

THE ‘TRACKS TO RUSSIA’ INTREPID TOUR AND A RELATED ROADMAP TO MEET THE GLOBAL NEED FOR CLEANER WATER AND MORE APPROPRIATE PLANTING TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

POLITICAL AND PERSONAL BACKGROUND TO RECOMMENDATION

This discussion seeks to serve the international, national and local community interest, to assist general policy direction in the light of Intrepid Travel website information on its direction and other information. Intrepid Travel has ‘joined over 4700 other companies world wide’ in signing the United Nations (UN) Global Compact which is a pledge by businesses and organizations that they will tackle ‘the big global sustainability issues such as human rights, labour standards, the environment and anti-corruption (sic.)’. The website states that what this means for Intrepid is that the organization has ‘to look at’ how it is tackling issues of human rights, labour standards, the environment and corruption’ through its business operations. It should also find ways to improve the way it addresses global sustainability issues, report on how it has embraced the UN Global Compact commitments and report on performance in each area on an annual basis. One assumes the best way to do this is on its website so everyone can see and comment. How different is Intrepid from others offering cheap tours? This is discussed again later. (I am partial to New Zealand tour guides, who have sports backgrounds but know heaps about the countryside and do all the cooking. NZ Routeburn Walk Ltd. guides are great.)

Later assessment is also based on a recent guided tour to China, Mongolia and Russia entitled ‘Tracks to Russia’ provided by Intrepid Travel in Sydney. As a result of also visiting Singapore immediately afterwards, I urged some key people to undertake discussions with Ho Ching, Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer of Temasek Holdings and others to develop an investment plan aimed at mutually reducing debt and improving trade relations through better coordinated, self-determining approaches to gaining sustainable development while cutting unnecessary costs. The Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development (IMCSD) report to the Prime Minister (PM) of Singapore entitled ‘A Lively and Liveable Singapore: Strategies for Sustainable Growth’ was discussed from global and Australian perspectives in this context, which is attached. The main focus of the responding submission was on the Singapore Zoo, the Jurong Bird Park, the Butterfly Park and Insect Kingdom, other green Singapore attractions and the related need to protect many increasingly vulnerable Asian species from extinction. (I found Nabokov’s ‘Speak Memory’ in St Petersburg. He would have loved it.)

The recent ‘Tracks to Russia’ trip is therefore also examined as a personal adviser, not merely as an individual consumer of Intrepid services, but in the broader international and Australian community, industry and public context of which Intrepid management, workers, clients and related community members are also part. An understanding of the requirements of sustainable travel is vital for sustainable development. The normal bill payers, for a great variety of reasons besides the exorbitant cost, usually like to see beyond the luxury hotels with their related giant conference centres and shopping malls which all appear extremely cold, to suit the suits. People of taste tend to be less crass

today and all must be wooed. For tour companies and guides this ideally requires some knowledge and identification with more than the immediate social environment of travellers or those who might benefit most immediately from their custom. Ideally, no captive tourist is to be told that jade will improve the lustre of her hair, or something just as silly. Everybody values an education and should not be treated like a child kept in the dark. (But enough is already said about unfair gender stereotyping - Vive la difference.)

My personal experience as a recently retired woman is that the travel industry workforce is full of many highly competent, thoughtful, sensitive and charming young guides of both sexes. The Russian guide and languages student who led our Intrepid Tracks to Russia tour, which started in Beijing and traversed Mongolia, was no exception. It was a pleasure to be led by her, which is discussed later. It was certainly through no adverse indication of hers that one gained the impression that the guide for the total trip probably has the most difficult job of almost anybody working in Intrepid, and is also likely to be the most valuable member of it, from the traveller's perspective. From this perspective one also wonders about the management and related cost relationships between the Intrepid shop fronts in rich countries which attract the tourists, and the tours and tour guides living and serving Intrepid in single and more limited locations, such as Ulan Ude or Lake Baikal, etc. I know nothing of this business, but have the strong impression that the tourist's interests lie mainly in effective definition of the field, rather than in the office. One wonders if this is also true from the broader organizational perspective and I have no idea. Ideally, however, this management and cost focus relates strongly to sustainable development, which has economic, social and environmental implications for all, including children. Intrepid charitable investment is addressed later in this context.

