PUBLISHER'S NOTE

BY RONALD LIEM

New Horizons

Discovering new-found favorites in all corners of the region

THESE PAST FEW MONTHS HAVE BEEN very exciting indeed. *DestinAsian* has once again garnered accolades from SOPA (the Society of Publishers in Asia), this year taking home the top honor for magazine design and receiving an honorable mention for feature photography. This is an extremely encouraging outcome as we always strive to better ourselves with each new edition. Being acknowledged by our fellow publishers and you, our readers, is truly thrilling and rewarding.

So, continuing in the vein of innovation, this issue really mixes it up by visiting a number of wildly different destinations. We look at modern Seoul (page 78), which has become truly global city in its own right according to our intrepid editor-at-large, Rob McKeown. We then head out to the stark landscapes of Mongolia (page 100) and discover this magical land by way of an exclusive polo club that convenes to battle it out in the spirit of the Khans. Frédéric Lagrange's photographs capture the sheer mystical beauty of this far-flung region, one that is deliciously shrouded in grand, ancient tales.

And then there is Palawan (page 92), a real treasure of a find in the far reaches of the Philippine archipelago. Here we witness nature at her best, tempered with a dose of remote luxury and island mystery.

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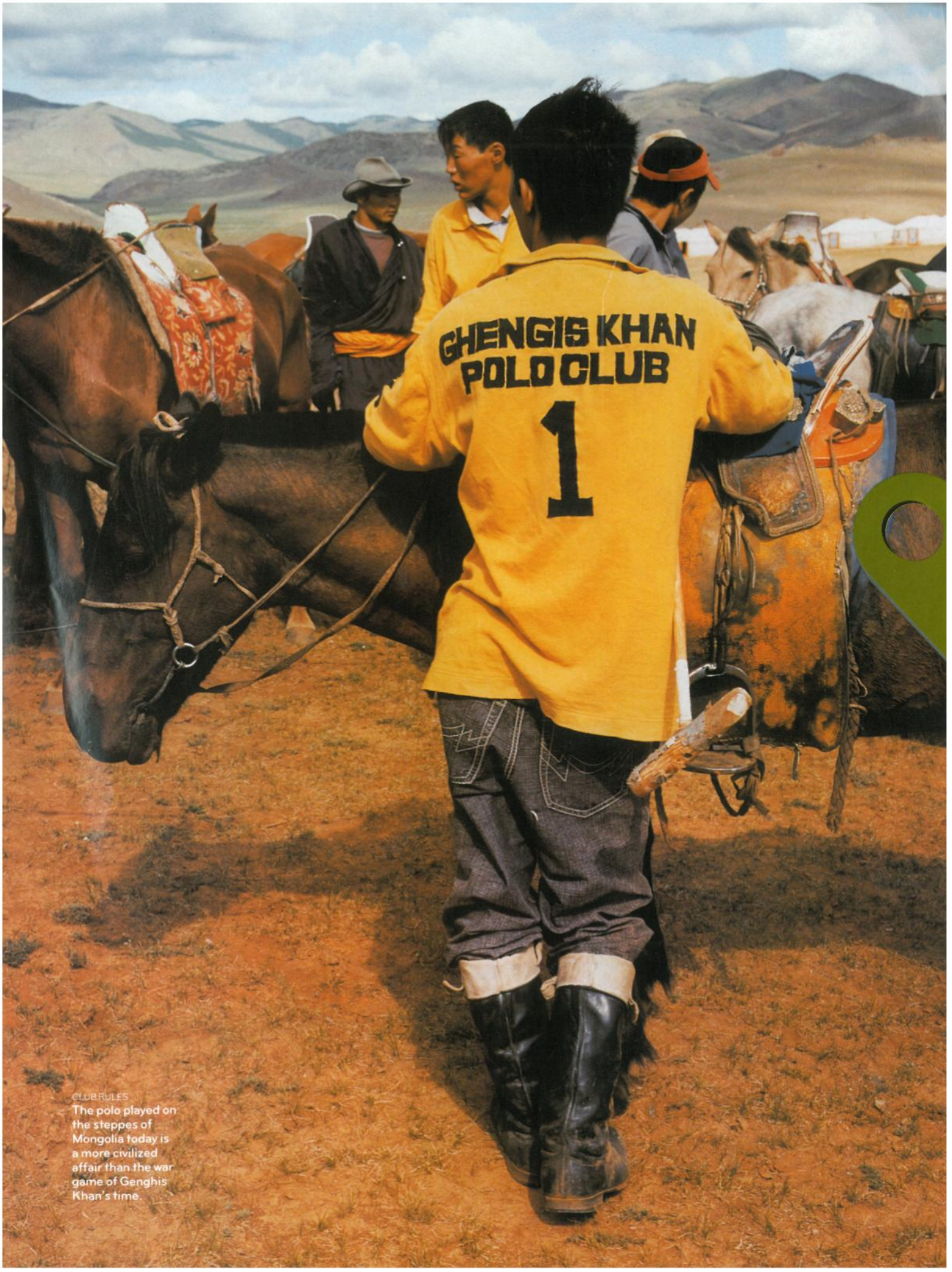
Contributors

