

Keith Ochwat

# ROUGHING IT

THE MAKING OF A TRAVEL ADVENTURE FILM

BY JO ANN LLOYD

**KEITH OCHWAT (AGB '06)** PROBABLY WON'T WIN ANY AWARDS for his attempts at traditional Mongolian throat singing, but he is garnering plenty of attention and praise for capturing that and other customs in his first travel adventure film, "Roughing It: Mongolia."

*The New York Times* praised the pilot program for its "fascinating material" and the filmmakers' "good eye for the unusual." The *San Francisco Chronicle* noted Ochwat's "easy likability and natural presence on camera," as well as the show's "infectious curiosity."

"Roughing It: Mongolia" is the first in an ambitious series of films that Ochwat and his partner, Christopher Rufo, are creating to give viewers a rare glimpse into some of the world's most beautiful – and isolated – places on earth ... places and cultures that most people know very little about.

The series takes its name from Mark Twain's classic book, *Roughing It*, documenting his journey through the American Wild West.

Born and raised in Sacramento, Ochwat chose Cal Poly's agribusiness major because, he says, agriculture is the one thing that all countries have in common. "We're all linked through agriculture – it's the foundation of any culture. Geography and climate dictate what will be successful – agriculturally – in that country. That, in turn, dictates the country's cultural nuances."

In "Roughing It: Mongolia," Ochwat and Rufo set out on a 1,600-mile trek through some of the world's toughest terrain to discover the cultural nuances of nomads. Nearly half Mongolia's population is nomadic, Ochwat explained.

They were in Mongolia for about eight weeks, "working our tails off," Ochwat said. "I've never worked so hard. When I was a student at Cal Poly, I worked odd jobs to pay my bills,





and I studied hard. I graduated cum laude. But I've never worked harder than when we were filming 'Roughing It: Mongolia.'"

Perhaps the toughest part of their trip came as Ochwat and Rufo were searching for the elusive nomadic reindeer herders. The duo found a guide – actually one of the herder's sons – but the man spoke no English. "We were able to communicate somewhat with hand gestures," Ochwat said.

"I had never even been on a horse before," admitted Ochwat, "except for maybe a pony at a state fair. Bagi, our guide, indicated that the ride would take four or five hours on horseback. Chris and I were hesitant, knowing we'd be sore and tired after such a grueling trip, but we decided we had to do this. We were on those horses three, four, then five hours. I was very sore. The sun was starting to set, then Bagi signals that he thinks he's found them."

What he found, to the duo's dismay, was a recently abandoned camping site. "That's the trouble with tracking nomads ... they keep moving," Ochwat said.

They hadn't planned for a long journey, didn't pack much food or water, didn't carry a tent, warm clothing or even a flashlight. "But we kept riding," Ochwat recalled. Six, seven, eight more hours go by. Finally, after 10 grueling hours on horseback, Bagi suddenly dismounts, ties up his horse and starts a fire. "What are we doing?" Ochwat asked in disbelief. They were, after all, in Siberia, in October, and they were cold.

"Mongolia is the coldest country on the planet," Ochwat said. "We had put ourselves into what could have potentially been a very serious situation. Chris and I ended up huddling together near the fire to try to stay warm. It was the worst three hours of sleep I've ever had. The moral here is to find an English-speaking guide," joked Ochwat.

The next morning Ochwat and Rufo were "sore as heck" but had no choice except to climb back on their horses and begin their search anew. After three or four more hours, they found them. "That was truly one of the happiest moments of my life," Ochwat said.

The entire trip was a blessing, Ochwat said. "A lot of it was frustrating. I was challenged like I've never been challenged. But I camped out with reindeer herders, I interviewed the President of Mongolia, I saw a shaman dance and pray to expel the 'black' bad spirits and welcome the 'white' good spirits."

And yes, he even sang with Mongolian throat singers and wrestled with the "Village Elephant" during the annual Three Sports of Men of Naadam festival.

"Roughing It: Mongolia" was picked up by PBS and has aired in some 150 cities throughout the United States, reaching more than half a million viewers. Ochwat and Rufo have since partnered with PBS for their next project, "Roughing It: The Great Pacific." This documentary will include eight 30-minute films focusing on Papua New Guinea, Greater Indonesia, Bali and Lombok, Borneo, Singapore, Malaysia, The Philippines and East Timor.

Before they depart on their "Great Pacific" journey, Ochwat and Rufo are busy with preparations, research and fundraising. "Chris and I have great support and the fundraising is going well," Ochwat said, adding that they are especially looking for corporate underwriters.

Their projects match perfectly with the goals of PBS: to inform, inspire and delight. "We want to educate, inspire people, and make it all aesthetically pleasing, entertaining and funny," Ochwat said. "If we do a good job, people will watch, and that is our ultimate goal." □

To catch a glimpse of Ochwat in Mongolia and for more information on upcoming projects, go online to <http://documentaryfoundation.org>.







(Top L) Chris Rufo with young horse jockeys at the Nadaam Horse Festival outside Ulaan Bataar; (Top R) Rufo on horseback with guide Bagi, looking for reindeer herders in northern countryside; (Middle L) Young jockey with racing horse at Nadaam Horse Festival; (Middle R) Archers competing at Nadaam Horse Festival; (Bottom L) Nomadic camel herder outside town of Moron; (Bottom R) Keith Ochwat, Rufo and driver Okta filming in Mongolian countryside (All photos courtesy of Keith Ochwat)