OPENLY LINK ENVIRONMENTS HOLISTICALLY TO IMPROVE THEM THROUGH COMPETITION: CONSIDER AIR, WATER AND LAND TOGETHER FOR ENERGY AND RELATED INDUSTRY PLANNING

On the UN Global Compact website the Board Members most relevant to the Tracks to Russia Intrepid trip in its related local, national and international context, seem to be Mr Charles O. Holliday, the well named Chairman of the Board of Du Pont in the US and Mrs Chen Ying, Director of the Beijing Rong Zhi Institute of Corporate Social Responsibility in China. The UN presence in Mongolia is obvious in very informative museums in Ulaanbaatar, explained in English. One assumes Mr Putin might recommend a related Russian manager of sustainable development as this appears a policy rather than an administrative issue. This direction is also recommended in the light of key agreements by leaders in the US, China and elsewhere to develop cooperative projects on energy and climate change and to put Sino-US bilateral relations on a more stable basis.

Richard Holbrooke, Chairman of the Asia Society in the US and many globally eminent others, recently produced 'a roadmap' recommending that President Obama should launch a 'US-China Partnership on Energy and Climate Change' and this should outline a major plan of joint action in each country to take the necessary action to ensure its implementation. The more interests involved in implementing a clear and open global direction for sustainable development the better. Tourism and related others should try to

get on board this early. The Pew Centre's comparatively secretive approach to the roadmap seems unhelpful. Secrecy fundamentally inhibits fair competition. It is a poor choice for public ignorance which leads to major increased costs and another financial crisis, not to improved outcomes for communities that financial managers ideally serve, rather than exploit in their own interests. Openness protects taxpayers and investors.

Paul Dibb and Geoffrey Barker write, in an article entitled 'The highly sensitive art of doing business in Beijing' in the Australia Financial Review (AFR 13.8.09, p.57):

.....China is now roaring back into economic prominence and regards it as vital that the Middle Kingdom resumes its place as a lofty and majestic world civilisation of surpassing refinement and superior to most other cultures.

Fair enough. What is the program and how is it costed? (They sound like the French.) The rest of the article suggests the authors think the Chinese government views the state as appropriately being everywhere – (like Gods?) Is this the sovereignty of the people? As Australians, we know all about that. Sovereignty depends on openness.

The IMCSD report on Singapore which is discussed in the attached submission, states its environmental, economic and social objectives are that the environment of Singapore is treated holistically, and indicates that the holistic approach to development starts with land use planning (p.23). Point that out to Richard Holbrooke. However, the IMCSD has a comparatively short-sighted national approach to development, rather than one which examines Singapore's most clearly demonstrable strengths in production. These are strongly related to the potential for improving health and the protection of biodiversity. This is an urgent need in Asia, from any global perspective which also seeks a high quality of life for future generations, rather than sacrificing quality of life and biodiversity for more narrowly driven interests, like endless shopping. Yu Qiao, in the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University, argues that Asians could negotiate with the US government to create a 'crisis relief facility'. His approach to sustainability is discussed briefly later and is ideally also considered in the light of The Declaration on Strengthening the Financial System, which was signed by the Leaders of G20 nations, including the Australian Prime Minister (PM), in London on 2.4.09.

From a sustainable development perspective, tackling the issues of water quality and availability early, in investments in China, Mongolia and Russia, could serve the broadest possible popular front of social and environmental interests. Water safety and availability have huge implications for the health of humans, other animals and plants. The natural link between water and land use has been recognized in water and zoo development in Singapore, where it is also safe to drink out of the tap, unlike in China, Mongolia, Russia, or many other places in Asia. Water safety is also necessary for a reduction in the plastic water bottles which litter the earth (along with land mines).