Andrew Rowat, a Shanghai-based photographer who has shot for *Travel + Leisure* and *Vanity Fair*, says of the South Korean capital ("The Best of Seoul," page 78): "Seoul is a bold city—bold design, bold faces, bold attitudes. It embodies the best of its neighbors: Japan's design aesthetic and China's fieriness. This gives the place a very unique identity."

"There's something about Colonel Kurtz to Christopher Giercke," says **Sophy Roberts**, who visited the German filmmaker at his exclusive *ger* camp in Mongolia ("The Thrill of the Game," page 100). "He's a totally unlikely find. He makes things happen." Roberts is the editor-at-large of the U.S. edition of *Departures*, and a columnist for *The Financial Times*.

Victor Paul Borg, based in Bangkok, yearned to visit Palawan ("The Last Frontier," page 93) and finally managed a two-month sojourn on the island last year. "It was better than I imagined. Pristine reefs and beaches as well as friendly inhabitants made it even more rewarding." Borg's articles have been published in titles such as *Outside* and *Bangkok Post*.



CLUB RULES
The polo played on the steppes of Mongolia today is a more civilized affair than the war game of Genghis Khan's time.

THE THRILL OF THE GAME

DEEP IN THE HEART OF MONGOLIA, A SPORT ONCE USED TO TRAIN THE CAVALRY OF GENGHIS KHAN IS MAKING A COMEBACK, THANKS TO THE UNLIKELY HOST OF AN EXCLUSIVE POLO CAMP **BY SOPHY ROBERTS**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE

PONY EXPRESS
A player in action on the pitch near the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club. Opposite: Accouterments of the game.

ON MOST NIGHTS, GUESTS DINE BENEATH THE STARS, FEASTING ON MOUNDS OF MUTTON AND FAR MORE BESIDES, FROM *AIRAG* (FERMENTED MARE'S MILK) TO RUSSIAN CAVIAR AND FINE CHAMPAGNE

MONGOLIA LUXE Christopher and Enkhe Giercke greet guests at their Orkhon Valley camp. Opposite, clockwise from top right: On the playing field; a polo memento; alfresco dining at the camp; Enkhe Giercke.

THE second time I meet Christopher Giercke is in Paris, at a polo festival organized by luxury-goods magnate Patrick Guerrand-Hermès. Giercke, with silver hair and sparkling black eyes, is dressed in his customary black corduroy breeches, knee-high leather boots, and tailored jacket with purple silk buttonholes—just as I've seen him wear in Mongolia, his summer home.

Today, I listen to him hold court among a group of well-heeled Parisians, all friends of Guerrand-Hermès. A German who divides his time between Kathmandu and the Mongolian steppe, Giercke is a filmmaker (he worked on *Apocalypse Now*), a precious-wool hunter (he supplies Hermès with cashmere), and the owner of an exclusive tented camp near the medieval Mongolian capital of Karakorum, where, from June to September, anyone willing to dish out thousands of dollars for the privilege can stay.

His audience is enthralled as he discusses his life's ambition: to reintroduce polo to Mongolia. The sport, or at least something resembling it, was played by the cavalry of Genghis Khan as a way to train horsemen to bend low at high speeds in order to finish off fallen enemies with a well-aimed thrust of the sword. There are also stories of the great Khan himself knocking about an enemy's head with a willow stick as if it were a ball.

Giercke and some friends kicked off Mongolia's first modern game of polo at his camp back in 1998; since then, they have sponsored the distribution of sticks and balls across the country. Giercke invites foreign polo players to teach locals, organizes tournaments, and manages his own team. He has also set up a training program poised to launch the country's most promising young players on the international polo circuit.

