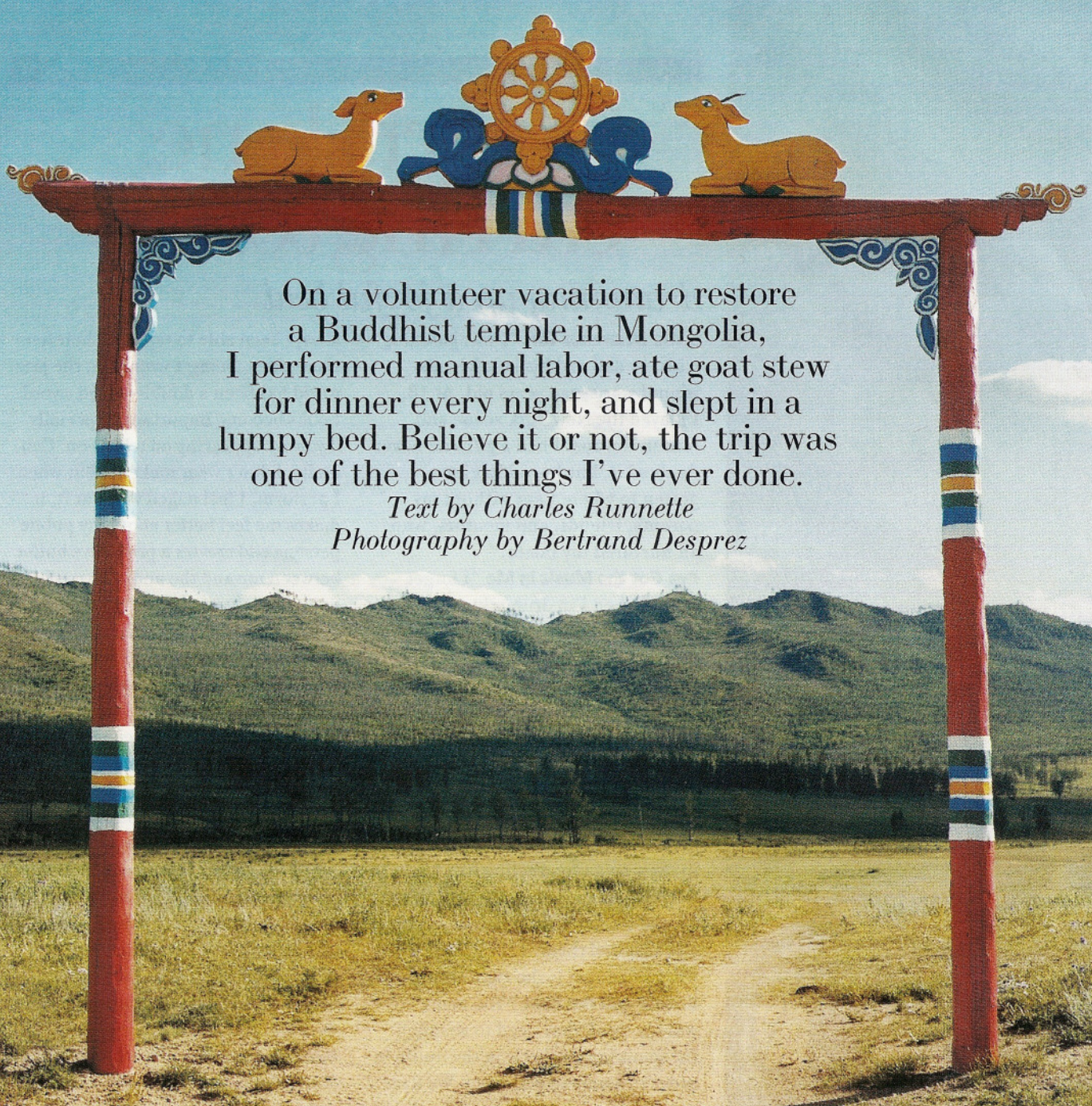


Mongolia

The Adventure of a Lifetime



On a volunteer vacation to restore
a Buddhist temple in Mongolia,
I performed manual labor, ate goat stew
for dinner every night, and slept in a
lumpy bed. Believe it or not, the trip was
one of the best things I've ever done.

