Among the Kazakhs of Xinjiang

By Bob Jones

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Below me, a spectacular view of the western Tianshan and the glinting silver on the blue Issyk Kul. I was flying back to Urumqi from Chymkent and Almaty, after two weeks driving west on hard seats and mostly bumpy roads through the mountains of western China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. I was terrifically excited about returning to Xinjiang and I anticipated the time I was to spend in the mountains. I was to embark on a week-long horse trek in this magnificent range, an exploration among the people who made these hills their home. The Tianshan, or Heavenly Mountains, stretch for fifteen hundred miles, from eastern Xinjiang near Barkol to the sandy wastes of Uzbekistan near Tashkent. It is the world's northernmost mountain range with 7000m-plus (22,960 ft.) peaks, the highest, Pik Pobedy (Mt. Tomur), on the Kyrgyz-Xinjiang border, reaching 24,400 ft. The eastern range is climaxed by grand Bogda Ola - the "Peak of God" - at 18,270 ft. in plain view from downtown Urumqi, the region's bustling capital. Bogda's white, cathedral-like peak stands shoulders above everything else. The range has been summer pasture for both Torgut Mongols and Kazaks for centuries; it is with these horse-riding and sheep-grazing nomads that I wish to visit.

I'm one day into my adventure. My young Kazakh guide Sailik has many friends here at Tianchi (Heavenly Lake) and seems to recognize everybody. Ambling about with Sailik I never seem to walk a straight line - too many people to greet. I end up sitting among the yurts of the Kazaks who summer near the lake. While the Kazaks here live in some of them, others are rented out to tourists. Tianchi has come down in the world. There has been rampant and uncontrolled development at the north end of the lake, and like all scenic areas in China where the hand of development has touched, the hand and touch are heavy. A cold mountain stream in the valley below the lake is marred by ugly concrete kiosks placed awkwardly in mid-stream. Waterfalls are defaced with construction litter. Swiss-style chalets of incongruous concrete and white tile mar the lower meadow area. An incomprehensible cable car system that, because of safety concerns, has never operated defaces the middle canyon from the entrance station to just below the lake.

The lake itself is still beautiful, however, and so I place my back to the development and look out toward the snow-covered peaks to the south. The lake is small, only two miles long, and narrow. Its eastern shore is a precipitous slope falling from a high, forested ridgeline. While the western shore is not flat, animal trails follow the shoreline. The hillsides and ridges are dark green with firs and dotted with sun-drenched meadows. A golden eagle sails high above the lake. Next to it is a pile of yurt parts: three feet of felts, folded and stacked neatly on the wooden door; on top of that is the accordioned latticework and the ceiling spokes, which fit into the *chanrach*, the circular hub that holds the entire structure together like myriad hands holding a ring aloft. It now sits like a crown on the top of the stack. The pile awaits loading onto the backs of cattle, to be transported high into the summer pastures.

I have no complaints about sleeping in a yurt here at Tianchi. It is warm and the sleeping quilts are more than adequate. It is large and roomy. I drank a great deal of beer with Sailik and two of his cousins last night. We drank by candlelight, Kazakh style, with each of

A dismantled yurt ready for transport

us drinking in turn from the same bowl, refilling and passing it along. It is the way friends drink, he says. But Sailik is a clever guy. Maybe they had only one bowl. Though I slept well, my thighs are sore from riding a horse into the hills yesterday, balanced on a small, inadequately padded Kazakh saddle of wood. I fear the upcoming ride.

The plan was to ride up into the mountains with Sailik, searching out Kazakh encampments, and we would rely on their famed hospitality to stay the night. It is now almost dusk, and the day has been long. Two hours to the end of the lake, another two into a beautiful west-leading valley to meet with the party of Sailik's cousin, then another couple of hours leading the horses straight up to their summer encampment (*awil* in Kazakh). The yurt was put up in ninety minutes in the family's traditional spot overlooking a high alpine bowl, probably at about ten thousand feet. The mountains under my feet are rock and mottled green grass, cross-hatched here and there in patches where the grazing of sheep and goats is more noticeable. Only two other encampments are visible from here, far away across the bowl. The river creases the mountainside, and smaller watercourses are revealed by the upward advancing arrows of firs, a dark healthy green. Here and there are constellations of white sheep and goats set against the firmament of green meadows. It is all quite magnificent.

