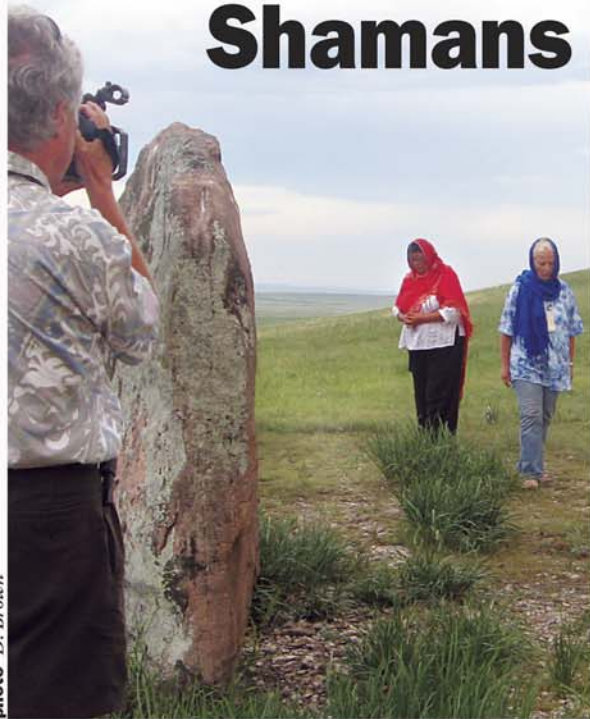


Shooting with Shamans



Siberian Visions Shaman Tatiana Kobezhikova (left) and drummer Barbara Borden at a sacred rock.

by David L Brown

Waiting take off from Moscow's Sheremetievo Airport (homeward bound after 16 days that seemed like 16 weeks), I'm thinking about the 10 days spent filming my friend, drummer Barbara Borden. The footage will be part of *Keeper of the Beat*, my feature doc on the life and music of Barbara, who had been participating in an extraordinary workshop on ecology-based shamanism and sacred places in the Russian republic of Khakassia, a breathtakingly beautiful spot in southwestern Siberia.

Three days were spent chasing lost luggage (including video gear), the result of a massive thunderstorm in Atlanta that caused me to miss my Moscow flight. After four

Shooting with Shamans cont p7

missed connections, I was re-routed to London to catch a flight to Moscow. Of course, my luggage didn't make that flight, and I learned from Delta's London staff that it was safe in Atlanta and on its way to Moscow. Having dealt with Russian bureaucrats in 1990, I sensed a coming bout of 'character-building.' Remembering Kafka's vision of cruel and heartless bureaucracy, I bought new underwear and was soon headed to Moscow.

Igor, the Russian travel coordinator I'd booked, was waiting for me in Moscow to drive me 40 miles to Vnukovo Airport, where I caught a plane to Abakan, Khakassia. I immediately drafted Igor to help navigate the airport bureaucracy and find my luggage. We headed to the main luggage storage facility, a cavern filled with countless suitcases and boxes. Lit by a single bare bulb, the place felt so much like a surreal depository of lost souls that I half-expected to run into Gogol's Chichikov. The woman in charge (straight from central casting for Kafka's *The Trial*) informed us she had no computer, and thus had absolutely no idea where the luggage might be. Further, she had no idea where a lost-luggage information computer might be found, nor who might know anything that could remotely help. When I asked to photograph her, she responded huffily, "Nyet! I am not an animal in a zool!"

"Welcome to Moscow," Igor smiled grimly.

Next stop, the Delta desk – which (at 7 am) was closed for another two hours. An official at the help desk near the baggage claim told us (without a shred of sympathy) that he couldn't help us because I had left the baggage claim area. A series of other officials spent a great deal of time speaking condescendingly, which noticeably raised Igor's level of frustration. Igor, however, remained tenacious and undeterred. I shudder to imagine how I would have fared alone with limited Russian: "Dobraye utra, and spacibo for all the help, folks."

At 9 am, Delta's slightly-more-helpful staff spent an hour between phone and computer before identifying the likely location of my luggage. A woman finally arrived to escort us to an area containing about 200 pieces of luggage. To my great relief, I quickly saw my three pieces there, only to discover trials of Russian paperwork – the completion of which took another hour under the scowls of various Kafkaesque bureaucrats.

But finally we arrived at Vnukovo Airport, where I had a double Russian vodka to celebrate

was struck by the sight of hundreds of slick giant billboards on the Moscow freeways for Panasonic, BMV, and perfume – and how much more affluent, attractive, and colorful Moscow looked than during my 1990 visit.

In Khakassia's charming tree-lined capital of Abakan, I was met by Barbara and her bass player Susanne, who had been performing to great acclaim with the group Fool's Gold in the Spirit of the Earth music, art, and puppetry festival. We checked into the hotel, then met the local filmmakers who'd filmed the performance, and went scouting locations for shooting

The next day our journey began with a shaman whose grandfather was killed for practicing under Stalin.

two group encounters that afternoon. Barbara's band was to meet Sergey, the local drum-maker who creates beautiful Siberian shaman drums, and Tatiana, our shaman and guide for the eco-shamanism adventure. Another Igor (one of the filmmakers) took us 30 miles from town to a famous pair of kurgans – large vertical stones found in pairs or in groups or in lines of 8 to 10 (similar to Stonehenge) that appear regularly throughout Khakassia. Usually burial grounds, many kurgans have been visited as sacred sites for over 3,500 years.