The Tracks to Russia trip undoubtedly implemented the carbon offset emissions reduction strategies outlined on the Intrepid website, which focus mainly on using 'local' operators. ('We engage locally-owned and operated services, thereby supporting local

people and not using long and carbon intensive supply chains', etc. etc.) However, plastic water bottles appeared the sole surrounding environmental issue any person I came across while travelling seemed aware of. Unfortunately the battle also seems already lost in Beijing. When plastic and other packaging is cleaned up, what happens to it? Also, where does concrete come from? What should be done about the encroachment of the Gobi Desert and other problems which may cause this part of China's air to be so brown? (I have no idea about such basic issues, which seems terrible to me. Teach us!)

Water quality and availability are not merely vital issues for every human but also centrally important for protecting environmental diversity today and in the future. Achieving clean water availability by openly coordinated government, industry and community planning could be done very competitively, with improvements made through comparison of the outcomes of production. Ideally, the quality of water in the Baltic Sea and Lake Baikal are not only important to Russians, but to the world. This is clear to the visitor to the World of Water Museum in St Petersburg. While those running the museum appear very cagey about what may be revealed inside, the City Marketing Agency of St Petersburg, the government of Finland and the UN have taken the time and money to promote the museum outside in English – 'What used to be just water is now a museum of it'. I guess St Petersburg local council is responsible for water and sewage and is strapped for cash. Focus on improving water rather than talking about it ideally should please all. This is ideally also reflected broadly in funding formulas. (See the museum on water treatment in the Paris sewers and recall Napoleon?)

Water quality and availability are closely related to land management, and how land is acquired and treated explains and underpins nearly all production and related wealth in considerable part. Air quality is in many ways a far newer democratic human interest than land or water protection. However, the potential for broader human development is lost in many current discussions of the implementation of the UN Kyoto Treaty and related carbon trading schemes. When competition to achieve goals is organized openly and broadly, rather than left to comparatively narrow and blind market mechanisms, it is hard to see how good projects for improving water quality and supply or planting more appropriate vegetation in areas that need this to occur, could do any harm or lose money.

From this global perspective, which seeks to harnesses broader economies of scale in diverse and competitive national and local production, market preference may be expressed not only as an individual but as a member of a group of taxpayers or related and informed fund managers. For example, I am unable to afford to buy a London park. However, its great parks are the main reason I could imagine living in London. (Think of Kew Gardens.) From the consumer related investment perspective it is crazy to see them mainly as a public expense, as one assumes the property market and their acolytes might naturally like to view the matter. One wonders, when tourism is more developed, as planned at Lake Baikal, will it be the usual concrete and glass edifices, from which Russia now appears comparatively free, thus adding to its unique history and charm?

What are the business incentives which cause so many huge and expensive hotels and commercial offices to be built early and often? I have no idea but guess it is related to

tax incentives which favour increased debt, and to related financial capacities to pass risk and its cost on to others in the market ad infinitum, or at least until the next crash. The purchasers of risk or another investment may be ignorant of exactly what they are buying into. As a Unisuper investor, I certainly am. (We are linked in a relationship of mutual contempt, where other investment options appear even less trustworthy or attractive.)

In an article entitled 'Why we need to reduce our dependence on foreign funds' John Shubert, the chairman of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia was quoted in the AFR (6.8.09, p.61) as saying that Australians have a tax system that provides incentives to increase debt and we need to design a tax system less biased against saving so that more investment can be funded. This seems a welcome change from the common US view that all Americans and the Chinese government should embrace debt to increase demand and help the economy out of crisis. However, Shubert does not centrally address the issue that the economy should be performing for communities and individuals, rather than driving them all blindly to economic collapse and renewal or resource exhaustion, starting with the poorest investors. Do not encourage the narrow, secretive, greedy, comparatively blind management of the past. We need broadly planned and competitive management approaches which generate greener jobs, not the old ones, slightly dressed up. Temasek structure seems to have the potential to stop repeating past investment imbalances, so that global production incentives for health and environment protection may become as legitimate and powerful as the historically entrenched incentives for war.

