

The Elusive Nomad

On the Road with Nomads in Central Asia: A Page Out of My Journal

by S. Clement

It's almost 6:00 p.m. on the twentieth of the month. This afternoon we left the small town around which our lives and travel have revolved for the last ten days, starting our trek back to the international border. The drive would normally have taken about six hours straight through, but we bailed off of the national "highway" (much of it no more than poorly maintained gravel track) and headed across country to see the last of the nomad camps before crossing the border.

We've driven over miles of some of the most desolate country you can imagine. Were it not for the occasional scrubby tuft of grass, this area could be described as lunar.

Since about two o'clock, a light to moderate rain has been falling, the mist adding to the sense of dreariness already induced by the largely monochromatic hills and barren rocks.

(Hours later) We are now seated in the round tent of a herding family. Rain is pattering on the roof. The camp is situated on the side of a valley, and several streams descend from the surrounding hills, converging in the middle of the little community of yurts. The roar of the running water makes a lulling backdrop to the sound of the rain and the quiet and familiar noises of nomadic housekeeping: the opening and closing of the stove door; the tapping of a metal poker as someone stirs the fire; the jostling of pots and kettles as tea is prepared.

Dusky light drifts down through the plastic sheeting that covers the center roof hole of the yurt, inducing a drowsy restfulness that follows nicely on a day of hard road.

Outside, most of this nomadic community is engaged in the evening milking of cows. The yard is muddy and wet, and everyone is bundled in what inadequate rain gear they can muster: old coats, plastic sheets, damp hats and old boots. Though I know that fairly intense work is being carried out in the



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rain just yards from me, I can hardly think of a more restful setting than that which I have just described.

One of the men of the family has come in from the damp and a kettle of tea has just been filled. It looks like we guests will be treated to something warm to drink—a welcome blessing on a cool, dreary and damp evening.

The colorful cloth is laid out on the floor before us and our evening tea is served. In addition to the cream, yogurt, and baked bread, there are two kinds of fried bread offered. One is like a fried pastry we called elephant ears that we used to get at the state fair; the other more like a New Orleans *beignet*. Both are tasty, especially spread with fresh cream and sprinkled with sugar.

They tell us that the rain has been falling for ten days straight. This is problematic as they are in hay harvest season. If the rain doesn't slacken up soon, winter could be tragic. A good supply of hay is critical to bring the livestock through the next few months of heavy snow and temperatures far below freezing. Muddy ground and damp grass do not make good hay.

Our driver tells us that the road will be difficult tomorrow due to the rain. We will see how that adventure develops.

For now, we'll catch up on our rest. I think I'll take a stroll outside, survey the community, get the lay of the land in case one of our party needs to step out during the night, and then come in to visit with our hosts as the night deepens. A pot of hot soup has been promised later in the evening.

We may be locked inside later due to the inclement weather, but that may prove to be beneficial. With nothing to do but wait out the rain, we will, hopefully, have a good, profitable visit, learning more about life for herding families in these harsh environs, and how people like us can engage, serve and share.

(A few hours later) The sun has set: the light of the full moon is diffused through a heavy canopy of clouds, giving a luster to the country that makes moving about outside easy, even in this unfamiliar place.

I am sitting on a pallet of pads and blankets on the floor of our host family's main yurt. The light of that full moon and the scant flickering of the dung fire escaping from the stove box barely illuminate the inside of this tent.

The patter of rain on the tent has stopped, but the murmur of the mountain streams outside seems to have become nearly a roar in the dead quiet of this lonely mountain night. I seldom feel this at peace, this at ease, this at home.

I almost don't want to go to sleep, preferring to sit awake and enjoy the reality of where I am.

The warmth of the stove bathes my face. The lightly acrid but pleasant aroma of the dung fire brings back memories of evenings spent with dear, beloved friends in other regions.

After stepping out this evening for a bit of fresh air and a half-bowl of tobacco, I returned to the yurt to find our supper spread. Two plates were piled with boiled mutton, and we were each served a big bowl of steaming mutton broth. Finely chopped onion and fried bread crumbled into the broth made a thick and tasty soup. Our host served us happily, and the conversation—through our driver-cum-translator—was full of laughter and learning.

Yes, I think that I'll just sit here on my pallet for a while and enjoy where I am.



Sleep is at my door, but she will have to wait. I must be sure to give thanks to my heavenly Father for blessing me so richly. He is good, and here I find it most easy to deeply enjoy him in the midst of his beautiful creation.

(Next morning) As day was breaking, the first light sneaking over the eastern ridge and chasing away the tentative light of the full moon, our host, a middle-aged nomad man named Rachim, could be heard outside making his morning prayers. The soft singing of “Allah hu akbar” drifted through the walls of our yurt.

The day starts early in a herding camp. As the sun crests the horizon, livestock is milked, then turned out to graze. The fresh milk is taken into the yurts to be processed. Cream will be separated; butter will be churned; yogurt will be started.

Once calm was brought to the activity of milking and the turning out of

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livestock, our breakfast was brought in. Rice boiled in milk was the main course, accompanied by the ubiquitous bread and dairy. Salted milk tea and black tea were passed around to finish it off.

We visited a while longer with our hosts while our driver checked over the truck. These are good people. As I shake hands with Rachim and thank him for his hospitality, he embraces me kindly and the word “honorable” comes to mind. Though I know that there is none righteous, there are some folk out there that we can, by worldly standards, call good. I think these are good people. But they still need the good news that we hope to share with them.

This is an inhospitable land, inhabited by a singularly hospitable people. Our quick, expeditionary pass through their

lands and lives has allowed us to meet a few of them and learn some potentially useful things about their world and the challenges facing them. With this information, we hope to be able to prepare and equip people who would be willing to answer the call and rise to the challenge.

Will someone hear, as did Paul in Corinth, the message that “I have many people in this place”?

How then will they call on him whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

Pray, indeed, that the Lord of the harvest would raise up workers for his harvest. **IJFM**

