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O'Gorman, Kevin D. and Thompson, Karen (2007) *Mongolian hospitality: intrepid travelling*. Hospitality Review, 9 (3). pp. 19-27. ISSN 1464-9101

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O'Gorman, Kevin and Thompson, Karen (2007) Mongolian hospitality: intrepid travelling. *The Hospitality Review*, 9 (3). pp. 19-27. ISSN 1464-9101

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This is an author-produced version of a paper published in *The Hospitality Review*, 9 (3). pp. 19-27. ISSN 1464-9101. This version has been peer-reviewed, but does not include the final publisher proof corrections, published layout, or pagination.

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A letter from Mongolia

Mongolian hospitality: intrepid travelling

Continuing the series on exploring diverse hospitality practices, **Kevin O’Gorman** and **Karen Thompson** explore the origins of Mongolian hospitality. They highlight the lack of commercial hospitality provision in Mongolia and reflect on some of the contemporary hospitality customs and practices centred on the ‘home’.

IN 2006 THE Mongolian people celebrated the 800th anniversary of the unification of the Mongol tribes; the foundation of the Great Mongol Empire under Chinggis Khaan.¹ At its zenith, this empire covered a 12m square-mile expanse that stretched 7,000 miles from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea. It is entirely landlocked and held to be the nation furthest from the sea.² Historically, its isolation combined with a terrain of high-altitude steppes, deserts and mountains produced a small but hardy population of horse-riding nomadic herders. Today Mongolia has a population of fewer than three million people in a country about the size of the whole of Western Europe. Roughly half of this population still pursue a traditional nomadic lifestyle on the Mongolian Steppe, while the rest live in the cities, mainly in the capital Ulaanbaatar.

Today approximately 300,000 tourists visit Mongolia per year.³ It is seen as a mysterious, spell-binding destination with great natural beauty: a visit to Outer Mongolia is often the ultimate goal for any intrepid backpacker. Mongolia is synonymous with

remoteness and wilderness and ‘stirs up the nomadic, exotic and mystic images of an international tourism destination.’⁴ This is in marked contrast to the view

Happy is he whom guests frequent, joyful is he at whose door guests’ horses are always tethered

presented to the Royal Geographical Society on 8 June 1903:

*Mongolia has not received much attention from Englishmen. Nor do I wonder. It has little or no charm for the tourist; no scenery, no sport. Mongol life is simple and not beautiful, and the few objects of interest are archaeological relics, unattractive in form, and not easily accessible... but there is still a good deal of blank space on the map—blank space which hardly contains any secrets of moment.*⁵



The twin appeals of Mongolia for the tourist are seen as its natural

resources and the traditional, semi-nomadic culture of the Mongolian people, showcased at events such as the Ulaanbaatar Naadam.⁶ A central feature of the



A nomadic *ger* erected in the mountain forest; the concrete steps indicate that this is a semi-permanent structure. (Author)

rich nomadic tradition is hospitality, in particular the warm and sincere manner in which the traveller is welcomed into the Mongolian home. Very little commercial hospitality exists in Mongolia outside the capital Ulaanbaatar and the other main towns. This lack of commercial hospitality provision means that, when travelling outside the main cities, tourists have the opportunity to integrate themselves more fully into Mongolian society and can be provided with a profound hospitality experience. Crossing the vast open countryside the traveller has to depend on the home hospitality.

Basis of Mongolian hospitality

Hospitality has been a fundamental part of Mongolian culture and heritage for centuries and can only be understood in the context of the lived experience of the people. It has been influenced by many different religious customs and practices including Nestorianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, Taoism, Confucianism, Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, and Shamanism.⁷ Mutual hospitality is central to Mongolian life and pervades the way the people think and behave; a traditional Mongolian proverb states:

*Happy is he whom guests frequent, joyful is he at whose door guests' horses are always tethered.*⁸

The customs of offering warm hospitality have evolved from the centuries-old nomadic life on the vast Steppe and Chinghis Khaan's 13th-century legal code, the *Ikh Zasag*. Any herder may have had

Custom dictates that a male guest should keep his hat on, but must always take his gloves off to shake hands, even when it is -50°C outside

to cover hundreds of kilometres on horseback in search of herds or camels driven off their pastures by a storm. Even today in the vast Gobi desert, when families travel away from their homes they will leave out food and drink for any guest that may call by in their absence. For their part, the guest has to observe hospitality customs and practices so as not to offend the host or bring bad luck on the household.

