Aims of the project

The aims of the project were to investigate, document, and experience the remote communities of Central Asia.

Throughout the globe, distinct geographical, environmental and political climates have shaped each community to the form it exists today, resulting in a diverse array of cultures worldwide. Diversity offers us opportunities for inter-societal sharing of ideas that help us solve the problems within each others communities.

Living in and being involved in the global economy means that our actions and decisions affect those living on other parts of the planet. Climate change has also opened our eyes to how we live our lives can have global ramifications. As we near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, and the world becomes increasingly integrated and globalised, diverse and unique cultures are rapidly disappearing.

These things can't be solved by monthly charity donations (though we are not suggesting that you stop!). Have a look around and see some other ways of living. Why do we choose TVs and cars? Did we even choose it? Could we do things differently, and still be happy? Should we do things differently?

The Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages (www.livingtongues.org) reports that on average, one distinct language is being lost every two weeks with 50 per cent of all languages estimated to be extinct in 100 years' time. In a recent study published in the eminent scientific journal Nature, Sutherland and colleagues (doi:10.1038/nature01607) found that 46 languages have less than 10 native speakers left and 357 languages with less than 50 speakers, with the languages becoming extinct at a far greater rate than animal species.

We believe that cultural diversity is important, and valuable enough to be preserved. There is a lot of indigenous knowledge (natural resource management, care for local flora and fauna, history, medicine) that is only to be found within the hands of peoples that have lived in the region for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Also, as each of these different cultures has evolved throughout unique geographical and political climates, there are many different elements of societal culture, ideas and tenets, that are unique to their situation. Thus, by maintaining the diversity that is present on this little jewel of a planet, we are not losing potential for ideas of how to organize our society. What elements and practices in these other societies might we be able to incorporate into Western society?
This journey and subsequent documentation was not about an unquestioning valuing all cultures as equal, not about blindly promoting tolerance of their customs and ways of life, but rather one of questioning our own lifestyle, their lifestyle, our own beliefs and practice, and their beliefs and practices. This involved learning what tools they use and how they use them – both in terms of locally available resources (land, flora and fauna) and the values and tenets of their social systems.

Learning from other cultures consists of seeing what does and what doesn't work for certain cultures, what problems their cultures have and what beneficial elements they have. Then, one must ask why it does or doesn't work. By seeing what faults our culture may have, what solutions other cultures may have to this, and what problems they have, we can better find solutions to the universal problems that plague mankind. Thus, in the process, one ends up questioning their own beliefs, and garnering new knowledge or ways of looking at things.

People often are not concerned with the preservation of the diversity of different cultures and the knowledge they have acquired, not so much because they do not care, but because often they do not know. If they saw and understood the importance of these cultures, they would be more likely to be moved to act. When people can connect first hand, empathise, sharing joy and sadness with these people, they will be emotional attuned to their cultures, more able to see themselves in their shoes, not so far removed. Once people see and understand the beauty and importance of these people and cultures and their indigenous wisdom, they will hopefully understand and promote the preservation of this diversity and its acquired knowledge.

From this problem itself, stems other questions, which hopefully our followers may go someway towards answering or even just questioning. Are other cultures important? If so, why are they important? Are we all part of the same or independent nature/culture? What is our role/place in a world full of many disappearing cultures and indigenous knowledge? We hope that this journey will help people explore some of these (and many more) questions, and move them to search for answers.

As we travel through Central Asia we aimed to get a glimpse of and document many other lifestyles. We aimed to do this as observers, without tarnishing the very cultures we are trying to document. However, when venturing into a foreign environment as an observer, it is a trade off between minimal impact on these cultures (to capture them in their most pure form), and documenting it to help people understand why they need to preserve it. By entering these fragile and uncontaminated cultural areas you often cause change to the indigenous populace by altering, bringing in, taking away or even unconsciously changing them; how much of this is legitimised by the documentation of these people? This was one of the larger issues concerning the planning and logistics of this expedition, which will require careful attention.

