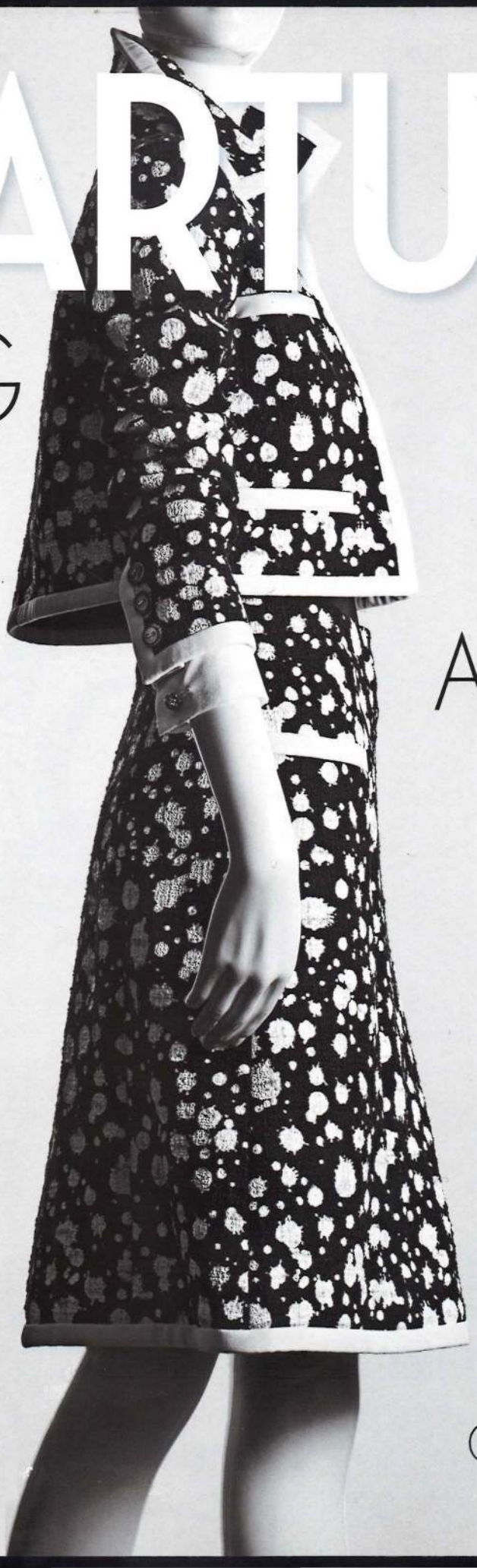
MARCH / APRIL 2015

DEPARTURES



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THE EAGLE HUNTERS *of* MONGOLIA

