

The incident in Ulan Bator

Watch where you point your lens in Mongolia, otherwise you may have to call on David Beckham for help, says Richard Asher.



The policeman handled the camera with great suspicion. He examined the offending device from every angle. Every now and then he looked up and glared at us. He knew that asking questions wouldn't get him anywhere – he'd already tried that strategy – so he went back to his inspection with a disapproving grunt.

We were in a tight spot. It's not that we didn't want to communicate; we just couldn't. We were in a tiny hut on the outskirts of Ulan Bator, apparently under arrest for having gone for a walk in the hills that surround the Mongolian capital. Nobody spoke English and our knowledge of Mongolian amounted to two phrases: "thank you" and "vodka". But we understood enough of the language of sirens,

guns and uniforms to realise we'd done something to upset somebody important.

Our afternoon stroll had started innocently enough. My friend David and I had left our hostel and its army of pasta-guzzling Swiss/Swedish/Dutch backpackers, meandered across the railway line that had brought us here from Moscow, and walked a couple more blocks to The Edge of Town. In Ulan Bator there's no such thing as outskirts. One minute you're in the city, the next you're in the hills.

And so we left The Edge of Town and climbed a couple of hills. We didn't have much of a plan, except to do a semicircle around the long valley in which Ulan Bator sits in its smoggy post-Soviet glory.

But fate had other ideas.

As we descended the second hill, we entered a valley containing a large, palatial-looking house at the open end on the city side. We looked at each other and shrugged. If it were an important residence, we figured, there'd be a fence and a pack of snarling dogs to defend it. Right? So we kept going, curious to see what the mansion was all about.

Perhaps it was a museum?

Eventually we reached asphalt – the only decent road surface we'd seen all month. That should have rung a warning bell, but we carried on. Only when a car with flashing lights swooped upon us did we realise that it might have been a rather important driveway.

Interrogation is too strong a word. It's a concept that doesn't really work when there's

a total language barrier. The authorities tried it for a while but all we could do was shrug. Mongolian isn't like French or German, where you might be able to catch a word or two if they speak slowly. It's impenetrable, even for people from neighbouring countries.

That said, we got the gist: We had obviously trespassed where we shouldn't have, and we were now suspected spies. The authorities seemed to be more interested in the camera than in us, but since this story is set in pre-digital times, they couldn't get an instant look at our subversive photographs. And so the plot thickened.

At first we battled to take the whole thing seriously. They didn't really think we were spies, did they? We were wearing bright purple anoraks and moon bags! We'd been picked up in the middle of the road in broad daylight! Hello... didn't they know what dumb tourists looked like?

Apparently not. Discussion followed discussion, with the camera dominating the agenda. And the longer it wore on, with no signs of humour on the part of the authorities, the less amusing the whole charade became.

I had two fears that were slowly becoming more and more real. The first was that the police would smash open the camera and confiscate my Gobi desert photos. The second was that we were going to have to bribe our way out of a Mongolian jail. That would throw our tight travel budget completely. It didn't even bear thinking about.

The boss policeman put the camera down and started making phone calls. He used an important-sounding voice, and there was no trace of a glint in his eye.

Evidently the two purple-clad hikers had done something truly awful, and nobody was about to burst out laughing and tell us it was one big practical joke. I started thinking about those movies set in Asian prisons.

Then we were in another police car, this time with an escort. We went whizzing back to town at high speed, lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Mongolia's omnipresent Uaz jeeps seemed to stand still as we flashed past and pedestrians dived into gutters to avoid the speeding convoy. So this is what it felt like to be a VIP!

We were heading straight for the city centre, past parliament and the main square, where the statue of Mongolia's national hero Damdin Sükhbaatar stared down disapprovingly.

Moments later we pulled up in front of an official-looking building. We were taken into

the lobby and told to wait.

So far so good. At least they hadn't thrown us into a cell.

We were waiting on benches with other, contented-looking civilians. It reminded me a little of a Home Affairs branch, and just like when you're waiting in the queue for a new passport, I experienced that curious mix of tranquillity and powerlessness.

David and I decided we'd treat ourselves to milkshake if we got out of this mess in one piece.

Then came the oldest trick in the book: separate the suspects.

And so it was that a smart man appeared before us and addressed us in English. He asked David to accompany him. I made to follow, but he told me to stay put.

A good 20 minutes went by before David re-appeared in the company of the smart English-speaking man. They shook hands, and when nobody tried to clap me in irons

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I realised we were both free to leave.

We tried not to break into a sprint as we made for the door, but I think I may have jogged a little.

What had happened in the interview room was this. David had received a severe dressing down for having incorporated the president's house on our walking route. Finally able to explain himself to somebody who could understand, he apologised profusely and pointed out that there was no fence and that we had no idea about where we'd been.

One of the other policemen in the room was apparently lobbying to destroy my camera, but luckily our English-speaking plain-clothes man didn't see the need. Nor did he want a bribe of any description. But he did have a couple more questions...

"Do you have a sister?" he asked.

Slight change of tack, this. David answered nervously that yes, he did have a sister.

This seemed to satisfy him. He smiled a wide smile. But he had another, even more important question. He leant forward with intent. "Do you like Manchester United?"

Neither of us gave two hoots about English soccer, but this wasn't the time to fuss over details. Why yes, of course, David said. He loved Manchester United. And David Beckham too.

Who doesn't love David Beckham?

Right answer! The detective clapped his hands with glee. The interrogation was over.

Our afternoon was gone, our doomed walk consigned to history. We calmed our nerves over the chocolate milkshakes we had promised ourselves. Not quite our usual diet of Mongolian mutton, but then this had turned into an unusual sort of a day.

Now that we were free, of course, our terrifying afternoon began to morph into a tale of great daring and bravery. After all, if you haven't been arrested, you haven't really travelled... The other backpackers would have nothing on us back at the hostel that evening.

A day later we were back at the square, sitting under Sükhbaatar's statue and reliving our exciting brush with the Mongolian police, when we spotted the detective.

Fearing he'd changed his mind and had come to get us, we frantically looked around for somewhere to hide. But the square was vast and empty, and before we could bolt he noticed us standing there like fools.

But we weren't in trouble. He just beamed and gave us two thumbs up. "Manchester United!" he said.

Thank you, David Beckham, thank you. ■