

Outer Mongolia, land of the Khans, like our West

By DELLA AND ARCH BAUMGARTNER

IRKUTSK, Siberia, USSR, Saturday, Oct. 19 — Our traveling group of journalists is back in Irkutsk, the USSR, following an eventful/uneventful trip to Outer Mongolia, located south of our present location.

If anyone mistakenly associates landlocked Outer Mongolia with the fabled Shangri La (which actually had its setting in Tibet), the land of eternal youth, forget it. It's nothing like that. On the contrary, its native inhabitants appear heavily tanned, if not weatherbeaten, even old before their years.

There's not all that much to attract one to Outer Mongolia, for that matter. Its citizens have a distinct lack of understanding for the outside world, but do seem to have a kindred spirit for neighboring Soviet Union. Lenin's huge photographs appear in public places, even pictures of Lenin, Marx and Engels, together.

Outer Mongolia advertises itself as a communist country, taking its cue from neighboring USSR; the USSR lets its peoples and the outside world know in ways subtle and not so subtle that it is the first communist country in the world.

Mongolian citizens' lack of understanding of the outside world — mixed with a healthy portion of mistrust — was evident when we scurried around a downtown commons with a copy of The Mail-Journal under our arm. We wanted to take a phony picture of several native Mongols reading the paper, so we could tell our friends The Mail-Journal is "read around the world." Those we approached shied away from us like we had the plague. No takers. Della even proffered a package of gum, which was swiftly refused. As much as to say, "Gum? What's that?"

All was not lost. We photographed three Germans in front of our hotel reading the paper. They were bearded, heavily jacketed against an oncoming cold spell, and looked like they were from another world.

Little Among Giants
Mongolia, whose official name is Mongolian People's Republic, is situated north of China and south of the USSR, two real

giants in today's world. China, with its billion, 60 million people, overshadows this tiny country of 1.77 million (Jan. 1983 figures), and the USSR is an obvious Big Brother to the north with its 270 million people.

Mongolia has no seaport, and roads leading out of here are secondary at best. Ninety-five percent of the people are Tibetan Buddhists. Lamaism is their religion.

Historically, Mongolia represented the so-called Mongolian hordes from the north who constantly threatened the weaker Chinese tribes with war, and were the direct cause of China building The Great Wall. Wars upon wars have caused a re-drawing of the Mongolian border lines, with a large portion of the original country known as Inner Mongolia becoming a part of China, and the rest being Outer Mongolia as we witness it today.

As far as a military threat is concerned, Mongolia has been completely emasculated and relegated to a pastoral state. Students of oriental history will remember reading when the great Genghis Khan roamed this part of the world with his mighty legions of warriors, scaring the daylights out of the lesser countries (or tribes) and plundering them for what they were worth. Then, some time later his grandson, Kubla Khan, gained fame in Europe through the writings of Marco Polo. (Note: See the accompanying box on the history of Mongolia as provided by the Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State.)

While the Khans held sway through this part of the world, even into Central Europe in the 13th Century, the relic of the great empire is a threat to no one today.

Its land area is 604,103 square miles, slightly smaller than Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Louisiana combined. Ulan Bator, the capital city where we visited, has a population of just 435,400

people as of 1981 and very little annual growth.

Almost 90 percent of the land is pasture or desert wasteland, of varying usefulness. Less than 1 percent of the land is tillable.

Train Trip 'Something Else'

To say that our train trip from Irkutsk to Ulan Bator is "something else" is to understate the odyssey. Our party of 17 journalists boarded the train at Irkutsk at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 16, and arrived at Naushki at 6:34 p.m., just five hours later. It was here that our long wait began. We had lunch ("not bad," someone said, "even the borsch"), walked around the "town," a veritable shantytown, and did what all waiters at train stations do — sit, talk, walk, read. We couldn't converse with the USSR natives.

We can tell you at this point that the train is what we in Indiana used to call a "milk run," for it stopped at every crossroad. We finally moved out to a town called Subbaatar, for a 3½-hour wait while Mongolian customs officials visited our sleepers, made a perfunctory search of our belongings and left with our passports in their possession. At something like 11 p.m., while most of us were trying to get some sleep, the train pulled across the border into what we thought must be the best guarded country in all the world.