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Plus

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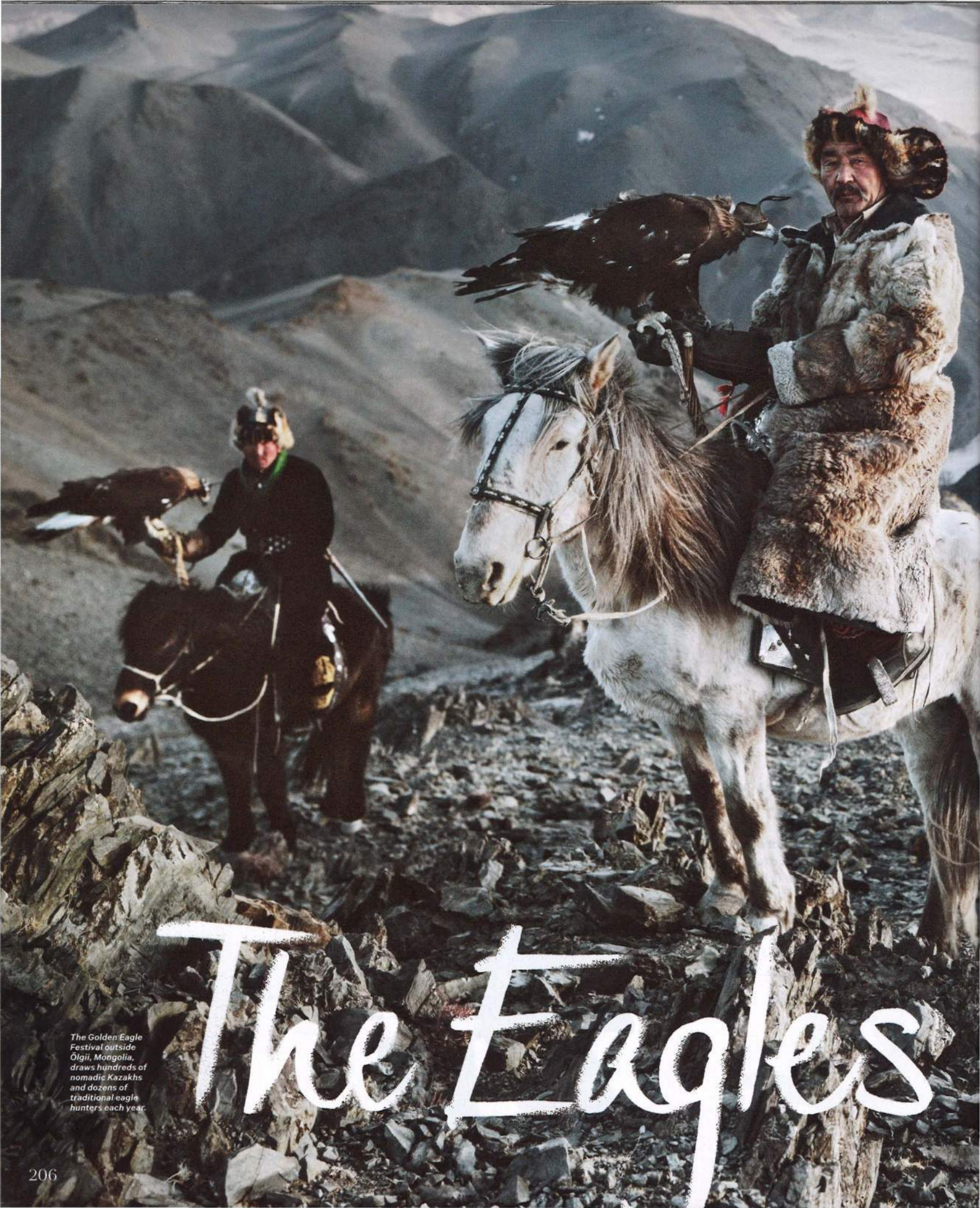


The Eagles

The Golden Eagle Festival outside Ölgii, Mongolia, draws hundreds of nomadic Kazakhs and dozens of traditional eagle hunters each year.

Have Landed

For the nomadic Kazakhs of the Central Asian steppes, the symbiosis between hunters and their majestic raptors was not just a means of a subsistence but a way of life. Now threatened by rapid modernization, the future of that tradition rests largely on the shoulders of one of Mongolia's prodigal sons—as well as a 13-year-old huntress. LAWRENCE OSBORNE meets the country's new eagle whisperers.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIMMY NELSON

I first met Jalsa Urubshurow in Ulaanbaatar's small international airport. It was an hour before dawn in early October, and Jalsa was there with a small party accompanying the Hollywood actress Michelle Rodriguez on their way to the remote far western settlement of Ölgii in the Altai Mountains. In the airport's tiny VIP lounge, seated at a tiny bar with his predawn coffee, he asked me as soon as I walked in the door if I liked drinking vodka.

"You're not a teetotaler are you?" he said.

The implication was that if I was, I was certainly in the wrong country. Mongolians love their vodka. The accent is pure New Jersey, the handsomely weather-beaten features pure Kalmyk Mongolian, and the handshake that of a cultured construction worker—which, in some ways, is what Jalsa is. As American as he is Mongolian, Jalsa is a remarkable personality: Only a man with tremendous persistence could have come from nowhere to make himself one of the most successful Mongolians of his generation.

