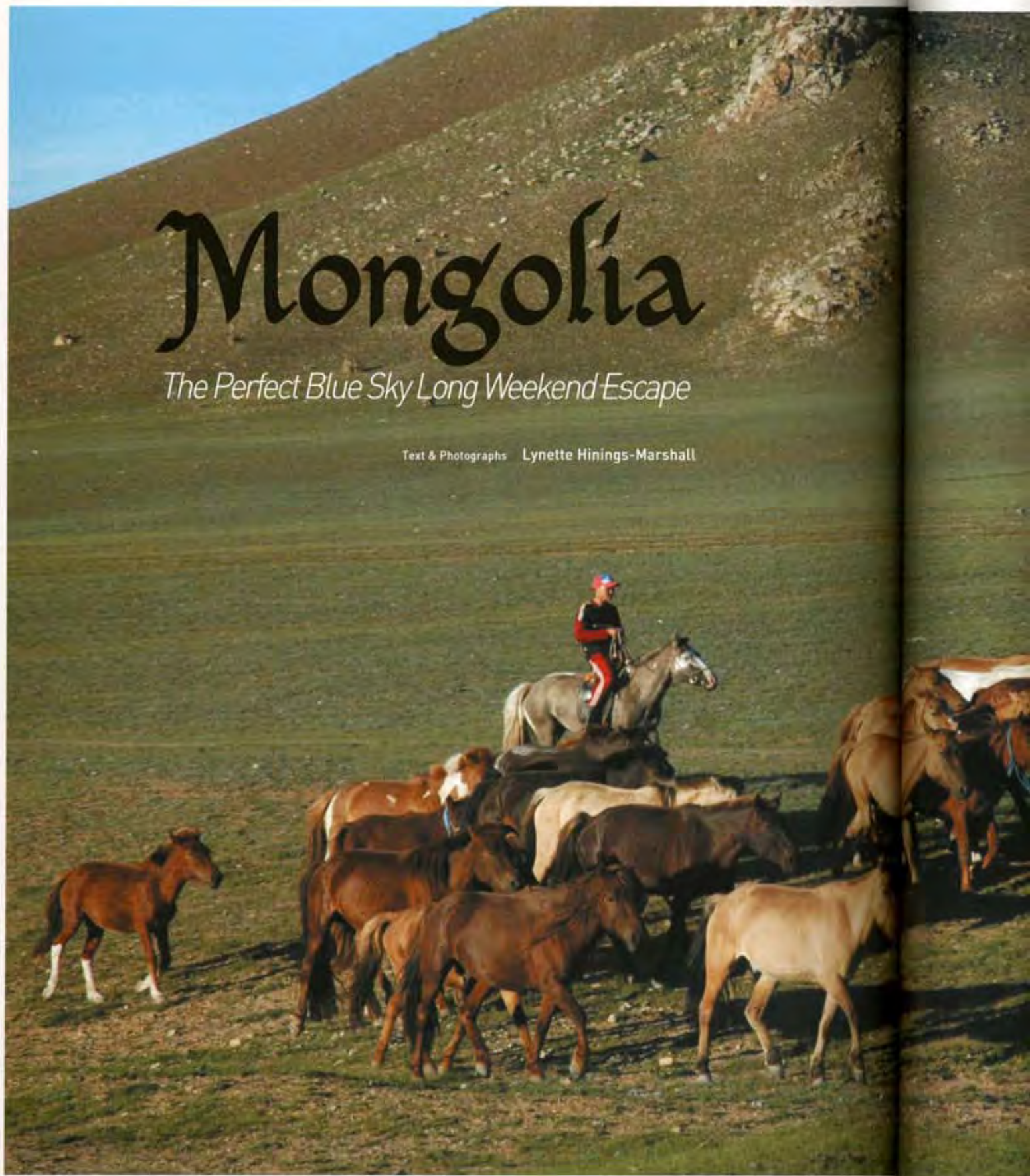


Mongolia

The Perfect Blue Sky Long Weekend Escape

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When asked what it is like living as an expatriate in Seoul so many images come to mind that I find it difficult to choose precisely what it is.... Perhaps it is how the sweet natured Koreans faces light up with dazzling smiles whenever I ask them a question. As my Korean language skills are virtually non-existent this is even more amazing to me because they haven't a clue what I am talking about. Seoul is the safest city I have lived in since becoming an expat almost 20 years ago. Not only is it a city without petty crime but the level of personal honesty borders on extraordinary. I cannot recall another city where I could leave my wallet on a counter in the post office—and this happened—and come back an hour later to find it intact and retrieve it from a smiling staff member. In nine months I have discovered how easy it is to build relationships with local storekeepers here without a word of common language. The diminutive woman I buy my vegetables from looks positively joyous as she flourishes fresh coriander in my face, or digs through boxes to fish out the red capsicums that are larger and crisper than those on top. When I am desperate for a particular vegetable for a dish I am preparing if she doesn't have it herself she will produce it from another vendor. But like so many places in the world Seoul is not the perfect, idyllic landscape. The one thing I had been missing was the high, bright blue skies that one experiences in Australia and in the United States where I have spent many years. However, a few months ago, I found those wide-open spaces and bright blue skies just two hours from Seoul—in fact almost next door—in Mongolia. So, for those of you who are worn down by the gray skies and haze of Seoul, Mongolia is the perfect blue sky escape and happily a complete rejuvenation is possible in just three or four days. A long weekend is all it takes and there are fortunately, quite a few of those throughout the year in Korea.

My husband and I left midday Friday on a non-stop Mongolian Air flight to Ulaanbaatar, the capital city. Our driver/guide met us at the airport with a cheerful *sain bainu* (hello) and broad smile then we set off for Terlej National Park just 80 kilometers northeast of Ulaanbaatar. Within 15 minutes of leaving the airport the magnitude and beauty of the Central Steppes spread before us. Endless expanses of plain were broken only occasionally by small

