relief after a long journey. The rooms were simple yet functional, with just enough space to drop our bags and stretch out. The beds, though not luxurious, were clean and comfortable—a rare and appreciated find in the world of budget travel.

The crisp, freshly laundered sheets were a small luxury, and the absence of mysterious stains or questionable odors felt like a victory. After enduring countless lumpy mattresses and dubious

accommodations in the past, this felt almost indulgent. As we settled in, the park outside our window swayed gently in the breeze, setting the stage for a calm and restful evening. In that moment, it was all we needed.

The Golden Gobi had been chosen on a whim, thanks to a travel blog recommendation. As it turned out, the place was a gem, a haven for a rare breed of traveler: old-school backpackers. These were the kind of adventurers who thrived on shoestring budgets, boasting about surviving off instant noodles and overnight trains, their gear held together with duct tape and optimism. They exuded an air of world-weary wisdom, swapping tales of far-flung adventures with an infectious enthusiasm that made even seasoned travelers feel like novices.

In a world increasingly populated by flashpackers—those traveling on mum and dad's credit card and demanding top-end accommodations—these backpackers were an endangered species. The contrast was striking. Flashpackers sought luxury hostels with rooftop pools and gourmet cafes, while the Golden Gobi's residents shared dorm rooms and dined on cheap street food, content with simplicity and authentic connections.

The stories they shared weren't curated for Instagram but raw and real, tinged with mishaps and serendipity. Listening to them, I was reminded of what drew me to travel in the first place: the thrill of the unknown and the beauty of the journey itself. At the Golden Gobi, it felt like I had found my tribe.

After enjoying the stories for a while, we politely excused ourselves. It had been a long day of travel, and we were all eager to get some

much-needed rest before diving into the adventures awaiting us in U.B.

Our first full day in U.B began with a harsh reality check: it was freezing.

Wrapped in every layer we'd packed—down jackets, fleece, and Gore-Tex—we ventured out to explore this quirky, chaotic city. Our first mission, as intrepid explorers of the wild and unpredictable frontier that is U.B , was not to seek out history, culture, or even a hint of Mongolian hospitality. No, it was the noble quest for coffee. After all, two weeks in the Gobi without caffeine was a terrifying thought, and we needed to fuel up before surrendering to such deprivation.

Thus began our wandering through U.B's streets, squinting at Cyrillic signs and hoping one of them translated to “espresso” or “flat white.” Eventually, we stumbled upon what claimed to be a café but had more of the ambiance of Nana's front room. The décor included lace doilies, floral curtains, and a faint smell of cabbage, which only added to its peculiar charm.

A kindly older woman welcomed us in with a warmth that could have melted the frost on our boots. She produced coffee from a kitchen that was visible through an open door, complete with a fridge plastered in faded magnets and a suspiciously vintage kettle. The coffee itself was passable—nothing that would win awards, but it was warm, caffeinated, and served in her best china cups with little mismatched saucers.

We drank in companionable silence while our hostess hovered nearby, beaming at us with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for grandchildren's school plays. Occasionally, she nodded at us

encouragingly, as if to say, “Yes, you can do it!”—though what exactly “it” was remained unclear.

Once fortified, we thanked her profusely, bowed in appreciation (it felt like the thing to do), and escaped back into the freezing streets of U.B, ready to tackle the city’s peculiar blend of history, karaoke bars, and Genghis Khan statues.

Our first stop was the State Department Store, a relic of Soviet days that felt like a cross between a time capsule and a flea market.

From there, we ambled to Sükhbaatar Square, the city’s main plaza, dominated by an enormous statue of Genghis Khan himself. He loomed over us, as if silently judging our lack of preparation. Oddly enough, just a stone’s throw away, we stumbled across a Beatles statue and a public square in their honor. Nothing says “Mongolia” like Lennon and McCartney, apparently.

Standing tall beside the Beatles statue was an unusual sight: a full-sized grand piano, its innards mercilessly gutted to house a blooming flower garden. The small detail of it being completely unplayable didn’t bother Doug in the slightest. Without missing a beat, he plopped down on the stool, dramatically “played” the non-existent keys, and launched into a heartfelt—if slightly off-key—rendition of Yellow Submarine. The flowers seemed unimpressed, but Doug was clearly living his best concert fantasy.

By lunchtime, we were starving and in desperate need of warmth. We found an interesting restaurant decorated in what best could be described as country and western chic and we settled in. After much gesturing and pointing at an indecipherable menu, we ended up with plates of shashliks and salad—delicious skewers of meat grilled to perfection. Revived, we continued our wanderings and stumbled



upon an Irish pub, because no matter where you are in the world, you're never far from Guinness and questionable décor.

One thing quickly became clear about U.B: its residents are obsessed with karaoke. Every second storefront seemed to house a karaoke bar, each more extravagant than the last. If singing out of tune to '80s power ballads is your thing, this city is your nirvana. We resisted the urge to test our vocal cords, though Doug did suggest serenading the locals with "Don't Stop Believin'."

Later that afternoon, back at the Golden Gobi, our next task was organizing a trip into the Gobi Desert. The owner of the Golden Gobi, a former nomadic camel herder (because of course she was), sat us down and asked, "Where do you want to go?" Cue four blank faces. I hadn't done a shred of research, and Brian looked like he'd just remembered Mongolia was a country. Thankfully, Lin, our resident planner, saved the day, mentioning something about wild sheep, goats, and ancient horses.

We all nodded sagely, as if we knew exactly what she was talking about, and suddenly we had an itinerary: sand dunes, ice canyons, camel trekking, and more wildlife than a David Attenborough documentary.

As we left her office, she handed us a list of "must-haves" for the trip. Wet wipes, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer were non-negotiable. "There are no showers, toilets, or water where you're going," she said cheerfully. "Best be prepared."

Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "You might also want to get some travel sickness tablets." My stomach sank. What had we just signed up for?

Off we went to the State Department Store, that towering relic of Soviet efficiency, to procure the essentials. Wet wipes? Check. Toilet paper? Check. Snacks? Double check—because if you’re going to the middle of nowhere, you might as well bring chocolate. Feeling victorious, we moved on to our next challenge: finding travel sickness tablets. Simple, right? Wrong. This seemingly straightforward task turned into an episode of *Survivor: Ulaanbaatar Pharmacy Edition*.

The young woman behind the pharmacy counter greeted us with a polite but utterly unhelpful smile as it became abundantly clear she spoke no English. We tried miming, but apparently, the international sign for “I feel sick” isn’t as universal as we thought. That’s when Doug decided to step up, fully committing to the role of “man suffering vehicular nausea.” He careened around the store making convincing car noises, arms flailing as though steering a rally car on Mongolia’s bumpy roads. For the grand finale, he pretended to roll down an imaginary car window and projectile vomit into the distance. It was an acting performance worthy of an Oscar—or at least a Golden Globe.

The pharmacist’s face lit up with understanding. “Ahhh!” she exclaimed triumphantly, diving into a drawer and emerging with a small packet of pills that she held aloft like a trophy. We all cheered as though we’d just conquered Everest. She smiled, we smiled, and for a moment, all felt like heroes. Sure, Doug had humiliated himself in public, but we had the tablets. Victory was ours.

Back at the guesthouse, we packed our bags with a mix of excitement and dread. The reality of venturing into the remote Gobi Desert was beginning to sink in. To calm our nerves, we returned to the Irish pub for one last Guinness, savoring it like it was the nectar

of the gods. Tomorrow, we would leave the relative comforts of U.B and plunge into the unknown.

As I sipped my pint, I couldn't help but wonder: would the Gobi live up to its reputation as a place of breathtaking beauty and isolation? Or would we end up as cautionary tales, victims of our own lack of preparation? One thing was certain—we were about to find out.

## Chapter 3

### The Great Ger Sleepover

We woke to a morning so cold and windy that even the sun seemed reluctant to show up, hiding behind the clouds as if avoiding an unwelcome obligation. But no matter—we were finally setting off on our grand adventure into the Gobi Desert! Or so we thought.

When we organized the itinerary, the hostel owner informed us that the first five days would take us through the "remote" parts of the country. This was a bit baffling, given that we'd already concluded the entire Gobi was essentially the middle of nowhere. Apparently, even the desert had its own hierarchy of isolation. After that, we'd be traveling on roads the hostel owner ominously described as "a little more traveled," which, frankly, didn't do much to boost our confidence.

Our guide for this escapade was Victor, a young Mongolian with a flair for the dramatic and a head for efficiency. Victor wasn't his real name—his Mongolian name was apparently so long and tongue-twisting that he'd spared us the humiliation of butchering it. Instead, he went by "Victor," which seemed both practical and vaguely heroic. Victor was a jack of all trades: guide, cook, problem solver, and enthusiastic wielder of a mysterious black rock he frequently rubbed against his bald spot. Whatever magical properties that rock possessed remained a mystery, but if it gave him solace about his hairline, who were we to judge?

Victor arrived at the guesthouse looking uncharacteristically serious. "I have bad news," he announced. Cue the collective intake of breath. Was the trip canceled? Had the desert been stolen? No, it was

just that a storm had closed the main (and only) road south. We'd have to leave late, miss our first stop, and camp somewhere unplanned. Relieved that we weren't about to die in a sandstorm, we enthusiastically declared this a part of the adventure. At this point, we were wild-eyed and excited about the trip, blissfully unaware of what the Gobi could dish out. Victor eyed us with skepticism but left to prepare, no doubt questioning if our optimism would survive the desert.

Two hours later, we found ourselves standing beside the road, our bags in a forlorn pile, staring at the vehicle that would take us into the heart of the Gobi. It was a UAZ 452, a relic of Soviet ingenuity originally designed in the 1950s to conquer the most treacherous terrains. Remarkably, these rugged workhorses are still manufactured today, unchanged in design or function—a testament to their unyielding practicality.

At first glance, the UAZ looked like a retro minivan, albeit one designed by someone with a grudge against aerodynamics. Its rounded, boxy shape and squat frame made it resemble nothing so much as a loaf of bread on wheels— or Bukhanka - a nickname it's earned in far-flung corners of the former Soviet states. Despite its humble, almost comical appearance, these vans are legends in rough terrain, perfectly suited for journeys like ours. Doubts aside, we knew this sturdy beast was our best chance of making it through the desert. And so, we christened it the Gambaa-Mobile and climbed aboard, ready for whatever lay ahead.

Gambaa, our driver, was a stoic genius with a green beret perched rakishly on his head. Hailing from the northwest mountains, he was the kind of man who could fix anything, drive anywhere, and probably wrestle a yak if necessary. He was also a pro at a game

called “knuckles,” played with sheep poo as jacks, and an expert in identifying the best type of dung for campfires (horse dung, if you’re curious). Truly a man of many talents

Off we rattled, the Gambaa-Mobile groaning like a senior citizen tackling a steep flight of stairs. As we crawled out of Ulaanbaatar, the landscape shifted to rolling, treeless hills where snow clung stubbornly to the ground. Herds of sheep, goats, and horses meandered across the plains, giving us unimpressed side-eyes as we passed.

Our first stop was a sacred pile of rocks adorned with animal skulls, old clothes, and random knick-knacks. To the untrained eye, it resembled a dumpster after a strong wind, but to the Mongolians, it was a holy site. Dutifully, we paid our respects, which mostly involved tossing a rock on the pile and pretending we understood what was going on.

We piled back into the Gambaa-mobile, rattling down the road like loose change in a piggy bank, until we pulled into a dusty parking lot. The centerpiece? A ramshackle building adorned with enormous, sun-bleached pictures of food that seemed to scream, “We’re edible... probably.”

“Lunch time!” Victor declared with the enthusiasm of someone who clearly wasn’t eating here for the first time.

“Good,” I thought, my stomach growling in agreement. What was I thinking?

Inside, the roadside restaurant offered a unique ambiance—if you’re into mismatched tables, flickering fluorescent lights, and a faint smell of mystery grease. Victor shepherded us in like dazed sheep,

guiding us to seats that wobbled just enough to keep you on edge. The decor was a bold mix of peeling posters featuring camels and rolling dunes, an odd reminder of where we were and, perhaps, what might soon be rolling through our digestive systems. Adventure, indeed.

Menus were handed out, each featuring glossy photos of dishes that bore little resemblance to anything edible. Victor, sensing our confusion, recommended the noodles, which he described as being “like chow mein.” This was reassuring. I like chow mein. Who doesn’t like chow mein? Noodles are universal, right?

Oh, how naïve I was.

When the plates arrived, my optimism evaporated faster than water in the desert sun. What sat before me could only loosely be called food. The noodles were a pale, gelatinous mass, clumped together like a failed science experiment. A few stray chunks of unidentifiable meat peeked out from the depths, and the whole dish was garnished with a smattering of shredded carrots that looked more apologetic than appetizing.

I took my first bite with the hopeful enthusiasm of someone who doesn’t yet know what’s coming. The texture was...unique. Imagine if someone overcooked pasta, then let it sit out overnight to congeal into a starchy brick, then decided to warm it up again in the microwave but forgot to add seasoning—or dignity. It was both dry and sticky, an oxymoronic masterpiece that clung to the roof of my mouth like glue.

The meat was another story altogether. Chewing it felt like a workout, and I briefly wondered if it might have been repurposed from an old leather boot. Each bite was a guessing game: was it goat,

camel, or some mythical creature of the steppe? The truth, I decided, was better left unknown.

And yet, there was tea. Sweet, milky Mongolian tea, served in a chipped mug that somehow felt like a lifeline. It was warm and comforting, the kind of drink that says, “Yes, everything else might be terrible, but at least you have me.” I clung to that tea like a drowning person clings to a lifeboat.

Around me, the other members of our group were grappling with their own culinary crises. Brian tried to liven up his noodles with a liberal dash of the accompanying soy sauce, only to discover that it wasn’t soy sauce at all but something far saltier and infinitely more mysterious. Lin tried to eat around the meat, a strategy that left her with little more than a sad pile of gummy noodles and a look of quiet despair.

Victor, meanwhile, ate with gusto, his plate cleared in record time. “Good, yes?” he asked, smiling. We nodded weakly, unwilling to crush his enthusiasm. “Very authentic!” Doug managed to say, though the words tasted as forced as the noodles themselves.

After what felt like an eternity, lunch was over. Plates were cleared, tea cups drained, and we stumbled back outside into the fresh air, grateful to leave the fluorescent-lit battlefield behind. As we walked back to the Gambaa-mobile, Victor assured us that the meal was just a warm-up. “Tomorrow,” he said with a grin, “we’ll try buuz!”

I wasn’t sure what buuz was, but I prayed it came with extra tea.

Before we set off again, I mentioned the need to find a toilet. The others immediately nodded in agreement, clearly relieved someone had voiced what we were all thinking. None of us fancied the idea of



spending several hours bouncing over rough roads with bellies full of tea and noodles threatening rebellion.

A quick scout of the area revealed a rickety outhouse leaning precariously, as if it had been designed more for comedic effect than practicality. Still, it was better than nothing. With grim determination, we took turns braving the questionable structure, knowing this was our best shot at comfort before the bumpy ride ahead.

Ah, the Mongolian roadside toilet. A phrase that sounds innocuous enough but in reality deserves a spot on the list of “Experiences That Test Your Will to Live.” Then it was my turn to brave this infamous facility. After all, I’ve traveled. I’ve seen things. Squat toilets in Indonesia, long drops in Australia, pit latrines in Africa—I considered myself prepared.

Oh, how wrong I was.

The “toilet” was housed in a shed that looked like it might collapse under the weight of a stern glance. Inside, I was greeted by a gaping hole in the ground and two precariously placed planks straddling it. These planks, I deduced, were for one’s feet, though they looked as if they might buckle under anything heavier than a butterfly. The stench hit me like a punch to the face—a potent cocktail of ammonia, decay, and overcooked cabbage. Breathing became optional.

As I approached the setup, gingerly balancing on the planks, I realized this was no ordinary challenge. For starters, aiming was key—one misstep and the results were disastrous. Secondly, the planks were slick with...well, let's just call it "misplaced enthusiasm" from previous users. My legs trembled as I squatted, praying to every deity I could think of that I wouldn't tumble into the abyss.

Then there was the hole itself. It was more of a suggestion than a receptacle, and judging by the carnage on the surrounding planks, many had either abandoned aim entirely or given up mid-mission. I was now part of a high-stakes game of “Don’t Touch Anything,” where losing meant not just shame but potentially a tetanus shot.

