



The wild East

Saddle up and ride to some of the most unspoilt, rugged and breathtaking landscapes on Earth. SOPHY ROBERTS hits the open trail for an unforgettable polo and riding camp in the untamed frontiers of the Mongolian steppes. Photographs by FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE

ESCAPE



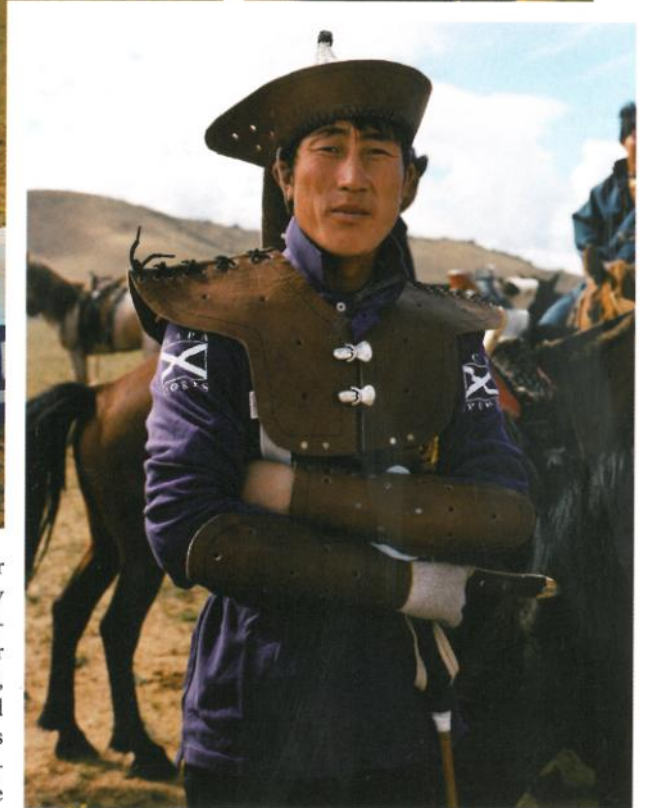
CHRISTOPHER GIERCKE AT
THE GENGHIS KHAN POLO
AND RIDING CLUB. *OPPOSITE:*
TRADITIONAL MONGOLIAN GER
ACCOMMODATION AT THE CAMP

ESCAPE



Magical parties involve feasting under the stars on Russian caviar, local mutton, French wine and fermented mare's milk

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
A POLO MATCH IN PROGRESS.
ENKHE GIERCKE AND
HER DAUGHTER CHRISTINA
ALLEGRA. A POLO PLAYER
IN TEAM UNIFORM



Christopher Giercke – one of Asia's more eccentric conservationists – is holding court inside a Mongolian *ger* (the mushroom-like, round tent of the Mongolian nomad).

He is dressed in his customary black corduroy breeches and frock coat with purple silk buttonholes and lining, and a matching cashmere scarf as soft as a shahtoosh shawl. German-born, a one-time child actor and film-maker (in his youth, he sourced 200 Filipino headhunters, used in *Apocalypse Now*), Giercke now lives between France, Nepal and the vast Mongolian steppe, with his stunning Mongolian wife, Enkhe, and their three young children.

It is here on the steppe, outside Karakorum, once the heart of Genghis Khan's empire, that Giercke and family set up their annual summer camp – the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club – to which he invites a limited number of friends and paying guests. Tucked away in the landscape's velvet folds,

on the banks of the River Orkhon, it is an otherworldly setting. The parties are magical, involving feasting under the stars on Russian caviar, local mutton, French wine and fermented mare's milk. Clients take over the site on an exclusive basis (up to 20 people for a minimum 10-night stay);

