

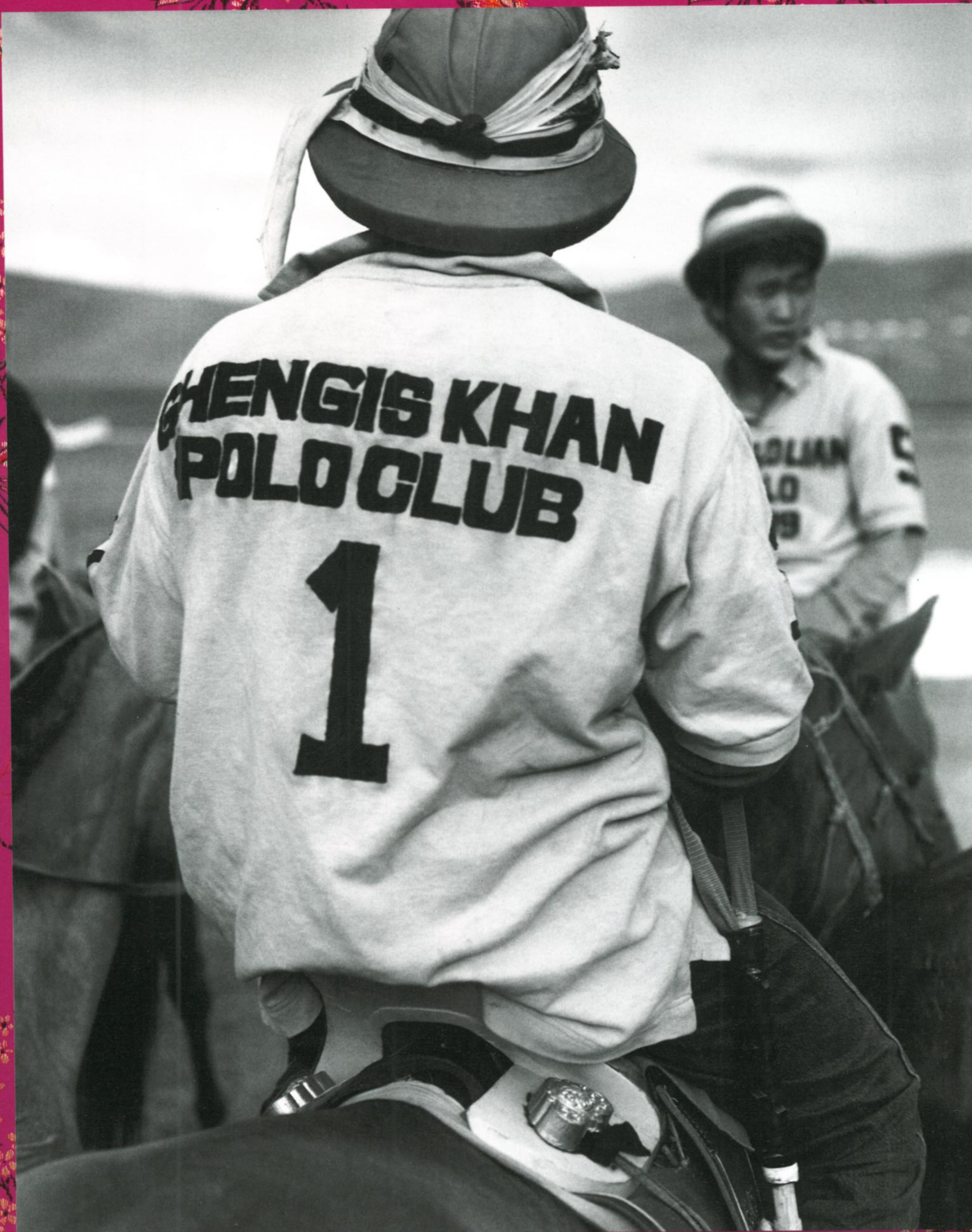
EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

Mongolia LUXE

AT THE GENGHIS KHAN POLO AND RIDING
CAMP, ROUGHING IT HAS NEVER BEEN QUITE SO REFINED.