The home is the focus of hospitality

Hospitality for Mongolians is based around the home. Outside Ulaanbaatar the vast majority of Mongolians still live in a *ger*, a large round white felt tent that travellers have long considered to be symbolic of the Mongolians.⁹ The *ger* acts as a one-roomed house, where the family, eat, sleep, cook and live. In Mongolian the word *ger* simply means 'home'; in Russian these

Tourist *ger* camps, which are collections of smaller *gers* that can be rented by the night, are springing up all over the countryside. Most camps have restaurant, shower and toilet facilities located near the *gers*.

(Author)



round felt tents are known as *yurta*, hence they are more commonly known in English as ‘yurts’. The *ger* exists as a traditional dwelling not only in Mongolia, but equally within other areas of Central Asia and Siberia that are home to traditionally nomadic peoples such as the Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Tuvans, Tatars, Yakuts and Buryats. The most commonly known kind is the traditional nomads’ *ger*, which is used by almost all Central Asian nomads, including the Mongols.

The traditional nomads’ *ger* is easily assembled and disassembled, and its components can be loaded onto a yak cart, although a truck tends to be more commonly used today. The *ger* is made of a wooden framework covered by large pieces of felt; decorative cloth covering may be laid over the felt. The wooden framework consists of collapsible lattice walls, topped by poles radiating from a central smoke hole. The entire *ger* is covered by a layer of thick felt held in place by ropes made of hair and wool. During the summer, one layer is sufficient, but during the winter, two or three layers are necessary. The bottom of the felt is arranged so that it can be raised about 30 cm from the ground to allow for more ventilation during warm weather. During the winter, wood is stacked against the *ger* as insulation from the cold and the rain.

Many customs and practices are associated with the *ger* and the provision of hospitality. For Mongolians the *ger* is not only the centre of their universe, but also a kind of microcosm of the social world of the Mongols within it; it is a map of the universe at large, the vault of the heavens reflected in the arched shape of the interior of the roof.¹⁰ The entrance faces south whenever possible and the north side (*xoimor*), located behind the central fire or cooking stove, is the most honourable spot in the *ger*. It is here that sacred objects, *ongon* (spirit dwellings) and other religious images are placed on a table. The sitting place next to the *xoimor* is the most honoured and is occupied

Whistling inside the *ger* or leaning against the upright supports is considered to bring bad luck on the host and the household

by elders, chiefs, lamas or other honoured guests. Traditionally the right, west side is the male side, and is the sitting place for men and storage place for men’s tools, saddles, bows and guns. The left, east side is the sitting place for women, where cooking utensils, cradleboards, and other women’s objects are placed. Since the southern side is the least honoured spot, young people are usually seated there.

Customs and practices of hospitality

Before entering a *ger* the traveller must leave any weapons outside. It is also customary when entering to cough loudly or make some kind of noise to alert

It is pungent on the tongue like vinegar ...it leaves a taste of milk of almonds... and it makes the inner man most joyful and also intoxicates those with weak heads

the host and demonstrate that there is no evil intent. Custom dictates that a male guest should keep his hat on, but must always take his gloves off to shake hands, even when it is -50°C outside. Visitors should always bring a small gift which should never be placed on the floor but left on a table, or ideally the *xoimor*, since putting things on the floor is considered disrespectful to the host. Gifts are expected to be of a practical nature.¹¹ A good guest should make sure that he is not a burden on the host and gifts of tinned or packet food, soaps or detergents are particularly useful. On arrival, the guest should tell the host where they have travelled from and the purpose of their journey. It would, however, be considered rude for a host to ask if the guest did not offer the information freely. Another arrival custom is the exchange of snuff and

Mongolian men traditionally offer each other their snuffboxes—it is rude to refuse!