To add insult to injury, the wind picked up. The shed creaked ominously as a gust rushed in, carrying with it a fresh waft of the horrors below. My balance faltered, and for one heart-stopping moment, I thought I was going in. But sheer willpower and a surprisingly strong thigh workout pulled me through.

Emerging from the shed, I felt like a war veteran. My fellow travelers, sensing my thousand-yard stare, avoided asking questions.

Victor, bless him, found my reaction amusing. “First time in Mongolia?” he asked with a grin. “You’ll get used to it.” Get used to it? Was that supposed to be comforting? I decided to take it as a challenge, though deep down, I doubted I’d ever truly recover.

As we climbed back into the van, the rest of the group whispered tales of their own toilet trauma. It turned out I wasn’t alone—everyone had their own battle scars. We laughed about it, mostly to keep from crying. It was an unspoken agreement: we were in this together.

The Gobi Desert is said to strip you down to the essentials, revealing your true self. And as I sat in the Gambaa-mobile, rattling along the bumpy road, I realized I’d already learned something valuable about myself: I could survive anything, so long as I didn’t fall in.

Several hours and one alternator swap later (performed by Gambaa in record time because, of course, he had a spare hidden somewhere

in the van), we veered off the paved road and into the wilderness. The “road” was now a faint suggestion of tire tracks on rocky ground. It was time to find a place to camp. The adventure was officially underway, and sanity was already in short supply.

As we bounced along the Gobi's endless, lumpy terrain, Victor turned around with a declaration that sent ripples of confusion through the group. “It’s too cold to camp tonight,” he announced matter-of-factly. “We’ll have to find a friendly nomad to stay with.”

Wait, what? Stay with a nomad? Was this...normal? Did nomads have some sort of unwritten code for hosting strangers? Did we just knock on a felt door and say, “Hey, mind if six foreigners and their slightly questionable van crash here?” The possibilities were thrilling and mildly terrifying. “What a fabulous adventure!” we whispered to one another, because clearly, none of us were ready to admit we had no clue what we’d signed up for.

Gambaa, unfazed as ever, rose to the challenge. His sharp eyes now scanned the horizon for nomadic signs—smoke from a ger chimney, livestock clusters, perhaps a rogue camel crossing the path. Meanwhile, we were bouncing from seat to seat like human popcorn, each hump in the so-called “road” reminding us that Mongolian terrain had zero respect for spinal alignment.

After a few failed attempts—turns out some nomads are like minimalists who consider a Ger with just a couple of bedrolls and a goat to be sufficient—they finally let us in: a young family who seemed willing to take a chance on us. We pulled up outside their Ger, somewhat bedraggled but wearing our best “We’re here to soak up the local culture” smiles. The family greeted us with waves and

smiles, a whirlwind of bowing that suggested they were either deeply polite or slightly amused by our clueless expressions.

The matriarch of the Ger—clearly a seasoned host—moved with the practiced precision of someone who had done this countless times before. She opened a chest with a quiet sense of purpose, pulling out bedding as if performing an effortless magic trick. Blankets, mattresses, and pillows seemed to appear out of nowhere, and within moments, the space was transformed into a cozy makeshift Mongolian slumber party.

It wasn't luxury by any means, but compared to a night on the unforgiving floor of a UAZ van, it felt like pure indulgence. The blankets were thick and warm, the mattresses just soft enough, and the worn rugs beneath us radiated a homely charm.

We gratefully accepted steaming cups of salty tea, the perfect antidote to the chill of the evening, and settled ourselves into a loose circle. The warmth of the Ger and our host's care wrapped around us like an embrace.

And so we sat there, nodding and grinning like the world's most exhausted bobblehead dolls. The Advanced Level International Smiling required more energy than we had, but we were committed. "Thank you, kind family!" we all said, over and over, pretending we understood the language of nomads just fine. The fire crackled away in the middle of the Ger, lighting up the felt walls with the glow of a really nice Instagram filter. It was snug, surreal, and honestly, a bit magical—if magical means squatting over a hole in the ground for bathroom breaks.

When the light finally went out—along with our hopes of using an actual toilet—the family settled onto their own bedding, and we all

huddled in the dark, surrounded by the soft murmur of desert life outside. It was like camping, but with fewer mosquitoes and more tea. As the silence settled in, we realized just how far out we were—like, if we tried to send a postcard home, it would take months to get a response.

But here we were, far from any “civilized” amenities, and oddly enough, it felt like an adventure. Not a planned, well-organized adventure with daily itineraries and WI-Fi, but the kind where you cross your fingers and hope you don’t wake up with a camel sharing your bedroll. It wasn’t perfect, but it was real, and as we lay there listening to the soft sighs of the family around us, we couldn’t help but feel a sense of camaraderie that we hadn’t expected. Maybe, just maybe, this was what it meant to truly experience the Gobi Desert.

## Chapter Four

### Waking Up in a Felt Fortress

We awoke to a crisp, sunny, and unnervingly still morning in the Gobi Desert. It was the kind of morning where you briefly think, “Wow, this is magical,” before realizing you haven’t yet faced the reality of no running water or a proper bathroom. Inside the Ger—a word that loosely translates to “felt yurt with delusions of grandeur”—our hosts were already hard at work. The lady of the house was bustling about, tidying up the bedding with the precision of a drill sergeant, while her husband was outside, wrangling horses and goats. Apparently, letting the herds loiter too close to the Ger is a recipe for being unceremoniously trampled in the night.

Good to know, I thought, glad I’d survived my slumber on the floor of what amounted to a glorified collapsible tent.

Meanwhile, their young son was tearing around the campsite with the kind of chaotic energy only a child fueled by desert air and zero screen time can manage. He was doing his best to “help” his dad, which seemed to involve a lot of darting back and forth, waving his arms like an overenthusiastic bird. This charming display of boyish mischief came to a screeching halt when his mum stepped outside, hands on hips, radiating an aura of authority that could halt a stampede. She let loose a rapid-fire lecture that needed no translation, and the boy, visibly chastened, shuffled off to complete his real chore: dung collection.

Yes, dung collection. Out here in the Gobi, where trees are mythical creatures and gas stations are a concept for other civilizations, dried horse dung is the fuel of choice for morning fires. With the

enthusiasm of someone returning overdue library books, the boy began scooping up the fragrant nuggets and delivering them to his mum, who accepted them with the kind of nonchalance that only years of practice can provide.

Once the stove was roaring with the fragrant glow of burning excrement, food preparations began. A bowl appeared, into which flour, water, and salt were thrown with the reckless abandon of someone who's been doing this for decades. The dough was kneaded, rolled, and slapped onto the fire. "Mmm, bread," I thought. "Delicious!" But as the flatbread was sliced into strips, my optimism faded. Noodles, I realized with mounting dread.

Seizing the moment, I slipped away on my own quest: to find a private patch of the Gobi for my morning business. Out here, privacy is a luxury, and the toilet situation is essentially find-a-rock-and-pray-for-the-best. Task completed with minimal trauma, I returned to camp just as Victor, our ever-cheerful guide, unveiled our breakfast.

Omelette, tomato, feta, and a sausage that defied classification. It was simple, hearty, and most importantly, not noodles.

After our meal, the little boy took it upon himself to give us a grand tour of the family's territory. He chattered incessantly in Mongolian, oblivious to the fact that we understood none of it. We smiled, nodded, and followed him like loyal subjects, admiring his favorite pony and a few very unimpressed birds.

Just as I began to enjoy this impromptu nature walk, Victor summoned us back. The family, in an act of overwhelming hospitality, had prepared a second breakfast. Apparently, the herder had made a trek to a neighbor's place to procure fresh meat—an honor not to be refused. So there we were, faced with another bowl

of noodles, this time swimming in a murky broth that looked like it might double as dishwater. The meat? Let's just say it was "mystery" and leave it at that.

As I reluctantly slurped my way through this second breakfast, I recalled a chilling tale from Ulaanbaatar about two Russian travelers who had eaten a marmot—a small, adorable rodent that thrives in the desert—and contracted the bubonic plague. Who knew the Gobi could serve up culinary adventures with a side of medieval disease?

With breakfast number two behind us, we packed up the car and prepared to leave. Victor informed us it was customary to give a gift to our hosts. Soap or laundry powder was apparently the go-to. We looked at each other in horror—none of us had thought to pack a travel-sized detergent kit. "What about sweets?" Lin suggested. "Better than nothing," Victor shrugged.

In a panic, we pooled together our travel snacks—an odd assortment of granola bars, trail mix, and half-melted chocolates—and presented them to the family with as much fanfare as we could muster. They accepted the offering graciously, though I suspected they were secretly hoping for something more practical, like toothpaste.

As we climbed into the Gambaa-mobile and bounced off into the horizon, I glanced back. The family stood waving, their smiles warm but perhaps tinged with relief. I couldn't blame them. Hosting clueless foreigners who hand over candy instead of soap must be exhausting. Still, as the vastness of the Gobi swallowed us once again, I couldn't help but feel a little wistful. For all its quirks, this remote corner of the world had a way of making you appreciate the absurdity—and beauty—of the human experience.



We spent the day bumping over the Southern Gobi, sometimes on what was best described as a vague track, and sometimes on terrain Gambaa seemed to invent on the spot. With a gleam in his eye that suggested he'd been watching too many action movies, he veered off-road entirely, cackling like a man possessed. The van bounced and rattled as we hung on for dear life, throwing each other looks that ranged from mild concern to did anyone actually check his driver's license? Gambaa, unfazed, carried on like a man auditioning for a role in *Mad Max: Desert Edition*.

Our destination? The Ich Nacht Nature Reserve, home of the rare Ibex goats and Argali sheep, though it felt like the real quest was to find Gambaa's sanity. Along the way, we bounced passed double-humped Bactrian camels (why settle for one hump when you can have two?), nonchalant horses, and goats that looked as if they were plotting something sinister. Every now and then, we spotted a nomadic herder standing in the middle of the void like an enigmatic character from a spaghetti Western, silently watching us with the confidence of someone who knows exactly how lost we were.

Finally, the flat, monotonous desert started doing something interesting—hills and rocks appeared on the horizon! Just as I was lamenting the lack of excitement, movement caught my eye. “Quick, look!” I yelled, startling everyone into a synchronized head-spin. There they were, Ibex goats, gracefully bounding across a ridge like the cast of a National Geographic special. The herd disappeared over the horizon, but not before we mentally high-fived ourselves for discovering them. Surely the Ibex gods were impressed.

Our moment of triumph was interrupted when the Gambaa-mobile sputtered to a halt at the base of a steep hill. Gambaa muttered something in Mongolian, and Victor helpfully translated: “Everyone

out. The van can't make it up with all of you in it." With much grumbling, we piled out and trudged up the hill. At the top, we turned to watch Gambaa work his magic. He backed the van up, revved the engine, and charged at the incline like it had insulted his family. Gravel sprayed, the van groaned, but against all odds, it reached the top—where it promptly stalled, as if in protest. Gambaa, however, grinned like he'd just won a trophy, and we cheered as if we hadn't doubted him for even a second.

Back in the van, we bounced across the reserve until we reached the ranger station. The ranger, a cheerful man who looked thrilled to have company, immediately hopped into the van. Ostensibly, he was there to guide us, but it became clear he was simply taking advantage of a free ride and a break from whatever it is rangers do in the middle of nowhere. To his credit, he proved quite knowledgeable, showing us 20,000-year-old rock formations, intricate carvings, and the best spots for spotting wildlife. Lin, our resident environmental scientist, was in awe, snapping photos and taking notes. As for me, the novelty of rocks wore off after the first dozen, but I nodded politely and tried to look interested.

The ranger filled us in on park trivia: how the Argali sheep had been saved from extinction by the reserve's conservation efforts, how scientists from all over the world stayed in tiny cabins nearby, and—most alarmingly—how the composted contents of pit toilets were used as fertilizer. "Veggies, anyone?" Victor quipped, and we all made a mental note to stick to canned goods.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the desert in hues of gold and crimson, we made our way back to camp, weary but deeply content. The day had been long and demanding, yet it left us with a profound sense of awe for the vast, untamed beauty of the Gobi.

Once back, I decided to send my drone up for a quick spin. The mechanical whirr broke the tranquil silence, and to my delight—and Gambaa’s—our drivers eyes lit up like a child seeing fireworks for the very first time. He clapped his hands and laughed in delight, pointing skyward as the drone rose higher, becoming a tiny black speck against the vivid evening sky.

From the drone’s lofty vantage point, the desert unfolded like an endless sea of undulating dunes and rugged plains. Herds of horses moved in unison, their sleek forms silhouetted against the fading light, their movements a ballet of wild grace. Nearby, camels clustered in scattered groups, their humps casting long shadows across the sand. It was a scene of serene majesty, a landscape so vast and boundless that it made our small camp seem like a mere pinprick in an infinite expanse.

The drone’s camera captured it all—the sun’s final rays brushing the horizon, the endless stretch of desert glowing in amber light, and the timeless rhythm of life among the herds. Gambaa watched the live feed on my phone with wide-eyed wonder, exclaiming excitedly in his language, his joy infectious. Even as tired as I was, I found myself grinning alongside him, sharing in his childlike awe.

The moment felt surreal, a collision of ancient and modern worlds: the timeless beauty of the desert and its creatures, viewed through the lens of a tiny buzzing machine. Above us, the first stars began to twinkle, heralding the arrival of night, but for a moment longer, the Gobi stretched endlessly before us, alive with quiet magic.

As the sun began its slow descent, casting long shadows over the rocky ground, we wrestled with our tents, trying to stake them into the unyielding earth. Tonight would be our first night of camping,

and the terrain wasn't exactly rolling out the welcome mat. The ground was a minefield of jagged stones, and as we spread out the wafer-thin sleeping mats, we exchanged doubtful glances, silently wondering if they'd protect us from the sharp edges beneath. Comfort, it seemed, was a luxury we'd left behind.

With the tents finally standing—some more precariously than others—we turned our attention to dinner. Victor, ever the culinary adventurer, set to work, his stove hissing and sputtering in the cool evening air. As the sky transformed into a masterpiece of reds and purples, we gathered around, balancing bowls in our laps, and dug into his latest creation. It was a modest meal, but out here, under a sky that seemed almost too perfect to be real, it felt like a feast fit for kings.

Not far from camp, a herd of wild horses moved gracefully toward a nearby waterhole, their silhouettes etched against the fiery horizon. Their presence added a sense of timelessness to the scene, as if we'd stumbled into a page torn straight from an ancient story. The wind carried their faint whinnies and the soft crunch of their hooves on the dry earth, blending seamlessly with the whisper of the desert around us.

The whole scene was so breathtakingly cinematic, it felt like we were living in a National Geographic documentary. All we lacked was the deep, resonant voice over of Sir David Attenborough to narrate the drama of our tiny camp against the vast, wild expanse of the Gobi Desert. The horses at the waterhole, the kaleidoscopic sky, even the faint flicker of our campfire—it all felt too perfect to be real.

The evening's grand finale was a visit to one of the ranger's Ger for music and a singalong. Inside the dim, cozy tent, we perched on an

assortment of logs and buckets while the ranger pulled out a battered guitar. Doug, ever the music enthusiast, joined in enthusiastically, and soon we were belting out country-western songs, clapping and harmonizing with varying levels of success.

Just as I thought the evening couldn't possibly get any more surreal, our host grinned mischievously, reached into the depths of his culinary arsenal—a.k.a. a dusty cupboard—and emerged triumphantly with a battered pot. It gleamed ominously in the firelight, as if it had seen more strange dinners than any pot should endure. He set it down with the reverence of a man about to reveal a culinary masterpiece, his smile a mix of pride and a touch of malevolence.

First, he boiled water with the fervor of someone trying to exorcise a ghost. Then, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, he produced the *pièce de résistance*: a bone so dried out it looked like it had been borrowed from a paleontology exhibit. Into the bubbling cauldron it went. The smell wafting through the Ger was... let's call it "character-building."

Then came the noodles. Oh, yes, those noodles. The same ones we'd been blessed with yesterday. And the day before. Were these noodles some kind of sacred desert staple? A rite of passage for nomads and park rangers alike? Or perhaps a secret U,N strategy to unify the world through identical noodle-based suffering? Whatever the case, the dish was back for an encore performance, and it wasn't bringing any friends. At least, mercifully, there were no vegetables this time—no mutant carrots or cabbage grown in the shadow of the pit toilet compost heap.