In an article in the Financial Times (FT 31.9.09) entitled 'Asia is the victim if the bond bubble bursts', Yu Qiao argues that for Asian countries the key agenda issue is the safety of their assets, denominated in dollars, as they look ahead to a devalued dollar from rising sovereign debt. He states that East Asian economies hold more than 25% of US sovereign debt, and if the US dollar collapsed the consequences would devastate Asians' hard-earned wealth and terminate economic globalisation. He argues Asian savings should be turned into real business investments where there is less risk from a currency default and that Asians do not want to bear the risk of investments where there is market turbulence and a lack of knowledge of cultural, legal and regulatory issues in US businesses. He states if a guarantee scheme were created Asian savers could be willing to invest directly and suggests a Crisis Relief Facility (CRF) used alongside US federal efforts to stabilize the banking system and invest in capital-intensive infrastructure projects. Asians could pool a proportion of their holdings of Treasury bonds under the CRF umbrella to convert sovereign debt into equity investment.

As a recently retired and risk averse investor in UniSuper, which has lost more of my savings in the past year than I have lost in my entire life, Yu Qiao's approach to stabilizing investment seems a good idea. However, as a taxpayer and as an investor, I don't want my money put into war toys for the boys or into anything else, merely because it makes more money for investors. I also distrust taking on 'socially responsible' investments, which have been some of the most opaque and volatile of all. The desire for financial compensation or revenge, rather than for injury prevention or rehabilitation, still drives the global approach to risk management, which is also feudal. Risk is currently treated and sold to others as a financial investment service. This process is not directly

related to stopping a ship from sinking, or a sea wall from breaking and flooding houses. It favours the financial controllers, who can usually feather their own nests first.

This problem is not sufficiently addressed by governments because the feudal mentality rather than scientific and democratic approaches to investment and the environment remain entrenched in law and commerce. This is discussed in the attached paper 'An ideal trust structure for the beneficiaries: An example from an Australian superannuation fund and a bank'. The prescribed private or public funds non-profit management model addressed in the Australian Treasury paper entitled 'Improving the Integrity of Prescribed Private Funds', has also been suggested to industry superannuation fund managers, governments and others, as a possible way of supporting projects aimed at improving social welfare, protecting biodiversity and achieving a low carbon future. Many such projects currently appear unachievable because of the national and state accretion of centuries of dysfunctional regulation, including protection for polluting industries, which makes investment in greener development and poor communities generally uninviting.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO US VIEWS ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND CORRUPTION

According to the Intrepid website, under the UN Global Compact, businesses and organizations will tackle 'the big global sustainability issues' such as human rights and anti-corruption (sic.), as well as labour standards, and the environment. Human rights and corruption may be highly contested concepts. For example, after the Second World War, the UN Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed all human beings are born equal in dignity and rights without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Given centuries of European anti-Semitism, ending in the extermination of Jews en masse during WW II, one might naturally have expected that the US government, especially in the light of its later keen interest in tackling discrimination against blacks and women, would first deal with anti-Semitism at home, as a result of signing the UN Declaration. During the cold and hot wars against Asian Communists mounted instead, Jewish intellectuals in the US were disproportionately treated to the McCarthy witch hunts, in lieu, one assumes, of the more old fashioned and direct attacks upon their persons. US interest in human rights has often been bizarrely demonstrated. It seems that keeping the family from being the collateral damage of war has nothing to do with it.

