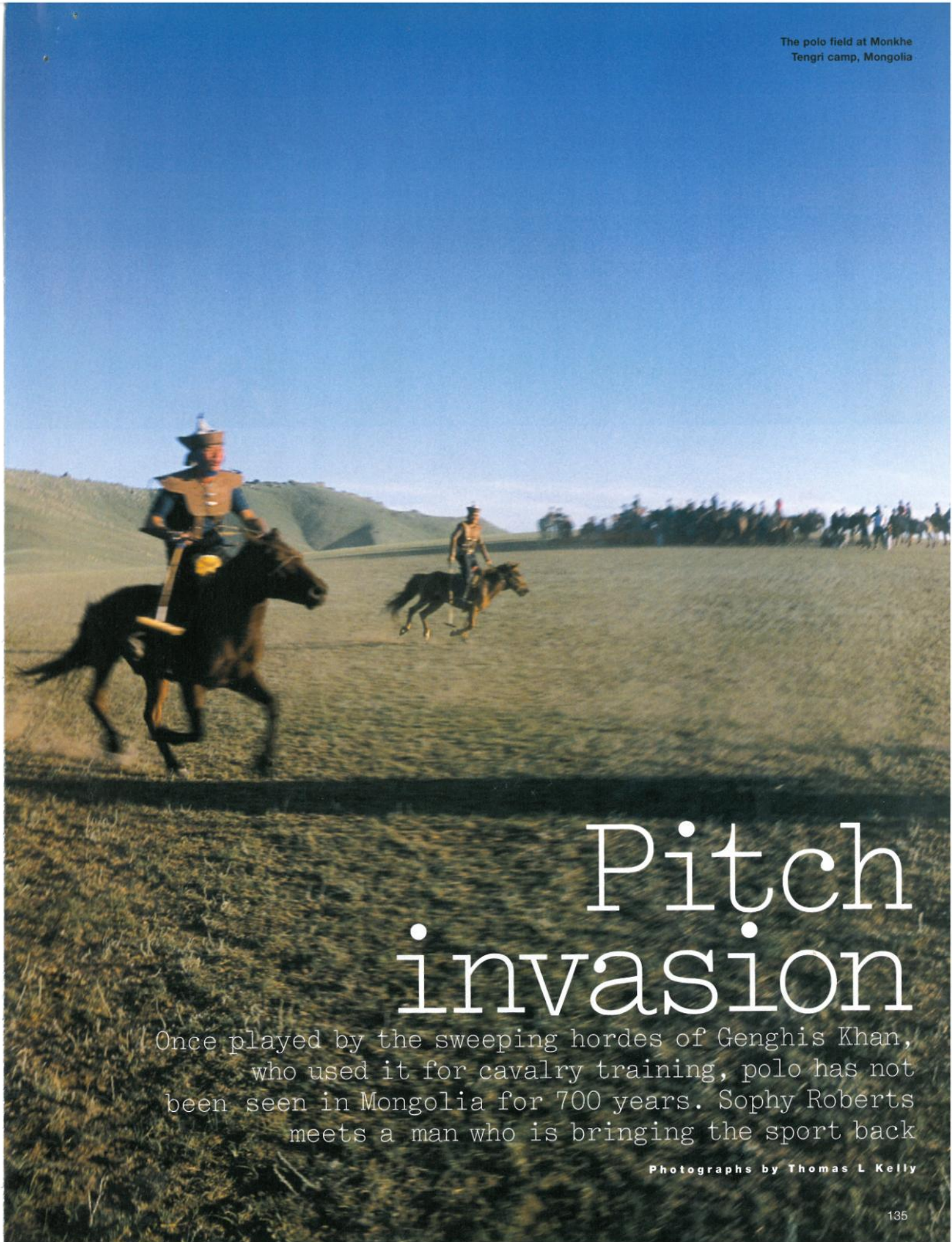
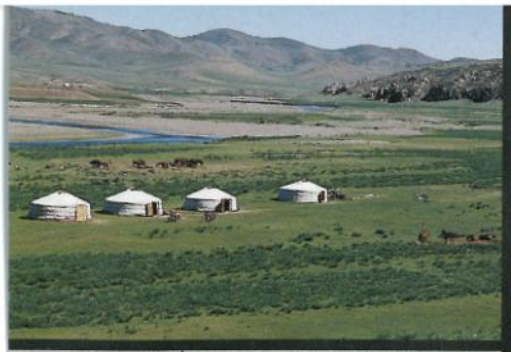
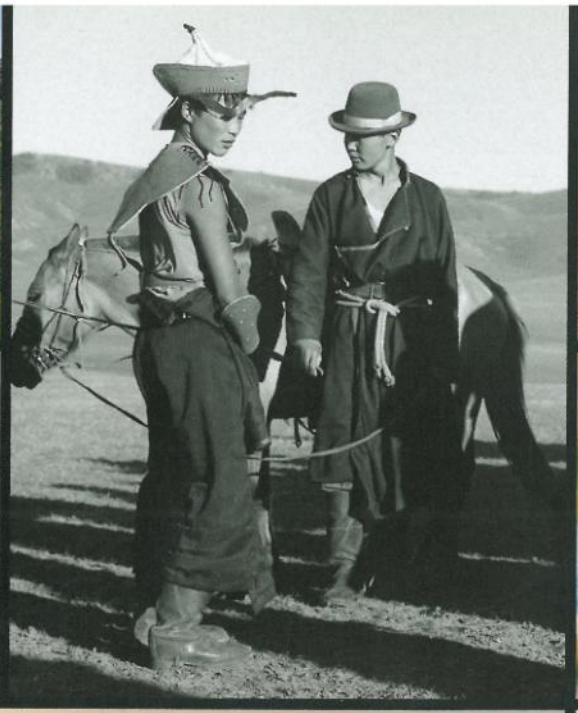