Giercke opens a map to explain the location of his camp. He points to Karakorum, Genghis Khan's former stronghold and now a World Heritage–listed ruin (the city was largely destroyed by a Ming invasion in the 14th century). Located in Ovor-Hangay province, Karakorum is 330 kilometers west of Ulanbaatar, Mongolia's modern capital, and some 500 kilometers north of the Gobi Desert. Thirty kilometers upstream on the banks of the Orkhon River lie Giercke's 25 *gers*—circular white tents built, in the traditional fashion, of wooden frames wrapped in canvas and felt. On the map, sweeping arrows trace one of the most ambitious military advances of all time, that extraordinary 13th-century push that saw Genghis Khan's warriors galloping west toward the gates of Vienna and east to the Sea of Japan. "And that," says Giercke with a flourish, "is the plan for our polo campaign."

The joke is delicious. It's also topical: this year marks the 800th anniversary of the founding of the Mongol Empire. But amid the idle chatter, Giercke flashes a knowing smile. Yes, this man is eccentric, but visit him in Mongolia, as I have done, and his quixotic ambition isn't as far-fetched as it might seem.

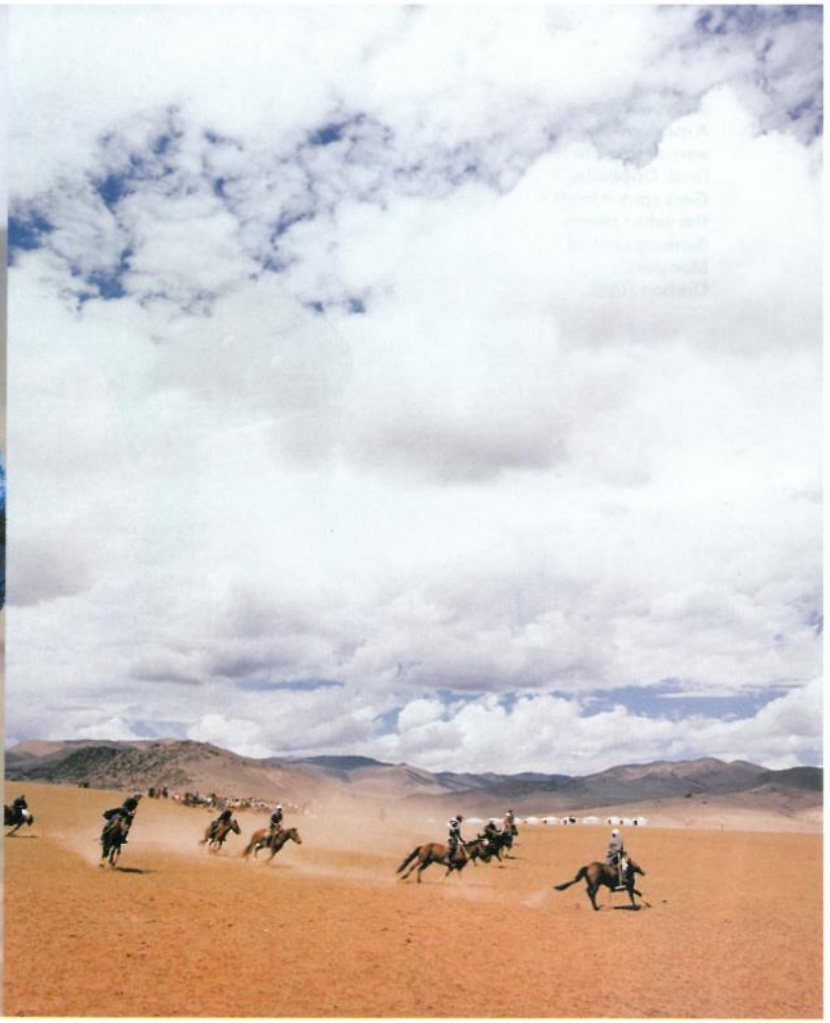
Giercke's HQ goes by the name of the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club. The camp, first opened to paying guests in 2001, sits on a small incline above the Orkhon, which snakes through the green steppe, slipping down like mercury from the Hangay Mountains behind. Giercke was introduced to the site by his serenely beautiful Mongolian wife Enkhe, whose family has lived in the valley for three centuries.

