

Golden Mountains – The Altai Republic in the Russian Federation

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It is said that Altai also means golden mountains. The development of transportation and the more liberal policy for visitors in Russia these past few years have made access to these mountains easier especially during the warm summer season. Being geographically located at the central Eurasian Continent, it is rich in natural sceneries which include beautiful mountain ranges and ravines, lush forests and rivers and lakes, all of which contribute to the great potential of this region as an international destination for sightseeing tours.

This is one of the places where we can serenely commune with nature and be made aware of the beauty of its unspoiled state. Our trip to the Altai Republic became an unforgettable trip that gave me an opportunity for self-reflection.



Natural scenery in the Altai Republic

The navel of the Eurasian Continent

The Altai Republic is one of the 21 republics in the Russian Federation. It is located in the southern part of west Siberia and shares its borders with two other Republics in the Russian Federation, Khakassia at the northeast and Tuva at the east. And it also shares its borders with three countries, Mongolia at the southeast, China at the south, and Kazakhstan at the southwest. The Altai Mountains which covers a considerable part of the Altai republic is characterized by steep mountain slopes spreading along these borders. The highest elevation of Altai Mountains is located at the peak of Mt. Belukha which stands at 4506m in the Altai Republic. Each country has its own Altai area. The population of the Altai Republic is around 205,500 (2001 statistics), its capital is Gorno-Altai. Its total land area of 92600 km is just slightly bigger than Hokkaido.

(<http://www.altai-republic.com/>): Altai republic web site.

The central part of the Altai Republic is

situated at 51°N Latitude and 87°E Longitude which approximately puts it at the middle of the Eurasian Continent. If compared to a human being, the Altai Republic would be at the navel.

Very popular Japanese used car

The research institute (BINP: Budker Institute of Nuclear Physics) I visited summer of last year is in Novosibirsk City. Here I saw many Japanese cars on the road. Almost all Japanese cars were used one. They were still under good working condition and seemed popular also in rent-a-car. I immediately remembered Vladivostok, a part of the Russian territory that faces the Sea of Japan, which has been a second home town to Japanese cars. It appears that recently Japan has been providing support to the transportation in the Siberian region, and even I, who am not related to the car industry, was proud of it.

My visit to the Altai Republic was made possible by the camping trip planned by the family of the researcher who was the host

during my visit to Russia. Two families of researchers joined the trip. Six men including myself and three women rode separately on two privately-owned cars, one was a station wagon designed to travel on off-road conditions and the other was a normal sedan. Both of which were Japanese cars. In an auto-repair shop at Biysk city where we dropped by to change tires, the name of several Japanese car makers appeared in what looked like a holding area for junked cars.



An auto-repair shop at Biysk

The severe traffic control

The lone airport that connects the Altai Republic to the rest of the Siberian major cities is found in its capital of Gorno-Altai. There is no railroad system in operation therefore transportation is highly reliant on cars and trucks. All the major national and district roads were paved, but I heard that most of roads in the smaller towns and villages were unpaved as they branched away from the main roads. After passing through the flat Altai district of the Russian territory and upon entering the Altai Republic, we started to see checkpoints at every village and town. The main purpose of these checkpoints is for surveillance of suspicious individuals and goods. And since there are very few traffic lights they also serve as monitors for traffic and speeding violations and for the collection of fines for these traffic offenses. These fines are collected as a legal means to augment the small budget allocated for highways and other

road infrastructures by the federal government.

The car I was riding together with the family that hails from the Altai republic was being driven carefully and was in no violation at the checkpoint. However, a fine (100 rubles equal to about 400 Japanese Yen) was paid in "a rattrap", though he was careful.



"A rattrap" is common in the world

A Siberian manner

The story that follows is about what happened in our short stops during the trip. The completion of the road network in the Siberian region has brought about an increase in the number of restrooms, shops and similar establishments in the region. However, we often could not find one when we needed them. So what we did was to pull over at the roadside and as soon as the car stops everyone dashed out of the car heeds the 'call of nature' and after a short while we gather again to continue our trip. At first, I was not able to keep up with what they were doing until I realize that there were certain considerations and/or rules in the manner by which they carried out these quick stops.



