

WEEKEND LIFE

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Casual

THERE IS a lot of potential and cleverness at Chuch, a vegan bistro, that's BYOB and all about tapas. PAGE H6

Food

LESLEY Chesterman chooses her Top 10 favourite food movies, a feast for the eyes and zero calories. PAGE H8



PHOTOS: BONNIE FOLKINS

Kazakh eagle hunters Ibolot Birkitkhan, left, and his father, Hizim, ride to a local festival near Sagsay in western Mongolia.

Soaring with the eagle hunters

MONTREAL PHOTOGRAPHER BONNIE FOLKINS pays tribute to Mongolia's nomads after epic rides across the steppes

RICHARD ANDREWS
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Escapes from Russian gunmen; hunting for wolves with giant eagles; living with Kazakh nomads in the remote wilderness of Mongolia.

Just another day at the office for St-Lambert artist and photographer Bonnie Folkins, who recently returned from one of her epic horse rides across Central Asia.

In talks, exhibitions and a coming book, which reads like an Indiana Jones screenplay, Folkins pays tribute to the region's remaining nomads and a way of life nearly destroyed by years of Soviet persecution.

Her adventure started one sleepless night five years ago while surfing the Internet for details about a trip she had planned for Mongolia.

"I love working in the sun and wind in wild — isolated places — and was energized by the thought of going to a



Hunters and their eagles develop an affection akin to parent and child. The relationship can last as long 10 years before the bird is released.

place I had always wanted to visit," she says. "I was stopped in my tracks by a photograph of people on horseback hunting with metre-long golden

eagles. I couldn't believe I was looking at a living culture 2,000 years old. To find it became my dream."

Folkins travelled to western Mon-

golia initially to find subject matter for her oil and watercolour paintings, which are displayed in collections throughout North America.

However, intrigued by a Kazakh minority in the remote Altai Mountains, she felt compelled to document their dramatic lifestyle.

The herder families are descendants of nomads who fled Stalin's terror campaigns of the 1930s, which left an estimated two million people dead on the Kazakh steppes.

"These descendants have retained their ancient customs that include hunting with the help of specially trained eagles," Folkins says. "Braving temperatures that drop below minus-30, the men balance their eagles on wooden hand props and ride to high barren precipices to hunt wolves, foxes and other animals."

The hunters trap and train birds to form a close bond that lasts for years.

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MONGOLIA Photographer earned her place among elite explorers

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"When one hunter named Ongar died of food poisoning, his eagle went into mourning," Folkins says.

"It wouldn't eat or sleep until it was taken back to the wild and encouraged to fly free."

The nomad families stay in adobe-style houses in winter, but live in felt tents during spring, when they follow their flocks to high pastures.

"I was invited to live with many families and was amazed to see how they survived in the dead of winter, with no water apart from melted ice," Folkins says. "The houses are heated by burning animal dung and any electricity comes from small solar panels to power a small TV or a light bulb for a couple of hours a day."

"The Kazakh people have been very kind and protective. They've also taught me to live with nature and how it's possible to survive and be happy without all the material trappings that we consider necessities."

Folkins has returned to the region numerous times since 2007 to live with the nomads and go on three horse rides of up to 1,700 kilometres across Kazakhstan and Mongolia. The expeditions have won her membership in the Geneva-based Long Rider's Guild, an elite group of international explorers and adventurers. Folkins has definitely earned the right to belong to the invitation-only organization. Central Asia is no Shangri-La. The region is known for its violent dust storms and predatory insects.

"Kazakhstan has two forms of tick-borne encephalitis and there's no cure for one of them," Folkins says. "Ticks should never be pulled out, but scraped off with a knife or a firm, slim object like a credit card. That's about the only use for American Express out on the steppes."

Wolves are another threat. "Although fire has been known to keep them at bay, wolves surrounded our camp one night and a sheep grazing nearby disappeared."

The night before, a woman living not far from our campsite was bitten by a wolf as she was checking her animals. Luckily, she managed to escape."

But perhaps the most dangerous animals are the two-legged variety: "Horse thieves lurk around every corner. They are brazen and even in the daytime might ride right up to observe your animals first before striking. One night, when we were setting up tents outside one of the Russian towns in Kazakhstan, a local woman warned us that a group of 10 young men, one supposedly armed, were planning to rob us of our horses and posses-



ALPAMY'S DALAIKHAN

A rest stop for Bonnie Folkins and her horse, Abdullah, during a 1,700-kilometre ride across the steppes of western Kazakhstan.



BONNIE FOLKINS

Eagle hunters in western Mongolia take their birds to mountain precipices where they can best hover and glide.

sions — or worse. So we had to take everything down immediately and ride off across the steppe in total darkness before they arrived."

Folkins has written an account of her first long ride

across Mongolia, which she hopes will be published this year.

A Dutch publisher is considering an illustrated work about the culture of Kazakh nomads and a volume

of photographic portraits is underway, titled *Golden Eagle Hunters of Western Mongolia*.

"It's a daunting task," Folkins says. "The eagle hunters are always on the

move and live in far-flung places that are difficult and sometimes even dangerous to access. But I'm going back again and hope to finish the book for publication next year."

Returning home, she admits she can have trouble re-entering her life. It's what many Long Riders call the Long Quiet: a deep and unsettling emotion felt after experiencing a strong connection with nature and animals.

"What helps me readjust is working quietly at my painting, selecting digital images and writing."

"I don't have a horse in Montreal, so I try to exercise to keep fit for riding when I'm away."

Folkins has been invited to deliver lectures and exhibit her photos at universities and galleries, including the Annenberg Space in Los Angeles. In Montreal, her work is on display at the Contemporary Arts Gallery on Crescent St.

Folkins's husband, David Harpp, is an award-winning chemistry professor at McGill University.

"While I fully support and respect Bonnie's work, I'm not nearly courageous enough to accompany her. These trips are way beyond my comfort level," he says. "I've had a chance to follow my dreams and she deserves no less."

To see more photos by Bonnie Folkins, visit: <http://bonniefolkings-photography.net/>