Our host stirred the concoction with a flourish, humming a tune that sounded suspiciously like a victory anthem. My stomach, meanwhile, was auditioning for a horror movie, twisting itself into knots of pure dread.

My friends, valiantly attempting to put on brave faces, caught my eye as they sang along to our host's cheerful melody. The desperation was unmistakable. Their smiles faltered with every stir of the pot, their eyes screaming, oh no noodle soup. But I was already halfway out of the Ger, quietly sidling toward the door like someone escaping a really bad karaoke night.

I didn't wait for the soup to be ladled out. As I slipped into the cool night air, the sounds of singing and clinking bowls drifted behind me, growing fainter with every step. Somewhere in the distance, a camel let out a braying cry that I could only interpret as, "Smart move, my friend. Smart move."

Outside, the stars stretched endlessly across the sky, a breathtaking reminder of how tiny we are. I sat for a while, soaking it in, before retreating to my tent. After removing the usual assortment of rocks poking into my back, I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, the sounds of laughter and off-key singing fading into the desert night.

## Chapter Five

### Nomads, Yoghurt, and the Quest for Directions

We were up, packed, and raring to hit the dusty trail at an hour that even the camels would call unreasonable. Our grand destination? Ich Gazaryn Chuluu National Park in the Eastern Gobi—home to unique red rock formations adored by climbers, the national Long Song competition (imagine karaoke but more soulful), and more camels than you can shake a stick at (though we didn't test this theory, for safety reasons).

But first, we had a thrilling date with the Gambaa-mobile—a bumpy, spine-realigning ride that could double as an extreme sport.

After bidding a heartfelt farewell to the ever-friendly ranger, we made our daring escape before anyone could insist on another round of noodles. With that, we were off, rattling into the horizon like slightly dazed adventurers in a Mongolian-themed sitcom.

Our first stop on the grand adventure was the illustrious Mineral Springs. These were not just any springs, mind you—they were allegedly famous. The water here didn't just gush out of the earth; it sprouted, brimming with promises of health, wisdom, and a sprinkling of other miraculous life upgrades. Essentially, it was nature's version of a self-help seminar.

In reality, what greeted us was... less inspiring. A rusty pipe stood at an awkward angle, grudgingly trickling out sulfur-scented water onto the dirt below, creating a scene that could generously be described as "a muddy, smelly mess." Horses milled about, their priorities clear—they were battling over the only patch of green grass within a thousand kilometers. Above the buzz of the flies and the faint sulfur

stench, we stared at the pipe, then at each other, wondering: Do we really need to drink this stuff?

Surrounding the so-called spring were little wooden huts dotting the hillside. To call them "rustic" was a level of optimism usually reserved for blind dates and infomercial products. Most were leaning so precariously that a strong gust of wind—or even a stern glance—looked ready to turn them into firewood.

“It’s a resort,” Victor announced with great enthusiasm, as though introducing us to the Ritz-Carlton. “People come here in summer to take the waters.”

I squinted at the shantytown-on-a-hill and thought, If this is a resort, then I’m the Queen of Sheba. Apparently, shantytown chic was a thing here, and Victor was its most passionate travel agent.

Before I could voice my skepticism, Gambaa—the fearless maniac of our group—rushed past us with the kind of urgency that only comes with free samples or a closing buffet. He cupped the sulfurous trickle in his hands, splashed his face, and then drank deeply, all with the expression of someone who’d just stumbled across the Fountain of Youth.

We watched in stunned silence.

“Right then,” Brian said eventually, breaking the spell, “let’s have a go at this magical water, shall we?”

And so, like the sheep we apparently were, we shuffled forward, dodging the mud and occasional horse poo. One by one, we awkwardly cupped our hands under the dribbling pipe, bringing the miraculous liquid of life to our lips. It tasted exactly as it smelled—



like rotten eggs that had been left out in the sun to ponder their life choices.

But Victor was watching us, his face beaming with pride, so we did what any polite people would do: we lied. We made approving noises that could only be described as “acting school dropouts trying to convey joy,” and nodded as though we could feel the restorative powers coursing through our veins.

As if to underline the water’s alleged magic, Doug immediately leaped over a nearby rock with the energy of a caffeinated mountain goat. Unfortunately, he didn’t quite stick the landing and ended up in an undignified heap on the other side.

Restorative powers or not, I’ll say this much: it’s not every day you drink water that smells like farts while being watched by an audience of smug horses.

We clambered back into the Gambaa-mobile, our noble yet battle-weary van, and set off toward our next camping spot. The day’s mission was to traverse from one remote corner of the Gobi to another—this time inching closer to the “big ticket” tourist areas that boasted actual trails and occasional human life. Tonight’s campsite? Somewhere smack dab in the middle of these two extremes.

What we didn’t know, as we bounced around in the van’s backseat was that our route cut through a particularly uncharted swath of the desert. And when I say uncharted, I mean not even Victor, our seasoned leader, or Gambaa, our intrepid driver, seemed to know where the heck we were going.

I was happily gazing out the window, watching a herd of goats who seemed to have their life far more together than we did, when Lin

jabbed me in the ribs. Her eyes darted toward the front seat, where Victor and Gambaa were deep in discussion, gesturing at the horizon with increasing urgency. I nudged Brian, who reluctantly paused scrolling through his phone and joined me in deciphering the mime show up front.

“Um,” Brian cleared his throat. “Is there... a problem?”

Victor turned to face us, wearing the strained smile of someone who really, really wished he had a better answer. “Well,” he said slowly, “we don’t come this way often, so we’re looking for a nomad to ask for directions.”

Translation: We’re lost

Doug, ever the optimist, shrugged, “Oh well, it’s all part of the adventure!” and promptly broke out the snack bag, handing out tiny packets of crisps like some sort of chip-fueled morale officer. Accepting the situation, I leaned back with my own packet of crisps and let the so-called experts figure it out.

Hours passed. Nomads, it seemed, had unanimously decided this part of the Gobi was not worth their time either. Just as we started to wonder if we’d ever see another human being, Gambaa suddenly pointed at a speck on the horizon—a lone figure on horseback. Without warning, he floored it, hurtling us across the plain in a cacophony of rattling metal and dust. The rider, understandably startled, looked ready to gallop straight into the sunset when we screeched to a halt just meters from him.

Victor and Gambaa hopped out to consult while we stretched our legs, relieved to be out of the van for the first time in hours. The nomad, wide-eyed but gracious, gestured animatedly in several

directions, occasionally pausing to sketch shapes in the dirt with a stick. After what felt like an eternity of head-nodding and muttering, Victor summoned us back into the van. “Storms have caused trouble ahead,” he explained, “but there’s an alternate route. Let’s go!”

“Onward!” Doug cheered, waving a bag of crisps like a victory flag.

Sometime later, we came upon a solitary Ger in the middle of the vast plain. Gambaa stopped again—perhaps for directions, perhaps for tea. An elderly woman emerged from the Ger, smiling broadly and motioning for us to come inside. We obliged, stepping into the dim, smoky interior and squinting as our eyes adjusted from the harsh sunlight.

The woman bustled about, pulling out low stools for us to sit on, then disappeared briefly before reappearing a large metal bowl of what could only be described as suspiciously thick yoghurt. When I first saw the bowl, my heart sank. Before I even knew what was in it, I was seized by an irrational fear that it was more noodles—the gloopy, unidentifiable kind that had haunted us since the start of the trip. Relief turned to apprehension when I realized it wasn’t noodles but something far more enigmatic.

Victor, sensing our hesitation, whispered, “It’s rude to refuse.”

Brian, ever the quick thinker, mumbled something about needing the toilet and vanished outside faster than you could say “fight or flight.”

The rest of us weren’t so lucky. We stared at the bowl, then at each other, ...before hesitantly taking a bowl, each topped with a biscuit teetering on the edge like a culinary warning sign.

The yoghurt, if one could call it that, was unlike anything I'd ever encountered—or hope to encounter again. It was warm, slightly tangy, and carried a hint of... something I couldn't quite place but wished I hadn't. The biscuits, meanwhile, seemed to be held together by sheer determination and an alarming amount of animal fat. Following local custom, we dipped the biscuits into the yoghurt, exchanging grim smiles as we chewed.

The woman, oblivious to our culinary distress, shared her life story through Victor. Her family had been nomadic herders for generations, and she proudly told us about her 1,000-head herd of goats and horses. At 78, she'd retired from riding after a nasty fall, but she beamed as she recounted how her children had left the nomadic life to become a doctor and a vet. Her pride was infectious, and for a moment, the yoghurt didn't seem so bad.

We politely declined seconds, thanked her profusely, and escaped back into the sunshine, rejoining Brian, who looked entirely too pleased with his clever escape.

Once outside, our hostess graciously treated us to a grand tour of her homestead. First, there was the Ger—sturdy, functional, and pleasantly cozy. Next, she proudly gestured toward a little shed that appeared to be held together by sheer optimism and a few strategically placed rocks. A strong wind would have turned it into airborne kindling, but hey, it added character.

Then came the *pièce de résistance*: her pride and joy—a gleaming, brand-new car, lovingly encircled by a fence. The fence wasn't for aesthetics, mind you, but a practical barrier to keep the local livestock from turning the car into their scratching post.

As if sensing the moment called for dramatic flair, she stood on the edge of the vast plain, pointing dramatically into the horizon and speaking rapidly in Mongolian. I couldn't understand a word, but in my mind, she was recounting epic tales of her days as a fearless rider, galloping across the endless steppe on her half-wild pony, chasing adventure and possibly escaping rebellious goats.

With the yoghurt devoured, stories swapped, and—most crucially—the correct directions to our campsite obtained, it was time to bid farewell. We climbed back into the Gambiaa-mobile, waving enthusiastically as she smiled and nodded, her car safely tucked behind its animal-proof fortress. Then, with a sputter and a jolt, we were off again, bouncing across the Gobi in search of our next misadventure.

After a few more hours of bone-rattling, Gambiaa-Mobile adventures, we finally rolled into Gazaryn Chuluu National Park, our campsite for the night. It was like landing on Mars—if Mars had better air and the occasional camel. Massive red granite rock formations erupted from the dusty plains, looking so surreal that I half-expected a UFO to land and ask us for directions. It was, in a word, stunning.

After a brief reconnaissance mission to find the perfect spot—because nothing ruins a good night's sleep by being trampled by a herd of camels—we settled on a cozy nook between two towering rocky outcrops. The tents went up with only a moderate amount of swearing, and we helped Victor transform our little patch of desert into a campsite that screamed, “We have no idea what we're doing, but we're trying our best. With camp sorted, it was time to explore.

Gazaryn Chuluu, as Victor explained, is a hot-spot in the summer for two reasons. First, rock climbers flock here to pit their skills against

the imposing granite. And second, it hosts the annual National Long Song competition every August—a showcase of *urtiin duu*, or Mongolian Long Song, a traditional form of singing characterized by extended, sustained notes that convey deep emotion and the vastness of the open steppe. The songs are often complex and ornamented, creating an otherworldly, echoing soundscape that reflects Mongolia's rich cultural heritage. Luckily for us, we were here early in the season, so it was just us, a couple of curious camels, and the eerie quiet of the desert.

Feeling inspired by the otherworldly scenery, I decided to try flying my drone. Big mistake. Within seconds, it seemed to channel the spirit of a mischievous desert deity and took off on its own rogue adventure. After a tense and mildly embarrassing chase, I managed to ground it and declared the operation a bust.

Exploration complete, we regrouped around the campfire for dinner, courtesy of Victor. The meal hit the spot, but the real highlight came when Brian triumphantly unearthed a bottle of Georgian red wine from the depths of his pack. With plastic tumblers in hand, we toasted to our survival and settled into silence, sipping wine as the Gobi treated us to one of its famously breathtaking sunsets.

It had been a long and chaotic day, but as we watched the sky transform into a canvas of fiery oranges and soft purples, it was clear: every bump, misstep, and rogue drone was worth it for this moment.

## Chapter 6

### The Great Missing Tourist Scandal

The day started with a picturesque calm: a clear blue sky, camels meandering elegantly among ancient rock formations, and kites gliding lazily overhead. Idyllic, right? Well, it was—until the serenity was shattered by an unexpected morning drama.

I was still savoring the last precious moments of warmth in my sleeping bag when a sudden commotion broke out. A frantic rap, rap on our tent flap was followed by Victor's usually composed voice, which now sounded more alarmed than a fire drill at a fireworks factory.

"Have you seen Doug and Lin?" he called, his tone teetering on full-blown panic. "They're missing!"

Brian groaned beside me, muttering something that sounded like, "Old mother hen," as he wrestled himself out of his sleeping bag. One shoe had mysteriously disappeared, leading to a small, muttered tirade as he rummaged around the tent. Shoe located, he stomped outside to get the details while I remained cocooned, eavesdropping from my toasty sanctuary.

From what I could gather, Victor was convinced Doug and Lin were lost forever, presumably halfway to Mongolia's version of Narnia, while Brian—half-dressed and not entirely awake—was trying to convince him they'd just gone for a walk.

Eventually, guilt and curiosity dragged me out of my sleeping bag. Outside, Victor was orchestrating what could only be described as an

amateur rescue operation. Spotting me, he sprinted over like I was some kind of aerial cavalry.

“Can you use the drone to find them?” he asked, wild-eyed. “Please! It might be our only hope!”

“Sure,” I said with a shrug. “Assuming it doesn’t develop a mind of its own again. I’m starting to think it’s allergic to rocks.”

As I unpacked the drone and Victor refined his increasingly elaborate search strategy, Doug and Lin strolled into view on the horizon, as casual as if they were coming back from a coffee run. The relief on Victor’s face was palpable. He collapsed into a camp chair with the dramatic flair of someone who had just avoided a hostage negotiation.

The story was, of course, anticlimactic. Doug and Lin, ever the intrepid explorers, had risen early to catch the sunrise and wander around the area. Not wanting to disturb anyone, they had tiptoed out of camp like stealthy ninjas.

Victor’s panic suddenly made sense when he explained his backstory: years ago, a couple of tourists, under the influence of vodka and poor decision-making, had wandered off into the Gobi night. A massive search effort ensued, and the pair were eventually found at 3 a.m., freezing and huddled behind rocks miles from camp. Since then, all guides are trained to go full Code Red at the slightest hint of a missing client.

“Don’t worry,” Doug quipped, clapping Victor on the back. “You’re not losing us that easily. Now, what’s for breakfast? I’m starving.”



Victor, visibly relieved, threw himself into breakfast preparations while we all sat down to enjoy the stunning view. Between mouthfuls of the omelette Victor had whipped up, we agreed that this place was so beautiful we could have stayed for days—though preferably without the morning search-and-rescue dramatics.

With breakfast behind us, it was time to dismantle our little outpost and climb back into the Goomba Mobile for another day of bone-rattling adventure. Today's mission? Bid farewell to the Eastern Gobi and roll into the Central Gobi, with our sights set on the legendary White Cliffs, or as the locals call them, Tsagaan Suvarga.

But first, culture called. Before we could leave, Victor insisted we visit a nearby monument dedicated to a renowned Long-Song singer. Perched on a hill with panoramic views of the plains, the monument commanded respect—or at least the appearance of it. We stood in a semi-circle, nodding solemnly and making vaguely reverent noises, while none of us had the faintest clue who this person was. “Magnificent,” someone murmured. “Indeed,” another agreed, as we shuffled back to the van, cultural obligations ticked off.

Next, we needed supplies. After a spine-jarring ride across the Gobi's dusty expanse, we stumbled upon the settlement of Gurvan Saikhan. Calling it a town was ambitious; it was more a loose collection of wooden shacks arranged around a dirt "square," with a few straggling weeds valiantly trying to stay alive. Victor marched off to hunt for food while we explored the general store, where we struck gold: chocolate ice cream. Brian added vodka to the haul because hydration comes in many forms. Victor returned empty-handed, muttering, “Not fresh.” With a shrug, he promised we'd find better supplies tomorrow.

Our next challenge was refilling the water jerry cans. This involved tracking down the keeper of the water pump, a man who arrived on a motorbike after what felt like an eternity of bell ringing and yelling into a static-ridden speaker. Once unlocked, the pump delivered questionable bore water, good enough for cooking but definitely not drinking.