A Siberian manner by main road M-52

Everyone goes out of the car and heads in the direction where we were coming from and a short distance away we would normally find a rocky area, a grove of trees and occasionally a brook. It looked like they have had good sense to find out where to stop when these needs arise.

In any case, I understood that the important thing is to go through these short stops in silence and with little hesitation and in the fastest way possible in spite of the situation. I think anyone will be sensitive to this anywhere in the world. More often than not, the places I went to had some traces of people going there before I did.

M-52 road reaching to Mongolia

We headed south along a road called M-52 which goes from Gorno-Altai to as far as Mongolia. Many rock reliefs that are said to have been sketched by the early inhabitants of this place can be seen from the appearance of the stones in the slightly elevated rocky area along the highway. We stopped at Onguday to buy our supply of



Rock reliefs near hill of M-52



Souvenirs sold on top of a car hood



A self-service gasoline station at Onguday

food to be used in camp. Also located here were a town hall, a garrison of the armed forces and a Greek orthodox church. We were able to get all the things we needed in one supermarket that faced a plaza where a cow was lying idle.

At the supermarket, there were vacuum cleaners and washing machines which were being sold at prices similar to Japan when you



Young Japanese-looking girls at Onguday

consider the exchange rate of 1 ruble to 4 Japanese yen. I also met a young girl who was an attendant in one of the street shops. She looked very much like Japanese and understood some English.

We left road M-52 at Aktash and went in the direction of the Cherishman river where we put up our camp. Cherishman river flows into the Teletskoye Lake which is called the pearl of the Altai. Fresh water flows out of this lake through a river called Biya which is in turn connected with the Katun river that



The Pazirik's Kurgan equestrian tribe



An only one traffic signal in grassy plain

runs through the entire republic and exits at the Arctic Ocean.

were riding horses but the young ones preferred motorbikes. Everywhere we saw young couples riding old motorbikes where one of them clung behind the driver in an embracing posture.



M-52 road reaching to Mongolia

In this grassland freeway, grazing cows might very well be only the traffic signals here since they cause the cars to stop as these cows cross the road.

Iroha-zaka of Altai

A free way of a grassy plain

After passing through the grassy plain, we were welcomed by an unpaved slope with a narrow roadway and having about 700m pitch differences. I took the liberty to call it the 'Iroha-zaka of Altai' because it resembles a famous slope in Nikko, Japan.

As we ran through the steep ravine that serves as a natural barrier, we saw a stretch of comparatively flat valley ahead. Also located in the nearby Ulagan plateau is an ancient burial ground of the Pazirik's Kurgan equestrian tribe.

Walking a little further we came into a wide prairie. Three roads that run parallel to each other and separated by a dozen meter go through this grass land at some area. They are shown in the map as dotted lines. Since this was a flat grass land, it looks like a freeway where the decision of whether to follow the existing roadway or diverting from it is in the sole discretion of the driver or the trekkers. We saw some local people who

The road surface was uneven with traces of streams made by water running down the slopes and ditches from tire marks. There were also sharp pointed stones which



Iroha-zaka of Altai and Cherishman River

protruded here and there which added to the rough condition of the road. Everyone, except the driver, had to alight from the car and walk in order to reduce its weight load. We started heading back down by half past 7 pm and we reached the base of the ravine by 8 pm. I was a little worried whether the sedan would be able to make its way back safely given the road condition.

We took the same road on our way home after 3 days of camping and this time the sedan stalled at the part where the slope was steepest at the beginning of the slope. We tried pulling the car by a rope a few times but it would not budge even as the wheels vigorously rotated in its axle. Since they considered me a guest, I was made to ride in the car. However, I suggested that we give the car a little lift as it starts so that it could move away from the point where it was stuck. I proposed



Walking slope of Iroha-zaka with satisfaction

that if we get the cars moving they should proceed until they reach the gentle portion of the slope about 1 km away, and then just wait for me there. I therefore inched up walking at the tail end of our group. I walked in quick steps having to stop at times for a short rest. I felt good because I was able to make some contribution. I could still remember the heartfelt thanks they expressed to me for what I have done.