In the current, comparatively new global paradigms and contests over land and its ideal treatment and uses, energy naturally remains at the forefront of attention in the 21st century, as it did in the 20th. The industry also has powerful historical supporters in mining, whose chains of operation and surrounding environments must be understood and ideally addressed to meet the broadest possible community of current and future interests. This submission therefore refers in an attached discussion to recent issues papers produced respectively by the Australian Productivity Commission (PC) Inquiry into Government Drought Support and the PC Review of Regulatory Burden on the Upstream Petroleum (Oil and Gas) Sector. It addresses the inquiries' questions from a broad risk management perspective ideally designed to achieve coordinated, sustainable development across Australian primary industries and beyond. Costing prevention of

disaster and rehabilitation of environmental damage are preferred to defining risk to pass it on to others. This requires more open, outcomes based and comparative accounting.

Who trusts their government? (I'm reasonably happy with mine as I find it more accountable, approachable and informative than the similar private sector operator.) As an Australian citizen, I was happy enough to pay taxation and expect government to allocate funding on my behalf, because it has the broader knowledge to do so more effectively than I. As an individual, my charitable allocations can only be comparatively ignorant. I reject the US preference for low tax plus personal choice of charity as an irrational option. The payment of taxation which is designed to support development for less emotional and more informed reasons than individual choice is necessary. To prefer charity to more informed policy making and related taxation seems primitive to me. From this perspective, tipping seems to be a practice which is mainly related to feudal opportunities for exploitation and corruption, while passing the cost of appropriate labour standards onto the consumer of a product or service, who may also deny the hapless worker. Bargaining seems likely to be most successful with the most impoverished opposition. I seldom do either. Investigation of such issues is important for good design of taxation, welfare, labour standards, and tourism concerns. Global power is based on many feudal anachronisms which prevent effective administration. This has many implications for identification of corruption, as distinct from mismanagement or waste or merely business as usual. Opening administration up on a continuing basis to justify it is better and cheaper than keeping secrets. Intrepid is discussed in this context later.

According to the article referred to earlier, 'The highly sensitive art of doing business in Beijing' (AFR, 13.9.09, p57) Peter Phillips, a former diplomat and Asia director for the Canberra lobbying firm Government Relations Australia' advises foreign businessmen:

to consider the possibility of personal or public compromise when confronted by offers of hospitality or gifts in commercial settings. If there is no danger of compromise, there is no problem about accepting hospitality or gifts. The acid test, perhaps, is how the receiver would respond if the hospitality or gifts was reported in a newspaper.

That is good advice about the newspaper. Let such information be openly available.

INTREPID: HOW IT PRESENTS ITSELF

The Intrepid website claims the organization's environmental responsibility is:

- To ensure we are working toward protecting the environment both locally and globally by using resources in an efficient, fair and responsible way.
- To have our trips designed in a way that limits the physical impact on our planet and the places we visit so that they may be enjoyed by many generations to come.

The Intrepid website states Geoff Manchester and Darrell Wade started the travel business Intrepid in 1989 and 'have honoured a commitment to contribute back to the communities where they operate'. The Intrepid Foundation Incorporated in 2002 with a contribution of AU\$200,000 and support of CAF Australia (God knows who that is.) Although Intrepid Travel provides support for The Foundation, they are now separate entities, allowing the Foundation to grow independently. The Foundation is composed of the Intrepid Community Project Fund and the Intrepid Perpetual Support Fund Account. Donations to the former go to the grassroots work of non-government organisations based in Intrepid Travel's operating areas and identified as making a valuable contribution to the local community. These include many small organizations or projects that may be visited during the Intrepid trip.

The Intrepid Perpetual Support Fund account 'has been developed by The Intrepid Foundation Incorporated in conjunction with CAF Australia and CAF Community Fund, registered charities that aim to increase the flow of resources to charities and not-for-profit organizations' (sic.). Funds are invested by CAF with Macquarie Private Portfolio management a wholly owned subsidiary of Macquarie Bank. Grant recipients or beneficiaries are approved by the CAF trustee and disbursed annually, having considered requests from the Intrepid Foundation Committee. CAF Community Fund is a registered DGR (whatever that is) public fund. (Never mind, it's only money.) Donations are tax deductible for Australian taxpayers. Is the Macquarie Bank involved through love?

