

# A wheel feat

A young Japanese man recently spent six months travelling from Japan to Dublin by bike. He talks to **Alva Mac Sherry** about his experiences in the wildest parts of the Eurasian continent

**H**ALF in jest, he calls himself the pedalling Bloom, and even James Joyce would have smiled. Leopold Bloom just wandered around Dublin — Yasuyuki Ozeki somehow took it into his head to cycle from Japan to Dublin and his trip is in fact more reminiscent of the original *Odyssey*.

Irish Times readers will have read occasional accounts of the progress of his dream. It began when he chanced on Ireland after reading a travel book, came to visit and fell for our easy approach to life: it expanded to the point where he abandoned an irksome, fledgling career in Japanese middle-management and put into action a plan to actually travel across land, by bike, from his home in Osaka to where he felt his heart now lay — in Dublin.

Last month the 27-year-old arrived, having pedalled 12,935 km and set his heart at ease about the cultural differences between Japan and Ireland, a problem that had much vexed him. He had cycled, camped, and charmed his way across some of the last great wildernesses in the world.

He left home in mid April and left Japan at the port of Kobe, China, and his first taste of the kindness of strangers.

The welcome of Chinese people he found overwhelming — and not always easy to deal with. People were hugely generous and he lost count of the free lunches pressed upon him, but they were curious in equal measure. Japanese and Chinese people can communicate in their shared written language and he spent hours answering questions about where he was going, why, where Ireland is,

what Ireland is...

Not far away from the fastidiousness of Japanese society, he found Chinese communal toilets, without a shred of privacy or plumbing, absolutely appalling!

He took a train 2 km across the border between China and Mongolia, and as he descended he was swept away by the feeling of space "as if I was sandwiched between sky and earth". The Mongolians and the Japanese share blood lines, and Yasuyuki paints a picture of a wild, high, flat place and a proud, fiercely independent people.

Five hundred metres into the Mongolian Gobi desert, the asphalt faded and he found himself on cart tracks. The only way to navigate the 760 kilometres to Ulan Bator, capital of Mongolia, was to keep the Trans-Siberian Railway in sight. For days he pushed his bicycle for 10 minutes, cycled another 10, then pushed again.

After the first couple of bumpy hours he met his first Mongolian, a man who appeared from nowhere on a white horse.

"He galloped up and then galloped away back over the horizon," says Yasuyuki. Within the hour he had returned, carrying a bucket of water to quench Yasuyuki's thirst and fill water bottles. Then he simply headed back into the desert.

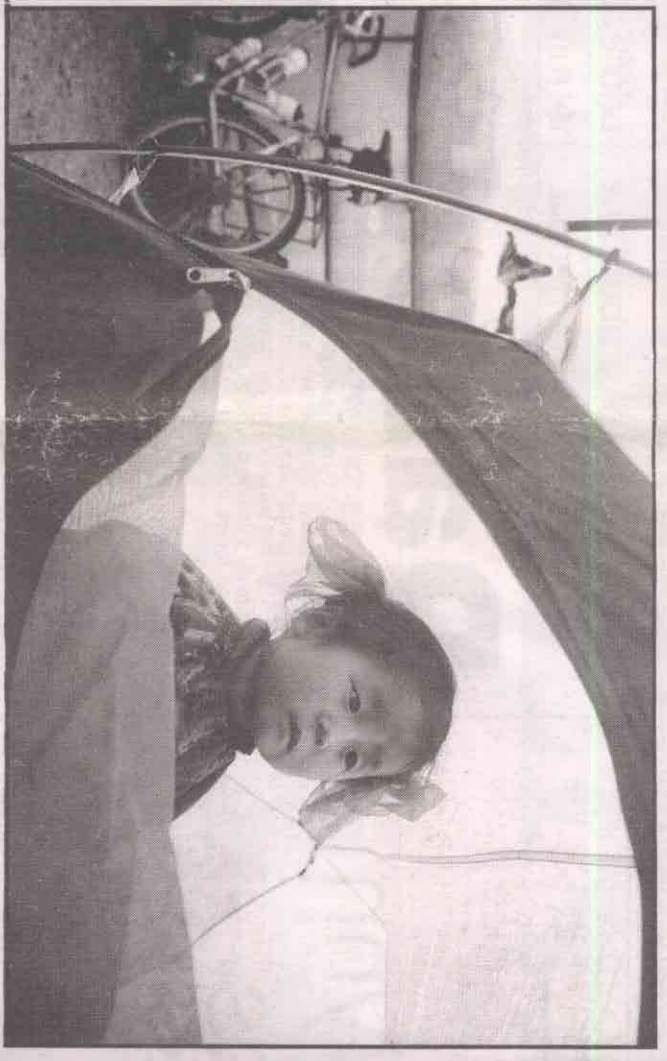
Outside the cities, Mongolians are nomadic herdsmen. They do not tend the soil because to them the earth is sacred. They own nothing but their tents, their horses, and their sheep, and they eat nothing but mutton, more mutton, a little flat bread, and, occasionally, rice from Russia.

