

# WIDE SKIES

*A curious gathering on Mongolia's endless landscape of wide, grassy steppes and undulating hills allows for an exquisite insight into life – and horseplay – in this last great frontier.*

Words and photography **ELISE HASSEY**







It's a bumpy seven-hour car journey from the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar, through landscapes of windswept mountains, wild grasslands dotted with nomadic families, and past thousands of wild horses to eventually arrive at the Genghis Khan Polo Club.

Pitched in the Khangai Nuruu National Park, overlooking the breathtakingly beautiful Orkhon Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage-protected landscape, the camp was founded by Christopher and Enke Giercke, with the aim of providing training and support for young Mongol riders while restoring this noble pursuit as the national sport of Mongolia. (Polo was a training method of the Mongol cavalry in the Middle Ages.)

An experience of unrivalled authenticity, the club operates during the summer months (June to October), attracting guests from all over the world in pursuit of a diverse and unique adventure. Our 30-strong group has been corralled together from across the globe by lifelong friends and long-time GKPC attendees Rinchen Choegyal and Jack Edwards.

"The intermingling of bold unique people, the contrast of old and new traditions, the adrenaline and the calm, all converging against the awesome historical and natural backdrop of the Orkhon Valley makes [for] an unforgettable moment in our evanescent lives," says Rinchen.

The first few days are filled with morning horse rides through the Orkhon Valley, and afternoons of mountain biking, rock climbing, archery, kayaking and tasting airag (fermented mare's milk). In the evenings, sundowners are sipped looking out to the sublime Orkhon River as wild horses plod across the streams and the occasional local rips through the countryside on motorbike. >>



*Sundowners are sipped looking out over the sublime Orkhon River as wild horses plod across the stream and the occasional local rips through the countryside on a motorbike.*

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *Looking out over Mongolia's vast Orkhon Valley; Polo players in action; The competition takes place against a rugged backdrop. PREVIOUS PAGE: Genghis Khan Polo Club horses grazing in front of the club's accommodation gers.*



*Mongolia is home to one of the last semi-nomadic cultures left on the planet, where more than three million horses outnumber the human population.*

CLOCKWISE FROM THIS IMAGE:

*Traversing the vast landscape under wide skies; Camp sundowners; Touchstones of the past inside a camp ger.*



Each night the candle-lit dinners begin with a performance by the internationally renowned Mongolian pianist Odgerel Sampilnorov in a communal ger, accompanied by liberal amounts of Genghis Khan Vodka.

The week intensifies with demonstrations, participation in Mongolian wrestling (with varied levels of success) and more riding. Mongolia is home to one of the last semi-nomadic cultures left on the planet, where more than three million horses outnumber the country's human population. Mongolians are considered some of the best horsemen on Earth, where children are competent on horseback by the age of three. Both the people and the horses here are strong and resilient, surviving some of the most adverse conditions on Earth. Each winter horses are released into the wild and the ones that survive are caught again at the beginning of spring. But in spite of the hardships of weather and environment, the Mongolian people are incredibly hospitable, always greeting strangers with a smile and, more often than not, a generous slug of vodka.

Our time on the Mongolian steppes reaches its culmination in the inaugural Mutton Cup Polo Tournament. But no matter who wins the hard-fought match, the Genghis Khan Polo Club is ultimately an otherworldly experience, an opportunity to step back in time and take in a world of wonder under wide skies. *IT*







CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *Catching horses the Mongolian way; Gers with a view; Helpful hints for the week ahead; Saddles at the ready; A local using an urga, a traditional lasso, to catch horses.*







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP FAR LEFT:  
Reining in the herd;  
Gathering for drinks after a day of activity;  
The otherworldly beauty of it all;  
Enjoying some fermented mare's milk;  
Locals take on the visitors at Mongolian wrestling;  
Traditional wrestling garb;  
The drama of Mongolia's traditional dress.



*The Genghis Khan Polo Club is an otherworldly experience, an opportunity to step back in time and take in a world of wonder under wide skies.*

