

One small steppe...

This page, a volcano overlooking White Lake, Mongolia.
Opposite page, a guard at the Erdene Zuu monastery, Kharkhorin

The last great wildernesses – of Mongolia, Namibia, Kyrgyzstan, Australia and Alaska – are going smart. Bring on splendid isolation, says Will Gethin

Trend report
Wilderness

This page, late afternoon at the White Lake. Opposite page, a mother tending her children's horses



Trend report
Wilderness

Mongolia

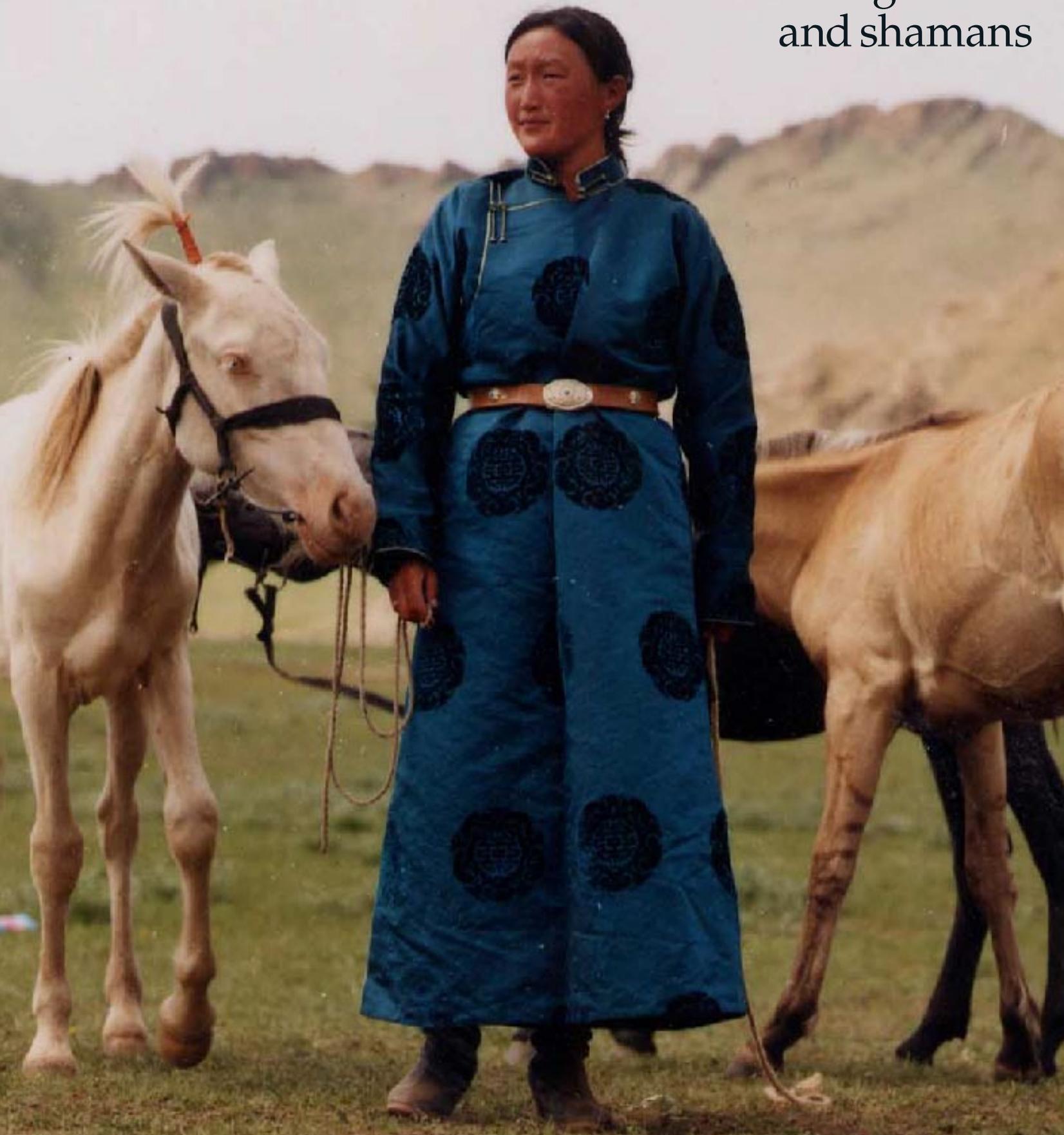
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o end, as far as the eye can see. The plains stretch on and on, seas of soft grass bathed in shifting light, now and again punctuated by squat white gers (felt tents), or cut through with snaking rivers. No boundaries, fences or paddocks, few roads or trees – just one horizon stretching vastly into the next.

