

Visions on the Steppe

Lucy Monro

A visionary in every sense of the word, Christopher Giercke is a man who gets the most extraordinary things done. A film-maker, Christopher first visited Mongolia in the early 1990s when the country was only just emerging from the all-enveloping shroud of communism under which it had laboured since the 1920s.



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ABOVE: Every summer Christopher and his wife Enkhe host polo's great and good at their camp in the Orkhon Valley. Home to the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club, the camp hosts the annual polo nadaam. The camp is summer home to the family including children Ich Tenger, D'Artagnan and Allegra.

“I had helicopters, so I could see things”, he says simply of the fact that he flew across one of the world’s most remote landscapes in search of locations and discovered far more than just a suitable venue for a film shoot. Even the shortest conversation with Christopher fills the listener with the belief that he is a man who ‘sees things’, but he sees far more than just scenery. Christopher Giercke sees possibilities and specialises in making the seemingly impossible possible.

It was in Mongolia that Christopher met and married his Mongolian wife Enkhe. They married at the top of a mountain up which their friends trekked to celebrate with them. The peak can be seen from the ridge across the valley on which they chose to set up their summer home. While the couple and their three children, Ich Tenger, D’Artagnan and Allegra, are based in Kathmandu during the winter, since 1995 they have made their summer home in the Orkhon Valley on the Mongolian Steppe. It is perched on a ledge above the Orkhon River some 60km from the nearest road and more than 300km from Mongolia’s capital Ulan Bator, that Christopher and Enkhe have established one of polo’s most remarkable bases. For three months every summer since 1998 a lucky few from among polo’s most elite circles join them in the ger camp that is home to the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club.

A man whose knowledge of Mongolia’s history is as expansive as the land in which the events unfolded, Christopher regales his guests for hours over dinner and lunch with tales of the armies of empires of days past that marched through and lived in the historic valley in which he has made his home.

Not surprisingly it was history that inspired him to adopt polo as one of his cause celebs. “It is entirely possible that polo originated in Iran - they too were a mounted warrior race”, he says on the subject of the perennial question that polo player’s agonise over about the sport’s origin. “But...”, he says, pausing before delivering his fait accompli. “Only last year, relics were discovered in tombs that show that polo was played here as early as the 4th century.”

Christopher knows his subject and he is passionate about it. Together with his friend the late AV Jim Edwards, he determined to revive polo in the land they both believed the game originated in after staging an impromptu first match on the Steppe in 1997 during a joint family fishing trip.

In 1998 the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club was founded and Christopher set about developing what has remained a constantly evolving brainchild ever since.

The emphasis is and always has been about training and development - identifying and nurturing talent and creating and maximising opportunity.

“For me Mongolia is above all a training country”, Christopher says. “For high-end polo a lot of things would have to be imported, including horses.”

In the beginning the game was the focus. In an equestrian society in the most literal sense - Mongolian children invariably learn to ride before they can walk and the Mongolian horse is the life partner of the nomad - Christopher and his friends found themselves with the luxury of an endless supply of talented horsemen. The surefooted Mongolian horses quickly proved

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themselves as adapt at playing polo as they were at carrying armies across the land in which they had roamed for centuries, so with ponies in plentiful supply and riding an assumed skill, all that needed to be taught was polo.

Reports from the early days of the GKPRC cite teamwork as having been one of the hardest qualities to nurture. The idea of passing the ball, or indeed of adhering to any rules of play, was alien to the Mongols and matches had a tendency to descend into mass charges for the ball with everyone wanting to career after it regardless of which team they were playing for.

Things are very different now. Among the many friends that Jim Edwards introduced to Christopher in the club’s early days was Col Raj Kalaan, Indian polo legend and captain of the national polo team for some two decades. For the last ten years Raj has visited the camp every summer to work with Christopher and an established training programme has quickly yielded results.

