

FROM OJAI TO THE ALTAI,  
IN THE TRACKS OF THE GHOST CAT

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WHERE THE  
WILD THINGS  
WERE



Snow leopards have never been known to kill a human. So I felt perfectly safe on a chilly morning following the fresh tracks of three snow leopards up through icy mountains to their dens. I ended up sitting in an absent leopard's perch to sketch the painting that became "The Snow Leopard's View."



My traveling partner and lifelong friend, Jim McEachen, was nearby, documenting our adventure on video. He's a bit smaller than me, so I figured if anybody was likely to inaugurate a new statistic in snow leopard predation, it was him. On the other hand, he's a seasoned mountaineer and plenty fit. I've seen Jim run along a Himalayan ridge at 10,000 feet above sea level carrying a 30-pound camera. He could escape.

If worse came to worst, I'd have to paint my way out of trouble.

I sketched, fingers cramping in the cold. Jim filmed, scrambling over the ox-blood purple rocks to capture the moment. Though they were probably watching us the whole time, the snow leopards stayed away. Good thing too, because we were a slippery, snow-covered mile from our guide, our horses, our supply-laden camels, and our Kazakh expedition staff, alone on a freezing Altai mountaintop in western Mongolia. Heaven.

I had decided long ago that I wanted to go to Mongolia. I should have done so back then. Twenty years later, it was a Mongolia within Mongolia that I was trying to find, a Mongolia that was not waiting for tourists, not pre-programmed to offer us what it thought we all wanted, not digested into a kind of Mongolianland, where everything was going to happen on schedule and as described in the brochure. I wasted a lot of time chasing this other Mongolia, with cold calls and emails to most of the major adventure travel handlers in the Asia market. Where was it? I should have realized much earlier what I later came to know. The key to the journey was not where to go.

The key was why. Why go? Why is everything.

#### HAVE CANVAS, WILL TRAVEL

Travel with purpose is a whole other thing from the produced and consumed itineraries that are the backbone of the adventure travel industry worldwide. When one brings something to the journey, something more than just a checklist of iconic beats to hit, then any fixed, predictable itinerary unravels and blossoms into a series of unforeseen opportunities and challenges.

I needed to stop asking what Mongolia had for me, and start asking what I was bringing to Mongolia.

I decided to do a series of large landscape paintings, executed in the field under extreme circumstances, to raise money and awareness for wildlife conservation in the areas where the paintings would be done. I had painted in the outback before, in the Himalayas, in Africa, so I knew I could do it, but these Mongolian paintings were going to be four times the size of anything I had done outdoors before, about twenty square feet per painting. I wasn't even sure if I could do them at that scale. That was a challenge. Now I knew why I was going. All I had to do was figure out where.

I'm connected to a wide network of wildlife conservation scientists because of the unique nature of my work with Walt Disney Imagineering. My particular portfolio of design projects revolves around natural history, and requires high levels of field research and cultural negotiation. It includes Disney's Animal Kingdom, a venue which has been involved

in wildlife conservation efforts for more than 15 years. This position gives me access to some pretty hardball characters in the conservation realm. I called up Dr. Rodney Jackson, the founder and Director of The Snow Leopard Conservancy, and asked if he needed any help drawing focus to project areas in Mongolia. He put me in touch with Dr. Bariusha Munkhtsog, Director of Irbis Mongolia, and the Senior Scientist at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences.

In a short while, I was able to target a very specific area of the Altai Mountains in western Mongolia, an area with a large snow leopard population and several projects underway, any one of which could use support and funding.

Once I had a distinct purpose in traveling, I found someone who was interested in doing something, not just selling something. Nomadic Expeditions, one of the most respected ground operators in Mongolia, were intrigued by the quirky assignment. Together with them and The Snow Leopard Conservancy, we concocted an expedition that eventually would be recognized by the prestigious Explorer's Club with a formal club flag. The expedition was basically myself and Jim, whom I have known since we were both in junior high, and with whom I have traveled to some seriously remote parts of the world. We would be joined later by Lane Merrifield, a friend and colleague. Our ground crew consisted of Baatar Navaansharav, called Baagi, who was our Mongolian country guide, our cook Surenjav Dalaikhan, one of the famed Kazakh Eagle Hunters, who was our camel drover, and his nephew, Bankhar. We hung the venerable Explorer's Club flag on the side of our common dining tent on the first night after we'd transferred our supplies from two Toyota Land Cruisers to two Bactrian camels. By the next morning, the camp, the camels, and the flag were covered in snow.

