

The Sudden Mongolian Hammer Mission (illustrated)

By Christina Dunigan

My teaching job in Korea had come with a plane ticket, but not shipping of household goods, so the dulcimer was back home, stashed at my mother's house. When a friend asked me to go to Mongolia with her for Chuseok (Korean Thanksgiving), I thought of riding proud Mongol horses across the steppes. Dulcimers had been the farthest thing from my mind.

But on our last night in Ulaan Baatar, our group of thirty tourists was herded into a hall for a traditional Mongolian music show. We were amazed by the "throat singing" -- an obscure technique that allows a vocalist to sing both a bass drone note and a high, whistling melody simultaneously.

The show was marvelous, but what really grabbed me was the lady who wheeled out a stand with what sure looked like a hammered dulcimer. When she whipped out hammers and started playing, I was in Heaven.

After the show, we filed past some of the instruments, set out on display. It sure looked like a hammered dulcimer. But, being with a tour group, I couldn't linger to seek out the lady or try to talk to her. But I started pestering the tour guide. Tomorrow morning was set aside for free time, for shopping. Could he get me to a music shop? Could I buy myself some dulcimer hammers?

The next day, his daughter and I set out from the hotel. There's no real taxi service in Ulaan Baata. You just flag down a passing car and start negotiating. Soon we were in a hole-in-the-wall music shop and I was presented with a small but beautiful variety of long-handled hammers, made of bamboo. The price? About \$8 for the one pair, \$10 for another. I bought both. The shopkeeper threw in a lovely box to keep them in.

I put my new treasures on display as soon as I got back to Korea, and started counting the days until I'd be back in the US and could try them out on my dulcimer.



I am a rank amateur to begin with, the most ill-trained and unpracticed of beginners, but I got my dulcimer tuned up and tried a few scales. The sound is lovely, soft and sweet. At first the handle length

gave me some trouble, but I started adapting and am confident that with a little practice I'll become quite comfortable with them.

What better souvenir can you ask for?