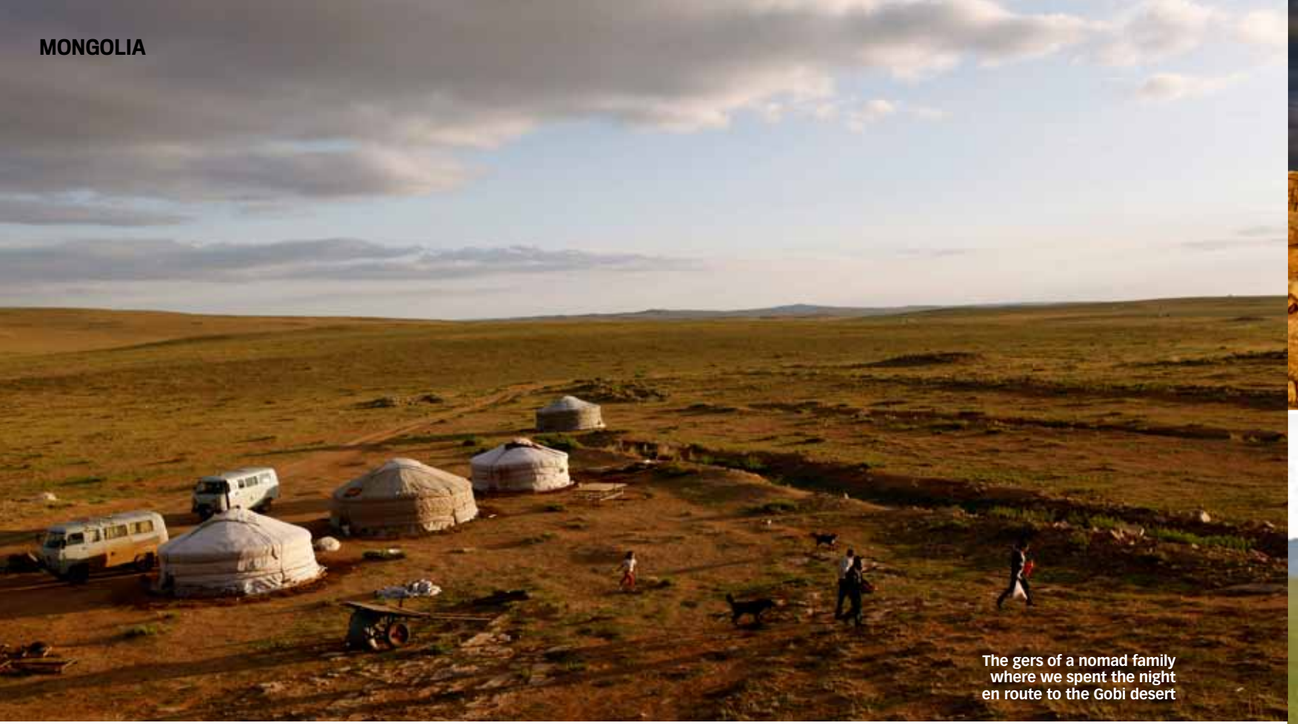
The open range

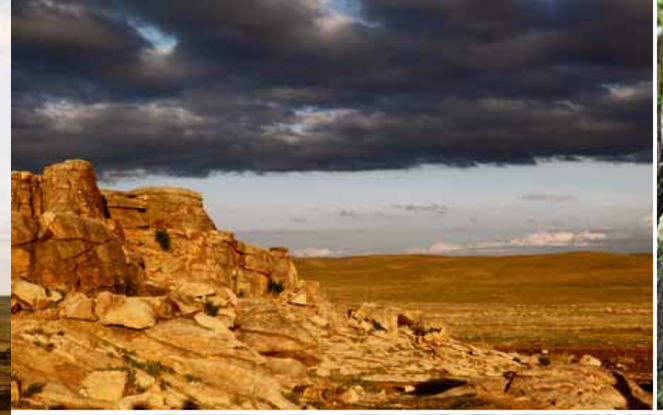
Mongolia is one of the few pristine places left in Asia. Carsten Stormer takes an epic journey into the former empire of Gengis Khan.