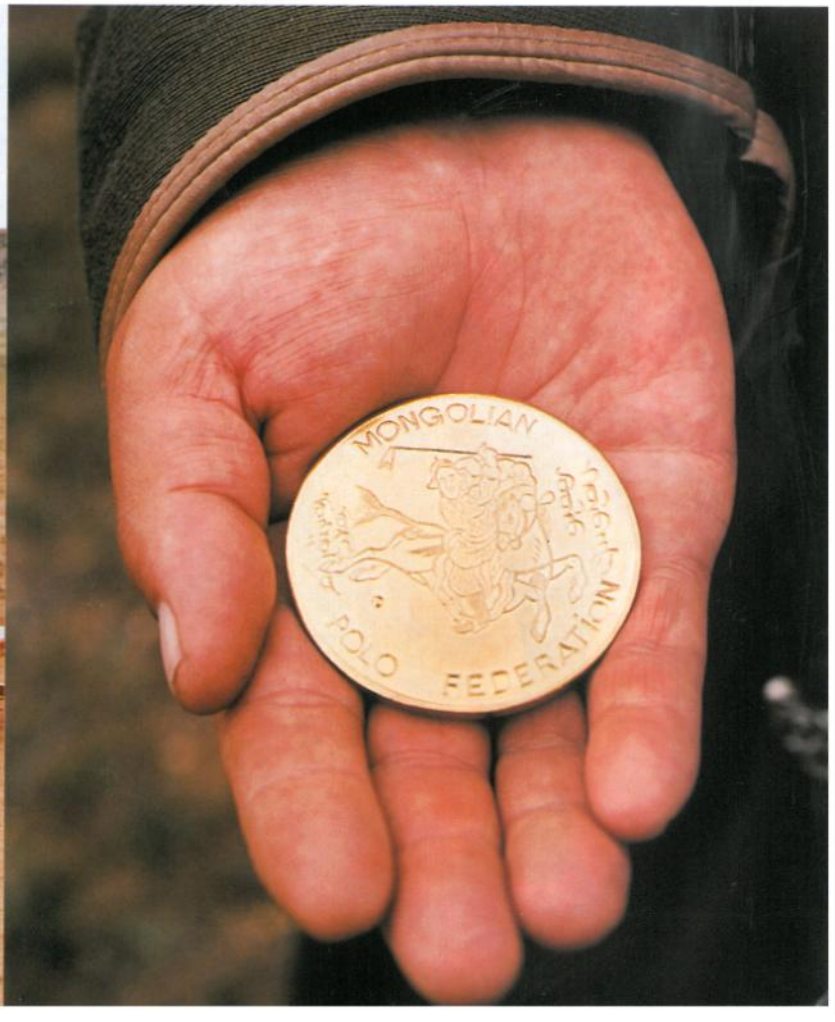
The accommodation is totally indulgent. Guests sleep under cashmere blankets in gers furnished with hand-painted double beds and small armoires, lit by wax candles and warmed by wood-burning stoves. The bathrooms may be basic and the satellite phone is unreliable, but for Mongolia, Giercke's camp offers a rare luxury. There are guides, cooks, nannies, maids—in all, a staff of 25. This includes a yoga teacher, a masseuse, and instructors for horseback riding, archery, and, of course, polo.

Most nights, you dine beneath the stars, feasting on mounds of mutton (the staple of the Mongolian diet) and far more besides, from *airag* (fermented mare's milk) to Russian caviar and the finest Champagne. "In France, they cook with two morels. Here, we cook with a *kilo*," boasts Giercke, who brings in bags of mushrooms from the Himalayas. He also imports cheeses and vintage wines from France, and can arrange for guests to fly in from Ulanbaatar on Russian-made Mi-8 helicopters, should they wish to forego the rough, seven-hour drive from the capital.

