



CANDLE-LIT DINNERS

Guests gather in the dining ger every evening to feast on hearty Mongolian dishes such as nettle soup, noodle stew and meat-filled dumplings

Mongol Magic

Friends from around the globe converge each year on a camp in the remote grasslands of Mongolia for a week of exotic adventure and revelry that culminates in a polo tournament. Kim Visudharomn takes us inside the Mutton Cup

Photography **ELISE HASSEY**





FAST FRIENDSHIPS

Clockwise from top left: Generation T lister Ploy Bhinsaeng (right) and sisters Lynn (left) and Kim Visudharomn made up the Thai contingent at this year's Mutton Cup; Young Mongolian riders prepare to race; Ploy Bhinsaeng leads her all-girl polo team against their rival all-boy team led by camp manager D'Artagnan Giercke; The Mutton Cup 2018 cohort, pictured with the Nomadic Winds, a trio of Mongolian musicians that include a throat singer and a contortionist



It's a little past 10pm in the Orkhon Valley of central Mongolia, barely an hour since the sun turned the clouds pink and orange as it began to slip behind distant mountains. Now the scenery is hardly discernible, the air still, and all would be silent if it were not for the incongruous thumping of bass, beats and... Beyoncé. Drunk in Love blares from one of the gers huddled at the foot of a grassy hill. Used by day as the tack ger, its felt walls, usually lined with saddles, reins and riding helmets, tonight enclose perhaps the most eclectic party in the country.

Investors, entrepreneurs, fashion buyers and hoteliers lock arms in jiving embrace with nomadic herders, shamanic healers and artisans, the former clad in garishly coloured polo shirts, the latter in deep jewel-hued dells, traditional Mongolian jackets belted chicly at the hips. The gamey

every evening and rounded up again by herdsmen on motorbikes at dawn. We've picnicked on a mountain strewn with precariously stacked boulders, and we've kayaked down the Orkhon River past herds of horses and running yaks, their skunk-like tails swooshing in the wind. Waking from our ritualistic post-lunch siesta, we've been greeted by goats and kids grazing, literally, at our doorstep.

The Mutton Cup was conceived over drinks on a winter evening in 2016 at the Shangri-la Hotel in Kathmandu. Brothers Sangjay and Rinchen Choegyal and their childhood friend Jack Edwards decided they would turn their love of adventure and fun into an annual event that would bring together a diverse range of friends from around the globe. They'd throw a week-long celebration in the most unlikely of settings, full of extraordinary activities and a carefully chosen cast of characters. It would be a truly new experience that could not be replicated anywhere else in the world—and being invite-only, one of the most exclusive.

"Our friendship group is truly international—the idea for the Mutton Cup was born through a longing to bring these amazing people together at a spectacular location and to throw one hell of a party," explains Edwards. "We like it when the people coming don't already all know each other, and they tend to be quite eclectic," Rinchen adds. "That keeps things interesting."

As for the eyebrow-raising name of the event itself? "In the West, mutton refers to old sheep meat, but in the East, where we all grew up, it's typically goat," explains Rinchen. The tournament's name takes inspiration from the celebratory meal served at the end of the tournament, the aforementioned "bodog" dinner—disembowelled goat cooked from the inside out by hot stones sewn into the cavity of the carcass. Charming. "It's a funny, jokey word, isn't it?" Rinchen laughs. "Anyway, we like the unpretentious rusticness of it; it's true to the experience of life on the steppe. Plus, bodog is a style of cooking with great cultural significance in Mongolia, said to have been first practised by Genghis Khan himself."

The trio hosted their first Mutton Cup in 2017, inviting 25 of their friends along for the wild ride. They booked out the entire Genghis Khan Riding and Adventure Camp, the very place where they'd learned to play polo in their teens (the camp began life as the Genghis Khan Polo Club in 1996). They have returned separately and together many times since, each forming their own special bonds with the camp and its team. "Our families have been close to the founder of the polo club, Christopher Giercke, for many years," says Jack.

