

State of play

The legendary horsemen of Kalmykia only dismount to play a game of chess. Or so Alban Kakulya was told before he traveled to Europe's only Buddhist state where a unique culture is struggling to survive

After 40 hours on this train, we are crossing landscapes even flatter, if such a thing is possible, than any we have seen so far. Mountains can be overwhelming, but the languor of the Greater Russian plains is harrowing, an endless ocean lacking the relief of white horses or the refreshing scent of sea spray. A few brick chimneys emerging from sleeping villages provide the only hint of verticality as we travel over the endless, impassive spread of yellow earth which is gradually, amazingly, turning to green. The intense green of thick, hardy grass is a herbivore's dream, an equine paradise. And it is here that the Kalmyk people – adventurous vanguard of Mongolia, or protective rearguard of Russia – settled, almost four centuries ago. And one can see why. This part of Russia combines all the best aspects of Mongolia. It is the promised land for a nomadic people who see wealth where horses can find good pasture and their riders a galloping vista. While I contemplate this promise through the window of my compartment, I try to overcome my astonishment at the drink my neighbor has pressed upon me. A newly converted Russian Buddhist, Elena lives in Moscow and is studying for a PhD on Kalmyk culture, with which she is much taken. The Kalmyk tea she has given me is a blend of butter, salt and a Lipton teabag, the latter being much improved by its exotic seasoning. Elena is traveling to the Kalmyk capital, Elista, for a cultural and scientific symposium. She will present her work, and make important contacts for the progress of her scientific research on The social and religious rituals of the Kalmyk community in Southern Russia. At last, there is a dip in the horizon. I expect to see a lake, some stretch of water. But it is a town that comes into view, a modest, temporary looking town. There was a lake before, but it disappeared; no one can really tell me why. On the platform at Elista, I am met by my interpreter, a strong young woman with a moonlike face, who welcomes me with a smile. Her black-varnished nails imply a penchant for hard rock. Her name is Inna, she likes Linkin Park and Green Day; she also likes South Carolina, and that's about it. Elista? It's alright. There isn't much to see... That evening, I make my first foray into the capital of the Republic of Kalmykia. Elista has 130,000 inhabitants, more

than 50 percent of whom are of Mongolian origin. It is also the headquarters of the World Chess Federation. Buddhism is the primary religion and the Kalmyk people have reason to be proud of their temple, which according to them is the biggest in Europe. The old people gaze at it as if it emerged from a dream to settle, majestically, a few hundred yards from Lenin Square. The statue of the great Vladimir has been moved to a different pitch, where the square narrows and the trees give it a little shade, but not so much that the nostalgic could claim it has been relegated to an inferior spot. A tactful revenge, suited to Kalmykia, which liked to think of itself as the proud, yet submissive, protector of the gateway to Russia in the pre-Stalin era.

Alexandra Dadjenova, an elegant old lady whom I meet as she comes out of her yoga class, was 13 in 1943. That was the year Stalin decided to deport the entire Kalmyk population to Siberia. One day, soldiers appeared and evacuated all the houses, shutting their inhabitants up in the schools. Alexandra remembers her mother wanting to ask the soldiers to let her return to their house to collect some possessions, but her aunt said there was no point, they were all going to be killed. Everyone waited there, without the slightest idea of the fate planned for them. At two in the morning, the doors of the schools were opened and the thousands of Kalmyks were herded into trains waiting to take them to Siberia, 70 to 80 people per carriage, for a journey of several days and an exile of more than ten years. When they arrived in Siberia they were assigned some land to share with Germans who had been living in Russia and been likewise deported. The Kalmyks didn't know what they'd done wrong to find themselves here, far from their own land, they who so valiantly shed their blood on the steppes to slow the advance of the Nazi invasion. They resigned themselves to the situation.

They didn't even blame Russia. There had been an error of judgement, certainly, but sooner or later things would come right.