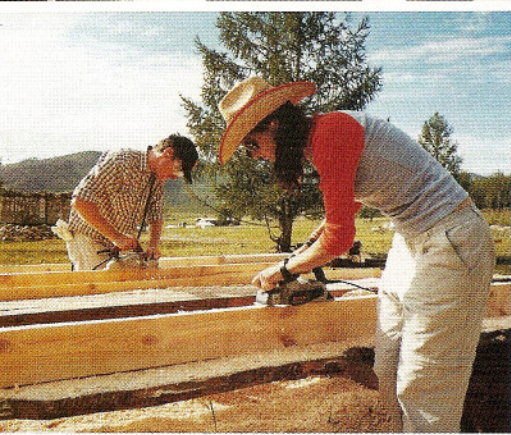
Text by Charles Runnette

Photography by Bertrand Desprez



I don't think we're going to get out of here alive,"
Suzanne said, shaking me. It was our first night in
our volunteer vacation camp in Mongolia, where we
were helping to rebuild a Buddhist temple, and we'd
both started to crack. The 35-hour trip had been
a lot harder than we'd expected. First there was a
cramped Air China plane flight from New York City
to Beijing, then a 31-hour train ride to the
city Ulaanbaatar, and finally an eight-hour
on-foot hike to our destination.

Happy Campers?
This page: Volunteers stay in
gers, tent dwellings like
the ones nomadic Mongolians
have lived in for centuries.
Opposite page: The entrance to
the temple grounds



“I don’t think we’re going to get out of here alive,” Suzanne said, shaking me. It was our first night in our volunteer vacation camp in Mongolia, where we were helping to rebuild a Buddhist temple, and we’d both started to crack. The 55-hour trip had been a lot harder than we’d expected. First there was a cramped Air China polar flight from New York City to Beijing, then a 31-hour train ride to the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, and finally an eight-hour van ride on dirt paths to our destination, Baldan Baraivan.

Hungry and very cold—even in our goose-down sleeping bags—we began to wonder whether this enviable trip had turned into *Survivor: Mongolia*.

Reluctantly, I stepped out of my sleeping bag to restart the fire in our drafty *ger*, the sturdy round tent dwelling that nomadic Mongolians have used for centuries. Fumbling around in the pitch-black *ger*, I grabbed our bag of magazines.

“Not *Vanity Fair*,” begged Suzanne. We both burst out laughing.

The Land That Time Forgot

Landlocked between Siberian Russia and northern China, Mongolia is one of the least densely populated countries in the world. It’s nearly three times the size of California, with a population of fewer than three million. The temple we traveled across the globe to help restore is in the most sparsely settled corner of the country, the Khentii region in the northeast. It’s an unspoiled swath of sparkling lakes surrounded by grassy valleys with the occasional pack of wild horses or camels. It feels a lot like the land that time forgot.

I awoke at dawn from that bad first

night reinvigorated by the breathtaking beauty of the scene outside. The sky was bright red, and through the mist hanging on the lake, I could see horses drinking at the water’s edge. I forced down as much of the so-called breakfast (a large bowl of gruel with sweet mare’s milk and slightly rancid butter) as I could stomach, ate one of my stash of peanut butter Clif Bars, and was ready to be put to work.

Nestled in a lush hillside, the 300-year-old Baldan Baraivan was one of the country’s largest and most important Buddhist temples before its near-total destruction in the thirties by the Soviet-influenced communist government. After the fall of the USSR in 1991, Mongolians began to consider ways to renew their centuries-old heritage of Buddhism. That’s where Mark Hintzke came in. A Buddhist from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he dreamed up the concept of the Cultural Restoration Tourism Project (CRTP) in 1996. “The initial idea was to start an organization to help communities overseas restore cultural artifacts,” he said. Hintzke heard about Baldan Baraivan through friends, and after raising capital, he opened CRTP’s first volunteer vacation camp in 1999.

After breakfast our entire group—

Continued on page 95

If you rebuild it, they will come.

From top: Craftsmen work with volunteers to restore Baldan Baraivan; the temple’s partially reconstructed interior; the writer and OS editor Suzanne Murray, plane wood; inside a stupa, or prayer site. Opposite page, from top: The family of nomads next door; wild horses at a nearby lake



5 Amazing Volunteer Vacations

If you don't feel up to crossing the planet to work in Mongolia, you can participate in many other programs around the world. Volunteer vacations range from expensive and far away to cheap and close to home.

Some require a 10-day minimum commitment; others can be done over a weekend. And while many are quite labor-intensive, others are fairly cinchy.

Volunteer vacations are tax-deductible and more memorable than ordinary trips. However, the amenities are typically far from luxurious. Be prepared to rough it a bit.

The following is a sampling of volunteer vacation programs run by a few well-respected organizations. We've considered the work required, the length of the program, the sleeping and eating conditions, and the ease of getting there, and have rated the programs on a scale of 1 (fairly easy) to 5 (pretty hard).