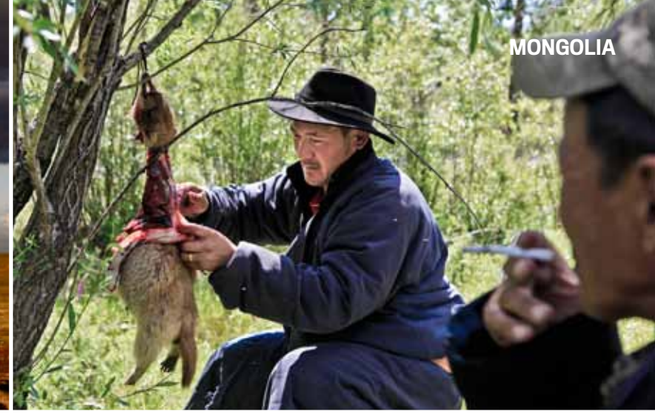
WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS CARSTEN STORMER

The guide Gimli leading the way through the untouched scenery of the Khentii mountains



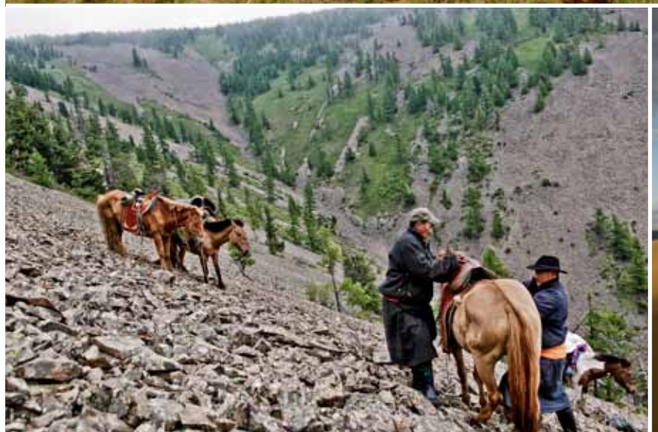
The gers of a nomad family where we spent the night en route to the Gobi desert

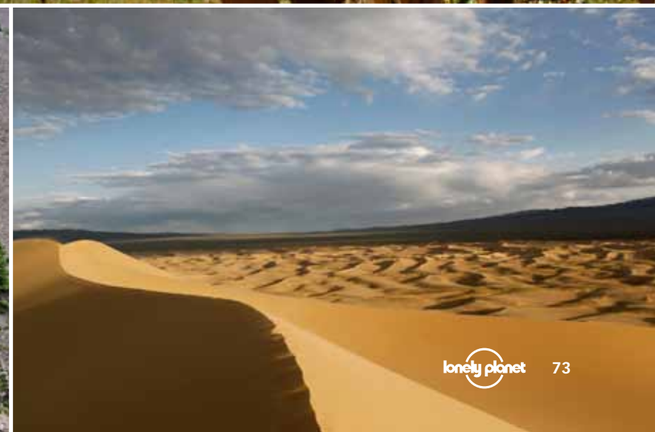




MONGOLIA

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM, CLOCKWISE:
The beauty of a vast, untouched country in the evening sun; Our guides Geronimo gutting a marmot for dinner and Gimli smoking a cigarette; Geronimo and Gimli riding through the Khentii mountain range; The singing sand dunes in the Gobi desert; Adrenaline: our horses refused to walk down an avalanche field





HOW quiet it is before the cloudburst. The sun has crept away behind black clouds, leaving behind nothing but a memory. Suddenly cold rain splatters down, seeping through clothing that soon clings to our skin like wet bedsheets. The temperature falls from pleasantly warm to something on the order of the low forties (10°C). An icy wind cuts across the high plateau of Mongolia's Khentii Mountains. We are freezing cold and miserable, standing on a cloud-shrouded mountaintop at 2,200 meters with nothing around us but trees, trees, and more trees. Plus maybe a few wolves, elk and bear—otherwise, we're alone.

We gaze into the depths down a steep slope of loose, jagged scree. That's where we're supposed to go down? Our horses, no longer trotting steadily but standing still, whinny nervously, their nostrils dilated. They refuse to budge. I slam my heels into my nag's sides, but instead of marching bravely down into the abyss, he leans around to bite me in the leg. 1- 0 for the horse. I dismount, trying to find my footing on the jumble of rock. I realize the earth under me is moving, and I can only manage one thought: I hope the avalanche doesn't drag us along.

