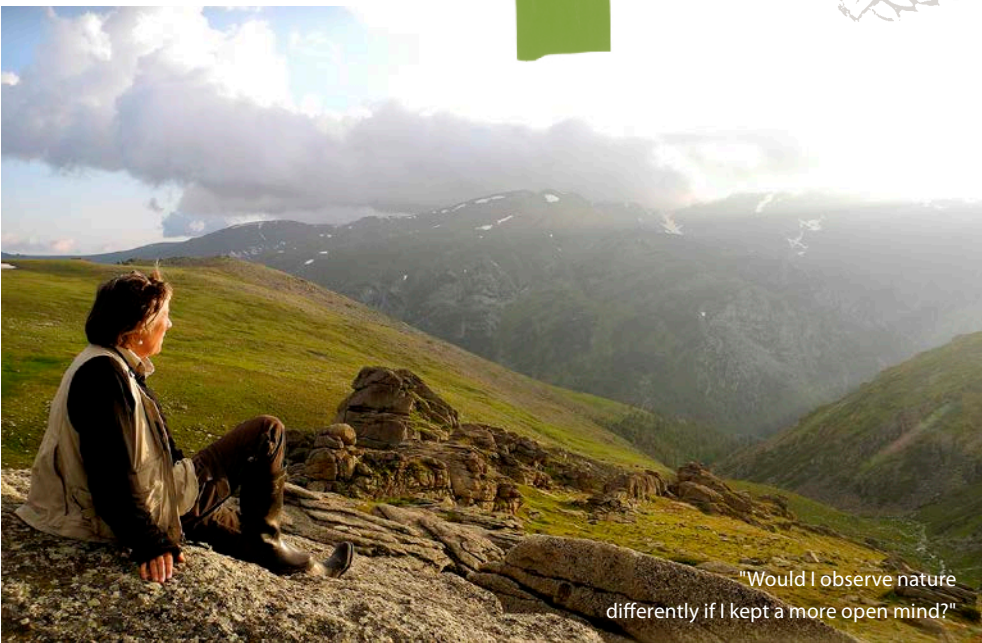


Horseback trekking in the Altai mountains

# Journey of the Spirit

Explorer and biologist Arita Baaijens went horseback trekking across the Altai Mountains in the heart of Central Asia. During her two-month journey, she tried to switch off her Western way of thinking and to open herself up to the scenery. She met a flying stag and surrendered.





The guide reads  
this country,  
so unfamiliar  
to me, like  
a well-worn  
book with many  
scribbles  
and notes in  
the margins



Long-haired yaks shuffle around the tent on the frosted grass. Their good-natured grunting curls the lips and removes all thought. Beyond the tent flap, the Tsengel volcano floats on a sea of morning mist. A little closer, where only last night an ugly travel bag was lying in the grass, a green gem trimmed with shiny diamonds now sparkles. As I stand in the tranquil Mongolian scenery, my lungs fill up automatically, greedy and eager, like a drowning person who has been under too long.

It's been two months since I started my trek through the unparalleled beauty of the Altai Mountains, where the borders of four Central Asian countries meet. My trip began in Kazakhstan and takes me through China and Mongolia to Russia, where I will complete the circle after 1500 km. As far as I know, no one ever managed this yet. It's too hard and too complicated, but setting a record is not the real purpose of my trip. It never was. I'm driven by curiosity and by the urge to push my personal boundaries. I spent many years crossing deserts on the backs of camels and learned that death is not something to be feared. Fifteen years and four books later, I was up for a new challenge. I ended up in the mountains and forests of Siberia, where nature is said to be filled with spirits, and where the wind carries messages. The indigenous people believe in nature spirits, and they perform rituals for mountains and trees, hoping to invoke prosperity or a cure. It's a far cry from our Western world. If you're sick, you see a doctor. Scientists explain how everything works. As a biologist, I have a good eye for the miracle of nature, but not for the hand of God. I always had a hard time accepting the notion of a Mother Earth having invisible powers and offering shelter to nature spirits. My irritation vanished when I realized that all beliefs about nature, including the scientific ones, are the work of humans. Any model of reality is an attempt to control chaos. It can be a myth of creation, a fairy tale, or a scientific model, depending on who says it. This only makes the world more exciting and adventurous, because what if I observe nature differently if I keep a more open mind? It's quite possible that I'll see phenomena and nuances that escape me now, although the people of the Altai see them just fine. So I decided to put this to the test. Ever since Kazakhstan, I've been

writing down the major ups and downs in my state of mind in a notebook, with information about the scenery. I hope it will result in a chart or a diagram that shows how scenery and mind influence each other. So far, I'm not very impressed with the results. My list shows that lousy moments can happen anywhere. Only the moments of intense happiness

