

A study Guide for

Lost in Mongolia

By Colin Angus

Mike Regan
Mr. Fred Stride
May 29, 2009
CGW 4U1
Period 2

Table of Contents

Introduction	Page 1
Map	Page 2
Glossary	Page 3
Study Guide	
Part One: Getting There	Page 5
Part Two: Mongolia	Page 6
Part Three: Siberia	Page 8

Introduction *To* **Lost in Mongolia**

Lost in Mongolia is the true story of an adventurous trio and their 5,500-kilometer journey down the world's last unchallenged river, the Yenisey River, from source to sea. The Yenisey is the fifth longest river in the world and it is the world's largest river by volume. The diaries written by Colin Angus describe in detail his journey with friends Ben Kozel and Remy Quinter from the very root of the Yenisey River in the mountains of Northern Mongolia to the Arctic Ocean. The Yenisey proves to be an extremely challenging river and the trio is faced with many of its perils. Most importantly Colin, Ben and Remy are able to experience the lifestyles of people in several parts of Mongolia and the Siberian Outback providing valuable insight into cultures that are almost entirely unknown to the Western world.

The map provided on the following page outlines Colin, Ben and Remy's source-to-sea trip down the Yenisey River. The glossary provides definitions and use of key words found in the novel. These words are valuable to understand because of their significance to the novel. Many of these terms have origins in Mongolian and Siberian culture. The following study guide questions are helpful in understanding the novel as well as understanding the political, cultural and social customs of each country visited by the trio during their Yenisey River adventure.

Glossary

Babushka – The Russian word for grandmother.

“With many a handshake of good luck, a radio and TV interview, the offering of an old emergency raft by Boris, and a peck on the cheek by the old Babushka we were finally ready to depart late on the 18th of July.”

Banya – A traditional Russian steam bath or sauna using steam created with heated rocks.

“The banya, a log structure with a corrugated roof, was nearby, nestled amid the birch trees.”

Dacha – A Russian country house or villa.

“The boat was lying on the shore of what is known as a ‘dacha’ community. The Dacha is the Russian equivalent of a summer cottage, but usually it is not just a place for rest and summer holidays but a place for planting enough potatoes, cucumbers, carrots, and tomatoes to survive the long and harsh winter.”

Dory – A narrow, tall flat-bottomed fishing boat with a sharp bow.

“We needed to find a place to overhaul our wooden dory, and this hamlet was a perfect location for the job.”

Encephalitis – A disease causing an inflammation of the brain.

“Ticks in this part of Siberia carry the often-fatal disease encephalitis.”

Fartlek – A workout or training technique where periods of high intensity activity are alternated with periods of lower intensity activity in a continuous workout.

“I put on my sneakers, left Remy and Ben sorting our gear at the train station, and jogged a brisk fartlek to the border.”

Ghengis Khan – A Mongolian ruler who founded the Mongol Empire (1206-1368), the second largest empire in world history.

“Allegedly Genghis Khan’s men could travel indefinitely, living on the milk and blood of their horses if they had to (they would bleed their horses without killing them).”

Ger – A wood-framed felt-covered portable shelter used by nomads in the steppes of Central Asia. It is also referred to as a Yurt.

“In midafternoon we encountered an encampment of four *gers*, and the bewildered herders waved us over.”

Khana – The frame of poles supporting a ger or yurt.

“Gers (sometimes called yurts) are basically a variant of the teepee, composed of a felt covering supported by a framework of poles called *khana*.”

Khoimer – The area in a ger used to store or display valuable objects. It is directly opposite to the front entrance.

“The khoimer, which is directly opposite the door, is where valuable objects are stored or displayed, as well as a small Buddhist shrine.”

Lada – The trademark brand of car produced by the Russian auto company AvtoVAZ.

“As the sun beat down in a typically hot Siberian summer day I journeyed to Baikal in a battered old Lada with the local news crew.”

Larch – A tree native to the cooler temperate regions of the northern hemisphere. They are dominant in the northern forests of Russia and Canada.

“Our crossing of the Arctic Circle was made just as the Birch and Larch trees were turning ablaze with golden yellows.”

Lonely Planet – One of the world’s largest publishers of travel books. The company also produces several outdoor television programs.

“As I rode downtown on the bus, a ponytailed twenty-something California lawyer named Eric read out descriptions from Lonely Planet of the different hotels and hostels near the city center.”

