

# MONGOLIA: TRAVELING IN THE LAND OF CHINGGIS KHAN

By Nick Gier

At a recent tourist briefing in Ulaan Baatar, the public relations officer for the American Embassy described Mongolia as a good friend wedged between two bad neighbors. Being a good US friend means that Mongolia gets \$110 million in aid for improving health, education, and private business. In return Mongolia is providing 150 troops under Polish command in Iraq. It also has a few dozen troops in Afghanistan. When we arrived at the national airport, we noticed an Alaska National Guard C-130 parked on the tarmac. Some of us inferred that it was involved in ferrying US troops to Iraq, but we were told that it was a joint "arctic defense" program between Mongolia and Alaska.

I asked the embassy official why it took so long to make friends with this former Soviet satellite. We recognized the Soviet Union in 1933 and Communist China in 1978, but have had diplomatic relations with Mongolia only since 1987. The answer was that Mongolia was a small nation that got lost and forgotten in the Cold War. Soviet allies in Eastern Europe, North Korea, North Vietnam, and Cuba got much more of our attention.

Some say that the Mongolians took to Communism more enthusiastically than the Russians. They produced their own Lenin, Sukhbaatar, whose statue stands in the center of the capital city Ulaan Baatar. There was also a large statue of Lenin right in front of our Soviet era hotel. Unfortunately, the Mongolians created their own Stalin, Choibalsan, who ordered the execution or imprisonment of tens of thousands in 1937-39 and was responsible for the destruction of most of the Buddhist monasteries.

Buddhist scholars have generally ignored Mongolia, even though there were at one time over 700 monasteries and a distinctive school of Buddhist art and architecture. Initially, I was blaming myself for not being more informed about Mongolian Buddhism, but now I find equal fault with my teachers and the books that I've consulted over 25 years of study. We need to be reminded, for example, that the title Dalai Lama is a Mongolian phrase and that the fifth Dalai Lama was a Mongol. Indeed, if it had not been for the Mongolians the Yellow Hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism would not be as dominant as it is today.

In 2006 Mongolians will be celebrating 800 years a nation, which was founded by Chinggis Khan in 1206. Some parliamentarians are proposing to change the name of the capital city to Chinggis City and replace Sukhbaatar's statue with one of the Great Khan. To complete the nation's move away from Communism, the tombs of Sukhbaatar and Choibalsan will also be removed from the front of the Parliament Building. The only prominent relic of Soviet times will be the Cyrillic alphabet, which combined with the architecture, makes travelers think that they have mistakenly arrived in a Russian city. The old Mongolian script is beautiful but unwieldy for the digital age.

Chinggis Khan's army, tens of thousands of deadly accurate bowmen on horseback, conquered most of China, Central Asia, and Russia—making it the largest land empire in history. The Mongols introduced gun powder, paper money, freedom of religion, pony express, diplomatic immunity, and the idea of international law as well as equality before the law. Chinggis Khan was not the first Asian warrior to wreak havoc in Eastern Europe, but he was different from his predecessors. He promoted soldiers and civilians on the basis of merit, not tribal or religious connections. He also outlawed slavery, torture, and the kidnapping of brides.

Those who resisted the Great Khan were destroyed. It is estimated that 30 percent of the Central Asian population was killed. Those who surrendered were spared and integrated into his society, including soldiers, scholars, engineers, merchants, and artisans. For example, a French artist designed the ornate fountain, flowing with four different fermented drinks, which stood in the middle of Chinggis' throne room. Chinggis welcomed all religions at his court and two of his sons became Christians. Under his grandson Kublai Khan, the founder of China's Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), Mongolians became Buddhists and 90 percent of them retain that faith today. The Buddhists insisted that animal sacrifice be abolished and the religion had a pacifying effect on the ancient warrior society.

Ever since Chinggis Khan's coronation in 1206, Mongolians have celebrated Nadaam, a festival we enjoyed July 11-13. It is dedicated to the "manly sports" of wrestling, archery, and horse racing. (Women now compete in the archery competition.) Mongolian wrestling is roughly similar to Japanese sumo and a Mongolian is now the sumo champion in Japan.

Forty percent of Mongolia's 2.8 million still live as nomads on what appears to be an endless expanse of pasture. Mongolia is the world's second largest land locked country about the size of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana combined. The families we visited appeared to be healthy and happy. The open air and a meat/dairy diet leads to a life expectancy of 68 years. A typical extended family has 200-300 goats and sheep. At one camp we learned that there were over 100 horses. It is said that Mongolians learn how to ride before they walk. Bactrian camels are also common, especially in the Gobi, and are used to move households several times a year. The house of choice is the traditional ger (Russian: yurt), a sturdy felt structure that withstands both severe winds and cold. Today's ger camps also include cars (mainly Korean), trucks, motorcycles, generators, and satellite TV. Tourists stay in well appointed ger camps all through the countryside.

The Communist government established schools everywhere and the country enjoys 97% literacy. (The vaccination rate is higher than ours.) The herders do miss the extra fodder that Soviet helicopters provided during harsh -30 degree winters. The bad winter of 1999-2000 have forced families into Ulaan Baatar where several hundred thousand live in gers with backyard latrines.

An empire that was once founded on manly sports will soon become a nation led by female professionals. Young boys are usually held back as herders, but the girls are going to school in droves. Women undergraduates now represent 70 percent of university enrollment and 80 percent of graduate students are women. In the most recent Fulbright competition for graduate study in the US, 19 of 20 finalists were women. Mongolian NGOs are led and staffed primarily by females. There are some serious discussions about what impact this will have on a once male dominated society. There may well be an increase in an already high male alcoholism rate and more cases of divorce and domestic abuse.

When the Soviets pulled out in the early 1990s, Mongolia suffered a depression twice as bad as the Great Depression. Except for utilities, transportation, and the mines, all businesses are beginning to thrive in private hands. There have been regular elections since 1992, and despite problems with corruption and cronyism, Mongolia has a good chance to preserve its traditional culture as well as prosper as a liberal democracy.