

Frisbee Diplomacy

Our minibus was a tiny boat in an ocean of grass. Half an hour out of Ulaanbataar, the purple Hyundai began to struggle across the Mongolian steppes, and several times the driver had to pull off, clamber around back, tinker in the engine bay, and climb back in.

"All Mongolian drivers also mechanics," Uuganta, our smiling, bespectacled local guide, assured us. "Country is so big, not possible call for tow truck. Driver must know how to fix everything. Our driver is very good mechanic: he fix bus, no problem."

Anxious looks passed among the seventeen of us. After an overnight train from Irkutsk, Russia, we were desperate for proper beds, food, and drinks. We shared unspoken relief when Uuganta told us, "I just call office; they send new bus--not possible complete trip like this--take several hours."

When it became clear that we'd be immobile for a while, Dave got out his Frisbee. A British guy just out of college, he was on a mission to photograph himself throwing his Frisbee past major monuments. He'd already logged Red Square, and was looking forward to the Great Wall of China. Eric and Conall and I followed him off the road and began throwing the disc around.

Suddenly two horsemen trotted across the road right up to our circle. Garbed in the traditional handwoven tunic and sash, they looked larger than life on their shaggy horses no bigger than ponies. They dismounted and squatted: an older man, maybe sixty, with a leathery face, and a younger man, his son presumably, with equally tanned but much smoother skin. They lit cigarettes and watched in bewildered fascination. We might have been commanders of a flying saucer: it was clear neither of them had seen a Frisbee before.

They drew closer, and we worried we might hit them with the Frisbee: at one point Conall grazed one of the horses on the muzzle, but the old man yanked it out of its spook, nodding as if to say, *Don't worry about it*.

"Are you from town?" the old man asked with Uuganta translating.

"He means Ulaanbaatar," Uuganta said.

"We're from England," Dave said.

The old man looked baffled even after Uuganta translated.

"The United States," I said. "Across the ocean."

"On the other side of the earth," the old man nodded. "I've heard of this place."

We offered to toss the Frisbee to them a couple times before the young guy got up and haltingly joined in. The old man shook his head in bashful awe, the way a child shrinks from touching a magician's hat. It was thrilling to realize there were still people in the world who could be awed by a Frisbee, but disappointing to think we were reducing their galaxy of wonders.

"Did you make this?" the young guy asked, turning the Frisbee over reverently.

"No," Dave said. "But I suppose you could."

"Yes," he said. "With a spring sapling. . ."

"Beautiful horses," I said, offering my palm to the young man's bay.

"You want to ride him?" he asked.

I looked around for support.

"Go on," Uuganta urged. "Cannot be true Mongolian man without ride a horse."

Before I had my feet in the stirrups the animal took off, and it was all I could do to keep him below a gallop with rope for reins, a tiny saddle, and my shoes almost scraping the ground. The boundless earth unfurled all around me like an enormous flag. It was a thrilling, terrifying half-mile before I managed to wheel the horse around and trot back to the group.

For the first time, the herdsmen were grinning.

"He says you look like a tree on top of the horse," Uuganta smiled.

"Maybe I should stick to Frisbee," I panted, dismounting. "Thank you." I handed over the reins.

"Come visit us. Just over there," the young guy gestured. "Horses for everyone."

"Wow," Conall said. "Could we?"

"Very long walk," Uuganta said. "No horses where we stay."

Suddenly the driver announced that the bus was fixed. The horsemen re-mounted, and Dave asked if he could take their picture.

"Good time to go," the old man said. "Bad winds coming."

The sky was an almost cloudless sweep of blue.

By the time the bus got underway the herdsmen had cantered off, vanishing into the rolling plains dotted with sheep and goats and horses.

Shortly after we got to our yurt camp a beautiful sunset turned into a hailstorm. Nestled in by a dung fire, I looked at the Frisbee on Dave's bed, and as I remembered the horse bounding beneath me, the uninterrupted horizon all around, and the enigmatic herdsmen's sudden laughter, I thought that magic has not gone from the world after all.