Mantra – A repeated word, sound or phrase. It is often used as a form of meditation.

“Not understanding a word, we smiled and repeated the mantras ‘This is a lovely ger you have here’ and ‘such a beautiful country you live in.’”

Omul – A whitefish species of salmon endemic to Lake Baikal in Siberia, Russia.

“For dinner I steamed the omul over the fire in a large pot. Although bony, the translucent white flesh of the carplike fish was remarkably delicate in flavor.”

Oxbow – A U-shaped body of water formed when a meander is disconnected from the mainstream of a river due to erosion.

“It is possible that the nests were already built by the time the floodwaters receded, in which case the adults must have traversed the entire floodplain forest many times a day to reach foraging sites in the shallows or on logs floating in the floodplain oxbow lakes.”

Shashlyk – A skewered meat dish in Russia.

“We had tea and *shashlyks* before calling it a night.”

Uni – The two central columns supporting a ger or yurt.

“Each pole is shaped individually and supported by two central columns called *uni*.”

Study Guide: Lost in Mongolia

The following study guide questions are to supplement the text and help the reader achieve a better understanding of the novel as well as the cultural, social and political background of each country traversed.

Part One: Getting There

1. Why do Colin and Ben decide to run the Yenisey River?

Colin and Ben decide to run the Yenisey River based on the success of their previous Amazon River trip. Both Colin and Ben enjoy the excitement of tripping, and they like the idea of challenging a river that no others have run before them.

2. How far is their Yenisey River journey? Why must Colin and Ben start in April?

The trip is 3,430 miles. The Yenisey is frozen for two-thirds of the year; they have a 5 month window, from the end of April to the end of September, to cover the distance.

3. The countries Ben and Colin are passing through are referred to as “bureaucratic nightmares.” What is a bureaucracy?

A bureaucracy is a large and ineffective administrative body that tends to stand up barriers in the way of making progress. The term bureaucracy is commonly used to describe large-scale organizations and government.

4. Who else will be accompanying Colin and Ben on the journey?

Joining Colin and Ben on the journey will be Remy Quinter from British Columbia, and Tim Cope from Australia.

6. How is the scene described as Colin arrives in Beijing?

The city is described as being very densely populated and heavily polluted.

7. Describe the problems encountered at Chinese customs. Does this make you think back to the term bureaucracy?

The day before departure to Mongolia Ben and Colin were ushered between several offices to arrange to have their gear weighed. Eight hours were spent dealing with Chinese customs authorities. Ben and Colin are sent away empty-handed. The ordeal is a prime example of a “bureaucratic nightmare.”

Part Two: Mongolia

1. What does “Ulaanbaatar” mean? Why is this significant?

“Ulaanbaatar means “red hero.” This dates back to the Communist revolution of the 1920s.

2. What happens when Colin finds himself in a “typical Third World situation?”

Colin was crowded by a large group of people grabbing at his belongings such as his wallet and film equipment.

3. On Tuesday, May 8 how does Colin feel about the Yenisey trip?

Colin feels that with the involvement of corporate sponsors and news broadcasters the trip has become more of a business than a journey for the sake of adventure and personal enjoyment. He “sold himself to make the trip a reality.”

4. Why does Shagga not want the trio to climb to the peak of Mt. Otgon Tenger?

Shagga says that local Buddhists worship the peak, and they believe it is a holy place. Shagga is convinced that the trio will die if they attempt to summit.

5. Describe Mongolian wrestling.

You must knock your opponent off their feet. If any part of their body besides their feet touches the ground, you win.

6. Why are there abandoned buildings in a valley of the Hangayn Mountains?

The abandoned buildings are from a high-ranking Soviet leader in the 1920s. The Soviets had a strong presence in Mongolia, and the resort was built for politicians to visit. They eventually abandoned the resort when money ran out.

7. Describe the structure of a ger.

A ger is a teepee-like structure composed of felt, a framework of poles, or khana, and two central beams called uni. The khoimer is a place opposite to the entrance of the ger where valuable items are kept as well as a Buddha shrine.

8. What was served for dinner in the ger? Was the food obtained locally?

Dinner consisted of beef strips, yak’s milk tea, yak cheese, and homemade bread. Everything except the flour for the bread was obtained locally.

9. How is a set of whitewater rapids measured?

Whitewater is measured on a scale from one to five. Class five rapids are the most severe. Class one rapids are very small, and one can fall in the water and be perfectly safe. Class five rapids require precise movements, and any small mistake or an unexpected dump from the boat can lead to death.