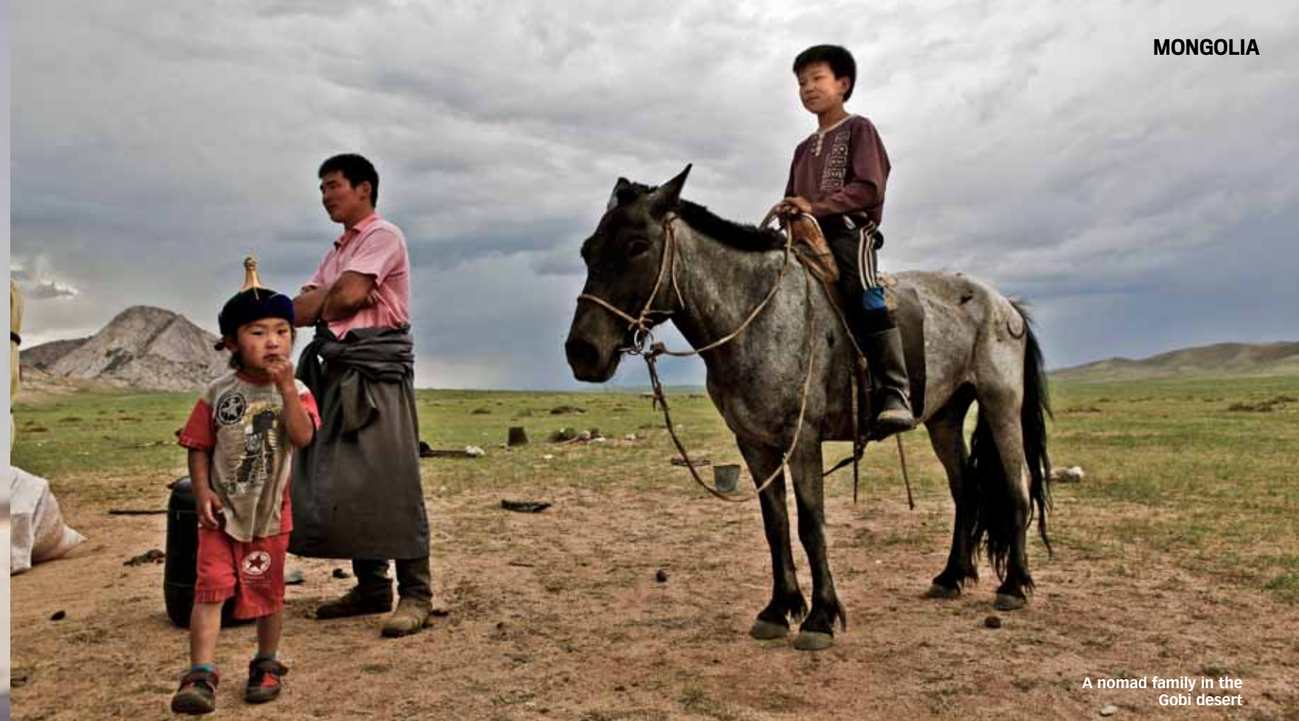
So what on earth are we doing on rockslide in the middle of the Mongolian wilderness? An adventure holiday for committed urbanites, that was our idea. I'm not so sure that the idea was a good one anymore. I tug on the reins and tell the horse, "Choo, choo, choo!" It seemed less idiotic when our Mongolian guides did it.

"There's no way back. We want to find the legacy of Ghenghis Khan."

There's no way back. We want to find the legacy of Genghis Khan. We had set off on this journey with two hunters as guides and watchmen, a cook, and two pack horses. We spent days in the saddle through the mountains and steppes of the Khentii Mountains in northeastern Mongolia, covering 300 kilometers in solitude. Within these heights was the untouched nature of endless forests. These woods are where the boy Temujin grew into the warrior who united the peoples of Mongolia, and thus becoming the greatest conqueror of all time. The world trembled at his name, and even today, it is spoken with respect and even some, with awe: Genghis Khan.