We arrived at the capital city of Ulan Bator at 8:40 a.m. Friday morning, Oct. 18, some 36 hours after we had boarded the train. It's interesting to note that when we made the return trip to Irkutsk by air it took 47 minutes! One would have to say these people aren't ready for the 20th Century!

We had what is called "soft coach," meaning we had sleepers on the train and we could go to bed and enjoy a fairly nice night of it. Inasmuch as we were on the train two nights, most everyone slept better the second night. Two women attended each car, and gave us hot tea each morning.

Women At Work

The rail bed appeared to be in fine shape, much like we found in China in 1979 and 1984 when we were there. We had ample time to watch heavily clothed workers replacing rail ties, doing all the work by hand. Usually, the crews were in parties of four, two men and two women. The women manned the shovels and heavy mallets for driving spikes just as the men did. No favoritism here.

We noticed a woman alongside, with pen and notebook in hand. We had the feeling she was monitoring the work of the crew to see that they "reached their quota."

Before we left for the Far East we told our friend Phil Oppenheim of Lake Tappan our itinerary, and when we came to Ulan Bator, Phil said he recognized the name as where they send Russians who fall into disfavor with the government. He could have been absolutely right. It looked like this kind of place.

Our hotel in Ulan Bator was

History Of Mongolia

In A.D. 1203, a single Mongolian feudal state was formed from nomadic tribal groupings under the leadership of Genghis Khan. He and his immediate successors conquered nearly all of Asia and European Russia and sent armies as far afield as Central Europe and Southeast Asia. Genghis Khan's grandson Kublai Khan gained fame in Europe through the writings of Marco Polo. Although Mongol-led confederations sometimes exercised wide political power over their conquered territories, their strength declined rapidly after the Mongol dynasty in China was overthrown in 1368.

The Manchus, who conquered China in 1644, were able to bring Outer Mongolia under Manchu rule in 1691 when the Khalkha Mongol nobles swore an oath of allegiance to the Manchu emperor. The Mongol rulers of Outer Mongolia enjoyed autonomy under Manchu control, and all Chinese claims to Outer Mongolia following the overthrow of the Manchu Dynasty and the establishment of the republic have rested on this oath. In 1927, Russia and Manchu China concluded the Treaty of Kiakhta, delimiting the border between China and Outer Mongolia that exists in large part today.

Outer Mongolia was a Chinese province from 1691 to 1911, an autonomous state under Russian Protection from 1912 to 1919, and again a Chinese province from 1919 to 1921. As Manchu authority in China waned, and as Russia and Japan confronted each other, Russia gave arms and diplomatic support to nationalists among the Mongol religious leaders and nobles. The Mongols accepted Russian aid and proclaimed their independence of Manchu rule in December 1911, shortly after a successful Chinese revolt against the Manchus in October. By agreements signed in 1913 and 1915, the Russian Government forced the new Chinese Republic to accept Mongolian autonomy under continued Chinese sovereignty, presumably to discourage other foreign powers from approaching a newly independent Mongolian state that would be looking for support from as many foreign sources as possible.

The Russian revolution and civil war afforded Chinese warlords an opportunity to establish rule in Outer Mongolia, and Chinese troops were dispatched there in 1919. Following Soviet military victories over White Russian forces in the early 1920s, Moscow again became the major outside influence on Mongolia. Under the revolutionary leaders Sukhe Bator and Choybalsan, the Mongolian People's Republic was proclaimed on November 26, 1924.

Historically, Mongolia's foreign relations have focused on its two neighbors, the Soviet Union and China. In the early 1960s, Mongolia attempted to maintain a neutral position amid rising Sino-Soviet polemics; this situation changed in the middle of the decade. Mongolia and the Soviet Union signed a new agreement in 1966, which constituted the umbrella for the reintroduction of large-scale Soviet Ground forces in the context of Moscow's general buildup along the Sino-Mongolian border. Many factors may have motivated this shift: a historical Mongolian antipathy for the Chinese; continued tensions on the Sino-Mongolian border (despite a 1964 demarcation); statements attributed to Beijing suggesting a continued interest among some Chinese for reannexing Mongolia; Russia's historical counterbalancing of Chinese influence; and heavy Mongolian dependence on Soviet economic aid.