10. What is dangerous about paddling through the flooded section of the river?

The banks are so severely flooded that the river runs straight through the forest on either side of the river. It is difficult to keep the raft in the middle of the river because often the river current will send the raft into the trees.

11. How did the raft capsize? What was lost downstream?

The raft capsized because as it was stuck on a tree. The river current forced the raft underwater. The group's film bag was lost downstream.

12. What happens to Colin as he tries to make a late night phone call in Ulaanbaatar? What does this say about the standard of living in Mongolia?

Colin is attacked by a group of teenagers looking for food. One boy attempts to knock Colin out with a small boulder. This shows the reader that Mongolians have a much lower standard of living than the average North American.

Part Three: Siberia

1. How was Lake Baikal formed?

Lake Baikal was formed when the Siberian Platform and the Sayano-Baikalsky folded belt separated creating a gap in the surface of the land four hundred miles long and six and a half miles deep.

2. Describe the tectonic plate activity in this region.

The Lake Baikal region is on a very unstable fault line; up to two thousand tremors and earthquakes occur each year.

3. Why is crossing Lake Baikal so dangerous?

Lake Baikal is known for extremely violent storms; it is especially dangerous in the summer months when the contrast between the shore temperature and the temperature on the lake creates a quicksilver microclimate. Hypothermia occurs within minutes of falling into Lake Baikal; its maximum temperature is thirty-nine degrees Fahrenheit.

4. Describe Hank's village house.

Hank's house is a small log home with a brick woodstove, a small living area, a sink draining into a bucket, and no plumbing.

5. What does the average professional make in Siberia? What does Hank have to say about Westerners?

The average professional in Siberia makes only ninety dollars a month, yet is satisfied. Hank believes that in the Western world people are never satisfied with what they have because their society revolves around consumerism and material goods.

6. Who were the Buryats? Why did they lose touch with their heritage?

The Buryats were the nomadic people who originally inhabited the land in the Lake Baikal area. They were forced to assimilate by the Cossacks during the early days of the Russian Empire. The Buryat people were "absorbed into the Soviet machine."

7. What is the disease that ticks carry in Siberia? How severe is getting a bite?

Ticks in this part of Siberia carry encephalitis. If you are bitten by a tick carrying this disease you have a one-in-ten chance of dying if you do not seek immediate medical attention.

8. Why does Olya want to participate for a ten-day leg of the journey?

Olya is a psychology student, and she would like to study and document the interaction of four men on a small dory. She will also be given an opportunity to practice her English.

9. What does Colin's date Elena say about Russian business?

Elena says that honest businesspeople cannot make an adequate living. The government takes ninety percent of earnings and the mafia takes the rest. The mafia members are the only wealthy businesspeople, and members of the mafia are found in the government, the police force, and in the army.

10. Describe living on the dory.

The team is constantly paddling; all day and night they take shifts on the oars. The team cooks and sleeps in a small cabin barely large enough to fit four people at one time. There is no privacy; team members have to go to the bathroom over the side of the boat. Water constantly leaks in through the hull of the boat. Water leaks through the roof of the cabin whenever it rains.

11. How does Vladimir's lifestyle compare to that of a typical Siberian? Think back to what Elena says about the mafia.

Vladimir lives a very luxurious lifestyle. His links in the mafia allow him a standard of living that is significantly more lavish than the average Siberian's lifestyle.

12. Is the dory designed to perform in whitewater?

No. It is a narrow boat with high sides; it could flip easily. The wooden hull cannot withstand contact with rocks, especially when many of the boards are rotten.

13. What caused the radioactive contamination in the southern region of the Yenisey? How has the contamination affected communities?

A nuclear facility was operated near Lesosibirsk during the cold war. Three decades of radioactive particle discharge has caused severe genetic mutation and cancer as well as the contamination of the entire river ecosystem.

14. Why is Yeniseysk considered "the father of Siberian towns?"

Yeniseysk was founded in 1619 by the Cossacks. They built a fortress there as a base for the exploration of Siberia.

15. How is the team treated when they go to the riverside bar in Yeniseysk?

The team is treated extremely well. Westerners are highly respected in Yeniseysk. At the bar the locals are practically fighting over Colin, Ben and Remy's company.

