Mongolia has taken a place inside me and lives there bringing me so much happiness in my everyday life – whether I am physically in Mongolia or there in my thoughts.
The land of the ‘Eternal Blue Sky’ has drawn me back four times so far and I’ve even had thoughts of living there permanently. In all my many travels no place has sung to me in such a way, not even my home of birth, Australia. Each journey to Mongolia has been different yet the same feeling of being ‘at home’ prevails for me there.

I arrived by train from Russia on the Trans Mongolian the second time I went to Mongolia. On the fifth morning of travel I woke to the day beginning over the steppe. I was curious about this feeling I had on my first visit of being ‘taken’. My initial trip was only going to be for 2 weeks and I stayed on for 2 months. I was returning to know what that feeling was – was it just that trip? The excitement of a new mysterious, magical place? Opening my eyes that morning and seeing that scene the feeling was there - home again!

On this second trip I was thinking about travelling to the most western corner to The Golden Eagle Festival in the Bayan Ulji province. Here lives the largest ethnic minority - the Kazakh’s. The tradition of Eagle falconry came to Mongolia with the Kazakh people when they fled Kazakhstan during the Soviet invasion in the 1920’s. Eagle falconry has been kept alive and preserved here and has recently taken a modern turn.

The documentary ‘The Eagle Huntress’ released this year focuses on a young girl who is following her dream to be an Eagle Huntress. It shows much about the Kazakh culture and the spectacular landscape. In Kazakh tradition eagle falconry is men’s only business. However Aisholpan, with a mother and father who believe in what matters most for their children – to be happy, have allowed her love for the eagle to develop. They have nurtured her interest despite tradition and done so in the most peaceful way. Aisholpan Nurgaiv, The Eagle Huntress, was the first female to compete at The Golden Eagle Festival. It was history in the making and I was there! As a 13 year girl she won the competition with a record breaking score of 5 seconds – the next closest score was 30 seconds.
he game is about speed, agility, time and skill. The hunter’s team mate releases the eagle from the top of the mountain that overlooks the festival site. The eagle then makes her way to the hunter who is mounted on their horse on the competition ground below. It is a game of training but also of chance. The eagle with her own will plays the game - maybe straight to the hunter or maybe a detour soaring in the eternal blue sky. The festival site is patch of dirt and when the games begin, the day unfolds. There are craft sellers, vehicles, camels and the hunters on horseback with their eagle on their arm. They are dressed in their best pelts or fine embroidery and seem to just appear from the nothingness of the horizon and a blank landscape. The gheris (yurts) pump out smoke, inside its toasty warm, with tea and khuushuur (mutton pancakes) to eat. I can smell, taste, feel it all now as I write. The air is crisp, dry, cold. One is rugged up and warm, prepared, a barrier of clothing for the worst of this climate so one is able to appreciate the best of it - the Eternal Blue Sky and sunshine.

It is my love of festival photography that first had taken me to capture the soaring eagles in competition. Since then I have returned experiencing three other festivals in different locations in the Bayan Ulji province. The Kazakh’s love a competition and coming together for some festival fun. What I feel at all festivals is a feeling of other worldliness, created by audience and performer as they leave their everyday life behind. I felt this also in my photographic work with music festivals where people enter a festival site and as they focus on what is around them, open themselves up to a lightness of being, a spiritual experience that exists in the ‘present’ moment.
It was strangely familiar the first time I went to The Golden Eagle Festival though visually it was nothing like anything I’d ever seen or experienced – men in pelts, women in fine embroidery, smoking yurts, racing camels and the eagles in competition. However there was that sense of familiarity that felt good and the divine element of the festival atmosphere just filled me with joy.

There were only a few tourists so no roped-off areas for safety, everyone just looking out for each other as everything was coming in all different directions - galloping horses, eagles hanging onto their rider’s arm, faces in fierce competition for speed, dust and more dust, surrounded and at one with the crowd and the sound of excited voices over the loud speaker giving the run down. It resonated with me. Just like the blast of summer heat, the Big Day Out, Sydney Olympic stadium, main stage act blasting it out, merged with the crowd but transported and morphed in a far off land.

Lonely Planet actually describe this part of Mongolia as the Wild West’ – ‘Uljii city is a windblown frontier town that will appeal to anyone who dreams of the Wild West.’ Horses, people, pulsing together as one as crowds do. I can still feel the touch of someone pulling me back from the racing horses as the crowd had surged beyond the game line out onto the track to get a better look - galloping horses coming straight for us as an unstoppable speed.