"We're proud of our vodka," he said. "In fact, even our vodka is named after Genghis Khan. That's Chinggis Khan while you're here."

Jalsa is "Mr. Mongolia" for many connoisseurs of adventure travel, but he was actually born to Mongolian immigrants in Freewood Acres, New Jersey. Today he is probably most famous for his fabulous **Three Camel Lodge** *(threecamellodge.com)*, in the Gobi Desert. But for the last 15 years, Jalsa has also run an annual festival for Kazakh nomad eagle hunters in the distant province of Bayan-Ölgii in the foothills of the Altai Mountains. He told me, as we split a small shot of Chinggis Khan, that he had managed to help save a rare "art form," that of nomadic eagle hunting, from

certain extinction. It has become his passion. His Golden Eagle Festival now attracts hundreds of people every October, along with curious visitors and voracious photographers from the outside world.

"But then even most Mongolians could be said to be from the outside world compared to Ölgii," Jalsa said. "You'll see. It's one of the most remote places on earth. I mean, it's one of the most remote places *in Mongolia.*"

I would soon see what he meant. By five, we were in the air, flying over the arid and ice-bound steppes, over vast lakes with desert shores. It takes about four hours to fly from Ulaanbaatar to Ölgii. Looking down, I didn't see a single road or even a single house. Ocher and gray, the steppe stretches to every horizon. Mongolia is a vast country of 600,000 square miles but contains less than 3 million people. It has perhaps the lowest population density on earth. Inside the Hunnu Air plane, however, the ruddy-faced Kazakhs in their enormous sable-fur hats felt like a crowd. We ourselves were now a group of seven: Jalsa and myself, Ms. Rodriguez (the tough-girl star of *Avatar* and the *Fast and Furious* franchise), and her four companions: a former New Zealand army officer living in Las Vegas with the splendidly local name of Genghis Cohen; Euro-Nascar racing champion David Perisset (also living in Las Vegas) and his wife, Audrey; and, from Paris, Hermine, the beautiful daughter of a former president of Gabon who now helps run one of the country's top airlines. Genghis Cohen, I soon learned, was not Mongolian at all: His Maori father had simply admired the military genius of the 13th-century conqueror. The owner of a specialist shooting range, Cohen had always wanted to come to Mongolia and try his hand at traditional archery. I wondered if they were typical of the eclectic people that Jalsa took around his ancestral home with his company **Nomadic Expeditions** *(nomadicexpeditions.com)*. I knew, for one thing, that he had twice taken Richard Gere around Mongolia. He later introduced me to a crown prince of Bhutan.

Ölgii's airport looks like that of a Soviet border post, which, in a sense, is exactly what it once was. Mongolia left the Soviet Union only in 1990. The tarmac was shrouded in ground mist, and as the sun rose, we saw ash-colored mountains and white nomad *gers,* or felt tents. Two Land Cruisers took us through Ölgii, with its decayed Soviet squares, through immense flocks of goats mingled with red-cheeked children on their way to school. On the far side, we followed the course of the dark-blue Khovd River, which curves through the desert steppes. Yaks and argali sheep meandered along the river as well, shadowed by saker falcons. Jalsa's temporary *ger* camp is built by the edge of this river every October for the Golden Eagle Festival and then dismantled afterward. It lies several miles from Ölgii, in a wilderness of grassland and glittering beech trees, the *gers* spread out along the gravel banks.

That night, we made a bonfire by the river under a steppe moon, and Jalsa told us how he had built the festival with three Kazakh partners, who, as if on cue, turned up in person to partake in several rounds of Chinggis. They were three jolly and bibulous luminaries of Ölgii: an archeologist named Edelkhan, specializing in local ancient petroglyphs; a magistrate called Medulkhan, involved in local politics; and his attorney brother, Kazbek. (Mongolians habitually use only one name.) Eventually a famous local musician and gynecologist by the name of Kugershan also showed up in traditional costume with his daughter, and the two of them played old Kazakh tunes on a pair of mandolin-like *dombra.* Saturday night on the Khovd.