This kurgan plateau, with a superb 360-degree view of mountains and steppes, was visually very powerful, and the pilgrims' ribbons and offerings clearly marked it as a sacred spot. This striking and potent spiritual location would be the last ritual site of the 10-day shamanic journey, but was too far a drive for that afternoon, so we returned to a lovely Abakan location in tall green grass on a mound overlooking the Abakan River. There we filmed three segments: the band playing, the band learning about Sergey's shaman drums, and the band learning about Tatiana's unique brand of shamanism. With Igor on the boom mic and Ira translating, the discussion was wonderfully lively. Violinist/vocalist Lucia Connes had an especially affectionate interaction and song-sharing with Tatiana – they'd bonded two summers earlier when Lucia attended the shaman workshop. Magic-hour's lovely light was soft and golden when we wrapped at 8:30 (9:30 sunset) and headed back for dinner and beers at the hotel. My first day of shooting in Siberia included a lovely 90-minute drive to a beautiful and sacred place...

and two hours of filming excellent interaction in another beautiful spot – an impressive success for a start.

The next day, Barbara and I bid farewell to the lovely members of Fool's Gold, and began our shamanic journey with Tatiana, a hereditary sha-

manism under Stalin). Over lunch, we met her and the workshop participants, all professional women from Moscow. We then had a guided tour of the Abakan Museum, learning a bit of Khakassian history, culture, and archaeology. Next came four hours of driving in two vans to Malaya Suia, the lovely mountain yurt village of Tatiana's family on the Biele Ius (White) River. As we drove, the landscape changed from rolling steppe (green plains with plateaus) to increasing larger hills with rocky plateaus, to foothills with many lakes, to large wooded mountains with spectacular river canyons. To quote Lucia Connes, "If you can imagine taking the best of Ireland's green fields, adding the majestic and dramatically carved slopes that line the Norwegian fiords or the summer foothills of the Swiss Alps, then add the lush and splendid softness of the Hawaiian islands, you have a general sense of this special land."

I'd add a mention of the dozens of delightfully weathered and picturesque villages with sumptuous gardens, and roads often blocked by countless herds of horses, cattle, and goats. Those drives, during which I often asked our driver to slow or stop for a shot, seemed to include stunning sight after stunning sight for the nature-loving cameraman.

Our camp of six yurts – sleeping three to six persons each – was located right on the river in a box canyon surrounded by large rocky mountains. The truly spectacular setting reminded me of Telluride Colorado, and hinted at the even larger Altai Mountain 150 miles to the west. We ate healthy plentiful meals in a large tent adjoining the cooking tent. The first night after dinner, Barbara presented Tatiana with a beautiful gift, a shaman drum that she had played for years. Created and painted by a Native American drum-maker, it had been signed by over 100 of Barbara's friends who had contributed to the cost of the Siberia trip. Tatiana was very moved by this gift, calling the drum "the best possible gift for a shaman." Tearfully, she said that whenever she'd play it she'd think of Barbara and



Shooting with Shamans from page one

all those who were so kind to think of her. This was the beginning of the touching sisterly bond that Barbara and Tatiana experienced. Barbara recalls: "While David was focused on shooting and recording virtually every minute, I was able to fully participate and delight in the majesty and beauty of Khakassia. And to engage in the grace and wisdom of Tatiana, an extraordinary and loving shaman who felt to me like a long lost sister."

We usually bathed each morning in the brisk river before breakfast, then enjoyed Tatiana's lecture-presentation on a variety of topics (from local archaeology to love relationships to healing physical and emotional problems) before exercise. Several times I witnessed a demonstration of her shamanic power. The first was when she talked about summoning the spirits which bring up the wind: as she moved her hands, a strong breeze picked up. Later, we all would witness her healing prowess on participants' bodies – truly a strong demonstration of her Reiki-like healing power. My camera recorded a woman's posture dramatically re-aligning after Tatiana had massaged her aura (adjusting her energy field without actually touching her body).

Each day, Tatiana's driver Vasali drove us in the van over very rough roads to several beautiful and sacred places: rivers, mountains, lakes, caves bearing significant petroglyphs. Often, we'd leave camp at 2:00 pm, returning near midnight. One petroglyph sequence, located on rocks high

above the green steppe, was the earliest known depiction of the creation story.

Twice, we were joined on these outings by Khakassian archeologists who explained various petroglyphs and rock carvings. The cave experience was especially profound, particularly when we all turned off our head lamps and Tatiana



A Traditional Siberian Sweat is enjoyed by Brown and Borden.

chanted an otherworldly chant in total darkness. Unfortunately, the cave was too wet and slippery to bring the video camera.

Sanduki Mountain was another very moving sacred place, with a fascinating legendary history and a spectacular 360 degree view. The trek to the top was a challenge, hauling the camera bag and tripod – but the effort was worth hearing Barbara and Tatiana sing together beautifully while facing the glorious views. The final workshop's supper took place on a high plateau, looking down on a double bend in the river and a lovely view of soft green Sanduki. The delicious meal called plov (consisting of pork, garlic, vegetables, rice, and dried fruit) was cooked in a large pot over an open fire.

Afterward, the sun set to the sound of singing and drumming by Barbara, Tatiana, and the participants. For the final ritual, we drove to the kurgans I'd visited on my first day in Khakassia. I filmed the women experiencing various levels of transformation as they passed through the 'gates' of the two massive kurgans in dusk's lengthy pink and purple sky. The mosquitoes were voracious, but our spirits were soaring. Barbara and I agreed that this was a fitting end to an unforgettable life-altering experience. *Keeper of the Beat* will be a much richer film for our having made this journey.



Shooting with Shamans from page one

Chanting Atop Sacred Mountains Brown films Barbara Borden (right) and shaman Tatiana Kobezhikova (center) at Sunduki Mt in Khakassia.

JAN 09 | VOL1 NO10

a forum for moving image makers

FREE OR BY SUBSCRIPTION

cine source

magazine.com

photo D. Brown

photos Barbara Borden