Fueled up and slightly more prepared for the day, we hit the road—well, if you can call it that. The journey to the White Cliffs was long, hot, and bone-shaking, punctuated by a surreal encounter with a nomadic couple who appeared out of nowhere on a motorbike. The woman joined Victor in peeling potatoes for lunch, chatting away as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Potatoes prepped, they hopped back on their bike and vanished into the horizon like desert phantoms.

When we finally arrived at Tsagaan Suvarga, the wind greeted us with unbridled enthusiasm. Standing too close to the edge felt like an invitation to become airborne. Naturally, Doug, the daredevil, decided this was the perfect opportunity for a photo op. With Lin clutching his belt in a death grip and digging her feet into the ground, it turned into a tug-of-war between man, woman, and nature. Doug got his shot, Lin avoided a coronary, and the rest of us cheered their survival.

From the wind-whipped cliffs, we descended to the base for a closer look. Driving around the base of the cliffs turned into an unexpected adventure when Goomba, with a mischievous glint in his eye, decided to channel his inner rally driver. The UAZ roared forward, bouncing from one hillock to the next like it had a personal vendetta against suspension systems. Inside, we clung to whatever we could grab, silently questioning our life choices.

Suddenly, Lin, seated beside me, had enough. “Stop. I’m getting out!” she declared, her voice halfway between panic and exasperation. Goomba slammed on the brakes with the enthusiasm of a man who thought he was being timed, and we all tumbled out like survivors of an impromptu roller coaster ride.

As Goomba gleefully resumed his off-road escapades, we took the more sensible option—our feet—and strolled to the flat road ahead, letting him burn off his rally car dreams in peace.

Our final destination for the day was a nomadic camp owned by camel herders who partnered with Golden Gobi. The setup was simple but charming: cozy Gers with actual beds and a long-drop toilet that boasted real seats—a step up in Gobi luxury.

Here, we encountered our first travelers in days. Unfortunately, they were those tourists, a group we quickly dubbed The Ugly Tourists. While they bickered and disrupted the peace, we enjoyed watching the nomad family water and milk their camels.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, we gathered around a picnic table with cups of tea, marveling at another breathtaking Gobi sunset. It was moments like this that made the long, dusty days worth it.

Day five dawned like every other morning in the Gobi—bright, shiny, and smug about how hot it was going to get. But today, we didn’t care. We had slept in proper beds, free from the torture of rocks digging into our backs. Breakfast was at the picnic table in front of our Ger, where we sipped tea and indulged in some early morning people-watching.

The Ugly Tourists (T.U.T, for short) were putting on quite the show, barking orders at their poor, beleaguered guide, who looked like she

was two demands away from walking into the desert and never coming back.

“No need for that sort of behavior,” muttered Brian, shaking his head. “No need at all,” we agreed, keeping our commentary low but our opinions sharp.

After breakfast, we gleefully tossed our bags into the Gambaa-mobile. No tent wrestling for us today. The plan was to hit Dalanzadgad for supplies and the holy grail—a shower—before heading to the Yolyn Am Ice Canyon. Spirits were high. Hygiene dreams were even higher.

The drive was the usual: endless plains, the occasional camel, and Victor yelling directions at the van. Eventually, we rolled into Dalanzadgad, a town that could best be described as a Wild West town that time forgot. Dusty, rough, and just sketchy enough to keep things interesting

Victor led us to the market, ominously referred to as the Black Market.

“Stay close,” he instructed. “It’s not very safe.”

Lin and I exchanged alarmed looks. We weren’t sure if “not safe” meant pickpockets or actual bandits, but we figured sticking to Victor like glue was a good idea..

Inside, the market was a full-frontal assault on every sense we possessed—and a few we didn’t know we had. The cavernous, windowless space was a sauna of 30-degree heat, completely devoid of air conditioning. Sweaty slabs of meat from animals we couldn’t, or wouldn’t, identify were strewn across concrete benches like some

macabre buffet. Horses? Camels? Antelope? Who could say? Certainly not us, and no one dared to ask.

Hovering above this surreal scene was a cloud of buzzing flies, working overtime to outnumber the humans in attendance. The smell? Oh, it was beyond words. A pungent blend of raw meat, heat, and regret, it hit us like a wall the moment we stepped through the door.

"Bloody hell," Brian muttered, clutching his shirt over his nose. "Might be time to become vegetarians. Or monks. Anything else, really."

Victor, however, was unbothered. No flies, no smells, no questionable origins of meat could deter him. He navigated the chaotic labyrinth of slabs and stalls with the precision of a man who had done this before—or was simply too stubborn to care. Stall to stall he went, inspecting the offerings with the intense scrutiny of a master chef.

Meanwhile, the rest of us formed a loose huddle near the entrance, not entirely sure whether to follow Victor or make a break for fresh air. Lin glanced around nervously, whispering, "Do you think that's horse meat? Or...camel?"

"Does it matter?" Doug asked, grimacing at a particularly large hunk that might have still been looking back at us.

Finally, Victor reappeared, triumphantly holding a slab of something—let's just call it 'meat'—high above his head like a victorious hunter. He grinned broadly as he marched toward the exit, clearly pleased with his haul.

"Don't ask questions," I whispered to Brian.

"Wasn't planning on it," he replied, already turning toward the door.

As we scurried out of the market, we couldn't help but admire Victor's determination. Whatever he'd bought, it was ours now, and we were just going to have to eat it.

Our next stop was a grocery store, where the group's priorities became hilariously apparent. Victor methodically loaded up on vegetables and mysterious tins of things that looked practical but unappealing. Meanwhile, the rest of us gleefully ransacked the snack aisle, piling up an impressive stash of chips, candy, and—because we were in dire need of "essentials"—a couple of bottles of vodka. Sufficiently provisioned for any apocalypse, we waddled back to the Gambaa-mobile like victorious hunters and set off for the next prize: the local bathhouse.

Now, let me tell you, I have never been so excited at the prospect of a shower. Five days without one can do wonders for your appreciation of modern plumbing. When we arrived, the public bathhouse was a revelation. Immaculately clean, equipped with steaming hot water and water pressure that could knock your socks off (if we hadn't been wearing the same socks for nearly a week). It wasn't just a bathhouse; it was a hub for the local nomads, who'd come in from the desert for a scrub and a slice of humanity. For a mere 3000T (about AUD 1.66), we were granted the luxury of 30 minutes in a shower stall that felt like paradise on Earth.

Every second of that half-hour was cherished. The dirt of the Gobi disappeared in rivulets, and my soul felt cleaner with every passing moment. It wasn't just a shower—it was a spiritual renewal. If I'd had time, I might've considered the full package: laundry, a haircut,

maybe even a manicure. This place was a beacon of civilization in a land that felt otherwise determined to batter us into survivalists.

Fresh, clean, and smelling more like humans and less like desert-dwelling wildlife, we piled back into the van and hit the road. Our destination? One of Mongolia's big-ticket attractions: Yolyn Am Ice Canyon. We trundled along the only sealed road we'd encountered since leaving Ulaanbaatar, marveling at its smoothness like it was a five-star luxury.

As we ascended higher into the mountains, Brian decided to spice up the ride with some altitude trivia. "We're at 2,250 metres or 7,300 feet above sea level," he declared with a sense of importance. We all nodded sagely, pretending to care, but let's be honest—we were still riding the high of that glorious shower.

Yolyn Am Ice Canyon, a 10-kilometer-long wonder tucked away in the southern Gobi Desert, is like nature's air conditioning unit. In winter, it's packed with 10 meters of ice, turning it into a frozen fortress. By summer, the glacier shrinks to a mere metre, just enough for the adventurous to gingerly tiptoe across. Its name, "Vultures' Gorge," hints at its avian beginnings as a bird sanctuary..

We rolled into the canyon's car park, stretched our legs, and took in the scene. Lin stood still, scanning the area like a startled meerkat. "People," she muttered, her tone equal parts disbelief and mild horror. And she wasn't wrong. After five days of nothing but the odd nomad or distant goat for company, the sight of other travelers milling about felt like stumbling upon an alien civilization.

There they were: actual humans, outfitted in an assortment of trekking gear, snapping photos, and gawking at the canyon. It was all a bit overwhelming after our self-imposed isolation. For a moment,

we stood frozen, adjusting to this sudden influx of humanity before mustering the courage to join the ranks of the canyon explorers.

The trek into the canyon was spectacular. Towering walls of rock, glacial ice underfoot, and wildlife everywhere. Huge birds of prey soared overhead, and little creatures we nicknamed Peek-a-boos darted out from behind rocks.

“They’re adorable,” I said, watching one scamper off.

“Adorable now,” Brian replied looking up at the birds, “but probably someone’s dinner later.”

The ice was precariously thin in places, a fact that Doug discovered in the most dramatic way possible. One moment, he was cautiously stepping forward, and the next, his foot plunged straight through the surface with an audible crack, sending an icy splash up his leg. He let out a startled yelp as he toppled backward, landing with a resounding thud in a most undignified heap. The rest of us froze, our collective breath held as we realized the ice beneath us could betray us at any moment.

Doug, now soaked and visibly rattled, carefully assessed the situation. Slowly and deliberately, he eased his foot out of the freezing water, each movement deliberate as if the wrong twitch might trigger a catastrophic chain reaction. His soaked boot squelched loudly as he began crawling across the ice on all fours, inching toward what appeared to be a sturdier patch.

“Right,” declared Brian, breaking the tense silence with his signature deadpan tone. “Time to retreat before we become the stars of a National Geographic cautionary tale.”



Without hesitation, we began gingerly retracing our steps, each footfall a calculated gamble as we made our way back to solid ground.

After our cautious retreat from the ice, which had already declared its grudge against Doug, we scrambled back to the safety of the Gambaa-mobile. Gambaa, ever the stoic driver, fired up the engine, and we trundled off to our camping spot just outside the park.

The drive wasn't long, and soon we arrived at a picturesque field surrounded by rugged hills and under a vast, cloudless sky. It was a stunning location—peaceful, calm, and blissfully free of biting winds. Just a light breeze drifted through, the kind that whispered rather than howled.

As Gambaa parked the van with his usual precision, we leapt into action, pitching our tents. With no wind threatening to turn the canvas into airborne kites, the task felt almost civilized. Tent poles slid into place, stakes behaved themselves, and for once, it didn't feel like the desert was actively mocking us.

While we worked, Victor set up his trusty stove and began boiling water for tea, his movements smooth and practiced. The soft hiss of the flame and the promise of a hot drink made the scene feel downright homey.

Once our tents were standing tall and proud, we gathered around Victor's makeshift kitchen. Each of us cradled a steaming mug of tea, the warmth seeping into our fingers as we sipped and soaked in the serenity of the evening.

As we were settling into our evening routine, sipping tea and admiring the scenery, another UAZ crested the horizon like a

character entering stage left in a desert drama. There they were: The Ugly Tourists (T.U.T), in all their entitled glory.

We watched as they tumbled out of their van, immediately setting up an array of folding chairs in a neat semicircle, like they were about to host a garden party in the middle of the Gobi. Their guide and driver, meanwhile, scurried around like overworked waitstaff, pitching tents, unloading gear, and generally doing all the hard labor while T.U.T sat back and supervised with an air of royal indifference.

“Tossers,” Doug muttered, his disdain cutting through the peaceful desert evening.

Victor, ever the diplomat, wandered over to share the latest update. “Their guide is not happy,” he whispered with a knowing look. We nodded in solemn agreement, but honestly, we were far too content to dwell on T.U.T’s antics.

Dinner was a feast of fresh meat and vegetables that Victor had triumphantly procured from the Dalanzadgad market earlier. The sight and smell of real food sizzling away were enough to erase any lingering thoughts of T.U.T. Brian, true to form, rummaged in his seemingly bottomless bag and produced yet another bottle of Georgian wine. “How many of those do you have?” I asked in awe. Brian just grinned like a magician revealing his best trick.

We raised our mismatched cups—some tin, some plastic, one suspiciously resembling a cut-up water bottle—and toasted to another day of adventures in the Gobi.

As night fell, the stars came out in full, dazzling brilliance, scattering across the sky like someone had spilled a box of diamonds. With our bellies full, our bodies blissfully clean (for once), and a slight buzz

from the wine, we sank into the perfect contentment that only the Gobi can deliver.

“Best day yet,” Lin declared, breaking the comfortable silence. We all nodded, gazing up at the universe above us, silently agreeing that life didn’t get much better than this—chairs, tossers, and all.

## Chapter 7

### Goats, Singing Dunes, and Improvised Melodies

It was a morning so still in the Gobi Desert you could hear a camel chewing grass a mile away—or at least Victor claimed you could. My main focus, however, wasn't the serenity but finally getting my drone's panorama function to work. I had visions of sweeping cinematic shots of the desert, but instead, my initial attempts mostly featured my face looking perplexed as the drone beeped indignantly.

Victor, ever the stoic Mongolian guide, merely muttered, "The drone ran away last time." That was his way of warning me without outright forbidding me. Undeterred, I sent the drone skyward, hoping for better luck. In the background, Brian attempted to wrestle a folding chair back into its bag, which, judging by the language he was using, was putting up quite a fight.

After my victory over technology (and Brian's over the folding chair), we packed up our tents, threw our gear into the Gamba-Mobile, and headed to the Nature Museum. Now, this museum was less "Smithsonian" and more "Taxidermy Enthusiast's Basement."

Victor led us around, proudly pointing out a rare white two-humped camel, Argali sheep, and a wolf that looked suspiciously like Doug's Labrador back home. When we challenged Victor to find us a wolf in the wild, he just laughed, leaned on a nearby display case, and said, "No one sees wolves in Mongolia anymore. They're smart—they see you first."

Lin found a corner dedicated to desert snakes and decided to fake faint dramatically, much to the delight of a group of local kids touring the museum. Doug, meanwhile, managed to knock over a

display of desert plants while trying to photograph the stuffed camel. Victor looked at the chaos unfolding behind him, sighed, and shepherded us back to the Gambaa-mobile.

We set off again, cruising along a surprisingly smooth bitumen road as the Altai Mountains loomed in the distance. The landscape shifted from rolling plains to jagged peaks as the Gambaa-mobile heroically climbed to an altitude of 7,600 feet.

After 45 kilometers of bouncing along dusty tracks with Gambaa skillfully navigating the terrain, the van came to a stop in a narrow canyon where a small stream trickled through the rocks. Victor, ever the multitasking guide and chef, hopped out and immediately got to work. “Lunchtime, we will eat here,” he declared, heading to the back of the van to set up his well-practiced mobile kitchen.

Out came the familiar pot and portable burner, the tools of what we were now calling Victor’s Gobi Café. The menu? Predictable but comforting: the same potato soup we’d had for lunch every day, complete with its signature chunks of the mysterious sausage that seemed to be a staple of Gobi cuisine.

Variety, as we were quickly learning, was not the spice of life in the desert.

As the soup simmered, we lounged on the rocky terrain, marveling at Victor’s ability to conjure a hot meal in the middle of nowhere. Reliable, if nothing else, we thought, as we dug into another hearty bowl.

He handed us each a bowl of airag—fermented mare’s milk.

Brian, eager to impress Victor, downed his bowl in one gulp, only to immediately regret his life choices. His face twisted into something between horror and disbelief as he croaked, “Tastes like gym socks and despair.”

Victor laughed heartily for the first time since meeting us. “Airag makes you strong,” he said, pouring Brian another bowl.

As we finished our meal, a herd of goats ambled into the canyon. At first, they seemed harmless enough—until one particularly bold goat made a beeline for Lin’s backpack, which contained a stash of chocolate bars.

Lin tried to shoo it away, but the goat was not easily deterred. Within seconds, it had snagged a bar and was galloping off triumphantly, wrapper flapping in the wind. Doug gave chase, but the nimble goat outpaced him, disappearing into the distance as he stumbled to a halt, breathless and defeated.

Victor watched the scene unfold with mild amusement. “Goats always win,” he said sagely.

As we continued across the plain, the iconic Singing Dunes appeared on the horizon. Rising up to 300 meters high and stretching 100 kilometers long, the dunes hummed eerily in the wind.

Victor explained that the sound came from sand avalanches caused by the wind. “Like music,” he said. “But very loud music.”

Lin, always up for a laugh, leaned out of the Gambaa-mobile and started humming a tune that none of us could quite place. Doug, not one to miss an opportunity, joined in with a harmony that could generously be described as “creative.” Within moments, we had an

impromptu a cappella group belting out an entirely off-key rendition of “Desert Nights.”