The ride up was comfortable, unlike that of the previous day. This saddle is broad and comfortable, the pace slow. Leaving the trash-covered north end of the lake behind us, we enter another, natural world. We ascend the trails and cross the streambeds surrounded by Kazakhs and their flocks. No tourists are here. Twice our horses splash across the deep cold river. My small Kazakh horse seems to take to me, or at least take advantage of me. I lead him up during the last climb, a steep ascent across young, green summer grass, and he rests his big head on my back and shoulder when we take the occasional break from the relentless climb. He has not yet had much exercise himself this year. He tries to lie down in the thick grass a few times, though Sailik says I must not allow him to do so. No kicks, no bites. He would turn around a few times to look at me when I was riding, and a few times when I was leading he would nudge me along. My first long-term commitment to a horse seemed to be working out, though my impression of a sense of equine congeniality was a bit premature. Once at camp he would not let me near him.

We are encamped on a ridge top, or rather just below the ridgeline, on the north side. Only a few feet separate the magnificent views north and south. The weather over the Tianshan spreads out in all directions above us, but I can see below it to the south and northwest. To the south is a deep valley, and the tall massive bulk of Bogda Ola is covered with clouds. To the northwest stretches the Zungarian Plain. In the late afternoon sun, five large lakes lay glinting in the flat distance. It is a typical daytime mountain weather pattern: the morning is clear; in the afternoon, there is a buildup of thunderheads and a threat of thunderstorms. The sky clears again in the evening.

Sultan Sharip Kös is the 61-year-old patriarch of this family. His son is Adal, 30 years old. Adal's wife is Gulnur, 23, and they have a two-and-a-half-year old-son, Archen. Adal and Gulnur have been married three years. Aikun is Adal's older brother, 32 years old. Sultan Sharip Kös and Aikun have come up with Adal to help set up the summer camp. In a day or so all but Adal,

My Kazakh host Adal

Gulnur and Archen will head back down. Relatives often help out with this transhumant (i.e., vertical) migration to summer pastures, ensuring that the campsite is cleared and everything is set up quickly, helping to construct the yurt, and doing the initial herd count. Arriving at the encampment, Adal's brother and father have helped with the initial setup. Sultan Sharip, however, will leave the next day for the lake, and Aikun has already left to find a missing cow.

The Kös family has little, yet much. They seem content, but Adal and Gulnur's yurt is small by comparison to other Kazak yurts, and I was happy to record with my camera the five adults as they quickly assembled the structure from the great pile of parts on the ground. The yurt (*otaw* in Kazakh) is an extremely efficient and highly movable structure. The materi-

Gulnur and Archen in their yurt

Erecting the frame of the yurt

The completed yurt

als used for its construction are easily obtained. The latticework and spokes are of willow or poplar, and the felt blankets and straps are made from the wool of the sheep that is the mainstay of the Kazakh economy. The bright red latticework is of round-sectioned poles (the Mongol variant has a square section) and held together with metal connectors and cord. It is stretched out like an accordion into a circle that acts as the wall structure, while the low and colorfully painted wooden door and frame are the anchors to the latticework. The ceiling spokes are about eight feet long and curved at one end, each one tied to the top of the latticework, while the straight end is inserted into the *chanrach*. This curve makes the dome and the sidewalls higher, the yurt roomier. The skeleton, thus constructed, is covered with large waterproof felt blankets, and tied off with cords and flat woven or plaited straps. Rounding off the remaining essential parts of the yurt are the potbelly stove and stovepipe and the reed screens, which are placed between the outside felt and inside latticework.

The interior of the yurt is roomy. The floor of a Kazakh yurt is divided into two basic sections, the entryway and a raised sleeping platform, which is earthen and covered with felts and rugs. The dirt entryway is where boots are taken off and left. At the center of the yurt is the iron stove and stovepipe that funnels the smoke out the top. On cold days it dispenses much heat. The yurt is also divided along gender lines. As one steps inside the yurt, to the door's left are hung all the horse paraphernalia: lariats, bridles, ropes, and other horse-related items. This is the men's domain. To the right are the cooking implements that belong to the camp's domestic commander, the wife. A washbasin stands there and kitchen implements hang from the latticework. To the back wall are the trunks which hold clothing and other domestic items, and which are piled high with blankets and comforters. The back wall itself is hung with the large and exquisite embroidery on velvet which was part of the bride's dowry, and which is bestowed the place of pride in the yurt. The sleeping platform is divided along the same lines, with the right side belonging to the women and the other to the men.