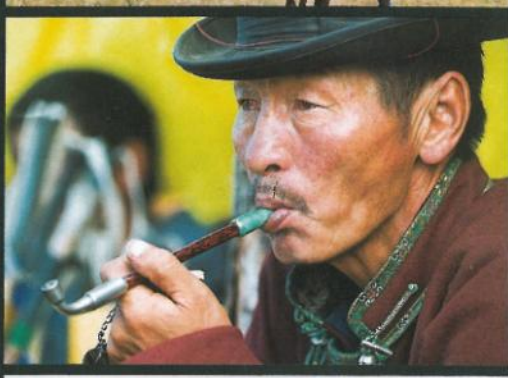
The polo field at Monkhe Tengri camp, Mongolia

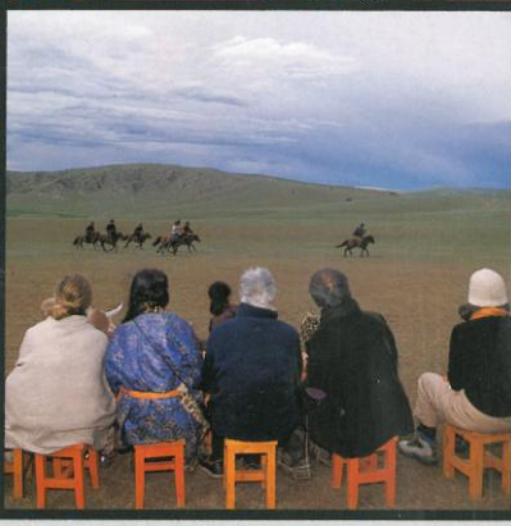
Pitch invasion

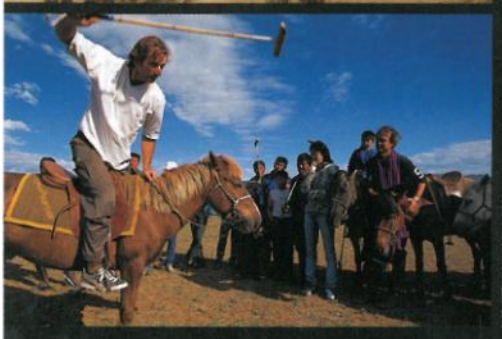
Once played by the sweeping hordes of Genghis Khan, who used it for cavalry training, polo has not been seen in Mongolia for 700 years. Sophy Roberts meets a man who is bringing the sport back

