

Call of the wild..



By Jasmine Miller
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For many, the very mention of Mongolia stirs up visions of the wild and the untamed - Genghis Khan and his soldiers on horseback, camels wandering the Gobi Desert, and wild horses galloping free against a dramatic landscape.

Up till a few years ago, visiting the place remained a dream for most, as just getting to the country was a daunting task.

But Mongolia, which has only 2.6 million people living within its 1,566,000 sq m area - making it one of the least populated countries on the planet - has been opening its doors in recent years.

While there are still no direct flights

there except from Seoul, Beijing, Osaka, Berlin and Moscow, the country is working with tour operators to increase inbound travel.

Universal Travel was one of the first Singapore agencies to organise trips to Mongolia, in 1994.

Managing director Khoo Boo Liat, 56, recalls that it was a major feat because there were no direct flights and that resulted in higher costs for the customer as connecting flights were involved.

Today, there are still no direct flights from Singapore. Khoo says Universal's tour groups fly to Beijing, before the plane goes on to Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia.

Despite the logistical hassle, 120 people signed up with the agency last year. The call of the wild is strong in

Mongolia. Most people go there not to shop or eat, but to experience the traditional nomadic lifestyle, say travel agents here.

"International food is more easily available in Ulaanbaatar now, as more Korean and Japanese, as well as Western, restaurants have opened there," says Khoo.

"We take our groups to the leather and cashmere factories in the capital for some shopping, and then it's out to the countryside like the sand dunes of Bayangobi and the ancient capital of Karakorum, which was built by Genghis Khan in the 13th century."

The highlight of the tour is usually a stay in a ger camp (traditional circular Mongolian nomad tents made of wood and white felt), where you get to rough it out in the countryside and get a taste

of local food and horseback riding.

Vegetarians and vegans may struggle with the local diet, as it consists mainly of meat like beef and mutton. Universal usually makes a special request for more chicken meals on its tours.

Toh Poh Joo, 31, who runs MXP Adventure, which has been organising tours to Mongolia for three years, says it is a destination that is getting popular with well-travelled Singaporeans who are tired of typical European and Asian holiday packages.

"Those who come to me want a holiday with a difference. They've read about Genghis Khan, they want to try something more adventurous."

Toh, who took "just a handful" of people to Mongolia when he started, says 30 went with him last year, and he

expects more this year. Visiting the nomad families is one of the major highlights of his company's package tours, he adds. Understanding the life of the nomads, how they eat and sleep, makes the holiday unique. And sleeping out in the open is a special experience.

"In the countryside, where there are no lights, you can see the Milky Way right above you. The night sky glitters with millions of stars, and there's a shooting star every other minute."

Sandra Lee, 45, who went to Mongolia for the first time last year with a girlfriend, says she surprised herself by actually enjoying the camping holiday.

"It was the first time that I'd ever roughed it out in the wild. There were no toilets out in the country, and we had to find a bush or a rock to answer Nature's call. I wasn't sure I'd last two days, let alone eight."

"But by the time I left, I was in love with the natural beauty of the country, and envied the nomads' simple but happy lives."

For K.K. Wong, 28, it is the ultimate break from a hectic, stressful lifestyle.

"I loved the silence and the peacefulness of the countryside. Not once did I miss the newspapers, TV and radio," says the human resources executive.

"There, you don't just feel like you're in another country. You feel like you're in another world."

What to do

Mongolia is celebrating its 800th anniversary this year, with a series of activities that began in January and go on till December.

So far, there have been indoor game festivals, ice festivals, music and cultural events, exhibitions, handicraft fairs and even a rock opera on Genghis Khan.

From next month to December, there will be horse fairs, art and photography exhibitions, as well as a Cavalry Ride featuring soldiers re-enacting the power of Genghis Khan's awesome army.

Ulaanbaatar, the country's capital, has a city centre small enough to be covered on foot.

There is just one shopping street here, says Khoo of Universal Travel. There is nothing much to buy other than cashmere and leather goods, but international cuisine and five-star hotels are easily available.

A number of tourist attractions are also here. Among them are the Ganden Monastery, which has several temples adorned with gold and jewels within its grounds; the Natural History Museum, which houses dinosaur eggs and reconstructed dinosaur skeletons discovered in the Gobi Desert; and the Winter Palace of Bogd Khaan, in which the last religious King of Mongolia lived.

It takes 10 hours to get to the Gobi Desert, by jeep, from Ulaanbaatar. One interesting sight is the Flaming Red Cliff, where dinosaur fossils - broken eggshells and previously unknown species - were found in 1922. Some bones are still embedded there.

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The spirit-powered poems of Stephen K. Roney

In a way, I think I live a fortunate life. Getting old is also quite a blessing, especially when I think back and wonder why I had to be young and reckless, heedless, headstrong and most troublesome. Part of the game, I suppose. I want to go back to Tuesday, January 3. On that day I met, in company with Professor Ashley Halpe, the Canadian poet and writer Stephen K. Roney—a man of the Thousand Islands along the St. Lawrence River. You see? One more stroke of good fortune in this fortunate time that I thank someone up there for. Roney is in a league of his own: poet, academic, feature writer, news writer, columnist, editor, publishing adviser, business writer, teacher—you name it: he's done it (and still doing it!).

Naturally, he spread himself, but, since the early 1990s, he plumped for the academic life, having gained that superb polish that is only given to rolling stones, teaching in universities in China, Korea, Canada, the US, and right now at the Khalifa College Al Ain, UAE. He grinned and said, "There's a lot of money there". Don't I know it?

