

# Mongolia

## The falcon has landed

In a land of horse lords, vodka and homes unchanged for 1,000 years, Octavia Pollock discovers a falcon-breeding project that is conquering hearts and minds

**I**SOLATED in the vast Mongolian steppe, buffeted by ceaseless winds, stands a green pole with a metal drum atop. Nearby soars a saker falcon, scanning the grassland for unwary prey. In the metal drum sit four young sakers, balls of fluffy down whose cruel, blue-tinged claws hint at strength and skill to come.

Up against the pole is a UAZ Furgon, a Russian 4x4 van that could have driven straight out of *Ice Cold in Alex*. Perched on top, gently lifting out a saker, is Dr Andrew Dixon, head of research at International Wildlife Consultants, implementer of the Mongolian Artificial Nest Project. It is a rare scheme, a conservation and research project with immediate and obvious benefits for people, animals and landscape.

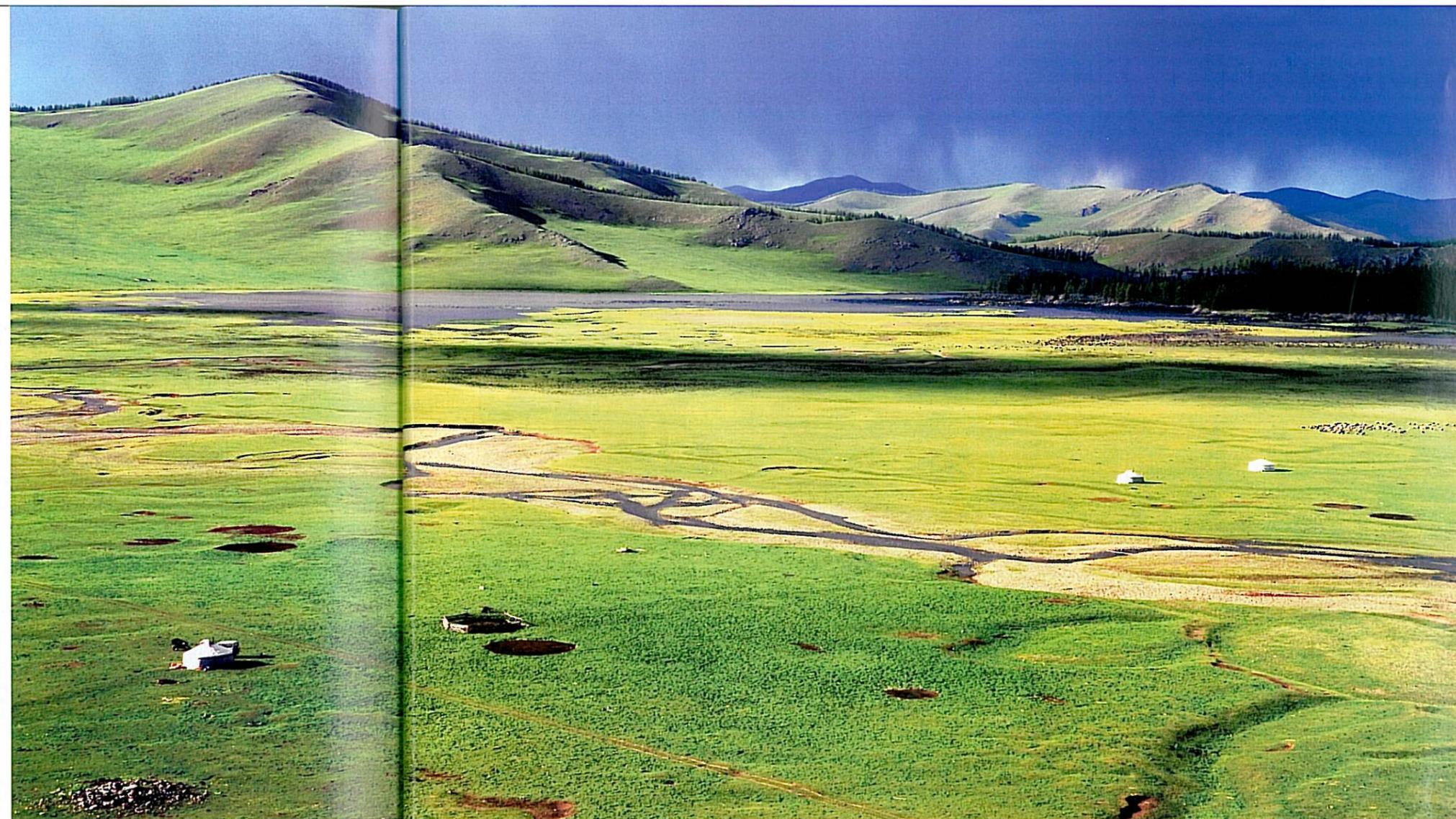
Despite the increasing modernisation of Mongolia, with roads spreading out from the capital Ulaanbaatar and gleaming glass hotels thrusting skywards from the dust, nomadic life on the steppe has hardly changed for millennia. Mongol herdsman still ride from dawn to dusk, standing up in their stirrups