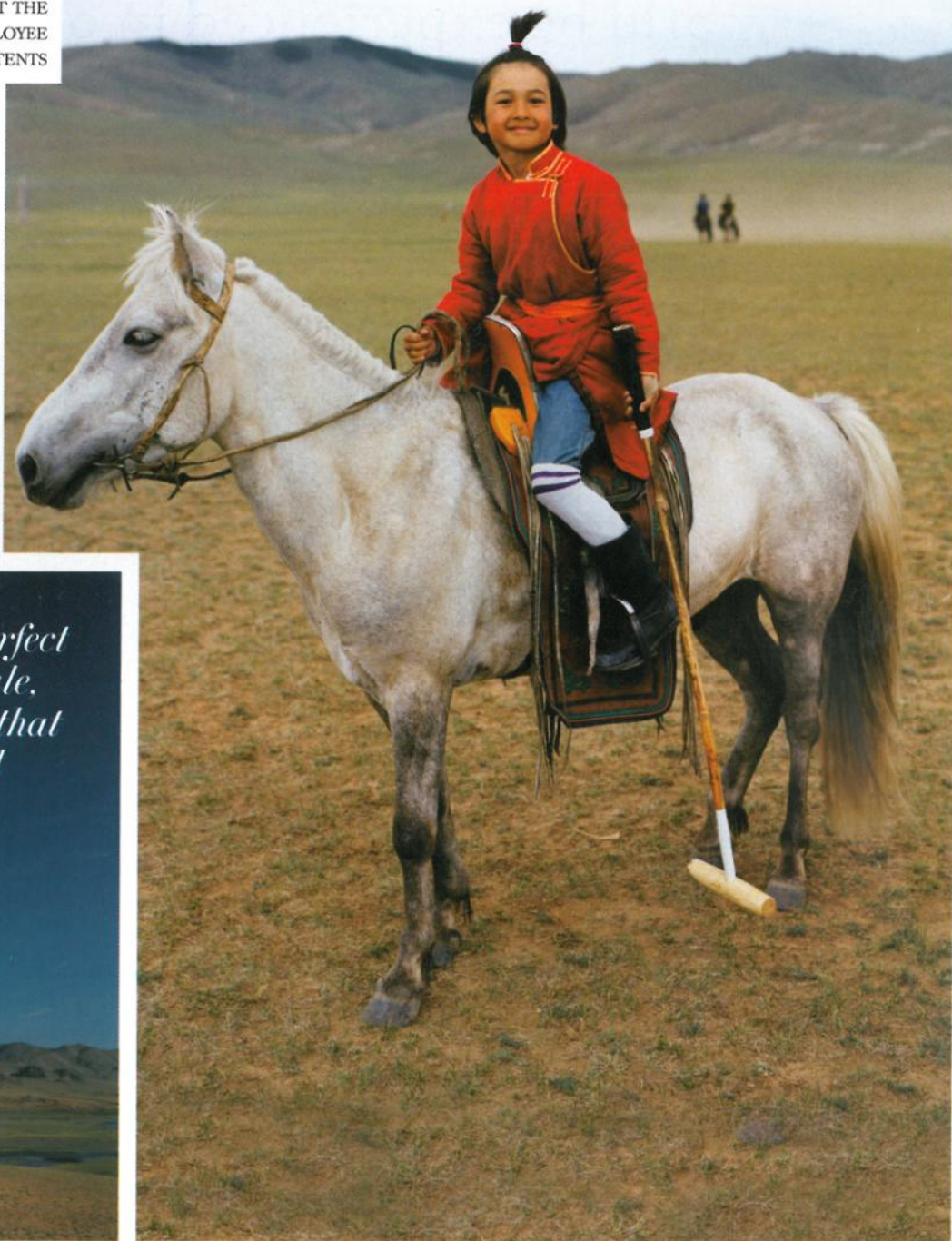
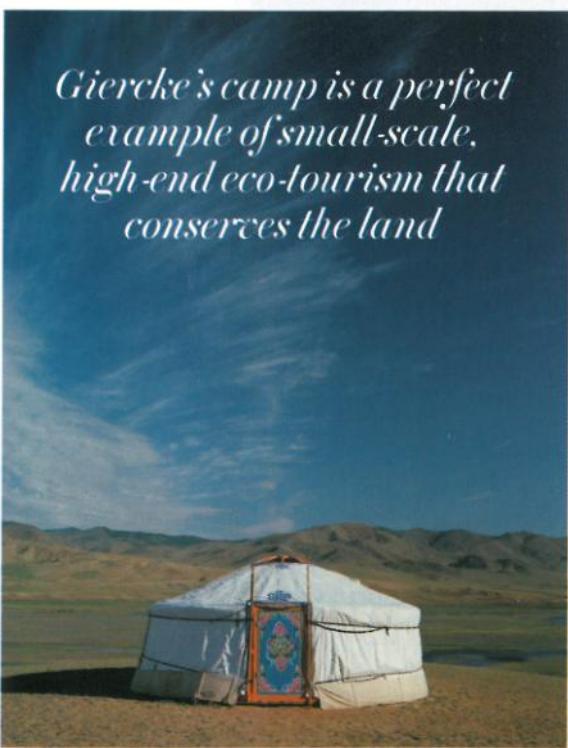
most are interested in horses. The cosy, felt-lined tents are lit by wax candles and warmed by wood-burning stoves; they are furnished with hand-painted double beds and the cashmere that Giercke produces, supplying both Hermès and Bamford & Sons. Made from the highest-grade Mongolian wool, it is spun and woven in Nepal, reviving centuries-old Himalayan techniques, which are now threatened by Chinese blending technology.

There's no generator at the camp – the sound would destroy the valley's bewitching

silence – and no electricity; the wooden Japanese bathtubs are heated by wood and yak dung. There are guides, cooks, nannies and maids, a yoga teacher and masseuse, as well as riding and polo teachers. By day, you can visit shamans in the hills, watch wrestling, hike, fish and attend the local Naadam (a national sporting festival held from 11 to 13 July). Polo tournaments and horse-racing are also on the agenda. Part of Giercke's mission is to help conserve the cultural heritage of Mongolia by reintroducing

ESCAPE

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
CHRISTOPHER GIERCKE'S SON,
D'ARTAGAN. A TENT AT THE
CAMP. A CAMP EMPLOYEE
CARRIES FOOD TO THE TENTS



Giercke's camp is a perfect example of small-scale, high-end eco-tourism that conserves the land

polo to the country where some believe it originated – providing social contact and entertainment for the disparate nomadic tribes living at the remote corners of the country (many of Giercke's high-profile guests make contributions to support this initiative).

By night, the gentle mood of the day goes up a gear, with songs from Tsogt, a Paris-trained opera singer from Hohhot. Vodka flows, and after sunset you are mostly drunk.

It is obvious that Giercke cares deeply about this country. For the most part, it

saddens him to see how tourism has developed – concrete-fixed *gers* with electricity, and walled-in camps – and he is concerned by the growing scourge of plastic littered across the steppe (he is working with the national parks authority to institute a clean-up programme). Giercke's camp, however, comes and goes from June to September without trace – a perfect example of small-scale, high-end eco-tourism that conserves the land it only temporarily adopts. 'What I offer isn't for everyone,' he says. 'This is not conventional

luxury, nor is it large-scale conservation. The country is so vast, I can only do what I can do. My purpose is simple: among like-minded people, I want to encourage a passion for Mongolia, its horses, and its land without fences, all of which need protecting.' □

Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Club (+976 11 320 149; www.genghiskhanpolo.com). Ten nights, from about £26,000 full board for 10 people, including riding, guides, instruction and entertainment. The camp is open annually from 1 June to 15 September.