Victor, our ever-patient guide, turned in his seat, raising an eyebrow but saying nothing. Gambaa, behind the wheel and blissfully unaware of the musical massacre happening in the back, drove on in stoic silence. Though he spoke no English, his occasional sideways glance suggested he didn’t need a translator to understand we were making fools of ourselves.

Even Brian, the self-proclaimed music critic of the group, couldn’t resist chiming in with his deep baritone—more theatrical than tuneful. “Is it karaoke night already?” he quipped, as Lin dissolved into laughter so hard she almost toppled back into her seat.

The Gambaa-mobile, with its rattles and groans, sounded almost like it was trying to harmonize, or perhaps protest. Victor, barely hiding a smirk, finally broke his silence. “Save some energy for the camels,” he said in his usual understated way, as though enduring our serenade was just another day in the Gobi Desert.

By late afternoon, we arrived at our camp for the night—a cluster of Gers owned by a nomadic family. These round, felt-covered tents were surprisingly cozy, with thick rugs on the floor and a small stove in the center.

Our hosts greeted us warmly as we stepped out of the Gambaa-mobile, the darkening sky already hinting at the drama to come. They ushered us into their Ger, where steaming cups of salty milk tea awaited. “Storm coming,” one of them said with a solemn nod, pointing to the heavy clouds rolling in across the horizon.

As we settled in, they brought out a tin containing their special "biscuits," which we had unfortunately encountered a few days ago. These hardy snacks, made from flour and animal fat, were the culinary equivalent of a dare. As they were placed before us, Victor's eyes locked onto ours with a silent, telepathic plea: Do not refuse. It's rude.

We exchanged uneasy glances, each of us hoping the other would take the first bite. Finally, Lin, ever the diplomat, broke off a piece and dipped it in her tea, giving us a nod of encouragement—or was it resignation? Quietly, we all followed suit, biting into what tasted like a cross between cardboard and raw courage.

Our hosts, clearly unfazed by the biscuits' reputation, sipped their tea and began to talk about the storm. Severe weather warnings had been issued, with predictions of snow, high winds, and the infamous Gobi dust storms. "Yikes," Brian muttered under his breath, earning a nudge from Doug, who whispered, "This is their normal."

"You may wish to think about your onward journey," our hosts suggested kindly, though the weight of their advice was clear. The storm wasn't just inconvenient; it could be dangerous.

Victor nodded in agreement. "It will not be easy if the storm comes fast," he added, glancing out the small window of the Ger as the wind picked up, rattling the wooden framework.

Despite the rising tension, Gambaa, our steadfast driver, appeared unbothered, calmly sipping his tea and staring into the middle distance as if braving Gobi storms was just another Tuesday for him. Meanwhile, Doug was trying—and failing—to discreetly pocket one of the biscuits for later, only to have it crumble into a powdery mess inside his jacket.



As the wind began to howl louder, our nomadic hosts reassured us that their Gers were built to withstand such storms, even as sand started creeping under the door. Still, the looming decision about whether to stay another night or press on weighed on all of us.

Victor broke the silence, his expression serious as he glanced between us and the darkening sky. “We need to decide,” he said. “Do we leave in the morning to try and get ahead of the storm, or stay the two nights as we originally planned?”

The weight of the decision hung in the air, as heavy as the clouds gathering outside. The camels stood tethered nearby, their calm, indifferent gazes a stark contrast to the tension inside the Ger. As the wind picked up, rattling the door, it was clear that either choice would come with its own risks. We exchanged glances, the reality of desert travel suddenly feeling very real.

We left the nomads’ Ger, our heads full of swirling thoughts about storms, camels, and biscuits, when Lin gave me a sharp nudge. “Look,” she whispered conspiratorially. “It’s The Ugly Tourists.”

I followed her gaze and sure enough, there they were—the group we’d now bumped into twice, pouring out of another UAZ with the enthusiasm of people attending mandatory tax seminars. Their arrival was heralded by their stressed-looking guide, who seemed like she’d aged a decade since our last encounter.

The group glanced in our direction—or, more accurately, through us, as if we were a mirage they were determined to pretend didn’t exist. Doug, ever the optimist, gave them a cheerful nod of acknowledgment. It was met with nothing but the cold, icy glare of indifference.

“What is wrong with these people?” Doug muttered, his good cheer slightly dented but not entirely deflated.

“They don’t look like they’ve smiled since they left home,” Brian quipped, his voice tinged with amusement. “Bet their guide’s already plotting her escape.”

We all chuckled, but honestly, it was hard not to feel a little sorry for the poor lady. She was shuffling after them with the defeated air of a woman whose spirit had been crushed by one too many complaints about the weather, the food, or perhaps even the color of the sand.

“I guess four scruffy backpackers from Australia are a bit beneath their refined standards,” I said with a shrug.

Doug raised an eyebrow. “Refined? They look like they’re on the world’s most miserable luxury tour.”

We all laughed and retreated into our Ger leaving The Ugly Tourists to their brooding. If they wanted to be rude, grumpy, and impervious to the joys of the Gobi, that was their business. We had more important things to focus on—like plotting our escape from the impending storm and wondering if we’d survive our upcoming camel trek.

Sure enough, the wind began to howl as we settled into our Ger. Brian attempted to close the door, but it fought back with all the vigor of a rabid kite. Victor eventually intervened, securing it with a practiced efficiency that left us in awe.

The camel herder arrived at the Ger, his weathered face breaking into a grin as he exchanged a few quick words with Victor. Turning to us, Victor announced with a smile, “The camels are ready for your trek.

Let's go!" His enthusiasm was infectious, and despite the ominous clouds gathering on the horizon, we couldn't resist the chance to ride these iconic beasts of the Gobi. Wrapping scarves tightly against the gusting wind, we stepped outside to find the camels waiting, their double humps looking both oddly inviting and slightly intimidating. It was time to embark on our desert adventure.

Brian took one look at the camels, wrinkled his nose, and declared, "Absolutely not. They smell like old socks." While the rest of us geared up for the ride, he opted to stay behind with Gambia, muttering something about avoiding unnecessary discomfort.

The camels, with their two impressive humps, provided a unique seating arrangement that felt less like a saddle and more like being firmly wedged into a camel-shaped recliner. Doug, ever the optimist, named his camel "Sandy" and immediately regretted it when Sandy began dribbling copiously on my jeans. I now had a damp, vaguely green stain that would haunt me for the rest of the trip—and possibly beyond.

Lin, however, was no passive participant. She decided to channel her inner adventurer and insisted on learning the Mongolian commands for the camels. This led to her yelling a mix of "Chuu!" and "Tsk-tsk!" like an overzealous drill sergeant. Her camel responded by stubbornly plopping down in the sand and refusing to budge, making Lin resort to bribery with a handful of dried grass.

Meanwhile, the skies darkened ominously, and the wind began to pick up, whipping the sand into small, stinging whirlwinds. Undeterred by the approaching storm, we pressed on, trekking across the desert on our wobbling, spitting steeds. The experience was less epic and more comedic, as Doug's camel continued its campaign of

defiance, trying to veer into every bush, rock, and mirage along the way.

Victor, riding effortlessly at the front like a seasoned cowboy, turned back to observe our ragtag procession. “You look... experienced,” he quipped, his deadpan delivery somehow cutting through the howling wind.

The camels, majestic as they were, seemed just as skeptical about our competence as Victor. Each groan, dribble, and misstep from the beasts added to the absurdity of the scene. And as the storm clouds gathered in earnest, we found ourselves laughing hysterically at the sheer ridiculousness of it all, despite the sand in our eyes and the steadily intensifying wind.

By the time we returned to camp, the wind was a full-blown howl, and Brian, smugly sipping tea with Gambaa, greeted us with a simple, “You smell worse than the camels.” He wasn’t wrong.

That night, as the wind roared around us, we marveled at the Ger’s resilience. The structure barely budged, even as the storm howled like a pack of wolves—or, as Lin put it, “like Brian when he drinks airag.”

Lin rummaged through her pack like a squirrel preparing for winter, triumphantly producing an assortment of nuts and crisps. She laid them out beside the stove in a spread that could rival a mini bar. “Snack time!” she declared, clearly unbothered by the ominous howls of wind outside. Meanwhile, Brian, ever the man of practicality, broke out the vodka with the solemnity of a doctor preparing medicine. “This will fortify us,” he announced, pouring generous shots as if we were about to face the end of days.

As we nibbled and sipped, Victor entered the Ger with the air of a man about to deliver news we wouldn't like. He gestured toward the flapping Ger door and said, "We need to discuss tomorrow." It seemed the storm wasn't just a bit of wind and sand; it was a full-blown Gobi special—severe, unpredictable, and not the kind of thing you wanted to be caught in.

"Should we stay an extra day or head out in the morning to dodge the worst of it?" Victor asked, his expression serious. After some deliberation, we decided to follow his advice: leave after breakfast and beat the storm. This decision, naturally, warranted another toast, because when in the Gobi, you face your problems with snacks and vodka.

As the wind outside started to gather steam, we sat around the stove in a companionable circle, munching on Lin's snacks and sipping Brian's vodka. The Ger creaked and groaned, but we felt snug in our little cocoon, reflecting on just how surreal—and undeniably cool—it was to be here in the middle of nowhere, on the brink of a desert storm. Life might've been a little precarious, but it was also unforgettable.

## Chapter 8

### Dust, Dinosaurs, and Showers

The morning dawned in the Gobi Desert with the kind of brilliance that makes you question if the storm from the night before was just a shared hallucination. Clear skies, crisp sunlight, and a wind so sharp it could sandblast your face greeted us as we emerged from our Ger. It seemed Mother Nature had spared us her wrath, rerouting her stormy tantrum elsewhere.

We would have loved to stay another day in this idyllic corner of the Gobi, soaking in its solitude and surreal beauty. But as much as the thought tempted us, we all agreed we had made the right decision to move on. It would give us more time to explore the wonders ahead and less time enduring the endless bouncing in the back of the van.

As we stretched under the sun like cats waking from a nap, our peace was punctured by the shrill commands of The Ugly Tourists, who were already up, planted outside their neighboring Ger like particularly unyielding cacti. They barked orders at their beleaguered guide, whose face was a masterpiece of suppressed emotion—equal parts terror, exhaustion, and the faint glimmer of a breakdown waiting to happen.

Doug, ever the ambassador of friendliness, decided that today was the day to win them over. He approached with his signature toothy grin and an overly chipper “Good morning!”

They responded with a grunt so indifferent it could have been mistaken for a camel clearing its throat. Doug, undeterred by the

frosty reception, pressed on: "Beautiful morning, eh? Got any plans for the day?"

Another grunt followed, accompanied by a dismissive wave. I didn't catch their response entirely, but it sounded like "Mind your own business." Meanwhile, I was too busy scrubbing yesterday's camel spit from my jeans to fully eavesdrop. Doug returned to our group muttering about manners and the downfall of civilization, while the rest of us tried not to laugh too openly.

"I really hope they're not at our next stop," Lin said, her tone as dry as the desert around us. "They bring the tone down faster than a lead balloon at a birthday party."

We all nodded in solemn agreement, like a jury delivering a unanimous verdict. Miserable behavior had a way of spreading, and we weren't about to let their doom-and-gloom act infect our Gobi adventure.

Victor, our ever-patient guide, summoned us for breakfast, rescuing us from the sour taste of our neighbors. Omelette, feta, tomatoes, mystery meat sausages (probably camel, but we didn't ask), and tea—fuel for the day ahead. The T.U.T. were forgotten as we demolished everything in record time, then helped Victor pack up before piling into the Gambaa-mobile.

As we waved farewell to our gracious nomadic hosts, Doug made an elaborate show of bidding goodbye to The Ugly Tourists, whose response was to pointedly stare at a patch of dirt. "Charming people," Doug remarked as we piled into the Gambaa-mobile, a vehicle that had all the charm and comfort of a poorly ventilated sauna.

Our next destination was the mighty Khongoryn Els Sand Dunes, a sprawling expanse of towering sand peaks 300 meters high and sprawling over 965 square that made you question the limits of nature's absurdity. At the base of the dunes, we stood in awe, marveling at the sheer size of these sandy behemoths. The wind had picked up, sending small whirlwinds around our feet, as if the desert was playfully reminding us who was boss.

"Right," Doug announced with the enthusiasm of a man about to climb Mount Everest. "I'm going up there. Who's coming?"

"You're mad," Lin declared, crossing her arms and firmly planting herself in the sand. "I'll stay here, thanks."

Brian and I nodded in agreement, siding firmly with the camp of common sense. Doug, however, was undeterred. He rummaged through the back of the van and triumphantly produced a piece of cardboard. "For the way down," he explained, holding it aloft like Excalibur.

Lin shook her head. "You're insane. Don't come crying to me when you break something."

Victor, looking more resigned than excited, sighed, "I'll come too." I suspected this was less about his love of sand dunes and more about his fear of losing Doug somewhere between the base and summit.

Off they went, Doug leading the charge and Victor trailing behind like a reluctant babysitter. The climb was less "majestic ascent" and more "two steps forward, three slides back," with Victor eventually giving up halfway. Doug, however, powered on, crawling the last stretch on hands and knees before finally reaching the summit.



From down below, we were clapping and cheering like fans at a rock concert as Doug stood atop the summit, arms aloft like he'd just conquered Everest. Then, with all the grace of a ballet dancer on roller skates, Doug plopped onto his cardboard chariot and launched himself down the dune, steering with his heels like a pro... or at least, trying to.

At one glorious moment, he went totally airborne, his sled hopping from one sand lump to another like a popcorn kernel in hot oil, and we could hear Doug whooping with the joy of a kid on Christmas morning.

Brian and I were hooting and clapping like we were at the season finale of our favorite show; meanwhile, Lin was over there mumbling about the incoming apocalypse.

Finally, with a grand finale that would make any stuntman proud, Doug crash-landed at the bottom, sending sand flying everywhere as if he'd just performed the world's messiest magic trick.

"That," he declared, spitting out sand like he was auditioning for "Pirates of the Caribbean," "was bloody brilliant!"

After Victor shook out what felt like the entire desert from his shoes, he reminded us of our tight schedule. "We need to keep moving. Long way to go," he said, with the urgency of a director on the last day of shooting. So, we bundled back into the van, which now looked like it had adopted half the Gobi Desert as its new interior decor.

And off we went, charging towards the ancient dinosaur grounds of Flaming Cliffs, like a band of explorers on a mission from Indiana Jones.

The journey to the Flaming Cliffs took us through an ever-changing landscape of flat plains and winding mountain passes. One mountain pass we navigated was particularly breathtaking, prompting Lin to lean dangerously far out of the window for photos. Doug, in a rare moment of caution, grabbed her belt and growled, "If you fall out, I'm not coming to get you."

On the other side of the pass, the landscape flattened out into what seemed like endless plains, stretching out like a giant's picnic blanket. A storm loomed ominously in the distance, with dark clouds and flashes of lightning that were like nature's own fireworks show, reminding us of its unpredictability. "Are we driving straight into that?" I asked, with a hint of nervousness in my voice.

Victor just shrugged. "Maybe, one never quite knows out here," he said, with the nonchalance of someone who's seen one too many weather forecasts go wrong.

Lunch was a tranquil affair by a babbling creek, where the grass was greener, the air fresher, and the goats looked suspiciously judgmental. After another round of tea and some more nameless sausages in a strange kind of flat bread we continued our journey to Bulgan, a small settlement and, more importantly, the site of a much-needed shower.

The public bathhouse was like stepping back into the times of the Flintstones. We waited in the dusty lounge, which probably hadn't seen a duster since the last century, while some brave soul chopped wood and fed it into the enormous, ancient boiler - which hissed and spat like it was auditioning for a role as an angry cat. When it finally decided to warm up, we were ushered into the cubicles. The water

was more of a lukewarm dribble, but after days of collecting dust like fine art, it felt like we'd won the spa lottery.

Brian came out, towelling his hair and grumbling about needing to do laps just to get wet. I gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "At least we don't smell like camels anymore."

"Thank goodness," he replied, "The smell was getting a bit much." I couldn't tell if he was pulling my leg or not, so I opted for the strategic silence route.

