



The Ger, or Yurt of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia is one of the most beautiful living spaces to be found anywhere. Now, as it gains popularity in the West, we look at this remarkable dwelling and find other that. . .

# HOME is WHERE THE GER is



The word ger means home in Mongolian, and it is the commonest portable home used by the nomadic peoples of Central Asia. It has a history that stretches back thousands of years, and it is found in Mongolia and the lands that surround it, such as Tibet to the South, certain areas of China to the East, Kazakhstan and Kirghizstan and even as far as Turkey to the West and Tuva and Buryatia to the North. It is even sometimes found further north in Siberia proper. In Siberia the Russians call them Yurta which is from where we get their other common name Yurt.

They are warm in winter and cool in summer and can be dismantled quite quickly and transported on the back of yaks or camels (or nowdays often by old Soviet built trucks) and taken to a new camp site.

## CONSTRUCTION OF GERS

Gers are round tents, generally around sixteen to twenty feet in diameter. Their walls are made of a wooden latticework, a little like garden trellace, which is around five feet high. The individual wooden slats are joined together with rawhide, camel skin is the preferred choice because of its strength. The sections are then lashed together with horsehair ropes.

More wooden strips are lashed to the top of these wall sections, and brought together at the top of the ger to form it's typical conical shaped roof. These roof strips are fixed to a wheel like structure called a *toono* or



*crwon* wheel, which sits in the centre of the ger's roof and which looks a little like a cart wheel.

This wheel helps to keep the roof in shape and also provides a hole for smoke to exit. One or more upright poles rest on the floor and support the wheel, keeping up the roof.

Gers were traditionally covered with several panels of felt made of



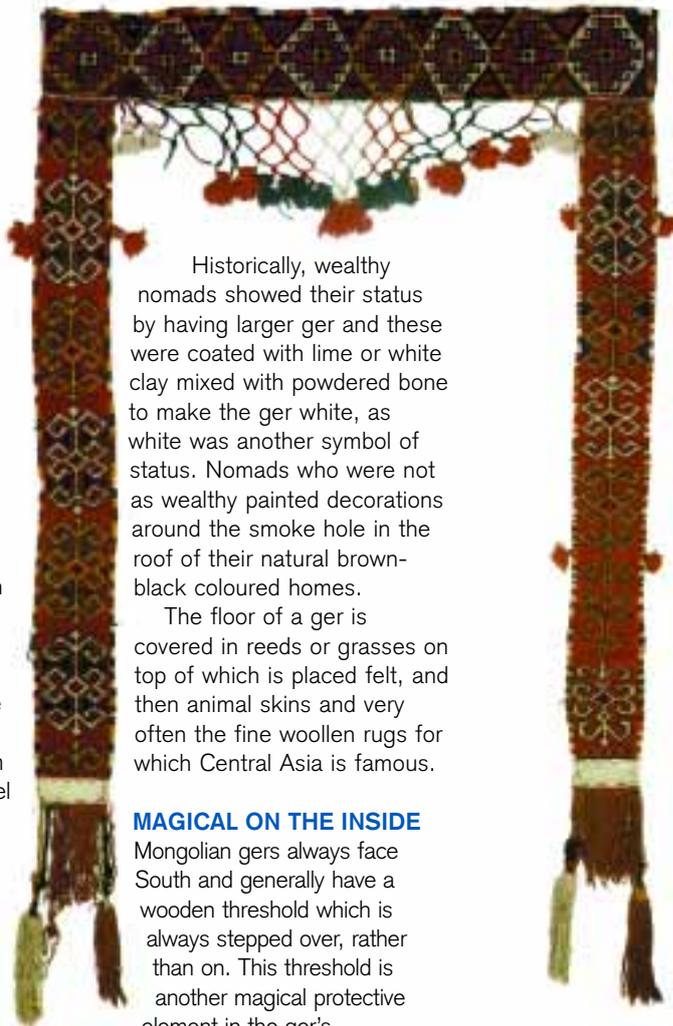


even more. Nowadays, most ger are made of cotton, often chemically treated to keep out the wet, some are even made of nylon. The felts are secured to the wooden framework with ropes.

The doorways of ger, are covered with a flap of felt or carpet, or closed with a wooden door. The entrance was always decorated, traditionally with protective symbols. Felt doors are either painted or appliquéd with coloured designs, and wooden doors are generally painted. The toono or crown wheel is the most sacred item in a ger. generally speaking women are not allowed to touch it. The Kazak's hand them down from father to son. The crown wheel symbolises the sun, hence it was and still is usually painted orange, the roof poles where painted blue to symbolize the sky and the door was painted wholly or partially green to symbolize the endless steppe people lived on.

Many designs on Mongolian gers derive from Tibet (Mongolia has a very close link to Tibet, even the name Dalai Lama is a Mongolian title) and have religious significance such as to prosper, to bind together, to blossom. In some cultures, especially those West of Mongolia carpet woven textiles are placed above the door not only to decorate them, but also to add further protection with their ancient designs.

either wool, or goat or camel hair. Felt is made by pouring water onto wool and then beating with sticks. Then it is rolled around a log, tied tight and dragged behind a horse for a day or so. Felt (and sheep) are waterproof because of lanolin present in the wool, but tallow or milk is sometimes also put onto the felts to help repel rain and damp



Historically, wealthy nomads showed their status by having larger ger and these were coated with lime or white clay mixed with powdered bone to make the ger white, as white was another symbol of status. Nomads who were not as wealthy painted decorations around the smoke hole in the roof of their natural brown-black coloured homes.