Photographs by Thomas L Kelly

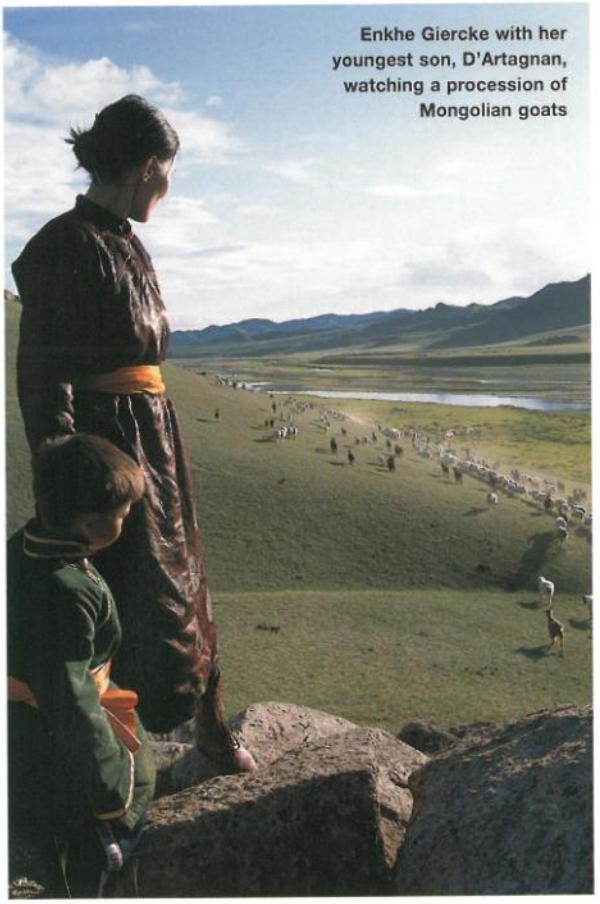





Clockwise from top left: *gers* on the banks of the River Orkhon; getting ready for a game; taking the field at Mongolia's first inter-state polo tournament; a spectator at the tournament; watching riders at Monkhe Tengri; members of the Chingis Khaan Polo Club with, *front row*, *from left*, Sophy Roberts, Christian Blanckaert, Benoît Perrier, and Enkhe and Christopher Giercke; Benoît Perrier passing on tips; a traditional leather belt; players in action at Monkhe Tengri; warming up for the tournament



Enkhe Giercke with her youngest son, D'Artagnan, watching a procession of Mongolian goats

WE ARE SITTING at a long, low wooden table on a hill rumoured to have been Genghis Khan's stamping ground, overlooking the River Orkhon in Mongolia's roadless heart. The sun slinks behind the far ridge of the Hangay Mountains, dusk spreading out across the austere emptiness below. Horses herd together for warmth. The river turns from silver to black. The nomads retreat to their *gers*, circular white tents like mushrooms in the landscape's green velvet folds. I have never seen a place more beautiful.

Our host is Christopher Giercke, a German film producer with a weathered tan and deep brown eyes. He is wearing a black shirt, breeches, black cord jacket and knee-high leather boots. His wife, Enkhe, a pretty Mongolian, is sitting at his side, wrapped in a hand-embroidered, peacock-blue, silk-and-sable-lined coat. She is pulling pensively on a tiny silver pipe. Giercke's audience includes a young Iranian academic, an opera singer and Christian Blanckaert, CEO of Hermès Sellier, the leather-making division of Hermès. We are listening, spellbound, to an account of the filming of *Apocalypse Now*, of cocaine-fuelled nights and live ammunition on set. Giercke, who was the assistant to Fred Roos, the film's co-producer, tells tale after tale. I am reminded of our telephone conversation the month before: like Kurtz, Giercke seemed too mad to be true.