"We started this festival at the end of the '90s," Jalsa said. "And back then, in 1998, the eagle hunters had virtually died out. The young boys were moving away to look for jobs in Ulaanbaatar and elsewhere. There were just a handful of hunters left. Now we have dozens who come here for the festival. We have over 400 eagle hunters in the region of Bayan-Ölgii today. We've helped revive a whole dimension of Kazakh culture."

The gynecologist and his daughter then launched into a strange, lilting version of Rod Stewart's "Sailing." The vodka began to flow.

The Kazakhs were—and many still are—Muslim nomads who emigrated into western Mongolia in the 1860s under pressure from the aggressively expanding czarist Russia. Their language is Turkic and thus unintelligible to Mongols, but they share with their hosts an ancient steppe culture based on the horse, on archery, and on hunting. In Kazakh, eagle hunters are known as *berkutchi,* from the word for "eagle," *berkut,* and as with the Mongols, their falconry skills have been honed over centuries. Genghis Khan himself is reputed to have kept a thousand hunting birds for his pleasure.

Edelkhan explained that Turkic and Mongolic peoples had been living in the Altai region for many thousands of years. (The following day, indeed, I wandered for hours across the steppe with a young guide and found scores of prehistoric petroglyphs and ancient deer-stones, spear-shaped pillars that marked the possible sites of 2,000-year-old graves.) The carving on the rocks showed ibex and wolves and hunters armed with bows. But no one knew when these people had started to use eagles as a weapon.

GENGHIS KHAN HIMSELF IS REPUTED TO HAVE KEPT A THOUSAND HUNTING BIRDS FOR HIS PLEASURE.

"It's a very ancient tradition," Edelkhan assured me. "It's widespread on the steppes. However, it declined in the Soviet period."

With a wingspan of up to seven feet and a maximum weight of 15 pounds, the golden eagle is one of the world's largest raptors, an animal that can hunt foxes and young deer in the wild. Trained by humans, it can even run down small gray wolves, though there is some dispute as to whether it can kill them. The *berkutchi* train their birds by dragging fox pelts behind their horses and calling the eagles to them as they canter at a fast pace—the birds swoop down at more than a hundred miles an hour and savage the pelts. During the two-day festival, each hunter rehearses this same move again and again, testing his eagle's killing skills, and is subsequently graded by a panel of judges. In real life, though, eagle hunters work in teams. They trek for days on horseback in some of the coldest regions on earth in search of their favorite quarry: the slow-footed corsac fox, prized for its voluptuous fur.

On the festival's first day, we drove out

The golden eagle is among the world's largest raptors, with a maximum weight of 15 pounds and a wingspan of up to seven feet.

across open desert to the foot of a rocky outcrop on top of which a flag had been raised. It was from this summit that the eagles would be released one by one. Below, surrounded by lines of old off-road Russian *bukhankas* ("bread-loaf" vans), a wide field was demarcated by stones and then divided by three parallel white lines. Each horseman had to ride across the lines as his eagle pursued him, and the sooner the raptor closed in, the higher the rider's score. Jalsa explained that the eagles were not bred in captivity but culled from wild nests and then released after seven years of hunting service. The tradition upon releasing them back into the wild is to leave a sheep's carcass on a hillside as a good-bye gift.

Out there on the plains, with mountains on all sides, the searing winds promised snow. A few Bactrian camels stood on the pale-yellow grassland. Every hour, a lone horseman appeared from the mountains, making his way towards the *bukhankas.*

The horsemen were each in a traditionally tooled leather and felt outfit, with an extravagant pelt hat, a handmade wooden Y-shaped stick protruding from the saddle, and a forbidding eagle sitting on the rider's thick protective gauntlet, its head covered with a leather hood to pacify it. As they cantered past, the horsemen would sometimes stop to show off their prize birds, raising them to make them extend their wings, and then look down at us in their magnificent sable coats and silver-studded belts. Later, we saw these same men galloping across the field with their eagles chasing them, swooping down to attack the pelts. Among them was a 13-year-old girl named Ashol-Pan, who in recent months has become something of a celebrity, featured prominently by the BBC. The Golden Eagle Festival and its dandyish hunters have indeed become photogenic icons in the age of mass media. And yet nothing about the event itself felt overly contrived. This was clearly a people rediscovering its own traditions with gusto.