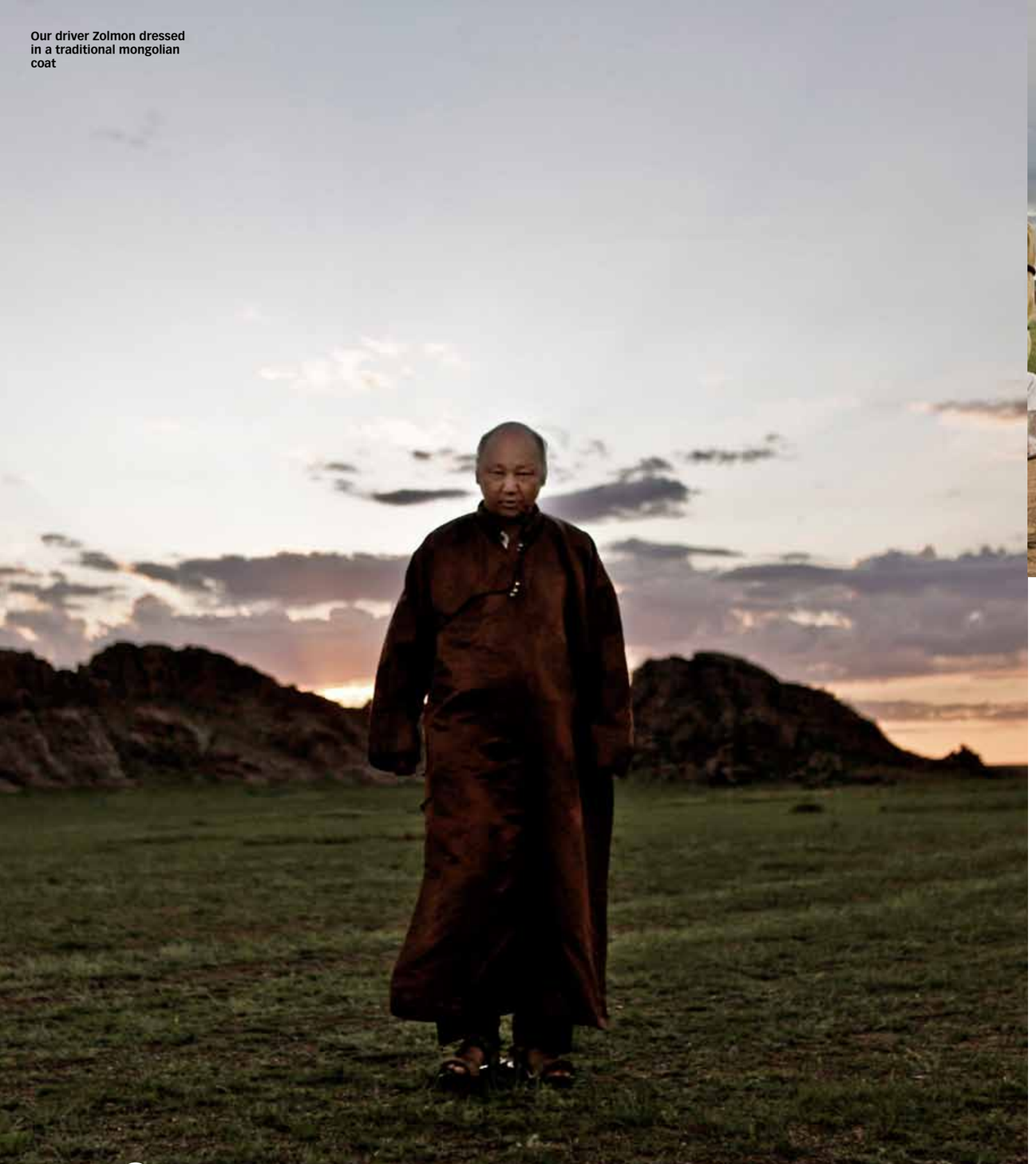
In a small bookstore on a side street in the capital, Ulan Bator, we found an English edition of *The Secret History of Mongolia*. Containing the history of Mongolia under Genghis Khan, it is for many Mongolians a sort of Bible—a tattered book whose contents, long considered lost, first reemerged in the early 20th century. This book is our tour guide, and we read it whenever we can to find out about battles and intrigues, the Mongol hordes, and the locals' daily life centuries ago. In this land without fences, three times the size of France, there are only 2.5 million people—and 13 horses per person. Our routine is a study in hands-on literary time travel, as the Khan's country has hardly changed since he last witnessed it centuries before. Nearly everything was just the way the book said it would be.

What is the legacy of this man who filled half the world with terror, created an empire that stretched from Korea to Hungary and Siberia to India, died in the year 1227 and changed the course of history? At first glance, not a lot. There aren't any palaces or monuments; almost nothing recalls his legacy. Even his final resting place is unknown. His heritage, his legacy, is the country that still bears the name of his tribe: Mongolia. Despite the people's cell phones, Internet connections ▶



A nomad family in the Gobi desert

Our driver Zolmon dressed in a traditional mongolian coat



and iPads, the people of the steppes still live much as they did 800 years ago: as nomads dwelling in *gers*—traditional round tents—that cling to the valleys and mountainsides like white mushrooms. They are people who measure wealth, not in cash, but in the heads of horses, yaks, and camels. And there are other things Genghis Khan introduced: diplomatic immunity, free trade zones, tax concessions, and religious freedom—in short, the foundations of the modern world.