We aimed to stay with, and follow numerous endangered nomadic tribes (some with as little as 50 native speakers left) which were predicted to have disappeared by 2050. Throughout this journey we documented the stories, wisdom, beliefs, way of life, language, music etc, of these cultures before they are lost forever. Many of these tribes have very few members left, and could disappear within the next 20-50 years. These tribes have gathered hundreds of years knowledge and wisdom which would be a terrible waste if it was lost. We aimed to be recording all this
knowledge and culture in various mediums, recording their songs, stories, dances, knowledge, way of life, social structures, myths of creation; the works.

These vanishing tribes if not documented now, will have their wisdom and knowledge (which has been gathered throughout the centuries and passed down from generation to generation) lost forever. Our current lifestyle as it is, is not the only way to live, there are many things wrong with it, it is only by looking to how other cultures live that we can progress. It is only by looking at other groups lifestyles that we can see how we can change ours, what works in their way of life, what doesn't, what works in our way of life, what doesn't, that we can truly move forward. This is what the expedition is all about.

We captured all our experiences on film (video and camera), on audio (digital recordings) and physically (artifacts) to document their respective lifestyles, and transmitting back in real-time back to you via this website. From myths of creation, to fables, to poems, and music, to sports and instruments and clothing, we aim to capture and document the spirit of these peoples on a variety of different media.

Through this website, and in combination with pre- and post- expedition talks and presentations, we aim to transmit these stories, in real-time, back to those around the world that are following our journey.

Our personal journeys:

For us, Steppe by Steppe, Side by Side was an opportunity to really grow and learn both as individuals and as a team. There were very real risks involved in such an enterprise and we recognised that we would be stepping well out of our comfort bubbles - our security will be centred squarely on our wits and our reliance on other people, not on our house, or our car. The diverse range of environments, both geographical and political, will be testing. It's was all in the preparation…

In a world where we are so focused on surviving in our own isolated economic driven culture, the idea of taking people out of that and placing them in a foreign society without Western technology or material wants - "living to live" - is intriguing. How would we survive? How would we live without the things we take for granted; piped water, electricity, mobile phones? It was also be interesting to find out what draws us humans to seek out these foreign cultures and what we have in common with them - is it something innate, something socially constructed, or something else? How do our experiences of these people change us? How do people cope when they are thrown into foreign culture, a situation of unfamiliarity, people they do not know, alienation, and anomie?

There are a number of reasons we decided to partake upon this journey: the challenges that it would present to ourselves and what we presently consider to be important; the opportunity to see and record some of these special people and places; the opportunity to bring to the public the knowledge these local cultures have gathered over the centuries. We think such a journey
presented a remarkable opportunity for two journeymen to bring the global issues of increasing culture homogeneity and loss of culture and local knowledge, and its relationship with affluent lifestyle, into living rooms through discussions amongst a mix of people that the viewer can relate to.

We hope our extensive experience in communication will contribute to making the journey rewarding, engaging; much more than merely entertaining.

*There are those people today who live the same life, day-in day-out - predictable, risk-free, dreamless. They are the harshest critics of those who choose to break free from this mundane existence.*

*In this world, too many people are afraid to pursue the life they truly desire, too afraid of being criticised by others, too afraid of failing, too afraid of not knowing the way.*

*However, there are also those who choose to follow their dreams, those who choose to rebel, those who strive to be free - those who live. Stay true to yourself. Break free from the chains of society - and live. May you too have the strength and courage to pursue your dreams.*

-Roger Chao

**Synopsis and findings**

A 12-month journey through ex-Soviet states, through all types of environments, and on a custom-made velomobile, is bound to generate a few interesting tales. The Steppe by Steppe project was certainly no exception. At every stage of our travels through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Xinjiang, we encountered opportunities to engage with the local people, and jumped at these chances with abandon.