Mongolia adheres to the Soviet line in foreign policy, supporting Soviet military action in Afghanistan and Soviet activities in Latin America and Africa. Mongolia also expelled several Chinese nationals for alleged criminal activities and increased its own and Soviet troop strength in Mongolia to counter an alleged Chinese military buildup along the border. More than 40 Soviet divisions are stationed in Mongolia, with another 35,000 Soviet specialists and advisers.

nothing to brag about. Our room was slightly larger than others we had on this trip, and the hot/cold water came through a swivel spigot that reached both the lavatory and the bath tub. Again, we were reminded of the great improvements this country should be making on their restroom facilities. The front of the eight-story, square-shaped building was designated "Hotel" by a simple electric sign.

If one goes out to eat in Ulan Bator, he goes either to our small hotel's dining room, or to the single other hotel of any size in this town with a dining room. The other hotel had a post office where one could get cards and stamps.

When we were there, some of our group met an oil prospector, a graduate geologist by profession, from Lafayette, Louisiana, who was on a hunting trip by himself in the high mountains of Mongolia. He had assembled a party of five — a driver, guide, cook, interpreter and so on — and took to the hills for three weeks. "I do this every year," he said, "in one part of the world or another."

Take To The Country
Our group made a two-hour trip into the country where we visited a nomadic village of a few huts. Several inhabitants were all dressed up in native clothing, the better for us to photograph them. They had seen American tourists before.

However, the trip to the village was a wonder in itself. Far back from the road we could see individual horsemen (similar to the American cowboy) riding the range. They were keeping track of their horses, cattle and sheep. The plain was open territory, much like some of our western states. They also had trained dogs to keep the flocks in toe. Every once in a while we could see a camel standing alone, sort of forelorn.

We wondered how they handled the roaming animals at night but we soon found out. As noted before, the Mongolians are nomadic people used to tending for themselves in open territory.

From time immemorial they have obliged themselves of portable and easy transportable dwellings, called Yurts or Gers. They are long developments of huts, marquees and wheeled abodes. A unique feature of the Yurt is its suitability to any season of year. Made of felt and hides, plus colorfully fashioned wood bracings, they can be assembled in 30 to 60 minutes, and they are sturdy enough to resist strong winds, provide a cool room in the summer and warmth in the winter. They are circular in form, usually 15 to 20 feet in diameter.

We were given some literature on the Yurt, and it noted: "The Yurt with its rich national traditions and characteristics occupies a central position in Mongolian architecture."

they had an excellent meal for our tired, if very pleased, group. We enjoyed hot mushroom soup. In this part of the world breakfast is light, lunch being eaten around two o'clock as the main meal of the day, and dinner a meal of modest proportions. Almost without exception, we found the food everywhere we visited to be very palatable, and the service good. When one considers the language barrier, the service must be considered excellent.

Another Circus

There are no newspapers for us to read, no television to watch and very little radio that would either entertain or inform us of world events. We were shut off from the world in a very definite sense. And so what does one do with his evenings? There's always the opera or the circus.

So far we had attended three operas, and while not understanding them fully, we found them a new and exciting experience. We attended the Moscow Circus, billed as the best in the world, and we were in no position to dispute this. We thought it fantastic in every regard.

And so it was another circus, last night in Ulan Bator. The big house that would have seated 1,000 or four thousand was only partially full, but the show went on just the same. They must have been aware that there were 17 Americans in the slim audience, for we were lavished in our applause with each new act. It seemed to pay off, for the continuing acts seemed to get better as they went along. It's easy to see why this part of the world has produced Olympic-winning gymnasts like Olga Corbett and Nadia Comaniche.