Recalls Sangjay, who was taught to play polo by an ex-Indian cavalry colonel in Mongolia, "I first visited the camp in 2009 when I came to watch Rinchen complete an overland race from London to Ulaanbaatar in a Skoda. I wasn't really expecting it, but the immediate humbling nature of the Mongolian steppe is hard to describe without descending into superlatives and emotions. And since we hosted the first Mutton Cup last year, the event will now be the first entry on my calendar."

A Mutton Cup takes a few months to organise, with tasks divvied up and undertaken by the boys along with their regular jobs (Sangjay as the general manager of Bangkok architect Bill Bensley's latest Cambodian resort, Shinta Mani

scent of goat from supper lingers as bowls of a traditional fermented horse milk intoxicant called airag is passed around the makeshift dancefloor. A mix of hip hop, top 40s and disco streams from a single unwieldy speaker, which is eventually hoisted and carried outside, with the throng of inebriated revellers following like mice behind the Pied Piper to dance in the moonlight under the vast starry sky.

This scene is described in our itinerary as "The Famous Bodog Party," and it's just one of numerous beautifully bizarre, how-on-earth-did-I-get-here moments that we've experienced since arriving at the Genghis Khan Riding and Adventure Camp for the Mutton Cup, a week-long adventure on the untamed Mongolian steppe that culminates in a friendly polo tournament played by international and Mongol riders.

Our days have been filled with outdoorsy diversions amid breathtaking scenery that has frequently left us speechless. We've galloped through wide open plains and up edelweiss-strewn hills on stocky, semi-wild horses, which are released

VAST EXPANSE

The gers of the Genghis Khan Riding and Adventure Camp stand out against the meandering Orkhon River and its magnificent valley. Opposite page: Hand-painted doors welcome guests to gers fitted with brightly hued furnishings made by local artisans



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IN STEPPE

Clockwise from top: Mongolia turns on brilliantly saturated sunsets; Founders Rinchen Choegyul and Jack Edwards celebrate their Mutton Cup win with their team; Rinchen, Jack, camp manager D'Artagnan Giercke and Sangjay Choegyul dressed for the evening's black tie dinner; a child sits atop his steed

Wild; Rinchen as an Asian equity investment analyst in Hong Kong; and Jack as managing director of the Tiger Tops group, a safari lodge business in Nepal).

The camp only exists during the summer months, after which it is dismantled and stored for the long winter. "It really embraces the nomadic traditions of the location in that sense," Rinchen says. "There are no permanent structures and the big felt gers are stored during the winter, leaving no trace on the pristine environment. In the winter the animals, horses included, are taken by nomadic herders up into the mountains where they are relatively protected from the elements, giving them the best chance for survival. Come spring, the horses are recaptured and trained for riding during the summer."

The camp also gives nomadic children from all over Mongolia the chance to take part in its Young Riders of the World initiative, a free summer programme of training in sports, including but not limited to polo, and lessons in English and art. Young players with promise are empowered to pursue the sports further, both domestically and abroad; indeed, the Mongol riders who played in the Mutton Cup got their start playing at Young Riders of the World and have travelled to ride and work in various places around the world. All of them recently returned from a season of polo in New Zealand and were participants in the All Asia Cup in Thailand a few months ago.

