

## How Mongolia is helping its nomads adapt to big city life

### Level 2 • Upper intermediate

#### 1 Warmer

Answer the questions. Then compare your answers with other students. Check your answers by finding the facts in the article.

1. What is the capital of Mongolia?
2. What is the name for a large tent-like Mongolian house?
3. What was the name of the famous 13th-century warrior-ruler who founded the Mongolian empire?

#### 2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

shack  
herders

plot  
scattered

livestock  
core

nomadic  
settlement

pride  
insulating

shelter  
slum

1. spread over a large area \_\_\_\_\_ (para 1)
2. a piece of land used for a particular purpose, for example building a house \_\_\_\_\_ (para 2)
3. a small plain building, usually made of wood or metal \_\_\_\_\_ (para 2)
4. preventing heat and cold from passing through \_\_\_\_\_ (para 2)
5. people who look after groups of animals and move them from place to place \_\_\_\_\_ (para 2)
6. moving from place to place rather than staying in one place \_\_\_\_\_ (para 2)
7. a place where people have come to live permanently, usually when there were very few people living there before \_\_\_\_\_ (para 4)
8. animals such as cows, sheep and pigs \_\_\_\_\_ (para 4)
9. poor areas of a town where the houses are in very bad condition \_\_\_\_\_ (para 7)
10. a feeling of respect for yourself \_\_\_\_\_ (para 8)
11. a place where people are protected from bad weather \_\_\_\_\_ (para 9)
12. the part inside an object that is nearest its centre \_\_\_\_\_ (para 11)

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#### Welcome to the yurt-opolis! How Mongolia is helping its nomads adapt to big city life

Oliver Wainwright

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- 1 Visit Ulaanbaatar on Google Earth and you will see that the Mongolian capital looks completely different from other cities. Hundreds of thousands of tiny white dots are scattered around the Soviet-era urban centre. It looks like someone has emptied a big bag of confetti over the landscape. The white specks extend for miles.
- 2 These dots are each in their own plot, sometimes with an orange tin-roofed shack. They are called yurts (or *gers* in Mongolian), and they are tents made of wooden latticework wrapped with insulating felt and canvas. For thousands of years, these tents have been the houses of Mongolian herders on the plains. And the nomadic tent-based mindset is not easily changed when herders move to the city – with problematic results.
- 3 “Mongolia is the least densely populated country in the world,” says Badruun Gardi, who grew up in Ulaanbaatar and, in 2016, founded GerHub. It is a non-profit social business that helps people adjust to the challenges of urban life. “When you’re a herder, you can go for miles and miles without seeing another family. You don’t have to think about living in a confined space with hundreds or thousands of people.”
- 4 The idea of a fixed capital city has always felt strange for this nation of nomadic herders. The 13th-century conqueror Genghis Khan ruled his vast empire from a nine-metre-wide yurt. And Ulaanbaatar itself used to be a nomadic settlement, formed by thousands of tents, following wherever the herds of livestock decided to travel. The Soviets tried to formalize the capital in the 1920s. They changed its name from Urga (Ulaanbaatar means *Red Hero*) and built concrete blocks of flats. But, as thousands have moved to the city in recent years, the capital has expanded outwards in all directions. The herders have come to the city because of the loss of livestock and promises of better education, healthcare and job prospects. But the adjustment from a nomadic life to life in a big city is difficult.
- 5 The world outside the *ger* is no longer grassland but a small private plot, with a two-metre-high fence. City residents must pay for water and fuel, rely on public transport and manage their waste. Their individual actions have an impact on others, sometimes for the first time in their lives.
- 6 These social challenges are made worse by practical issues: there is no running water in the *ger* districts, sewerage or central heating. In winter, when temperatures can fall to -40C, each household burns around three to five tonnes of coal, and this makes Ulaanbaatar one of the most polluted cities in the world. And the problem is getting worse.
- 7 “People usually think of the *ger* districts as slum areas on the edge of the city,” says Gardi. “But they represent over 60% of the entire population of the city, and they’re growing by 30,000 people every year.”
- 8 Gardi founded GerHub to help bring a sense of pride back to the *ger* districts. After a few years working in whatever spaces it could find, the organization’s educational and social outreach programme has a new home. It is a contemporary version of the traditional *ger*, designed by the Hong Kong architecture studio Rural Urban Framework.
- 9 The new Ger Innovation Hub is impressive. Its shimmering plastic walls surround a wooden framework, which surrounds an inner space that has mud-brick walls. In summer, the entire hub can open up. The wall panels lift so that activities can take place in the surrounding landscape. In the hard and difficult winter, the building creates a shelter.
- 10 “We were inspired by the structure of the *ger* itself,” says Joshua Bolchover, from the University of Hong Kong, whose students helped to build the project. The resulting structure creates spaces that can be adapted to all kinds of activities, from preschool playtime to workshops for teenagers, training sessions for local businesses and meet-ups for the elderly.
- 11 The layered design means that, if it’s -40C outside, it would be about 0C in the buffer zone, thanks to solar heat. This is “fine for kids to run around with their coats on,” says Bolchover. And the central space would only need to be heated to 15C because of the warmth radiating from the

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mud walls. A circular space at the centre is big enough so that a *ger* can be put up over it, too, creating an even more insulated central core for smaller gatherings.

- 12 "We want it to be as lively a place as possible," says Gardi. "In winter, it can be particularly difficult being stuck indoors for months, so we

hope this will be a place for social life to happen and new community ties to form."

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### 3 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. In recent years, thousands of nomadic herders have started to move from the countryside in Mongolia to the capital city.
2. Mongolian herders and their families must learn that the way they live will affect other people when they move to a city.
3. Mongolia is the most densely populated country in the world.
4. Ulaanbaatar is one of the least polluted cities in the world.
5. The new Ger Innovation Hub has been built to give nomadic herders a place to live in the winter.
6. Its structure and design are based on a traditional Mongolian yurt.

### 4 Collocations

Read the definitions, then find the word you need to complete each collocation. The first letter of each missing word is given to help you. Check your answers in the text.

1. a small restricted area where you have little room to move about – c\_\_\_\_\_ space
2. the chances someone has of finding a job – job p\_\_\_\_\_
3. water that comes into a building through pipes – r\_\_\_\_\_ water
4. a modern type of something – c\_\_\_\_\_ version
5. a structure made of wood that supports something and makes it a particular shape – wooden f\_\_\_\_\_
6. an area that safely separates one place from another – b\_\_\_\_\_ zone
7. relationships or connections between the people who live in a particular area – c\_\_\_\_\_ ties

### 5 Talking about the article

Talk to a partner about the article. Use the key words in task 2 and the collocations in task 4.

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#### 6 Discussion

1. Read paragraph 1 of the text again. Find Ulaanbaatar on Google Earth, look at the satellite views and photographs and talk about what you see.
2. Follow the link below and discuss the four pictures of the Ger Innovation Hub. Is it different from what you imagined when you read the article?

[www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/may/17/yurt-opolis-mongolia-city-life-ulaanbaatar-community-hub#img-1](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/may/17/yurt-opolis-mongolia-city-life-ulaanbaatar-community-hub#img-1)

#### 7 Webquest

Write a country fact file about Mongolia. Include interesting facts and information under the following headings as well as any others you think of.

- Land and geography
- People
- Language and arts
- Economy
- Food and agriculture
- Energy
- Infrastructure
- Politics
- Traditions and festivals