For the past 10 years, Giercke has presided over a private camp, Monkhe Tengri, in this lonely wilderness in the Ovor-Hangay province. The valley, where Enkhe's family has lived for three centuries, is seven hours' drive from the capital, Ulaanbaatar, or 30 minutes from Mongolia's medieval capital of Karakorum, which was largely destroyed by a Ming invasion in the 14th century. The camp consists of 10 *gers* with comfortable, hand-painted beds, Mongolian cashmere blankets and cosy fires; from June it will be open to paying guests for the first time. But Giercke has a grander plan: to reintroduce polo to Mongolia, where the game was once played by the Khan's great hordes. It is a huge project, no less ambitious than controlling Francis Ford Coppola's army of 500 Filipino extras, plucked from the jungle and unhappily ensconced in a five-star hotel in Manila for a month.

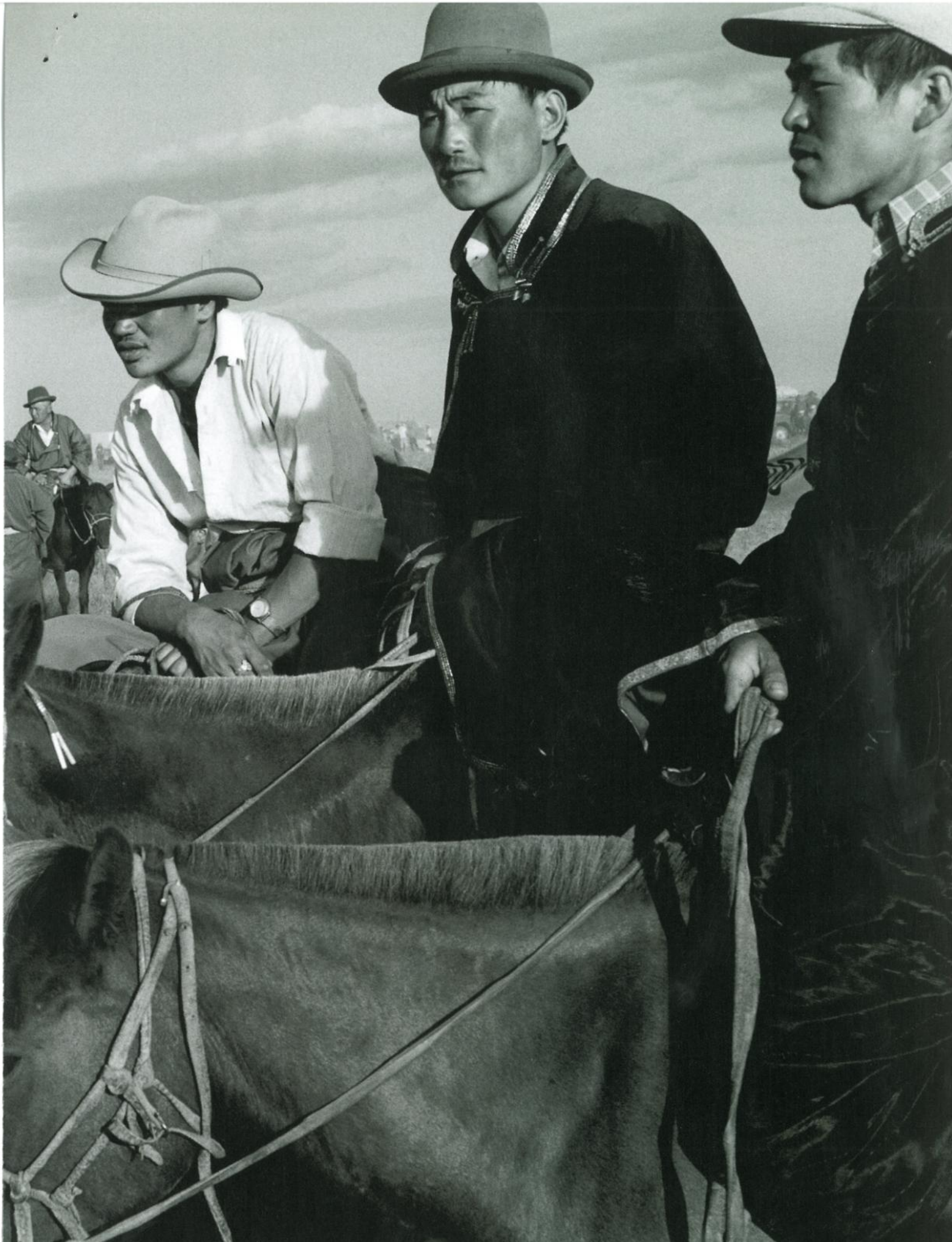
In the 13th century, the golden age of the Mongol Empire, a sport resembling polo became a training game for the Mongolian cavalry throughout High Asia. Horsemen learned to bend low at speed, like acrobats, to finish off fallen enemies with sabres, looting their prey on the ground by scooping up jewels that caught their eye. There are stories, too, of Genghis Khan knocking about an enemy's head as if it were a ball.