I hate the Macquarie Bank. According to the article 'Rudd's leadership comes cheap' (Sydney Morning Herald 30.12.08, p. 4) the PM's salary of \$330,000 per annum falls \$30,000 short of the salary of the Governor General because her package formula is tied in part to the chief justice's salary. On the other hand, in an article entitled 'The case for a new top tax rate', Richard Denniss of the Australia Institute pointed out that the two richest men in Australia in 2006/07 were bankers. Macquarie Bank's Allan Moss received \$33.90 million in that year, followed by Phil Green, who got \$17 million for his efforts. Denniss argued that from July 2008, the top tax rate in Australia of 45% would apply to those earning over \$180,000 per year. He claimed that a new tax rate for incomes over \$1 million per year would not only increase the equity of the Australian tax system but also increase tax revenue. If this tax had been implemented, Allan Moss would have paid an extra \$1,645,000, on his \$33.90 million salary, according to Denniss. Good luck to government also in handling the golden handshakes and the tax shelters. (The lawyers on both sides have for centuries known when they were onto a good thing.)

After I retired in 2007, Macquarie Bank was spending money every night on prime time TV inviting people to invest their savings with the experts (them). Then the crash came, as I'm sure they knew it would. If I had invested as I bet they would have directed, I'd probably be living on a government pension now. The UniSuper Report to Members for 2008 showed in 2007-2008 that the Socially Responsible Balanced Option was -9.47 and the Socially Responsible High Growth Option was -10.20. The High Growth Option was -10.20. The main Socially Responsible Investment Managers are AMP Sustainability; AMP Sustainability Balanced; BT Australian Sustainability Fund; Dexia Sustainability (International); State Street Global Advisors (currency overlay). One always wonders

where our money is going and how much of it is being siphoned off in the process. The hypocrisy of financial interests which bleed the ignorant on one hand, while handing out charity on the other sickens me. Ditch the Macquarie Bank and get a better system.

INTREPID TRAVEL, LOCAL INTERESTS AND HOW I EXPERIENCED THEM

I enjoyed the Tracks to Russia trip very much. I particularly loved the wonderful banya and water slides into Lake Baikal, after Valery, the host, who had spent his life as a commercial fisherman, had showed us around a small area of the lake in his boat and we had a swim. His wife (whose name I fear I forget) cooked terrific food and was clearly an equal partner in the business. The cabins and garden were modestly and beautifully kept. After dinner we sat round a fire cooking fish and singing while the sun went down over the lake. It was a fantastic experience which in the opinion of most of the group we had to leave too soon to return to Irkutsk. We thought we were being given an option to stay on longer, but it turned out that the bus driver, who apparently manages the Irkutsk connection, needed us to go back because he had already made a commitment to take another single tourist to see an Old Believers village and a Buddhist monastery, with a Biryat guide, a long way out of Irkutsk. This trip was a comparatively expensive add-on, which rankled with me mainly because I, like others, thought we had been given the opportunity to stay on at Lake Baikal, instead of travelling miles and miles again by bus, so quickly after getting off the train when we would soon be on it again. Irkutsk is not pretty and I rightly or wrongly gained the impression the Old Believers are on the map mainly because of their good Intrepid connexions. Would one visit 7th Day Adventists in Australia, especially if their living arrangements looked pretty much like anybody elses?

