The Urban Clan of Genghis Khan

An influx of nomads has turned the Mongolian capital upside down.

By Don Belt

Not long ago a young Mongolian livestock herder named Ochkhuu Genen loaded what was left of his life into a borrowed Chinese pickup truck and moved it to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's sprawling capital. Slender and dignified, Ochkhuu gave no outward sign of turmoil as he buried himself in the mechanics of packing, lifting, unpacking, and assembling. He may have been disappointed in himself, even shaken, but outwardly he was as smooth and focused as a socket wrench.

Within hours of arriving, Ochkhuu had pitched his ger—the nomad's traditional round dwelling—on a small, fenced plot of bare ground he'd rented on the outskirts of the city. Around it were thousands of other plots, each with a ger in the middle, jammed together on the slopes overlooking Ulaanbaatar. Once his stovepipe was raised and the stakes driven in, he opened the low wooden door for his wife, Norvoo; their baby boy, Ulaka; and their six-year-old daughter, Anuka.

Norvoo also took comfort in the task at hand. She put aside her worries long enough to make sure their ger was as cozy as it had been in the countryside: linoleum floor, cast-iron stove, and cots around the edges, with family pictures neatly pinned to the wall and a small television on a wooden table.

Outside their door, however, the view was starkly different from what it had been on the steppe an hour southwest of the capital, where they'd raised their livestock next to the ger of Norvoo's parents. Here, in place of rolling grasslands, there was a seven-foot-high wooden fence a few feet away. And in place of Ochkhuu's cherished livestock—the horses and cattle and sheep—there was only the landlord's dog, a black and brown mongrel staked in the yard, who barked himself hoarse at the least provocation.

There was plenty of provocation just beyond the fence, in the ramshackle slums, or ger districts, where about 60 percent of Ulaanbaatar's 1.2 million people live without paved roads, sanitation, or running water. As in other urban slums, the ger districts are high in crime, alcoholism, poverty, and despair, which is why many people here do the unthinkable, for a herder: They lock their gates at night.

"We step outside the ger and all we can see is that fence," Ochkhuu said. "It's like living in a box."

Nomads were never meant to live in a box, but Ochkhuu and Norvoo weren't there by choice. During the winter of 2009-2010, most of the couple's livestock either froze or starved to death during a white dzud, a devastating period of snow, ice, and bitter cold that follows a summer drought; it lasted more
than four months. By the time the weather broke, the couple’s herd of 350 animals had been cut to 90. Across Mongolia some eight million animals—cows, yaks, camels, horses, goats, and sheep—died that winter.

"After that, I just couldn’t see our future in the countryside any more," Ochkhuu said quietly. "So we decided to sell what was left of our herd and make a new life."

It was also a clear-eyed calculation to improve the lives of their children. Ochkhuu and Norvoo feel no great affinity for city life, but they see its advantages. In the countryside they were far removed from nurses and schools, but here they can get free medical care for their infant son, and Anuka can attend a public school.

There are more than half a million Ochkhuus and Norvoos living these days in UB, as Mongolians call Ulaanbaatar. Many have been driven from the steppe by bad winters, bad luck, and bad prospects. And now that Mongolia's coal, gold, and copper mines are attracting billions in foreign investment, they also have flooded into UB in search of job prospects created by the economic upsurge from mining money.

Beyond the downtown high-rises, UB often feels like a frontier town run amok, strewn lengthwise along a river valley like gravel left behind by a flash flood. Founded in 1639 as a movable Buddhist monastic center and trading post, the settlement took root in its present location in 1778. The town was laid out along one major thoroughfare, which runs along the base of a low mountain. Today that road goes by the name Peace Avenue, and it’s still the only direct way to get from one side of town to the other. From daybreak to nightfall, it’s jammed with traffic. Driving it is like getting on a conveyor belt that inches past crumbling Soviet-era apartment blocks, side streets that run promisingly for 50 yards and then end at a barricade, unexplained piles of rusted iron and concrete, and office buildings so clumsily situated and hidden from view that no taxi driver can find them.

Add to this a flood of nomads, many of them recent arrivals whose skill set doesn't include city driving, crossing a busy road, or the subtleties of social interaction in an urban environment, and you've got a heady mix. It's not unusual to be waiting in line at a kiosk and have some gnarled tree trunk of a man in herder clothes—steppe boots, felt hat, and the traditional wraparound del—stomp to the front of the line, shouldering customers out of the way like a hockey player, just to see what the place is selling. If there are other herdies in line, he gets pushed back just as hard. There are no fights, no hard feelings. That's just the way it goes.

