



Immersed in
NATURE

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: PASCALE SURY
LOCATION: MONGOLIA



Ideas jostle in my head. *What will I experience, what will I discover? A simple life? Comfort? I don't think so. Will I be cold? How will we communicate? Where will I sleep? What will I eat?* I try not to think, not to anticipate. I'm soaked and my face stings from the freezing Siberian wind. Pine trees burdened by snow loom out of the formless sky. *Forest means arrival.* Then I see the first teepee and the smoke of a wood stove. From behind a tree, the first reindeer raises its head. Then two. The vision is magical.



Sain Baina-U! [Good morning!] I have just arrived in the Tsaatan camp after long hours of riding in a snowstorm with my guide Bilguun. The greeting floats through the air from the opening of the *ortz*, one of five teepees, and I step inside this new world for the first time. An old dream has finally come true.

Khurzee Magsar pushes me close to the wood stove in the centre of the *ortz* with a big smile, and urges me to sit and dry off. *'Bayarlalaa!* [Thank you!]' I reply, grateful for the warmth. As my eyes adjust, I see that Khurzee is stirring something in a pot and has no doubt just broken off conversation with the two men sitting nearby. She welcomes me with a traditional salted butter tea, just like the drinks being sipped by the men, and I take it from her with a smile.

My gaze darts around the *ortz*'s interior. It's small. *All their lives happen in this narrow space,* I think. It's so different from my own life, but I like the culture shock. I look down at the tea. Although my own diet is gluten free and vegan, I cannot refuse

this – even if just to warm my hands. Khurzee and I look at each other and smile. It's a moment of communication beyond words.

Bilguun sits a little way aside, watching our interaction intently, ready to jump in. A guide is essential here; the Tsaatan speak Tuvan, a Mongolian dialect. Living conditions are extreme here, in the icy vastness of northern Mongolia. I'm only just beginning to understand what that truly means.

For the survival of their reindeer, the Tsaatan live isolated from the rest of the world, in the taiga on the Siberian border. Dried meat hangs from the spars above my head. The Tsaatan live on meat and dairy products, and their lives are punctuated by the rhythm of the animals. The bond with their animals is close – a bond they depend upon absolutely. This is something else, I realise now, that I can only truly begin to comprehend over the coming days as I spend time with these people.

After the tea and some mutual observations, I am taken to the neighbouring *ortz* where Bilguun and I will sleep. ▶▶



The journey to the Darkhad Valley was long: 10 days from the capital, Ulaanbaatar, to the province of Khövsgöl; 10 days by car and on horseback, 10 days in breathtaking landscapes, running the steppes – in the cold, the high altitude, the dust. Access to this region close to Russia is also not possible without a valuable permit. This long and difficult journey marked a separation between everything I know and everything I hoped to come to know.

As a photojournalist, nomad, and long-distance traveller, I promised myself years ago that I would spend time amongst the Tsaatan. I've always known that such a journey would be rich in emotions and lessons but physically demanding.

Having been on the road for months, my body feels tired – I need a little comfort. And I know that by going to the Tsaatan, I will live in simplicity in every way. The older I get, the more I need nature, simplicity, authenticity. I do not find these values when I am in Europe. Being far from my landmarks and my comfort zone gives me deep joy. And yet sometimes the reality can be harsh.

That night, the temperature drops to -8°C . I sleep fully clothed and inside two sleeping bags. I am awakened by the cold but also by the cry of reindeer and children playing outside. I decide to get up even if I feel reluctant in the biting frost.

Outside, the first rays of the sun warm me – it feels so good. The children are laughing, cheeks rosy red. They don't seem to suffer from the cold; I realise they must be used to it. They wear traditional clothes, the *deel*, which can be made from cotton, silk, or wool. The children, especially one in particular, Zaya, keep asking me to push them on the only swing in the camp, which I do. 'Higher, higher!' Zaha laughs out loud in pure delight. Meanwhile, the boys play football with a reindeer-hair ball. I am surprised by their inventiveness: they play with what they find around them in their natural environment – a piece of wood, the dog – and do not need industrially manufactured toys.

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I spend some time with Khurzee. We walk together in the snowy forest from one reindeer to another. She is almost 50 years old, I learn as Bilguun translates, and is the mother of four children. I find myself bewitched by the beauty of the Siberian forest – this stark, elemental place. ‘We seek the cold for the survival of the reindeer,’ Khurzee says through Bilguun. ‘They need it for their bodies. We are nomads, like many Mongolian people, but we are the most isolated in the country, from a minority ethnic group in Mongolia, a small Tuva community of Turkish origin living in the province of Khövsgöl.’ She explains that ‘*Tsaa*’ means ‘reindeer’ in their language: the Tsaatan are therefore ‘those who live with reindeer’. However, they prefer to call themselves ‘people of the taiga’.

‘There are only 220 of these reindeer breeders left,’ she tells me, ‘divided into 44 families scattered into small nomadic clans.’ Khurzee Magsar and her family lead a simple and harsh life in an environment

to match. So different from my Western existence.