BY SOPHY ROBERTS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY FREDERIC LAGRANGE





Played as a war game during the reign of Genghis Khan, polo
in Mongolia today is a more civilized affair.



Christopher Giercke has worked in film (he cast 200 Filipino headhunters in *Apocalypse Now*); as a lay Tibetologist; and as a precious-wool hunter (supplying Hermès with things cashmere). Most often, Giercke divides his time between Paris, Kathmandu, and Mongolia. Here, some seven hours by car from Ulaanbaatar, the country's capital and largest city, he runs the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Camp.

From June to September, Giercke invites friends—and a limited number of paying guests—to attend a very grand summer fête. With his Mongolian wife, Enkhe, and their three young children at his side, Giercke orchestrates a series of weeklong spectacles during which polo playing and horse racing are catered with caviar, Champagne, and *airig* (*airig* being fermented mare's milk). Musicians and acrobats are invited to perform and play piano, and professional pilots fly propeller planes brought in from Ulaanbaatar.

But Giercke's greatest talent may be as host. To him, anyone curious and daring enough to sign on and pony up for an experience they can only have "heard about" falls into the category of friend. Any friend willing to helicopter out to the Mongolian steppe, an honored



On opening day of the polo festivities, mounted players face the judges who first announce the rules of the game.



Clockwise from top left: Enkhe Giercke, with daughter Kristina-Alegra, greets guests helicoptering in; Swiss watchmaker and polo player Franck Dubarry; at dinner; red and black caviar; Christopher Giercke; the tent where dinner is served.

guest. This is rarity meets richness meets rusticity. It's true luxury sans concierge. Understand this and you understand all.

It is the fabulous mix of people that I remember most from my first visit four years ago: Hamid Sardar, an Iranian-born, Harvard-educated Tibetologist; Christian Blanckaert, CEO of Hermès Sellier; Tsogt, a Paris-trained opera singer from

Hohhot. Guests came, guests went—someone was always floating in from London, Paris, or Saint Barths. There were grand dinners under the stars, tales told round the campfire afterward, the occasional burst into song.

A few years back Patrick Guerrand-Hermès booked the camp, as it's called, and brought along family, friends, and



Clockwise from top left: Ludovic Dagneau de Richecour, who spent last summer working at the camp; traditional Mongol furnishings from the tents; Enkhe, dressed in a Tibetan *chuba* (coat) with horse trainer Gustavo Gaii; in front of the main ger; postdinner high jinks; gallerist Katie de Tilly Blarn.

