

CASA, TASTE, TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE

# VOGUE

## Living

EDITED BY DIVIA THANI DASWANI

**TRAVEL**

# MONGOLIAN RHAPSODY

*ALEX KURUVILLA, Condé Nast India's managing director, crossed the Chinese border and found that, indeed, not all those who wander are lost...*

*Text and photographs by ALEX KURUVILLA*

Heaven on earth  
Dusk at a ger  
camp in the  
Mongolian steppes



**T**he Trans-Mongolian Railway pulls into Choyr, an abandoned Russian military base, a relic of Mongolia's communist past. It will halt for all of 10 minutes—long enough, since it is unlikely that anyone except the odd Mongol will alight here. This is the East Gobi desert, and the majority of passengers are travelling to Ulan Bator, just a dot on the map for most.

Our journey had begun the previous day in Beijing: as darkness fell, we crossed the China-Mongolia border at Erlian. A passport check at midnight—reminiscent of black-and-white war movies—and a changing of wheels to 'broad gauge' reminded us that we were entering new and unfamiliar territory.

In Choyr, a silver statue of a Mongolian cosmonaut in the town centre seems to be the only inhabitant. While I make a mental note to check if a Mongol had indeed travelled to space, we are bundled into an old Soviet bus and are soon heaving over the Mongolian steppes. The silence is punctuated only by the groaning of the gear box. The mobile signal soon abandons us; we are warned that we will be incommunicado for a week till we reach the capital, Ulan.

Our first halt: the Red Rock Ger Camp in the Ikh Nart Nature Reserve, a vast, protected area with strange but wonderful rock formations and teeming with ibex, argali sheep and Mongolian gazelles. The gers or yurts (felt-lined tents) where we will be spending our first night beckon, magical against the dramatic sky.

Early next morning we are ready to explore our surroundings as we set out on our first trek. The terrain looks decep-

tively simple, but the rock-strewn tracks are tricky to manoeuvre. We barely get a glimpse of our first argali (giant, wild sheep) before they dash off behind craggy rocks upon our approach. We finally reach a small valley with a huge outcrop from which our camp, Red Rock, gets its name. We stop in our tracks—a herd of wild

horses, proud and free, is before us. We head back towards camp, coming across occasional skeletons of ibex and argali in our path, a chilly reminder that not all survive the bleak winter, when temperatures drop to 40°C below freezing. Back at camp, it's time for our first social visit, to a local nomad. His ger stands alone, the nearest neighbour being roughly 40 km away. Our host, Taimur Bataar, owner of close to 500 heads of sheep and horses, welcomes us with a large bowl full of cheese, hardened dried yogurt and clotted cream. His wife passes around a large pitcher of steaming milk straight off the Russian-design hearth that's the centre of every Mongolian home. Taimur Baatar offers

horses are untamed and the saddles are uncomfortable. Of course, our host and his tribesmen ride with effortless ease. It seems that a Mongol learns to ride before he can walk.

The next day, we set off for Camp No 2 (seven hours away, we are told). This turns out to be what can only be called Mongolian Stretchable Time—even more flexible than Indian. But luck is on our side: we stumble upon a local celebration. The men in stetsons and fancy boots, the women glamorous in colourful deels, amid chanting offerings made around an ovoo—a pile of rocks with prayer flags

fluttering on top. (I read somewhere that the ovoo has Shamanist origins.) The high-

**History lessons**  
Left: The Trans-Mongolian Railway that runs from Beijing to Ulan Bator.  
Right: A silver statue of a Mongolian cosmonaut in the town centre of Choyr



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me snuff from a decorative onyx bottle. Not wanting to offend, I try a pinch, but all it does is tickle my nose. Seeing Indians in the group, Taimur tries to impress us with his knowledge of the Non-Violence Movement and the Mahatma. We are eager to ride his horses and our host obliges. It is a challenge: the

light of the celebration is a horse race, a gruelling 30 km across the steppes. The participants are boys and girls as young as four and five! The race begins. Soon, the horse and rider are little wisps of dust in the distance.

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**Train to nowhere**  
Above: The changing of wheels to broad gauge takes place at Erlian station at midnight. Below: Daybreak at Manhan Sands. The changing landscape from steppes to desert is evident





It's an experience—lying on the ground, wind howling outside, tent fluttering dangerously, the headphones snug and the plaintive cry of Bono



fronted with a wide expanse of sameness, I'm uncomfortable, to say the least. When we finally arrive, it is dark. But nothing prepares us for the spectacle that awaits us in the morning.