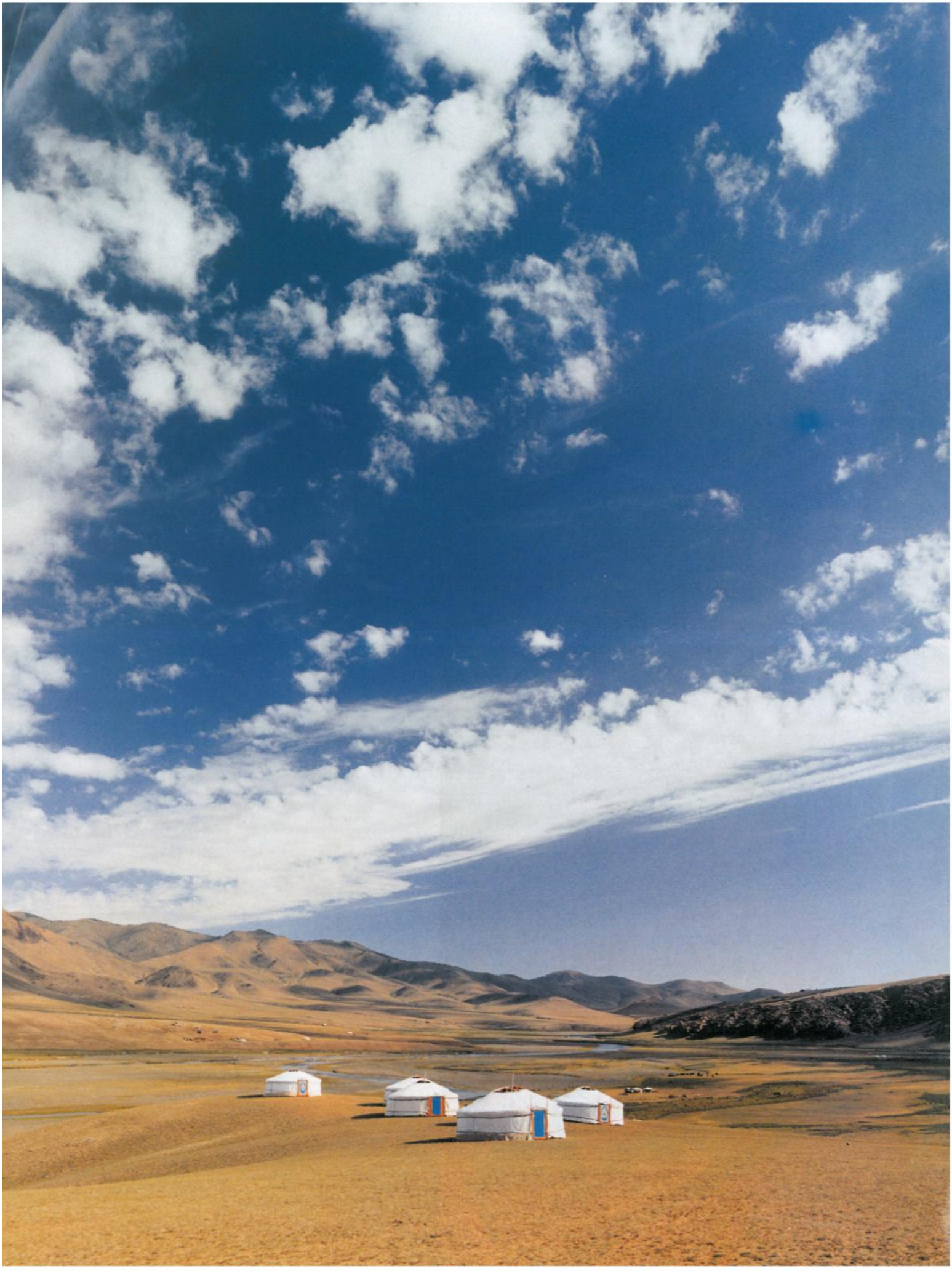
But for all this luxury, the camp is no conventional five-star resort. In fact, it's not a resort at all. There's no air-conditioning, no pool, no concierge. Giercke runs the place as he would a private home. He will charm you, entertain you, and tell stories all night round the fire. His team ensures that everything runs smoothly, and Enkhe, who has an impressive sense of personal style, keeps on top of all the details.