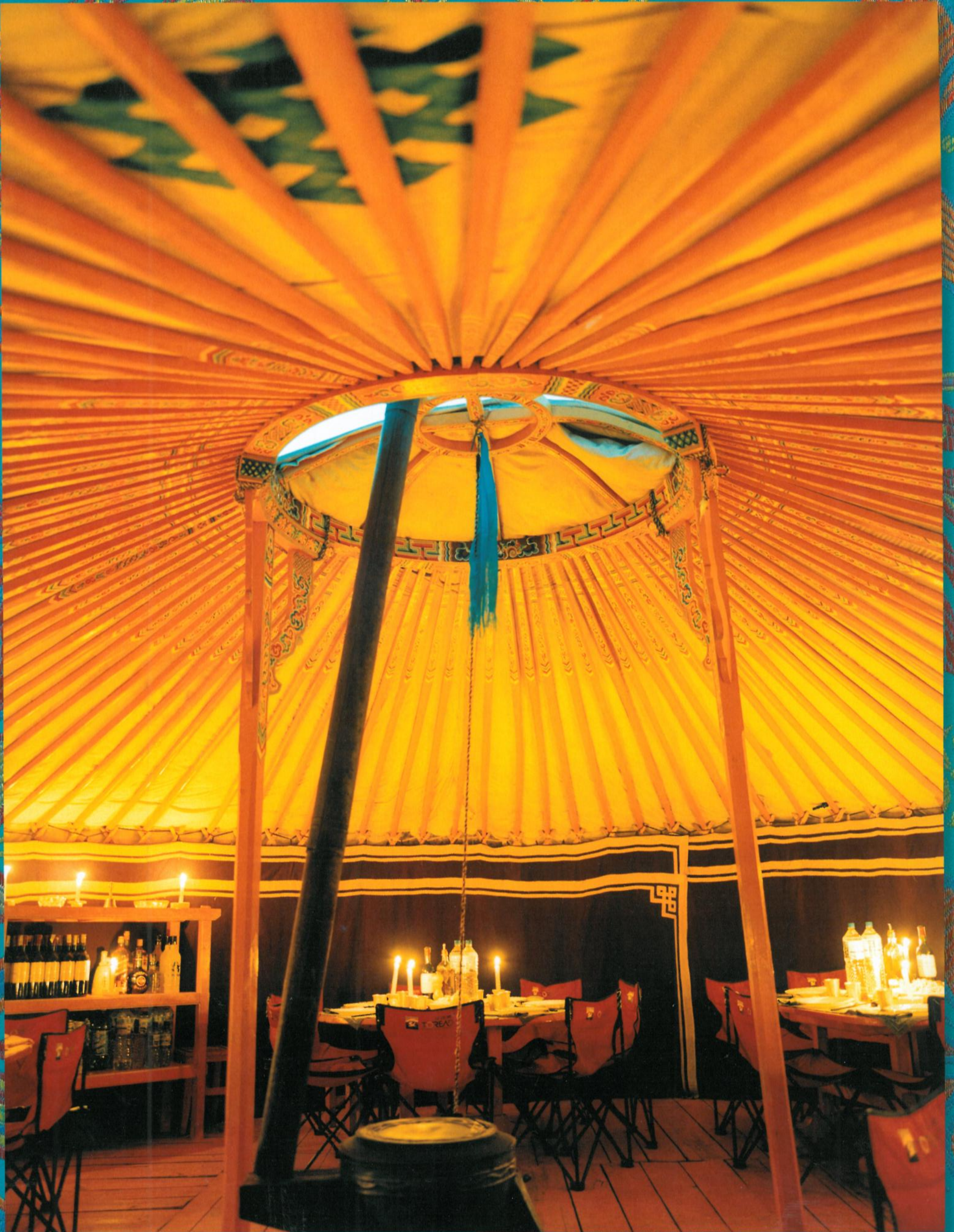
his favorite cheeses (delayed at customs, mind you, while the Mongol authorities prodded, poked, and sniffed suspiciously). “At the last minute the Rothschilds couldn’t join the party, but they were noble enough to send the wine,” says Giercke.

There are guides, cooks, nannies, maids, a yoga teacher, an experienced masseuse, and an on-site doctor—in total, a staff

of 25, including Gustavo Gaii, a horse trainer from Argentina. Riding and polo instructors cater to students of all levels. But make no mistake: This is rustic. The satellite phone is unreliable; the helicopters, Russian Mi-8s, are rough. Guests sleep wrapped in cashmere, in round, felt-lined tents called *gers* that are lit by wax candles, warmed by woodburning



Argentine polo player Alejandro Novillo Astrada, a member of Franck Dubarry's TechnoMarine Team. *Opposite: Inside the candlelit dining ger.*





Guests dine alfresco when weather allows.

stoves, and furnished with small armoires (carved by camp staff during winter months, when the weather is so cold rocks split and cow's tails have been known to freeze). Yet there are few places on earth so strangely appealing—still fewer where horses run wild and children learn to sit in a saddle before they can walk. The Mongolian ponies may be small, but they're fast and sure-footed as hell when racing toward the 3,000-year-old obelisk-cum-goalpost. Come fall, when tents, saddles, and silver are sent to storage, this obelisk will be the only remaining sign that the Genghis Khan Polo and Riding Camp existed at all—until the next June, when the party begins again. ■

GENGHIS KHAN POLO AND RIDING CAMP costs \$50,000 for a group of up to ten people plus an extra \$10,000 per air transfer between Karakorum and the Buyant-Ukhaa International Airport at Ulaanbaatar. This covers four-wheel drives, riding horses, polo horses, all guides (fishing guides included), entertainment, meals, and table wine. Excursions—such as curator-led tours of Mongolia's cultural sites, museums, and local archaeological digs—can be organized upon request. Contact Christopher Giercke at 976-11/320-149; nomadconnect@magicnet.mn.