As Christopher’s own children took up the game the training focus moved. “Five years ago I switched towards children”, Christopher explains. “Now I am seeing the results of that, and I can see the future.”

The future is bright, but so is the recent past. In the last five years Christopher has succeeded in sending Mongolian polo teams to Argentina, Australia, Singapore and France to play and train. This autumn he will make a triumphant return to his native Berlin, almost six decades after he escaped East Berlin in September 1961 just weeks after the Wall went up, with a Mongolian polo team captained by his eldest son Ich Tenger to play an exhibition match at the Berliner Polo Club.

Christopher has not just created players and teams, but most importantly the necessary governing infrastructure to facilitate Mongolia's participation on the international stage. In 2002 he founded the Mongolian Polo Federation and became the FIP (Federation Internationale de Polo) Ambassador and international coordinator for Mongolia which is now an official FIP member. Key to the camp's remarkable success is the support of the international polo community and it is as convivial and inspired host that Christopher excels, extending invitations every year to his friends, among whom number the great and the good of polo. Patrick Guerrand-Hermès, Martin Aguerre, Eduardo Novillo Astrada and the Schwarzenbachs all number among those who have visited the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club and the 2010 guest list included representatives from London's Ham Polo Club, Singapore Polo Club and Steve Wyatt, founder of Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club in Shanghai. From guests past have come today's sponsors. In 2006 Shanghai Tang's Executive Chairman, Raphael le Masne de Chermont threw the Chinese luxury brand's name behind the project, sponsoring the annual

Shanghai Tang Polo Cup and developing a line of Genghis Khan polo shirts from the sale of which a percentage of revenue is donated to the GKPRC. Peter Prentice, a man with a long history of polo sponsorship and one of the most eclectic and inspired polo portfolios was also among Christopher's 2010 guests and the First International Polo Nadaam saw the inclusion of the Royal Salute Puissance.

So what of the future? Christopher's immediate aims are to build upon his proven success to date: "I want to build up the children's summer training facilities and initiate the same in other parts of the country, which means that the trainers need to be sent out", he says. "I want to push for a winter training programme at secondary schools and then I want to start an international children's training camp at the club with children from other parts of the world so that we can start a children's exchange programme."

Those aims would be ambitious in any environment. In Mongolia where winter grips the country in a bitter eight-month long embrace each year and where infrastructure among a nomadic population is minimal, they are ambitious in the extreme. But Christopher is not a man daunted by challenge.

Of his many wondrous achievements I am curious to know which he considers his greatest, or from which he derives the most pleasure. He answers without hesitation, "To see children happy and competing fairly in teams is great", he says proudly, but with the perennially modest charm that engages all he meets and more often than not rallies them to his cause. 🐾



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STEPPE RECITALS

A patron of the arts as much as he is of polo, Christopher Giercke promotes talent wherever he finds it. He discovered Odgerel Sampilnorov at the college of music in Ulan Bator where she was an elite student. A pianist of truly rare and remarkable ability, 'Orel' had reached a point from where she could progress no further in Mongolia.

Christopher hired her as a piano tutor for his sons Ich Tenger and D'Artagnan and, realising that he had discovered an exceptional talent, set about facilitating opportunity. "I called the Italian Ambassador, Gabrielle Menegatti and when he heard her he was so inspired that he immediately organised a scholarship in Perugia", Christopher explains of his protégé's remarkable story so far.

Orel finished her four years of study at Perugia this year as the best student of her conservatory. The next step is likely to be Paris, but for a magical week in the Orkhon Valley this summer guests at Christopher's camp were treated to piano recitals every evening before dinner and local nomad children enjoyed private lessons at the camp on a baby grand piano shipped out from Ulan Bator. Where Orel's career will take her next is as yet unknown, but it is likely that the Mongolian Steppe could well prove an unlikely launch-pad to international musical renown.



Photo: Courtesy Shanghai Tang/Thomas L. Kelly

Orel's Facebook name is Orel Sampil.