

# NOMAD'S LAND

On the vast and empty plains of central Mongolia, an innovative new private camp immerses guests in the lives of nomadic herders, opening their eyes to a country, and a way of life, in a state of beautiful, complicated flux. **Maria Shollenbarger** reports

**M**y first meal in Mongolia took place on the fourth floor of an office tower in a sleekly tricked-up steakhouse, where the menu featured Wagyu beef and Umbrian porcini and hits of the 1980s and '90s played at near thumping volume. It wasn't quite the setting I had expected for my maiden repast in the country. The ruthless beauty of the steppes, streaked with the vivid green of late spring; wide skies, full of fast-moving clouds and diving, kiting raptors; bracing winds and endless space; and perhaps some mutton, seared over an open fire – these were more the elements I'd

envisaged. Mongolia was a country I'd dreamt of visiting since I was about 11 years old, watching an episode of *Wild Kingdom* in which nomadic herders careened joyfully on their sturdy horses across a landscape so huge and so empty my mind struggled to process it. Everything about it captivated: the eagle hunters and shamans, the caravans of woolly Bactrian camels and ceremonially decorated yaks with their gleaming, jingling harnesses. In the ensuing decades, I would craft elaborately articulated fantasy trips, incorporating some of all of these exotic

**These pages: a traditional Mongolian ger in the Altai Mountains surrounded by the family's livestock**

components. None of them involved pizza margherita and Tears for Fears on the sound system.

Yet that first supper in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's buzzing and fast-growing capital, augured a journey that while brief – just four days – was full of revelatory moments, ones that went to the complicated heart of an enormously beautiful place in great flux. Among my dining companions were Dr Chuluun Togtokh, who chairs Mongolia's Institute for Sustainable Development and is a globally recognised authority on climate change; his son Mergen Chuluun, a Harvard







Clockwise from left: the Mandala Mongolia camp where the author stayed. The author's bedroom, with orange stakes supporting the roof and wooden chests that contain riding chaps. A guest with Chimeddamba and his wife Tsedeusuren, who have just set up their summer camp



Business School alumnus, who was, until recently, executive director of the Mongolia Business Council and is CEO of Togtokh Trade, a private consultancy helping local companies achieve goals sustainably; and Ishbaljir Battulga (Ishee to his friends), a tourism operator who co-manages a luxury goods company – Mongolia's only locally owned one – that makes clothing and accessories from the finest goat, yak and baby-camel hair, purchased from nomadic herders. We had been convened by Karina Moreton, an Englishwoman with a passion for the country, who lives a few miles from Chipping Norton, but spends as much time in Mongolia as the exigencies of family life will allow.

These days she's deeply concerned with the increasingly precarious state in which both its wilderness and its nomads – who constitute over a third of the population – exist, as the effects of climate change are felt with an immediacy and severity that, Togtokh affirms, are among the most conspicuous on the planet. Sustained periods of drought and increasingly severe winters, known as *dzuds*, have decimated the livestock on which Mongolian herders rely (more than 700,000 animals are estimated to have perished of cold and starvation last winter and a

staggering 9.7 million in 2009-10). It's a terrible conspiracy of warped natural phenomena: the drought makes for poor grazing, so the animals enter the cold months weakened; then unusually extreme temperatures (last January saw them plummet to  $-43^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) prove too much for them to survive. The result has been a mass human migration off the steppes and into the city: ger districts – permanent settlements where erstwhile herders have pitched their round felt tents, hoping for a less challenging set of circumstances – have proliferated in and around Ulaanbaatar. Many are woefully underserved by plumbing or infrastructure; unemployment is high; and the gers' coal-burning stoves are the main culprit in the capital's occasional appalling levels of air pollution.