Whenever guests arrive they will always be offered a place to sit, something to drink, and some food. If the host has nothing to offer his guests, the neighbours will always give everything he needs to entertain his guests. The guest will always be shown where to sit. It is common practice to sit on the floor and the guest should either squat or kneel or, if seated on a stool, should tuck his feet underneath him and take particular care not to stick them straight out in front. After being welcomed and received into the *ger* the guest is free to walk about; however, it is important to always move around the central fire/stove in a clockwise direction. Whistling inside the *ger* or leaning against the upright supports is considered to bring bad luck on the host and the household.

Beverages in the hospitality ritual

Central to any act of hospitality in Mongolia is *airag* (fermented mare's milk) and its use is recorded throughout history. Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, records how, during milking, tubes were inserted into the mare's vulva and air was blown in to force the teats down while blinded slaves stood in a circle



The felt covering for the roof and the lattice walls can be clearly seen; the front door is on the right hand side.

(Author)

churning the milk to create milk spirit.¹² During his travels to Mongolia in the 13th century, the Franciscan Friar William of Rubruck refers to the consumption of fermented mares' milk at banquets in the Khaan's court in Mongolia.¹³ Friar William goes on to describe how it is made:

the mothers stand near their foal, and allow themselves to be quietly milked; and if one be too wild, then a man takes the colt and brings it to her, allowing it to suck a little; then he takes it away and the milker takes its place. When they have got together a great quantity of milk, which is as sweet as cow's as long as it is fresh, they pour it into a big skin or bottle, and they set to churning it with a stick prepared for that purpose, and which is as big as a man's head at its lower extremity and hollowed out; and when they have beaten it sharply it begins to boil up like new wine and to sour or ferment, and they continue to churn it until they have extracted the butter. Then they taste it, and when it is mildly pungent, they drink it. It is pungent on the tongue like vinegar when drunk, and when a man has finished drinking, it leaves a taste of milk of almonds on the tongue, and it makes the inner man most joyful and also intoxicates those with weak heads. It also greatly provokes urine.

The process of milking and fermentation today

remains remarkably similar to that described by Friar William, rather than the colourful version of events presented by Herodotus. *Airag*, in large hide bags, is sold at the 'roadside' in recycled plastic bottles which have an unfortunate tendency to explode due to

suutei tsai (milk tea)... contains hot water, mare's or yak's milk, a generous spoonful of fresh or rancid butter, rice, lots of salt, very little tea and possibly some borts (dried meat)

continuing fermentation: *airag*, like Guinness, does not travel well. Mongolians have long extolled the medicinal qualities of *airag*. It is said to give strength and cheerfulness, destroy microbes in the intestines, and improve the metabolism. A guest, when offered a bowl that they do not wish to drink, can either just take a sip and pass it to the next person, or make a libation offering by dipping the ring finger of their right hand in the bowl and flicking it three times towards the sky. Undeniably, *airag* is an acquired taste, as President George W Bush discovered on his visit to Mongolia in 2005. According to the Washington Post doubt exists on whether Bush actually drank:

*No word on whether Bush actually swallowed or not, but some of his aides evidently did, judging by the looks on their faces afterward.*¹⁴



Moving house for the summer. This is the *ger* pictured opposite, with the family, packed onto the back of a Russian flat-bed truck.

(Author)

Another and stronger dairy-based alcoholic beverage is distilled from *kefir* (a thin yoghurt) or *airag*. Mongolian *arkhi* is a clear spirit which is consumed undiluted. The popularity of *arkhi* among Mongolian males can be attributed to the days when it was the strongest available alcohol in Mongolia, rather than to its pungent flavour, which resembles that of rancid milk. *Tsagaan Arkhi*, or white vodka, introduced under the Russian influence, is a popular gift for the host. Often bottles change hands several times before they are finally drunk.