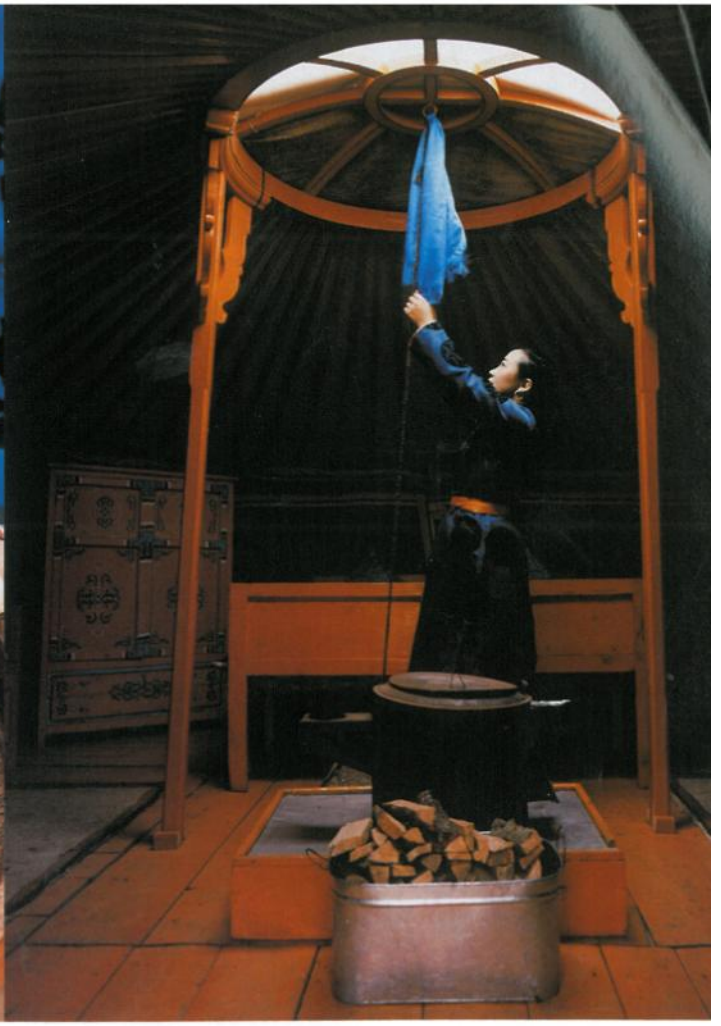
Still, the real draw is the scenery—vistas so beautiful that even the most world-weary are inspired. Ger encampments sprout like