Cattlemen



Gandantegchenling Monastery

clusters of Gers (nomad tents) that looked like white round knobs placed on a canvas of reddish-brown and green. In the distance, rows of mountains beckoned, and just a few short hours after leaving our city apartment, Seoul was a distant world.

Even the paved roads in Mongolia are rough by Western standards so we were thankful that our guide had a relatively new Toyota Landcruiser. En route to Terelj we stopped at an *ovoo*. These cairn-like piles of rocks and branches are considered by Mongols to be sacred places to pay respect to the spirits of nature. To ensure our safety we walked clockwise around the *ovoo* three times, then clambered up to a small cave about 20 meters above ground. The guide explained how this cramped space was sanctuary to 300 Buddhist monks during the 1930s Communist purges. Sitting at the cave entrance breathing in the tantalizing peace and quiet it was difficult to imagine those tumultuous times.

As we drove on, the sun sat high in a cloudless sky and apart from passing the occasional rumbling, over-laden

truck or sighting a small herd of cattle or goats on the grassy steppes we felt wonderfully alone in this vast land. We pulled up at Miraj Ger Camp in Terelj National Park around 5 pm, and as the sun wasn't due to set until 9 most of the gers were still available. Our guide negotiated a rate of US\$25 per person per night that included three meals and we were able to select our own ger. They were much larger than I had imagined and the brightly-painted, ornately-carved wooden doors—all facing south to protect from the winds—made it difficult to decide. Opting for privacy I chose the one farthest away that was just a few minutes walk to the large restaurant ger at the top of the camp. When I stepped inside onto the wooden floor of our ger the turquoise and yellow colored silk draped around the walls created an exotic air. In the center was a wood-burning stove that was lit for us at 10 each night and again at 6 the next morning. Typical of high country in early September the days were warm and dry but when the sun set, the temperatures dropped at least ten degrees. Early mornings were deliciously "cuddle up in bed" cold. Our ger