That night, by the Khovd, our little band ate *khorkhog,* a dish of mutton cooked with hot stones (traditionally inside the stomach of a deboned marmot or other animal but now, with more pedestrian intent, inside pressure cookers). One has to pluck out one of the black stones and rub it therapeutically in one's hands—satisfyingly medieval. As we started another round of ritual vodka abuse while handling the mutton-greasy stones, Jalsa pulled out a far bigger surprise: a bottle of wine from the renowned Italian producer Angelo Gaja.

He said he had brought it with him just in case any of us turned out to be connoisseurs. It was astonishing, and it was followed by a bottle of a far rarer wine, a Soldera Brunello di Montalcino. Strange indeed to be sitting in the middle of the Mongolian steppe around a wood fire sipping a Soldera Brunello from a silver drinking bowl normally dedicated to alcoholic fermented mare's milk. But then it was, in some way, typical of Jalsa's way of doing things. Perhaps as the result of his uniquely mixed background, a Mongol growing up in New Jersey and becoming a wealthy self-made man in the cutthroat construction business, Jalsa has a way of being sui generis in all things.

His family originated in a region once known as Dzungaria, now part of Xinjiang in northwestern China. This was once the home of a Mongol people called the Oirats, who emigrated from there to southern Russia in the early 17th century, where they became known as Kalmyks. Their new home, still called Kalmykia, was on the banks of the Volga River and the Caspian Sea, and they are still the majority of the population there. After Kalmykia became part of the Soviet Union, Jalsa's father migrated even farther west to Bulgaria, where he met Jalsa's Kalmyk mother. Then they moved to Germany.

"They were refugees," Jalsa said. "They ended up in a displaced-persons camp after the war, but the Tolstoy Foundation managed to persuade the American authorities that they were 'Russians,' and they got into the U.S., despite the immigration controls on Asians. They allowed in 571 Kalmyks as 'Caucasians.' That's how we ended up in Monmouth County, New Jersey. We were poor and definitely not Caucasian, but my father always kept alive the myths of Mongolia for me. He was illiterate, but he used to make me read *The Secret History of the Mongols,* the 13th-century account of the life of Genghis Khan. I spoke Mongolian at home, and I always wanted to go back."

Jalsa began work in his uncle's construction business. He became a skilled carpenter, and soon he was running his own company building wood-frame houses. It became one of the largest companies of its kind in the United States, All-tech Carpentry Contractors, and Jalsa made his considerable fortune.