We went, Roney, Ashley and I to the Peradeniya University, because Ashley insists on "emerit-sis-in" the English Department and its eager students. The University and Ashley are inseparable—will always be—although I still wonder whether the ghost of this particular "swagman" will be heard some day singing at a university "billabong". Oh, perish the thought! That is light years away!

What held me were the readings of Roney's poems. They are exquisitely simple in style and construction and they carry in their core both faith and belief. They tumble out of a kind of spiritual culture that sometimes takes the form of a spiritual quiz. He puts humanity and spirituality into a blender and suddenly, we have a puree of simply-said words, repetitions, poured onto our panicked heads with the insistence of the smokiest Canadian maple syrup.

Roney was listened to with enthusiasm at the English Department, and most interestingly gave us his poetry readings with a background—how and why his creations took form. His fingers thrummed the pulse-beat of the man who roiled and moiled about his business, snared by the world of trade and

commerce. His nights are restless, his head a giant ledger and spreadsheets are his bed linen:

"Demands on my time are monied and various,
Budgets are burgeoning, time lines are tight;
We shall see, we shall see, we shall see, we shall see,
Why can I no longer sleep in the night?"

This is the state of the business-fevered man, "tossing in bed... tied up in spreadsheets... accounts of the company... figures... the stock exchange..."

"God only knows what's the final Gnatt diagram;
Critical paths always fade out of white;
Building our high-rise investments in Babylon;
Sleeping through days and waking at nights."

This poem, "Memo Re: Writing Memos" is a song that is so insistently sung today—and this is where Roney writes the score so well. He hears, in his mind, the pulse-beat, and his deep religious conscience moves in to make the song live. He does not ascend to airy word-coloured heights nor descend to pits of the ludicrous. His poems are deceptively simple, both in the words he uses and the rhythms he creates. He told his audience of the significance of the blazing red maple leaf of autumn on the Canadian flag and then gave us "A Memory of Falling Once in Leaves":

"A memory of falling once in leaves
And then again in leaves and once more falling
Only again to rise, and risen run
That fall to spring and springing once be gone
'Til fall, and fall again, and rising
'Til spring be
Spring again, and one more rising
'Til fatal fall of dark and dinner time."

The play on words ties up the springing of spring, the leaf-fall of the fall, that fills the mind with the rich redness of a riotous shedding of nature, filling the air with a redder snowfall—and the seasons follow, each with their coming and going with every year.

Once, he said, when walking out at dusk, a young man came to him, shuffling, head bowed, hands reaching out, beseeching silently. "At first I thought he was a drug addict; or a homeless vagrant; and then he raised his head, looked into my face and with a whimper, backed away, turned and tottered away. I was unnerved. What had he seen in my face? His thunder-browed father? The demon who gleefully rocked in his head? A remorseless God? Or a bleeding spirit raised from the dead? I went home to write of this encounter..."

"There is no thunder here, no open tomb;

No curtain torn, no tocsin
blast of doom;
No call to mourn or hope;
Just Mad Tom, a devil
down his throat."

Roney employs the symbol of the resurrection of the Christ. Did this mad drug-laden derelict see in his face a stern, risen Jesus? What fantasies occupied his mind? What visions haunt a drug-crazed man? Does he see "a

mountain shuffling into night / or sun at the doors of night?" Roney wonders:

"And should my hands and feet start running
gore,
And should I die, then come to life once more;
It is yet a thing of no great note
Just old Josh, wild spirits down his throat."

It is in offerings such as these that we see how well Roney spirit-powers his lines. He is a deeply religious man, but allows his awareness of the divine to be buffeted by his own quest to discover the

mysteries of his faith.

"Just shuffling, Jesus, ghost fires all about,
But Heaven's light is Hell-fire inside out."

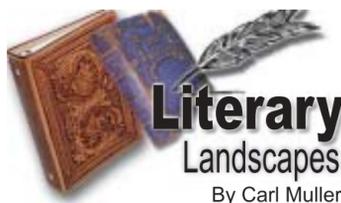
(Remember the Nicene Creed? When Jesus died, it is said: "He descended into Hell—and on the third day, he rose again.")

"For lambs look down, and browse, and bleat a note by rote —
But scaling Calvary's spire required a goat."

We have lines of deep significance here. The lamb in Christianity, although a symbol of the Christ, is also the creature of sacrifice and spilt blood. Humankind is lamb-like in that it looks to the Good Shepherd redeemer, and yes, is not the lamb also the poor lost sinner? The lambs are the flock and yes, they do bleat by rote, parroting the prayers they are taught. What then is needed to scale the heights of Calvary? The will and strength of the goat? There, on the cross is the lamb sacrificed. The goat of stronger mettle will scale the heights. What has Roney dragged out of that drug-laden mind. And what did that man see? A lamb or a goat; a dying God or a carousing demon? Also, does not the devil appear as a goat in the time of Lammass and at the Sabbath of the witches?

Roney immersed himself in the works of the ancient Korean poets. He told us of Po U, the poet and 16th century head of the Korean Zen Order, who was an immensely strong giant of a man. He also headed the Ministry of Justice and Defence. But there were those who plotted to kill him. They challenged him. Nine strong men would each strike him one in the stomach with their fists. Po U accepted the challenge, but each of the conspirators wore mailed gloves under their thin leather gloves. Po U took the searing blows, then collapsed and died three days later, vomiting blood from his ruptured stomach organs. "In these three days of agony," Roney said, "Po U wrote his last poem. Let me give it to you in English:"

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Literary
Landscapes

By Carl Muller