

In SEARCH of the Reind



BY OMAR C. GARCÍA

The March sky was clear and the weather was cold as we boarded the twin-prop airplane in UlanBator, Mongolia. As I sat down and shoved my backpack under the seat in front of me, my thoughts turned to the Tsaatan people we would soon meet in the mountains near the Siberian border. One year earlier, my friend Jerry Smith, who provides care for homeless children in Mongolia, had e-mailed information and four photographs of these nomadic reindeer herders. “The Reindeer People need to hear the gospel,” Jerry wrote. His brief note and the photographs of the people were like a Macedonian call. I printed the photographs and taped them to the wall next to my computer and began to pray daily for these people who have little or no access to the gospel.

During that year, praying daily for the Reindeer People awakened and nurtured a longing in me to take the gospel to them personally. I spoke with Steve Peace, my pastor at that time, about the possibility of leading a volunteer team to Mongolia. Steve offered his full support and became a prayer partner. The need for concentrated prayer became more apparent to me after watching a Travel Channel program about the Reindeer People. According to the program, travel to the remote mountains of northern Mongolia would be difficult at best. Actually finding the nomadic reindeer herders would be even more difficult. Prayer was most definitely needed!

As I pensively stared out the window of the airplane, the sound of the propellers startled me back into the present. I turned and exchanged affirming glances with the other team members as the plane lumbered into the air and turned sharply to the northwest. The barren, snow-covered landscape



eer People

Notes From My Journal

below accentuated the geographical challenges of taking the gospel to people in such distant areas. The vast emptiness of the Mongolian landscape certainly gives new meaning to the words “remote” and “isolated.” Three hours later we bounced twice onto the single runway outside Mörön. This community of gers — the round tents that Mongols call home — would be our launching point to the north.

Journey to TsagaanNor | Jerry had arranged for the only two known believers of TsagaanNor to meet us in Mörön. We exchanged greetings with our new friends and guides and loaded our gear into two four-wheel drive vehicles. Once we left Mörön, we would not see paved roads again. For the next 12 hours, we inched and bounced our way north over open range, across frozen rivers and lakes, and through mountain passes. Richard, one of our team members, described our journey as the 12-hour version of an eight-second bull ride. At one point we had to get out and hike through the snow as our jeeps made a precariously steep descent through an icy mountain pass.

We knew travel would be difficult; we just did not realize how difficult. One vehicle broke down twice, and the other vehicle broke down once — a little unnerving when you are so far from roadside assistance. After the third repair stop, we began to wonder if we would reach our destination. However, our drivers proved to be quite resourceful in keeping our aged Russian-made vehicles running with the few tools and used spare parts they carried with them.

The long jeep ride to TsagaanNor gave us lots of time to reflect on why we

had come so far. The cold weather, the rugged terrain, and the repair stops fueled a discussion about the greatest missed opportunity in the history of missions. Early in the 13th century, Kublai Khan learned of the gospel from Marco Polo’s father and uncle. The Mongolian emperor expressed great interest in Christianity. He sent a letter to the Pope requesting as many as a hundred missionaries to spread the gospel throughout his empire, which included China at that time. The Pope belatedly sent only two missionaries. Unfortunately, the journey proved too difficult, and the gospel emissaries turned back. As a result, the Mongolian peoples did not hear the gospel and turned to other beliefs instead. Reflecting on this sad page of history strengthened our resolve to continue our journey.

We arrived at the town of TsagaanNor after midnight, when the temperature was well below freezing. Quickly unloading our gear, we scurried into the small home belonging to our host. Once inside, we huddled around the wood-burning stove and soaked up the relative warmth it provided. The next morning we had our first view of TsagaanNor. It looked like a town out of the pages of the Old West, with stocky Mongolian horses tied to fence posts. As we glanced to the south, we saw a boy lowering a bucket through a hole in the ice to get the morning supply of water for his family. In another direction we saw men chopping and stacking the wood that is vital to surviving the bitterly cold Mongolian winters. To the east and the north we surveyed the mountains that are home to the Reindeer People. Somewhere in those mountains we hoped to make contact with them — a contact that would extend the kingdom of God to the hearts of these nomadic reindeer herders.