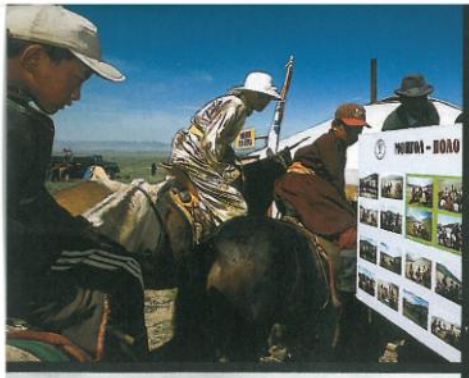
At that time, the Mongolian Empire stretched from the Black Sea in the west to the Sea of Japan. Buffeted by those great nation-grazers, Russia and China, the country has since shrunk to the size of Alaska, its population a quarter of Moscow's. Except for the odd Soviet-built factory, it is a little-scarred landscape, a place of nomads, steppes and infinite horizons; fenceless, with no laws of land ownership. Meadows are decked in larch, cowslip, edelweiss and daisies. The air smells of sage and wild thyme. In the silence, eagles float high on thermals, scouring gin-clear rivers from which a child pulls trout with his hand. It is also home of the taki, the original horse of High Asia – wild, almost extinct, with two more chromosomes than the domestic horse – as well as around four million short-legged, sure-footed Mongolian ponies, tough enough to survive the brutal winters, which are so unremitting that rocks split and the tails of cows snap off. Every family outside Ulaanbaatar owns at least a score of horses. Everyone can ride and children learn to sit in a saddle before they can walk. This remains true, despite the Russian army vehicles and Japanese imports beginning to emerge as alternative transport, mainly because Mongolia is so poor (nomads survive on a diet of mutton, mutton fat, moonshine vodka and milk). And outside the cities the country has only two asphalt roads.

The horse occupies the centre of the Mongolian world – as the hero of folk tales, the subject of songs, the adulated winner of a race even if it gallops riderless past the post. Jumdaan, a member of the Mongolian Polo Federation, describes the high regard in which the horse is held: 'I was born next to one. Even working in the city in Russia, studying at Moscow Film School, I could never lose my love of the horse. This is true of every Mongolian.'

'This is what inspired my project,' says Gierke, who over the past decade has got

Players from three different provinces relax between matches at Mongolia's inter-state polo tournament





