

TRAVEL

www.thisistravel.co.uk



Lost world: a ger camp near Khoton Nuur Lake, Tvanbogd National Park

Horses, wrestling and meat balls. Welcome to Genghis Khan country

WILL GETHIN

One steppe beyond

GENGHIS Khan has been championed by The New York Times as Man of the Millennium and historian John Mann, in his book, *Genghis Khan — Life, Death and Resurrection*, surmises why: “Before Genghis Khan, all cultures lived confined by climate, geography and ignorance and now the world is a global village.”

In 1206, Khan united disparate Mongol tribes, founding the world's most expansive ever empire. By 1280 it stretched from Beijing to Hungary.

Yet it seems impossible to imagine that the Outer Mongolia I recently travelled through was once a leader on the global stage. It is a vast empty land, three times the size of France, where half the 2.5 million population are nomads living in felt tents, travelling across the steppe with their livestock in rhythm with the seasons.

A Nomadic Encounter tour with Panoramic Journeys takes you under the skin of Mongolian culture. We saw wrestling tournaments, helped nomads herd and milk their yaks, and galloped across the Gobi desert. Traversing endless vistas of undulating grasslands beneath coniferous mountains, we crossed rivers, spotted wolves and wild horses, picnicked and fished by vast

Nomadic life in Mongolia is still traditional



WILL GETHIN

lakes, and roamed the edges of gorges and volcanoes.

Visiting nomadic families in their gers (round tents) we feasted on fried dumplings and meat balls and dried curds, typically washed down with a bowl of airag, fermented mare's milk. Staying in ger camp hotels, we were treated to delicious versions of this classic cuisine.

To modern Mongolians, Khan represents a leader who gave a sense of direction to the country, introduced a celebrated management system, preached religious tolerance and created political stability. This year's 800th anniversary of

the Mongolian state has inspired many festivals. In Kharkhorin, the ancient former capital established by Khan — then called Karokorum — Mongolians gather to venerate the legend of Khan with a two-day festival.

Reaching Kharkhorin, we head for Erdene Zuu — Mongolia's oldest monastery — for an outdoor performance of the opera Karokorum. Inside the monastery walls, Khan-style warriors parade on horseback, resplendent in fur-lined helmets and brandishing bows and arrows. The opera is set at a time when Mongolia was the epicentre of the world stage.

“It's been composed to demonstrate the globalisation in Karokorum in the 13th century,” director Bold Sergelen tells me as people feverishly claim their seats. “A centre of trade and culture, it was home to many different nations

and religions.” I learn of plans to move the capital from Ulan Bator back to Kharkhorin to commemorate Mongolia's heritage.

The arrival of Mongolia's president Nambaryn Enkhbayar is met with applause as sentries raise fiery torches towards a red-streaked sky, bringing the opera to life.

The next morning, in a valley overlooking Kharkhorin, monks and nomads sit silently before a giant silk tangka of the Buddha Maitreya, deity of the future.

“The president” points a grinning nomad as a row of seven horsemen ride leisurely uphill, decked out in duds, fedoras and boots. As President Enkhbayar begins his first of three revolutions around the tangka in accordance with superstition, I ask what message he'd like to tell the world:

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Devout: young monks return home after worship

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

“Just as Mongolia has changed world history before, so it will have influence today, as we remember past lessons about responsibility and allowing religions to coexist,” he says.

When the Mongol dynasty imploded in 1368, Outer Mongolia disappeared from world consciousness. In the 20th century, communist Russia administered a 69-year period of repression painting Khan as a vicious tyrant, demonising Buddhism as “opium”, destroying hundreds of monasteries and killing thousands of monks. It was only in 1990, when Mongolia's doors opened to the West,

that the monks returned to monasteries and Khan was once again celebrated as a hero. His image can be found on postage stamps and vodka bottles; rock bands and institutes bear his name.