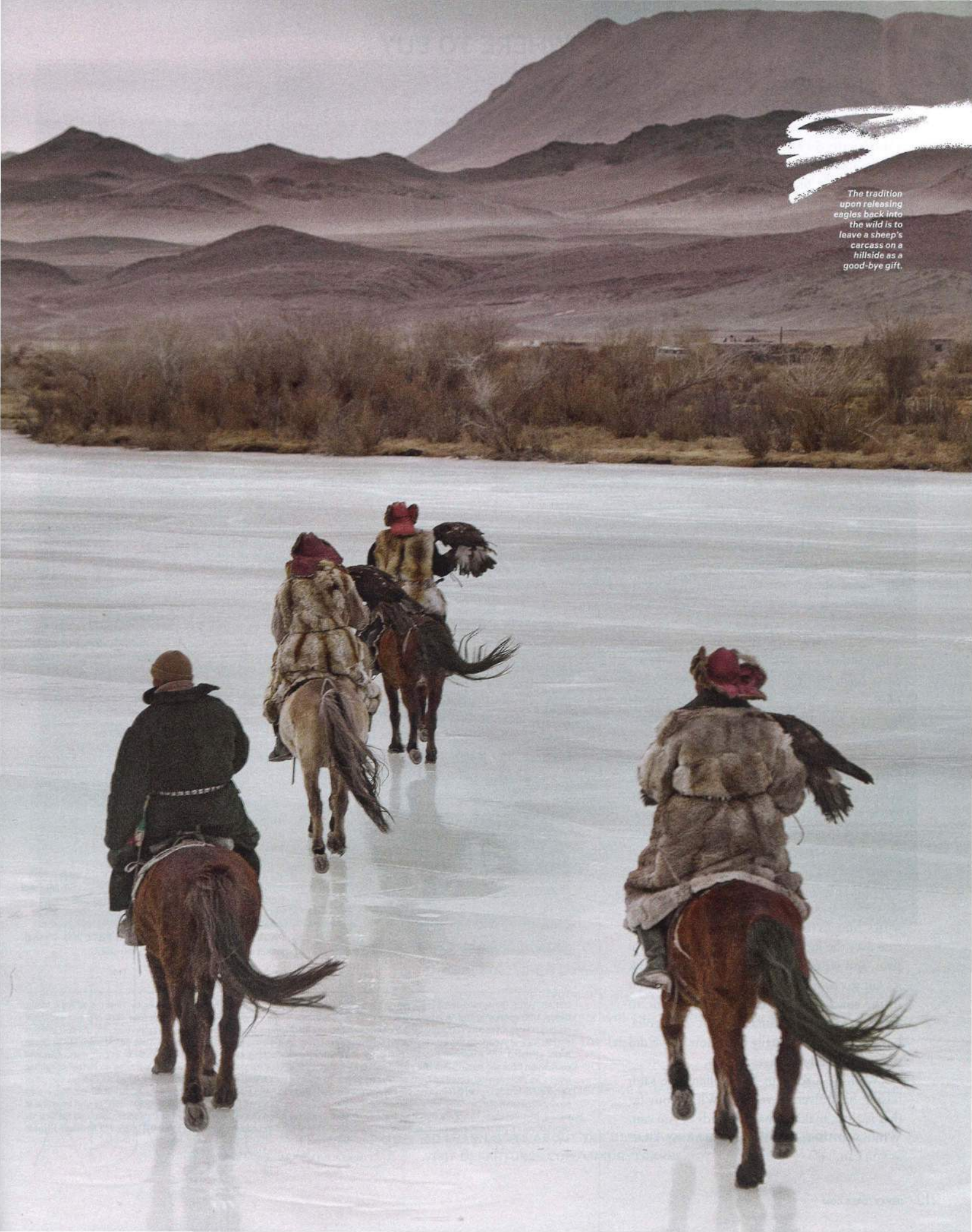
In 1990 events in far distant Mongolia came home to New Jersey. The Soviet Union broke up, and Ulaanbaatar declared independence. A six-man delegation from the new national parliament arrived in the United States, headed by Dashiin Byambasuren, who would go on to become prime minister. The delegation later asked Jalsa to help them develop the country's tourism industry; in response, he set up the U.S.-Mongolian Business Council, and shortly thereafter Mongolia was opened for the first time to Western visitors.

"When I came back in 1990, it was an overwhelming experience," Jalsa said. "Twenty-five years ago, it was a totally different place. There were almost no cars in Ulaanbaatar. There were hardly any restaurants or bars. Kids played soccer in front of the Parliament building. There were about 600,000 people in the whole city—now there are 600,000 cars! And they're not Ladas."

"TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, MONGOLIA WAS A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PLACE. THERE WERE ALMOST NO CARS IN ULAANBAATAR."

In recent years, growth in Mongolia has averaged 12 percent a year—in some years, it's been among the highest in the world. Despite being hit hard by the 2008 crisis, the so-called wolf economy (as Mongolia's is often called) has rebounded, driven by mining and cashmere, of which Mongolia is the world's second largest producer. Mining, indeed, has made Ulaanbaatar something of a boomtown raking in huge profits from coal, fluorspar, copper, and tin. Trade with China is thriving, as are the luxury and tourism industries.

