



ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

DUSTIN COOPER BALTIS IS A FULBRIGHT ENGLISH TEACHING ASSISTANT IN MONGOLIA. WITH ITS TENT COMMUNITIES, SHAMANIC RITUALS AND MASKED RESIDENTS, IT SOMETIMES FEELS LIKE ANOTHER WORLD. IT'S ALSO HOME.

By Stacia Hernstrom MLA '05 | Photos by Gan-Ulzii Gonchig

Dustin Cooper Baltis '10 pauses at his front door, a mass of Soviet steel that someone has painted blue. Over his face he straps a blue pollution mask that looks designed more for a fighter pilot than an English teacher. He's wearing three pairs of pants, two jackets, wool socks, knee-high boots, a scarf — and a red rabbit-fur hat.

He's about to step out into the coldest capital city in the world, where winter lasts more than half the year and temperatures plummet to -40°F. And between the ubiquitous smokestacks and dust from the nearby Gobi Desert, the air is 14 times dirtier than the World Health Organization would like. One in 10 deaths in Ulaanbaatar is attributed to the pollution. Ironically, more people have Facebook accounts than pollution masks.

It's Monday in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Baltis is on his way to work at Mongolia’s National University, the country’s first university, established in Mongolia more than 70 years ago. Just last year, he was working the night shift at Austin’s Bennu Coffee and finishing his BA in History at St. Edward’s. Now he’s the university’s 13th Fulbright scholar.

He arrived in Mongolia last August to begin his yearlong teaching assistantship and quickly acclimated, despite the strangeness of it all. Compared to the four months he spent studying Buddhism in Nepal — with running water on alternate days and electricity in scant six-hour stretches — Ulaanbaatar’s mirrored skyscrapers, Walmart-esque mega stores and high-speed Internet feel almost like home.

“Honestly, Mongolia is nearly as ‘modernized’ as Texas,” he says. “I expected life to be as hard as it was in Nepal when I got here. But I arrived, and everyone was on an iPhone.”

That he has settled in so easily doesn’t surprise the university’s director of Fellowships, **Caroline Morris**. “Dustin doesn’t really experience culture shock like most students do. He’s now spent significant time in India and Mongolia, and he seems to be one of those rare people who truly don’t experience [their] home culture as the center,” she says. “He sees each place as different and equally important. That requires a tremendously strong sense of self.”

Baltis plows through the dusty, dreary cityscape, barely able to see more than 10 feet in front of him. A 20-something guy battling the chill with a bottle of homemade vodka stares at him as he crunches through an icy alley. He’s used to the staring. He doesn’t like it, but he’s used to it. The cashier at Minii Market, the gap-toothed girl with pigtails on the No. 34 bus, his neighbors, his doctors — everyone looks at him and wonders why he is here, in their country, so obviously foreign. He knows some Mongolians see him as a threat to their own and to their resources; others have simply never seen someone with fair skin. He looks down, walks fast (he once was assaulted for being a foreigner) and tries to remember what it’s like to go unnoticed. The more invisible he is, the better.

As the alley empties out near the Korean barbecue place that sells decent brisket, he grabs his red suede messenger bag and heads toward the university. He thinks of Otgo, the chubby, gregarious mother and professor who is his Fulbright supervisor. She offered him room in her parents’ house when his dorm flooded three months into his assignment. She helps him cut through the endless red tape, from lines at the hospital to problems at the visa office. And often, they share borscht and beer over lunch, talking about stipends, scholarships and the best Mongolian chocolate. They’ve decided it’s Golden Gobi from the south. Or at least he has; she only eats Russian chocolate.

It took three recommendations, two essays, one interview and 13 months before Baltis tore into his Fulbright acceptance packet.

The process is daunting, no matter how qualified you are, says Morris, but Baltis forged ahead fearlessly. “Dustin can break down a skill or a subject and absorb it systematically. He understands how long it might take to learn to speak a language fluently or write a novel, but he is not intimidated by the scale of the task,” she says. “He figures out a creative plan of attack and begins.”