Suddenly, cantering hooves and tremulous neighs announce a horseman drifting behind his herds – ‘Shoo! Shoo!’ he cries – urging on his miscellany of camels, yaks, goats and horses. Resplendent in trilby and robe, with a thick yellow sash wrapped about his waist, he brandishes his urga (lassooing stick) at an ocean of wispy blue sky.

This is Outer Mongolia – ‘Land of Blue Heaven’. One of the last great wildernesses on earth, it is a vast, landlocked kingdom

It is an epic land
of wild horses,
howling wolves
and shamans



A traditional
Mongolian saddle

Trend report
Wilderness

Namibia

An epic wasteland, Namibia is defined by its desert, which constantly changes colour, from deepest red to silver. This year, there have been the biggest rains here since 1976, so the desert has exploded with growth and is more spectacular than ever. Go now. The size of Great Britain and France combined, it has a population of two million. Its wild canvas is moulded with canyon valleys, the highest sand-dunes in the world and volcanic activity. Inaccessible and remote, Namibia is, simply, something else. 'You can't get more isolated or more beautiful than Namibia,' says Frances Geoghegan of Africa Travel. But while most visitors go to Etosha, Sossusvlei or the Skeleton

Coast, the new great uncharted quarters are Kaokoland near Angola and the Caprivi Strip by the borders of Botswana and Zambia. In Kaokoland, stay at the Serra Cafema Camp. This is wild, out of this world. The chalets are beautiful, and a new management is taking it back to earlier glories. Only locals are employed and profits go back into the community. View

crocodile from a boat, take a quadbiking hike up rugged mountains, across tabletop hills and beautiful dunes, and chill out with the Himba tribe in the desert. Along the slender 280-mile Caprivi Strip in the tropical wetlands of the north-east, there's a more watery Namibia to explore. Ntwala (see 101

Best Hotels) is a truly sensational new camp. **UK reservations** Africa Travel Centre (tel: 0845 450 1533; africatravel.co.uk).

These trips mix up creature comforts and roughing it

between Russia and China that was stowed away like a stolen treasure for the best part of the last century – an isolated Communist state until 1990, when it became a democracy and opened its doors to the West.

It is an epic place, etched with vast lakes, immense gorges and gaping volcanoes, and teeming with wildlife. It is a land of wild horses and herdsmen, of howling wolves and chanting monks, throat-singing minstrels and mysterious shamans. Kazakh eagle-hunters roam the Altai mountains in the west and shamanic reindeer tribes dwell in the northern taiga (coniferous) forests that border Siberia. Three times the size of France with a population of only 2.8 million, Mongolia is the ancestral home of Genghis Khan, who seeded the largest overland

empire that the world has ever known. Some 800 years later, it is sparsely inhabited by one of the last truly nomadic people.

It is countries like Mongolia that we now crave. We have been so busy getting our sticky fingers on so much of the world's surface that we long for the outer reaches, the edges of places. We want the world. We want it before it melts or sinks, blows or shrinks. We want to go on a journey, to get our hands dirty, to have a run-in with a beast of the night, to be scared, to be thrilled, to lose ourselves in nature's extremities – the deserts, icecaps and flood-plains, the salt flats and endless steppes. We want escape and adventure, we want to go back to our roots, to stand solidly within nature, yet tread lightly. We want to meet people who

Kyrgyzstan

One of the planet's highest places, Kyrgyzstan's snow-capped Tien Shan mountains – 'mountains of heaven' – are home to soaring vultures and eagles and are covered with forest peaks. Valleys and hills are linked by rolling steppe. Iridescent lakes act as mirrors to this natural grandeur and arctic plateaus are inhabited by grazing yaks and prowling wolves.