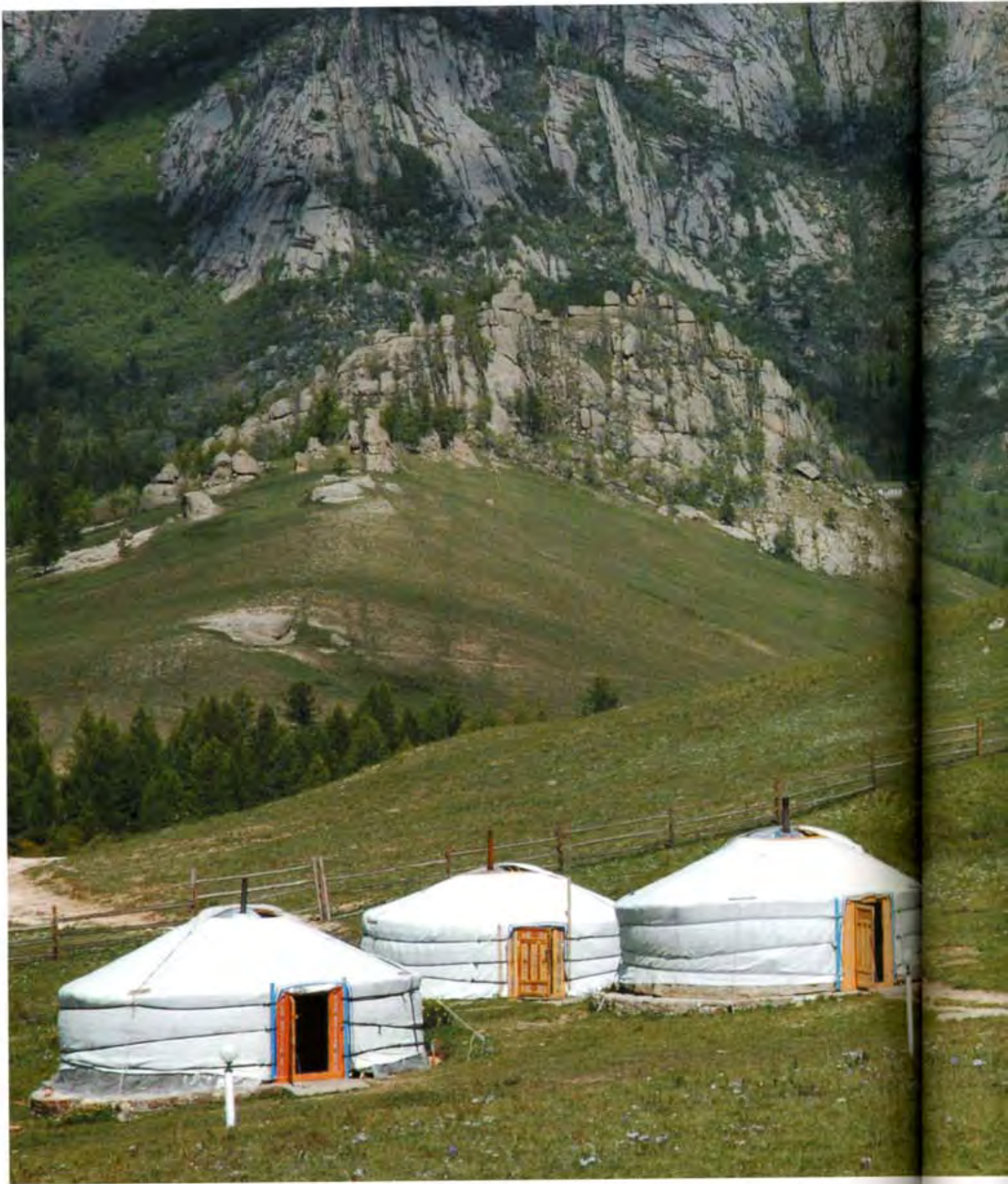
had four single beds around the perimeter separated by brightly painted, carved storage chests. If you are the snuggling type it is possible to rent gers with king-size beds. Clean towels were set out on each pillow and with room to walk around without running into each other we were all set for a comfortable stay. As it is common practice for the driver/guide to have their accommodation paid by the client we arranged to meet for dinner at 8 then went our separate ways. Anxious to explore we set out for the closest hill, past some more goats and cows and spent the next two hours trying to capture in digital format the beauty surrounding us. For those who have seen the American or Canadian Rockies, the views around Miraj Ger Camp are reminiscent of that high country.

The shower block at the camp had hot water thank goodness but little else in the way of comfort so after quick ablutions we set off for dinner as the sun began to drop in the sky. Our dinner companions were a couple of young German women who planned to stay ten days to recover from a tortuous bus journey from Russia. They were taking a year off from university to travel the world and it was nice to speak in complete sentences for the first time since our arrival as our guide's English was somewhat limited.

Dinner started with a traditional Mongolian dish of small steamed dumplings called *buuz* followed by a salad of carrot, coleslaw and cheese and a creamy egg salad. The main course was mutton curry served with a bowl of boiled rice followed by watermelon. I wasn't ready to try *airag*, fermented mare's milk, or *nermel*, a lethal home-distilled white spirit also made from milk, but my husband tried both and declared them to be "interesting" before switching to Chingis beer. The staff kindly offered to serve coffee on the veranda of a small wooden house that overlooked the camp so we could watch the sun set. We were treated to the most breathtaking sight of a huge rainbow spilling to the ground at the foot of a nearby mountain. When a staff member came into our ger to light our fire at 10, I barely noticed as I drifted off into the deepest sleep I had experienced in months. After a breakfast of cold cuts and local hard cheese, cereal with hot milk, scones with jam, and weak Mongolian tea we headed for the hills with bottled water and cameras. There are hills and mountains for every level climber in Terelj National Park and we opted for the taxing but not alarming elevations. Horseriding is easily arranged for a reasonable US\$10 an hour. Tourists can opt for the high, narrow,



Central Steppes





Ger Camp Khustain Naruu



Freshwater river

ornately-carved leather Mongolian saddle or, for those of us with a few extra inches, the wider, more comfortable Russian saddles. The extensive grasslands of this region cry out for wannabe Genghis Khans to gallop their way across the plains for hours on end without interruption.