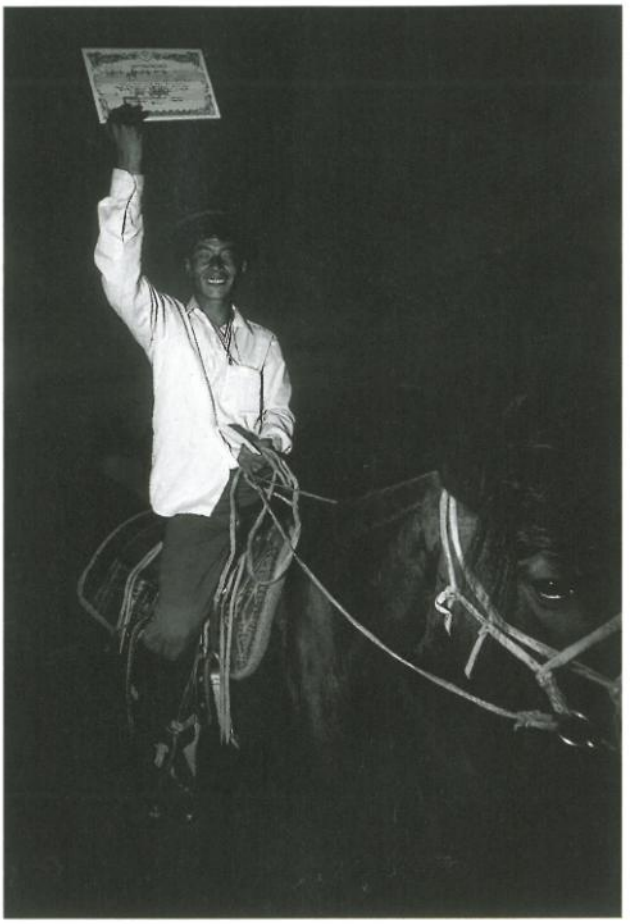
Clockwise from top left: spectators inspect team line-ups at the Mongolian Polo Federation's inter-state tournament; Enkhe and Christopher Giercke with their two sons, D'Artagnan and Ich Tenger, and Enkhe's brother, *far left*; a team, dressed in the traditional costume of leather-and-silver warrior hats, takes the field in the inter-state tournament; spectators enjoying the action; Munkhbat, who won a silver medal for wrestling at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, judging the country's inter-state tournament; the banks of the River Orkhon, in Ovor-Hangay province, where Christopher and Enkhe Giercke's Monkhe Tengri camp is based. *Opposite*, one of the victorious players from the Gobi Desert

to know Mongolia by scouting for film locations. 'This passion for horses exists nowhere else in the world. They all have horses and are excellent riders. We can bring back their martial art. It can become a national sport for the people, not the elitist game it is in the West. Watch them play polo – it's like war, the memory of what the Mongols once were.'

The first ball of the modern game in Mongolia was struck at Giercke's camp in July 1998. Giercke (who lives in Mongolia from May to September, dividing the rest of his time between Paris and Kathmandu) had invited two friends to stay. Jim and Kristjan Edwards, owners of Tiger Tops Hotel in Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park, are both polo players; Giercke is not (although his wife and young sons play). Between the three of them, they founded the Chingis Khaan Polo Club (Chingis Khaan, seen on the players' shirts, is a variant spelling of Genghis Khan). The Edwards brought with them six leather saddles, 35 sticks (just over a metre long, a good 25 centimetres shorter than standard), 30 yellow polo shirts and 50 balls from Harrods. They also brought a teacher, Colonel Raj Kalaan, from the Delhi Polo Club. Foreign sponsorship came from friends: among them, Enkhsaikhan Jargalsaikhan, the Mongolian Ambassador to the United Nations; and David Shields, former boss of the New York Stock Exchange. Giercke recalls offering US$5 prize money to local herders. This inspired competitiveness (in Mongolia, five bucks buys a lot) and word spread quickly. The following year, the Edwards returned. Together with Giercke they sponsored another 100 sticks and brought with them Aimée Junker, who once worked with the Maharajah of Udaipur's polo ponies, and Nikhilendra Singh, a player for Jodhpur. The nomads were beginning to get the hang of the game, and Giercke heard rumours of the sport spreading across the steppe.