The main non-alcoholic drink, also consumed in copious quantities, is *suutei tsai* (milk tea), which frequently contains hot water, mare's or yak's milk, a generous spoonful of fresh or rancid butter, rice, lots of salt, very little tea and possibly some *borts* (dried meat). It is thought to aid digestion. Some Mongolians also hold sacred the bowl in which the tea is served, because it is through this bowl that the fire communi-

Despite the stay being so short, a level of closeness and affection develops which is rarely experienced outside one's own immediate family

cates with the people surrounding it.¹⁵ Bowls of food and drink will be offered by the host using their right hand or both hands the guests should receive them in a similar manner.

The traditional Mongolian barbecue

Mongolian cooking is generally very simple and does not use many spices, flavourings or sauces. Common dishes include *buuz* (steamed meat-filled dumplings), *guriltai shul* (mutton soup with noodles) and *khuushuur* (fried-meat pasties). The most common meat is mutton, in various forms—boiled, stewed, cooked with fat and flour, or served with noodles. Mutton is the staple national food, to such an extent that the smell is inescapable, particularly in *gers*, and travellers often complain of smelling of it for weeks after their return.

Horsemeat is also particularly popular in Western Mongolia, as is roasted marmot. Marmots were traditionally hunted as a nomadic pastime. When caught, they are killed and cooked whole from the inside out by stuffing with hot rocks, taking care to avoid punc-

turing their skin and letting the fatty juices escape; simultaneously fur is often singed off with a blowtorch. The animal puffs up and the arms and legs extend as steam and the stones cook the marmot from the inside. This cooking technique—the real Mongolian barbecue—is also used for sheep, and it is considered lucky to sleep with one of the stones used in cooking underneath one's pillow. A recent Western craze of 'Mongolian barbecue' restaurants appears to have very little to do with either Mongolian food or true Mongolian hospitality.

Culinary traditions and practices date back at least 800 years; as the Venetian explorer Marco Polo reported in the 13th century, the Mongolians

live on the milk and meat which their herds supply, and on the produce of the chase, and they eat all kinds of flesh, including that of horses and dogs, and Pharaoh's rats [the name Marco Polo gave to marmots], of which last there are great numbers in burrows on those plains.

One particular danger with Mongolian marmots is they can be carriers of bubonic plague. Most years there is a summer outbreak of this plague somewhere, people die and an area is quar-

antined but this does not deter people from hunting them for food. However, Mongolians will never eat an animal that they found already dead or could catch and kill with their bare hands as this is an indication that the creature could be infected with the plague. Meat products are often supplemented during the summer with a variety of dairy products made from yak or horse milk, including the dubious delicacies of dried milk curd and fermented cheese.

Service and etiquette

At any Mongolian meal guests are served according to gender and status. Sheep are divided in a symbolic manner with male guests and men of high status given meat from the back, whereas women are offered the breast bone and rib. Small slices are taken from the lower back and offered to the goddess of the fire.

The fire situated in the middle of the *ger*, literally in the centre of the Mongolian home, is considered to be one of the oldest religious concepts for the Mongols. The spirit of the fire has given life to all the clan's fires and is held sacred.¹⁶ The fire god can be evoked on

many occasions that are central to the hospitality process—for example, in spring for blessings upon the animals, which are depended upon for food throughout the year.¹⁷ Likewise libation offerings are made to the fire god: in spring, at the summer solstice, during the preparation of meat and at wedding ceremonies.¹⁸ When receiving hospitality it is important to treat the fire in a respectful manner: the most common ways of offending against this custom are throwing rubbish into the fire or sitting with feet pointing to the fire; both these are considered disrespectful.

