



**Time Traveler:
In Search of Dinosaurs and Other Fossils from Montana to Mongolia**
by **Michael Everhart**

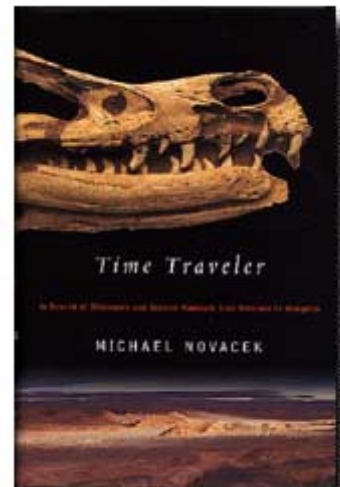
Michael Novacek
Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2002, 352 pp.
0-374-27880-6, \$26.00

Following his acclaimed **Dinosaurs of the Flaming Cliffs**, Mike Novacek has written a new book about the adventures of his youth, and his early years in paleontology. In addition, **Time Traveler** brings the reader up to date about Novacek's more recent expeditions to Mongolia and Patagonia. The book is well illustrated with an assortment of photographs, line drawings, maps, and charts, and an enticing cover photo of a **Velociraptor** skull that is almost suitable for framing. **Time Traveler** is informative, if a bit earthy in spots, and easy to read, but is somewhat of a disappointment to those of us expecting page after page of new paleontological discoveries. As an example, only two of the 28 pages in Chapter 22 are actually about paleontology. In his defense, fieldwork in paleontology is certainly not what Hollywood portrayed it to be in the recent theme park series. Novacek is very much a realist when comes to portraying the heat, frustration, discomfort, and danger of his various forays into some of the most distant places on this planet. He is occasionally introspective in regard to these trips, asking himself at one point, "[t]he obvious question was, why Yemen? Why

not do paleontological work in a more auspicious and tranquil territory?"

Mike and I agree on the book that got both of us interested in paleontology: **All About Dinosaurs** by Roy Chapman Andrews. We were kids when the book came

out in the 1950s and the idea of going to far off, exotic places was an adrenaline rush. In **Time Traveler**, Novacek pursues his own exotic locales, first as a series of "what I did on my summer vacation" trips in the western United States while in college and graduate school, and then to other countries and continents as a professional paleontologist. In the western U.S., Mike vividly describes the perils of drinking from mountain streams, the use of dynamite in fieldwork, the unusual sounds made by antelopes. and a danger-



ous night descent down a slippery mountainside during a thunderstorm. From a trip to Baja California, he relates tales about following slow, smelly truckloads of chickens up narrow mountain roads, local drinking and driving practices, the stench of a quaint drinking establishment ("We did not so much see the gloomy bar as smell it; the stench of urine rivaled that of any bat cave I had explored as a teenager"), the dangers of sleeping with scorpions, and the perils of attracting insects in the desert.

A trip to Chile in search of fossils above 7000 feet in the Andes Mountains involved even more risk taking. Before his description of a bumpy airplane ride into a remote airfield, Novacek relates a survival story about an earlier fossil collecting trip by John Bell Hatcher (1861-1904) to the region. Predictably, within a day or two, Novacek has his own near fatal accident when he is thrown from a horse, hitting his head on a rock and wrenching his knee when his hiking boot gets stuck in a stirrup. Although fossils are found, the trip seems to go downhill from that point. As described in this passage, meals prepared in the field were certainly not for the squeamish: "... after the brief warm spell the meat took on a greener cast. We cooked some tough chunks with the marshmallow stick method and watched the maggots try to escape from the inferno."

In an unsuccessful expedition to Yemen, his field camp was surrounded one night by people of uncertain alle-

giances, and the situation was in doubt when a "surly fellow pointed his Soviet-built automatic rifle at my forehead." If conditions in the desert were decidedly unfriendly, the hotel accommodations in the cities were certainly less than 5-star; "...we checked into a reasonably respectable hotel where one was forced to shower in a basin that did double service as a toilet. ... it was difficult to contend with a shower floor ornamented with piles of human excrement...."

Novacek's description of a return trip to the Flaming Cliffs in the last forty pages of the book actually contains the most paleontology, with descriptions of new finds and a new look at how these spectacular fossils came to be preserved. He also relates much of the history of fossil collecting in the Gobi, from Andrews to the present, including the local politics and international intrigue.

While Novacek briefly discusses many relevant paleontology subjects from Permian extinctions in the western U.S. to the newly emerging fossil treasures of the Gobi Desert, **Time Traveler** is more of a travelogue of his sometimes dangerous, around-the-world adventures than a trip through time. To paraphrase a country and western song made popular at different times by Waylon Jennings and by Willie Nelson, parents of small children reading **Time Traveler** might be thinking, "Mamas don't let your babies grow up to be paleontologists." For the rest of us, it's already too late.