

# In the Wilds of Tuva

In Tuva, in the outer reaches of Russia, shamanism remains intact. This Siberian outpost continues to honor ancient and profound ties with nature and life's most primitive elements. Links between visible and the invisible worlds still flourish in a place lost to time.

text and photos by *Igor Starkov / Saltimages*

The republic of Tuva, nestled between the vast Siberian expanses to the north, and Mongolia to the south, is one of the least known and most curious corners of Russia. Often referred to as “Land of Eagles and blue mountains”, it is a land of pristine forests, lakes of all colors, and the birthplace of the Yenesei River, one of Siberia's major rivers flowing over 2000 miles to the Arctic Ocean.

Statistically, Tuva is one of Russia's poorest and most dangerous republics, with high alcohol and drug addiction and low employment. It's a place where neither communism nor the free market economy has worked.

People of Tuva are looking further back in time to when traditional ritual beliefs ruled their lives. They've returned to worshipping the natural spirits around them: earth, wind, fire and water – which have shaped Tuva's beautiful landscape.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tuva was trying to revive its rich traditions. Central to the cultural life of the people of Tuva is shamanism, which is undergoing an extraordinary revival after almost five decades of violent repression. Shamanism has survived, being practiced in secret and Tuva is now one of the places amongst very few others in the world where the shamanic heritage has remained unbroken.

New forms of traditional practices appeared to be, forms never existed before. Today practicing shamans in Tuva are organized into several competitive societies. They are officially registered to the state as practicing religious organizations. They pay taxes, have offices, license and function legally.

While some shamans work in “shamanic clinics” and



have clients from all over the world, other shamans prefer to live surrounded by nature, which they worship over all other things, working alone and receiving clients in their home, according to ancient traditions.

According to the shamanic worldview, the world is divided into two realms, the real and the invisible, the latter being a projection of the real world inhabited by spirits whose actions influence the life of humans.

Shamans are believed to have the power to see the invisible world and communicate with spirits.

All is Alive. The drum has its own spirit. Smoke is sacred and an intricate part of everyday life. The spirits eat just as we eat. They say that if the spirits are not fed, the ritual will not go well.

Have you ever met a bear? That is fully possible. How about, perhaps, a bear spirit? Hardly. But the members of the shamanic society “Adyg Eeren” (“Spirit of the bear”) not just meets him on a daily basis, but also often addresses him with questions and pleas for help. “Adyg Eeren” is one of the strongest shamanic societies in Tuva, and its chairman is considered to be one of the most powerful shamans. It is more than just feeling the power of a bear. It is becoming one with it; letting its spirit work through one for the purpose of healing.



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When a Tuvan shaman is shamanizing it is a sight to behold: the clanging of metallic objects on gown and drum, bells, beating of the drum and the shaman's rattle-beater, the "orba," with its metal rings all sounding with the shaman's voice above it all.

Tuvan shamans do not lie down during the séance. They stand and move around. Some are what we might



generally call melodic and graceful while others rough and noisy. They sing shamanic hymns, which can be healing songs, songs of praise for their spirit helpers, song descriptions of their journeys or also songs of blessing. Moving around the fire or the patient, the shaman dances and becomes an assistant in the rite.

He battles with spirits, dances in praise or thanksgiv-



ing. The Tuvan shaman is almost always in motion. It isn't a matter of a power dance, it is rather that, parts or even the entire journey is active movement.

In the past most Tuvans lived as nomads and moved between three or four places every year to get grass for their cattle. Since immemorial times Tuvans have inhabited



Central Asia where they have created and maintained a unique culture.

People of Tuva live in a strong bond with nature. Depending on hunting and performing what might seem cruel rituals they respect nature and coexist with it in a unique manner. ●