In the above context one should note the excellent chapter on the environment in the 2009 edition of the Lonely Planet Guide entitled 'Trans-Siberian Railway' but that nobody involved with the trip gave any information about the natural environment, except Valery. One should note that there is a wonderful example of Old Believers religious practice and a convent surrounded by extensive and beautiful wooden buildings and gardens on the way to Lake Baikal, which was delightful. Beijing's Lama Temple and the park nearby were my favourite places in Beijing, although few write on the latter, which I found by taking the wrong direction coming out of the subway. The Llama Temple is commonly billed as the most famous Buddhist temple outside of Tibet. It is very large and spectacular in a very welcoming and interesting public environment. The nearby park is very beautiful and people also play traditional music or games there, and also modern ones, in small or large groups. People also re-enact traditional Buddhist ceremonies and practices in costume. This was lovely and very interesting. (However, it was not on the Intrepid program. This is an observation, not a criticism.)

Another favourite experience on the trip was staying with the extremely hospitable and interesting nomadic herding family in their ger in Mongolia's 'best national park' – Terelj. The food was great and the environment was beautiful. One of the excellent museums in Ulaan Baatar discusses the successful reintroduction of endangered native horses to Mongolia, but information about the relationship between native people and their environment and related government policy did not seem available. Intrepid states

on its website that ‘We can particularly learn from indigenous rural communities about their relationship to the land and how they have practiced sustainable development for centuries.’ In the absence of more information this seems romanticism to me. Perhaps they only practiced sustainable development because so many babies died. There is construction and activity of various kinds in the park and one wonders about its future.

I think the issue of the relationship between commercial tourism and the treatment of the animals involved in it should also be one in which Intrepid takes an interest, in line with its mission. Our train arrived in Ulaan Baatar much later than expected and we were first to drive and then travel to the ger by horse or ox cart. Apart from the horses, only one ox cart pulled by a very small ox had been provided to take the group. The tiny ox appeared overburdened, especially when it fell over in the river shallows. Our guide asked for another, at the instigation of some of the women in the group. Another cart and ox eventually turned up and we proceeded in the dark. Some people got upset riding behind animals which were alternatively having pointed sticks stuck in their anuses and being whipped on the balls to make them move faster. Others did not. One cart rider was sprayed with shit as a result of the former practice and someone else was inadvertently hit by a whip. Most people got off to walk beside the carts. The return journey with fewer local people on board and bigger oxen, undertaken in daylight, was fun and not controversial. However, the issue of animal treatment is one which is difficult to address from an informed and sensible perspective by any consumers unfamiliar with animals.

As a tourist, staying in the Ulaan Baatar guest house which supports the Lotus Children’s Centre for orphaned children seemed an excellent idea to me and food at their local vegetarian café was terrific. (I tried to go back next day but it was closed because of the Mongolian Naadam festival). The guest house was full to the brim with similar tourists and so nine of us were squeezed into a very small room, which was a disappointment to most after being cooped up in the train. I have no problems sleeping close to men and can sleep anywhere. However, we had very small, mixed quarters so much that I think this may have been a particular burden to those who either find sleeping difficult or who do not wish to mix so intimately and consistently with the opposite sex. Hotel Pilau shared rooms in St Petersburg are palatial and the facilities wonderful in comparison with the Lotus guest house or the one in Moscow. The trains were usually fine except for the border crossing where everybody waits with the toilets closed from 5.00 am until the bureaucrats start work checking passports, etc. at 9.00 am and finish their long task.

The Tourist Office in Ulaan Baatar seemed extremely helpful to me and it may be a good idea for Intrepid to work more closely with them. (I have no idea.) For example, when most places in town were closed down, workers from the Tourist Office were staffing an information table and even currency exchange at the Naadam festival. They also gave out a very good, short survey to those attending the opening ceremony of Naadam, asking how Ulaan Baatar and its environment could be improved. This was collected before the colourful opening ceremony started. Because the stadium is very big, I think the excellent activities with horses, etc. could be improved by more activity around the stadium perimeter, as many people may find it hard to see the centre of the field well.

When I went into the Tourist Office on first arrival, asking where to find a computer, they suggested use of one in their office. I have never seen such a pro-active Tourist Office.