When Yasuyuki reached a nomad tent, he would stop and the family would invite him to eat and to stay the night with them.

"Mongolians are kind in a very dignified way," says Yasuyuki. "They never asked me anything, they just said 'Come, eat, or 'Come, sleep.' They remain, of all the people he met on his travels, his favourite race — tied with the Irish.

After Ulan Bator, where Yasuyuki found shelter with the nurses of the local Christina Noble Foundation centre (they had heard about his trip on the *Gerry Ryan Show*, which continued to follow him as he headed west) it was back on the asphalt and off towards Russia. There had been a three-day uphill climb out of China and into the high plains of Mongolia. It was two hours downhill to Russia.

He cut through Kazakhstan, where it fits into Russian territory. Then, his problem was that, while he had a visa to enter Russia the first time, he had none to get back in after diverting into Kazakhstan. There was a long queue of lorries heading across the border and he simply took a deep breath, cycled up inside the line, waved cheerily to the astounded customs officers, and freewheeled across the border.



would be tempted to throw them at the tent. Such measures kept the badgers at bay, but nothing could keep the friendlies off.

More often than not, he would be woken by tumult outside and the rocking of his tent. Grasping the knife he kept under his pillow he would yell out whatever word of Russian seemed most likely to drive off the intruders, but they would simply reply "Friend, friend". He would crawl out reluctantly to find men clutching bottles of vodka. He was being invited to join them for a bit of a binge and they wouldn't take no for an answer.

The Russian style of kindness, he says, is to do everything "endlessly" he says. They would press him to join him in their homes, "to drink endlessly, eat endlessly, and carouse late into the night.

One of the great landmarks of his journey fell as he reached the top of the Ural mountains, in central Russia. There, looming out of the distance, was a tall milestone. On one side it said Europe, on the other Asia. He was heading back into civilisation.

At the Irish Embassy in Moscow, a still rather malodorous

Yasuyuki found himself being solemnly briefed by the First Secretary on which Irish pubs in Moscow served decent Guinness. "I felt proud to have reached Moscow — and I felt I was once more connected to the world," he recalls.

Leaving Moscow, he found himself suddenly unremarkable. The road was full of cyclists touring Europe with their tents and their saddle-bags.

his dinner. After another short ferry ride, he reached Sweden, Stockholm, and Maria — "no words are needed" to describe that, he says.

He and Maria cycled together from Stockholm to her home in Copenhagen — Sweden, he observes, is the most civilised of countries, with an almost perfect society.

Having travelled so far, Europe seemed tiny. A nip into Denmark, a stroll through Germany and the Netherlands, a jink into France, a whizz across Britain, and then he was at Fishguard. For the four-hour journey to Rosslare, he sat and thought back over his whole route, his huge adventure, and as he reached Rosslare in body, he reached Rosslare in spirit too.

There, he was greeted by a reporter and producer from the *Gerry Ryan Show*, and by the marketing manager of Bridgestone. They took him to the Great Southern hotel in Rosslare, where, on a pan of offending his elders, he had to dance all night with older ladies on a golden years break, all regular listeners to the *Gerry Ryan Show*, all insisting he should have a pint on them.

At night, when he pitched his tent, he would take his rubbish far away so as not to attract scavengers — bears and wolves. Then he would clear all the rocks nearby away so that no passing human

At night, when he pitched his tent, he would take his rubbish far away so as not to attract scavengers — bears and wolves. Then he would clear all the rocks nearby away so that no passing human

At night, when he pitched his tent, he would take his rubbish far away so as not to attract scavengers — bears and wolves. Then he would clear all the rocks nearby away so that no passing human

# eat

travelling from cherry about his continent



Above, Yasuyuki Ozeki dreaming of a pint: he had a map of his route painted on his helmet so he could show strangers where he came from and where he was headed. Photograph: Pat Langan.



Left, a young Mongolian girl, Bahimphk, tries Yasuyuki's tent for size. Right, a young Mongolian hertsman advised Yasuyuki of bandits on the road ahead. Photographs: Yasuyuki Ozeki