Indigenous people believe  
in nature spirits and perform  
rituals for trees

seem to have something in common. I'm always above the tree line then, where my blood tingles as much as the air does. It's not bad, but somehow I had hoped for a little bit more. And last night, my first night in Mongolia, I got it. I had just put up my tent in the summer meadow belonging to some shepherds who are also my interpreter Huandakh's parents. I wanted to say something on camera before dark, about the treeless landscape, the many hues of green, and the fantastic sky that looks much bigger and bluer here than anywhere else. To my surprise, I began to cry, and kept on crying for the rest of the evening. It's the weirdest thing I ever experienced.

### A universe of felt

Back to the yaks and the early morning. A little numb from the cold, I step into the ger, the felt tent belonging to Huandakh's parents. It smells of burned dung and boiled yak's milk. My interpreter is still in bed with her three-year-old daughter, who is staying with her grandparents, and is glad to see her mother. The child looks pretty robust and not at all like the fragile interpreter, whom I have dubbed Barbie because of her lipstick and powdered cheeks. "Come on, lady," says our horse guide Dalaikhan, rattling the iron bedstead. "Everyone else is up." Dalaikhan arrived yesterday, on the back of a moped, wedged between a large cooking tent and his luggage. Our horseback journey through Mongolia starts tomorrow, and my spirits lift at the sight of Dalaikhan and his supple leather hat, jaunty overcoat, worn >

"Would I observe nature  
differently if I kept a more open mind?"





Prehistoric etchings depict a flying goose, a symbol of the soul

> boots and sparkling eyes. Our Mongolian Marlboro Man also has other qualities that Barbie lacks: decisiveness and curiosity.

My eyes roam the interior of the ger, which is of a cheering beauty. Beds, coupled together like railway carriages, are adorned with embroidered puppet show curtains and soft cushions. Shiny shallow bowls sit under the beds for the nightly pee. Every available place on the walls is covered by embroidered tapestries with hand-sewn geometrical patterns. The women's domain is to the right of the low door, with food supplies and bowls on a

This magical statue,  
at least a thousand years old,  
has an amazing power

sideboard painted blue. Boots and coats are on the left of the door. In the center, I see a stove, a small table and stools: what more could a steppe dweller ask for, besides freedom?

I describe the interior like an outsider would. A nomad recognizes his own soul inside a ger, the history of his people, the bond with heaven and earth. Every detail, every decoration, every colour, every part of the ger, from the rickety door and threshold up to the hole in the roof, has a deeper meaning and reflects the cosmic order. The matter of arranging your furniture is not free of obligations, although nobody remembers why the women's domain

should be on the right of the stove, and why men use the left half. They do it because their parents and their ancestors did it this way. The ger is like life itself taking its natural course. It's absolutely pointless to ask how and why.

### An outsider passing through

The soft burble of melting water is everywhere. Boulders and pebbles as far as the eye can see. Blind walls of ice, soft blue speedwell in juicy green grass full of icy-cold rivulets, and small islands of yellow and purple primroses. Rain clouds chase each other high overhead. Dalaikhan pulls our packed camel along on a rope tied to a wooden pin through its nose. I've never seen such a huge camel up close. The hairy back of this double-humped animal – I call him Elvis because of his striking mop of hair – is covered with rugs that function as buffers. There are rounded beams on his sides with household goods and provisions hanging off of them. Elvis trudges behind the horses, a little dispirited, burdened with our food, tents, luggage, jerry cans, cooker, pots and pans. It's about 150 kg in total, not counting the video cameras. And now it's starting to rain. No wonder Elvis looks grouchy. The tough climate of the Altai mountains – extreme cold and snow for eight months of the year – blasts, lashes and moulds body and soul of all creatures living here. Take the shepherd on the mountain pass where we were just freezing to death. There was a hailstorm. Freezing air and megalomaniac vistas took our breath away. The curious shepherd's boy walked over to us, a flock of sheep in his wake. His face was contorted with the cold, water was dripping from his coat, he had no

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of all creatures living here