A remote and mysterious kingdom, Kyrgyzstan was off-limits to foreigners until 15 years ago. Its golden age was that of the ancient Silk Road trade route. Alexandra Tolstoy, whose book *The Last Secrets of the Silk Road* relays her experience of retracing this route on horse and camel, hosts tailor-made riding trips here with her Uzbek husband, drawing on their unsurpassed knowledge gained from years of riding in the most obscure places. Canter past itinerant shepherds and glacial rivers and through vast meadows of lavender and mint. It is spectacular.

Wake up and look through the opening of your tent to see amazing stars and the sun rising in a beautiful valley with clouds hovering over the trees. You may even stumble across a game of *ulak tartysh* – like polo, but with a goat's skull for a ball. With little tourist infrastructure and few western visitors, Kyrgyzstan is an illustrious adventure playground whose time has come: its mountains are uniquely suited to sports like snowboarding, heli-skiing and rafting.

UK reservations Wild and Exotic (tel: 01439 748401; wildandexotic.co.uk).

are like we used to be before we became like us. Above all, we want to be blown away.

Outer Mongolia is one of these massive landmasses, wildernesses that also feel like the last places on earth. It is to these lost continents at the back of the world that affluent, conscientious thrill-seekers are now heading: Namibia, Georgia, Alaska, the more inaccessible parts of Australia, the Libyan desert. These are the new-wave old-world Shangri-Las of adventure travel – vast, uninhabited spaces beneath endless skies.

The market is booming. Karina Moreton of Panoramic Journeys, who organised my trip (and Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman's televised motorcycle ride across Mongolia), says: 'People have always been drawn to the remote, the undiscovered, but even more so now. Once, travelling in these types of places was only for the intrepid, but now people like us concentrate on taking the edge off the discomfort.'

Next year Panoramic Journeys will be opening its own ger camp in Mongolia, exclusively for its clients. You won't catch sight of a single other tourist and the camp will be wonderfully kitted out: double beds with crisp sheets, fabulous horses, a fleet of great local staff and planes to fly you out on trips to more distant parts of the country.

Another man relishing this new trend is daredevil Jonny Bealby, whose adventure

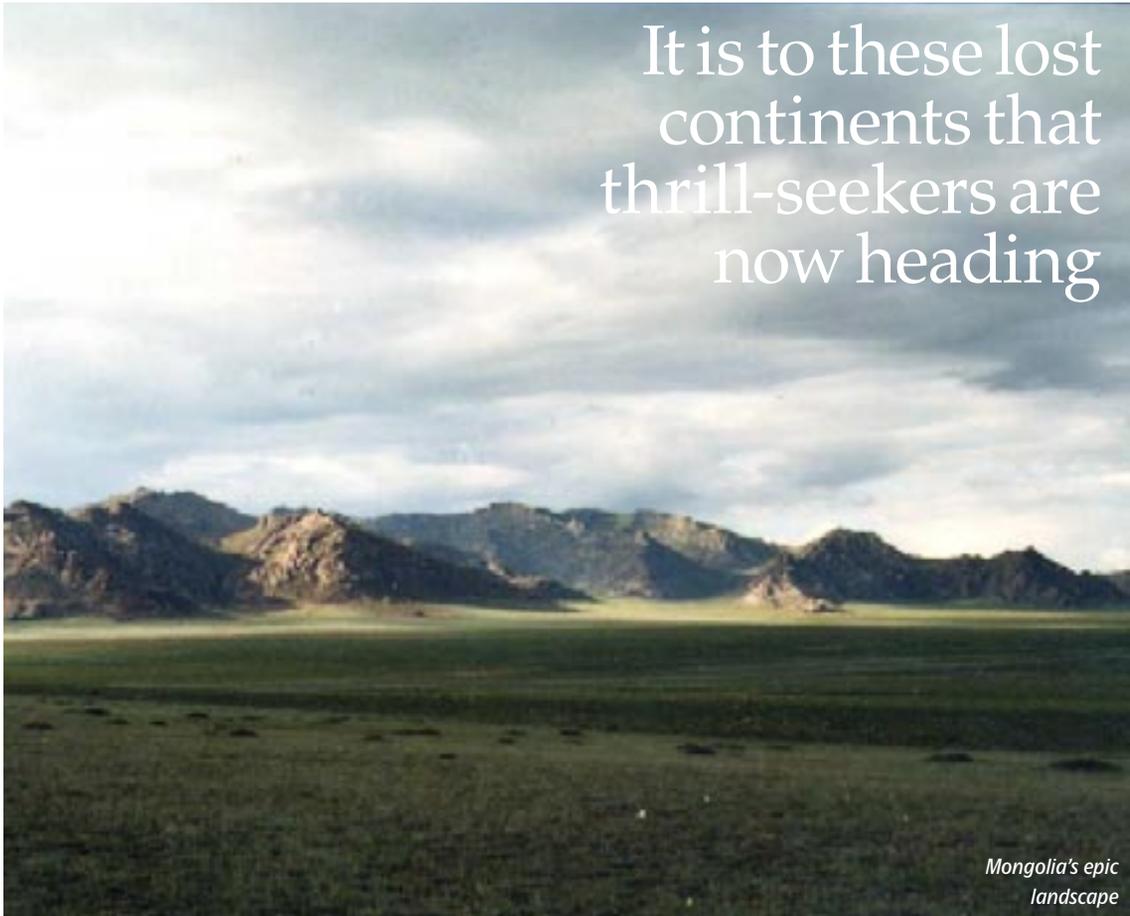
travel company Wild Frontiers (tel: 020 7736 3968; wildfrontiers.co.uk) provides a cushioned springboard to some of the most difficult and unstable of these regions, from Tibet and the Hindu Kush to the Caucasus countries (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and the 'Stans' (including Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan).