Mongolia has done a great deal to open itself to the world since the fall of communism and the breakup of the Soviet Union. The young democracy attracts foreign investment. The standard of living is climbing and the economy is growing, and one of its pillars is tourism. Beyond the tourists who leave the country laden with unique experiences, it is Mongolians above all who benefit from the travel boom—even though the cold winters with temperatures of 50 degrees below zero leave only a three-month window during which moderately comfortable travel is possible. Outside the capital Ulan Bator, hotels are virtually nonexistent. Travelers sleep in the nomads' gers, brokered for a fee by travel agencies. Teachers, students, and herdsmen take summer jobs as tour guides to earn extra income. Mongolia's capital is nature,

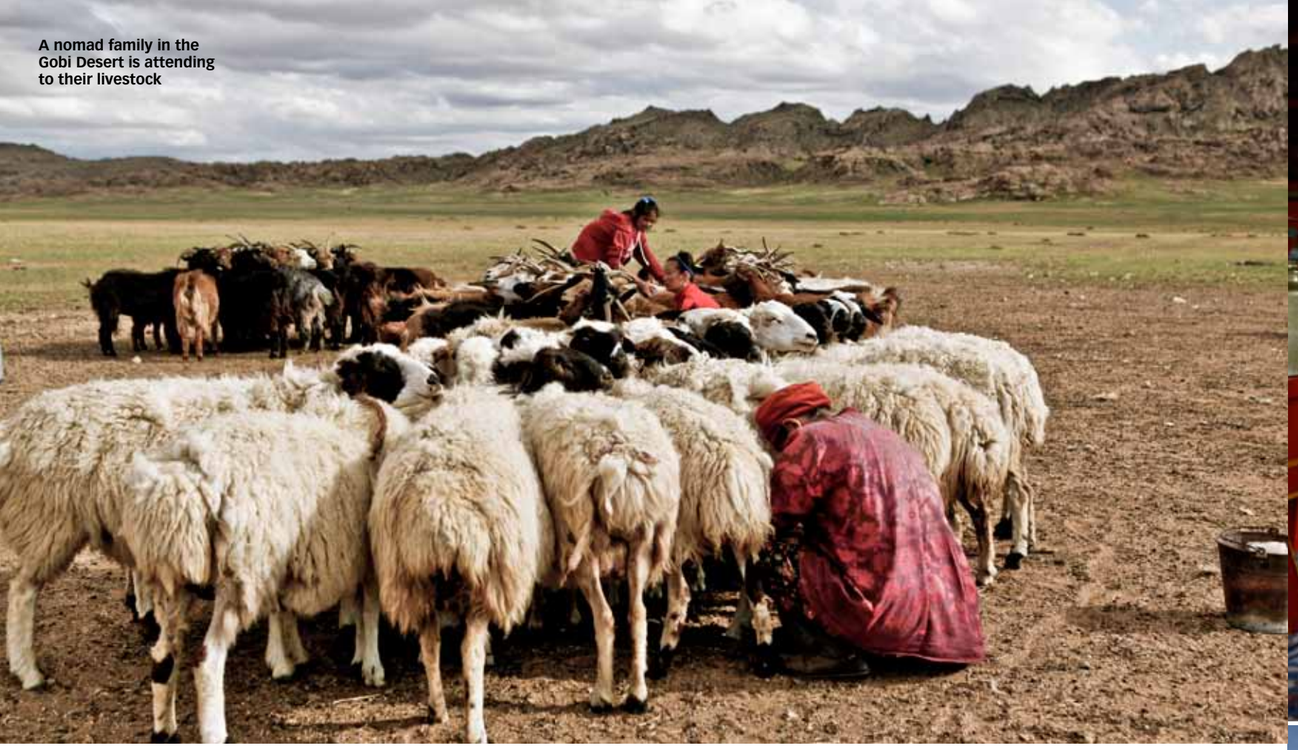
"Mongolia's capital is nature and the tour guides' workspaces have a backdrop of awe-inspiring beauty."

and the tour guides' workspaces have a backdrop of awe-inspiring beauty.