To say that Sangjay, Rinchen and Jack look forward to the Mutton Cup would be an understatement. They take their fun seriously, having drawn up a comprehensive yet spontaneous itinerary that introduces and immerses their guests in the lifestyle, rites and rituals of one of the world's last remaining nomadic cultures. There were horse races, archery tournaments and wrestling matches against Mongol champs. On several occasions, the camp's pianist, Odgerel Sampilnorov, enthralled us with her beautiful playing of Bach, Chopin and Beethoven. Then Beethoven would turn to Tiny Dancer as we gathered around the baby grand to belt out glam rock tunes. Mongol musicians, throat singers and contortionists performed prior to our "black tie" dinner, which kicked off with a foraged nettle soup, simmered and served from a large cauldron by camp chef Mingmar Sherpa. Then came trays of Mongolian meat-and-potato pasties that we ate with our hands, not a fussy dinner fork in sight. Though speaking of fussy silverware, the simple tumblers from which we drank our wine and water, while possessing the unassuming look of beer pong cups, were in fact crafted from the finest Nepalese silver. These precious cups accompanied us on all our rides, carefully packed in the rucksack of a herdsman and distributed during our water breaks, then collected and counted back into the rucksack each time.

Such are the small touches of understated luxury that make the camp so charmingly different from ... anywhere, really. Nearly every item, including the gers themselves, has been sourced or produced locally. The velvet-leather-marble look of most five-star accommodation is eschewed for handmade wooden furniture, each piece adorned with delightful decals painted by the camp's resident artist, Golden Buckle. Hot soaks are taken in tall lacquered-wood baths imported from Japan, and a layer cake of cashmere blankets tops our beds

(the Giercke family produces some of the world's finest cashmere using locally sourced material, supplying a number of international luxury houses). There are zero comforts of the digital kind, of course—no electricity, no internet, no news, no problem. After all, there are far more interesting things to do than scroll through Instagram. Like, for example, attending a naadam, or traditional Mongolian festival.

On our last day of the Mutton Cup, children from all over the valley gather for a horse race, one of the three sports that make up the games of a naadam (the others being wrestling and archery). More than 70 boys and girls aged from five to twelve sit proudly, many bareback, on their families' horses, parents calming the more restless stallions. The children seem unfazed, pulling assertively on the reins. "Mongol children are expected to be able to sit and stay on a horse by age three," explains camp manager D'Artagnan Giercke, the second of Christopher Giercke's three children. "At age five, they're expected to race."

And race they do, galloping against the wind, squatting, standing, whipping their horses with spindly sticks. We tail them closely in a car driven by Shiva, the venerable camp shaman and bone-setter, as he sings along to a spirited anthem on the radio. I look over at my travel companion, Ploy Bhinsaeng, who has tears streaming down her face.

Hours later, as we try on outfits for the bodog party, Ploy explains why the race moved her. "As a horse rider, I'm so impressed by how gutsy these kids are; there was no holding back," she says. "They're just little kids, some haven't even been to school, but they know how to ride because that's how they help provide for their family." As the only woman on Thailand's national polo team, Ploy is particularly fond of the fearless female riders. "Those little girls with their pretty plaited hair, they're so spicy and sassy overtaking the boys. I love it! It gave me goosebumps because it made me think of Doda."

Doda Moto, who works at the camp, is the daughter of a famous racehorse trainer, Moto, whose horses consistently place in the top five of the annual national Naadam Festival. Doda herself is a highly accomplished rider, having won numerous races. "In their ger, they have more medals than cupboards for clothes," says Ploy. "I had heard of Doda when she came to Thailand for a polo tournament. Christopher Giercke was always talking about her. I feel so lucky to have finally met her, to have spent time with her and her family."

Every morning, while the rest of us were sleeping off the previous night's revelry, Ploy would wake at sunrise to herd the horses with Moto or milk mares with Doda and her mother. The two young women would later train together, and eventually played alongside each other in the Mutton Cup tournament on an all-girls team cheekily named Chicks with Sticks.

"Doda wanted to know what the 'real' outside polo world was like: playing internationally, learning from experienced mentors and so on. But I think I was the one who has been taught a thing or two about life," says Ploy. "I grew up in pony camps and dressage competitions; Doda and her friends, they learned in the wild, in the land of horses they call home. Horses are intrinsic to their ecosystem, riding runs in their blood. They're what's real. They're the real deal." 🐾