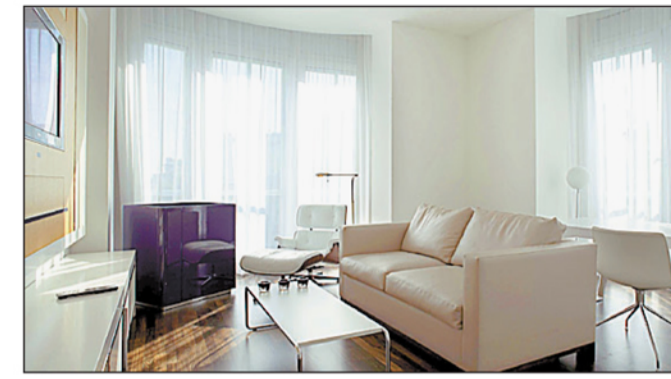
“Khan the dynastic founder has become a symbol of unity and strength”

We visited a herding festival where nomads gathered around a grassy arena on horseback with yellow sashes and trilby hats. These eager spectators stand tall in their stirrups, peering over cars to view finishing jockeys. Roars of applause greet a nomad's victorious lasso as a horse bucks around the stadium. I have never seen better riding ability than that of the Mongolians.

Later, lama Baasanuren gives a tour of a new lama training school at the Erdene Zuu Monastery, explaining that because of the communist purges, there is a lack of young monks. “We need an inspirational leader like the Dalai Lama for Buddhism to develop,” he says.

Meanwhile the ancient cult of Khan shows signs of developing into a religion. Within Mongolia — a nation threatened by economic hardship — Khan, as dynastic founder, ancestor and idol — has become a symbol of strength, peace and unity.

WAY TO GO
Panoramic Journeys (01608 811183, www.panoramicjourneys.com) tailor-makes 10-day itineraries in Mongolia from £1,290pp excluding flights. Air China (020 7744 0800, www.air-china.co.uk) has return flights to Ulan Bator via Beijing from £582. Other operators include Exodus (0870 240 5550, www.exodus.co.uk), which does 15-day tours from £1,749pp including flights, and The Oriental Caravan (020 7582 0716, www.theorientalcaravan.com), which has 16-day trips from £1,485pp excluding flights. Key Mongolian festivals for early 2007: Tsagaan Sar Festival (Mongolian New Year, 18 February), Ice Festival (20/21 February), Camel Festival (23/24 February), Nauriz Kazakh Spring Festival (22 March). Panoramic Journeys does trips to all of these.



It's all ME, ME, ME in Madrid

THE Madrid hotel scene gets caliente with the opening today of the ME Madrid Reina Victoria (from the Sol Melia group) in Plaza de Santa Ana. Originally set to be a Hard Rock hotel, things changed and ... well, now it has no excuse for not being a roaring success designed, as it is, by architect Keith Hobbs (Nobu, the Clarence and Parrot Cay).