On the Khovd River, Jalsa and his young all-Mongolian staff (many of them graduate students) run a camp that is deliberately transient. The whole thing is taken down the day after the last visitor leaves, and no trace remains. In this respect, it's a typical nomad *ger* encampment. It's made to be ephemeral and traceless. Three Camel Lodge, located in



The tradition upon releasing eagles back into the wild is to leave a sheep's carcass on a hillside as a good-bye gift.

the open desert about 40 miles from the remote town of Dalanzadgad, runs in similar spirit, partly on solar power.

The following morning, we rode out to the festival for the finals. A large crowd had gathered, and Jalsa mounted the podium to make a speech. The hunters, looking like a steppes war party of centuries past, paraded up and down after their final exertions, and the first prize was given to the cherubic Ashol-Pan. I went to congratulate her afterward, and she asked if I could take a picture of her eagle, not just of her. I asked her if she was proud to have come ahead of all the grizzled, experienced male hunters around her. They were, it should be said, kissing her and mobbing her affectionately.

"Today is the best day for me," she said, her cheeks almost carmine between the sable flaps of her hat. "But I've been doing this since before I can remember." When Jalsa set up his festival, she was not yet even born. Now a young girl might be the most globally recognized face of the eagle hunters of Bayan-Ölgii.

Within a few hours, the festival itself disappeared. The *bukhankas* drove off in swirls of dust taking the Europeans and Americans with them, the half-dozen dreadlocked backpackers strode off to make the long hike back to Ölgii, and we stood around with the archers to shoot a few blunted arrows from the fearsome recurve bows that 800 years ago had terrorized all of Eurasia. Genghis Cohen pulled a few arrows but said that the bow's draw weight was so heavy that he had a problem keeping it steady. The tiny Mongolian girls, however, fired theirs off effortlessly and with deadly accuracy. As the sun declined, we drove back to the Khovd and built another fire on the bank.

The temperature had plunged dramatically, and there was now a premonition of the brutal winter to come. Jalsa had set up an incongruously elegant cocktail bar, and we drank, of all things, iced-vodka tonics made, of course, with Chinggis (no rocks necessary). The moon rose over the fast-moving, desolately beautiful river, and we got uproariously drunk. I think it's fair to claim that all of us now felt that even in the space of a few days, we had come to know something intimate about Mongolia, however little we actually did know. If we did then, it was only because of Jalsa.

"We have a toast in Mongolian," he said, raising his quivering vodka. "While your father is alive, make as many friends as you can. While your horse is alive, see as many lands as you can." ♦

WHERE TO BUY

THE NOUVEAU NOMAD

PAGE 116 Brunello Cucinelli bag at Brunello Cucinelli, 212-627-9202. **Hermès** scarf at Hermès, 800-441-4488. **Louis Vuitton** guitar case at select Louis Vuitton boutiques, 866-884-8866. **Esquivel** shoes at store.esquivel.com. **Cassina** chair at cassina.com. **Band of Outsiders** coat at Band of Outsiders, 212-965-1313. **Apparatus Studio** censer at apparatusstudio.com. **Denis Colomb Lifestyle** shawl at deniscolomblifestyle.com. **Astier de Villatte** incense at John Derian Company, 212-677-3917. **PAGE 117 Salvatore Ferragamo** shirt and tie at Salvatore Ferragamo, 866-337-7242. **Cartier** pen at cartier.us. **Hublot** watch at Hublot, 212-308-0408. **Tiffany & Co.** bracelet and bangle at tiffany.com. **Astier de Villatte** saucer at John Derian Company. **Barton Perreira** sunglasses at bergdorfgoodman.com. **Hermès** notebook at Hermès. **Bauman Rare Books** inscribed first edition of *Men Without Women,* by Ernest Hemingway, at baumanrarebooks.com.

A CHICER SNEAKER

PAGE 118 Pierre Hardy at Pierre Hardy, 646-449-0070. **Tomas Maier** at tomasmaier.com. **Del Piano** at scoopnyc.com. **Jimmy Choo** at jimmychoo.com. **FEIT** at feitdirect.com. **Z Zegna** at zegna.com. **Hermès** at Hermès, 800-441-4488. **Tod's** at tods.com.