> shelter at all. Does he complain? The boy doesn't know any better. This is his life, outdoors with the animals, no one to talk to except the wind and the bleating sheep. No wonder then that gers play such a central part in stories and songs. The felt shelter is the warm womb that every shepherd longs for while he wanders around the lonely pampas. The encounter makes me wonder to what extent I, an outsider passing through, can really read and understand this landscape. Our guide reads this country, so unfamiliar to me, like a well-worn book with many scribbles and notes in the margins. Where I see rocks, he spots eagles' nests. A hill looks like a hill to me, but he knows that a wolf killed so-and-so's foal there. That farm up against the mountainside? It belongs to the Whatsits, their grandpa did this and that, and their son drowned in the river one stormy night. When we reach an ovo, a pile of rocks marking a sacred place, Dalaikhan knows which village comes here every year to pray for prosperity. Every stone, path and mountain has a story. My experiment with the chart shows that my mind subconsciously registers more than I had hoped after all. The biologist in me can't explain the torrent of tears a few nights ago, but my subconscious picks up subtle signals from my surroundings and passes them on in code, to keep me from being too shocked. Unlike in China and Kazakhstan, I see ovos and prayer ribbons and offerings to nature everywhere in Mongolia. My brain registers the outward signs of respect and awe for nature, but sensing the deeper meaning is something that happens without my rational mind.

### Solidified life

My little horse and I dance along, across the tufts of grass, in slow motion, so the others disappear from view and I have the mirror lakes, cloud formations and frozen mountains all to myself. My raincoat comes off. The Black Lake, lying between me and China – and supposedly surrounded by menhirs – comes closer. From its shore, we travel north along ancient burial mounds and rock formations with engravings. It's one of those days when everything goes swimmingly. Green islands float in glassy lakes, trees (trees!) reach for the sun high up in a bright blue sky, and muddy paths dry up beneath our feet. Three days, two mountain passes and various

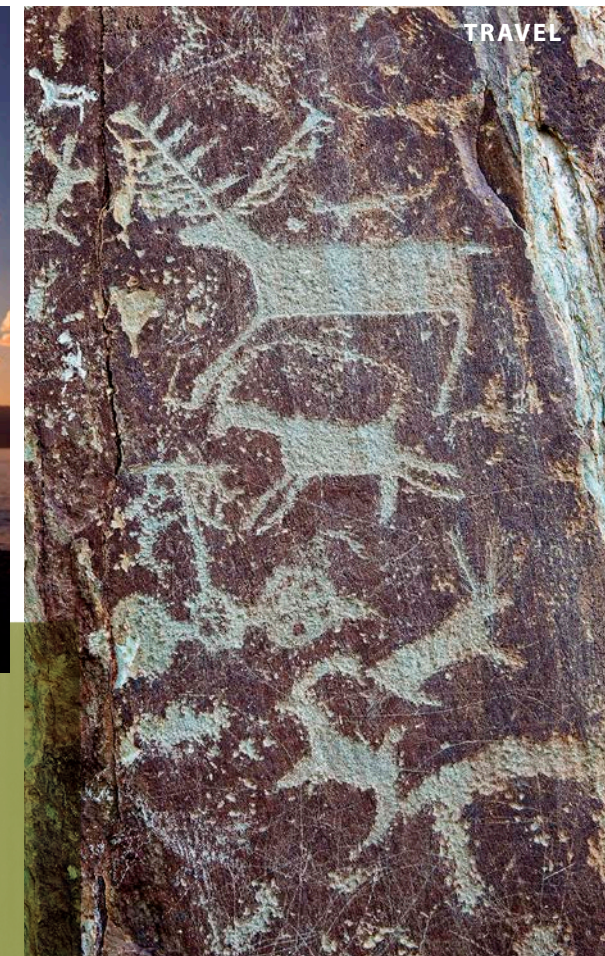
turbulent river crossings later, our small company reaches the sacred Sheved-Uul Valley. In prehistoric times, people etched miles of signs into the granite rocks. I clamber deeper into the rocky crevices, humming a tune. The smell of thyme floats in the air. A hare jumps out of sight. There's the first horseman, carefully depicted holding a lasso. One rock further down I see a clumsy version of an ibex, a rock goat with long horns. Solidified life surrounds me on all sides. I see horsemen and galloping horses, ibexes, wild boars, and also magical creatures. One smooth rock face suddenly makes my heart skip a beat. Dozens of figures tumble around in a dark universe of solidified magma, but what really takes my breath away is a gigantic flying stag with antlers in curly spirals and legs elegantly floating in the air. This magisterial animal, escaping from two outstretched hands, was made 3000 years ago by people in the Bronze Age. Its half open mouth is that of a flying goose, a symbol of the soul. And its flight into the sky probably depicts the transformation of the soul, rising to the heavens after death. I say 'probably' because we'll never know for sure what prehistoric people thought. But since the stag is often depicted on gravestones, and the white goose still symbolizes the pure soul in the Altai today, my explanation might be right. It's remarkable how much power the iconic image still exudes, even after thousands of years.