Blazing Trails

Wilderness Volunteers

Acadia National Park, Maine

Located on the rocky shores of Mount Desert Island, Acadia National Park is filled with granite cliffs that tower over sand and cobblestone beaches; mountains carved by glaciers rise from the sea. Acadia has more than 100 miles of hiking trails and 45 miles of old carriage roads for hiking or mountain biking.

WHAT YOU'LL DO Projects include working with the park staff to repair retaining walls on the carriage trails.

WHAT IT COSTS About \$200 a week; camping gear not included.

DIFFICULTY: 2 TO 3 There are a wide variety of jobs for all strengths and ability levels—but expect to get dirty. At night, you'll camp in tents in the park.

928-556-0038 or wildernessvolunteers.org

Protecting Wildlife

Earthwatch Institute

Pantanal, Brazil

The Pantanal is the world's largest wetland and home to more wildlife than any place outside sub-Saharan Africa. Thirty million caiman alligators share this Utah-sized swamp with anteaters, anacondas, jabiru

storks, giant otters, hyacinth macaws, rheas, capybaras, tapirs, piranhas, and the world's largest jaguars. Volunteers are part of a research and conservation program coordinated with Conservation International to help keep the endangered parts of the Pantanal safe from modern threats such as agriculture development and the black market trade in rare species.

WHAT YOU'LL DO Volunteers help scientists collect data about the habits of the wildlife. Tasks include everything from cooking meals to weighing turtle eggs.

WHAT IT COSTS For a one-week trip, the all-inclusive rate (room and board, plus transportation to and from the nearest airport in Brazil) is about \$1,800.

DIFFICULTY: 2 TO 3 The beautiful nineteenth-century Rio Negro ranch house, where most volunteers stay, is plush (translation: there are showers and good local cuisine), and the work is fairly simple, but it's in a remote part of Brazil.
800-776-0188 or earthwatch.org

Preserving a Piece of History

Sierra Club Red Rocks

Sinagua Archaeology Research Verde Valley, Arizona

Tucked away in Arizona's Coconino National Forest, the Verde Valley has been home to Native Americans for centuries. Now sightseers and movie producers have discovered it, and the archaeological treasures need to be preserved.

WHAT YOU'LL DO From a base camp, volunteers assist Forest Service archaeologists in surveying, mapping, and photographing prehistoric sites.

WHAT IT COSTS One-week trips are \$495, plus a one-time Sierra Club membership fee of \$25.

DIFFICULTY: 4 TO 5 The work isn't hard, but you'll need to be in good shape to move around the sites, which are spread across the canyons, and to outrun the mountain lions. Just kidding.

415-977-5522 or sierraclub.org/outings/national

Saving the Whales (and Dolphins)

Volunteer Vacations Hawaii Waianae, Hawaii

The warm, shallow waters surrounding the Hawaiian Islands are an important habitat for the North Pacific humpback whale—and the only place in the United States where they reproduce. One of this conservation program's goals is to

Continued on page 125

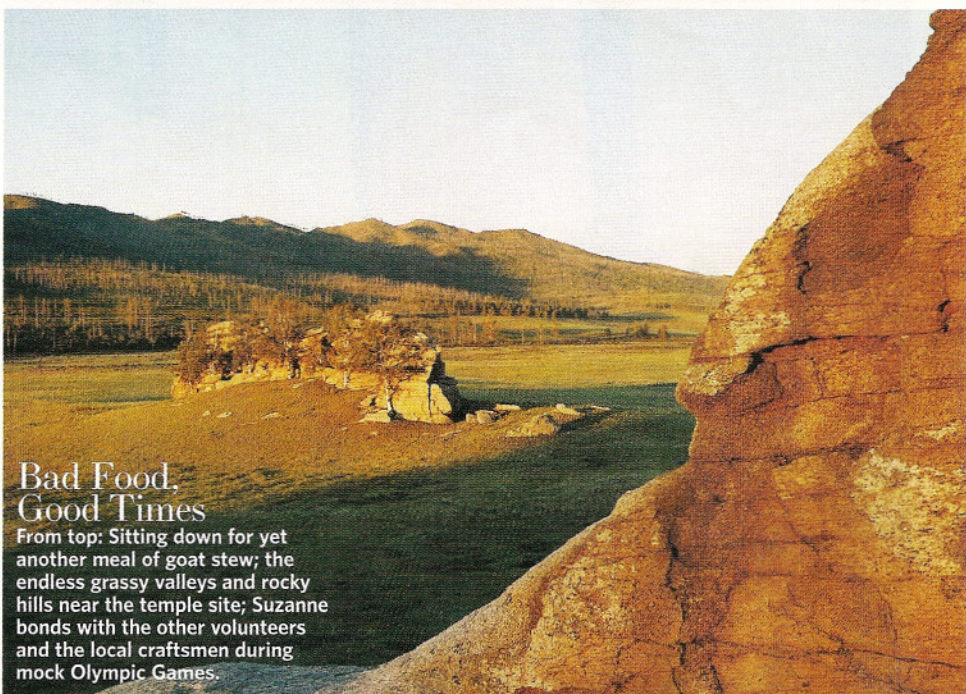
the 25 Mongolian craftsmen who work full-time at the site, the handful of Americans (including Hintzke) who run the camp, and the “participants” (us, plus 12 others)—gathered in a circle for our work assignments. The Mongolians were mostly twenty-to-thirtysomething men. One sweet-looking old man, Jaminguroo, master carpenter, turned out to have a surprising connection to Baldan Baraivan: “I participated in the destruction of this temple, and now I am 83, and I am back to help restore this temple.” We affectionately called him Grandpa the Destroyer.

