

Mongolia: 6 months with the nomads of the steppe

Mongolia is five times as large as Italy and has a population of two and a half million inhabitants, of whom 900,000 are still nomad shepherds who move with their camel caravans at least fifteen times a year in search of new pastures or

water for their animals. Goats, sheep, yaks, camels and horses, ranging from a few hundreds to several thousands, provide them with meat, milk, wool and cashmere (that they sell mainly to China) and constitute the only wealth which these proud, wandering horsemen are prepared to fight for. "Wouldn't you like to go and live in the city?" In the six months I spent living with the nomads in the different regions of Mongolia I never heard anyone give a convinced affirmative to this question. The nomads are very curious about life in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, since most of them have never set foot there. But, despite the free-market system introduced in the country since 1992, after 300 years of Chinese and 70 years of Soviet domination, this curiosity hasn't yet become an actual attraction: "What about my animals? How could I take them with me?" – they all asked me. I didn't know how to reply. The nomad's strong link with his livestock is a deep sentiment which can often astonish and disconcert you when you come up against it. The children learn to ride almost before they learn to walk and by the age of three they can all sit in the saddle by themselves. The nomads have a special rela-



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relationship with the horse, *morj*, almost a symbiosis, and this has not altered despite all the changes in society. Often you earn a Mongol nomad's respect if you show respect for his horse (a descendant of the *Equus Prjevalskii* of which only a few specimens remain).

In Mongolia you meet on average two inhabitants every square kilometre. The lowest population density in the world. If you're not prepared for it, the great emptiness of Mongolia can bewilder even the most expert traveller: to the north there is the taiga, to the south the Gobi desert, to the west the Altai mountains and from here, to the east as far as you can see, only steppe, steppe and steppe.... Overhead and all around a boundless sky. Always blue. Deep blue. Blinding. You can't hide from it, you can't escape it. You can't deceive it. And the eternal sun. No cloud in sight, no shade. It shows up everything and everyone. The proud nature of the Mongols is forged in this fundamental element, this immense and hostile space. The horsemen of the steppe capably face its challenge every day enduring temperatures that can easily drop to 50° below zero.

If you happen to glimpse something on the horizon it's almost always a gher, the Mongols' typical, round tent. Let's go in. The guest's place is to the north, opposite the entrance which always faces south. The women sit to the east, where the kitchen utensils are, and the men to the east, where they keep their guns. In the middle of the gher the great stove puffs smoke into the sky through the *toghona*, the central hole from which light also enters. Every morning old *Tungalagtuya*, a beautiful woman's name which means "bright sunrays", throws a spoonful of milk to the sky and one to the ground. She is following the Shamanic rite and blessing a new day.

DEBATE

Look at it carefully! A geographical map always has many colours indicating mountains and plains, seas and rivers, volcanoes and islands, glaciers, deserts and all the rest... This was how the Earth was and is.

To survive, the first living creatures learnt to adapt to these different features of the land. This is how variety was created, spontaneously. In every form of life.

I want to imagine a moment, in the history of the world, in which different creatures could live peacefully together.

Perhaps the deterioration of this garden of harmony began as people evolved and no longer had only to worry about surviving. They found they had the time to consider their differences as something to vaunt and use as a form of power....

Dear children,

Do you like the fact that there are many populations different from yours in the world?

Why do you like it or not like it?

How do you think these populations are "different"?

Do these differences make you afraid or do they make you curious?

Is a "different" person less important than you and your usual friends?

How would you react if a Mongol child were to enter your class now? What would you tell him or her? What would you ask him or her about?