I spent six days in St Petersburg staying at the Hostel Pilau and found the city beautiful and fascinating and the hostel very comfortable, well managed and central. The Hermitage was more amazing than anything similar I have seen in Europe, not because of the collection as much as the incredible opulence and attention lavished on each of the innumerable huge rooms and the beautiful vistas that each of them provided onto the river, the courtyards, or other portions of the building. Russian royals certainly knew how to do feudalism. Taking a boat to the palace at Peterhoff and spending all day wandering between the fountains was also beautiful and impressive. The Peter and Paul Fortress, which provides a history of Russian government and upheaval with English information about key people locked up in its cells, and the house of Peter the Great, were also fascinating. St Petersburg has a wonderful array of bookshops and Russian classics in English. There is no better place to read these than St Petersburg.

My favourite experience in Moscow was the sculpture park full of pieces from Russian 20th century history, which are still being added to and which are dotted around wooden tea houses and gardens. The visit to Lenin, (compared with that to Mao), and the Kremlin were very instructive. Our guide took us by subway to Victory Park, in memory of the millions of Russians killed in World War 2, on the first night of our stay. This was impressive in numerous ways. The Russians appear to queue up for McDonalds happily at all hours of the day in Moscow and St Petersburg. I can only share their enthusiasm, as a hamburger, large crisp salad and orange juice cost less than half of an equivalent sit-down meal elsewhere. (Economies of scale may be great and self-reinforcing?)

My most disturbing experience involved the Russian Consulate in Sydney. I got my visas from China and Mongolia early and easily. The latter provide a spare, in addition to the one in the passport. (A Mongolian joke?) To get a visa for Russia, one first needs an invitation from Russia. To get this, one fills in a request form on the Intrepid website. I did this early. After I got my China and Mongolia visas, I followed up on the nil response from Russia by going into the Intrepid Office and asking them to send another email to Russia, which they did. When I got the letter of invitation from Russia, which came via a Melbourne office and a Russian tour company there, I noted it covered only the days of the Intrepid trip and not the days I would be continuing to stay on in St Petersburg. Many times I tried to ring the Russian Consulate in Sydney but they appear not to answer phones or emails. I then went to the Consulate, taking my travel itinerary and letter with me to explain my problem. When I arrived at 10 am, I found lots of people in a waiting room, who, like myself had no idea that the Consulate would be closed between 9am and 11am, contrary to the website. When I eventually reached the window to talk to somebody I was told that I could only re-apply all over again.

I returned to the Intrepid office and paid the money for Intrepid to handle the whole Russian visa thing on my behalf. I filled out the forms in front of them and left my passport with them for the representatives of the Russian Consulate to pick up after Intrepid had resent it to Russia and received the letter of invitation via the Russian

representative in the Melbourne office. The Russian Consulate naturally charges to pick up and return passports to the Intrepid Office, after the visas have been inserted. The above experience with the Consulate was alienating in more ways than I can describe, especially at the start of a trip into the unknown. It costs some people money unnecessarily, to support others better. Is it corruption, waste, or business as usual?

In general, however, let me say again how much I enjoyed the Intrepid trip and how much the guide's competence and concern for everybody's welfare was appreciated, along with her charm and beautiful singing. I thought the Russian movie answer to 'Grease' entitled 'Stylish People' which she showed us on her computer, while doing the translations, was terrific. I also think the trip notes were excellent, particularly those provided on arrival in Beijing which contain consistently structured information about each country in regard to its history, geography, people, government and economy, as well as a short dictionary of key words, places of interest and related travel information. The former seemed to follow the World Health Organization holistic and comparative approach to health and the environment, which seems to me to be the way to present key information for best effect. However, one needs more than the excellent Lonely Planet guide if one wishes to know about the natural environment. Kumuka tours and New Zealanders provided the latter information much better, in my very limited experience.

Thanks for your consideration of these recommendations. Yours truly,
Carol O'Donnell, St James Court, Rosebank St., Glebe, Sydney, Australia.