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# Epic Mongol Battle

Eagles and yurt hotels are the weapons of choice in this conflict.

I'M ONLINE researching a story and stumble upon a familiar name. I pick up the phone and call Jalsa Urubshurow, a childhood playmate from my hometown of Howell Township, New Jersey. It's been 30 years, and yet within minutes we have renewed our friendship forged traipsing through the pine barrens at the edge of our rural neighborhood. Impulsively, we hatch a plan to meet on the border of China and Mongolia the following spring. He wants to show me what is at stake in his ancestral homeland as it shakes off

a wicked hangover from Stalin-era communist rule. "Mongolia in real life is the adventure we always dreamed about as kids," he says.

Though our heads are flecked with gray, we recognize each other when we meet in the sand-blown border town of Erenhot. After my jacket is stolen by a rogue taxi driver, Jalsa flags down a motorcycle and races after the thief before I can even ask him what he's doing. He soon returns, laughing, jacket in hand: "It's the wild frontier."

A sparsely populated country more than twice the size of Texas that looks to the Dalai Lama for spiritual leadership, Mongolia remains mostly a land of yurts (known as *gers*) and nomadic herders who travel on horseback across the largest unfenced grasslands in the world. Even the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, which has sprouted new designer stores such as Vuitton, Armani, and Boss, remains circled by thousands of handcrafted gers made of canvas and wool felt.

But it's what lies outside the capital and beneath the grasslands that has compelled multinational mining corporations to rip up land and pollute rivers.

"Mongolia is on the cusp of a development tsunami. There is hardly an international mining company that is not prospecting here," says Jalsa as our 4x4 kicks up red dust across the Gobi. We are retracing the route taken by American explorer Roy Chapman Andrews, who discovered the world's first nest of fossilized dinosaur eggs here in the 1920s.

Jalsa, the charismatic founder and president of Nomadic Expeditions, a pioneering Mongolia-based outfitter, offers a sustainable alternative to wholesale mining of coal, copper, and gold. He sells guided trips that explore Mongolia's natural and cultural heritage.

The Gobi is not the stark dunescape I imagined but is blanketed in *taana*—a wild onion that is a food source for pastoralists' herds.



Bird's-eye view: Participants at Mongolia's Golden Eagle Festival.

**The Gobi is not the stark dunescape I imagined but is blanketed in *taana*—a wild onion that is an important food source.**

at construction sites to starting what became one of the leading carpentry framing firms in the U.S. His American-style success story made him a well-known figure in the tight-knit Mongolian-American community. When a government delegation visited the U.S. in 1990, Jalsa met Dashiin Byambasuren, who would become Mongolia's prime minister three months later. The prime minister asked Jalsa to help his ancestral country develop tourism.

The builder accepted. He visited Mongolia for the first time and started putting the country on the global tourism map—initially with Three Camel Lodge and later by founding the Golden Eagle Festival, an annual October event designed to preserve the age-

old tradition of hunting on horseback with eagles. Now in its 12th year, the festival draws travelers from around the world who come to watch the nomadic hunters release their eagles from a high cliff in feats of speed and agility. The entire event has the feel of a giant Mongolian country fair, including music, dance, and horse-riding games. Travelers, led by local guides from Nomadic Expeditions and other outfitters, learn about traditional culture firsthand and see the raptors up close.

Now Jalsa faces a more formidable challenge—how to stop

We are headed to Three Camel Lodge, Mongolia's first community-based eco-lodge, built by Jalsa together with local craftsmen following Mongolian design and using indigenous materials, such as unprocessed desert stones and handmade roof tiles. Its 20 rooms buck five-star luxury in favor of comfortable authenticity (nightly rates start at \$220 for two, including meals).

On the balcony overlooking an eye-squintingly bright vista of the Gobi, Jalsa explains how, in the three decades since we last met, he went from pounding nails

uncontrolled mining from trashing Mongolia's wilderness. From the Gobi, we head north to Lake Hovsgol, an 85-mile-long body of fresh water considered to be among the purest on the planet. As we bounce on kidney-jolting roads to the Russian border, the Gobi gives way to open grasslands, which meld into rolling hills that turn into taiga forests before reaching a region of icy clear streams and snow-covered mountains. Beyond that: Siberia. I have seen fewer than a hundred people during five days of travel—often just two or three at a time, mostly on horseback. We do pass a handful of vehicles, some shiny and new. Mining speculators, says Jalsa.

"The only way to stop them is to demonstrate that tourism can bring in good money on a sustainable basis for future generations while also protecting the land that Mongolians consider sacred," he notes.

This might be just wishful thinking if it were without precedent. But in 1987, white-water rafting outfitters in western Canada took a similar approach against plans to turn the Tatshenshini-Alsek river watershed into the largest copper mine in the world. The government eventually rescinded the mining permit and created a 2.4-million-acre protected area that's now a popular eco-adventure destination.

Mongolia—a mostly poor, developing country—could prove a much tougher challenge. But Jalsa is not alone in his quest, as more Mongolians recognize the threat to their land and way of life. One of them is Tsetsegee Munkhbayar, a former yak herder who won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2007 for leading a grassroots movement that successfully shut down 35 mining operations and continues working to improve and enforce mining regulations. "With the combined voices of local people and travelers, we can have a stronger economic argument to stop mining," says Munkhbayar.

Back on the road, we pass a succession of blue prayer flags tied to piles of rocks and trees. Jalsa stops the Land Cruiser to circle these spiritual shrines three times on foot. Locals believe the custom brings good luck to travelers. The Jersey boy who always wanted to play Mongolian war battles is now fighting to defend his homeland with festivals and eco-lodges. I tell him this is going to be a tough battle to win. "That's what they told Genghis Khan," he says. ■

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