

Steppe up to adventure

Oliver Eliot

A land without fences, Mongolia is the ultimate destination for those in search of wide open spaces, incomparable vistas and an innate sense of freedom. An invigorating and exhilarating destination, Mongolia is a land whose legends are etched deep into the world's psyche - for the simple reason that much of it was conquered by the warriors who forged the world's greatest land empire on the backs of the small but sturdy steeds that still roam free across Mongolia today, outnumbering man by 13:1.

Legend holds that Genghis Khan's warriors substituted their victim's heads for polo balls and Mongolia is generally believed to be the place where the 'game of kings' originated. Indeed, evidence has recently been uncovered showing that polo was played in Mongolia as early as the 4th century. Polo's ancient history furnishes the sport with some spectacular and remote locations in which a variety of versions of the original game are still played. Against all odds mountain polo continues to flourish in Gilgit, Chitral and Shandur in northern Pakistan and in Drass, Ladakh, Leh and Manipur in Indian Kashmir and north east India. In these places polo in various forms has been played consistently since its introduction, but in Mongolia, after the demise of the Mongol Empire the game was forgotten for centuries. Until 1997...



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The polo camp founded and created by Christopher Giercke in the Orkhon Valley on the Mongolian Steppe is arguably polo's most remote and unique venue - which considering the many extreme and exotic locations that the game enjoys is a significant statement. The polo camp that is the base for the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club is absolutely and utterly unique and is 'right up there' at the top of the list of 'must dos' for polo players in search of adventure, history and, importantly, the chance to give something back to the game from which they derive so much pleasure.

Perched atop an historic ridge, chosen - probably because of its prestige in terms of location - by khans throughout the centuries as their chosen burial site, the traditional ger camp set up by Christopher Giercke and his wife Enkhe is exceptional in the extreme. The location is second to none, a wondrous place above and beneath which the sky appears eternal and the landscape infinite, and the camp itself exquisite.

Open for three months of the year each summer, during which time it is home to the Giercke family and their very fortunate guests, the camp is one of polo's greatest modern day treasures. Accommodation in gers (traditional canvas covered round felt tents) is luxurious with guests cocooned in circular comfort with cashmere-swagged beds, traditional hand-painted bright orange and blue furniture and central wood-fired stoves. Homes to Mongolia's nomads for centuries, gers are designed to sustain the elements from which they protect. They are round so that the Siberian winds that blast the Steppes can't catch and lift them and are always erected with their doors facing south for the same reason. About half of Mongolia's population still lives in traditional gers with the whole family sharing the one-roomed circular tent and life revolving around the central hearth. In the Giercke's camp space is not at such a premium; the large dining ger boasts a baby grand piano for pre-dinner piano recitals, the kitchen ger is a day-long haven of warmth from which sumptuous feasts are produced, the bath ger delivers Mongol charm with a Wild West feel with adjacent wooden bath tubs hand-filled to order with piping hot water heated on the central stove and a 'comms' gear is literally the camp's powerhouse, running the batteries that store solar



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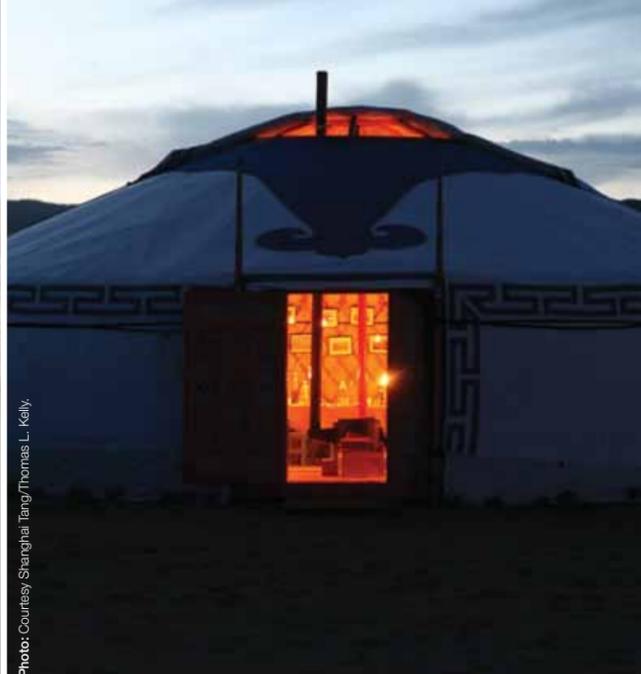


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energy and the fridges that make ice cold beer and ice in pre-dinner drinks possible.

Without exception guests share a love of horses and of polo. Mornings are spent stick and balling or trekking across the endless hills and valleys that extend in every direction from the camp. The half-wild lifestyle of the Mongolian horse - without exception Mongolian horses roam free for most of their lives, being rounded up each morning when they are required for work or riding - has produced animals with incomparably placid characters, making riding enjoyable for the experienced and remarkably possible for novices. Sure-footed and willing, the descendents of the horses that carried Genghis Khan's warriors traipse up boulder-strewn mountains and across rivers without protest and demonstrate an impressive turn of foot when asked to do so across open spaces. The best way to experience a landscape is to ride through it and in Mongolia that experience is as big as the eternal sky that stretches above the ancient

landscape. Daily chukkas take place in the afternoons with local players, adults and children, from the surrounding areas joining international guests on the world's most wide-open polo field - in keeping with the fact that there are no fences in Mongolia the polo field is unboarded. Training takes places daily throughout the summer with the season's climax being the annual polo nadaam.

A place of incomparable beauty where guests are guaranteed to meet like-minded souls, the camp is a place where vision has become remarkable reality. In the world of polo there are many special invites and incredible places. An invitation to the Giercke's camp in the Orkhon Valley is one to be cherished. It is a very special place indeed. By invitation only.

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