At the crack of dawn, I scramble out of my tent to discover that our camp is nestled right on the edge of a large sand dune—the morning glow holding it in an embrace. And then, a rainbow appears. I am awestruck.

Over the next couple of days, I discover that the Bactrian camels, despite their awkward gait, are the best way to travel through the steppes, desert and rocky mountains. In the desert, temperatures can range from 35°C during the day to almost zero degrees at night.

We arrive at Arburd Sands, a ger camp run by a family of famous Mongolian horse trainers. We watch horsemanship at its best—the skilled riders one with their horses. They demonstrate the capture of wild horses with a pole and a lasso, and we watch, fascinated, as they wrestle the horses to the ground.

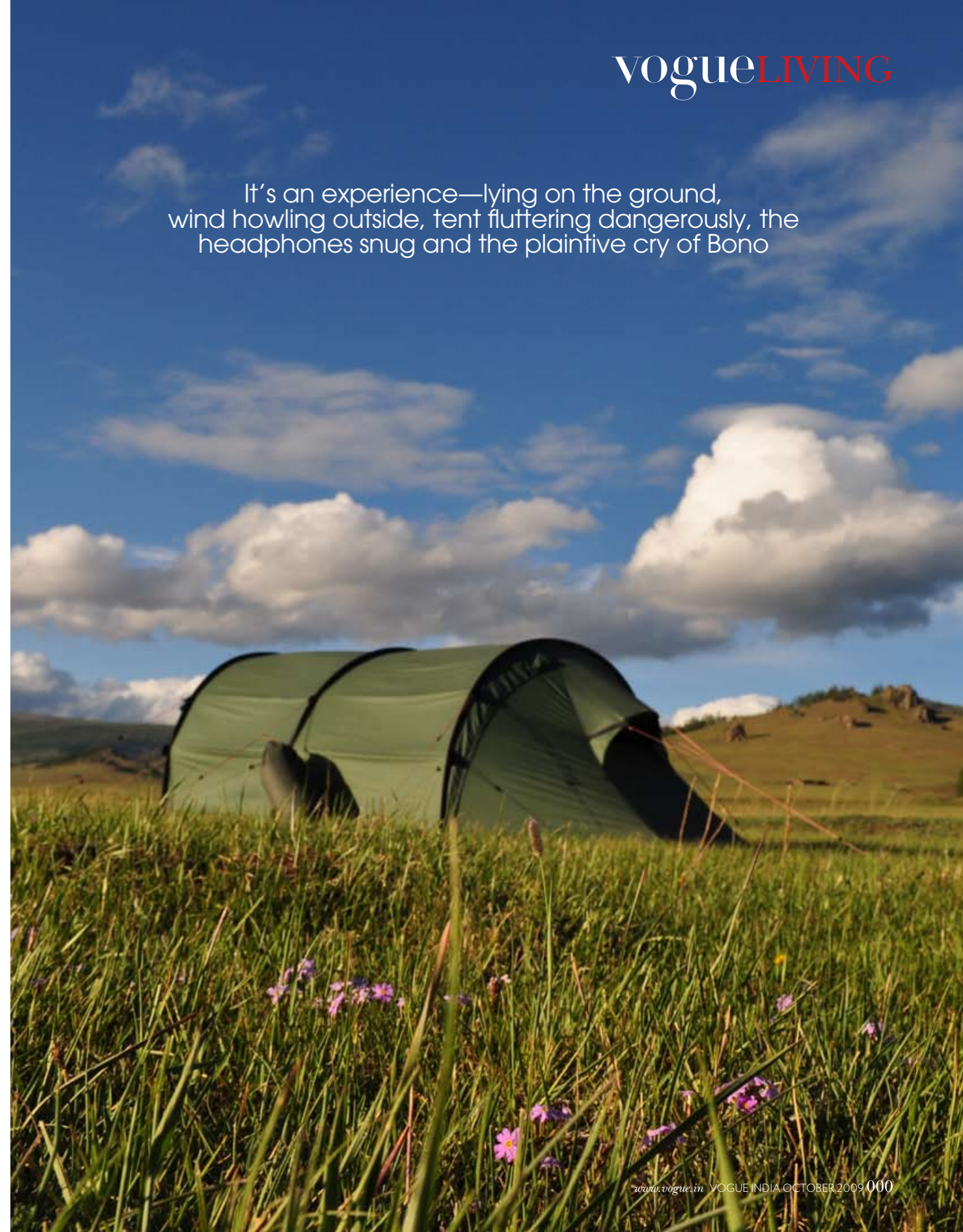
We continue north-east towards Ulan. The Zorgol Hairhan mountains, giant vertical rock formations in the middle of the steppes, are revered by the locals. Against the ridges we spot gazelles, Sibe-

**Face book**

*Clockwise from top left: Kuruvilla gets set to cross the desert on a Bactrian camel; a member of the camp crew; on the banks of the Tuul River; men in stetsons at a local celebration; a nomad's son on the steppes; rock formations at the Ikh Nart Nature Reserve; women in sunglasses and deels (traditional costume) for the local festival*

rian ibex and the occasional argali. The climb to a peak turns out to be the toughest challenge of the trip.