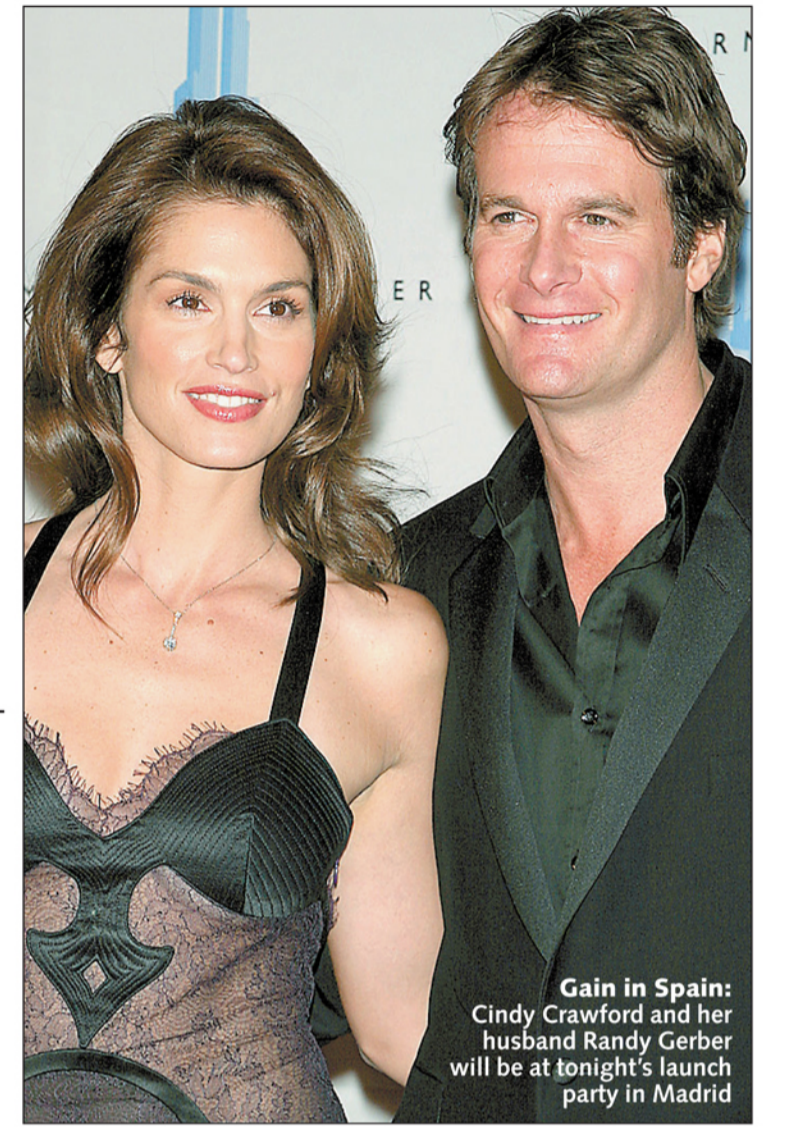
Hobbs has upgraded the existing hotel dating from the Twenties. There are sleek dark hardwood floors, 300-thread count linen, rainfall shower heads and organic Aveda products. There's also state-of-the-art home theatre entertainment centres, interactive 32-inch plasma

TRAVELSEEN

JO FERNANDEZ

televisions, WiFi internet and iPod docking stations — if guests forget to pack their own, one preset with 900 songs can be provided. Easy.

The Penthouse rooftop terrace bar and Midnight Rose restaurant are the latest from nightlife supremos Randy and Scott Gerber (W Hotels) — the launch party tonight should have celebs flocking, with Randy's wife Cindy showing her support. Doubles from €189 (£134 room only), 0800 962 720, www.solmelia.com



Gain in Spain: Cindy Crawford and her husband Randy Gerber will be at tonight's launch party in Madrid



THIS Daisy zip-up weekend bag from Alison Van der Lande is made from the softest, palest peach Italian calf's leather lined with sky-blue ribbed satin. Inside it has zip and phone pockets and comes with a shoulder strap. It would be a crime to let it grace the grubby carousel, so save it for UK weekends. The Casino Royale production team commissioned the designer to make a Buster Bag (black and serious looking) for the baddie, Le Chiffre. Also available, £335. Weekend bag, £310. Stockists: www.alisonvanderlande.co.uk

WIN VIP tickets to the Extreme Sports festival



AND you thought the festival season was over ... the White Air Extreme Sports Festival kicks off from tomorrow until Sunday on the Isle of Wight, at Yaveland Beach in the south of the island. Now in its 10th year, there will be free taster sessions for kitesurfing, paragliding, powerboating and windsurfing, world champion jet-ski displays and graffiti artists. There will also be parties on Friday and Saturday nights, where competitors and spectators mingle.

If you can hop over at short notice, and would like to win tickets and transport for two people, send an email with your daytime phone number to: info@iwepp.com. Entries must be in by 10am tomorrow, and tickets will be binned to the winner.