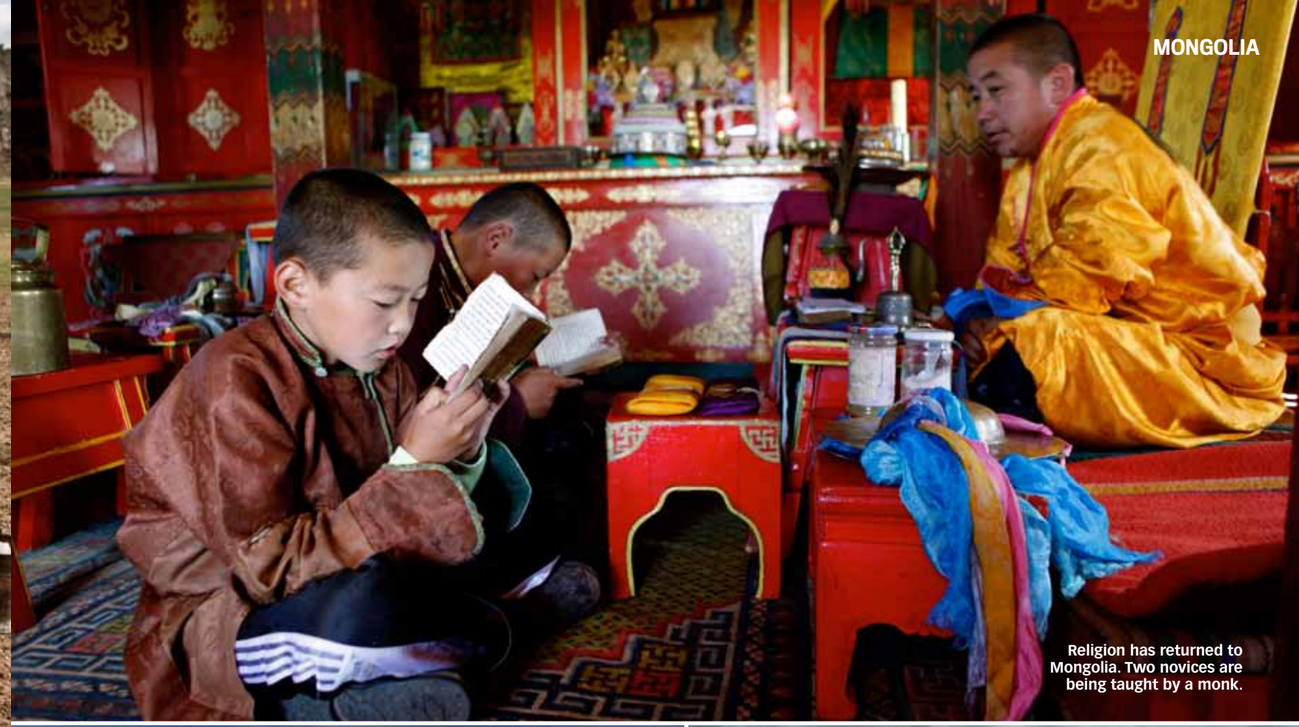
After two hours we are finally at the bottom of the valley. I am panting as hard as the horse, but we are uninjured except for a few scratches on our arms and legs. We ride on, through pine forests and up and down ridges, for up to 12 hours a day. Utterly exhausted, we sit by the campfire in the evenings, massaging our sore backsides and thighs, often too tired to collect firewood or put up our tent. Our Mongolian guides pick up the slack, shaking their heads in mock dismay at the urban wimps.

For eight days, we ride over mountains and through forests, cross small streams and raging torrents. We sleep in the ruins of a 17th-century monastery where a Chinese prince with a broken heart once buried his dead consort. Her ghost is said to haunt the surrounding forests. We drink water from mountain rills, camp on hillsides, bathe in icy glacial lakes, and fight our way through swarms of flies and mosquitoes with bodies as thick as a finger. And all the time, our eyes are glued to the natural world around us: an elk trotting along a bare mountain ridge; an eagle circling overhead; and marmots scampering across lush meadows and vanishing into their burrows the moment they see us, with calls that sound distinctly as if the rodents were laughing at us.