It is early morning, but I have already been up for hours. I slept well in the high mountain air, on the felt-matted sleeping platform with six other people. Everyone is up with the daylight, and, after milk tea and bread, the men are out tending to the livestock. There is no water source close by the camp; so every few days Adal and Gulnur must take the horses along the mountain path to the closest spring, quite a ways away, and fill the two ten-gallon plastic jugs they use in camp. Adal does not say much, but he is a very decisive person. He quit drinking years ago, quit smoking only the previous year. He takes care of the flocks of four closely related families, over 700 sheep and goats, plus horses and cattle. His family will be up here until October. The sheep and goats were sheared once in April; he does not need to worry about that again until the fall. Approximately 450 of the animals are sheep raised for wool, about 100 for their meat, and 150 are goats. They have ten adult cows with five or six calves. Three horses round out the spread.

The sheep and goats must be counted each night, and Adal must account for them all. Naturally, the number of sheep and goats increases from day to day now, with the birth of lambs and kids. The animals are driven into an area just west of the yurt. Then, with people lining up across the field but leaving a wide opening, on a whistle and verbal command the animals begin to run through the opening. As they do, the couple counts them, Adal the sheep and Gulnur the goats. With only two people here during the rest of the summer, the counting must be quite a challenge. The clamor of the animals is constant, but with darkness, they all settle down quickly to a quiet sleep. The newborn lambs and kids, so fragile in the first day or two after birth, are brought into the warm yurt for the night. In their helplessness they are a very sweet addition to the group. Adal is up at daybreak before five a.m. to take the animals to the pastures, or *jaylaw*. Late in the afternoon he must again climb or descend to herd them back to the camp. The animals respond to verbal commands to move, and an occasional well-thrown and strategically placed rock encourages them in the right direction.

Adal took me along this day, up onto the ridge high above his camp. I search out a good view of Bogda Feng. There is a gentle, flower-strewn meadow above this pastureland, beautiful beyond words, green and lush, punctuated along the broad back of the ridge by rocky outcrops, colored with orange and yellow lichens. From near the top of this fairyland, I can look upon the vast, broad side of the Bodga Massif, the drifting clouds sometimes sparse and fleeting, accentuating the height of the 18,000-foot mountain. From where I stand, the main peak rises behind Akbulak, "White Headwaters," a lower, rocky handmaiden that sets off the awesome beauty of Bogda. A creek falls over a sheer rocky wall running across the empty valley, and the sound of the falling water carries clearly over the distance. There are horses grazing above me. A lone shepherd whistles to

his flock, somewhere hidden from my view. I am tempted to follow the summer routes along this magnificent valley, up beyond this idyllic place. The track below in the valley parallels the river, and for the past two days I have seen small caravans of Kazakh families, horses and cattle loaded down with all their summer needs - yurts, bedding, pots and pans - slowly making their way up to their family pastures. Often the sheep and goats are one or two days ahead of the family, herded by one or two family members.