I tent, he would stop and stay the night with them. Mongolians are kind in a very friendly way," says Yasuyuki. "I never asked me anything, just said 'Come, eat, or sleep.' They remain, of course, a favourite race — tied with the Ulan Bator, where I found shelter with the Foundation centre (they heard about his trip on the *Ryan Show*, which continues to follow him as he headed it was back on the asphalt fit towards Russia. There had a three-day uphill climb out and into the high plains Mongolia. It was two hours cut through Kazakhstan, it juts into Russian territory. Then, his problem was that, he had a visa to enter Russia at first time, he had none to get in after diverting into Kazakhstan. There was a long queue of heading across the border simply took a deep breath, and up inside the line, waved at the astounded customs officers, and freewheeled across Siberia and Russia, he would eat in the small towns he through, for although he in one way in the deepest of his, he was also on a main communication route across the waist

would be tempted to throw them at the tent. Such measures kept the buddies at bay, but nothing could keep the friendships off. More often than not, he would be woken by tumult outside and the rocking of his tent. Grasping the knife he kept under his pillow he would yell out whatever word of Russian seemed most likely to drive off the intruders, but they would simply reply "Friend, friend." He would crawl out reluctantly to find men clutching bottles of vodka. He was being invited to join them for a bit of a binge and they wouldn't take no for an answer.

Yasuyuki found himself being solemnly briefed by the First Secretary on which Irish pubs in Moscow served decent Guinness. "I felt proud to have reached Moscow — and I felt I was once more connected to the world," he recalls.

Leaving Moscow, he found himself suddenly unremarkable. The road was full of cyclists touring Europe with their tents and their saddle-bags.

cut through Kazakhstan, it juts into Russian territory. Then, his problem was that, he had a visa to enter Russia at first time, he had none to get in after diverting into Kazakhstan. There was a long queue of heading across the border simply took a deep breath, and up inside the line, waved at the astounded customs officers, and freewheeled across Siberia and Russia, he would eat in the small towns he through, for although he in one way in the deepest of his, he was also on a main communication route across the waist

he says, is to do everything "endlessly," he says. They would press him to join him in their homes, "to drink endlessly, eat endlessly," and carouse late into the night. One of the great landmarks of his journey fell as he reached the top of the Ural mountains, in central Russia. There, looming out of the distance, was a tall milestone. On one side it said Europe, on the other Asia. He was heading back into civilisation.

At the Irish Embassy in Moscow, a still rather malodorous

but I like this style the best." And now? "I feel content and satisfied. I feel 'well done, Yas'. Nothing is bigger than the continent of Eurasia, so nothing is too big any more.

"But I also feel I did nothing. People in Japan pushed me, and people I met all along helped me along, and people in Ireland pulled me along." He would next like to go into space, and to look back from the moon on his route across Eurasia.

After his arrival he and Maria, who had flown over for her first visit to Ireland, went off for a brief holiday on the Aran Islands — by bike, naturally. Pedalling along, they passed a local man on a couple of hundred yards down the road, the man jammed on the brakes, turned after them, raised his hand and shouted across the fields of his Mor: "Yas, Yas! Well done Yas!"

he says, is to do everything "endlessly," he says. They would press him to join him in their homes, "to drink endlessly, eat endlessly," and carouse late into the night. One of the great landmarks of his journey fell as he reached the top of the Ural mountains, in central Russia. There, looming out of the distance, was a tall milestone. On one side it said Europe, on the other Asia. He was heading back into civilisation.

At the Irish Embassy in Moscow, a still rather malodorous

That was the start of the Regular Listener phenomenon. After his report to the *Gerry Ryan Show* next morning, and as he made his way towards Wicklow, people in passing cars would honk their horns and lean out to greet him. People in towns clapped him through, and offered him tea. A Regular Listener offered to buy him lunch.

He reached Montrose and the *Gerry Ryan Show* next day, and from there had a Garda outrider — and still more cheers, waves and honks from Regular Listeners. His journey ended at the Guinness Hop Store — nearly 13,000 kms for a pint.

His conclusions? That the people of every nation are kind, but there is a different style to their kindnesses.

"When I arrived in Ireland it was special," he says. "But I tried to be fair to the rest of the world. This is not the perfect country,

he says, is to do everything "endlessly," he says. They would press him to join him in their homes, "to drink endlessly, eat endlessly," and carouse late into the night. One of the great landmarks of his journey fell as he reached the top of the Ural mountains, in central Russia. There, looming out of the distance, was a tall milestone. On one side it said Europe, on the other Asia. He was heading back into civilisation.

At the Irish Embassy in Moscow, a still rather malodorous

That was the start of the Regular Listener phenomenon. After his report to the *Gerry Ryan Show* next morning, and as he made his way towards Wicklow, people in passing cars would honk their horns and lean out to greet him. People in towns clapped him through, and offered him tea. A Regular Listener offered to buy him lunch.

He reached Montrose and the *Gerry Ryan Show* next day, and from there had a Garda outrider — and still more cheers, waves and honks from Regular Listeners. His journey ended at the Guinness Hop Store — nearly 13,000 kms for a pint.

His conclusions? That the people of every nation are kind, but there is a different style to their kindnesses.

"When I arrived in Ireland it was special," he says. "But I tried to be fair to the rest of the world. This is not the perfect country,