'People are looking for adventure,' says Bealby. 'They no longer want just a holiday – they want to go and explore new cultures, and grow. The more original and out there the trip, the better.'

Do people ever get spooked by having to rough it? 'Our trips are a mixture of creature comforts and roughing it,' says Bealby. 'Rather than go to all the most smartest hotels, we select the most interesting option available – in Pakistan, you'll stay in a beautiful hotel one night and a rope bed in the Kailash valley the next.'

Charlie Carlow, the viscount founder of Sydney-based Wilderness Australia (tel: 00 61 2 9231 2113; wildernessaustralia.com.au), which specialises in tailor-made safaris Down Under, is also catering to this growing demand. 'People are looking to get away from the mainstream and seek out five-star experiences over five-star opulence.'

Inspired by Africa's increasing wilderness market, Carlow has imitated it in Australia, with an emphasis on first-rate guides and an



It is to these lost
continents that
thrill-seekers are
now heading

Mongolia's epic
landscape

You won't catch sight of a single other tourist

Trend report
Wilderness

Australia

The vast continent at the bottom of the world is one of the most diverse environments on earth – with a desolate desert, tropical rainforests and a mass of home-grown creatures you can't find anywhere else (just consider the wallaby, kangaroo, koala).

Australia still has vast stretches of uncharted territory that, until very recently, have been hard to access with any comfort. Unblemished spots include parts of the Cape York Peninsula, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and the pristine wilderness of south-west Tasmania.

Straying off the beaten track used to be pretty rough. But now Wilderness Australia is blazing a trail through the wilds, making it possible to explore them in style.

Its flagship adventure trip starts in a isolated, indigenous region of Arnhemland in the Northern Territory (accessible by permit only); local Aborigines guide you through virgin woodlands and flood-plains. Stay at the heavenly Bamurrus Plains in the pandanus bush, overlooking wildlife grazing, and end up at Bullo River (amid half a million acres of Outback), where you can take part in the activities of the cattle station.

Wilderness Australia can also lay on heli-swallowing: typical Aussie camping, but you chopper in rather than trek to untouched locations and eat fabulous food on full linen before falling asleep under the stars.

UK reservations

Wilderness Australia can be booked through Tim Best Travel (tel: 020 7591 0300; timbesttravel.net).

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attempt to surprise and surpass expectations with the experience, and an authenticity that they could not find any other way. 'This is what people remember much more than a fabulous five-star in Sydney,' he explains.

Tim Best Travel (tel: 020 7591 0300; timbesttravel.net), a pioneer of old-school adventure travel in South America and Africa, has also experienced a surge in requests for more extreme territories. 'Over the past five years or so, people are choosing to be less and less sedentary,' says Best. 'In Africa, people used to go on more easygoing safaris in the Masai Mara or Serengeti. Now they are asking to elope into the wild and, most importantly, escape other tourists.'

