

In Mongolia: A People and Their Horses

Mongolia is one of the world's least known lands. It is a country wedged between two great powers, and one caught between the old and the new. Above all, Mongolia is a land of awesome natural beauty. To the west and north lie rugged mountains; to the south, the forbidding gravel plains of the Gobi Desert.

In the midst of the Gobi's splendid desolation, a man named Lodoi has chosen to erect his home: a circular tent of white felt known in Mongolian as a *ger*. While his wife welcomes visitors with cool camel's yogurt, Lodoi explains that he moved to these grazing grounds only that morning. The nutritious desert plants that provide forage for his 150 camels are sparser than usual, he sighs. "It's been very dry." Among the possessions the family is still unpacking are a tricycle, assorted aluminum pots and a shiny Jawa motorcycle imported from Czechoslovakia. There is also a rifle. "If wolves come down from the mountains," he says with a grin. "I will shoot them."

Lodoi is one of not quite 2 million people who live along with 500,000 camels, 2.5 million horses and 15 million sheep in the Mongolian People's Republic. Only about 3,500 Western tourists visit the country each year, and they are forced to stay within the confines of organized groups. The guides do not have to worry too much because few Mongols speak any foreign language but Russian.

The homeland of Central Asia's fabled horsemen, Mongolia for centuries was synonymous with Genghis Khan and his mounted hordes, who swept across the Eurasian continent like bands of avenging angels. From 1691 until 1911, the region known as Outer Mongolia was a vassal state of China's Manchu overlords. Then, after a decade of turmoil, Mongolia, with Soviet help, became a nation in 1921. Ever since, the sparsely populated country, always fearful of neighboring China, has been a willing Soviet satellite. An estimated 35,000 Soviet bloc civilians live and work there, while four Soviet divisions keep close watch on the border with China.

Mongolia's capital city of Ulan Bator marches to a distinctly Soviet beat. Plying the streets are shiny black Volga and Chaika cars. Ulan Bator even looks like a Soviet city, with its concrete high-rise



Splendid desolation: Lodoi, a camel breeder, in front of his home in the Gobi Desert

apartments and vast, empty central square. Outside the main library is a bronze statue of Joseph Stalin, which just before sunset casts a long, spooky shadow.

Among the best places for people watching in Ulan Bator are the department store, modeled after Moscow's GUM, and the central square, which is favored by Mongolian newlyweds. Rolling up in a small convoy of Chaikas, a wedding party solemnly poses for pictures. The groom sports a dark suit. The bride wears a white gown. But many of the other women are traditionally dressed in silk tunics called *defts* that have brilliant saffron, chartreuse or orange sashes. Nearby a dozen schoolgirls, their hair tied in bright, floppy bows, squat on the pavement, pulling up weeds that have pushed through the cracks. Still another regular of the square is a thicket man, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his Western-style jacket. "Change money? Change money?" he persistently inquires.

"Why do you want dollars?" a visitor asks.

"Buy leather coat," he haltingly explains. "My wife—birthday tomorrow."

The traditional Mongolia, though, is visible on the edges of Ulan Bator. There, wooden fences separate sprawling subdivisions into a series of enclaves and also keep the animals from wandering. Each lot typically contains several modest buildings and a *ger* or two. Little girls in short skirts walk up wide dirt roads hauling jugs of water, while an old woman sits fingering her Buddhist prayer beads. Down the hill, in the shadow of a high-rise, a young man pauses by a fast-running stream to water his horse. a

white mare with a high-pommeled saddle.

It is on Mongolia's central steppes that the old nomadic horse culture remains most alive. Near the village of Khujirt, where vast treeless grasslands stretch unbroken, a Mongolian family has set up camp. Leaping onto the back of a dun-colored mare, a red-checked boy gallops off to round up a nearby herd. Two dozen mares and a stallion the color of burnished copper rush frantically by, only to stop near an area where a group of foals has been tethered. Inside the *ger*, frothy mare's milk, left to ferment overnight in leather pouches, becomes

the sour, fizzy drink the Mongols call *airak*. The great Mongol emperor Kublai Khan, it is said, drank *airak* made from the milk of 10,000 snow-white mares.

Though life seems to go on much as it has since the days of Genghis Khan, many things have changed. Mongolia's colorful herdsmen are now organized into collectives. It is unlikely that the horseman's life-style can survive many more generations. A push is on to modernize and industrialize the country, and already nearly half the population lives in urban or semiurban centers. Settled agricultural communities are becoming more common. Mongolia's leaders are considering making other changes. One of the topics currently under discussion is the introduction of a system of last names. Mongolians now typically go by only first names.

Still, it will not be that easy to take the country out of a Mongol. Even urbanized inhabitants of Ulan Bator show obvious pride in their unique culture, retaining a link to the distinctive *ger* if only for weekend camping. The Mongol tradition of Ulan Bator is most evident during the great Nadam, or games, held in celebration of Mongolian independence day on July 11. The festivities kick off with a gala parade in the city's central square. After the scantily clad wrestlers and long-robed archers compete for honors, a 30-km horse race takes place across an emerald plain under town. The jockeys, dressed in blue-and-red silks, are all children under ten. As the animals and riders race past, modern Mongolia, with its factories and high-rises, seems far away. For now at least, the horses and people of these ancient steppes have remained as one.

—By J. Madeleine Nash