On Sunday we visited the popular tourist attraction, Turtle Rock, then drove through Ulaanbaatar to Khustain Nuruu National Park, 100 kilometers west of the city and home of the famous Prezewalski wild horses. Turtle Rock, which as its name suggests, is a huge, carved granite rock that looks exactly like a turtle. I checked out the sauna hut, which was disappointing, then we bumped our way over a bad gravel road for about 20 minutes to an imposing looking structure set on the side of a mountain. It looked like an ancient monastery from a distance but after a long climb up the steep stairs we were surprised to see new

signage "Meditation Center." Apparently the Mongolian government built it only a few years ago to cash in on the growing Buddhism related tourism.

Just before midday we arrived at Ulaanbaatar and strolled through the open spaces of Sukhbaatar Square followed by a hearty European style lunch at Winner's Café. A pleasant three-course lunch for three of us cost only US\$18. A must-see in Ulaanbaatar is the Gandantegchenling Monastery just 10 minutes from the city center. It operates today with 10 datsans and temples and 900 monks. If you are short on time the most important monument is the Migjed Janraisig. This temple for the veneration of the Bodhisattva of Compassion has become a symbol of independence for the Mongolians and the Janraisig statue of copper gilded in gold stands an impressive 26.5 meters high.



Then it was on the road again for the two-hour drive to the wild horses' park, the last 30 minutes being a gravel road that ribboned its way through open grassland surrounded mountains as far as the eye could see. It seemed like no time at all before we entered the "Welcome to Hustai" gateway with its huge photograph of the horses. The immediate task for our guide was to arrange a visit to the wild horses at dusk, which is the best time to see them. These horses, which are also called Takhi by the Mongolians, became extinct in the wild in 1968. At that time there were 54 that had been caught around 1900 and one other in 1951 but all were divided between European and American zoos and private parks. Genetic drift and inbreeding in this captive population threatened the species with total extinction. But fortunately the dedicated Dutch couple Jan and Inge

Bouman created semi-reserves in the Netherlands and Germany to serve as an intermediate stage between captivity and release into the wild. Then between 1992 and 2000 the total population of Takhis, now numbering 84, were brought back to Mongolia. The naturalist who guided us explained that there are currently 186 horses and it will be another decade at least before they reach the desired number of 350 which will make them self-sustaining and safe from natural disasters or epidemics.

After an hour of driving over rutted dirt tracks we were lucky to see at least 20 of the wild horses. They were smaller than we expected with short tails and erect manes. We were able to get within 100 meters of them but retreated to about 200 meters while the naturalist explained their behavior to us. When the moon rose and we could no longer see the horses we drove back to our ger, which turned out to be even more comfortable than the one at Miraj. What made Hustai so special for us was that the horses attract a different kind of tourist, people who had travelled across the world to see them.

Next morning after a leisurely breakfast we enjoyed two hours walking up and down the hills. In the daylight we were able to spot the small fat Bobac marmots that burrow deep into the ground around Hustai. There are about 25,000 of them in the park and they are the size of a small, short-legged domestic dog. They certainly looked cute standing at the entrance to their burrow, heads lifted and bushy tails pointed skyward, daring us to come closer. We also saw vultures, eagles and falcons soaring through the skies at both parks. At Hustai, my husband photographed about 20 black kites sitting on a fence. After lunch we climbed back into the Landcruiser for a trip to the Neolithic graves that dot the upper terraces of the Tuul River valley. The most spectacular gravesite just west of Hustai Park's boundary is called the Ongot-grave. About 1,400 years ago people of Turkik origin carved the gravestones in which man-like features can be easily recognized, a most remarkable reminder of an ancient civilization.

It was Monday. Time to think about going back to Seoul. We were flying home via Beijing for shopping but it was difficult to tear ourselves away from this beautiful land of blue sky. It takes only a couple of hours to escape to the vast empty and magnificent countryside of Mongolia whenever you are feeling the oppression of gray skies and crowded streets, and Mongolia is the perfect weekend escape destination.

Bayartai (goodbye) saikhan bolloo (we had a good time).