

# POLO

*comes home to*

# MONGOLIA

Its roots go back centuries, to Genghis Khan and beyond. Now polo is making a comeback in Mongolia

BY RON GLUCKMAN

Urtnasan Chuluumbaatar swept in, riding bareback, graceful as the breeze, bonded to his small, stout pony, as if both were born for this task. Leading his Mongol horde, he decimated the opposing horsemen. After the carnage ended, the tally was 8-2 with Urtnasan, whom friends call 'The Wind', scoring four times. Just like that, Mongolian polo had returned to its ancient pasture.

Polo is often associated with Genghis Khan, who used it to train and entertain his fearsome cavalry, but it disappeared from these steppes centuries ago. Yet every summer in recent years, balls roll, sticks swing, and the lush landscape resounds with cheers of "Hurreel!" – a Mongolian expression that some historians believe gave us "hurray!". Whatever the truth, three cheers go to the unusual Genghis Khan Polo Club, launched by spunky German filmmaker Christophe Gierke and supported by a group of his globetrotting, polo-playing friends.

Gierke first came to the stunning Orkhon Valley in the early 1990s, and was instantly entranced: by the people, the spectacular scenery and the mesmerising nomadic lifestyle. Married to a Mongolian, he began producing high-end cashmere and looking for ways to help improve life for the local people. Watching children as young as six race fearlessly across the steppes provided



*The plains for polo games are inaccessible due to snow for much of the year, so this sport of kings needs to be enjoyed in a window of opportunity*





Visitors do not just come for the polo, but also for the mixture of modern and traditional events and entertainment that accompany the games



# Genghis Khan

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inspiration for his Club – really only a couple of dozen gers (Mongolian felt-covered tents) plus whatever luxury Gierke can add to a spot seven bumpy hours from the capital of Ulaanbaatar. Much of the year, the polo field isn't even accessible because of thick snow and ice.

Summers bring sunshine and a growing number of tourists, up 50 per cent across Mongolia in the first six months of last year. Many come to this gorgeous valley for horse trekking and hiking in one of the country's largest national parks. Nearby is Karakorum, established by Genghis' descendants as one of the world's great capitals in the 13th century. Nothing remains of the original palace where wine once flowed through golden spigots of massive fountains, but tourists and pilgrims flock to colourful Erdene Zuu, a fairytale complex of stupahs and Tibetan Buddhist temples that dates to the 16th century; it's one of Mongolia's oldest and most important religious sites.

For a quirky upscale adventure, nothing beats the Genghis Khan Polo Club, which lures some of the world's top polo enthusiasts to a site with rustic facilities but rich appeal. Toilets claim billion-dollar river views but are little more than outhouses perched picturesquely upon a rocky cliff. Still, there was nothing spartan about the multi-course meals here, catered by Enkhene, Mongolia's top celebrity chef.

For visiting Shanghai Tang Polo Cup, hosted by the Hong Kong-based luxury brand Shanghai Tang, there were also fine wines, champagne, and piano

recitals nightly. Gierke not only trucked in the only piano for hundreds of miles, but brought along Odgarel Sampilnorov, Mongolia's top classical musician, to tickle the ivories. "This is what you might call 'glamping,'" chuckled London stockbroker Nicholas Wills, explaining: "That's glamour camping."

While Gierke adds plenty of frills, the real appeal is simply to be immersed in the magical Mongolian countryside. In true nomadic style, the Genghis Khan Polo Club isn't rooted to one spot, but roams around the Orkhon Valley, recently named an UNESCO World Heritage Site both for its unique cultural and scenic value. This lush valley was cradle to some of the world's greatest civilizations, including the Mongol empire, which, in the 13th century ranged from Korea all the way to Europe – one of the largest empires the world ever knew.

Genghis Khan began life in these parts as a simple animal herder among poor tribes that survived by tending sheep and horses, roaming remote pastures that no other people wanted, according to Jack Weatherford, author of the bestselling biography, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. Contrasting depictions of a savage leader, Weatherford paints a picture of a brilliant planner and military strategist, who consolidated the tribes of the steppes into efficient fighting units. His skill on the battlefield carried over to the way Genghis governed, with responsibility delegated in the same precise manner.