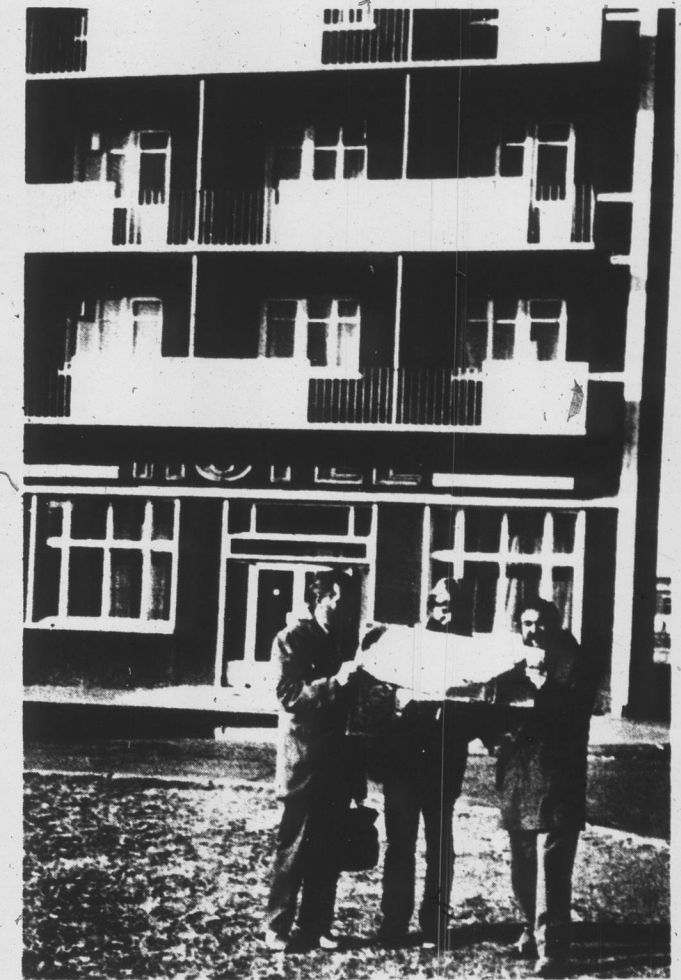
We had it figured the performers were paid by the state, and the size of the gate made little difference to them.

We were up early Saturday morning for our 9 o'clock plane trip to Irkutsk. We apparently had an important personage aboard our plane, for everyone kept his seat until this party left the plane. We noticed he was met by a small group, and after considerable handshaking and smiling, the group sped off in what looked like German-built Mercedes automobiles.

We were in for another long and tiring inspection at customs after we landed at Irkutsk. And so we were glad to get back to our rooms on the eighth floor of the very fine Irkutsk Hotel overlooking the Angara River.

We're glad we visited Mongolia, and we're glad we had the long, tiring train ride into that country, in spite of the boring, seemingly unnecessary waiting at the border. And while we considered this one of the rewarding parts of our trip, several of our group spoke of how they were glad to be returning to Irkutsk. Imagine — one being glad to get back to Siberia!

We are recommending the trip to Mongolia to our friends. We're sure they will find it as "different" as we did.



MAIL-JOURNAL READ 'EVERYWHERE' — We toted a copy of the Thursday, November 20, 1985, issue of The Mail-Journal with us, with the idea of sitting down several Mongolians as they appear to be reading its news columns. We wanted to prove the local paper is "read everywhere." Being camera-shy, we found no Mongolian takers, but several visiting Germans saw the humor in our plan and obliged, in front of our hotel in Ulan Bator.