It has been a few days, and I am having some stomach distress. I am not used to the plain Kazakh food and the somewhat unsanitary conditions of the camp. Before driving up to the lake, Sailik and I had stopped off at a local open-air market to purchase food for the pack trip. Besides the biscuits, fruit and cabbage, he also bought two kilos of fresh lamb. Plopped into a plastic bag, the meat hung from his saddle for almost three days before we cooked and consumed it. Aged, or rather, ripe. It is extremely difficult to keep clean under any conditions, given the huge numbers of animals and manure in the camp's immediate vicinity. It is a miracle that little Archen is not constantly sick. Kids that age constantly put fingers and other objects into their mouths, and he is no exception. His shoes are always sticky with cow dung. He is always running and constantly falling down. He wears split crotch pants, and, for a little boy reveling in the dirt, he probably has worms or other parasites. But he is a bright, healthy, cheerful and friendly little boy, who will reach up to grab my hand, who does not mind my holding him, who likes to play with his very loving father Adal and who misses his mother Gulnur when she is out of sight. He has already developed a relationship with the animals around him. He has a wonderful time commanding the cows - animals that are ten times his size, yet seem afraid of him. The staples of Kazakh meals are *nan* - the ubiquitous bread of Central Asian peoples - and *chaisz*, or milk tea: a concoction of brick tea, fresh cow's milk and salt; sour cheese; and short noodles, whittled from a ball of dough. *Kumiss* [*qimiz*], or fermented mare's milk, is popular during the summer months. The *nan* is unlike the round, flatbread of the Uyghurs and Uzbeks. It is a small, hard loaf easily baked in camp, where there is no oven. It is nutritious, tasteless but palatable when dipped in tea. Because of its saltiness, the *chaisz* is thirst quenching, similar in effect to a sports drink. The brick tea is broken into smaller pieces and dumped into a large teakettle and boiled. The resulting tea is not too strong and delicious on its own. The preparer then measures out the right amount of salt into a bowl, pours tea into it, and then pours it all back into the kettle to mix and dissolve thoroughly. Bowls are placed on the felt platform, and fresh milk (first heated, then cooled) is ladled into each bowl, and tea is poured to mix them. The final product, with bits of cream and curd floating on the surface, is refreshing, and bowl after bowl is consumed, along with pieces of *nan* and *irimshiq*, hard, sour Kazakh cheese.

It is time to leave the Kös family and return to Heavenly Lake. Adal is already up and gone to take his sheep and goats out by the time I awoke. I have a real respect for him and his wife, with all the work they must do every day to raise their animals and little boy. During the day I spent with him up in the pastures, I saw him as a very independent and self-sufficient man, who understood well the mountains and weather, his animals and the solitary life of a nomadic family. The previous day, I had presented him with a pair of Russian-made binoculars that I had bought in the Urumqi bazaar. Certainly he would need them more than I. Their residence here for the summer and much of the autumn would be lonely enough.

Kazakhs today in China are in transition, and one day the future of this traditionally independent people will be determined. There are about a million and a half Kazakhs living in Xinjiang. The central government wants them to live in permanent villages and adopt a sedentary life. Many do, as the increasing numbers of Kazakh villages and towns at the foot of the Tianshan attest. There are two sides to this government policy. On the one hand, some would consider it a kind of cultural imperialism, forcing the traditionally horse-riding and nomadic Kazaks to live the way the agrarian and town-dwelling Han Chinese do, as farmers and merchants, and closer to the centers of administrative and political control. They are encouraged to give up old ways. On the other hand, the government is also concerned about the standard of Kazakh living, and would prefer them to go to school, live closer to adequate medical care, and, in general, to raise their standard of living. But the transition to a sedentary lifestyle has been a perilous one for many formerly nomadic Kazakhs. Alcohol and drug abuse is common among young Kazakhs, and crime is all too frequent in the towns.

There are few economic opportunities for the Kazakh youths these days. The tourist trade at Heavenly Lake is dominated by Han Chinese, who run the hotels, shops and restaurants. Kazakhs (not known for their mercantile skills) are relegated to renting out their horses and yurts to tourists, and Kazakh children pose with lambs and ponies. Few Kazakhs go on to high school or college. Sailik is one of few Kazakhs I met in Xinjiang who had gone to college and graduated. As an educated Kazakh, he was troubled by the rivalry and chaos among the horse owners, each one jostling with the other in the rush to rent their horse to a tourist. Sailik had undertaken the cause of attempting to organize these horsemen and to bring some harmony and cooperation to this fledgling tourist industry. The traditional clan system seems to encourage dissention between rival families rather than cooperation. An old Bakhtiyari saying is relevant to the situation of the Kazakhs in China: "Me, my brother, and my cousin against the world; me and my brother against my cousin; me against my brother."

We are heading back down from the mountains. The vertical haul that took two hours the first day is accomplished in only 30 minutes in reverse and with the help of gravity. By the mid-afternoon, I am comfortably resting in the Kös family yurt above the north shore of the lake. They have done fairly well in catering to the tourist industry. The yurt is outfitted with a refrigerator, and there is a small stereo and television. Old Sultan Sharip is rather proud. Sailik poses with his uncle and cousins, and there is a wonderful closeness in this family. Sailik is the joker, and as we pose for some pictures, he teases Sultan Sharip about his fly being open. We all laugh heartily. My legs are fine. My horse, about as much in shape as I

was, is very glad for the rest. Back on my feet, I explore the nearby forest slopes. Now and again, riders come through leading their horses. I come across a few men butchering a sheep beneath a tree. And I sleep well that night. The next morning, before we take the van back to the city, Sailik and I head down to the creek to wash. Only after I have scrubbed by face with the clear water, do I notice the very clean sheep entrails draped over the shrubs and gently weaving back and forth in the flow of creek water nearby. But they do not faze Sailik, and his toilet is quickly done. We are soon on the road back to Urumqi.