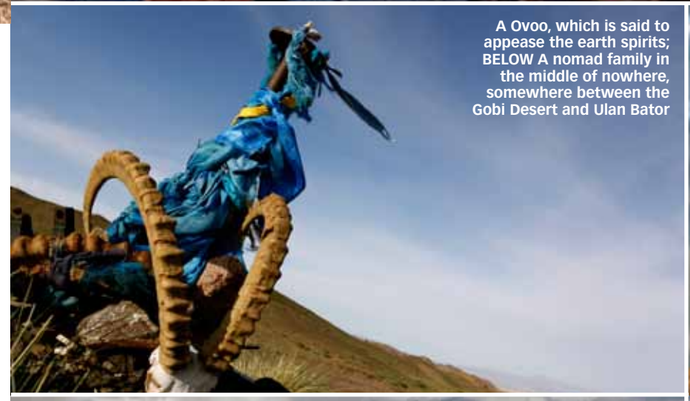
Our Mongolian guides have names we can't pronounce, much less remember. One we call Geronimo, because he is the leader and regularly fires off his shotgun at animals he happens to see in the underbrush. On one occasion, he shoots a pheasant and serves it to us the next morning for breakfast, grinning proudly. Another time, he returns to camp with a dead marmot hanging from his saddle. We christen the other Gimli because he carries an axe on his belt and reminds us of the dwarf in Lord of the Rings. Gimli is never seen without a cigarette. Our cook owes her name to her girth and her habit of wearing pink plush coveralls: Kung Fu Panda. In the evening we sit around the campfire together, drinking Genghis-Khan-brand vodka. We cook a meal, and then we fall into a deep, dreamless sleep. ▶



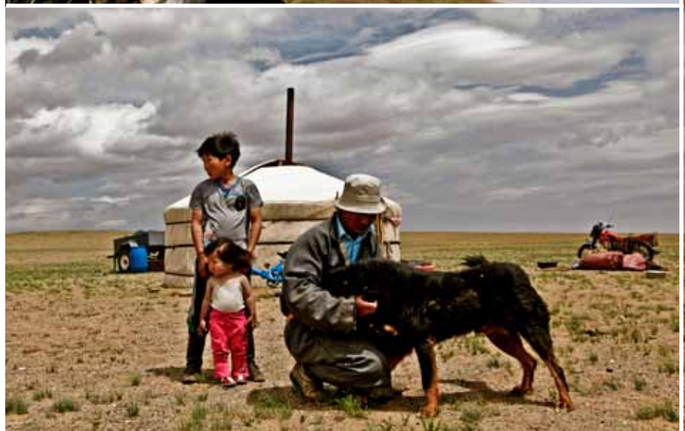
A nomad family in the Gobi Desert is attending to their livestock



Religion has returned to Mongolia. Two novices are being taught by a monk.



A Ovoo, which is said to appease the earth spirits; BELOW A nomad family in the middle of nowhere, somewhere between the Gobi Desert and Ulan Bator



A Mongolian woman walks near the singing sand dunes of Chongoryn Els

TWENTY YEARS after the end of the Soviet Union, Mongolia is slowly finding its place on the world's tourist maps. The result is a gentle eco-tourism—with the Gobi Desert as its crown jewel, the absolute highlight of any journey to the central Asian country. How many travelers come there each year is not known, but the numbers of backpackers and upscale culture and history buffs who come to gape at its landscape are steadily rising. Many make only a brief stop here on the Trans-Siberian Railway as they travel from Moscow to Peking or vice versa. The Gobi belongs to any visit to Mongolia, the way the Great Wall belongs to Beijing, Angkor Wat to Cambodia, or Machu Picchu to Peru.

On a day when the sky can't seem to make up its mind between rain and sunshine, we reach the last outpost of civilization. The village of Terelj is a smattering of colorful wooden huts and snow-white gers, two hours away from Ulan Bator by car. Our butts and thighs are rubbed raw and our backs hurt. Our faces are sunburned. We long for nothing more than soft beds in Ulan Bator, hot showers, and food that doesn't come from cans. Two stays later, we climb into a rickety Russian van and rumble off toward the Gobi Desert. Our destination: the "singing dunes" of Chongoryn Els.

"You have to be patient, sedentary, and a two-fisted drinker, since there's vodka—lots of vodka."

It takes time to reach the singing dunes. You have to be patient, sedentary, and a two-fisted drinker, since there's vodka—lots of vodka. Two o'clock in the afternoon and we're sitting in a wind-struck stone cottage, and drinking not just a glass or two, but by the bottle. While the Mongolian woman with the red cheeks and the face tanned to leather by the sun scoops mare's-milk yogurt into bowls, her husband pulls the third bottle out of his coat and holds another brimming glass under our noses. Outside, a huge dog barks and tugs at its chain, blocking all egress with its passionate attempts to reach our throats.