Another custom to be wary of is that of tucking up the cuffs of a *deel* (a traditional Mongolian gown, still commonly worn outside Ulaanbaatar), which is associated with death. If a person has touched a dead body he has to tuck up his cuffs, and if he has no cuffs he has to tuck up his sleeves instead.¹⁹ Old people, especially if they are ill, become very troubled and visibly upset if someone comes to visit with their sleeves rolled up; there is a genuine fear that the visitor has come to bury them alive.

Even after only one night living in a *ger* with a Mongolian family the departure can be an emotional experience. Despite the stay being so short, a level of closeness and affection develops which is rarely experienced outside one's own immediate family. On departure hosts will traditionally wish their guest a safe journey; a customary reply is to wish that their sheep will fatten or their horses grow up to be strong and swift.

The future of Mongolian hospitality

For tourists visiting the Mongolian countryside it is still common to stay with a family in their *ger*. However, an extension of this traditional hospitality within the Mongolian home can be found in the commercial *ger* camps that have been constructed at popular tourist sites throughout this vast country. These camps generally consist of a collection of smaller *gers* for sleeping, along with a toilet block and a larger *ger* used for the restaurant and communal areas. Although demand is highly seasonal, the camps are permanent in location and the *gers* often have concrete bases to increase the visitors' comfort.

Within both the larger *ger* where guests are received for their meals and the smaller ones where they sleep,

many of the customs and practices relating to traditional Mongolian hospitality are increasingly being diluted, a function of the commercialisation of the host/guest relationship. In the same vein, it is also notable that Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts will open Mongolia's first hotel owned by an international hotel group by the end of 2007. This will be closely followed by a Hilton Hotel in the centre of Ulaanbaatar. Responses to these developments have been mixed. While the potential for profitability spillovers is welcomed, there is a real fear that the arrival of international conglomerates will detract from Mongolia's appeal as a unique destination.

Since the 1903 presentation to the Royal Geographical Society, Mongolia has encountered both political revolution and significant social turmoil. Given that the country experienced both Chinese and Soviet rule before finally gaining independence after the fall of communism in Mongolia in 1990 and adopting a new,

responsibility on the guest to behave hospitably to his host ... guests must be aware of their host's circumstances and not place an undue burden on him

democratic constitution in 1992, it is remarkable that hospitality customs and practices have survived in a form that would be recognised by Marco Polo or even Herodotus.²⁰ Today, Mongolians remain a profoundly hospitable people and this is consistently shown in their hospitality to strangers, who very quickly feel a genuine and deep sense of welcome as they are treated like honoured guests.

The steady increase of tourists to Mongolia is in danger of changing the dynamics of the host-guest relationship, as much through the behaviour of the tourists as though the development of a commercial hospitality sector. Travelling in Mongolia is still challenging, both physically and emotionally, but it is a rich, rewarding and wonderful experience, with a great responsibility on the guest to behave hospitably to his host. Just as the Mongolian host is hospitable towards his guests, guests must be aware of their host's circumstances and not place an undue burden on him.

How the development of the commercial hospitality industry within Mongolia will affect the tourist experience is, as yet, unclear. Indeed, given the practical



difficulties of travelling to and from Mongolia, and the current climatic and infrastructural limitations on visitor numbers, there must be a question over the scope for such development. Moreover, there are certainly those who would argue that commercialising Mongolian hospitality by separating it from the home and from the traditions on which it is based will deprive the country of its unique selling point as a destination for the intrepid traveller.

THE AUTHORS IN THE FIELD

(Far left) KAREN THOMPSON lectures in Tourism at the University of Strathclyde. Her principal research interest is in tourist behaviour, with specific reference to transport and events. She has undertaken a number of research projects on tourism in Central Asia including, most recently, a study of visitor motivation and experience at the Ulaanbaatar Naadam Festival.

(Second left) KEVIN D O'GORMAN is currently completing his PhD in the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow. His research interests comprise the history and philosophy of hospitality and his PhD research involves an analysis of ancient, classical and mediaeval texts, both in their original languages and using modern commentaries on them, to establish the true origins of hospitality.

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