

The biggest holiday in Mongolia is drawing to a close. Tsagaan Sar, which means White Month, celebrates the Lunar New Year. Mongolians will save up all year for this holiday. Weeks before, they will start making buuz (the little meat dumplings), often more than a thousand of them, along with a variety of other foods to serve visiting family and friends during this celebration. The focus is on white foods like buuz, arrol (dried milk curds), specially shaped hard cookies, potato salads, milk tea, and vodka—the foods available in winter in Mongolia. Officially the celebration lasts 2 days but unofficially it starts well before with preparations of cooking and house cleaning and then lasts a good week or so beyond the official days. The highlight of the celebration is the visiting of friends and family.

For example, the first day of Tsagaan Sar everyone dresses up in their best deel (pronounced “dell”) and a furry hat. I went with Bold and Tsermaa to visit Bold’s father, Janscren, who is also my supervisor’s father. There are many little ceremonies associated with these visits. I suggest you might like to read about some of them on the web—use Wikipedia or just search in Google. The most important is to greet each person properly. The oldest person is greeted first. The younger person puts his forearms under the older persons and touches the elbows while the older person lays his forearms on the younger person’s forearms, palms up. A greeting is voiced, one sniffs each other’s cheeks (instead of kissing the cheeks) and then the same ceremony is performed with each person in the family. Even very little children know what to do. The men offer their snuff bottles to each one present and one sniffs the cap and hands it back. A gift is presented to the host, usually with a ceremonial blue scarf draped across the forearms. Gifts are also given to the visitors, even to little children. There is a lot of food, often on a low table with a big bowl of “idee” in the middle—you’ll see a photo below. Sometimes you stay for a while and may play a special Mongolian game of dominos. Then you go on to the next family’s home. I’m not sure how it all gets coordinated, but somehow everyone in the family visits everyone else in the family. And in big families, this can go on for over a week, with people going out to or coming in from the countryside.

It has really been fun to participate in this celebration and in the little ceremonies that accompany it. You’ll find a number of photos from my “Tsagaan Sar visits” below.

Directly following Tsagaan Sar, I had another very different adventure. Every year, Khovsgul has a Ice Festival up at Lake Khovsgol. I was at Hatgol near where it’s held at Thanksgiving but didn’t really get to see much of the lake at that time. I wasn’t planning to go to the festival—I didn’t look forward to the drive there and knew it would be very cold. However, at the last minute, Tuul, a friend of mine invited me to go along with her and some of her co-workers. She was taking care of the logistics (we stayed overnight) and I knew the car was reliable—big four-wheel Land Rover. So I said yes. I was told I should wear my deel and ended up wearing a sheep-lined deel lent to me by Tsermaa and a second jacket-style deel over it from Sara, my supervisor, plus a furry hat and my high boots. I felt like there were 3 of me when I had everything on!

We drove up Wednesday morning, leaving at 9 and arrived in time for the opening ceremonies. You actually drive up the lake for about 10 minutes and the festival is set up along one shore. There was a big stage set up, a number of ice sculptures including a ger of ice, plus a display of handicrafts lined up on the ice. And the President of Mongolia and his wife and daughter were there. We were able to find a place right up

again the rope surrounding an area in front of the stage—no places to sit. The ceremonies started off with singing and dancing and then various welcoming remarks and a short speech from the President and more singing. There were lots of media people there inside the ropes, sometimes making it difficult to see what was going on. At one point, a cameraman and reporter from Mongolian National Television came along and stopped in front of me. The reporter put out his microphone and asked what I thought of it all. I was appropriately complimentary about being there, of course.

Then the Presidential entourage came down off the platform and toured the displays. Crowds followed them but a crew of bodyguards kept people at bay. My friend Tuul thought I ought to try and say hello to the President and managed to maneuver us to a spot where the President and his wife and entourage were walking through the ice sculpture displays. Tuul manages to say to the President's wife that I would like to greet her and before I know it, I'm shaking hand with Tsolmon, his wife, and talking with her about being in the Peace Corps. She's walking a bit behind her husband and when he turns to see her, I take the opportunity to shake his hand and have a few words with him too! Meanwhile, my friend Tuul has my camera and is taking pictures of all this. I don't know how I got past the bodyguards, but I did! So below, you'll see pictures of me shaking hands with President Enkhbayar and his wife. One of the highlights of the trip!

We also admired the sculptures and watched some ice skaters race. The festival itself is fairly modest. They were to have some ice wrestling and a driving on ice competition plus some horse and sled races. A number of the horses and sleds drove around giving rides for a price. Our group just had fun going down some ice slides that had been built and playing tug of war on the ice. It was very cold and I was glad when we headed back to Hatgol where we stayed overnight in a guest house. Tuul and her group had brought food and there was a wood stove in the room some of us stayed in so we cooked our own meals.

The following day we went back to the ice festival for a while. We drove up the lake at one point to see a prominent rock that people like to visit and took some photographs. The water in the lake is very clear and you could see down into the water easily. The way the ice freezes, it looks like ribbons of ice floating vertically just below the surface—you'll see an example in the photos below.

The Mongolians would love to have a lot more tourists come to this festival though I didn't see many "foreigners" there. At this point, I think the weather is just a little too cold for people to stay outside for very long when you're not accustomed to it. Despite being very warmly dressed, it still didn't take long to really begin to feel the chill. My hands especially would get very good just trying to take a few pictures. Mongolians, on the other hand, can go easily without gloves for long periods of time. We drove back to our guest house and fixed a meal before driving home Thursday evening. I'm glad I went. It's a big event for Khovskol and I may not get the opportunity next year. Tsgaan Sar marks the end of winter and beginning of spring for Mongolia. It does feel as if the weather is beginning to moderate a little but I won't be packing up the wooly sox and long underwear anytime soon!