The prize includes two VIP four-day festival passes (includes entry to weekend parties) and return train and Wight Link Fast Cat crossing from Waterloo to Ryde via Portsmouth. www.whiteair.co.uk

KATHMANDU

UP TO **40% OFF** Selected **Lightweight Fleece & Beanies**

Microgrid Top
Ideal expedition companion that can be worn as a first or second layer.
Alicia® Grid-Air Fabric Men: S-XL, Carbon Retail: £40.00, disc 40% **NOW: £24.00**

Gloriana Pullover
Ideal as an outer layer or as a warm mid layer.
Ponteforto Tecnolle® Fabric Women: 8-16, Black, Plumstone Retail: £35.00, disc 40% **NOW: £21.00**

Offer valid 23-29 October 2006. While stocks last.

£5 Off Selected Beanies
LaPaz, Yata Retail From: £15.00 **NOW FROM: £10.00**

SPECIALISTS IN QUALITY OUTDOOR CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT FOR TRAVEL & ADVENTURE

Spitfields • Unit 11 Bishops Square, Brushfield St, E1. Phone 020 7375 3411
London • 1-2 Berners Street (Just off Oxford Street), Phone 020 7436 7499
Covent Garden • 26 Henrietta Street, Phone 020 7379 4748

www.kathmandu.co.uk

Berlin Tourism

BERLIN

WinterMagic

Fantastic, festive, fun!

Experience Berlin's unique WinterMagic for yourself! From November until the start of January, Berlin has a stunning 50 Christmas markets with all the fun of the festive season! The perfect time to discover the city's fantastic Opera houses and its wealth of unique shopping outlets, party venues ... and lots more!

Must-See-Events

- 08.12. - 10.12.2006 „3 Magic Flutes in 3 Opera Houses“ Deutsche Oper, Komische Oper Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden
- 05.10.2006 - 15.01.2007 Rebecca Horn Exhibition, Martin-Gropius-Bau
- 13.10.2006 - 30.04.2007 Cabaret, Bar jeder Vernunft
- 27.11.2006 - 01.01.2007 Christmas markets

Hotels. Tickets. Infos.
www.wintermagicberlin.com
Tel. +49 (0)30-25 00 25



Eye for design: Dune Beach Village's unique bungalows

Eco days at the Dune

WE eagerly anticipate the 2007/2008 brochure with Western & Oriental early next year for inspiring new additions such as the Dune Beach Village on the Coromandel coast in south India's Tamil Nadu. The eco-friendly beachfront hotel set in 30 acres of differently themed bungalows, offers swimming pools, tennis courts and a

restaurant using organic produce. Seven nights from £969pp B&B with flights and private transfers. On the website now: www.westernoriental.com

“Elegant Resorts” sleek new brochures don't disappoint, with the additions of the Mandarin Oriental in San Francisco and W Retreat & Spa in the Maldives. www.elegantresorts.co.uk

TAKE THREE...CRUISE DEALS

- **Island Cruises** (08708 503 959, www.islandcruises.com) has seven nights on the Island Escape cruising around the Mediterranean — Olbia, Rome, La Spezia, Sete and Nice — for £349pp full-board with return flights to Palma and ship transfers. Departs Gatwick 31 October.
- **Celebrity Cruises** (0845 456 0523, www.celebritycruises.co.uk) has a 10-night cruise stopping at Puerto Limon in Costa Rica, Colon in Panama, Cartagena in Colombia, Georgetown in Grand Cayman and Cozumel in Mexico for £1,296pp. The price includes all meals, one night's pre-cruise accommodation and return flights from Heathrow. Book by 31 October this year for departure 4 November 2007.
- **Board Costa Cruises'** latest ship, the Costa Concordia, with a two-deck Samsara (Elemis) Spa for a Med cruise stopping at Barcelona, Palma, Valletta, Palermo and Civitavecchia. Seven nights costs £660pp full-board with flights and transfers. Spa cabins £1,000pp. Departs Savona on 20 November. 020 7940 4499, www.costacruises.co.uk

IN THE KNOW ...

Costa Rica has been touted as the latest destination for a while, and now Michelin-starred chef Richard Neat is rumoured to be opening a restaurant there. Neat has been dishing up his brilliant and original seven-course dégustation menu at Casa Lalla, a riad turned-restaurant with rooms in Marrakech.