The first culture we witnessed and experienced was that of the Kazakh people, and our introduction to their famed tradition of hospitality occurred in the very first village we rode through, Korgalzhin. A middle-aged lady discovered us on the street and instructed us to follow her to her house, where she fed us endlessly until we became too tired to eat, at which point she laid out beds for us to sleep the night. At the next town, Barshin, a teenage boy on his bike ushered us to his grandfather’s house, where we again were inundated with tea, and given the best room in the house in which to sleep.

This trend continued throughout all of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The Uzbeks and Tajiks share very similar traditions, and since it was deep into summer when we were there, we were spoilt by all the glorious fruits of the season. It is said that this tradition of hospitality comes as a result of Islam, but it is expressed with such fervor in these peoples, irrespective of
the extent to which they adhere to other Muslim practices, that it can be said to be more a
national tradition.

Unfortunately such an enthused welcome was not experienced in all regions that we
explored. Before entering Kyrgyzstan we had been warned about the dangerous streets there,
which we ignored because we’d heard that for all the countries before then and they’d been quite
pleasant. However, traveling within Kyrgyzstan, even the locals thought their own country was
very unsafe, and this did concern us. Indeed, we had two mugging attempts and three cases of
theft in the country, plus the citizens were generally less hospitable than the previous
countries. Notable exceptions to this were the Uzbek, and conservative Muslim towns of
Halmion and Uzgen. It could be speculated that ironically it is the Tourism industry itself,
strongest in Kyrgyzstan of all the CIS states, that has intoxicated the locals to see hospitality as a
profitable business, and foreigners as a source of quick money.

Following this, we ventured throughout the Uyghur Autonomous region of Xinjiang in Western
China. Here, it was impossible for us to experience the hospitality of the local people because it
was illegal for the ethnic groups to bring us into their private homes. We know that at least they
wanted us there, as they invited us in on several different occasions, but each time the police
came and dragged us out! We were very disappointed that we could not live with and experience
the Uyghur traditions as we had with the Kazakh, Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz before.

As expected, all these experiences of hospitality in far-away lands carries with it tales of exotic
culinary adventures. Our first exciting yet puzzling meal was on our first night on the road,
where we where invited to the home of some workers just out of Astana, to share some freshly
cooked horse intestine. We managed to politely avoid eating on that occasion, but we could only
hold out for so long, because it turned out that the favourite and national dish of the Kazakh
people, Beshbarmak, centres around horse meat, fat, and intestines. And as guests, of course we

- Horse intestine stuffed with horse fat, and the soup
- Chinese banquet
- Plov all the time
- Watermelons in south Kazakhstan and Samarkand
- Apricots in Putkhin
- Grapes in Istaravshan and Halmion
- Curut and cream in Urumbash
- Pig at Anton’s in Uzgen with Ziodin
- Learning to make chuchuvara and manti

Animal encounters

- Always milking cows
- Horses in taldysay
- Sheep in Kashgar
• Alive dogs in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, dead dogs in China
• Pigs in Kyzyl-Orda
• Wolves in Altin-Emel and Aktogay

Medical problems

• Flu in Uzgen
• Roger’s bad in Shubarkol
• Megan’s bad in Andijon
• Both bad in Hotan
• Roger’s burn
• Roger’s tooth
• Megan’s chest infection
• Megan’s knee out of Uzgen

Music and dance

• Barshino with Dombra
• Kazakh not so enthusiastic about the dance
• Uzbeks in Kazakhstan
• Pakhtakor party
• Karmatosh wedding
• Uyghur men at Korban, women not allowed
• Traditional dance shows all over, in Shubarkol, in Isfara
• Grandpa dancing at the Toi outside Osh
• Komus in Kyrgyzstan, like Kazakhs, not for dancing