on legs like steel springs, mutton is boiled and mare's milk brewed, and herds of sheep, goats, yaks, camels and horses roam the landscape. Good grazing is essential, but the sands of the *gobis* (deserts) are encroaching, assisted by the thousands of rodents—gerbils, Brandt's voles, marmots and ground squirrels—that burrow and nibble unceasingly. Birds of prey are their natural predators, but, hitherto, there has been nowhere for them to settle. Now, 5,250 metal drums stand in the featureless plains south and east of Ulaanbaatar. When birds of prey occupy these artificial nests, they have the potential to reduce the rodent population and improve the pasture, eliminating the need for the indiscriminate poisoning to which the nomads had previously resorted. Engineering skills have been developed in Bayan *soum* (district) through nest construction, and, as understanding among the herders spreads, guards are mounted against thieves taking nests for scrap.

**'At the top of a hill, looking down on herds of animals with never a barrier to be seen, I felt as if I had found a kind of Eden'**

The family of the Bayan *soum* leader has been unfailingly supportive, and it was next to their winter camp that we pitched our *ger*. A *ger*, or a *yurt*, consists of trellis walls and a roof of poles, all covered in layers of felt and canvas. The door always faces the 'auspicious south', and the woodwork is gaily painted in bright orange or blue. Dozens of people can live and sleep in one, as we found when we piled inside for a riotous night of Mongol hospitality. We shared bowls of *airag*—fermented mare's milk, sweet and slightly fizzy on the tongue—platters of cheese and cakes and Chinggis Black vodka, served in a beaten silver bowl, and were entertained by haunting, many-layered throat singing. To our shame, our own repertoire didn't stretch far beyond *American Pie*.

Such a welcome was typical. In the Tsenkher valleys amid larch-covered hills, I ate solid yellow boiled yak's milk and yoghurt with Chuluun and Adiya and their son, Ulaana



Round white *gers* dot the boundless landscapes of Mongolia, lush and full of growth after the long, cold drought of the winter months

and was looked after superbly by my guide, Esee, and driver, Nyama, who does an uncanny Charlie Chaplin impression. Led by young Ulaana in his weathered grey *del*, we spent all day exploring on horses that skim over the marmot-hole-riddled valleys with astonishing speed. At the top of one hill, looking down on herds of grazing animals with never a barrier to be seen, I felt as if I had found a kind of Eden.

Mongol horses (so called despite only reaching about 14.2hh) are the toughest in the world. A group that was taken to a German circus escaped and galloped home, straight across 6,000-odd miles. In the valley of the Tuul river, we stumbled upon a local Nadaam festival, where a cloud of dust announced tiny children on tiny horses at the end of a 12-mile race. They were greeted by wizened old men in brightly coloured *dels* perched on embossed wooden saddles and leading strings of horses, some only a year old.