#### THE LOST ECHO

My first painting was intended to be a portrait of the sacred mountain, Shiveet Khairkhan, which shaded our camp from the setting sun. But that was now invisible, hidden behind squall after squall of fine powdery snow blowing in from the deeper and higher Altai Mountains along the Russian border. I was determined to paint, despite the weather, so we rigged the huge canvas like a sail, and I painted instead the much-closer mountain to the north, a mountain that a local Tuvan hunter told us had particular significance.

The previous night, before the snowstorm, we had gathered around the warmth of an iron stove in our tiny dining tent with a Tuvan named Khenzkhuu, whose sister was a shaman. Tuvans are an ancient ethnic group whose modern homeland sits just north of the Mongolian Altai border in what is today Russia. Unlike the Altai's Muslim Kazakhs, the Tuvans generally practice the ancient shamanic traditions of their ancestors.

Dr. Rodney Jackson had asked me to inquire about any local spiritual traditions that might affect snow leopard conservation efforts. So, we interviewed Khenzkhuu to see what he thought. We sat, sipping vodka and arkh, a local liquor made from cheese (which tastes way better than it sounds) and

Among the plein air paintings Rodhe painted was of this sacred Altai mountain, Shiveet Khairkhan. Their guide, Khenzkhuu, told them that the dwindling populations of leopards meant “they are offended.”



Khenzkhuu told us stories about the snow leopard and what it meant to the local people. Like many of the Mongolians we would meet, he blended traditional and contemporary ideas as he spoke, moving from spiritualism to global climate change, to market economics as he sought to explain the plight of the mysterious cat.

He told us that snow leopards are regarded as highly spiritual creatures, messengers of Tenggri, the Sky Spirit. They are easily offended, and if offended will move away. There is a kind of curse on those who kill a snow leopard. Our guest felt that local climate changes — which might be attributed to global patterns — were part of the curse incurred by the massive kill-offs that followed Mongolia's switch from a socialist to capitalist economy.

Khenzkhuu made a comment that I found particularly moving and poetic. He pointed to the mountains on our northern flank and told us how, when he was young, he would see snow leopards in these moun-

tains all the time. They were hunted out, “offended,” and were now gone.

He said that, when the snow leopards left, the mountain “lost its echo.”

Voices died, muffled in the empty rocks. I thought that this was a vivid metaphor for the loss of resonance that comes when a landscape loses that most vital aspect of its essence, the living creatures upon it.

So that morning, in flurries so dense they were like a fog of snow crystals, I set up my canvas below the mountain with no echo and began to paint. A huge camel wandered by and obstinately posed in front of my view, so I painted him, too. I kept the tubes of paint in a fishing vest under my parka. That insulation kept the colors warm and viscous. It was cold. How cold? No idea. I was raised in Hawai'i, so to me, if water freezes... that's cold. And it froze fast.

The wind came and went in heavy gusts, bringing with it sheets of snow. The canvas was well-rigged and stable against the wind, but the snow kept melting on the canvas and

running down with the pigment. We devised a technique to keep the work going. I would paint as long as I could, until the melted snow had saturated the canvas. Then, we'd carry the canvas back into the tent, next to the stove, which was stoked with yak-dung fuel, and bake the canvas dry. Then, back out again into the snow.

I had to complete the painting that day. I had set a goal of 10 paintings in just less than 30 days in the field. Taking into account the long days we would spend caravaning by horse and camel through the mountains, I had less than one day per painting. Luckily, the storm broke by early afternoon, and by evening, much of the snow had melted. We even had time to ride out and investigate the ancient petroglyphs carved by the thousands into the rock beneath the sacred mountain. Some petroglyphs in the region were old enough to include rhinos, mammoths, and ostrich. On the morning of our departure we found a petroglyph of a snow leopard, just above our camp.

front hit us as we crossed a high pass, our camels rebelled, two horses bolted, and we found our chance to be good guests. As Dalaikhan chased the scattered animals, Baagi led us down the pass to take shelter in the first encampment we came to, three gers, or yurts, one of which looked like something from the dawn of time, if not for the solar panel mounted outside. This was the family ger camp of Selim Khan, a Kazakh clan leader who would have made his ancestors proud, well over 70 years old, tall, hale, vigorous, dressed all in black with a huge black fur hat. Sitting enthroned in his smoky, ancient ger, he simply commanded that we would not travel, we could not travel, in this cold. Instead, he would vacate a ger and give it to us until the weather turned. That ger, a clean, orderly circle decorated with colorful Kazakh tapestries and rugs, became our kitchen, living room, and paint studio, in which I was able to paint one of the largest images, the view of the mountain Shiveet Khairkhan, made from sketches I had done the day before the first snowstorm.