When he decided to learn Tibetan, he swapped language lessons with a monk in Austin. When he wanted to explore Buddhism, he spent a semester in Nepal and a month teaching Tibetan exiles in India. And when Baltis couldn’t use words to make friends there, the guitar/drums/piano/sitar player organized jam sessions instead.

“There is the old adage ‘Sometimes things are better left unsaid,’” says one of his instructors from St. Edward’s, **Josh Bertetta**, who teaches religious studies. “In the space where language barriers prevented communication, Dustin brought people together through music. In that space, where things were left unsaid, the music communicated thoughts, feelings, ideas that perhaps language could not express in the first place.”

MONGOLI-WHAT?

If you’re wondering exactly where Mongolia is and what it’s claim to fame is, you’re not alone. The country isn’t exactly making U.S. news headlines on a daily basis. Here’s a CliffsNotes overview of this faraway land.

Where the heck is Mongolia?

It’s in northern Asia — sandwiched between Russia to its north and China to its south. Genghis Khan hailed from Mongolia. The country declared independence from China during the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and became a democratic country in 1990.

And what languages are spoken?

Most Mongolians speak Mongol, but a minority (less than 10 percent) also speak Turkic and Russian.

So is it a big country?

It’s the 135th most populated country with more than three million people calling it home. It’s twice the size of Texas.

What’s the Mongolian economy like?

There used to be a lot of herding and agriculture, but that’s changing: The country’s extensive mineral deposits are drawing foreign investors, and there’s a mining boom of sorts going on right now. Its GDP is estimated to grow 20 percent this year, matching the growth in 2011.

What should I know about Mongolia?

Ulaanbaatar, the capital (and largest) city in Mongolia, has a very good chance of becoming the Dubai of central Asia, says **Dustin Cooper Baltis ’10**, who’s currently living there. “You should also know that the discovery of America hinged on the fact that the Mongol Empire lost control of what is commonly known as the Silk Road, which connected Asia to Europe in the 15th century,” he notes. “This forced European explorers to look for alternative routes to Asia. Columbus sailed west and landed in the Caribbean. The rest is history.”





At 9:13 a.m. Baltis approaches the fuchsia building where he teaches English three days a week. Hazy blocks of dense smoke make it look like dusk, though most people are still clutching their morning coffee. The pollution is worse in winter, when the Mongolians who live in round canvas-and-timber huts called ger burn coal to stave off the constant cold. It clears up around February, only to return when cold nights descend upon the city.

Baltis remembers when he spent a weekend in a family's ger on the city's edge. Saturday night, the neighbors invited him to watch an old shaman pass traditions to a younger one in a sacred ceremony. He sat next to an old woman, and she shared her basket of chocolate gummy candy with him.

The old shaman and the young shaman each beat a drum the size of a hula hoop, bending and stooping and spinning in rhythm. Embroidered animal patterns shimmered between the red and blue strips of the shamans' robes, and hunks of fur bobbed around the headpieces. Baltis couldn't see their faces because they were covered with a long, dark cloth, but he knew the spirits had taken hold when the shamans began talking in voices that weren't their own. The younger shaman fell to the floor of the ger, talking in the voice of a 90-year-old woman.

He took pages and pages of notes — he's writing a novel set in Mongolia — as a translator explained what was happening. Just a few feet away, in the canvas tent next door, the family's children watched one of the 100 or so channels the satellite dish broadcasts on their flat-screen TV. Afterward, at dinner, everyone shared part of a sheep sacrificed and prepared for the celebration.

Baltis has a Tibetan friend who calls him *inje nyompa*. “It means ‘divine madman,’ which is someone who teaches people by doing things in a very strange fashion,” he says. Take last semester, when he introduced his students to *New Yorker* fiction via podcasts, which led to a discussion on the privatization of warfare. This semester, he'll share seven poems — and then reveal them as lyrics from the Beatles.