LOGOS 2.0

PAGE 120 Fendi at Fendi, 212-897-2244. **Versace** at select Versace boutiques, 888-721-7219. **Louis Vuitton** at select Louis Vuitton boutiques, 866-884-8866. **Dior** at Dior, 800-929-3467.

MOLTO MILANO

PAGE 170 Louis Vuitton shirt and trousers at select Louis Vuitton boutiques, 866-884-8866. **Persol** sunglasses at sunglasshut.com. **Ermenegildo Zegna Couture** jacket, sweater, trousers, scarf, and belt at zegna.com. **PAGE 171 Bottega Veneta** jacket, shirt, and trousers at bottegaveneta.com. **Brioni** pocket square at Brioni, 855-693-9862. **PAGE 172 Fendi** jacket, shirt, trousers, and sunglasses at Fendi, 305-931-4326. **Caruso** scarf at Caruso, 646-757-3041. **Pal Zileri** shoes at Pal Zileri, 702-431-5721. **Valentino** shirts and trousers at Valentino, 212-355-5811. **Caruso** tie at Caruso. **Bally** portfolio at Bally, 844-442-2559. **Santoni** shoes at santonishoes.com. **PAGE 173 Brioni** jacket, shirt, and scarf at Brioni. **PAGE 174 Phineas Cole** jacket and shirt and **Paul Stuart** trousers at paulstuart.com. **Stefano Ricci** pocket square at stefanoricci.com. **PAGE 175 Tom Ford** jacket, shirt, and jeans at Tom Ford, 888-866-3673. **Stefano Ricci** jacket, shirt, and trousers at stefanoricci.com. **David Yurman** cuff links and ring at davidyurman.com. **PAGE 176 Ralph Lauren** suit at select Ralph Lauren boutiques, 888-475-7674. **Salvatore Ferragamo** sweater at Salvatore Ferragamo, 866-337-7242. **Brooks Brothers** polo at brooksbrothers.com. **PAGE 177 Dior Homme** jacket, tank top, shirt, and trousers at Dior Homme, 800-929-3467. **Brioni** pocket square at Brioni. **Richard Mille** watch at Richard Mille, 310-285-9898. **PAGE 178 Caruso** waistcoat, shirt, and trousers at Caruso. **Bottega Veneta** shoes at Bottega Veneta. **PAGE 179 Dolce & Gabbana** suit and shirt at select Dolce & Gabbana boutiques, 877-703-4872. **Canali** tie and pocket square at canali.com. **Montblanc** watch at montblanc.com. **PAGE 180 Burberry Prorsum** knit shirt and trousers at burberry.com. **Brioni** shirt at Brioni. **Montblanc** cuff links at Montblanc. **Ermanno Scervino** coat at shop.ermannoscervino.it. **PAGE 181 Hermès** jacket, tank top, shirt, and trousers at Hermès, 800-441-4488. **Borsalino** hat at borsalino.com. **Bottega Veneta** portfolio at Bottega Veneta. **Ermenegildo Zegna Couture** shoes at zegna.com. Grooming by Loris Rocchi. Production by Mandala Creative Productions (mandalacp.it). The models are Andy Walters, Benjamín Bendeck, and Florent Megdout. Thanks to the Excelsior Hotel Gallia (starwoodhotels.com) and Luca Bombassei (lucabombassei.com).

BLING BANG THEORY

PAGE 186 Tito Pedrini ring at titopedrini.com. **PAGE 187 Chanel Fine Jewelry** brooch at Chanel Fine Jewelry, 800-500-0005. **PAGE 188 Verdura** cuff, similar styles at Verdura, 212-758-3388. **PAGE 189 David Yurman** necklace at David Yurman, 212-752-4255. **PAGE 190 Van Cleef & Arpels** earrings at vancleefarpels.com. **PAGE 191 Dior Fine Jewelry** ring at select Dior boutiques, 800-929-3467.

SIMPLE MODERN CLASSIC

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