EXCLUSIVE REPORT: PAKISTAN RAMPS UP NUKES

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TRAVEL SPECIAL

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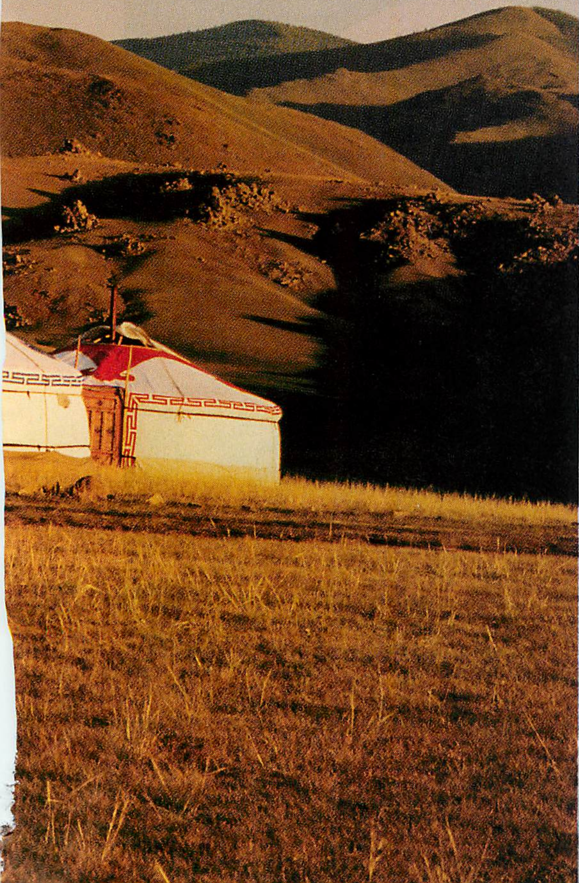
Country of the Khans

Meet modern Mongolia—a mishmash of PlayStations, yurts, heavy metal, teenage shamans, Genghis Khan toilet paper, fried meat, and ancient glory.

By Peter Pomerantsev

Photographs by Andrew Rowat



ULAN BATOR WAKES to the racket of construction of new Hiltons and Shangri-Las: girders tearing through the shingly ground, cranes swaying over archipelagoes of nomads' flat felt yurts. Old men in traditional cerulean kaftans with golden tassels, squinting through the smog, are helped over SUV-crammed roads by their children who sport black designer suits. I meet Ankaa, a sarcastic television stand-up comedian (typical joke: at 60 a Mongolian becomes wise; at 61 he dies). He wears drainpipe jeans and a fake Armani jacket, and fiddles with the latest iPhone. We are going to visit his shaman.

We drive out of the downtown and off-road into Ulan Bator's shantytown, the Gehr district, where almost a quarter of the country's 2.7 million people have come to look for work. It's every family for itself: some live in yurts; others build wooden shacks or wobbly brick houses. They burn tires, cow shit, and coal for heat, hook wires to electricity cables for power. We arrive at the shaman's yurt. He is a 19-year-old with innocent eyes. He lives with his mum. He is playing Grand Theft Auto on PlayStation. He covers the screen with a J-Cloth. Dims the lights. Pulls on wolf furs, bear claws, a mask of eagle feathers. His mother looks on, proud but a little confused: "I grew up during communism. We were taught that shamanism was a lie. But since my son was beaten up a couple of years ago, he has been hearing 'a voice.' I was skeptical at first, but he seems so convincing."

The shaman lights incense, bangs a drum, contorts like an epileptic on the floor. He lies still. When he rises he is a cackling old man, his movements birdlike. He is a 13th-century nobleman in Genghis Khan's army, an ancient ancestor. He is angry at being woken up. We offer vodka and Japanese cigarettes to placate him. Ankaa, face to the floor, hands trembling, asks the advice you might inquire of a parent or psychologist: Which girl should I marry? Why doesn't my work *make* me happy?

A shaman craze has been sweeping across the country. Street drunks will tell you they're channeling the great Genghis Khan himself, the

Mongol warrior-ruler who conquered half the known world in the 13th century, terrifying medieval Europe, and whose legacy was repressed under the Soviets for fear of arousing nationalist urges. The Khan's benevolent, stern face is everywhere you look–on vodka bottles, toilet paper, Irish bars, investment funds. A 30-meter chalk portrait of him is engraved on the hills above the city, like the tattoo of a lover on a sailor's shoulder. A passing British television crew shooting a series about "history's great dictators"–Genghis will star alongside Hitler and Stalin–is derided by the locals. "Genghis was actually the father of modernity, the first to create a functional state throughout Eurasia," insists a hopeful Mongolian film producer, eyes alight. "I'm planning a film that will change the image you people have of him as a blood-soaked tyrant. Can you recommend a scriptwriter?"