About the Author

Bob Jones is a professional guide and Professor of Asian Studies at City College of San Francisco, where he has run the College's Summer Program in China since 1998. He specializes in the history and people of the Silk Road, and has lectured and led Silk Road expeditions for the Smithsonian Institution, the American Museum of Natural History, City College of San Francisco, and for Geographic Expeditions. He contributed to the Silk Road Foundation's "Travel the Silk Road" webpage (www.silkroadfoundation.org /toc/index.html/). He is scheduled to lead a 17-day China-only Silk Road trip from May 4-20, 2004, for Crane House/ The Asia Institute and the University of Louisville School of Arts and Sciences. From September 5-30, 2004, he will lead "The Silk Road Across Turugart Pass," a 26-day tour for Geographic Expeditions of San Francisco, which visits China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. For information on both tours, contact Geographic Expeditions at 1-800-777-8183 or Bob Jones at silkroader@bellsouth.net.

Announcements

The Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS) announces its Fifth Annual Conference, to be held October 14-17, 2004 at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, U.S.A.

CESS invites panel and paper proposals on topics relating to all aspects of humanities and social science scholarship on Central Eurasia. The deadline for submission of panel/paper proposals: APRIL 2, 2004. The geographic domain of Central Eurasia extends from the Black Sea and Iranian Plateau to Mongolia and Siberia, including the Caucasus, Crimea, Middle Volga, Afghanistan, Tibet, and Central and Inner Asia. Given the substantial interest in this conference, the program committee will be able to accept only a portion of the proposals submitted. The conference web pages for additional information are:

Main conference website:
http://cess.fas.harvard.edu/CESS_Conference.html
Registration:
http://cess.fas.harvard.edu/CESS_Conf-Reg.html
Program: (available in June 2004):
http://cess.fas.harvard.edu/CESS_Program.html

Full information about hosting and location at Indiana University:
http://www.iub.edu/~cess2004

CONFERENCE-RELATED CORRESPONDENCE SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO:

CESS 2004 Annual Conference
Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center (IAUNRC)
Indiana University
Goodbody Hall 324
Bloomington, IN 47405 U.S.A.
fax: +1 (812) 855-8667
tel.: +1 (812) 856-5263
e-mail: cess2004@indiana.edu

The Mongolia Society will hold its annual meeting in conjunction with the CESS conference. For more information: http://www.indiana.edu/~mongsoc/.

Current and upcoming exhibitions (as announced on the web sites of the hosting institutions):

Salvation: Images of the Buddhist Deity of Compassion

August 14, 2003–July 5, 2004

The **Los Angeles County Museum of Art** (LACMA) celebrates the importance of the Buddhist deity Avalokiteshvara—also known as Guanyin, Kwanum, and Kannon—across Buddhist Asia. "Salvation: Images of the Buddhist Deity of Compassion" is on view in the Masterpiece in Focus gallery. Avalokiteshvara, the primary source of Buddhist salvation, was the subject of extraordinary works of devotional art in various forms across many cultures. Spanning 1,500 years, these works represent the finest creative achievements of India, Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet. For more information, visit the Museum's website at http://www.lacma.org.

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Tibet: Treasures from the Roof of the World

October 12, 2003 - May 16 2004
The Bowers Museum of Cultural Art
2002 North Main Street
Santa Ana, CA 92706

Through the prism of its finest art, "Tibet: Treasures from the Roof of the World" offers Americans a rare glimpse into a great and mysterious world culture. Travelers trekked thousands of miles to see these treasured and priceless artifacts. Emperors presented them as gifts. Now, for the first time in the Western World, Americans will be able to see nearly 200 of these exquisitely created sacred objects, all with great cultural significance. The objects are from collections in Lhasa, including the Potala Palace and from the Tibet Museum.