Next stop was the general store for supplies. Victor, ever the pragmatist, went for the essentials: canned goods and water, while the rest of us zeroed in on the real necessities - snacks, specifically the Russian chocolate ice cream we were all now hopelessly addicted to. Gambaa, on the other hand, emerged with a bottle of vodka tucked up his sleeve and a grin that screamed 'trouble'. I didn't inquire further; some mysteries are better left unsolved.

The sky had turned into a dark, moody canvas with lightning performing its electric dance in the near distance. The storm we'd been dodging like a cartoon character from an anvil finally caught up, and Victor's face was a picture of concern. Camping was now as appealing as sleeping in a lightning rod.

"Right," declared Victor, "Time for plan B," and he sprang into action, dialing numbers like he was in a speed dial contest. After several no's, he finally hit the jackpot. "They're not officially open yet," he said with a sigh of relief, "but it'll give us shelter."

We cheered, though our excitement was less about avoiding the storm and more about the promise of real beds.

The camp was, to put it mildly, one of those 'you have to see it to believe it' places. The restaurant was shaped like a tortoise, giving new meaning to "slow service," and the recreational room was an architectural marvel, or perhaps a marvel at how buildings could be shaped like dinosaurs. Imagine walking into a room where you could play ping pong under the gaze of a stegosaurus's tail or read a book in the shadow of a triceratops's horns. Scattered around the park were various dinosaur statues, standing guard like the world's most prehistoric security detail, and then, for some inexplicable reason, there was a statue of a rabbit, looking as out of place as a penguin at a barbecue.

The whole place had an air of having seen better days, with paint peeling off the buildings like old skin and the general ambiance of a venue that had long ago lost its battle with time. It was like walking into a theme park that had been forgotten by the world, or at least by anyone who cared about maintenance. This camp was a bit like your grandpa's old shed - full of character but clearly in need of some TLC.

"It's like Jurassic Park on a budget," Lin remarked.

Despite its quirks, the Ger we were assigned was warm and comfortable, with actual toilets nearby —a luxury worth it.

We ambled into the kitchen to find Victor at the counter, looking like a chef about to battle in the culinary equivalent of the Colosseum. Sleeves rolled up, with a look of determined concentration that could have been mistaken for someone trying to crack the final clue in an escape room. Before him lay the infamous hunk of meat, now liberated from its well-traveled cloth cocoon. This was the same piece of meat we'd bought three days prior at the black market,

which had since been bouncing around in the back of the van like it was on some sort of meat pilgrimage.

“Good Lord,” said Brian, his eyes wide as if he'd just seen a ghost, “Has that been in the back of the car all this time?”

“Apparently so,” replied Doug, raising his eyebrows in a way that suggested he was contemplating whether this meat was still on the right side of edible.

“This is how it's done,” Victor announced, totally ignoring their interchange with the confidence of a master chef who forgot his cookbook. He grabbed a knife and began hacking away at the meat, each chunk landing on the counter with a dramatic thud. “I'm making soup!” he declared, as the chunks went flying into a pot of boiling water.

But it didn't stop there. Victor rummaged through a bag and triumphantly produced a couple of dented tins of vegetables—labels barely clinging on after days of rolling around with us. “Fresh is overrated,” he said, popping them open with a rusty can opener that looked older than the steppe itself. Without ceremony, he dumped the contents—corn, peas, and something that might have been beans—straight into the pot.

“No spices, no fuss. This is the Mongolian way,” he said, stirring the concoction like he was performing ancient culinary alchemy. The pot bubbled away, producing an aroma that was... well, not exactly inviting, but undeniably soup-like.

“How long does this take?” I asked hesitantly

Victor grinned. "Not long. The flavors just need to... get to know each other."

We exchanged dubious glances as the pot continued its questionable transformation.

"I hope that meats well cooked" muttered Brian " It's been in the back of the car for days"

Lin just nodded, looking visibly pale.

The soup, to everyone's surprise, was delicious—if you ignored the questionable origins of the meat.

That evening, we settled down to enjoy what was supposed to be a relaxing time, though the beer was warm enough to have probably been sunbathing all day. "He must think we are Brits," grumbled Doug to no one in particular, in reference to the English affection for their beer drunk at room temperature. We were in the company of the camp owner, a man whose stories seemed to stretch as wide as the Gobi Desert itself. His tales were like the landscape - vast, wild, and full of surprises. We talked about his business, which had seen better days but was rich in character, much like the beer. The conversation shifted to life in Mongolia, which he painted with broad strokes of nomadic freedom and harsh winters.

Then, the subject veered into the realm of legend when he started recounting his encounter with a bear. After a few sips of that lukewarm brew, his tale of wrestling a bear became more animated, his arms flailing to mimic the struggle, his voice booming with the echo of the bear's roar - or so he claimed after the beers had done their work. We weren't sure if we were hearing about a real event or

the beer-fueled fantasy of a man who loved his stories almost as much as he loved his warm beer.

This night, sitting around with the warmth of the fire and the slightly less welcome warmth of the beer, felt like the perfect capstone to a day that had been filled with adventure, new experiences, and the kind of camaraderie that only comes from shared misadventures. It was a moment where the lines between fact and fiction blurred, but the laughter and the bonds formed were undeniably real.

As the storm raged outside, we huddled in our Ger, laughing and recounting the day's adventures. Doug's sand dune escapade became the highlight, retold with increasingly exaggerated details until it resembled a scene from an action movie.

As I lay in bed that night, listening to the wind howl outside, I couldn't help but smile. The Gobi had a way of testing your limits and rewarding you with stories you'd never forget. Tomorrow promised more surprises, but for now, I was content—sandy, tired, and thoroughly amused by the madness of it all.

## Chapter 9

### The Gobi's Unpredictable Charm

We awoke to a morning so breathtakingly clear and cold that it felt like the Gobi Desert had taken extra care with its makeup for the day. The only problem? We were moving at a pace that could generously be described as “sloth-like,” thanks to a late night with a bit too much beer. Victor, our ever-patient guide and now exasperated taskmaster, stood outside the Ger with his arms crossed, tapping his foot like a disappointed parent.

“Come on!” Victor barked. “We have a long way to go today.”

“Okay, okay,” muttered Brian, rummaging in his bag with a look of desperation. “I need coffee and paracetamol before I can do anything. My head feels like a camel danced on it.”

Doug hobbled up, muttering darkly about sand dunes and rocks. “I think I hit that last bump too hard. My foot’s sore this morning.”

Lin, always the pragmatist, gave him an unmistakable I told you so look but said nothing. Instead, she rolled her eyes and shook her head in mock despair.

“Paracetamol?” offered Brian, holding out a blister pack that looked like it had been through the same rigorous journey as we had.

Doug grabbed it gratefully, popping two pills and chasing them down with a swig of strong, black coffee. With aches soothed and caffeine flowing, we managed to scarf down our usual breakfast of omelette, feta, tomato, and the ubiquitous mystery sausage—possibly Gobi’s answer to Spam.



Finally, we packed up the van and hit the road, heading toward the Flaming Cliffs. As we settled in, Lin, who had read up on our destination, gave us a history lesson on the way. She explained how the Flaming Cliffs, or Bayanzag, were not just visually stunning but also a significant site for paleontology. "In the 1920s," she began, "Roy Chapman Andrews, who inspired the character of Indiana Jones, made some of his most famous discoveries here. He unearthed the first known dinosaur eggs, along with fossils of Velociraptors and Protoceratops, changing our understanding of prehistoric life."

As the scenery shifted to green plains framed by distant snow-capped mountains, the Gobi seemed to soften, offering a different kind of beauty. The transition from the stark desert to this more verdant landscape was almost poetic, a reminder of the diverse ecosystems within this vast region.

The Flaming Cliffs themselves are world-famous for their stunning red sandstone formations, which under the right light, appear to glow with an internal fire, hence the name. These cliffs are not only a marvel of natural beauty but also a treasure trove for paleontologists. The red sandstone has preserved a rich record of life from the Late Cretaceous period, making Bayanzag one of the most important sites for the study of dinosaurs. The discovery of dinosaur eggs here was a pivotal moment in paleontology, providing direct evidence of how dinosaurs reproduced and cared for their young. This site continues to yield new fossils, offering further insights into the ancient world that once thrived beneath these very cliffs.

When we arrived, the cliffs were every bit as awe-inspiring as their reputation suggested. The fiery reds of the sandstone, the vast desert stretching below, and the crisp air all combined to create a scene straight out of a prehistoric dream.

“Stunning,” I breathed.

“Just think,” Brian added, “Dinosaurs roamed down there 80 million years ago.”

“Yeah, and some of them are still wandering around,” Lin added, casting a sly look at Doug, who was still hobbling along like a geriatric Velociraptor.

I nodded vaguely, too busy wrestling my drone into the air to really listen. Victor shot me a skeptical glance. “If that thing flies off again, we’re not chasing it,” he warned.

“It’ll be fine,” I said with more confidence than I felt. My drone seemed to have a mind of its own, or perhaps I was just terrible at flying it—both were equally plausible.

The drone initially behaved, soaring over the cliffs and capturing breathtaking footage. But just as I began to bask in my own competence, it decided to channel its inner rebellious pterosaur. It swooped erratically, prompting Gambaa, to shout something in rapid Mongolian.

Victor translated with a smirk, “He says it’s the ghost of a Velociraptor!”

As the drone veered toward a rocky outcrop, Brian sidled up to me. “You’ve got no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

“Not a clue,” I admitted as the drone landed itself precariously on a jagged ledge.

Retrieving it required Brian to scramble up the rocks in a manner he later described as “daring paleontology.”

“You’re welcome,” he declared, handing me the drone with a dramatic bow.

Meanwhile, Lin and Doug had found their own adventure, sifting through the red dirt like determined treasure hunters. When Doug triumphantly held up a rock, claiming it was a fossil, Lin’s excitement was palpable.

Enter Gambaa, the resident expert on all things prehistoric. He examined the find with the gravity of a seasoned paleontologist, muttering in Mongolian. Victor translated with a chuckle, “He says this is... camel dung.”

Doug’s face fell. “What?!”

“Petrified camel dung,” Victor clarified, barely suppressing his laughter.

Lin burst out laughing. “So, we’ve been digging for ancient poop?”

“Congratulations,” Victor said, “you’ve just invented a new field—Dungology!”

Doug stared at the “fossil” with mock reverence. “Well, at least it’s a first for my resume.”

As the day wore on, Victor called us back to the van. “We still have a long way to go and need to find a good place to camp tonight,” he said, his tone suggesting no room for argument.

We exchanged skeptical looks. The plan—or lack thereof—seemed delightfully vague, but that was part of the adventure.

Lin shrugged. “Who knows where we’ll end up this time?”

"Who knows? But what an adventure we're on!" exclaimed Doug, striking a pose like he'd just landed the lead role in an action movie. With the flair of someone who absolutely wasn't responsible for driving, he hopped into the Gambaa-mobile and plonked himself down in his seat, ready for the day's escapades.

“Onward” he cried

Gambaa, the actual hero behind the wheel, gave a knowing nod and started the engine, while the rest of us followed Doug's lead and made ourselves comfortable in the van. We settled into our seats ready for another day on the road.

As we rolled away, I couldn't help but stare out the window, awestruck by the view. Millennia-old cliffs towered in the distance, green pastures stretched endlessly, dotted with nomad Gers like scattered storybook houses, and snow capped mountains loomed majestically on the horizon. Mongolia, you show-off, I thought. You're the ridiculously photogenic friend of countries.

Our next sacred stop on the Mongolian Adventure was the Holy Mountain. Not just any mountain, mind you, but a mountain so holy you couldn't even whisper its name unless you fancied a lifetime of bad luck and angry glares from the locals. Mongolian legend said so, and we weren't about to test it. After all, we'd barely survived Flaming Cliffs with our dignity intact.

Between us and this mystical pile of rocks lay 400 kilometers of Gobi wilderness. Given our blistering average speed of 200 km a day—thank you, Gambaa-mobile—we decided to break the journey in half and camp somewhere halfway. “Somewhere” being the operative word. The plan was loose. The destination looser. A bit like Gambaa’s steering.

As we bounced along the rutted tracks, Doug launched into a full-throated rendition of “On the Road Again.” Naturally, we joined in, with Gambaa drumming on the steering wheel and Victor hammering out some enthusiastic dashboard percussion. It was the kind of impromptu jam session that would make even the most hardened music critic weep—or cringe.

One by one, though, the enthusiasm waned. First Victor, then Gambaa, then me. By the time Doug reached verse three, it was a solo act, and a bad one at that. Mercifully, he gave up, leaving us in the warm embrace of silence, the engine hum, and the ever-present sound of dust invading every crevice of our vehicle.

Brian slapped on his headphones, Lin scribbled furiously in her journal—probably documenting our descent into insanity—and Doug and I stared blankly out the windows at the endless beige plains. A tumbleweed might’ve been a welcome.

Eventually, salvation appeared in the form of a tiny, dusty settlement. We rolled in desperate for water, fuel, and a vague sense of civilization. Stretching our legs, we wandered toward what appeared to be the local general store, though “general” was generous.

These Gobi outposts are the stuff of cinematic clichés. Frontier towns built for nomads, complete with people lounging in doorways like extras waiting for their cue in a spaghetti western.

“Lordy,” Doug exclaimed, squinting dramatically. “I feel like I’m in a Wild West movie. All we need is a couple of cowboys and a shootout at the O.K. Corral.”

“And a saloon,” quipped Brian, clearly angling for a bar stool.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Victor muttered. “It can get pretty rough out here. Fights aren’t exactly unheard of.”

Lin and I exchanged a look, silently agreeing that sticking close to the store (or hiding under a display shelf) seemed wise. The store itself was less “grocery” and more “what on earth is that?” Shelves buckled under the weight of everything from animal feed to mysterious tinned goods, many of which bore labels that screamed “eat me if you dare.”

But fear not—there were essentials. Chocolate. Ice cream. Vodka. The holy trinity of Gobi road trip survival. We loaded up on necessities (and luxuries) before scurrying back to the Goomba-mobile, heads swiveling like meerkats on high alert. The last thing we needed was a brawl breaking out over a misinterpreted stare.

Gambaa revved the van like a man escaping a heist, and we careened out of the parking lot in a plume of dust.

Next on our itinerary: the local water filling station. It was less a “station” and more a shed with some pipes sticking out at odd angles. Pulling in, we immediately noticed two shady characters fiddling

with the plumbing. They had tools. They had purpose. They had trouble written all over them.

Victor and Gambaa exchanged a knowing look before muttering rapid-fire Mongolian at each other. Then, as if auditioning for an action movie, they both leapt out of the van.

“Stay here,” Victor barked, and we obeyed with the enthusiasm of people who wanted to live.

“Think they’re stealing water?” I whispered to Lin.

“Looks like it,” she said, eyes glued to the scene.

“Water rustlers!” Doug declared with the glee of someone narrating their own adventure. “We’re in the Wild West for real!”

“This is technically the East,” Lin corrected, her inner geography teacher emerging even in the face of crime.

“Yes, yes,” Doug waved her off, “but you know what I mean. It’s totally wild out here.” Then, ignoring all common sense, he flung open the van door and strolled toward the drama.

“Mad,” muttered Lin. “Completely mad.”

The rest of us stayed in the van, feasting on chocolate ice cream and silently congratulating ourselves on our survival instincts. Doug, meanwhile, leaned casually against the shed like he was supervising the operation.

After a few minutes, he sauntered back. “Yep,” he confirmed. “Water rustlers.”

As if on cue, the pipe they'd been tampering with erupted in a geyser of water, prompting cheers from the would-be bandits.

Victor and Gambaa returned, having successfully filled our jerry cans without getting involved in the plumbing chaos. We loaded up, sped off, and returned to the vast nothingness of the plains, leaving the water rustlers to their wet and likely illegal endeavors.

Back on the road, the Gambaa-mobile resumed its trademark performance of bumps, rattles, and the occasional ominous squeal that left us all wondering if it might finally disintegrate like a poorly constructed Lego model. Outside, the endless Gobi plains stretched out like a featureless beige carpet, and inside, the mood was equally thrilling. The Holy Mountain remained an unreachable dream on the horizon, and before we could get anywhere near it, we still needed to figure out where to camp for the night.