# “POLO

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Besides transforming the way people lived, and fought, his greatest legacy may be distribution, of goods and ideas, from one end of the globe to another.

Polo wasn't invented by Genghis or in Mongolia. That honour likely belongs to Persia, where descriptions of the game survive from over 15 centuries ago. Historians believe it actually originated in ancient Iran around the 6th century BC. Whatever the case, what became known as 'The Game of Kings' was among the many things globalised by Genghis Khan, according to Weatherford.

Restoring the sport to one of its ancient homelands has become a quest of Gierke, who taps his contacts in the fashion industry for support as he trains youngsters in a game that once was national pastime. Key is the team-building aspect, he says. "Mongolians know wrestling, boxing and horse racing. These are all solo contests. Polo brings them together in a team activity."

Trainers have come from all over the world, often sponsored by distant clubs or players who have been swept up in Gierke's great dream. Previous polo soirées featured the Hermes clan. "The family had been everywhere in the world," Gierke says. "Mongolia was the last place, except the moon."

Indeed, there is a certain rugged allure to the land. Tourists find few comforts, but ample rustic charm in the rural living, abundant livestock and barbecues. Only open to tourism for two decades, it's also a pristine land with dazzling landscapes and breathtaking star-filled skies. Some travel writers call it the Last Great Place.

For polo, that certainly holds. While the Game of Kings may owe much of its history to Mongolia, it has evolved into quite a different game. Around the globe, it's generally become an elitist sport, largely due to the cost of maintaining fields and so many horses. Scores must be ready for a typical match, according to Steve Wyatt, who runs Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club in Shanghai, the largest in China. Riders switch often, as horses tire quickly in the rugged pace.

Not so in Mongolia, where the horses are smaller, with stamina that surprised visiting players at the Shanghai Tang Cup. "Here the game is super fast and super aggressive," noted Wills. Bigger western horses tend to move in graceful arcs, while Mongolian horses move directly, relentlessly. Hence, the game seems ideally suited to Mongolians, as the 8-2 score at the Shanghai Tang Polo Cup attests. Raj Kalan, who owns a club in India and has two sons who are professional players, first came to Mongolia in the 1990s to help Gierke train the locals.

"Polo is perfect for Mongolia," he says boisterously. "Every Mongolian has horses, there are sticks everywhere, and there aren't any fences. The entire country is like a polo pitch."



Clockwise from above: children practicing on horseback; wrestling, Mongolia style; a child in a ger; three gers under a moonlit sky



## DESTINATION

Mongolia is a grand adventure destination, where horse treks and hiking crowd the schedule rather than spas or comforts. As much as they marvel at the open space and starry skies, tourists can expect to spend a lot of time bouncing along rutted dirt roads, and staying in rustic gers (the felt-covered Mongolian tent), where barbecued meat - and more meat - dominates the menu.

Yet only two decades after ending its isolation in the Soviet sphere, Mongolia has definitely become a buzzy new destination. Rapid growth in business travel, largely due to Mongolia's mining boom, has spurred on new hotel construction in the capital of Ulaanbaatar. **Kempinski** was the first to open a Mongolian inn, but soon will have the company of lavish new **Hilton** and **Shangri-la** properties.

Meanwhile, the once-spare entertainment options have expanded greatly. For views over Sukhbaatar Square and the entire city, try **Sky Lounge** on the top floor of the new **Central Tower** (Louis Vuitton, Giorgio Armani and Ermenegildo Zegna can be found on the glitzy ground floor). Popular with locals and expats nightly are a group of pubs including **Khan Brau** and **Ikh Mongol**, which serve massive meals along with surprisingly good Mongolian homebrews.

For inventive regional cuisine, you can't beat long-time favourite **Silk Road** (try chef Enkhene's homemade feta cheese). Upstairs is **Veranda**, serving pastas and steaks. Both restaurants have terraces with stunning views over one of Ulaanbaatar's oldest surviving temples.

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Mongolian polo player in traditional dress

RON GLUCKMAN (2), COURTESY SHANGHAI TANG (1)