Now Moreton has set about bringing attention to, and in some small measure mitigating, the problem. This is why I'm here: to be the first to experience a unique tailor-made experience she's piloting through boutique travel designers Cazenove+Loyd called Mandala Mongolia, a high-spec, private, mobile ger camp that can be set up anywhere in the country, from the Altai Mountains in the west to the southern Gobi Desert – to, in my case, less than 90 minutes' drive from

Ulaanbaatar, on a wildflower-strewn plain not far from Hustai National Park. The location is mostly contingent on clients' desires, whatever the physical coordinates. However, the idea of Mandala Mongolia is to "shadow" the nomadic families with whom Moreton has cultivated relationships. Its guests, for a few days or weeks, participate in the lives of the herders, observing their routines, walking or riding their land, and hearing, via the translations of a guide and host, their stories.

But Moreton's aspirations for the project don't end there. "We work with a number of small urban charities that identify families who are 'city nomads' – ones who've suffered major livestock losses and moved to the city, where their hopes for jobs are often not realised," she says. "One month's occupancy of Mandala will fund an entire year of support for such a family to live alongside one of our established families and help with their animals. This family will feed and help re-assimilate the 'assistant' nomads; we'll pay their salary."

It's an innovative philanthropic model here, to be sure. In the meantime, however, Mandala Mongolia on its own is compelling enough stuff. I departed the elegant surrounds of the Shangri-La Ulaanbaatar





Clockwise from above:  
a family prepares to move to a summer encampment. Milking the goats can be a lengthy process. In the Altai Mountains, some nomads hunt on horseback using golden eagles

around midday with my host guide, Almagul Karagaz, heading west. Within half an hour we were off the highway and onto a rust-hued dirt road, tracing the centre seam of a shallow valley cupped by low granite ridges; the skies overhead, to my delight, were pinpricked with tiny silhouettes of hawks riding on thermals far above us. After another half an hour we began to climb one of the slopes, the dirt trail cresting the summit and following it for a couple of miles, the Land Cruiser vibrating every once in a while in the stiff wind. All around were plains furred with grass and pools of blue-white caryopteris, punctuated every so often in the far distance by a series of bright-white dots – the gers of herders. Goats, sheep and diminutive, skittish horses, their manes sheared and stiff, were dustings of brown and beige.

Eventually, we reached a birch wood, in which was pitched a small tent – an indulgent lunch stop set up by a few of Mandala’s advance team. We ducked out of the wind and into a wholesome three-course lunch of traditional dumplings, fresh salads and a parfait with a coulis of sea-buckthorn berries, Mongolia’s

panacea fruit (Almagul elaborated its salutary elements, most famous among them its vitamin C levels, said to be many times those of oranges). When we emerged, the wind had died down and the temperature was soaring past 30 degrees; we continued along and over the ridge and dipped down onto a wide plain, where Mandala awaited.

The camp (pictured on previous page) is a thing of quiet excellence, conceived to please both the most adventurous and demanding of Cazenove+Lloyd’s clients. That we are squarely in the wilderness is evidenced everywhere – by the lack of a phone signal, by the patent emptiness of the horizon, by the velvety absoluteness of the darkness once the sun retreats beyond the far hills. But at my disposal are a hot shower and a king-size bed swathed in soft cotton and down and draped in netting; a separate dining and living ger, with a pull-down screen and projector for films, as well as a turntable and a selection of vintage vinyl compilations of classical piano and symphonies (a couple with gorgeous Stalin-era cover designs), and a telescope for stargazing (when Mandala is based this

close to Ulaanbaatar, a local astronomy professor can drop by of an evening, given a day’s notice).

There are French presses for the coffee, a hammock strung between two birches and four staff, among them a chef who deftly refined Mongolian standards such as beef dumplings in milk tea and stone-grilled mutton khorkhog for an urban palate. The ger’s design hews broadly to tradition – orange spokes supporting the roof, their azure tips representing the sky; thick felt panels layered between waterproof covers to keep the chill wind at bay; wood chests and armoires painted with floral motifs and containing hot-water bottles and riding chaps, snacks and a handcarved cooler full of local lager and fresh juices.