Hours passed with the monotony only an endless car journey through the Gobi can provide. Doug, bless his relentless optimism, attempted another round of singalongs. His choice of "Bohemian Rhapsody" might have been inspiring if not for our collective groans and synchronized glares. Brian, ever the peacekeeper, offered us his headphones in what can only be described as a self-sacrificial act of bravery. Lin busied herself in the back, sketching charmingly terrible stick-figure renditions of water rustlers in her journal. Meanwhile, I stared out at the horizon, half-expecting a tumbleweed to roll by and cap off the Wild West theme.

At some point, Gambaa veered off the vague dirt path we'd been rattling along. "We're looking for somewhere to camp," Victor announced with all the gravitas of a man who just realized he'd be herding cats into tents for the night. "Hopefully near a nomad camp,"



he added. “For safety.” A comforting thought, though I wasn’t sure whether he meant safety from wildlife, the elements, or ourselves.

For the next two hours, we careened across the plains like a group of lost Mad Max extras, searching for a nomad camp that wouldn’t turn us away. The first family we approached politely declined, citing “too many animals” as the reason. Trampling in the night was apparently a legitimate concern. The second camp’s occupants were just as friendly but equally unhelpful, gesturing vaguely at the horizon as if to say, “Try over there, where the nothing continues.”

By the time the third camp rejected us, the sun was sinking lower, the temperature dropping faster than our morale. Lin, who had been uncharacteristically quiet in the back, suddenly snapped.

“Enough!” she declared, her eyes wide and slightly crazed. The van collectively turned to face her, startled. “We need to just camp,” she continued, her tone teetering on the edge of hysteria.

Doug and Brian, sensing a mutiny on the rise, quickly nodded in agreement.

“She’s right,” I chimed in. “Let’s just pitch the tents near the van. We’ll be fine.”

Victor sighed, clearly unimpressed with our laissez-faire approach to survival. But with no better options in sight, he reluctantly agreed. Twenty minutes later, as the last rays of sunlight faded into the freezing void, we parked on what could only be described as the flattest, windiest patch of desolation the Gobi had to offer.

As we piled out of the van, the icy wind greeted us with a slap to the face. Tents were pitched at lightning speed, each of us silently

praying they wouldn't blow away before we could crawl inside. Gambaa, ever resourceful, wandered off to collect horse manure for a fire, while Victor began setting up his mobile kitchen with the efficiency of a man who'd done this a thousand times—probably under protest.

Out came the battered pot and, inevitably, the same suspicious lump of meat that had been marinating in the Gambaa-mobile's questionable climate control system for four days. Great chunks were hacked off and tossed into the pot with potatoes, a ritual we'd witnessed so many times it felt almost ceremonial.

Lin, eyeing the meat with a mixture of horror and resignation, muttered to no one in particular, "And I worry about driving home from the supermarket with meat on a hot day."

Meanwhile, Doug and Brian decided that no Gobi camping experience was complete without a touch of domesticity and set up the table and chairs. And then, because the Gobi wasn't surreal enough, Victor connected his phone to a speaker and blasted Kylie Minogue's *The Locomotion* across the plains.

Without warning, Doug sprang to life, shimmying across the desert in what could generously be described as an interpretive dance. "Come on!" he shouted, gesturing wildly.

Caught up in the absurdity of the moment, I joined him, followed by Brian and even Lin, who abandoned her usual reserve to form a makeshift *Locomotion* conga line. We stomped, swayed, and flailed our way across the barren landscape, laughing so hard we could barely breathe.

As the song ended, we collapsed into our camp chairs, a giggling, windblown mess. “Not many people can say they’ve done the Locomotion in the Gobi Desert,” Doug declared, his chest puffed with pride.

We nodded in agreement, still catching our breath.

Victor, ever the practical one, chose this moment to plop the steaming pot of meat-and-potato soup onto the table. Whatever skepticism we’d harbored about the questionable protein vanished as we devoured bowl after bowl, the warmth of the meal battling the bitter cold. Nearby, the horse manure fire crackled cheerfully, its pungent aroma a small price to pay for heat.

As we ate, the stars began to emerge, dotting the inky sky in a display so vivid it almost made up for the day’s chaos. Almost.

After dinner, we all pitched in to help Victor clean up, moving with the kind of easy teamwork that comes from spending days bumping along the Gobi’s rugged tracks together. The water was icy enough to make our fingers sting, but we didn’t mind too much—there was something comforting about finishing the day’s tasks as a group. The fire, though modest and fueled by horse manure, crackled cheerfully nearby, its glow defying the encroaching chill of the night.

Doug, ever the ringleader of morale, pulled out a bottle of vodka and began pouring shots into our assorted collection of cups. “Strictly medicinal,” he proclaimed with a wink, holding his cup aloft. We clinked them together, laughing at the absurdity of our situation—a group of mismatched adventurers huddled around a manure-fueled fire, toasting the freezing night in the middle of nowhere.

The first sip burned its way down, leaving a pleasant warmth in its wake that spread through my chest and fingers. For a few blissful moments, it was enough to chase away the chill. We sipped and savored the quiet companionship, watching the fire dance and listening to the wind whistle through the vast, empty plains. There was a simple beauty in the night—one of those rare, unplanned moments that felt like it belonged in a movie montage.

Eventually, the cold began to creep back in, and we all knew it was time to surrender to our tents. Armed with every piece of clothing I owned, I climbed into my sleeping bag, which felt like slipping into a frosty cocoon. The wind rattled the tent walls, but I felt oddly content. Layer by layer, the warmth began to build. The fabric of my sleeping bag softened, and the icy edges of the night seemed to retreat.

Somewhere in the distance, a pack of animals howled, a reminder of why Victor had wanted to camp near a nomad camp in the first place. As I nestled deeper into the pile of blankets, I realized there was a certain charm to it all—the kind of experience you’d never choose but would remember forever. The wind outside became a lullaby, and I felt the day’s adventures settle in my mind like warm embers. Somewhere between shivering and sighing, I drifted off to sleep, grateful for the strange, wonderful unpredictability of the Gobi Desert.

## Chapter 10

### The Frozen Symphony of the Gobi

We woke the next morning to a symphony of howling winds and temperatures that could have frozen a penguin's bottom. None of us had slept a wink—between the relentless cold and the tent-flapping chaos, we all looked like weary adventurers straight out of a survival documentary.

Gathering in a bleary-eyed huddle, Lin broke the silence. “Gosh, what a night! I thought my tent was going to take off, and I’d wake up halfway to China.”

“Terrible,” agreed Brian, shivering. “Took me an hour just to defrost.”

We all stood there, staring blankly at the desolate expanse, contemplating the absurdity of voluntarily camping in a wind tunnel masquerading as the Gobi Desert. Finally, I broke the silence. “Right,” I said with authority, “time to find a bathroom rock.”

This sparked unanimous agreement, and we stumbled off like sleep-deprived wanderers, scouring the barren terrain for rocks to shield our dignity. By day nine of this trip, privacy was a distant memory, and we had all embraced the art of open-air bathroom breaks. Mission accomplished, we reconvened at the van, where Victor had brewed up some life-saving coffee.

Clutching my steaming mug like a lifeline, I muttered, “Just what I needed.”

“Mmm,” Brian agreed, wrapping his hands tightly around the cup, seeking its warmth against the biting cold.

Meanwhile, Victor wrestled valiantly with the gas stove, trying to cook breakfast while the wind played a relentless game of "blow out the flame." We, on the other hand, embarked on the next comedy of errors: packing up our tents.

What should have been a straightforward task quickly escalated into a scene worthy of Looney Tunes. Tents transformed into rogue kites, jerking us around like characters in a poorly rehearsed slapstick routine.

Brian found himself grappling with our tent, which inflated like a parachute and threatened to launch him into the Mongolian stratosphere. “I’m not ready to paraglide!” he yelled, clutching the poles for dear life.

Suddenly, Doug’s panicked voice cut through the wind. “It’s escaped!” he bellowed, pointing to his and Lin’s tent, now hurtling across the plain like a deranged tumbleweed. Doug bolted after it, his strides fueled by desperation. Just as the tent seemed poised to join the wild goats on their morning commute, Gambaa —the quiet hero of our crew—materialized out of nowhere.

With the precision of an Olympic wrestler, he tackled the rogue tent, rolled it into submission, and handed it back to Doug with a triumphant grin. Disaster averted, we finished packing up just as Victor announced breakfast was ready.

The wind howled its disapproval, so we retreated to the sanctuary of the Gambaa-mobile to eat. Breakfast was a swift, silent affair; no one lingered over their scrambled eggs in this frozen wasteland. Fueled

and somewhat thawed, we hit the road, leaving this inhospitable patch of the Gobi far behind.

We continued our journey north, the barren landscape whizzing past like an endless loop of a particularly dull screensaver. After about an hour, Gambaa pulled the Gambaa-mobile into yet another desert settlement that looked uncannily like yesterday's pit stop.

"This place looks exactly like the last one," Brian said, squinting suspiciously at the scattering of low, dusty buildings. "Are we sure we're not just going in circles?"

Victor chuckled, clearly amused by our growing paranoia. "No, no, I promise this is a new town. It's going to be a long time before we see another, so we should stock up. Plus," he added with the enthusiasm of a man who knew how to sell a stop, "there's a lovely monastery being rebuilt here that's well worth visiting."

With that, we rolled out of the van and set off to tick off the essentials. At the general store, we gathered enough food and water to survive what felt like the next ice age. At the petrol station, we topped up the Gambaa-mobile's tank, and at the water station, we filled our jerry cans without incident. Doug kept glancing around like he was expecting another run-in with rogue water rustlers, but alas, today's water-filling attendant was an efficient, no-nonsense sort. Doug looked visibly disappointed.

Supplies secured, Gambaa hit the gas and sped off, only to screech to a halt moments later in a dusty car park next to the monastery. The wind greeted us with its usual icy ferocity as we climbed out, pulling jackets tighter and hats lower, bracing ourselves against the gale as we trudged towards the ancient structure.

As we explored, Victor began recounting the grim history of Mongolia during the 1930s.

“Mongolia became a Soviet satellite state after the 1921 revolution,” he explained, his voice rising above the wind. “Under Soviet influence, and the leadership of Khorloogiin Choibalsan, a brutal campaign began in the late 1930s to destroy Buddhism and assert communist dominance. Over 700 monasteries were razed, and 18,000 monks were executed. These monasteries weren’t just religious centers—they were hubs of culture, education, and medicine. Their destruction wiped out centuries of knowledge and heritage, much of it looted and sent to museums in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Only in recent years, after the fall of the Soviet Union, has Mongolia started rebuilding what was lost, like this monastery here.”

For once, none of us had anything to say. We stood in the howling wind, each of us lost in our own thoughts. It was impossible not to feel the weight of the history Victor had shared, the sheer scale of human cruelty and cultural devastation.

Eventually, we shuffled back to the van, heads bowed, the usual banter replaced by silence. Lin pulled out her journal, scribbling furiously, no doubt capturing the weight of what we’d just seen and heard. The rest of us stared out the window, the desert blurring past, as we sat with the heaviness of it all.

After what felt like an eternity of bumping along the flat, dusky plains, we stopped for lunch. The landscape stretched out around us like some cruel joke—a completely barren expanse, devoid of vegetation, hills, or even a shadow to break the monotony.



While Victor prepared lunch with his usual efficiency, Gambaa took it upon himself to entertain us. He collected a handful of rabbit droppings—yes, rabbit poo—and indicated through charades he was going to teach us how to play Mongolian-style jacks. Brian and Doug were immediately hooked, tossing poo into the air and whooping loudly every time they managed to catch more than one "jack" on the backs of their hands. Lin and I sat back, watching the spectacle unfold with a mix of amusement and horror. Call me picky, but I wasn't about to toss animal feces into the air for fun.

Lunch was quick and functional. We were all eager to get back on the road, spurred by the promise of reaching the elusive Holy Mountain after two grueling days of endless flatness.

As the hours passed, the landscape began to change. Slowly at first—hints of green here, a rise in the terrain there—and then, suddenly, hills surrounded us. A large, glimmering lake appeared, and the grass grew lush. Nomadic settlements dotted the scene, their Gers standing proudly amid the improved scenery.

"There's more rain here," Victor explained. "Better grazing for animals. The nomads here are more prosperous."

It was obvious. Compared to the southern Gobi, these people looked positively well-to-do.

Then, as we rounded a hill, the Holy Mountain appeared, rising majestically from the plains like a solitary sentinel. Victor spoke its name with reverence, and Gambaa bowed his head. We all sat quietly in the van, letting them have their moment.

After a few minutes, Victor clapped his hands, breaking the silence. "Okay!" he announced. "Let's set up camp!"

Excited to finally stop for the day, we jumped into action. The lack of wind was a luxury, and we quickly set up our tents. Victor handed out tea, and we sank into our camp chairs, savoring the peaceful view. Below us, in the valley, a group of nomads wrangled goats near their stockyards. Their Gers, nestled in the hills, completed the postcard-perfect scene.

Then, as if on cue, a nomad pulled up on a motorbike and started chatting with Victor and Gambaa. Doug, ever the curious one, wandered over, joining their conversation with enthusiastic nods that screamed, I have no idea what you're saying, but I'm here for it.

The nomad gestured to his bike, and Doug, without hesitation, climbed on the back.

"Is he... getting on?" Lin asked, her voice equal parts disbelief and resignation.

"Looks like it," Brian replied, as the bike zoomed off up the valley.

"Mad," Lin muttered.

"Completely bonkers," I added.

From our vantage point, we watched as Doug and his newfound best friend embarked on their whirlwind tour of the valley. First, they stopped at a Ger, where Doug awkwardly ducked through the low doorway and was greeted by a smiling family. We could only imagine the exchange inside, likely involving a lot of head nodding and exaggerated hand gestures from Doug, trying to bridge the language gap. After a while, they reappeared and sped off to the stockyards. Here, the nomad gestured wildly at the animals, while

Doug nodded earnestly, adopting the air of a seasoned goat herder taking in vital trade secrets.

"Looks like he's getting a crash course in goat management," Brian quipped. "Shame he doesn't speak Mongolian. Or goat."

We watched the spectacle, trying to stifle our laughter as Doug enthusiastically mimicked the nomad's gestures. Then, the motorbike climbed a hill, stopping dramatically at the crest. The two stood silhouetted against the sky, the nomad pointing animatedly at the landscape as if unveiling the secrets of the universe, while Doug nodded along like an eager student taking mental notes.

When he finally returned, Doug dismounted with a flourish, his grin stretching from ear to ear. "Absolutely brilliant!" he declared, collapsing into his chair. "Not a clue what he was saying, but the view up there was incredible!"

"Bonkers," Lin muttered again.

"Completely," I agreed, standing up to help Victor prepare dinner, Brain and Lin followed, leaving Doug to bask in the glory of his imaginary nomadic apprenticeship.

As we approached Victor's makeshift kitchen, he was unwrapping a familiar hunk of meat.

"Is that...?" Brian asked, staring at it with suspicion.

"Yes," Lin said grimly. "The same meat we bought five days ago at that shady market."

Victor calmly sliced the last usable bits from the bone, tossing them into his bubbling pot. The bone, however, he handed to Gambaa, who took it with a gleam in his eye and marched off toward the nomad camp.

“What’s he doing with that?” I asked.

“Giving it to the dogs?” Brian guessed.

“Not a chance,” Victor replied. “That’s his treat. He’ll have the nomads boil it for him, and he’ll feast.”

Sure enough, Gambaa returned about half an hour later, chauffeured by a nomad on a motorbike and holding a steaming pot. He sat down at the table and devoured the bone with gusto, sucking the marrow out as we watched, equal parts fascinated and horrified.

Victor called us over for dinner, breaking our trance as we watched Gambaa polish off his bone feast with a level of enthusiasm that was equal parts impressive and unsettling. He looked utterly content, and his satisfaction seemed contagious as we gathered around the camp table. The meal was simple—meat and potatoes cooked to what could generously be described as "perfection" by Victor. Perhaps we were just getting used to the unique flavor profile of meat that had spent several days fermenting in the back of a hot van. Somehow, it was delicious—or at least, we convinced ourselves it was.

As the last rays of sunlight began to fade, we carried our camp chairs closer together. Above us, the Holy Mountain stood solemnly, its silhouette framed by a sky painted in hues of gold, crimson, and violet. The air was cool and still, a rare moment of peace after the relentless wind and dust.

Despite the cold nights, the endless bumpy roads, and hours spent staring at barren, featureless plains, I realized in that quiet moment that every challenge had been worth it. This place, with its raw beauty and peculiar charm, was more than a destination—it was an adventure. And I wouldn't have traded it for anything.