The Jesus Film | On our first day in TsagaanNor we made arrangements to show the *Jesus* film in the evening. Our translators prepared hand-written invitations to the film and distributed them around the town. Later in the morning we learned of one Tsaatan family that was camped near the town. We asked our driver to take us to see the family — something not easily or quickly done because of the cold. Our driver had to build a fire in a bucket and then place the bucket under the engine of the jeep. Once the engine was sufficiently warmed, our five-member team squeezed into the single vehicle for our first excursion to meet the Reindeer People.

My heart beat with anticipation as we approached the campsite. As we drove across a snow-covered clearing toward a wooded area, a single tepee came into view. Like the Indians of the American West, the Reindeer People actually live in tepees and move with their herds about six to eight times a year. Before the availability of canvas, they used animal skins to cover the framework of their tents. The single tent before us was covered with faded and patched canvas — the only insulation that stood between the dozen-plus family members who lived within and the cold that threatened from without.

The family graciously greeted us and invited us inside. Once inside, a quick glance revealed the absence of any luxuries — no pantry, no clothes

Life among the Reindeer People today has changed very little since the days of Genghis Khan. Daily chores like chopping wood or fetching water are not optional. Every member of the family must assume responsibility for contributing to their survival in the unforgiving cold of northern Mongolia.





closets, no beds, no furniture, and no access to medical care. The only thing we found in the tepee was bitter cold, bare ground, and barely enough hope to survive one more day. Sadly, we in the West have made a mockery of survival by turning it into a new genre of television entertainment. However, in northern Mongolia, no one gets voted off the island, and the possibility of death is a reality. Those who survive do not win a cash prize, only the prospect of one more day of the same grueling challenges.



We had a very pleasant visit and invited the family to attend the showing of the *Jesus* film at TsagaanNor that evening. They came, along with many others from TsagaanNor. After the film, many of those present placed their faith in Jesus for salvation. We were elated at the response and rejoiced that our hosts now had a new and larger family of faith to nurture.

Changing Plans | The following morning, we had a team devotional from Acts 16:6-10 on the importance of being flexible when plans change. Following our devotional, we loaded our gear into our vehicles for our trip into the mountains. Later that afternoon, one of our vehicles broke down, forcing us to squeeze into the other vehicle and return to TsagaanNor. Our morning devotional on flexibility had become a reality. That evening we quietly ate our meal, not fully understanding why we had to turn back. Afterwards, we had a devotional time on the subject of prayer. Our hosts joined us and asked many meaningful questions about prayer, extending our discussion late into the evening. At the conclusion of our time, they thanked us for helping them understand so much about the discipline of prayer. God had turned us back, we concluded, for the benefit of our hosts.

MANY LANGUAGES — ONE WORD

World population: over 6 billion
 Languages spoken in the world: 6,703
 Number of people who speak a language with no Scripture: at least 380 million

Source: Wycliffe Bible Translators (www.wycliffe.org)

Another Attempt | The next day we made a second attempt to reach the Reindeer People. We spent the morning winding our way into the mountains. Shortly before noon we parked our vehicles and hiked the remainder of the way. When we finally reached one of their camps, we felt as though we had traveled to the ends of the earth. A year of prayer and preparation had finally brought us to this place few westerners will ever have the opportunity to visit. We found ourselves among people on the other end of the Great Commission, people with very limited access to the gospel. These were the descendants of those who were denied the opportunity to hear the gospel because of a failed missionary endeavor centuries earlier.

We settled into the tepees that would be our temporary homes and



enjoyed the gracious hospitality of the Reindeer People. We learned about their customs, their animals, their fears, and their hopes. We taught the children to sing “Jesus Loves Me.” The children joyfully and perfectly mimicked our words. We prayed that one day these children would fully understand the meaning of those words.

The resourceful Reindeer People depend on animals for food. The 55-year-old woman (right) sewed and gave me a pouch made of reindeer leather. She and her daughter prepared a fine meal of noodles and reindeer meat for our team while her husband read a gospel tract in Mongolian language.



