

THE SPORT OF KINGS

An almost mythical land of nomads, epic landscapes and the ghost of Genghis Khan, Mongolia is a place few tourists ever get to see – let alone experience a tradition that's hundreds of years old. As polo moves to the forefront of Mongol culture, **Justin Cartwright** joins a new annual tournament to play a chukka or two. Photography by **Andrew Rowat**

Tales of the riverbank

A camp of traditional *gers* (yurts) by the Orkhon River houses polo players from the Shanghai Tang tournament



Some countries exist largely in the imagination, and Mongolia is one of them. When I was at school, there were three things we were taught about the place: the Mongols lived in yurts, they survived on fermented mare's milk called *kumis*, and Genghis Khan was the most bloodthirsty warrior the world had ever seen. In fact yurts are called *gers* in Mongolia, the locals seem to drink a lot of fermented milk from cows and yaks, and Genghis Khan was not just a genocidal maniac; he encouraged trade and religious tolerance. As we land in Ulan Bator, the capital, a huge equestrian statue – the biggest statue in the world – of the man himself is visible, and above the town there is an enormous outline of him carved on a hillside, rather like the giant figures on the chalk downs of Wiltshire. Genghis Khan is still regarded as the father of the nation.

The moment I leave Ulan Bator – a frenetic, semi-industrialised frontier town – on every distant hill and in every isolated valley there are *gers*, with a few ponies tethered and vast herds of sheep, goats, yaks and cattle stretched out, moving like the shadows of clouds across the landscape. The *ger* is a spacious rounded tent, with felt walls attached to a circular wooden frame. The whole thing is relatively light and very warm, allowing the nomads to pack up and move (about a third of the 2.9 million people of



“ VAST HERDS OF YAKS AND SHEEP MOVE LIKE THE SHADOWS OF CLOUDS ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE ”

Mongolia still live this way). Each family lives at a loosely defined distance from the other. Grazing is, as with all nomadic peoples, a constant preoccupation. Some winters are so bad that half the herds and flocks die.

As I drive over the final hill on my seven-hour journey north of Ulan Bator, I gaze down into a broad valley with a wide gleaming strip of silver silk lying on its floor, the Orkhon River. The Orkhon is Mongolia's longest river, eventually reaching Lake Baikal in Russia after nearly 700 miles; the whole of this part of the Orkhon is a Unesco World Heritage site, because of its beauty and because it contains one of the most important sites of Mongol history, Karakorum, once the capital. Below me in the valley are about 45 *gers*, the home of one of the most quixotic and glamorous enterprises I have ever come across, the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club.

To cut a very long story short, the Club was founded by Christopher Giercke, once an East German and now a resident of Nepal. Giercke believes the Mongols invented polo, although as far as I can see there is no mention of it in the anonymous saga, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, written after Genghis Khan's death (1227). There are plenty of sports involving the severed heads of enemies, but none resembles polo. However, the Mongols have always been cracking riders: they ride the ponies with a curiously upright seat, which the country's art suggests is age-old. Here the phrase 'born in the saddle' seems to be almost literally true.

I'm here to see Mongolia's annual polo tournament, a three-day competition involving players from Singapore, Hong Kong and India. All will be riding the very small Mongol ponies. This wonderfully appealing or, depending on your temperament, slightly eccentric enterprise is backed by Shanghai Tang, which was founded in 1994 by David Tang and is now part of the RicheMont luxury goods company. David's spirit, however, lives on in both the brand's sophisticated fusion between Western and Han Chinese clothing and in the hotels he still owns (en route, I stayed in his China Club in Beijing, a cluster of traditional Chinese buildings around six courtyards, where my childhood enchantment with *Aladdin* and *The Land of Green Ginger* flooded back).

Raphael le Masne de Chermont, chairman of Shanghai Tang, tells me what they are trying to create out here: a sense of pride in the Mongols' traditional culture and skills that might, one day, translate into a world-beating polo team. But he also loves the idea that this solitude and space correspond to something valuable in the human experience. I can also see, from their point of view, the attraction: a glamorous sport, enormous vistas and the Shanghai Tang brand associated with this wildness and exoticism. The tournament comes to a climax on the final day with the Shanghai Tang Polo Cup, Mongols versus the rest.

Most of the year Mongolia is a cold place, with temperatures falling to -50°C in winter. But my *ger* at the camp is comfortable enough and warm: there's a welcoming fire in the simple stove, with a long chimney leading up to the stars. That night, the *High Life* photographer and I dine by candlelight accompanied by one of Mongolia's finest classical pianists, Odgerel Sampilnorov, who serenades us with music by Chopin. The food is prepared by Mongolia's answer to Jamie Oliver, Chef Enkee, who has ventured some way beyond the classic diet of meat and fermented milk. The evening is bizarre and wonderful. Much later, I wander under a nearly full moon along the hillside back to the *ger*. Fifty or so ponies are grazing on the hillsides around. I have the intoxicating sense of being in a landscape that has not changed for thousands of years.