In return for the use of his camp, I created a small portrait of Selim and family in his ger. This was apparently a big deal. Thus it was that we found ourselves at our first Khorkhog feast, a whole sheep, killed and cooked in its own skin, then served up on a platter over large sheets of pasta. To initiate the feast, Selim offered me the ear, sliced fresh off the head which crowned the immense pile of food. Chewy.

When it came time to depart a couple days later, the two paintings executed in Selim's camp were not dry. We improvised a solution by strapping them over the top of our loaded camels, like plein air blankets. Exposed thus to the sun and air for an additional day as we marched up valley, they were dry enough to roll up by the next morning. This technique worked so well that we repeated it several times across the journey, our camels draped in color as they marched along the steppe.

It was further up this valley that we came across the fresh snow leopard tracks leading up to a crag above our trail. Up until then the largest wild animals we had seen were eagles. The big ibex, argali, and elk were missing, the herders' landscape being dominated by cashmere wool goats. This was the new market-based economy at work, exercising its subtle influences on ancient cultural patterns. You don't eat cashmere wool. You sell it. Instead of 30 goats to feed a family through the

winter, herders now drive several hundred goats, each sheared for its wool, wool which ultimately makes it to New York, Paris, Moscow, Beijing, and elsewhere as cashmere sweaters, scarves, and other accessories no longer priced only for aristocrats.

There is no labeling process, no regulatory process, no way to insure that cashmere is coming from sustainable practices. So, it's not. The goats eat everything, the wild ungulates leave, and there's nothing left for snow leopards to eat, except the very lucrative goats.

Imagine if the mountain lions who live above us in Ojai regularly preyed upon our cars, or broke into ATMs and stole our savings. Serious conflict of interest. Herders defend their investments, however reluctantly. Mountains with no echo.

Within an hour of leaving behind the overgrazed pastures of the Kazakh herders, we had found the snow leopard tracks, laid down that very morning. I painted the sketch from the snow leopard's point of view, from a strategic perch that surveyed both the long valley behind us and the saddle of the pass we were about to cross. Jim and I spent a while, high in the strange sharp rocks of the snow leopard's castle, as we called it, before rejoining the camels and horses for an epic slog over two vast snowfields, in which we lost the

We loaded up the shaggy camels and headed south through the Altai, in the direction Khenzkhuu had told us we would still find snow leopards. Everywhere around us were ancient mound burials, memorials to countless generations of nomadic clan chiefs whose herds had grazed these valleys. Megaliths stood like sentinels, watching us pass. People had lived here for millennia, together with the snow leopard. What was it that made our era so incompatible with wild life? We have such power as modern people. Is it only the power to consume and destroy?

If we destroy what sustains us, what is essentially part of us, then, is that any power at all?

#### CAMELS IN REVOLT

We rode on horseback through this haunted landscape, feeling on our necks the gaze of these watching stones. We were their guests. A good guest brings gifts.

A couple days later, when a sudden cold



Snow leopard tracks wind up the mountain. Though the expedition never saw the leopard, it was clear it saw them.

One of the expedition's Bactrian camels enjoys a lakeside respite with a Mongolian pony for company.



camels, with all of our water, gear, tents, food, and fuel, until nearly sundown. When we finally recovered our caravan at sunset, we made camp under a gnarled larch tree by the side of a huge lake fringed by snowy mountains that reflected in its mirror-still waters.

#### HANDS ON APPROACH

The Mongolians we met along the way led lives that were not much changed from those of their ancestors, but the minds of those Mongolians were very much changed. They were our contemporaries. Adventure travel is not time travel. We would sit in some lonely ger, huddled around a common fire, drinking yak butter tea, and Baagi, our guide, would proudly explain that I was working with James Cameron on a new Avatar project and the nomads would nod, "Avatar. Good movie."

We set off into another entirely different range of mountains, drier, more stark and brutal than the grand snowpeaks Jim and I had traversed earlier. Yet here, protected from the goat hordes, were herds of ibex, argali, black-tailed gazelle and even saiga antelope on the opposite flank of the massif. And dozens of snow leopards. Our new team, made up of Uriankhai ethnic Mongols, carried a ger with them on a camel, so we no longer had to use our increasingly floppy dining tent. They adopted us and

our work as their own. This had a lot to do with the painting.

Painting outdoors is a very public act, a kind of obvious manual labor. Everyone can see that the painter has tools and equipment, a certain technical skill, and that the product takes time to produce. It looks like work. Whether here in Mongolia, or earlier in Bali, Africa, or Nepal, anywhere I have painted where people work with their hands, "work" means "work together."

Each time I had to mount the easels, move a worksite, unmount the canvas and roll it up, or stretch a new canvas, an improvised team appeared, eager to help. As my newly discovered apprentices held the frame, I would stretch the canvas tight, and someone would hammer in a pushpin, over and over, until the canvas was ready. We would drum on the canvas to make sure the stretch was tight. Inevitably, this would elicit comments about shamans and shamanism, as if what we were stretching was a huge shaman's drum. Perhaps that's why our itinerary was hijacked by our camel crew on one of the last days of the expedition.