One of Best's biggest sellers is small-group hunting trips with the Kalahari bushmen

along the borders of Namibia and Botswana: the rite-of-passage hunt of an antelope that commemorates the transition from boyhood to man. He also recommends Kenya's Matthews Range and countries such as Niger and Mali, which can be expensive because they are difficult to access, but well worth the schlepp. For the ultimate safari, he suggests fly-camping in south Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve, the world's largest reserve without human inhabitants.

Like all industry old hands, Frances Geoghegan, MD of the Africa Travel Centre (tel: 0845 450 1533; africatravelcentre.co.uk) champions Namibia: 'It's the number one hotspot for adventure travel off the beaten track. It's out there.' Geoghegan also marks out Gabon as the next big story in Africa: 'At

Alaska

North America's last true wilderness is an intoxicating mystery – a place where midnight suns bask over a massive, uninhabited void, endlessly locked in winter. This ancient, frozen otherworld is remarkably unexplored. Concerned only with basic survival, the original natives stayed along the outer reaches, scarcely venturing into the perilous core. The Gold Rush of the late 1800s saw a small migration. Now people come, not for gold, but for the state's haunting beauty. Head straight for Ultima Thule, mythically revered as 'a land remote beyond reckoning', engulfed within the 13.2 million-acre Wrangell St Elias National Park, itself within North America's largest protected landmass. Step into a bush plane at Chitina airport, fly over towering mountains, lush valleys and endless glaciers, and land at the lodge 45 minutes later – 100 miles from the end of the road and 50 miles from other human life. Here, under the wing of famous bush pilots Paul and Donna Claus, you can go flight-seeing over ice fields and lakes, and land on glaciers where no one has been before. Venture deep into the undisturbed world of wild beasts – grizzly bears, moose and coyotes – most of which have never seen people. Comfort-camp in the wild, listening to the sound of ice cracking all around. Gargantuan rocks, big seas, vast skies and perpetual twilight all do the heart-stopping trick.

UK reservations Ultima Thule Outfitters (tel: 001 907 688 1200; ultimathulelodge.com).

the moment, there are no flights here, but it's going to be mega – great for viewing elephants and whales and totally wild.'

In South America the hip Explora Hotel concept (masterly design, comfort and exploration in inhospitable places – visit explora.com) has recently been hosting trips into the wilds of Bolivia and Argentina, immersing guests in some dramatic landscapes, from extraterrestrial salt flats to monstrous Patagonian glaciers. The new hotshot operator in this area, Blue Parallel (blueparallel.com), offers short, week-long taster excursions to these more daring South American destinations. Even Gordon Campbell Gray, proprietor of London's slick One Aldwych, is considering opening a remote lodge in the wilds of the Falklands.

But in exploring these 'last places on earth' are we making 'remote' extinct? As Karina Moreton says: 'While we strive to meet client requests for ever remoter places, we are careful to look after the unspoilt wilderness they are seeking in the first place. We have to strike a balance between pleasing clients and helping preserve the country'. With most of the aforementioned companies supporting conservation projects and rural communities in the countries they visit, this kind of sustainable tourism may safeguard both the high-end wilderness market and the prized frontiers they deliver.

Back in Mongolia, we sit inside a family ger as a weathered woman cheerily prepares us a late lunch of freshly sliced beef wrapped in intricate pastry parcels. She is draped in a long velvet robe and her cheeks are an idiosyncratic Mongolian cherry-brown.

'We've been camped here for two days,' she says, getting up to poke the fire in the wood-burning stove. 'It's a good spot for

grazing the animals. We'll have to move again in a month, if the weather gets dry, so that we can be close to a river.'