His students are a motley mix of 16- to 24-year-olds all majoring in English. Some are already fluent; others know just a few words. The common denominator, albeit a challenging one, is conversation about their own country.

Mongolia's exploding economy — it's predicted to grow faster than any other in the next decade — “has created lots of problems and loads of opportunities,” Baltis says. “It also has created a culture that is trying to maintain its heritage. The youth are into Korean pop and rap, while the older generations sometimes ‘miss’ communism, or parts of it at least. Everyone is trying to figure out their cultural identity.”

Not least of all is 28-year-old Baltis, who took vows to become a Buddhist from a Tibetan lama in Austin last summer and is planning return trips to Nepal and India. After his Fulbright ends in June 2012, he will stay in Mongolia to start a creative-writing program at the University of the Humanities. He'll also draw a paycheck as a writer and editor for the city's English newspaper, a position he already holds as a volunteer. And he'll finish three more novels, bringing his total to seven completed.

Ultimately, that's what he wants to do: teach, write books and publish them. “Everything I do is to accomplish these goals,” he says.

And that's why, even when he's reached his goal of becoming a professor, he'll always be a student at heart, says Bertetta. “Education, in whatever form it may take, is part of life, part of the human process — not just something that leads to getting a job and securing a future,” he adds. “Dustin understands this and lives this.”

Baltis himself is more humble: “Oh, I hope to just not work in the service industry anymore.”

Baltis heads inside the dilapidated building and unfastens his pollution mask. Drenched with sweat despite the frigid temperatures, he strips off his scarf and two jackets as he climbs the concrete stairs to his classroom.

He dodges the missing floorboards and walks to the front of the room, where the chalkboard has fallen off its hinges and leans against the wall. The yellow and lime wallpaper the Soviets selected back in the 1950s peels at the corners. As his students tuck into rows of metal desks, Baltis distributes a poem — lyrics from “Across the Universe” by the Beatles.

Words are flowing out like
endless rain into a paper cup.
They slither wildly as they slip away across the universe.
Pools of sorrow waves of joy
are drifting through my opened mind,
possessing and caressing me.

He reads it aloud. Then they read it with him. They talk about the new English vocabulary words, the symbolism, the figures of speech. They draw parallels to their own lives. And then he takes out his iPod and plugs it into the classroom's only speaker. With a spin of the dial, Baltis makes John Lennon's voice fill the room. The words, these new words, this new song, ricochet off the stained ceiling tiles.

They listen. They talk. About the song, about their lives, about the Beatles statue in the center of town, where on one side a Mongolian teenager hunches over his guitar, alone, in his drab communist flat. On the other side, the metallic figures of John, Paul, George and Ringo emerge from brilliant red brick. They listen again. And they talk about pools of sorrow, waves of joy and what it means when words can, finally, flow like endless rain.



ANOTHER CUP OF TEA

St. Edward's University Magazine asked **Marianne Shea '11** what it's like to go from being a college student in Austin to an English teacher in Amasya, Turkey. In her own words, she tells us what it's like to live each day 7,000 miles from all that's familiar. Go to www.stedwards.edu/webextras to read her story and see the photos.

TOP OF THE CLASS



Since 2004, 13 Fulbrights — a highly selective scholarship sponsored by the U.S. Department of State — have been awarded to St. Edward's University students to study around the world in places including Costa Rica, Germany, Thailand and Turkey. This number takes St. Edward's to the top of the list of master's-granting institutions producing Fulbright students. Last year, St. Edward's was tied for fourth.

And it just keeps getting better: Of this year's 21 Fulbright applicants from St. Edward's, 10 students and recent alumni are finalists. We'll keep you posted on who's headed where next year.

To help educate, inspire and shape amazing students like Dustin Cooper Baltis, make a gift to The St. Edward's Fund by June 30 that will provide scholarships at www.stedwards.edu/makegifts or return the enclosed envelope.

YOU CAN READ MORE ABOUT
DUSTIN COOPER BALTIS'
EXPERIENCES IN MONGOLIA
AT WWW.COOPERBALTIS.COM.