#### WINGS OF DESIRE

Instead of taking us deep up the valley we had planned to enter, our caravan stopped in a grove of ancient poplars

"Here you will paint," one of the nomads stated, "Shaman's tree." Of course, I agreed. This was one of those moments I have come to treasure as the whole point of field painting among indigenous people, when they become the deciders, the directors, and we all collaborate together on an image that can no longer truly be said to be my creation alone.

The grove was suffused in a golden glow from sunlight filtered through the autumn leaves, now yellow and beginning to fall. Many of the ancient trees have unusual openings in them, womb-like. They curled around us in a dance too slow to see, a dance that took centuries to complete. The grove was sacred to female shamans and had been saved from destruction in the Soviet period by the grandmother of one of our nomad guides, a tough, clear-eyed woman who ran our camp.

The main tree had a small altar set before its feminine hollow, and festoons of colorful khadag prayer scarves tied to a low branch. Whatever I had thought I was going to paint, this was now my mission. As I set up my easel, the nomads came and made offerings at the tree, chanting and circumambulating the thick trunk.

There were owl and eagle feathers scattered in the dry leaves, from nests high above. I had been making my brushes

from local materials the whole time, yak hair, camel hair, goat hair, and, when I found them, feathers. I took one of these eagle feathers and made a brush from it, using it for the line work on the painting. It was one of the best, most fluid brushes I have ever used, as if it wanted to paint. When I was done, I tied the brush to the tree with a sacred scarf and left it where I found it, part of the leopard in the land. This painting never left Mongolia. It, too, became part of the land.

#### IN SEARCH OF A NEW STORY

Our expedition ended in a small mountain camp funded by the World Wildlife Fund and operated by a Dr. Munkhtokhtog. He and his crew hosted us again, with goat feasts and ancient songs sung into the night. He led us on high trails, following more tracks and signs of the cats that we knew were watching us from above. There was science. There were camera traps, video logs, data sheets, reports and monographs. But what Dr. Munkhtokhtog really wanted to talk about was stories, myths, oral traditions and legends.

Our journey had begun with a metaphor for the spiritual loss of vitality, a mountain with no echo. And here, among scientists, supposedly the quintessence of objectivity and rationalism, we would again talk of the snow leopard as the spirit of Tengri,

the intercessor of the heavens, the proud and gentle cat that when "offended" leaves, and takes the soul of the mountain with it. We would talk of the curse that falls on those who kill the ghost cat.

Rather than highlighting the rational arguments for why an apex predator is necessary for a healthy habitat, Dr. Munkhtokhtog's biggest idea for protecting snow leopards was to create a movie about the curse. Munkhtokhtog said that the No. 1 reason by far that herders did not kill snow leopards was respect for traditional taboos. Myth. Legend. Story. And there were we, a painter, a cinematographer, and a website developer, delivered to his camp as audience and collaborators. The next morning, I climbed up above our camp, and sat in a snow leopard's cave, looking out at its dwindling remnant of the world, and thought, "If we can't save this creature, a creature who lives where no one else can survive, a creature nobody even wants to kill, what can we save?"

I think it is our time now, the artists, the storytellers, the spiritual leaders, and the poets.

The rational scientific arguments for wildlife conservation and sustainable living are well-made and well-distributed. They have reached their audience and had their effect and it is not enough.

People are not rational beings. They are the stuff that dreams are made on, creatures of poetry, spirit, and emotion. If they are to change, as they must if we are all to enjoy a future we would ever wish upon our children, then it will be story that changes them. I set out to do a simple thing, something I thought I could do as an artist of no great repute, to paint some pictures that might get a bit of a buzz up for snow leopard conservation and sell them to raise a few bucks for the cause. I will still do that. But I came away convinced that it is the arts themselves that are the point, not just as a tool to raise money for scientists and conservationists but as the main tool for change. I think it's us now that take up the cause.

Places like Ojai are therefore places of global importance, gathering places of creative and spiritual thinkers coupled with persons of exceptional productive capabilities. The world needs a new story of itself, one that inspires us all into a liveable future, rather than disciplines or scolds us into a temporary truce with nature. In a world where instantaneous communication compresses us all into one community, why should it not be here that those stories are made? Why shouldn't the distant nomads of Mongolia say, "Oh, yeah, Ojai. good place." 🐾



The expedition crosses a broad, dry plain between Altai ranges. Rodhe's canvas, strapped to the camels' backs, dries in the sun and wind.