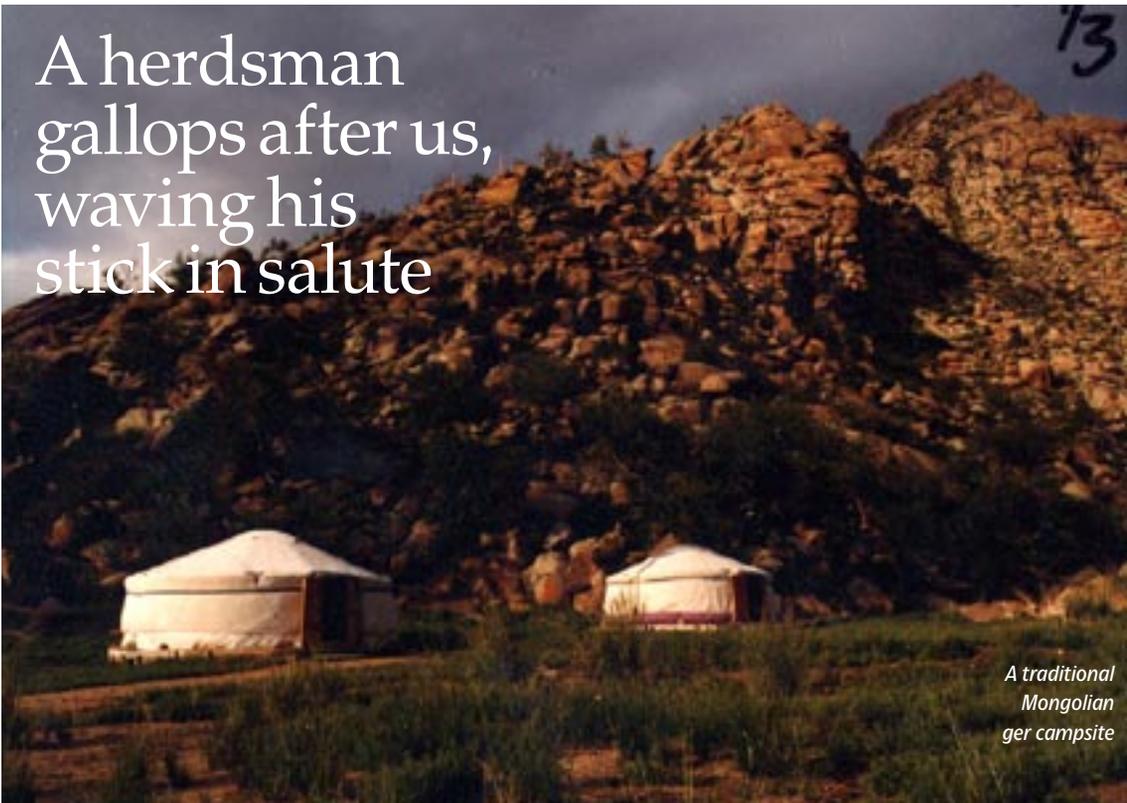
Standing over a large barrel in the corner, a young girl ferments mare's milk, stirring it slowly with a wooden pole. This airag is the favoured drink of Mongolians. A bowl is passed around in a clockwise direction; westerners may be glad to pass it on, so bitter is it to the uninitiated. The father pours vodka into a bowl; he dips his ring finger into the liquid, touches it to his forehead and flicks it to the sky as an offering to the spirits. Bringing out the family photo album, he points to a picture of himself on horseback, with two slain marmots slung over the saddle behind him. As vodka freely flows, we exchange songs.

Afterwards, tired and a little drunk, we leave the ger in a clockwise direction, walking out backwards, as dictated by superstition. In a typical gesture of Mongolian hospitality, a young herdsman gallops after us, waving his urga to salute us on our way.

Later that day we reach Bayangobi on the edge of the Gobi desert, the rolling steppe merging with desert wastelands spliced with gold sands, rocky-red grit and green scrub. We gallop across the dunes at the back end of sunset, enraptured by the fresh air, the freedom and the open space. The mountains turn a smoky blue as thunder rumbles and clouds bruise. Escaping grassy scrub, we reach crisp dunes and gallop on.

UK reservations Panoramic Journeys (tel: 01608 811183; panoramicjourneys.com).

Rates From £1,290 a person for a bespoke 10-day trip, excluding flights. Air China (tel: 020 7744 0800; air-china.co.uk) flies from London Heathrow to Mongolia Ulaan Bataar via Beijing from £582 return. □



A herdsman gallops after us, waving his stick in salute

A traditional Mongolian ger campsite