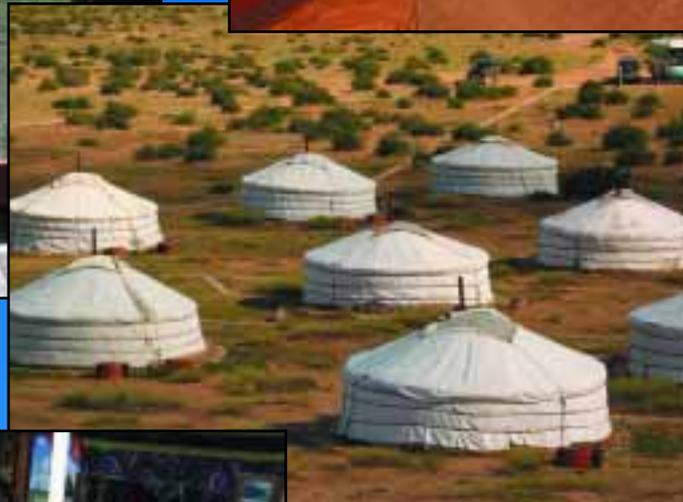
The floor of a ger is covered in reeds or grasses on top of which is placed felt, and then animal skins and very often the fine woollen rugs for which Central Asia is famous.

#### MAGICAL ON THE INSIDE

Mongolian gers always face South and generally have a wooden threshold which is always stepped over, rather than on. This threshold is another magical protective element in the ger's construction, as thresholds have held magical symbolism for many cultures, a vestige of which can be seen even today in British culture in the washing of the front step to a house.

Traditional Mongolian gers follow a standard way of dividing up the inside. Coming in from the door and going sunwise around the ger traditionally first would be a goat skin bag containing a drink called *Airag*, or *Kumiss*, made from fermented mare's milk. Next to this would be





a place for horses saddles and other horse gear. Weapons and tools would often be hung on the wooden laticework by the saddles, and further round the ger musical instruments or other more domestic objects would hang down from the framework.

Then, next to the saddles would be the man's bed, at the head of which would be a

chest or cupboard for holding clothing and personal items.

At the back of the ger, in the North, facing the Southern doorway would be the family altar, generally set on a wooden table, chest or cupboard. This would always include a mirror, so that any negative energy entering the ger would be scared off by its

own reflection. The altar marked the division between the man's and the woman's half of the ger.

Continuing round, on the East side, next to the altar would be another storage chest or cupboard for the woman of the ger to store her clothes and effects in, followed a little further round in the East by her bed. Between her bed and the door would be the kitchen store, for food and cooking equipment.

In the centre of the ger is the hearth which also served as the cooking and eating area. An opening in the center of the roof, where the poles met, acts as a smoke hole and also allowed some daylight to come in.

The furniture inside gers is often beautifully painted and in



many cultures the laticework is covered by rugs hanging down as backdrops to give extra warmth and colourful decoration. In gers belonging to rich Mongolians expensive Chinese silk brocades or Tibetan thangka paintings would also hang from the walls of the ger to decorate it. A ger would also have a number of tent bags made from carpets or appliqued felt which could be stuffed with clothes and used as cushions.

Ger have been the palaces of great Mongol rulers, and there are tales of splendor about the beauty and size of these great ger. Marco Polo writes of the ger of Kuyuk Khan, which he describes as being made of white velvet, and was large enough for two thousand men to stand in. It was supported by gilded columns, which were fastened with gold nails, and the insides were lined with brocade.

Kublai Khan's ger was said to be even more splendid, large enough to hold 10,000 people, and supported by three columns which were carved and gilded and tied with ropes of silk. It is said to have been covered on the outside with lion skins, and hung with ermine and sable furs on the inside.

### A CIRCLE OF GER

Very often ger are put together in encampments of many ger. Sometimes this is a family group, or because people have come together to have a festival or hold a ceremony, and in Tibet students of some of the non monastic forms of Buddhism live often in ger encampments.

Encampments, or *ordos* are arranged traditionally to form a circle which is open to the South. When it is time to move the camp, it is traditionally the women's job to pack up the ger, and a small ger can be dismantled in less than an hour. Felt is used to pack around family valuables and tied together with the ropes used to hold it to the ger. Small children are placed in chests, with the top or side removed and the chest are then tied onto one of the more docile animals, on which point, the toono which is considered especially important is put on the most docile animal of all.

Large ger used by the great Khaans, could measure up to thirty feet across, and were often built

permently on low wagons which served as their wooden floors. These were not dismantled but transported whole on the wagons, drawn by a large number of oxon.

Over its long history the ger has developed into a place of comfort, practicality and elegance. It is a noble dwelling, fit for a Khaan or a goat herder, a place for the playing of music, the telling of stories and the performing of ceremonies, a place of richness that lets us live close to the earth in a place of great beauty.

Sacred Hoop wishes to thank the Ulaan Taj Ger Company of Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia for their help with this article and for supplying some of the photos included in it.

Ulaan Taj supply gers to the UK via their office in Surrey. To find out more visit [www.ulaantaj.com](http://www.ulaantaj.com) or see their advert in this issue of Sacred Hoop.