At the end of the festival and as the day was coming to an end, a busload of Kazakhs arrived. They were Chinese Kazakhs from the border, a week’s drive away, musicians that no one had ever met. They were late as they had broken down along the way. Nonetheless they started up their concert and there were soon there were tears of joy.

Looking out over The Golden Eagle Festival of Mongolia. The audience are moving towards the finishing line for the camel race.
Left: Baquibek children.

Below left: Chinese Kazakh musician from across the southern boarder of Mongolia. She plays the dombra. Dressed in traditional Kazakh costume.

Below: Baquibek, when talking about the relationship between hunter and eagle he said "our souls are connected".

Opposite: One of the oldest eagle Hunters.
My friend Janarbek explained no one could believe they were singing all the songs that they knew - the Kazakh songs. In my experience Mongolia is a place to expect the unexpected. It’s akin to the nomadic thinking, a living in the moment with life naturally unfolding. As most of Mongolia operates like this you are forced to join in - fighting it only makes for a stressful travel experience! It suites my nature perfectly, my artist’s way. I feel so good here because of this flow and also to be in a climate that I find so invigorating. This nomad way is matched by space. A big open space under the simplicity of a vast uninterrupted sky. In it I feel myself, boundless and free.

The writer Haruki Murakami described my experience so well. “Sometimes when one is moving silently through such utterly desolate landscape, an overwhelming hallucination can cause one to feel that oneself, as an individual human being, is slowly unravelling. The surrounding space is so vast that it becomes more and more difficult to keep a balanced grip on one’s own being. I wonder if I am making myself clear? The mind expands to fill the entire landscape, becoming so diffuse in the process that one loses the ability to keep it fastened to the physical self. That is what I experienced in the midst of the Mongolian steppe. How vast it was! It felt more like an ocean than a desert landscape. The sun would rise from the eastern horizon, cut its way across the empty sky, and sink below the western horizon. This was the only perceptible change in our surroundings. and in the movement of the sun, I felt something I hardly know how to name: some huge, cosmic love.” I was so glad to find someone known and credible like Murakami had referred to this experience as cosmic love. I had written in my own travel journal that it was love that was the unseen element that held the whole of this fabric of life together. The feeling was so strong and I couldn’t name it at first then it was so simple. At my host family’s home in the countryside everything I’d experienced was communicated through every means except spoken language. Sign language, drawing and the clinker was laughter. I observed the feeling in conversations between my host husband and wife. They had seven children so had already had a bit of life together. They were still laughing together, enjoying each other. It felt like a life of simplicity with such depth. By comparison I reflected on my culture and life as so complicated and too often so emotionally shallow.

On my last visit I had the chance to ask my friend, nomad, eagle hunter Baquibek about what it is that lies between his eagle and him. Through the interpreter he said ‘Our souls are connected’ and further to that he said ‘our souls are connected to all our animals and our land’. It is something I feel too. While in our culture it’s not a given, it was a wonderful to hear this. So simply said, a matter of fact statement from a man - a big, strong hunter, head of a family.

In my search for meaning and understanding I have seen those with a close relationship to nature are complete. They seek nothing. They accept what is. The nomads worry about nothing. They respond to what arrives with nature’s cycles. This is more that just my observation. Yet another inspiring aspect of Mongolia for me is the people I meet along the way, often travellers with a purpose. A researcher who was working with nomads told me that when asked if they worry because the weather is always so unknown and they rely on it for their survival, the nomads almost could not understand the question. To worry about something they could not do anything about. These people display a great reverence for nature, stemming from traditional Shamanic and Tengrist beliefs. At the pinnacle is ‘The Eternal Blue Sky’ which covers Mongolia. The relationship with nature is two way, both nature and man have a role in taking care of each other. Maybe this is the reason for this ‘big love’ I feel there and the ‘cosmic love’ of which Murakami writes.

Sophie Howarth has been a professional photographer for over 20 years.

She has previously documented music festivals and her book ‘Peace Love and Brown Rice – A Photographic History of the Big Day Out’ was published to popular and critical acclaim. Sophie’s photographic exhibition ‘Soaring - The Golden Eagle Festival of Mongolia’ is being held in Sydney at The Concourse Art Space, 409 Victoria Avenue, Chatswood from Wednesday 1st November until Sunday 19th November 2017.

Or visit sophiehowarthphotography.com

Hunters from the Altai Mountains come together for an Eagle Festival at ‘Ice Mountain’ in February 2017.

Hunters at The Golden Eagle Festival - traditional hunters clothing, on their hip they wear embroidered Kazakh bag carrying meat for their eagle.