Nine days into our trip, the weather has turned extreme. Strong winds threaten to blow away my tent, but the Heidelberg is German and stubborn. Temperatures dip, a sign that we were approaching Ulan. My North Face Tundra sleeping bag is made of stern stuff, a match for the elements. But it's an experience—lying on the ground, wind howling outside, tent fluttering dangerously, temperature sub-zero, the Bose headphones snug and the plaintive cry of Bono... 'Magnificent... magnificent'. Nirvana!







**Country roads**  
 Clockwise from above: Yak carts carrying equipment and luggage across the river; the Khan Khentii mountains; the 131ft-high Chinggis Khaan statue stands incongruously in the middle of the countryside

The next day, we are in the capital of Mongolia, Ulan Bator. The Russian influence is overwhelming: the architecture, the signs in Cyrillic, street names... I am already missing the vastness and solitude of the steppes. The city sounds are jarring. I want to go back.

But there is one stop we must make before heading back to the wild. The Gandan Monastery is the centre of the Buddhist revival. It was crushed by the communist regime that destroyed most of Mongolia's monasteries. The prayer wheels are worn—testimony to the thousands of hands that have spun them. Mongolia and Buryatia in Russia are the northern-most areas that practice Lamaism. We drive to the Hadan Hoshuu steppe valley and continue through the forested Zamtiin Pass and finally pitch

camp by the Tuul River. The local herders meet us with horses, yaks and gers.

Our first night here has an element of drama and danger, a reminder of the risks and remoteness of the terrain and a lesson in leadership and safety. We are huddled in our sleeping bags, the wind tearing and rain lashing at our tents. Above the din, we are alerted by the sounds of some of the team in hot discussion. One of us is missing. Mandy Singh, our group leader and veteran adventurer, takes control calmly. In minutes, a search and rescue mission is mounted. We split into five teams, with a Mongolian accompanying each, and fan out across the neighbouring wilderness. It is pitch-dark and the surroundings are bleak and inhospitable in contrast to the breathtaking prettiness of the day. There is no sign

of our missing teammate; our whistles and shouts are swallowed by the wind. Just when the search teams' spirits are at their lowest, we hear excited calls. He has been found. Relief floods the group. No time for post-mortems though, as we quietly head back to the tents.

The scenes that unfold in the next leg of the journey are jaw-dropping. We are heading into the Khan Khentii mountain range, a protected reserve three times the size of Yellowstone, a wilderness that is home to the brown bear, wolf, lynx and moose. This is the southern fringe of the Siberian taiga, deeply forested with larch and birch, and climatically the southern-most part of the Arctic. We trek across the permafrost area, meadows as large as several football fields; following the Upper Tuul and Zuunbayan Rivers. Our



**Wild, wild east**  
 Clockwise from above: The camp staff; the famous horse trainers at Arburd Sands display their prowess with a lasso and pole





