

Saturday, March 2, 2013

For the past few days we've been watching the ice melt on Khovd square and on the pathways and sidewalks around town. I guess it's true! Spring arrives after White Month, Tsagaan Sar. Tsagaan Sar's date is based on the lunar calendar and is the beginning of the new year. We began the week of February 11 with two days off from school. This National Holiday is the most important holiday of the year for Mongolians who are compelled to visit their family members and share food and gifts with family and friends. The traditional deel is often seen worn by older Mongolians these days because of the cold weather but during Tsagaan Sar, it was a common dress item for younger Mongolians as well. This is a fairly new revival and many many beautiful deels were seen throughout town and at the home celebrations.

My initiation into Tsagaan Sar began with a casual invitation by our neighbor Tsagana who lives in the apartment next door with her husband and four children. Tsagana, whose name means "white," called and invited me to drop by. Mongolians are very proud of this holiday and happy to discuss each part of the tradition. So, in between trips to the kitchen, Tsagana and her other friends carefully explained the meaning of the large sculpture on the table made of bread and decorated with sugar cubes, Mongolian cheese, and candy.

I had been told by other foreigners that a gift of chocolates and a crisp Tugrik bill are appropriate to bring to the host. So once inside the living room where the large table was spread with food, I handed over the gifts. These were placed on a shelf nearby where many other items were carefully exhibited including a carton of milk (radiated milk that doesn't need refrigeration) and a hadag,* the blue scarf that one sees all over Mongolia.

A greeting was performed with each guest whereby the oldest person (usually me or Woody) was seated at the table and then each family member standing, faced me and placed their arms under mine and wished me a healthy life or good Tsagaan Sar (I'm not sure which). He or she, then allowed me to kiss them on each side of their face. (This greeting has been continuing since Tsagaan Sar with all the University staff exchanging the greeting with each other or visitors just once.) The older person is always the kisser and his/her arms are on top of the younger persons. Each of Tsagana's children, except the 6 month old, came and gave me greetings and wishes. Of the other guests, one woman wore a deel, as did her children (12 and 6 years old) as did one of Tsagana's girls. Tsagana did not nor did her husband.



The decorative sculpture on the table (bol) is for viewing only, like a gingerbread house in a home where people celebrate Christmas. After the holiday is finished, the sculpture is dismantled and distributed to friends and family. Various other dishes covered the table including candy, cheeses, cut salami and pickles, fruit, and special sweetened aruul, the dried milk curd typically eaten as a snack.

Tsagana served hot milk tea, the typical drink served to guests and offered in restaurants, and plates of salad. Her salads were made with potatoes, eggs, and mayonnaise so the



overall appearance was mostly white. Her husband who speaks a bit of English remained seated during her bustling about and pressed us to eat. Meanwhile, she had taken buuz (dumplings) from her freezer and began steaming them in the kitchen. Soon large plates of buuz were presented to us at the table. After eating and visiting for a while, toasting with vodka and red wine, Tsagana brought each guest a gift. This is the signal that it is time for the guest to leave. (I love this not-so-subtle message!)



During the course of the Tsagaan Sar celebration, Woody and I attended six different celebrations, four at University colleagues' apartments, one in a student's home, and one in a family's ger. Each one followed the pattern as described above with a few variations. Sometimes the vodka was flowing, sometimes only wine was served. My colleague Oyun who had a huge piece of cooked meat on her table (a cow's back, I believe she told us) follows the tradition that the oldest person cuts slices and serves them to the other guests around the table. She also served aarts, the yogurt like drink (white) along with the milk tea and red (not white) wine.



At Sudo's house, where we went with five other students, her father joined us and passed the vodka cup requesting a song each time one of the young women was handed the cup. Woody and I sang verses from "Home, Home on the Range" and "Oh My Darling Clementine." Oyun explained that about forty families would visit her over the course of the holiday which extends officially for one week but can really continue for several more.

By far, our most exciting trip was last Saturday, February 23 to the ger of our friend, who makes wool slippers, stuffed animals, miniature gers, and deels, and sells milk, aruul, yogurt, and sea buckthorn berry juice in a herder's shop just down the street. We had decided to check on her Saturday morning to pick up Woody's new slippers when we were invited to come back to the shop in a few hours in order to be driven to her ger in a

neighborhood south of town near the airport. Once at her family's ger, we spent a few hours enjoying her company (little English was spoken) and were presented with chocolate and a handmade stuffed horse and mandarin which we believe belonged to an older daughter attending University in UlaanBatar.

This was our first visit to a family's ger since our arrival and the experience was both humbling and enlightening. Khovd is surrounded by ger districts where the vast majority of the population lives. If you've been looking at Woody's photos, you know that most gers in the city sit behind walls or fences and may share a yard (khashaa) with another family, likely a relative. When a family earns more money, they might replace their ger with a small house, usually rectangular with a few separate rooms. The basic set-up of the house is basically the same as the ger. Some families can buy an apartment like ours.

The ger has a round floor plan and all the furniture is situated around the outside edge. A stove is in the center and vents to the outside through the round wagon-wheel in the roof that also has glass windows and lets in sunlight. The stove is used for both heating and cooking. There may be a small cupboard or worktable along the edge for preparing meals, but often times the work of cooking and cleanup is done squatting on the floor. A small table (like a low coffee table) is used for meals. From the photograph above, you may be able to see the roof ribs of the ger which all meet at the wagon-wheel at the roof's center. Woody has hopes of helping to construct a ger when the weather warms up so I'm sure there will

be a more detailed description on his website in the next few months. While there may be electricity to the ger, there is no running water. So, a small sink area serves as a place to clean up and an outhouse outdoors is available. This is also true of most houses that are built. Indoor plumbing is reserved for apartments, some business, and office buildings. This ger had an electric washing machine and also a commercial top load freezer.

As can be imagined, this visit was a highlight for us and despite our language challenges, we were able to express our appreciation to the family with hugs, photographs, and enjoying the food placed before us.

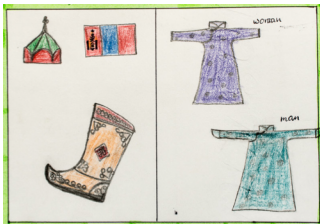
On another note, Woody and I have actually been working at the University this month. The postcard project that the sophomore students started in October/November came to fruition this week when I took all the returned postcards into class and distributed them to the students. Using their maps of the US and matching the postcards sent and received, we were able to talk and write some facts about the US. (Lots of Mongolian spoken, I might add...unfortunately.) Most of the students received a postcard from the US and were thrilled to read their messages and connect with someone in that faraway world. I have photos to share with people who were involved in the project. They may be hearing from their postcard pal again.



Returns



Learning about Wisconsin



Davka's



Aimoldir's

*(The hadag can be seen most frequently outdoors at ovoos...the "shamanistic" rock piles that commemorate a safe crossing or passage, typically at a high place. The blue scarf can also be tied on trees, statues, graves, or at any other location.)