An orts is important in Tsaatan life. I can enter without permission, but a strict division is required inside. Each time, I look at Khurzee’s face to show me where I can stay or sit. It’s like a little game between us. She explains: ‘The space on the left is reserved for guests, the one at the back for relatives, and the space on the right, where I am sitting, is that of the owners.’ All these people live around the wood stove, the centrepiece, the guardian against the cold. ‘For us, the fire, into which no waste is thrown, is sacred,’ Khurzee explains. ‘And I am responsible for maintaining it. It is one of the roles of the woman.’

But Khurzee has so many tasks to accomplish every day. Within the family, she is also responsible for the interior of the orts; the making of tea, bread, cheese, and yoghurt; the drying of meat; finances; children and their education; making clothes and crafts... and more. Meanwhile, the man goes to cut wood. ‘Are you never tired?’ I ask her. Her answer

is just a big smile. Her English is poor. Most of the time, we communicate with gestures if Bilguun is not with us.

I’ve observed that the couple share the tasks related to reindeer, with the exception of milking females, which is reserved for women. The couple are rich compared to other families: they have a beautiful herd of nearly 400 reindeer, while the average is around 100.

The Tsaatan rely on their animals for almost all of their basic needs. Reindeer provide incredibly rich milk, cheese, meat (even if in small quantities), fur, and leather. They help with transport, and their excrement serves as fuel. Their antlers, reaching full development during the rutting period, represent a significant annual income. Twice a month, the family goes to town to stock up on sugar, rice, flour, and salt.

Khurzee’s life is governed by the reindeer. She gets up early in the morning for milking, and every day I follow her to observe and learn. ▶▶

This is the complex dilemma of these nomads: attracted by the modern world, but worried about seeing their own ancestral world gradually disappear.



I like the sound of the milk tinkling down into the pot. White drops bloom like snowflakes on her clothes. The reindeer doesn't move at all, and Khurzee is silent, utterly focused on her daily task. I respect her silence. This moment is suspended: Khurzee, the reindeer, the white pines around us, and me standing just aside, breath held and heart thumping.

The herd is then taken to the heights of the camp to graze. When necessary, about four times a year, the Tsaatan move with their herds to allow them to find food. Lichens, which only grow in this taiga environment, are essential for their intestinal flora.

In summer the nomads move further north, even more isolated from the rest of the world, to find the cold that suits the reindeer so well. In winter the temperature can drop to -60°C . But, every year, the Tsaatan must venture ever further into the taiga in pursuit of the cold – as well as the lichen, threatened by the oil industry. Khurzee, who perpetuates a timeless way of life, observes climate change even here. The family lost 100 reindeer last year due to unseasonal heat.

Life, weather, and climate can be read on faces: with deeply grooved wrinkles, they look older than their age.

A life in harmony with nature gives Khurzee's family everything, but also requires vigilance. Every evening, I observe the breeders tying up their animals near the teepees, guarded by dogs to keep predators at bay during the night. The wolf represents a real danger, particularly at the end of summer when the first big cold snaps arrive from Siberia.

Spending time with them is a beautiful lesson for me. Despite a difficult daily routine, Khurzee loves her free life, so rich in simplicity. Her world and mine are so different.

While most Mongols are Buddhists, the Tsaatan are animists and developed the practice of shamanism over the centuries. Khurzee explains: 'The shaman, acting as a messenger, creates the link between the world of men and the world of spirits. Spirits that are found everywhere: in

trees, springs, mountains, or *ongon*, these sacred supports in the shape of figurines.'

Today, their ancestral way of life is threatened, even though they receive \$80 per month per adult and \$40 per child from the government to help them maintain it. 'It's not much but it's better than nothing,' Khurzee tells me. Increasingly, the Tsaatan are turning to tourism, welcoming travellers in exchange for a little money and selling them crafts. This new activity represents both an economic boon and a challenge for the Tsaatan, because this external influence also tends to change their ancestral shamanic and totemic rites.

For several years, the government has required all Tsaatan children be in school from the age of six. They only visit their parents on weekends or during vacations, and for Khurzee and her family this upheaval will likely hasten the end of their nomadic life. Many Tsaatan have already moved to urban areas. This is the complex dilemma of these nomads: attracted by the modern world, but worried about seeing their own ancestral world gradually disappear.

It's time to go. Khurzee is standing next to me. She keeps on smiling. Then she takes me in her arms. 'Thank you for your visit and for sharing our way of life with others.' I thank her for her hospitality, sad beyond words to leave but enriched by this intense experience.

As Bilguun and I ride away on our horses, I think about how lucky I am to have been born in a rich country with hot water, electricity, and health care. All the comforts. But it's by stripping back these things, immersing myself in a different world for a while, that I can truly understand how lucky we Westerners are to have them.

I feel that Khurzee is happy, even if I know that she has to struggle every day for food, for money, for the education of her children, for reindeer, against wolves. Many other struggles I'm not even aware of. But despite all this, perhaps she has the most precious treasure of all, something so many of us have lost: she lives in nature, and nature gives her everything.

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