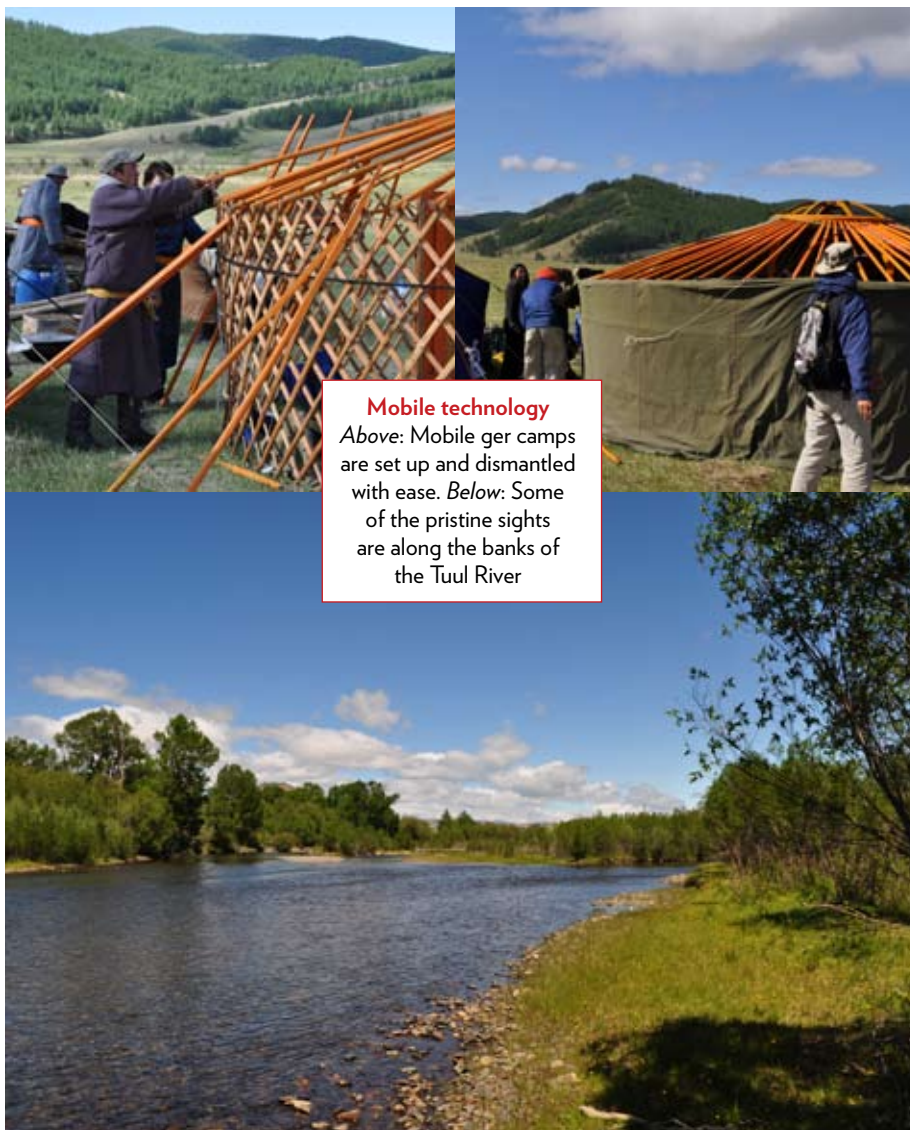
# VOGUELIVING

equipment and luggage follows on yak carts. Occasionally, we ford a river on horseback or take a ride on the carts.

But what Khentii is most famous for is not its fascinating wildlife or spectacular scenery. This is the stomping ground of Chinggis Khaan (better known as Genghis Khan), the greatest conqueror the world has known, who in the 12th century ruled over a vast empire spanning Asia and Europe. There is no escaping the Great Khan in Mongolia. We have landed at the Chinggis Khaan International Airport, almost stayed at the Chinggis Khaan Hotel, had our fill of Chinggis vodka, been to a Chinggis nightclub and come across a giant 131-foot Chinggis gleaming stainless steel statue incongruously stuck in the middle of the countryside. Mongolia even has a rock band named after him. But I leave Chinggis to the scores of Japanese archaeologists searching for his grave and instead let the breathtaking natural beauty carry me away.

I soak in the unspoiled splendour and purity of our planet. The air is like elixir, the ground virginal. We linger. It is difficult to leave, knowing I may not return. But in my mind, in my heart, I will.

Weeks later, back in Mumbai, I look out of the window. I am riding my Mongol horse across a vast meadow. The purple mountain range ahead is capped with white, a lone steppe eagle hovers above, and the wind is cold and bracing. The mobile rings. ■



**Mobile technology**  
Above: Mobile ger camps are set up and dismantled with ease. Below: Some of the pristine sights are along the banks of the Tuul River

### IBEX EXPEDITIONS

This expedition to Mongolia was undertaken by the members-only Ibex Explorers Fellowship, but is available on request. Rated one of the 'Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth' by *National Geographic*, Ibex organises unusual trips across India and to Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and Sri Lanka. Founded in 1979 by Mandip Singh Soin, Ibex offers a range of dizzying activities, like heli-skiing, snowboarding, whitewater rafting and mountaineering. The less experimental can choose luxury trips, jeep safaris, eco-tours or trips themed around art, photography, golf, cricket, fishing or ornithology. Soin embodies the conscientious adventurer—his own exploits include studying tribal issues in the Andamans and crossing the Thar on camelback.

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