Mongolians today "want to be both cosmopolitans with BlackBerrys and ancient warriors who believe in shamans and worship Genghis Khan," says Bumochir Dulam, a young Cambridge-educated professor of social sciences, as we sit in his airy office in Ulan Bator, windows shut against the spring dust storm outside. "It's an impossible combination. How can you be both?"

A Mongolian ministry invites me south to see the future, to an investment conference in Sainshand, a transport and industry hub-to-be. I ride on the Presidential train, built in the 1970s for the general secretary himself. From the outside it looks like a clumsy box on wheels. Inside I'm asked to take off my shoes and place them on a special shelf. In socks and with a rucksack on my back, I walk the narrow brown corridor. There are single cabins with en suite coffinlike bathtubs; a private dining room with stiff, narrow-backed chairs and plates of fried chicken with tinned pineapple already laid out. When the train starts, a smiling woman rolls up the rug along the corridor (even though all the passengers removed their shoes) and puts down a fresh rug for the journey. Smiling again, she hands me a pair of camel-hair slippers.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Getting There

There are direct flights to Mongolia from several cities (Berlin, Seoul), but the most beautiful route is on the Trans-Mongolian railroad (trans-siberian.co.uk).

Where to Stay

Ulan Bator's Bayangol Hotel (about $120 a night) offers everything from spicy pickled cabbage to fried lamb and cornflakes for breakfast.

This is so different from my entrance to Mongolia, also by train, along the Trans-Mongolian from Siberia. There, Mongolian traders–thick-armed girls and sweating men who could all pass castings for Genghis Khan–are bivouacked eight people to four-place berths with metal beds. They smuggled vast vats of vodka, sunflower oil, coffee, fish, benzene. As we creaked toward the border they hid bottles and cans behind sliding walls, between the ceiling and the roof, beneath the beds and floor. The conductor, a martial-looking woman with a war paint of bright lipstick, aided

Mongolia today: high-tech future; traditional past; apartment blocks; descendants of the great Genghis.

and abetted. I was clearly in the way. A one-eyed man with vodka breath and wrestler's shoulders slammed me by-accident-on-purpose against the wall when I refused to hide his packs of coffee. But now, on the Presidential train, I'm softly woken by a gentle-voiced attendant, inviting me to a breakfast of fried meat.

In Sainshand town hall, there's a triumphant procession of PowerPoint presentations: Mongolia's new train lines will forge together here to smelt, refine, and multiply the value of raw materials, sending them on to Beijing, Vladivostok, Tokyo, Rotterdam! There will be high-tech parks, garden suburbs, chain restaurants, boutique hotels!

I leave the hall and walk through the town—stained socialist apartment blocks, flimsy like damp matchboxes, spill aimlessly over the dry, hoarse Gobi. Hunting for a drink, I'm informed the bars serve no alcohol after 5 on Fridays—a recent policy attempt to save the locals' sanity and livers (I get some under the counter anyway). The faces here seem vacant, tough, exhausted. It's an expression you see in the paintings of Khurelbaatar, the modern-art prodigy who won the Beijing Biennale in 2010. Khurelbaatar paints black-and-white portraits of traditional Mongolians, hemmed in by abstract, modernist, colored frames. His Mongolians look sullen, confused, assaulted by a new world, desperate for guidance but too proud to ask.

Back in Ulan Bator (UB to the locals), I hit the bars again. At a live-music venue, the audience bunches between the bar and stage in little tribes: black-hooded, all-knowing hip-hoppers; Brit-poppers stroking their barely bearded chins; sweaty-haired metalheads. Never in the clubs and bars of London or New York have I seen youth so behooved to their roles. Each supports their bands (and their bands only), the music slick but derivative of things you've heard a million times before on MTV. Then the band Jonon comes on. They look so young and nervous—boys like freshly hatched chicks in outsize leathers and baggy trousers, girls coyly hiding behind their *morin khuur* and *yoochin*, the local horse-headed fiddle and dulcimer. They spend an awkward amount of time tuning up and coughing.

But when they play, it knocks me sideways. Throat singing bores into the stomach; dulcimers prickle the spine; drums lift me from my seat. The shaven-headed Gee bounds onstage to join them, his rap the perfect correlative to the Mongolian landscape: gnarly and harsh, a cleaver hacking through tough meat ... and then a sound like water in the desert, the impossibly journeying vowels, flowing tenuto notes, glissandos, yodels, and vibrating *shuranhai* of the "long song," the song Mongolian nomads sing when traveling, transmitting stories between generations and carried here this evening by a woman emerging from backstage dressed in a Khuree dress that echoes the patterns of a Buddhist temple, colored like a firebird. And in this impossible little symphony of long song, rap, throat singing, and rock, Mongolia finally makes sense. PowerPoint presentations and shantytowns, shamans and iPhones, galloping Khans and manicured bankers—all reconciled for a brief moment on this stage. The audience all rises, shedding its tribal postures, faces unfurled with the joy of sudden recognition. **NW**

Pomerantsev is a television producer and nonfiction writer.