

## RIDERS OF THE WIND

In western Mongolia's remote highlands, a journey unfolds through vast steppes, vanishing traditions, and the enduring bond between a Kazakh eagle hunter and his golden bird. **Photos and Text by Charukesi Ramadurai**



From left: In a nomadic shepherding family, every member—male or female, young or old—is skilled in horse riding and rounding up livestock; the tradition of *berkutchi*, or eagle hunting, dates back several centuries and is practised in parts of Central Asia. Training begins when the eagle is just a few months old and continues throughout its life with the same master.





Clockwise from left: The livelihoods of these nomadic families are entirely dependent on their livestock, which means their daily routines are dictated by the grazing needs of their horses, yaks, sheep, and camels. While the men help round up the animals at the end of the day, the women feed and milk them each morning and evening; the warm summer months are easier on these families, as they stay in their comfortable home in the plains and the animals don't have to wander far for pasture. Pictured here is Galym with his wife Shynat and their two younger children outside their summer home; mobile and internet connectivity is extremely limited in these mountainous regions, and mobile phones are only now beginning to make their way into such remote areas; *berkutchi* is traditionally the domain of men, but young women are slowly making inroads into this age-old sport. Teenager Arujon is already an expert and may well become one of Mongolia's next great eagle hunters; since nomadic families live in isolation, spaced far apart to avoid competition for pasture, they must find ways to entertain themselves—music becomes a vital companion during long, lonely evenings.







*Clockwise from left:* The double-humped Bactrian camel is native to the Central Asian steppes and remains one of the most commonly domesticated animals; Mongolia is famed for its vast skies and dramatic clouds—reflected here in a lake on a balmy summer evening as locals gather to enjoy the fine weather; for Galym's family, one of the pleasures of summer evenings is enjoying the cool breeze along the banks of the Sagsai River, which runs near their home. By October, the rivers and streams begin to freeze and remain out of bounds for several months.







**K** HAIYR GALYM LOOKS like a cowboy straight out of Central Casting. The wide-brimmed hat, the weather-beaten cheeks, the shy smile, and the gruff manner—it’s everything I imagine from a Texan cowboy. Except this one lives in a landscape that seems a world away from the dusty plains of the American South.

In the early summer of 2024, I spent a few days with eagle hunter Galym and his family in a remote region in western Mongolia. I stayed in a basic but comfortable *ger*—a circular tent, also known as a yurt in some places—pitched next to their own small home. I had no phone or internet connection, and my hosts spoke not a single word of English. But I have never felt more connected to the world than I did during this time.

Galym is a nomadic shepherd of Kazakh ethnic origin and, like others in his community, a traditional eagle hunter. The ancient practice of hunting with golden eagles—known as *berkutchi*—has been carried out in parts of Central Asia for centuries. But like many other traditions, it is vanishing, with barely 250 *burkitshi* (as Kazakh eagle hunters are called) left in Mongolia.

He shares his tiny winter home with his wife Shynat and two of their younger children—teenager Arujon, already on her way to becoming an expert eagle hunter, and ten-year-old Seruen, who has been riding horses since he was a toddler.

Though I had seen many images of eagle hunters in action, I was delighted to go behind the scenes and observe their daily lives firsthand.

At the time of my visit, Galym and Shynat were preparing to pack up their meagre belongings and move to their temporary summer home in the mountains. Everything in their lives is dictated by the whims of the weather and the needs of their livestock, following a well-oiled routine of grazing their horses, sheep, goats, and yaks every morning and rounding them up into pens by late afternoon.

Then comes the milking session, where the women sit with painfully bent backs on low stools, trying to avoid getting kicked by the goats and yaks. Arujon is the perfect foil for her mother—working just as hard, but smiling twice as much. Little Seruen follows his father like a shadow, absorbing every nuance of horsemanship and herding.

Eagle hunting typically takes place only in winter, when small prey like rabbits and foxes are plentiful. “She’s become fat now,” Galym tells me through my English-speaking guide, Shokhan, as he pats his eagle Tas Tulek’s head with obvious affection. This means Tas Tulek cannot fly as high or as fast as she usually does. I am not too bothered by this—I have seen enough images of eagle hunters in action and was delighted by the chance to witness their lives behind the scenes.

However, this way of life also disappearing, Galym’s two older sons have already left home for formal education in the city and are unlikely to return to their roots. Perhaps the future of the tradition will fall upon the only female in that generation—Arujon—to carry it forward. ☸



Clockwise from top left: In Mongolia—especially in the remote western regions—animals far outnumber people. One can travel for hours without encountering another human; Mongolians are famously hospitable, welcoming even strangers into their homes with warm tea and a hearty meal, often including hard, salty cheeses known as *aaruul*; villagers dressed in their finest coats pose for a photograph under the gentle summer sun. In these remote, isolated settlements, community bonds remain strong and enduring; inside my *ger* (also known as a yurt), a circular tent used by nomadic communities across Central Asia. Though simple, the *ger* is comfortable, heated by a long stove at its centre, with floors and walls lined in colourful carpets and tapestries.