The climax of our trip happened on the night we showed the *Jesus* film on a portable DVD player in one of the tepees. With rapt attention, the people watched and listened to the story of Jesus. *This is why*

we have come so far, I thought to myself. Lowrey, Mike, Richard, Jon, and I encircled the tepee on that cold night and prayed for the people inside. At the conclusion of the film, eight out of the 12 adults in the camp placed their faith in Jesus for salvation. Eight people chose to submit to the will and reign of God in their lives. Our small team rejoiced that the kingdom of heaven had new citizens in the remote mountains of northern Mongolia.

THE LAST FRONTIER

The region approximately from 10 degrees to 40 degrees north of the equator spanning from North Africa to East Asia is called The Last Frontier and contains the greatest concentration of unreached people.

The Last Frontier contains

- 28 percent of the world’s population (1.7 billion people)
- 80 percent of the world’s poorest people
- 9 of the top-10 worst countries in terms of religious persecution
- 97 percent of the least-evangelized peoples on the earth (birthplace of all major religious blocs, including Christianity)
- Less than 5 percent of all missions work

Of the 2,161 people groups (or 1.7 billion people) who have little or no access to the gospel

- Less than 10 percent have the New Testament translated into their language
- Less than 10 percent have complete Bible translations in their language
- Less than 20 percent have the Jesus film in their language



From the International Mission Board Web site: www.imb.org/GlobalVision/wwpower/wwppg7b.htm.

Seed and Leaven | Our experiences among the Reindeer People caused us to reflect on the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32) and the parable of the yeast (Matthew 13:33). Both parables illustrate how something small eventually grows into something great. Jesus said that the mustard seed was the smallest of seeds but, once planted, grew to become the largest of garden plants. Jesus also taught that like yeast, the kingdom of heaven quietly spreads from one life to another, transforming individuals one by one. This leavening activity happens as citizens of the kingdom understand and fulfill their responsibility to preach the kingdom of God (see Luke 9:2), that is, to share the gospel with others. That small group of eight adults would be the seed and yeast to their fellow Reindeer People.

The Challenge | Finishing the task of taking the gospel to all peoples (Matthew 24:14) will require that Christians consider and respond to the needs of those with the least access to the gospel. Like the Reindeer People, over 2,000 people groups today still await the liberating light of the gospel. Many of these people have never met a Christian, seen a Bible, or entered a church. Many are kept in darkness by hostile cultures, governments, and religions. The Reindeer People in particular have extremely limited access to the gospel.

The sobering reality for many other unreached people groups is that they will not hear unless we go. Those of us who have the light have an obligation to those who live in darkness (see Romans 1:14). The greatest crime we can commit is to withhold the light from those living in spiritual darkness.

Every year we are inundated with images of Santa and his reindeer. This year, allow those images to remind you of the Reindeer People of Northern Mongolia and all the people groups in our world today who have yet to hear the story of Christmas. 🏠

Omar C. Garcia served as minister of education at Bear Creek Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, at the time of this trip. He presently serves at Plymouth Park Baptist Church in Irving, Texas. He and his wife, Cheryl, have three children, Elizabeth, Jonathan, and Gina.

The Reindeer People occupy a permanent place in my heart and in my prayers. I can still remember the expressions on their faces as we hiked out of their camp and slowly made our way down the mountains. Their expressions made all the prayers, planning, expenses, and travel worthwhile. As I turned to take one last look at their camp, I thought, "Who would have come to tell me about Jesus if I had been born in these mountains?"



VOLUNTEERS IN MISSIONS

Are you ready to respond to the challenge of volunteering overseas? You won't regret it! Just ask those who have gone before you. Each year more than 20,000 volunteers — people like yourself — go in His power throughout the world as evangelists, teachers, construction workers, musicians, athletes, medical personnel,



Vacation Bible School workers, agriculturists, and more.

You play an important role within the body of believers. God has uniquely gifted you with a heart to serve Him and all humanity: "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (1 Chronicles 16:24). As you go in His power, sharing your faith and serving others, you'll bring glory and honor to Him.

See where and how God could use you to help reach a lost world. Search the International Mission Board's VIM Projects Database at www.imb.org/vim/VIMSearch.htm to find the overseas project that fits best with how God is calling you.

From the International Mission Board Web site: www.imb.org/vim/default.htm.