

How Mongolia is helping its nomads adapt to big city life

Level 3 • Advanced

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 given to a large tent-like structure that the nomadic people of Mongolia usually live in?
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.

sprawling
fringe

herders
prudent

cladding
arduous

exacerbated
tendrils

insulating
buffer

plummet
striking

1. the long thin parts of some plants that join onto things and help to support the plant _____
2. preventing heat and cold from passing through _____
3. people who look after groups of animal and move them from place to place _____
4. built over a wide area in a way that is ugly or not carefully planned _____
5. made worse _____
6. suddenly become much lower _____
7. something that is on the outer edge of something else _____
8. attracting your interest or attention because of some unusual feature _____
9. something that protects another thing by being between it and something else that could harm it _____
10. a hard substance that is put on the outside of a building to protect it or make it look more attractive _____
11. extremely difficult and involving a lot of effort _____
12. careful and using good judgment _____

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

Travelling herders are moving to the Mongolian capital, but they're having trouble with urban ways. We step inside the yurt-inspired hub that's fixing their culture shock

Oliver Wainwright

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- 1 Visit Ulaanbaatar on Google Earth – the only way most of us are likely to get there for some time – and you will find that the Mongolian capital looks like no other city. Scattered around the Soviet-era urban centre are hundreds of thousands of tiny white dots. It is as if someone has emptied an enormous bag of confetti across the landscape, the white specks clustering in the folds of the valleys, extending outwards for miles in long, snaking tendrils.
- 2 These dots – separated in their own plot and sometimes accompanied by the orange rectangle of a tin-roofed shack, visible when you zoom in close – are yurts (or *gers* in Mongolian). For thousands of years, these transportable tents, made of wooden latticework wrapped with insulating felt and canvas, have been the house type of choice for the Mongolian herders on the plains. And the nomadic tent-based mindset is not something easily given up 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, a non-profit social enterprise 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 what living in a confined space with hundreds or thousands of people means. It’s the biggest challenge we face as a country.”
- 4 The idea of a fixed capital has always been a strange concept for this nation of nomadic herders. The 13th-century conqueror Genghis Khan ruled his vast empire from a nine-metre-wide yurt, while Ulaanbaatar itself used to be a nomadic settlement, formed by thousands of tents gathering around a movable monastery, following wherever the herds of livestock decided to travel. The Soviets attempted to formalize the capital in the 1920s, changing its name from Uрга (Ulaanbaatar means *Red Hero*), building concrete blocks of flats and setting out an urban grid, which was consolidated in the post-war era. But, as thousands have flocked to the city in recent years, driven by the loss of livestock and promises of better education, healthcare and job prospects, the capital has expanded outwards in all directions as a sprawling ger-opolis. The adjustment from life on the open steppe to the hustle of the big city clearly takes some getting used to.
- 5 For starters, the world outside the *ger* is no longer rolling grassland but a small private plot, encircled by a two-metre-high fence. City residents must pay for water and fuel, rely on transportation and manage their waste. Their individual actions have an impact on others, sometimes for the first time in their lives. They encounter common problems that become the responsibility of a collective body of people.
- 6 These social challenges are exacerbated by a host of practical issues: there is no running water in the *ger* districts, sewerage or central heating. In winter, when temperatures can plummet to -40C, each household burns around three to five tonnes of coal, making Ulaanbaatar one of the most polluted cities in the world. And the scale of the challenge is only increasing.
- 7 “People tend to think of the *ger* districts as these fringe slum areas,” 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 of working in whatever spaces it could find, the organization’s educational and social outreach programme has a new home, in the form of a contemporary take on the traditional *ger*, designed by the Hong Kong architecture studio Rural Urban Framework (RUF).
- 9 Standing as a faceted polycarbonate pavilion in the midst of a muddled *ger* neighbourhood in the Songino Khaikhan district, the Ger Innovation Hub is a striking arrival. Its shimmering plastic walls envelop a slender wooden framework, which itself wraps around an inner space defined by mud-brick walls. In summer, the entire thing can open up, the wall panels lifting to let activities spill out into the surrounding landscape, while in the harsh winter, the layered structure creates a sheltered buffer.

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10 “We were inspired by the structure of the *ger* itself,” says Joshua Bolchover, co-founder of RUF, a research-led practice based at the University of Hong Kong, whose students helped to build the project. “We thought, what if we peel the layers of timber, insulation and waterproofing apart to create a room within a room, like a Russian doll?” The resulting structure (judging from the photographs) creates a loosely defined series of spaces that can be adapted to all kinds of activities, from preschool playtime to innovation workshops for teenagers, training sessions for local businesses and drop-in 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 (“Fine for kids to run around with their coats on,” says Bolchover), thanks to solar gain trapped by the polycarbonate cladding, while the central space would only need to be heated to 15C, the warmth radiating from the thermal mass of the mud walls.

A circular amphitheatre at the centre of the space has been sized so that a *ger* can be erected over it, too, creating an even more insulated central core for more intimate gatherings.

12 “We want it to be as lively a place as possible,” says Gardi. “In winter, it can be particularly arduous being stuck indoors for months on end, so we hope this will be a place for social life to happen and new community ties to be formed.”

13 Unfortunately, the building only had the chance to host an opening workshop before the coronavirus lockdown halted all activities in the city – Mongolia took particularly prudent early action, with few cases of Covid-19 and no deaths so far. Hopefully, when the centre does reopen, it will become a vital social hub to help this fledgling community form neighbourhood bonds and reap the benefits of their newly urban life.

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3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions in detail using information from the article.

1. Why, in recent years, have thousands of nomadic herders started to move to the city?
2. What practical issues are former Mongolian herders and their families likely to face in the city?
3. What social challenges might they encounter when they move to a city?
4. What is the purpose of the new Ger Innovation Hub?

4 Collocations

Match the words to make collocations. Then check your answers in the text.

- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| 1. social | a. body |
| 2. confined | b. defined |
| 3. urban | c. doll |
| 4. job | d. enterprise |
| 5. open | e. gatherings |
| 6. collective | f. grid |
| 7. Russian | g. ties |
| 8. loosely | h. space |
| 9. intimate | i. steppe |
| 10. community | j. prospects |

Using your own words, define what each collocation means in the context of the article.

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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.

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

3. What other challenges do you think nomadic herders might encounter when they move to a city?

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