Family structure

• youngest son stays at home to look after the family
• Circumcision between the ages of 3 to 7
• The richest are the ones with most sons because they are the bread-winners
• girl must be married by about 23, otherwise it becomes a disgrace
• Alternatively, the girl goes to University so they can earn their own keep
• The more children the better
• Most important things – weddings and circumcision ceremonies
• Life savings toward these parties
• Tajikistan government was trying to outlaw large parties, to try to persuade people to spend less on weddings and more on tables and chairs (they traditionally eat on the floor and have no need for tables and chairs)
Mechanical problems with the Quike, and logistics

- tyre blowouts
- 28 punctures in an hour
- Spokes popping
- Brake repairs
- Drivetrain freezing up in the cold
- Gear shifter freezing up in the cold
- Shipping over there very difficult
- Couldn’t just throw it on a car, needed a truck
- Kamaljin’s truck going 6 km/h up the mountain passes to Bishkek

Security concerns (higher population density and poorer communities).

- Pakhtakor watch
- Drunk man in Kazakhstan
- WileyX goggles

Putting smiles on their faces, and giving back an English/foreigner experience to tell their friends

- Schools – Barshin, Shubarkol, Terekty,
- Dostik
- Shubarkol
- Pakhtakor
- Dostlik
- Gagarin (lonely Tolik)
- Pakhtakor
- Dima and Shamil in Samarkand. This was not tradition for them – they were just bloody good blokes
- Karmatosh
- Gusar – woman that adopted Megan in place of her dead daughter
- English teacher in Zerafshan valley
- Zebo
- Faridon in Khojand
- English teacher who wouldn’t let us go

Encounters with police from Uzbekistan onwards.
• corrupt police because their wages are so poor
• Kyrgyzstan 20 soum bribe on the roadside
• The way we were received by the police and military personnel in China was quite a contrast from the CIS states, and scarier. Everything was performed with clinical precision. The police and PSB and army were everywhere. It may have been that we were in a particularly sensitive area at a particularly sensitive time, but the way the executed their jobs left no margin for error, from anyone.

Religion.

• Omen.
• In Uzbekistan (many Tajiks), Tajikistan (many Uzbeks), and Uyghurstan, the greeting is Assalam wu aleikum, Arabic for peace be upon you. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, arguably the less overtly religious of the nations, it was shortened to Salom or Salem.
• Head-scarves, the full-face ones especially in Uzgen.
• Beginning of Ramadan in Istaravshan
• Rosa Eit in Halmion
• Korban in Kashgar

Handicrafts

• Dostlik
• Pakhtakor
• Istaravshan
• Flour mill in Shahrkristan
• Carpet weavers in Karabulak and Zerafshan village and Buragen
• Aktogay
• Shabanbay bi
• Khojand Arts college
• Putkhin

Border and visa troubles

• More than our fair share of border and visa troubles.
• Our first pass through Kazakhstan went without a hiccups, and this may have given us a false sense of security
Insights into political structure, and the different background and attitude to Australians

- water problems
- land borders and disputes
- relatives get the jobs
- role of religion
- attitude to time and tardiness

Struggles with the environment

- desert crossing
- winter in Kazakhstan
- steppe south of Zhezkazgan
- Kazarman pass

Sleeping in strange places

- Mazar in Ayni
- Dump outside Kyzyl-Orda
- Mosque in Turkistan
- Stuck in camelthorn at Aidarkol lake
- Hike through snow to shepherd’s house in Kazakhstan
- Nowhere not PSB-approved in China!
- In old man’s bed in Šary-Tash
- In the middle of the Taklamakan
- BozAdyr boy’s house on the balcony
- Inside with the mozzies and then outside in Kyzyl-Orda under the mosquito net
- Lots of sleeping outside in South Kazakhstan

Rooms with entire families, multiple generations

Future plans concerning the project

Audio, video clips and book in MAI repository for use in research at Monash University.

Book

Website ongoing as travel advice and information about independent travel in Central Asia

There is still opportunity for the production of a documentary, to be completed when the resources become available.
Also, a Project to start an NGO helping the schools in Kazakhstan.

And to return to complete part 2 of the project when we secure some more funding.