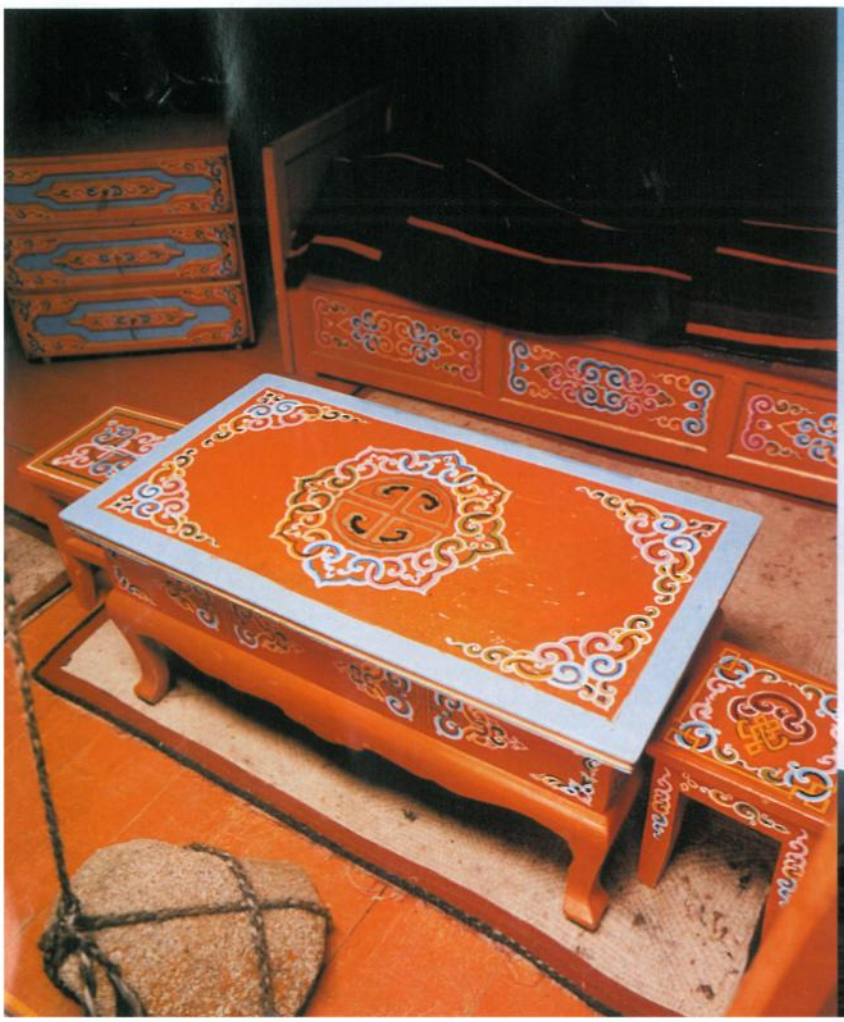


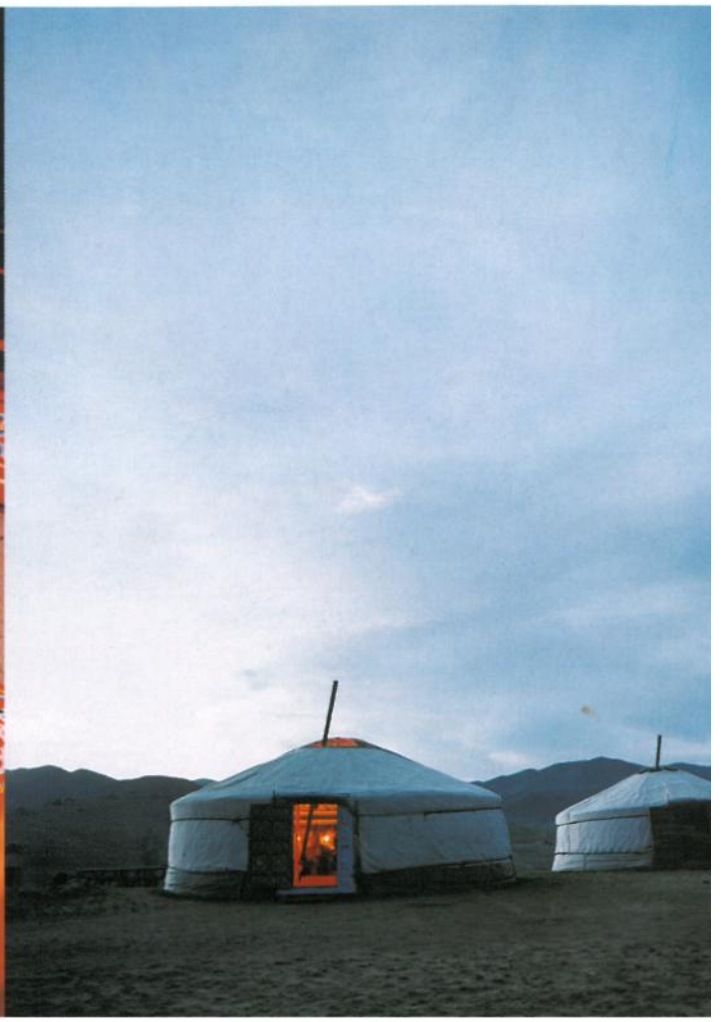

MONGOLIAN
POLO
FEDERATION

STEPPE MASTER
A modern-day warrior takes to the field. Opposite: *Gers* sprout from the velvet plains flanking central Mongolia's Orkhon River.









mushrooms from the velvet plains. Cattle and sheep roam freely, minded by young boys. Sometimes you see children draw fish from the river with their bare hands. And, apart from the occasional rumble of an ex-Soviet army jeep or the spluttering of a motorbike, there's no sound of traffic.

Mongolia is a vast and fenceless land. It is overwhelmingly peaceful, and when you walk, the air is scented with fresh thyme and sage as the herbs are crushed underfoot (at least in summertime; Mongolian winters are so cold that rocks can split and the tails of cows have been known to snap off). Everywhere there are horses—sure-footed Mongolian ponies that outnumber the country's 2.5 million people two to one. Everyone can ride, and children learn to sit in the saddle before they can walk. Mongolians can lasso an unbroken colt with greater skill than you will see anywhere else in the world. But then the horse occupies the center of their universe, at least for now: in a country the size of Iran, there are only two asphalt roads outside the capital.

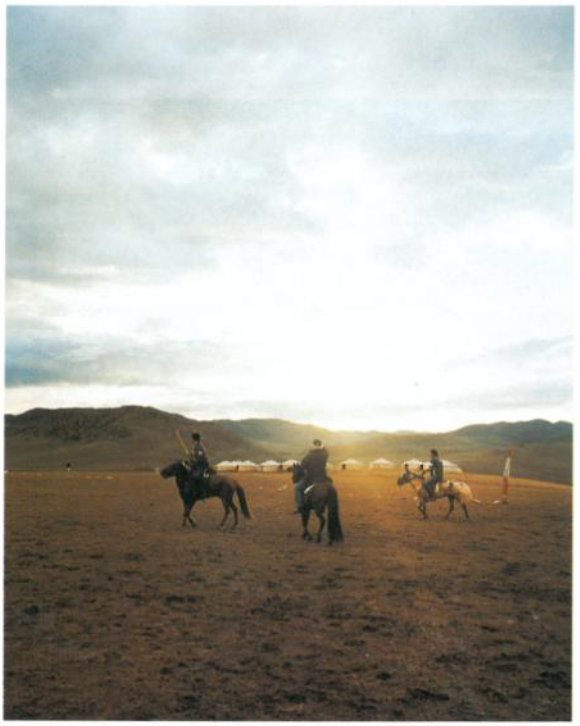
"Like every Mongolian, I was born next to a horse," says Jumdaan Choimbol, a film director and member of the nascent Mongolian Polo Federation. "Even working in the city in Russia, studying at Moscow Film School, I could never lose my love of the horse." Fables and folklore all speak of this passion. Mongolia, after all, remains a nation born of nomads.