In 1999, a nomad from Dorno-Gobi, 1,300km south of Monkhe Tengri in the Gobi Desert, was holidaying at the Orkhon waterfall, two hours' ride from Giercke's camp. She heard talk of a horse-back game being played by the local herders. She returned to her husband, Erdenebilig, the village elder, and insisted he make contact with the German in charge and ask him for sticks. Erdenebilig did, and has since organised tournaments with the neighbouring three provinces.

OUT ON THE PITCH is Erdenebilig's squad. Fifteen players have driven for four days to get here, their horses in the back of an open truck. Their opponents are the Chingis Khaan Polo Club. They are playing with a Mongolian ball fashioned out of plaited hide. It's a far cry from Cowdray Park (but far more chic, notwithstanding the latter's Cartier diamonds, Kidds and handsome Argentinians in tight-fitting trousers). Some of the players wear yellow shirts and warrior-like hats with painted silver tips sticking up from their brown-leather crowns. The opposition are in sun-bleached fedoras and *dels*, side-buttoned robes belted with wide, coloured silk, worn with knee-high leather boots crumpled at the ankle. We sit on the edge of a rough pitch; one goal is marked by a 3,000-year-old stone obelisk, the other by a stick. Christian Blanckaert, wrapped in Hermès cashmere, shares *airag*, fermented mare's milk, with Enkhe, sipping from a silver-embossed bowl. Giercke smokes a Cohiba Robusto with his Mongolian father-in-law, who prefers snuff, dressed in a simple brown *del* bound by a saffron-yellow belt. Giercke's children, Ich Tenger, aged six, and D'Artagnan, four, play with their nomad cousins in front of the wooden table around which we all sit drinking. On the pitch, Benoît Perrier, from the Polo Club du Domaine de Chantilly (owned by Patrick Guerrand-Hermès), teaches the Mongols how to improve their stickwork: 'You must be as you kiss a girl. Please – slow down the swing.'



'Polo can become a national sport. Watch them play – it is like war, the memory of what the Mongols once were'

Erdenebilig's team is here not only for Perrier's tuition. They have also come for the first inter-state Mongolian polo tournament, due to be held later in the week. It has been organised by the Mongolian Polo Federation (MPF), an organisation founded by a group of five Mongolians in 2000 when Giercke, who brought another 200 sticks to the country that year (followed by 500 in 2001), could no longer afford to keep funding requests. The sticks, made in India, cost US$15 each, balls US$10. This is not, however, the main expense. Mongolia is vast and, if the game were ever to take off, paid polo coaches would be expected to visit the farthest-flung regions. Currently, polo is being played in six of the 21 provinces. By 2006, the 800th anniversary of Genghis Khan law, Giercke and the MPF want to see the game played at the State Naadam (the country's largest sporting festival) in Ulaanbaatar. They hope polo will find equal footing with the other major national sports of wrestling, horse racing and archery.

The MPF's 11 board members include Jumdaan, a former child jockey and horse stuntman, now a major Mongolian film director; Sodmandakh, a top Mongolian lawyer; Davaadorj, general manager of

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The aftermath of the 40km 'Big Race', in which 300 stallions take part

Pitch invasion

Continued from page 141

the Mongolian Sports Federation; Enkhe (this is how Giercke keeps his hat in the ring); and Munkhbat, a giant of a man with inscrutable hooded eyes, famous throughout Mongolia for bagging his nation's first ever Olympic silver in the 1968 Mexico City games. He is a wrestler and regards polo as a fellow martial art. He is also a man of few words: 'I am very proud we can show to the people something that looks like a real sport,' he declares.

Later that week, Karakorum's two-day *Ikh Khurd* ('Big Race') is in full swing. This is where the MPF's first inter-state polo tournament is being held. Nine teams are playing, from three different provinces, in addition to three all-female teams (the 'boy meets girl' dimension is turning out to be an important attraction). The pitches are in open steppe. The walls of Erdene Zou, a 16th-century monastery, flank one horizon, with the road from Ulaanbaatar tipping off the other edge. The match, meant to start at 9am, is running six hours late. This is because the morning has been spent haggling over the pitch: this is a vast steppe and the area selected sits on the only incline in sight.