### Magical monkey

A few days later, the sun is high in the sky when we reach the summer camp of some Tuvan yak herders. A handful of gers are built in a semicircle. Outside every doorway, there's a simple altar made of rocks, with a sprig of juniper to ward off disaster. The oldest inhabitant, Urtnasan Alonbayr, invites us into his felt abode. The doorpost is so low that visitors are forced to bow to the sacred fire in the middle of the room, on which a dish with hot oil and dough balls is simmering. Grandpa shows us photographs and tells us about the history of the Tuvan people, which originate from nearby Siberia. Small glasses fill up with home-made araga as if by magic. Grandpa talks and tops us up, and tops us up again until our eyes shine. My muddled brain can see the magical monkey Urtnasan he is telling us about jumping around. It is said to be the Great Maker of all the rock engravings >



Elvis the camel, as Arita calls him, carrying food, tents, jerry cans, a cooker, pots and pans on his back



Dozens of  
figures  
tumble around  
in a dark  
universe on  
the rock  
face



Every part of the ger, even the hole in the roof, has a deeper meaning and reflects the cosmic order



> in the valley we just passed through. Foreign experts who disagree are plain wrong, is his decided opinion. Who else but a mythological creature could scratch magical figures into rocks? You might dispose of Urtnasan's ideas as nonsense, but maybe the old Tuvan is better at understanding Stone Age man than academically trained scientists whose world no longer contains any magic at all. The magical stag keeps haunting me in the days to follow. I can see the image in my dreams, and sometimes during the day, in my mind's eye. A strong brand, that's what advertisers would say about a logo like that. I'm sure psychologists could figure out why the noble flying animal with its outstretched neck occupies my mind so much. I suspect it means I have to learn to let go. I'm still asking questions about the how and why of this sacred scenery, although all things sacral are by definition not part of logic. "Give the brain a rest," that's what I intended to do out here. But if you have no talent for losing control, that's not easy. The deer slinks away, but suddenly comes back with a vengeance when we get to Tavn Bogd, five mighty summits covered in ice and snow on the border between Mongolia, China and Russia. The stone and ice giants look down arrogantly on the puny horsemen at their feet. Even Elvis the pack camel seems to have shrunk in the wash; his huge shape is barely noticeable against the overwhelming backdrop of ice and rocks. Imposing ovos are placed in strategic positions and wrapped in colourful prayer ribbons. What an amazing place for an altar! Where in the world can you pray to five Olympic gods all at once? My chest expands,

oxygen races into billions of cilia, fireworks explode, thoughts dissolve. It's hard to describe what happens next, because thoughts doesn't play a role in it. I spend two days walking, lying on the grass, sitting in my little tent on the edge of a glacier, and I stare at the majestic mountains in their white cloaks, at the changing light, at the racing clouds and the shifting colors. No second is ever the same and I am completely mesmerised by so much beauty, beauty that has a nasty edge to it at this altitude. Nature rules here. If the wind picks up for a second, I turn into an icicle. I can't sleep anymore, my eyes refuse to shut. I stare and stare at those mountains, completely fulfilled, completely happy. This is how a groupie must feel, or a member of a sect. Risking the danger of the God of the Old Testament turning me into a pillar of ice, I turn my head 180 degrees every other minute to catch a final glimpse of the tops of Tavn Bogd. Sometimes, I trot over to a glacial lake and stare at the reflection of those white summits on the dark water. As often happens on this journey, I want to dissolve in this scenery that has had me speechless for days now. What was it that I saw, all those hours at the foot of Tavn Bogd? Maybe the source, the filled void from which everything springs and to which everything returns. In any event, Tavn Bogd utterly silenced all the voices in my head. I was in paradise for two precious days: in the mountains, the colors of eyes, and the space behind the clouds. The flying stag will be pleased. 🦅

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY ARITA BAAIJENS