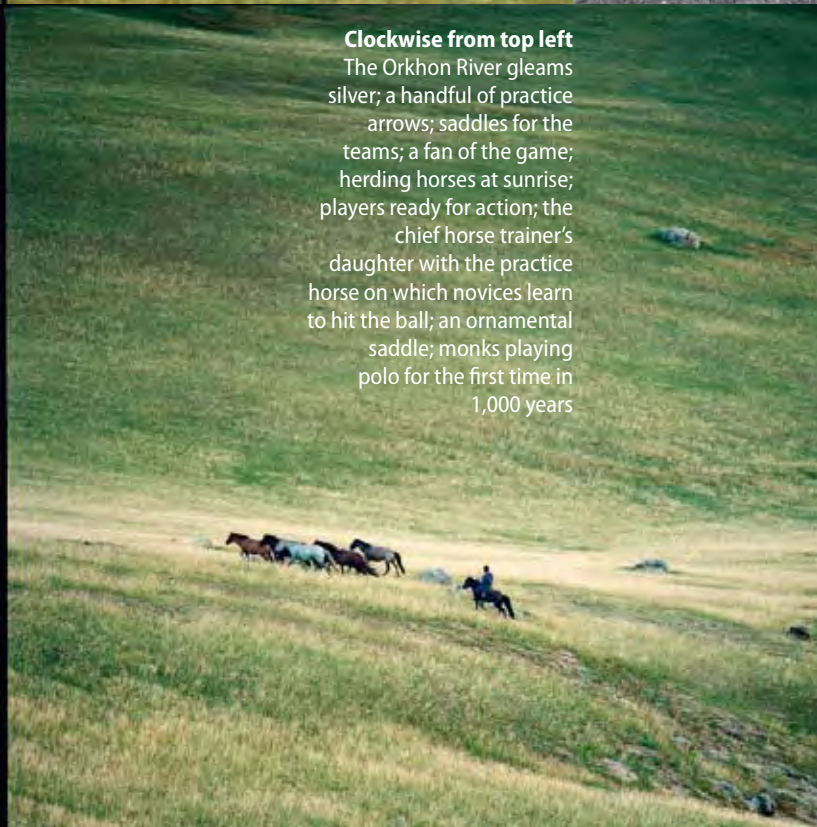
The next morning I try my hand at hitting a polo ball. Many years ago I played the sport and, oddly enough, as soon as I am on a pony – only marginally bigger than a Great Dane – I long >



A whole different ball game International players mounted on the diminutive local ponies

Opposite Traditional Mongolian dress is designed to cope with sun or deep snow





Clockwise from top left
The Orkhon River gleams silver; a handful of practice arrows; saddles for the teams; a fan of the game; herding horses at sunrise; players ready for action; the chief horse trainer's daughter with the practice horse on which novices learn to hit the ball; an ornamental saddle; monks playing polo for the first time in 1,000 years

to get out there and smash the ball upfield. But I have forgotten how difficult it is. First you have to get the pony going in the right direction, then you have to hit the ball while travelling at speed: imagine golf at 20 miles an hour played in the rough. I hit a few tussocks of grass, and once or twice make glancing contact with the ball. My pony has seen it all before. Stoically it does whatever I ask of it. As a reward, I offer it a piece of apple afterwards and realise that it has never seen a piece of fruit in its life, and has certainly never been offered a reward for carrying a human being.

All the ponies are the same, quite content with wiry grass, and unimpressed by my Pony Club guilt. The real polo players are galloping about and smacking the ball, supervised by an elegant retired colonel of the Indian Cavalry, whom everyone calls The Silver Fox. It's hard to tell where the polo field ends and the infinite steppe begins and it's becoming increasingly difficult to think about the world beyond this one.

Later, I walk for an hour up the Orkhon River. This river is home to one of the biggest freshwater fish known to man, a relative of the salmon called the taiman, which can reach 60kg. A young Englishman working at the camp lends me his Hardy fly rod, although he warns me that the river is too murky to fish that day. I try nonetheless, with a pheasant tail nymph from the

Wiltshire Avon. I am hoping at least to interest a small trout, but nothing is rising. Anyway fishing is just an excuse to bask in the landscape, and this is sheer bliss. Across the river a herdsman guides his sheep and cattle gently along the riverbank.