'Drink, drink,' the man signals to us, revealing brown teeth in a grin. 'Whatever, one more glass can't hurt,' we murmur, having forgotten long ago that he speaks no English. Concentrating, I manage to focus my gaze. Around us is nothing but grassland and desert with a few grazing camels. Outside of grass, shrubs and the bleached skeletons of camels, there is nothing to hold one's gaze before the distant horizon. Kites and vultures whirl in the sky. Our driver, Zolmon, lies drunk on a sofa, cuddling his pot belly, grinning happily at the ceiling and making vague hand gestures of no obvious significance.

For four days we rattle through the Gobi Desert in our Russian minibus, a total of 2,000 kilometers. The desert rushes past the open windows in a never-ending nature documentary, an explosion of color—red, then brown, ochre, yellow, sometimes a bit of green. Rocks, sand, scree, hills. Birds of prey ride the thermals to look out for easy meals. The silhouettes of camels flutter in the heat. Once we drive for hours through rolling hills covered with fluffy green down, and through the window comes a distinct odor of chives. In a region of gorges that the Mongolians call "the flaming cliffs," we go looking for dinosaur bones and instead find petrified wood. Again and again we pass Ovoos, pyramid-shaped heaps of stones where we stop, circle the mound three times on foot, and add rocks or vodka bottles: votive sacrifices to soothe the earth spirits—a nice change from long hours of driving and a good chance to stretch your legs. ▶

Our traces on the crest of the singing sand dunes of Chongoryn Els

Camels tank up on a watering hole in the Gobi Desert

When we finally reach the singing dunes of Chongoryn Els after a nine-hour drive, we are a bit hung over from our last binge with the friendly herdsman. It is a chain of massive hills of sand rising from the bleak landscape, like huge yellow waves nearly 200 meters tall. Gers sprout like giant champignons in the landscape, erected by nomad families so tourists can spend the night. Camels and horses graze in an oasis.

It is 7pm and the evening sun is bathing the dunes in golden light as we start the steep climb—on all fours—quite a demanding task. Our feet sink to the ankles in the fine, powdery sand. For every two steps upward, we slide one back. I have to gasp for air, wipe off the sweat, then try again. It takes us two hours to climb 200 meters, until we reach the crest of the highest dune and are rewarded with a breathtaking view.

Little waves of sand swell as far as the eye can see. The wind whips grains of sand against our skin. They feel at first like pinpricks, ultimately combining with sweat to cover our skin with a slushy film. We stand and walk on the crests of the dunes for hours, wondering when they'll finally start singing. And then, suddenly, overhanging sand nearby collapses like a mudslide and moves down the slope. We hear a soft humming that slowly becomes louder, until it sounds as though somewhere a solitary monk were playing on a *dungche*, one of those long Tibetan trumpets. It is the soundtrack of the moment, played for our ears only. We stop in our tracks, shield our faces from the flying grains of sand, listen reverently and enjoy the magic until the sand quiets down and nothing can be heard but the rushing of the wind.

"Our feet sink to the ankles in the fine, powdery sand. For every two steps upward, we slide one back."

ON THE WAY to Ulan Bator, we stop at a small monastery where a single monk instructs two novices. The monk nods to us, indicating that we should sit down with him. A momentary smile flits across his face as he slams a cane down on a novice's fingers. He had stared at the visitors too long with huge, curious eyes. The boy's head flushes deep red, and he quickly returns to concentrating on the book in his lap, loudly reciting old Tibetan verses. As we leave the monastery, the monk winks at us.

The monastery and its monks are sights that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago. Religion was prohibited under communist rule. Starting in the 1920s, many monasteries were demolished, thousands of monks murdered, books and sacred texts burned. With the end of the Soviet Union, religion returned to the steppes of central Asia. But it has become difficult to find novices. Young Mongolians show little interest in a life of abstinence and sacrifice. Modern life, with all its promises, lures the children of nomads into the cities.

Two days and countless potholes later, our central Asian adventure is at an end. A trip to Mongolia is a journey back in time to an era when life was slower and simpler, a chance to have time away from frenetic activity and stress and gain distance from noise and pressure. The hours and days seem to have been severed from the fabric of time. Our bodies are tired from long days in the saddle and on the back seat of a Russian jalopy. But our senses are intoxicated by our experiences, our thoughts wander freely, our minds are refreshed. What remains of a journey to Mongolia is fulfillment—and the memory of one of the last pristine places in Asia. LP