"These people are completely free," says Baabar, a prominent publisher and historian who writes often about Mongolia's national character. "Even if they've been in UB for years, their mentality is still nomadic. They do exactly what they want to do, when they want to do it. Watch people crossing the
road. They just lurch out into traffic without batting an eye. It doesn't occur to them to compromise, even with a speeding automobile. We're a nation of rugged individuals, with no regard for rules."

Early one Saturday morning Ochkhuu, Norvoo, and their kids returned to the country for a weekend at Norvoo's parents' home to prepare their farm for winter. Ochkhuu helped Norvoo's father, Jaya, cut hay for eight hours, and by Sunday night they had moved enough hay to the barn to keep his animals alive through the winter, even a dzud. Jaya too had lost huge numbers of animals during the last dzud—his herd had dropped from more than a thousand to 300 animals—but he was determined to make a comeback, banking on decades of experience as a herder both during and after communism, which he rather misses.

"There were bad things, of course. I hated being told what to do by bureaucrats. But communism protected us from disasters like last winter," he said. "Even if you lost all your animals, you wouldn't starve to death."

Although they supported Ochkhuu and Norvoo's decision to move, Jaya and his wife, Chantsal, often said how lonely they were without them next door. But moving to UB was out of the question. "I wouldn't last a week in that city," Jaya scowled. "Too much noise, too much jangling and banging. I'd get sick and die."

Men like Jaya and Ochkhuu are authentic livestock herders, unlike others who failed during the dzud, said historian Baabar. After the collapse of communism, when many Soviet-era factories closed down, thousands of people left UB to reclaim their pastoral roots. But "they'd forgotten everything they knew about being nomads, how to raise livestock, how to survive these tough winters," he said. The pity, says Baabar, is that they are also not fit to compete in the city.

All this comes at a time when Mongolia, communist until 1990, is seeking to reassert itself between the two powers next door, Russia and China, that have pushed it around for centuries. Nationalism—even xenophobia—is on the rise, and foreigners are increasingly blamed for Mongolia's problems in the same breath as local and national politicians, who are widely considered, with justification, as deeply corrupt.

Visiting Chinese businessmen, accused of enriching themselves at Mongolia's expense, no longer venture out after dark on the streets of the capital for fear of being attacked by young guys in black leather channeling Genghis Khan, who is back in vogue as a symbol of Mongolian pride. Banned during Soviet times, images of Genghis are everywhere you look today, from vodka labels and playing cards to the colossal, 131-foot steel statue of the conqueror on horseback that rises from the steppe an hour east of UB to cast the mother of all dirty looks toward China.
He's not the only one looking in that direction. By many estimates, Mongolia is sitting on a trillion dollars' worth of recoverable coal, copper, and gold, much of it concentrated near the Chinese border around Oyu Tolgoi, or Turquoise Hill. There Ivanhoe Mines, the Canadian mining giant, is tapping the world's largest undeveloped copper and gold deposit in partnership with Rio Tinto, an Anglo-Australian company, and the Mongolian government, which holds a 34 percent share of the project, potentially adding billions of dollars to the national economy.

How much of that will migrate 340 miles north and into the pockets of ordinary people such as Ochkhuu is an open question. Experts at the World Bank and the United Nations are urging Mongolia to invest that money in infrastructure, training, and growing the economy, although the current government, led by Prime Minister Sukhbaatar Batbold, took a more direct approach, pledging to grant every man, woman, and child a payment of about $1,200 from the mining windfall.

Ochkhuu doesn't believe he'll ever see that money. But in the meantime, he needs to work. At first he tried his hand as an entrepreneur, having identified what he thought was a need in the community. He and a partner rented a room at a local hotel and then marketed it to ger dwellers, who lack running water, as a place to take a shower or a bath. He went door-to-door looking for customers. There were very few takers. Ochkhuu lost more than $200 on the deal, a sizable chunk of his savings.

Now he's thinking of buying a used car and turning it into a taxi. He'd need to borrow the money, but he'd make a pretty good living, and the freedom of driving and being his own boss appeals to him. More important, he'd be able to drive his daughter to and from school.

"We may not be able to raise our animals in UB," he went on. "But it's a good place to raise our children."

Passing through the fence into his yard, Ochkhuu drags the wooden gate behind him until the latch clicks.

"God, I miss my horses," he says.