16. At what latitude is the Arctic Circle? What happens at this point?

The Arctic Circle surrounds the globe at exactly sixty six degrees and thirty three minutes north. It marks the point at which trees stop growing due to the conditions of the tundra soil. Above the Arctic Circle there is 24 hour daylight in the summer and during the winter months the sun barely rises above the horizon at its highest point during the day.

17. Describe the aurora borealis.

The aurora borealis display is described as scarlet, emerald, and ivy bands that dance in the sky. Colin compares the lights to a "Pink Floyd light show."

18. Why is Potopova referred to as a community of "lost Arctic souls?"

The Siberian natives, the Nenets, were expected to assimilate into European culture. Their tribe leaders and medicine men were taken away and slaughtered. Potopova is a community of box homes where the Nenets were forced to abandon their traditional ways of life and be educated "the white way." Death and suicide rates are extremely high, and most locals have resorted to alcoholism in an attempt to rid themselves of their misery. The Nenet life expectancy is forty-five years. Their traditional way of life and their culture are on the verge of extinction.

19. Why are the buildings in Dudinka on stilts?

Buildings are on stilts to prevent them from sinking into the permafrost.

20. What does Ootla take Tim, Remy, Colin and Ben to see?

Ootla takes the team to see a field of human bones. More than 2000 Germans who immigrated to Russia during World War II were shipped to the far north to die. Joseph Stalin was afraid the German immigrants would side with the Nazis during an invasion.

Lost in Mongolia

Personal Response

The novel *Lost in Mongolia* is a series of diaries written by Colin Angus over the course of the source-to-sea Yenisey trip. The reader does not have any access to the thoughts of other characters in the novel. The following diary has been written from the point of view of Australian, Ben Kozel. Ben is Colin Angus' long time friend and travel partner for several trips including a source-to-sea trip of the Amazon River, the second longest river in the world.

Sunday, September 23, 2001
Ben Kozel

Today we finally reached the delta of the mighty Yenisey. It has been four and a half months since the start of our journey in Mongolia. It feels almost surreal to me that the trip is coming to a close; after such a journey I've become accustomed to nomadic life on the river.

The Yenisey River trip has been a great learning experience. The people of this land and their ways of life are an incredible inspiration to me. They live on very little; most of the luxuries that are standard to us at home in Australia are not available to them, yet they are content with what they have. These people of rural Mongolia and Siberia work so hard on a daily basis just to survive, yet they are the kindest, happiest people I have ever had the privilege of meeting. It makes me wonder why our society revolves around consumerism. People we have met on the Yenisey are living proof that happiness is not determined by one's standard of living.

Over the course of the last five months I have been able to experience incredible cultures like the Nenets, but I have also learned that their traditional culture and way of living is becoming very rare due to encroaching European influence. The Siberian natives have been forced to live in box housing communities and to be educated the white European way. The situation in Russia is very similar to the issue faced by their Canadian counterparts, the Inuit. It discourages me that such a beautiful native culture is being destroyed by the pressure of Europeans to assimilate. I am hopeful that the publicity our team is earning from the journey will pay off and more people will recognize the value of maintaining such incredible cultural diversity. I also hope that I am able to inspire people through my travels to become more open-minded, and see that there are incredible people everywhere in the world, and there is so much out there to see and experience first-hand.

Also on this trip I have learned about serious environmental issues that threaten the wildlife ecosystems of many sections of the Yenisey River. Most of Russia and Mongolia rely on non-renewable energy sources such as coal and fossil fuels. The pollution caused by these fuels harm much of the Yenisey watershed and the species that rely on it. Another contributor to the pollution of Siberia's natural landscape is several nuclear facilities that are currently operated. Leaks, spills, and explosions of toxic and radioactive waste have caused harm to the natural landscape of Siberia and pose severe health threats to people living in the vicinity. Awareness must be raised about the need to eliminate the use of such harmful resources and switch to long-term renewable energy.

I intend to continue tripping as much as I can. There is so much I want to see, and I feel that I am responsible for raising the awareness of people about the importance of stepping out into the real world. What developed countries need are for people to see that there is more to life than having money and material possessions.

I am really excited about the diary Colin has been writing. I know he's planning on having it published as a novel. If he follows through as planned I recommend reading the book; it would be a great way for people to learn about the unique geographic features of the Yenisey River and the amazing people we have been fortunate enough to meet on our journey. Colin's novel might even inspire a few adventurers! I guess we'll see where it all leads.