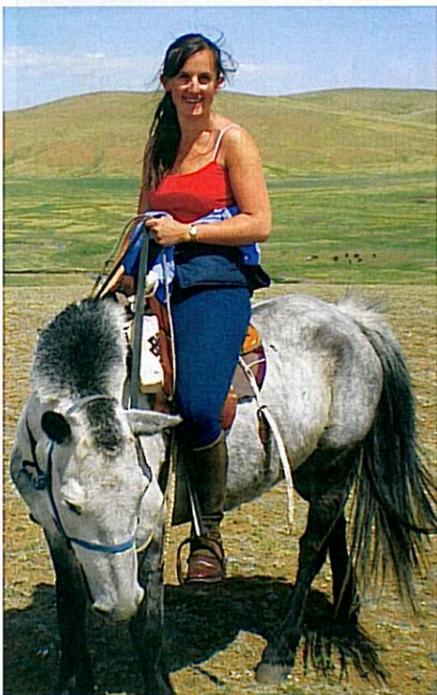
Spirituality abounds in Mongolia, a mixture of shamanism and Buddhism, with a touch of the modern cult of Genghis Khan, expressed through *ovoos*, piles of rocks or sticks on every hilltop. More poignant are the ruins of monasteries, destroyed by the Russians in 1937 in a blitz that saw hundreds of thousands of monks murdered.

The monastery of Kharkhorin, on the plains where Genghis Khan's vast armies gathered, is notable for the space where 60-odd temples should have stood beside the few that remain. All but hidden in the mountains of Bat Khaan stand crumbling monastery walls. They almost escaped the Russian ravages, until the cloth covering a golden dome was removed a second too soon, and the

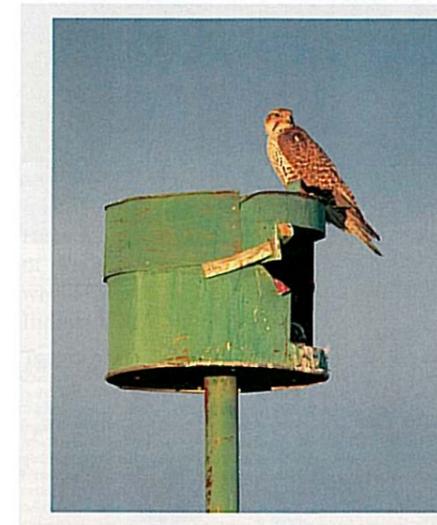
gleam caught the eye of a retreating soldier. With black clouds gathering, we skittered down from the suddenly ghost-filled site, strange voices following us on the wind. Motorbikes may whizz up the mountains and grey tentacles of tarmac may be invading the open miles of steppe, but Mongolia is still an enchanting land. Visit as soon as you can, and never say no to the vodka. 🦅

### Travel Information

● *Panoramic Journeys* (01608 811183; [www.panoramicjourneys.com](http://www.panoramicjourneys.com)) has a 14-day *Nomadic Encounters* tour, with a homestay in the Gobi desert, from £2,585pp, including domestic flights  
● To visit the artificial nests in Mongolia, email Nicola Dixon of International Wildlife Consultants at [nicola@falcons.co.uk](mailto:nicola@falcons.co.uk)



The author on Grey; Mongol horses are known only by their colour, with every shade having its own name to avoid confusion



### NEED TO KNOW

#### The Artificial Nest Project, and how you can help

After testing four nest designs in 2005, that with a closed roof and a side entrance was found to be preferred by the sakers (left). Now, there are 5,250 different nests spaced at 1.5 km intervals, across 4,000 square miles, which in 2011 provided a home for 198 pairs of saker falcons, 177 upland buzzards, 171 ravens and 83 common kestrels. The scheme is run by Mongolian scientists from the Wildlife Science and Conservation Centre and International Wildlife Consultants (UK), and sponsored by the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi. Sakers are exported to Gulf States for hawking, in agreement with the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism. A strong saker population means the impact of poaching is reduced, and a managed population in artificial nests can be used to set a sustainable harvest quota. Each spring, field assistants are invited to stay in *gers* near Bayan—a rare chance to live the Mongol life and contribute to a conservation project that really is making a difference. *The Artificial Nest Project* (01267 233864; [www.mefrg.org](http://www.mefrg.org))  
**Read before you go** *In search of Genghis Khan* (Tim Severin)  
**Read when you're there** *In the Empire of Genghis Khan* (Stanley Stewart)  
**Did you know?** The steel equestrian statue of Genghis Khan is 132ft high, the tallest in the world