Below us on the plain, one of the herder families Moreton has worked with on and off for years has just set up its summer ger. Both with gunmetal-grey hair, Chimeddamba and his wife Tsedeusuren (Chimedee and Tseegii to me) have settled here from May to October for going on 40 years, with a herd of some 600 or 700 animals – cows, goats, sheep and the small native horses, their manes still long and shaggy after winter – as well as two sons, now grown. Over cups of boiled-milk





tea and tangy sheep curds, Almagul translates as Chimedee describes how their livelihoods – and lives – have changed. I comment on the beauty of the landscape, cast in a watercolour of greens. He considers the view. The grass is disappearing faster than usual this year, he says. They've had months of drought and already his animals are having to range further to feed. A slim young woman with a gleaming knot of obsidian hair pours us more tea. She is the sister of his daughter-in-law, Chimedee explains, who is looking after the grandchildren while the daughter-in-law teaches at a local village school for the summer. I ask him what he thinks of the Mandala Mongolia re-assimilation concept, of "city" nomads repatriating to his way of life. His face softens, a thousand folds deepening slightly as he produces a faint, possibly cynical, smile. He would welcome the opportunity to help any youngster out of there. But life out here is *hard* – harder than it has ever been. He says part of him understands why they move to the city, but he sees how soft they've become and wonders if they are strong enough to take up his way of life again.

The days at Mandala were crafted according to my whims. And as tempting as its indoor environments were, the wide outdoors was the place to be. We visited a nearby camp run by a family that raises yaks, camels and goats, which provide them with both milk for dairy products and indescribably soft – and valuable – hair that they gather and sell to clothing manufacturers in Ulaanbaatar. We were served the local spirit of fermented mare's milk

**Clockwise from left:**  
**Bactrian camels are a vital source of milk for nomadic herders.**  
**A herdsman prepares boiled-milk tea**

– surprisingly mild – by the husband, while his brothers, trained at the national music conservatory, performed traditional throat singing. Both clasped tall horsehead fiddles, drawing long, plaintive notes from them, while the wind sighed in melancholy harmony outside.

In their quiet fashion, Chimedee and Tseegii welcomed us into their day whenever we ventured down the plain. We strolled with their goats, watched their chestnut stallion chase his mares up the slopes. One morning we helped erect a second ger for Chimedee – unrolling carpets, beating flat bolts of thick felt, slotting the orange roof spokes into place. Chimedee's sons nattered and joked, hauling furniture to and fro, admiring ornate silver-studded horse bridles they had unpacked, and comparing the merits of their Russian motorbikes before roaring off on one of them to wrangle a few far-flung animals. And stretching in every direction around the tiny encampment, were the plains, begging exploration on foot or horseback – a landscape that, bar Chimedee and Tseegii's camp, was empty as far as the eye could see.

In the evening back at the camp, sitting with a glass of burgundy and caviar spooned onto the chef's homemade crisps, I watched the sky fade from washed pink to purple to bruised blue-black, the tiny dots of the few gers below us fading into the darkness, while above, corresponding points of whiteness brightened into recognisable constellations. Here was the inconceivably vast space, the rootless, exotic life on which so many of my fantasies had hinged, all cast in a more complex – and urgent – context than I'd foreseen by the Mandala experience. It was both the Mongolia I had dreamt of for so long, and a Mongolia I'd never imagined. ♦

#### TO BOLDLY MONGOLIA

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of **Cazenove+Loyd** (cazloyd.com), the **Shangri-La Hotel, Ulaanbaatar** (shangri-la.com) and **MIAT Mongolian Airlines** (miat.com), which flies from Hong Kong to Ulaanbaatar daily, from £700 return. Cazenove+Loyd operates ger itineraries in Mongolia from April to October: a six-night itinerary with two nights at the Shangri-La, two with Mandala Mongolia Nomadic at Bayan Gobi and two with Mandala Mongolia Escape at a seasonal location, £6,300 per person including guiding, transport and meals; an 11-night itinerary taking in Gorkhi-Terelj National Park and the Gobi Desert (Three Camels Lodge), £8,950 per person. International flights not included. **British Airways** (britishairways.com) flies from London Heathrow to Hong Kong twice a day, from £458 return.