The night sky in Altai with much stars fall

It was already 9 pm in the evening when we arrived at the camping site. The men

immediately gathered firewood and put up the tents while the women prepared the food. Everyone carried on with their tasks silently. Summer in the higher latitudes, brings about long daytime and darkness falls at around 10 pm. We had a supper of bread, cheese, salami sausage and cucumber which we ate under a campfire. I leisurely drank the genuine vodka which was given to me. The vodka and raw garlic had a healing effect such that I was gradually relieved of my fatigue. The exhaustion and sleepiness from long hours of driving is also immediately relieved by the same healing effect of this combination. My first bite of the raw garlic gave a burning sensation in my mouth and I felt that it was too hot for my taste.



Two boys enjoying fishing at the river



Campfire with big mess kit

Under the circumstances we were in, it was practical that everyone did the same thing.

We enjoyed the warm summer night by singing songs with guitar accompaniment while we express appreciation for the safe trip we had on that day. Up until then I have not experienced full Russian hospitality and concern and what I experienced gave me a feeling of peace and tranquility. Just before I went to sleep, I caught a glimpse of the night sky in Altai through a gap in the grove and I was surprised to see so many stars visible from where I stood.

Scenery of healing of an early morning

It was still 5 am when I got up the next morning. It was my first camping trip in almost 20 years but I felt totally relaxed upon waking up. At 6 am I decided to take a walk alone along the river bank. The daylight has already arrived in the ravine though I still have to see the sun which is at the moment starting to peep from the edges of the gorge. As I watched every step I took while I walked along the riverbank, a splendid scenery which I have not seen until then slowly came into view. The sweet morning air and the beautiful weather together with the tranquility of the ravine gave me a soothing feeling for a while and all I could hear was the sound of the water rushing down the river.

It is said that the average Japanese nowadays reach the turning point of their life at around 50 years of age. In the past few years I had a lot of time to ponder about my life but while I was enjoying nature in the middle of nowhere, I felt like I was just



Healing scenery in a early morning



Cherishman River and tour members

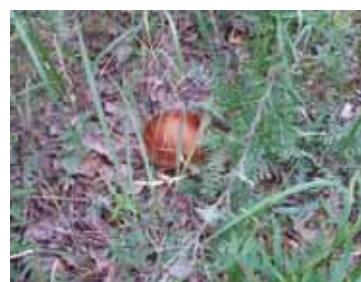
beginning to grasp the real meaning of self reflection.

Hard to forget the dream of the Natasha

Where did we come from and where are we headed to? At the camping trip there was this 19 year-old lady who was gifted with both intelligence and beauty, they called her Natasha. When she was introduced to me she greeted me in beautifully pronounced Japanese saying "Hello Mr. Kobayashi, my name is Natasha". I was surprised by her greeting but more so I was very pleased with it. Her mother finished her PhD in Japanese culture related to IROHA CARDS and she works as a Japanese interpreter. In the camp, Natasha



Sweet wild fruits in a tree with lots of thorns



A chaperon mushroom



A bridal-veil like pink flowers

and her father enjoyed playing volleyball in every morning and this reminded of the inseparable bond between father and daughter.

We only bothered with the basic necessities during the camp therefore we were able to take time to fully enjoy it. Among the things that we did in the two days of camping were to walk away and back to the camp along the river for about 10 kilometers and visit a waterfall which was around 4km from the camp. Along the way, we ate wild fruits, picked mushrooms and looked around for flowers, and I can say that I have now felt the joy of living together peacefully.

There are things that we wish we would dream about in our sleep and there are those which we never hope to dream about. Half a year after I visited Russia, I had a dream about Natasha. In my dream, we were on our way back from the waterfall we visited in the Altai. I was looking for Natasha as we climbed up a steep slope since she went up ahead of me. When I felt her presence behind me, I turned around and looked back and saw the golden mountains of Altai lying calmly as it were being lit by the setting sun. I admired the beautiful scene for a while. And as I was looking away from it I saw a bridal-veil like of blooming light pink flowers at my footstep.

After that dream, I received an email from her mother written in Japanese saying that Natasha figured in a traffic accident and has now been called back to heaven. Since then, I had not been able to read that email again without shedding tears.

(Translated in 2004.6.22)



Natasha standing at the base of the Altai Falls



A map of the Altai Republic (in Japanese)