



Expedition to Paradise

Field Study: Humanities

Summary: In 2013 WINGS Fellow Arita Baaijens and her expedition partner Wayne Poulsen circumnavigated the Altai Golden Mountain region in Central Asia. Traversing 1500km on horseback, Arita was on a quest to find out what exactly is sacred about these particular mountains. Many legends claim that the region is home to a hidden paradise called Shambhala. Arita's main goal on this expedition was to make the connection between the geographical location and its sacred meanings. Arita made many trips to the region to familiarize herself with the land, people, and indigenous worldview before setting out on her journey. She took her personal experiences from this expedition to map and study cultures that are connected by the same ecosystem and heritage, yet disconnected by firm national controls.

EXPEDITION GOALS

- Spread awareness of the existence of and need to preserve the unique flora, fauna, geology, and culture of the Altai Mountain Range.
- Present the Altai mountains in the four Altai countries as a unity.
- Research the meaning of sacred landscapes.
- Showcase the Altai as a coherent system
- Invite stakeholders to share their vision for the future



WINGS Fellow Arita Baaijens holding the Flag over the Chinese part of the Altai mountain range

- Promote cultural exchange across borders

THE EXPEDITION

Day to day, the team travelled mostly by horseback. Slow travel is the best way to experience and engage with the Altai and its people. To study the interaction between landscape and mind, Arita kept a record of her state of mind and the physical environment at those particular moments. The resulting map shows the interaction between topography of the mind and topography of the physical environment.



Arita filmed the entire journey through the snow capped mountains, canyons, lakes and valleys for a documentary film. The mountain range is one of the last refuges of snow leopards and Argali sheep. As they traveled through the mountain range Arita collected and recorded stories of the shamans, villagers, and musicians to gain an insight into the cultural heritage of the mountain range.

As the team travelled through Kazakhstan they were able to experience one of the most remote parts of the mountain range, Karakaisk National Park, where there were hardly any human encounters. In China, the team traveled with local horsemen and was invited to share tea and local food with many nomadic families. In Mongolia the team encountered many places of worship: stone altars, offerings, and ovoos (stone piles) which mark natural places of power.

While traveling through Russia, Arita talked to the locals about plans for a gas pipeline and roads across the sacred and vulnerable Ukok plateau, an uninhabited valley between glaciers and home to snow leopards and Argali sheep. Arita discovered that the Altaians consider the Altai - its rivers, mountains, stones and trees - a living being.

WHO

Artia Baaijens
WINGS Woman of
Discovery, 2014

WHAT

First time circumnavigation of the Altai Mountain Range in Modern History

WHEN

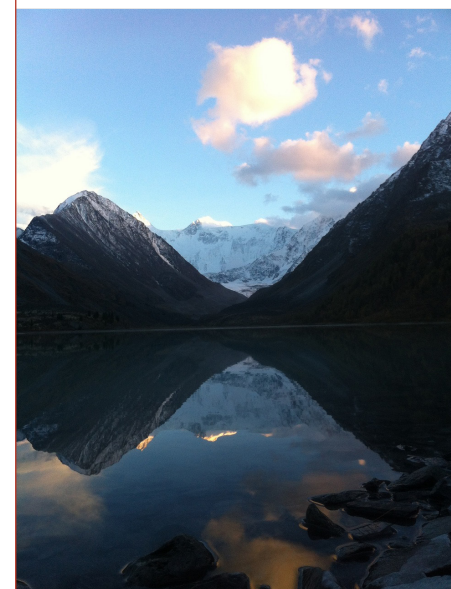
Summer 2013

WHERE

The Altai Mountain range where the borders of Russia, Mongolia, China, and Kazakhstan meet

WHY

Research the Meaning of Landscape



The indigenous people do not believe in heaven or hell in the afterlife. Paradise is to be found on earth, in the Altai.

CHALLENGES

Arita and her team spent several years preparing for the 2013 Altai Expedition. Traveling is only possible in the Altai mountains for 3-4 months due to harsh climate conditions, so timing was critical and challenging.

Obtaining border zone permits posed a logistical challenge because mountain region spans four countries with strict border controls. Different translators were needed in each country to communicate with officials, nomads, and herders along the expedition. Traveling in sensitive geographical border zones requires establishing good contacts beforehand. All 4 countries also had fragmented conservation policies, making management of the mountain range difficult.

Horses were not permitted to cross international borders, so the team had to rent different horses from different contacts in each country. At each border crossing, horses, translators and fixers had to all be present at a specified time with all travel documents. If just one expedition element missed the appointed border crossing time, the entire expedition could be compromised. The biggest challenge was to



Arita discussing native culture and events with the local people



Arita creating her own map on animal skin matching the natural sacred spaces with their importance to indigenous culture

travel with an open mind and ‘think’ with the senses.

EXPEDITION RESULTS

Arita collected and recorded stories, and shares them with a wider audience through interviews, publications, documentary, presentations, and books. She also filmed the expedition to reach an even wider audience. In order to truly understand and research the meaning of this sacred landscape, Arita combined the mapping of the physical environment with her personal experiences. The results of the expedition are widely shared: an article was published in 2015 in Russia, 2 TEDxtalks, book and exhibit Search for Paradise (January 2016), articles in Dutch magazines, presentation at the World Explorers Conference, Ireland and at WNF headquarters, Amsterdam. More publications, presentations and discussions are planned for 2016.

She discovered that ‘nature’ and ‘place’ are not objective and fixed realities. Our perceptions and experiences are a mental construct. In the end it does not really matter whether nature is animated or not. But it does matter which version of the story we believe and what our society aspires to. A child growing up in a culture that believes the forest has a self or soul, will grow old together with the forest. A child who looks at the trees as future firewood, will see that forest being cut down during her lifetime.

ABOUT THE FELLOW

Arita Baaijens is an explorer, writer, biologist, and mountaineer. In 1990 she gave up her job as a consultant in environmental affairs and has been pursuing her dream of exploring the world ever since. She has completed over 25 desert expeditions on camel throughout Egypt and Sudan. She is the first woman to have crossed the Western Desert of Egypt solo on camel. Arita uses storytelling as a powerful tool to reach people and create a 2-way flow of ideas, knowledge, skills and experience.

CONTACT/INFO:

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EXPEDITION TEAM

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Arita Baaijens

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