The participants were thirty- or fortysomething women (and one man besides me). hilariously archetypal neurotic New Yorker Debra (“Is this paint mixed with gasoline? I feel like I’m getting brain damage over here!”) was traveling with her soft-spoken, volunteer-vacation-alumnus brother Nick from Georgia (“I was expecting harder work”). Amy, a sci-fi author, was researching a book about Mongolians in outer space—really (“Their language is like Klingon”). Alexandra, from Boston, had been to Baldan Baraivan twice before and planned to return for two more summers.

Our first day’s assignment was to help build a new ger for the camp. Sukhe, a kind, oversize Mongolian, explained that we would build it in the traditional manner—from scratch. Before we knew it, Sukhe had us cutting and planing pieces of wood. And suddenly, the thoughts about bad food and sleeping conditions faded away. Now we felt connected to this place.

The schedule at Baldan Baraivan is fairly regular. Breakfast (aka nomad’s gruel) at 7:15 AM was always followed by the morning gathering. Then we were divided up into groups and sent off to work on various projects for about four hours. Lunch (always something goatlike) was served at

Continued on page 126



Bad Food, Good Times

From top: Sitting down for yet another meal of goat stew; the endless grassy valleys and rocky hills near the temple site; Suzanne bonds with the other volunteers and the local craftsmen during mock Olympic Games.



The Adventure of a Lifetime

Continued from page 95

1 PM, after which we could go back to work, take a nap, or head out on a hike. Following a 5:30 PM dinner (goat stew), we'd either wash off some of the day's filth in the dribbling solar shower or chat around the campfire.

On Sundays, instead of work, the staff organized goofy Mongolian-participant bonding activities. During our stay, they put together a mock Olympics. The winners got coveted prizes, including chocolate and other junk food. I ended up with all the young Mongolian guys as teammates and soon realized that our game plan was "Cheat like hell and do anything to win." When we did, my teammates immediately shared their food prizes with everyone. We weren't on *Survivor* after all. Thank God.

Building and Bonding

Over the ensuing days, we worked at projects around the site—from painting the ger we'd helped build to planing boards for the reconstruction of the temple's courtyard. Sure, it could be compared to prison-camp labor, but the work was only as difficult as you wanted it to be.

It was also the most rewarding aspect of the trip. The work was when we bonded with the Mongolians and one another. "It was all about the people," Debra said. "I can't tell you how touched I was when Moogie, one of the Mongolians, bought the participants a goat with his own money and threw a *horhok* [a Mongolian barbecue] to thank us. He almost cried as he toasted us, and so did I."

Even though some aspects of this volunteer vacation could have been improved upon (the food!), our trip to Baldan Baraivan was memorable. We were exhausted, occasionally uncomfortable, and sometimes a little queasy, but always aware that it was the trip of a lifetime.

After our return to New York City, Suzanne summed it up: "Mongolia's a beautiful country, and that was the best way of establishing relationships with locals and contributing to the preservation of their cultural heritage. It was amazing. I'm so glad I did it. I'd go back."

Today, whenever Suzanne and I tell the tale of our Mongolian volunteer vacation to friends, the comically bad food always comes up. But Debra helped us put it in perspective: "We could have spent our money to go to Club Med, and the food would have been better—but the people and the experience would have sucked."

She's right. I loved the experience, and I'm still in touch with many of the people. But if you go, do pack a box of Clif Bars. Seriously. 🍌

A six- or eight-day stay at Baldan Baraivan runs from \$1,080 to \$2,000 (meals and round-trip transportation from Ulaanbaatar to the site included). CRTP has also just started a November-to-January program in Nepal. To learn more about either trip, go to crtp.net.