It was this potential that first inspired Giercke to try and bring back the steppe's lost sport. Hence the camp, which would teach Mongolians about the game they'd forgotten over the centuries, and, at the same time, introduce outsiders to the country he now calls home. "The idea is to meet and partake in the tradition of the nomadic festivals," says Giercke. And so he hosts fabulous summer feasts that are at their best during late July, when they coincide with the state Naadam (an ancient sports festival) at nearby Karakorum.

Naadams are celebrated each summer across Mongolia, the largest and most raucous of which takes place in Ulanbaatar. The three-day Naadam in Karakorum is less touristic by far. You won't see another tour group, just the odd intrepid traveler who has come out here on a whim. Spectators watch horseracing, wrestling, and archery—the *eriin gurvan naadam*, or "three manly sports"—and, thanks to Gierke and his friends, attend polo matches, Mongolian-style. "Watch them play," says Giercke, "and it's like war, a memory of what the Mongols once were."

GREAT CLOUDS OF DUST FOLLOWED THE HORSEMEN

AS THEY CAREERED UP THE FIELD, CRASHING INTO EACH OTHER, SHOUTING LOUDLY, AND BENDING SO LOW THEIR HANDS SEEMED TO SWEEP THE GROUND



HOME ON THE RANGE
Getting ready for a game. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Luxuries at Giercke's camp include red and black caviar; inside a *ger*, the tent where dinner is served; hand-painted Mongol furnishings.

Polo in Mongolia is indeed nothing less than bizarre, a world away from the calm, sophisticated, etiquette-conscious game played elsewhere in the world. Sure, the Mongolians go by the so-called Hurlingham book of rules, but there are marmot holes to contend with and a greater consumption of alcohol than is sipped on the polo fields of St.-Tropez or England's Cowdray Park. So the blood is up, and the crowds are huge. During my visit to Karakorum, some 10,000 nomads had arrived by horse, motorcycle, truck, or jeep from as far away as Ulanbaatar.

Many had come for the Ikh Khurd ("Big Race"). This is a 30-kilometer horserace held every three years (the next one is due in 2007) in which some 300 stallions compete, ridden by child jockeys anywhere from eight to 14 years old. On this day the riders wore delicate paper hats and bright silk outfits. As they urged their ponies down the track to a finish line marked by huge crowds, their young faces weary and strained, I felt a twinge of indignation welling up inside of me. Still, this is Mongolia, and judging by the beaming faces of the onlookers, such youthful displays of horsemanship are a point of national pride.

The polo event took place later that afternoon, in open steppe with the faint silhouette of the 16th-century Erdene Zou monastery in the distant background. Spectators stood tall in their stirrups, craning for a view of the action.

A commentator shouted over a crackling mike that was wired to an old car battery, and the match began—a game between the Genghis Khan Polo Club and a visiting team from Dorno-Gobi, a village 1,300 kilometers to the southeast. I stood in a gold-braided tent reserved for the organizers and VIPs. Standing next to me was Giercke and a giant of a man named Munkhbat, who won Mongolia's first Olympic silver medal, for wrestling, in the 1968 Mexico City games. Munkhbat told me he was a keen supporter of polo, which he regards as a martial art. "I'm very proud we can show people something that looks like a real sport," he said.

Sticks started to fly, the players charging at high speed for a ball that kept getting stuck in pockets on the uneven ground. The crowd surged forward, bending the pitch lines. There were great clouds of dust as the horsemen careered up the field, crashing into each other, shouting loudly, and bending so low their hands seemed to sweep the ground. "They play crazy," said one of Giercke's European guests.
"But my God, they can ride."

(*Continued on page 120*)