The next day, I take a day trip to the ancient capital of Mongolia, Karakorum. It's a sad little town, half rural, half shacks, with a few official buildings and plenty of *gers*. It once housed a huge complex of 65 monasteries, until the Stalinist Mongolian People's Party came to power in 1922, destroying the monasteries and killing nearly 20,000 monks in the process. Outside the city walls, I encounter some huge eagles, props for tourist photographs. A few dazed German backpackers are having their pictures taken with one on their arm. These birds, which have an immense wingspan, are also used for wolf hunting, released from the saddles of ponies and falling like thunderbolts onto the wolves. If the wolves show any sign of fighting back, another eagle is unleashed. I tentatively hold one. It weighs at least 12kg and I can imagine what it would be like for a wolf to be hit from 500ft up by one of these birds aiming its 6in talons unerringly at the back of the wolf's neck.

Inside the complex Erdene-zuu, near Karakorum, only a solitary monastery and a few temples stand, rebuilt in the Tibetan style. But it is possible to imagine what was here once. The head lama >

“I HIT A FEW TUSSOCKS OF GRASS AND MAKE GLANCING CONTACT WITH THE BALL. MY PONY HAS SEEN IT ALL BEFORE”



First past the post
The tournament includes a race for under-14s with some riding bareback



of the monastery grants me an audience. He explains his relative youth by saying that, since independence from Russia in 1992, Buddhism is again growing in Mongolia, but there have been no trained monks for 70 years. He is the new generation. He also explains he is engaged in social projects in the town: there is a problem with alcohol. It seems to be a sad but inevitable consequence of giving up the nomadic life for an existence in the town. I have seen it in Namibia, in Wyoming, in Kenya and in the Arctic Circle. The vast compound is desolate, but there are plans to rebuild many of the lost temples and monasteries. Prayer wheels are revolving hopefully, a couple of elderly hippies wander aimlessly, and the chants of monks rise as I leave for the journey back along the Orkhon River to the camp.

That night there is a special feast – goat has been slow-roasted for hours. Before dinner we are treated to traditional, haunting Mongol entertainment. A man performs throat music – astonishingly lyrical and strange – and young girl contortionists bend themselves into improbable positions, a hangover of Soviet influence. Portions of cooked goat are handed around and vodka poured, another legacy from Russia.

The following day it's the Shanghai Tang Polo Cup. A strange sight greets me as I emerge from my *ger* in the morning: an ancient fire engine is watering the field. I find myself entered in the frontier *puissance* – did I agree to this in the middle of the night? – a competition in which the aim is to strike a polo ball over a small wooden fence. I manage to hit the fence, but fail to loft the ball over it. A professional polo player can hit the ball 70 yards and loft it 20ft into the air. But I'm not the only >



Clockwise from top Mongols young and old are at home in the saddle; *gers* are felt-walled and portable, and make warm and comfortable homes; a local resident; our writer fishing, more in hope than expectation; the doorway to a *ger* with painted polo motif



one to fail – one or two miss the ball altogether and others hit it way off line.

Mongol wrestlers follow, throwing each other violently to the ground while wearing surprisingly camp outfits that look like a pair of baby-blue Speedos matched with separate blue epaulettes. There's also a horse race for the under-14s; the youngest seem to be about six years old. It's thrilling to see the children assembled from miles around, many riding bareback. Eventually they canter off to the distant start line and soon they are galloping back across the steppe in a cloud of dust towards the finish, about three miles in all. The winner is awarded a prize of about £25, a large sum in a country with an average yearly income of £795.

Then it's the Shanghai Tang Cup and a certain tension fills the air; the ponies seem to move a lot more urgently than in the earlier friendlies. The Mongol team turns faster, rides harder and trounces the visitors. They have an advantage in knowing the ponies, but their innate horsemanship carries them a very long way. This team has spent time in Australia improving their polo where, as one of the players told me, he found it difficult at first to adjust to bigger horses. Actually I don't have any fear for his future: before the match he demonstrated trick-riding, vaulting over his pony at full gallop and then clinging out of sight to the side of the animal, presumably once a military tactic. The plan is to enter a Mongol team in the regional eliminators for the World Polo Championship, which will be held in Argentina next year.

The tournament draws to a close. Prizes are awarded, photographs taken and Champagne flows. As we prepare to depart this magical place Enkhe Giercke, Christopher Giercke's wife and a Mongolian princess, leads the plaintive farewell song and I am assailed by

a longing to return. I want to ride for miles up the Orkhon River, fishing and camping along the way. I want to see the Gobi Desert, the Orkhon Khurkhree waterfall, Lake Baikal. Back home in London, I go for a walk proudly wearing my Genghis Khan polo shirt. I am astonished and only slightly miffed to see someone else wearing one, too, in Islington, a universe away from the endless steppe. But at least I still have Enkhe's sweet voice ringing in my ears.■

For more details about the Shanghai Tang Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club, visit genghiskhanpolo.com. For booking information, contact Christopher and Enkhe Giercke on ichtenger@magicnet.mn.

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Into the sunset
A group of Buddhist monks ride off after their polo game

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