## Chapter 11

### The Hunt for the Horse: The Gobi Finale

We woke to yet another dazzling Gobi morning, the kind that makes you wonder if the desert has been secretly staging itself for a postcard. The Holy Mountain shimmered in the distance, its rugged silhouette softened by the golden glow of the early sun, while a herd of goats grazed lazily nearby, oblivious to our impending departure. Over breakfast, we shared knowing glances—today marked the final full day of this wild, dusty, and often absurd adventure we’d embarked upon.

It was our tenth day of exploration, and optimism filled the air. “Today’s the day we find the Takhi,” Doug announced with the enthusiasm of someone who had clearly forgotten the cautious realities of wildlife spotting. Lin, sipping her tea, raised an eyebrow. “If by ‘find the Takhi’ you mean ‘get baked under the relentless sun and navigate endless rocky trails,’ then yes, today is definitely the day.”

Victor chuckled and shook his head. “Don’t get too excited. The Takhi are incredibly shy. It’s very rare to catch sight of them.”

So far, our journey had been anything but fruitless. We’d marveled at the Gobi’s diverse creatures—only the elusive wolves had managed to stay out of sight. The Takhi, however, was the last to check off our list, the crown jewel of this adventure.

Gambaa, our driver, stood beside the Goomba-mobile, sipping tea and watching a local nomad paint his goats’ horns.

“What’s he doing?” Brian asked, pointing.

Victor, our ever-patient translator, didn't even look up from his coffee. "Identification. It's so they know which goats are theirs."

"Couldn't they just name them?" Lin asked, amused. "Seems easier than lugging around a paintbrush."

Brian, always ready to contribute to a conversation he didn't understand, leaned in. "What about ear tags? Cows have those."

Victor sighed and relayed the question to Gambaa, who responded with a snort. After a rapid exchange in Mongolian, Victor smirked. "He says, 'Tags are for tourists, not goats.'"

Satisfied that we had officially been outwitted by a goat herder, we packed up and began our journey northeast toward Hustai National Park, home of the elusive Takhi.

The Gobi Desert faded behind us, giving way to the stony plains of the steppes. It was a desolate landscape, dotted only by the occasional sad shrub and what I generously called "mystery bushes." Gambaa hummed along to the van's engine while Victor explained the drought's impact.

"The area's overgrazed," he said. "The government rewards herders with larger herds, but goats and sheep eat everything. The drought just makes it worse."

The terrain became harsher, and distant mountains teased us like mirages on the horizon. By lunchtime, we'd reached a rare oasis—trees! Actual, honest-to-goodness trees! "Do you think we're hallucinating?" Doug asked as Lin poked a trunk to confirm its existence. We set up lunch by a river, a sight as rare as Doug willingly eating vegetables.

“This is amazing,” Lin said, her voice almost reverent. “Look at the trees. It’s like finding water in a desert.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s literally what we’ve found, Lin. A river in the desert.”

Ignoring me, Lin wandered toward the trees while Doug struck out in search of a suitable “toilet rock.” Brian, meanwhile, had discovered a marmot colony and was furiously snapping photos.

“They’re so cute!” he exclaimed.

Doug returned, looking less enthusiastic. “You do know they’re plague carriers, right?”

Lin, ever the pragmatist, chimed in. “It’s their fleas, actually. But sure, let’s get cozy with the plague marmots.”. “Big difference.” Doug shrugged. “If I get the plague, I’ll be sure to tell the doctor to blame the fleas and not the marmots. That’ll fix everything.”

Post-lunch, the journey continued, and the roads deteriorated rapidly. Somewhere between pothole number 37 and a particularly aggressive bump, we got a flat tire. Gambaa, our driver and a man who could probably build a car out of yak dung if needed, jumped into action. “He’ll fix it in five minutes,” Victor declared, watching Gambaa already wielding a jack.

“Perfect,” Doug said, hopping out of the van. “Time for a toilet rock.” This was our code for finding a vaguely private boulder to crouch behind. Lin wandered off to stretch her legs, pausing to watch more marmots. Meanwhile, Doug returned looking far too smug. “Found a good one,” he declared. “Great view, minimal wind, and no



marmots to judge me.” Lin shook her head. “Aim high, Doug. Aim high.”

Flat tire replaced, we pressed on, arriving at Hustai National Park “This is Takhi country,” Lin declared, her eyes gleaming. “We’re finally here.”

“Did you know they’re the last truly wild horses in the world?” she asked.

“Yes, Lin,” Doug replied. “You’ve told us that seventeen times.”

“Well, it’s important!” she insisted. “They’re not just wild; they’re prehistoric. They’ve survived for millennia!”

“Unlike me,” Doug muttered, “who won’t survive another hour on this road.”

As we drew closer to Hustai National Park, the hilly countryside came into view—rolling slopes dotted with grassy fields and broad river flats glistening under the morning sun. Victor leaned forward in his seat, his voice rich with pride and purpose. “This,” he began, gesturing out the window, “is Hustai National Park, a vital sanctuary and the heart of the Takhi’s story. These hills are where they brought the Przewalski’s horse back from extinction.”

He paused as the van followed a winding road, the golden grasses swaying in the breeze. “By the 1960s, the Takhi had disappeared from the wild entirely. But in the early 1990s, they began reintroducing them to this land with horses brought from European zoos. Today, Hustai is home to the largest wild population of Takhi—around 423 of them roam these hills and flats.”

Victor's hand swept across the landscape. "This park spans 506 square kilometers, and it's alive with more than just the Takhi. There are 44 species of mammals, over 200 species of birds, and countless plants thriving here. The balance of life in this place is extraordinary, but the Takhi remain its crown jewel."

He leaned back slightly, his tone softening. "Of course, it hasn't been easy. Conservation means tackling challenges like managing grazing conflicts with livestock and ensuring the genetic diversity of the herd. But they've worked closely with local communities through ecotourism and education, showing them how important it is to protect this land and its inhabitants. Hustai isn't just a park—it's a lifeline for the Takhi and a legacy of what can be achieved through determination."

He smiled faintly. "Now, let's go see if we can spot them. That's the real magic of this place."

As we entered the national park a massive dust storm hit. Visibility was so bad we might as well have been navigating with our eyes closed. "I think I see something!" Lin shouted over the wind. Doug squinted. "Is it a Takhi?" Lin frowned. "No, it's just a rock. A very horse-shaped rock."

But then, as if the Takhi themselves had grown tired of our incompetence, a stallion appeared by the roadside. Doug gasped. "It's majestic!" Lin nodded, leaning halfway out the window to snap photos. When she finally pulled back into her seat, she was coated in dust but grinning ear to ear.

"Worth it" she said

Further along, we encountered a group of vets treating a young, sick Takhi. “What’s wrong with him?” Lin asked. A vet explained passionately about conservation efforts and the challenges of preserving the species. Doug leaned in. “You’re doing amazing work,” he said sincerely.

The dust storm grew fiercer, so we decided it was best to head to our camp for the night—a Ger complex just outside the boundaries of Hustai National Park.

By the time we arrived, the storm had left us looking like relics unearthed from an ancient desert expedition. The camp, nestled in the hilly countryside, was as rustic as they come, but it had a charm that immediately made us feel welcome.

We settled into our Ger, appreciating the snug warmth and the sight of proper beds—a welcome luxury after days of camping on rough, stony ground. It felt like sinking into clouds compared to the thin mats we had grown accustomed to.

Once unpacked, we stepped outside to get the lay of the land. The storm continued its wild dance around us, obscuring much of the view, but we could just make out the silhouettes of hills and the occasional outline of another Ger in the distance. The air was thick with grit, but the promise of a comfortable, warm night kept our spirits high—until Brian pointed to a shack in the distance. “Is that what I think it is?” he asked. “The toilet?” We all trooped over to investigate our worst fears realised.

Lin surveyed the toilet situation and turned pale. “Oh no. No, no, no.” Doug peered into the squat log-drop setup. “It’s like the toilet from day one, but worse,” he announced. “And that’s saying something.”

For those unfamiliar, let me paint you a picture of that day-one toilet. It was a shed that looked as though it might collapse under the weight of a stern glance. Inside was a gaping hole in the ground with two precariously placed planks straddling it. These planks were meant for your feet but looked ready to buckle under anything heavier than a butterfly.

Today's toilet, however, upped the ante. Not only was the hole larger and more ominous, but a rope had been thoughtfully attached to the door. "To hold on to so you don't fall in," Victor explained cheerfully. Lin eyed the rope warily. "It's slimy," she said. Doug grabbed it and immediately recoiled. "It's very slimy. I don't want to know why."

Lin decided she needed backup. "Doug, you're coming with me," she announced. Doug blinked. "To the toilet? What am I supposed to do? Hold your hand?" Lin glared. "If it comes to that, yes. You're not abandoning me to this... this pit of despair."

Somehow, they survived. Later, we gathered around the fire in our Ger. Despite the dust, the cold, and the questionable toilet situation, there was something undeniably magical about the moment.

"To the Takhi," Lin said, raising her glass of vodka.

"To marmots," Doug added, earning a groan from Lin.

"To the plague-free parts of Mongolia," Brian said with a grin.

"And to Goomba and Victor," I finished. "For getting us here in one piece."

Victor translated our toast, and Gambaa grinned, raising his glass. “Welcome to Mongolia,” he said in halting English.

And with that, we drank to the wild horses, the endless steppes, and the absurd, unforgettable journey we’d shared.

Our last day in the Gobi dawned as clear and sharp as the knife-edge chill in the air. The kind of morning that feels like it’s daring you to conquer it, or at least to layer up and make a decent attempt. The plan was simple: breakfast, pack up, and head back to Ulaanbaatar. Simple plans, however, rarely survive in the wilds of Mongolia—or in the company of our group.

The night before, after Victor and Gambaa had called it a night, the rest of us convened a secret council over the last dregs of vodka. The topic? Takhi. We had seen one of these wild horses the day before, but only through the swirling chaos of a dust storm that had turned the park into a hazy Martian landscape. “That doesn’t count,” Doug had declared, setting down his glass with the kind of determination only the slightly tipsy can muster. We all agreed. We needed one last attempt. The only problem was convincing Victor, our long-suffering guide. After some spirited debate, we elected Doug as our spokesperson.

Now, at breakfast, we all waited for Doug to deliver the pitch. And waited. Doug, entirely focused on his omelette, seemed to have forgotten the vote—or his role in it. Finally, Lin, ever the practical one, took action. A swift kick under the table jolted him out of his culinary trance.

“Why did you kick me?” Doug hissed, glaring at Lin.

“Ask him,” she replied through gritted teeth, nodding toward Victor, who was calmly sipping tea, blissfully unaware of the brewing mutiny.

Doug cleared his throat. “Victor, we were wondering if we could, um, maybe go back to the park this morning? To, you know, try and see the Takhi again?”

Victor raised an eyebrow, the international symbol for “This better be good.”

“Please?” Lin chimed in. Brian and I nodded like overzealous bobbleheads.

Victor sighed deeply, the kind of sigh reserved for small children, stubborn tourists, and yaks that refuse to move. “You know the chances of seeing them are very slim, right? And we still have a long drive to U.B.”

“Just a couple of hours,” I pleaded. “Yesterday was a dust storm apocalypse. We barely saw anything!”

After a rapid-fire consultation with Gambaa, Victor relented. “Fine. Two hours. But we leave now.”

We packed the van in record time, tossing bags and gear into every available crevice like a chaotic game of Tetris. The Takhi quest was on.

The park welcomed us with golden grasses waving in the breeze and a horizon so vast it seemed to stretch into eternity. A few kilometers in, we spotted what looked like a herd grazing on a distant hill. Or so we thought. Doug and Brian were out of the van in an instant,

scrambling up the hill like caffeinated mountain goats, with Victor trailing behind, muttering something that was likely not complimentary.

Lin and I stayed back, choosing to admire the scenery and supervise Gambaa, who was reorganizing the van with the precision of a master craftsman.

“They’re climbing for nothing,” Lin suddenly said, shielding her eyes from the sun. “The Takhi just bolted.”

Sure enough, our intrepid adventurers returned, looking both winded and sheepish. “Never mind,” Brian said, still catching his breath. “It’s beautiful up there. Great day for a hike!”

We pressed on, hope flickering like a candle in the wind. And then, as if the Takhi gods took pity on us, we rounded a bend to find an entire herd grazing peacefully on a grassy river flat. Stallions stood guard while foals frolicked in the morning light.

We stopped breathing, the scene too perfect to disrupt with even the smallest gasp. “Wow,” Lin whispered.

“In all my years of coming here, I’ve never seen so many at once,” Victor said, his voice filled with genuine awe.

We crept closer, marveling at the sight of these rare creatures in their natural habitat. Out of the roughly 400 Takhi in the park, we had somehow stumbled upon 70 in one glorious moment. It was as if the universe had decided to gift us this memory as a send-off.

The journey back to Ulaanbaatar felt both triumphant and bittersweet. We passed the hours recounting our encounters with

ibex, argali, red deer, and now Takhi, each memory punctuated by laughter and a shared sense of wonder.

Once back in the city, the practicalities of travel quickly took over. Securing train tickets for the next leg of our journey turned into an exercise in intrigue, involving a rendezvous with a shadowy figure in a dimly lit alley. He emerged from the shadows like a character in a spy film, holding what we assumed were train tickets—but could just as easily have been theater props.

With no small amount of skepticism, we handed over fistfuls of Mongolian tugriks, watching them disappear into his coat pocket. In exchange, he presented us with four slips of paper—fragile, handwritten scraps that could have been tickets, IOUs, or very expensive bookmarks.

Brian held one up to the light, squinting at the faint markings. “Think these are legit?” he asked, his tone a mix of doubt and amusement.

I shrugged, tucking my own “ticket” into my jacket. “Guess we’ll find out at the station,” I replied. After all, what’s adventure without a touch of suspense?

That evening, after long, blissful showers and the luxury of clean clothes, we headed to the Irish pub to thank Victor and Gambaa with a proper send-off. Over Guinness and vodka, we shared stories, laughed until our sides ached, and toasted to the 11 incredible days we’d spent bumping across the Gobi.

But the night wasn’t over. Back at the guesthouse, the owner stopped us. “Karaoke later. You come?”

Doug’s eyes lit up like a disco ball. “Absolutely!”



Lin and I exchanged looks of wary resignation. Karaoke? In Mongolia? Sure, why not.

The karaoke bar was an experience unto itself. Private rooms ensured no audience would suffer our off-key renditions, though Doug attacked the microphone with the enthusiasm of a man auditioning for "The Voice." His rendition of A Hard Day's Night was followed by a surprisingly energetic Jump by Van Halen. The locals, unimpressed, reclaimed the mic with soulful Mongolian ballads that filled the room with an unexpected melancholy.

As the evening wore on, the four of us sat back, drinks in hand, reflecting on the journey. The dust storms, the endless horizons, the rare moments of silence broken only by the sound of the wind—it had been an adventure of a lifetime.

"I can't believe it's over," Lin said softly.

"It's not over," Brian said, raising his glass. "It's just the beginning."

And he was right. Ahead of us lay the Trans-Siberian Railway, a steel ribbon stretching across Russia, promising new stories, new adventures, and undoubtedly, new mishaps.

"To Mongolia," I said, raising my glass.

"To adventure," Doug added.

And as we clinked our glasses, a new power ballad filled the room, and Doug leapt to his feet, mic in hand. Because when in U.B you sing. Or at least, you try.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Dalton is a globe-trotting storyteller from Australia with a knack for turning chaotic adventures into captivating tales. Having lived in Italy and France, she's mastered the art of indulging in local cuisines, soaking up rich cultures, and deploying animated hand gestures when language fails. Alongside her equally adventurous partner, Claire has a passion for long, winding overland journeys—complete with broken-down buses, dubious toilets, and chatty chickens often outshining the drivers.

The duo thrives on exploring offbeat destinations—places too remote, hard to pronounce, or inconvenient for the average traveler. From swapping moonshine-fueled stories with Mongolian nomads to accidentally sparking a karaoke revolution in Vietnam, they dive headfirst into every cultural encounter, awkward moments and all. With humor and heart, Claire captures these escapades for readers willing to trade comfort for chaos. Buckle up—or don't—but bring your sense of humor along for the ride.

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