Attention has also been on the 'Big Race', an event held every three years (the next one is due in 2004), which attracts around 10,000 nomads who travel by horse, bike, truck or Jeep from as far away as Ulaanbaatar and the Gobi desert. Three hundred stallions take part, ridden by child jockeys in brightly coloured silks and paper racing hats. Earlier in the morning, they had taken an emotional leave of their parents (occasionally, a jockey is killed) and ridden out 40km across the steppe to a point from which they galloped back to a finish line marked by the crowds. The winning horse has since returned, riderless; and most of the spectators are drunk. We are waiting now for the polo to start.

Within minutes, a crowd has formed, hundreds of people on horseback, bending the unmarked pitch-lines. They surge forward in their saddles, standing tall in stirrups, hollering as the players thunder up and down in billowing clouds of dust, smashing their sticks, driving swarms of grasshoppers from the sere grass. These people have never seen a game of polo before. A commentator speaks into a crackling microphone wired up to a car battery. We sit under a gold-braided awning, sharing *araig*. Sticks snap. A hat is knocked off; the player leans low at a trot and picks it up. The ball disappears down a marmot hole. Each seven-and-a-half-minute chukka runs over. No one scores, so the goal posts are moved. 'Right of way,' 'no crossing,' 'line of the ball' – all Western technicalities – are ignored. 'They play crazy,' Perrier whispers in my ear, 'but my God they can ride.'

There is no treading in of divets and no penalties, at least until a critical nil-nil draw between Erdenebilig's team and the Chingis Khaan team. After lengthy deliberation, they go into five minutes of extra time. Still no goals. Erdenebilig refuses to play another game; he claims his horses will die. Unlike the local players, they had no change of pony and the animals have also been used in the ladies' tournament. 'Let Jumdaan and the wrestler settle it,' announces Giercke, shrugging off any suggestion of turning to the Hurlingham rule book. 'I think hitting at speed is one option, or the two captains fight. I think fighting is the more interesting and it's better than shooting. But if Erdenebilig says his horse is going to die, it's difficult.'

They go to a shoot-out, each player has one shot each, at a 30-metre distance from goal. By now our shadows are stretching out across the width of the field, the dust is settling in the evening light, the grasshoppers resuming the soft, incessant lullaby peculiar to Mongolia. Finally, a ball slips between the posts. Erdenebilig has won. The crowd unfurls across the steppe, rallying around the winners. An old drunk, stumbling up to the judge's tent, presents Munkhbat the wrestler with his lame chestnut horse. Under those dark, reptilian lids, he flashes a smile – like a glint of the silver River Orkhon – and disappears into the dust as the crowd hurries to see Erdenebilig receive his US$200 prize.

Map: Graham Parrish

Polo marks

Steppes East (01285 651010; fax: 885888; www.steppeseast.co.uk) arranges trips to Mongolia. Prices from £1,995 per person for an 11-day holiday, including flights, accommodation and transport. **Air China** (020 7630 0919; fax: 7630 7792; www.air-china.co.uk) flies to Ulaanbaatar, via Beijing, with a compulsory one-night stop in the Chinese capital, from £695 in May. A visa is required to enter Mongolia – these are available through **Zierer Visa Service** (020 7833 2700; www.visaservice.co.uk) for £57, or directly through the **Mongolian Embassy** (020 7937 5238) for £30. To stay at Monkhe Tengri camp, contact **Nomadic Connection** (tel/fax: 00 976 11 32 92 42; e-mail: nomadconnect@magicnet.mn), the Giercke's travel company. The camp is available for groups of 10 to 15 from June to September. Monkhe Tengri has riding and polo facilities, cooks, guides for fishing and hunting, and 4x4 vehicles to drive guests to and from Ulaanbaatar airport. A 10-day stay is from US$25,000 for a group of 10. Children under 10 stay free, those up to 16 half price. Nannies are available on request. For information on polo in Mongolia, contact Jumdaan (e-mail: mglpolofed@magicnet.mn)