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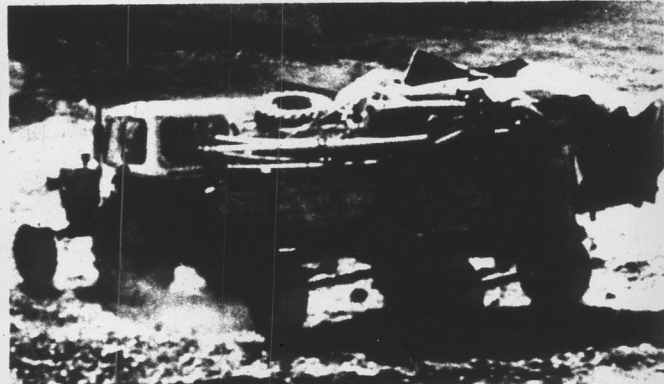
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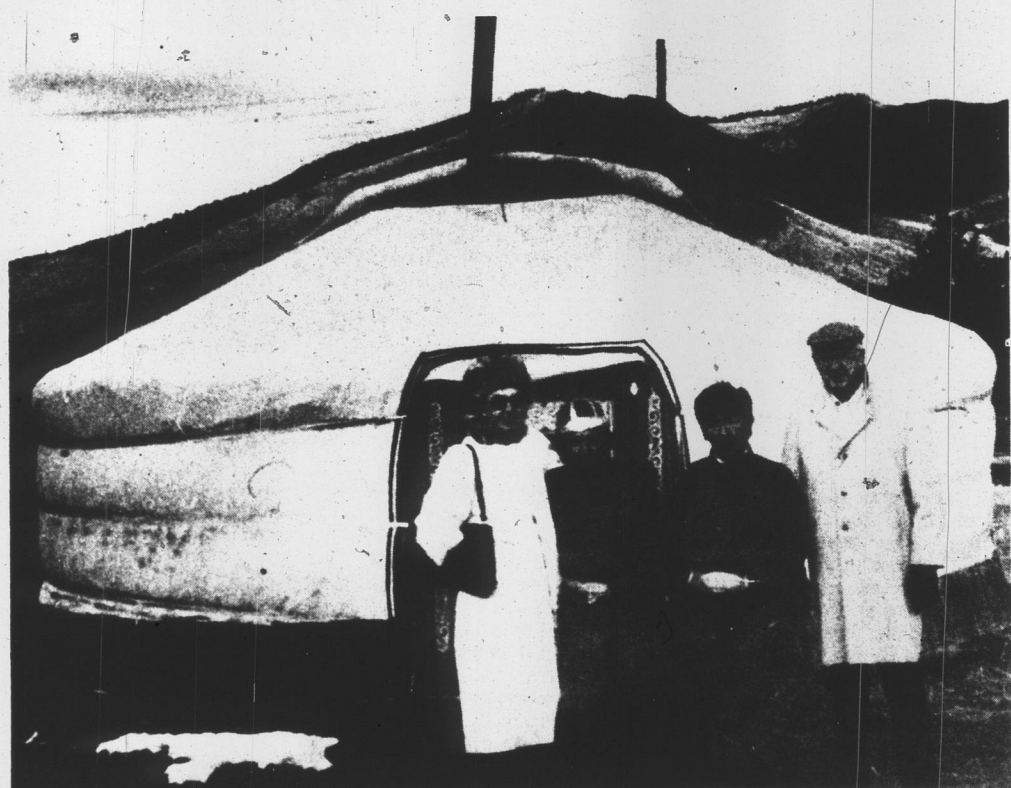
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A NOMADIC DWELLING — A nomadic people, the Mongolians load their homes (known as Gurts) on the back of their trucks and move along with their herds. They can re-erect their portable homes in a matter of 30 to 60 minutes.



GURT PROVIDES COMFORTABLE HOUSING — A native Mongolian Gurt is quickly assembled and provides quite comfortable housing for this mobile race of outdoors people. We just "had to" have our photos taken with a native family outside their Gurt (also known as Gers). We found them quite comfortable, even against a harsh wind.



LIKE AMERICAN WEST — We found the landscape of Outer Mongolia much like the great American west, for its expansive beauty. Herdsmen on horseback, again resembling the American "cowboy," live on the range with their assortment of animals, making good use of their Gurts. This photo was taken outside Ulan Bator, the capital city.



MONGOLIAN DRESS — This photo shows a Mongolian in Ulan Bator, the capital, in western dress, while his wife appears in native costume. Their features are distinctly oriental and easily recognized.

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