Alexandra remembers carrying out Buddhist rituals in the privacy of their home – she and her family always maintained their traditions. At 17 a husband was picked out for her and she had two children with him. Their lives as exiles, while not easy, was something they became accustomed to: people built new houses and made new friends. And then, in 1956, after Stalin's death, Khrushchev decided to let the Kalmyks return home. Though this was good news, first there was another harrowing journey to a place where nothing awaited them. Elista was in ruins. This second displacement almost wiped out what little was left of Kalmyk culture, according to Sanal Koukeev, who practices Tibetan medicine within the Elista Buddhist temple complex. Koukeev is a Kalmyk in his late 30s. He qualified as a nurse, and spent a year at medical school before the opportunity came to study a type of medicine "closer to the soul" than allopathic medicine. Inspired by the ancestral cultures of the Mongolian and Tibetan people, he is convinced that Kalmyk culture will disappear over the next 50 years: the Deportation may not have succeeded in burying it completely, but globalisation will finish the job. Though young Kalmyks are showing a resurgence of enthusiasm for their native language, the number of people who speak it is so few that it's hard to imagine this handful saving an idiom for which there is little general interest.

During my interview with Sanal Koukeev – who speaks perfect English – my interpreter Inna has been putting the

finishing touches to her black nails. She tells me now that she can't understand why people are always stirring up the past. "So what if Kalmyk culture dies out? Is it so important that it must be preserved against the effects of time?" For a moment, I think that this attitude at least allows her to live in the present, until I remember that she is in fact living in the hypothetical future of her next trip to South Carolina...

The time has come for me to leave Elista, and travel towards the great steppes, to see the horses of this legendary nation of horsemen. Who knows, perhaps I will also see a few camels on the Astrakhan plains. Once we've tracked down a driver willing to take my interpreter and me all the way to the banks of the Volga, and bought a pair of trainers for my high-heeled rock chick – still stunned to find herself in such dreary footwear – we set off on the journey. Andrei drives to a loud electro soundtrack which, I must say, fits well with the powerfully repetitive landscape of the Kalmyk steppe. And then, is it divine intervention? A moment's madness on Andrei's part that has sent us careering off the road into the high grass? No. Andrei knows exactly where he's going – to his cousin's place, somewhere over there. It isn't any more uncomfortable – this is no bumpier than the pot-holed tarmac – but there is a difference, and an important one: there is no longer anything on which to hang one's gaze, no road disappearing over the horizon, stubbornly seeming to lead somewhere. Everything looks the same, endlessly the same. It crosses my mind what a remarkable prison this would be. No need for walls. No way to escape without being spotted from miles in every direction. I push away this attack of agoraphobia with a sigh, trying to find some tiny irregularity somewhere on the horizon.

Suddenly, Andrei draws my attention to a cloud of dust shining in the setting sun of the late afternoon. We swing left, heading straight for the sun and the golden cloud. Dozens of horses.

Andrei slows to walking pace, drives to within about 50 yards of them. We step out of the car and walk cautiously closer. They don't run away, just stand there looking at us, swinging their heads. After a few minutes, we can almost touch them. They are as curious as we are. It's a magical moment, in the golden light, with the soft murmur of the grazing horses blending subtly with the breeze rippling over the grasses of the steppe. The tips of the blades undulate slightly, making it seem as if the earth is moving; the horses move lightly through this dreamlike pasture.

The experience gives me faith in the horse-riding tradition of the Kalmyk people, in the special relationship between man and beast. In this oceanlike landscape it seems a plausible thing. I turn towards Andrei and ask him about the relationship between the human inhabitants of the steppes and the horses. "Well, we hunt them, so we can sell the meat!" He adds that it's easy money, as wild horses don't need looking after. "We help ourselves when we need to." So much for my naïve romanticism.

I had been told that the Kalmyks dismount their horses only to play a game of chess, but the reality is somewhat different. Horses are animals of no more or less importance than any other – and in many families backgammon or cards have taken the place of chess. And yet, there is no way one could visit the republic without going to Chess City. This complex, in a suburb of Elista, was inaugurated by Chuck Norris, with Kalmyk president Kirsan Ilyumzhinov and the World Chess Federation in attendance. A billboard bearing the Dalai Lama's smiling face

attempts to brighten a lifeless neighborhood. The Federation headquarters consists of a 3,000-square-foot office containing a few busy, stressed officials. The architectural design hesitates disastrously between cheap grandiosity and second-rate kitsch. I depart the premises which, judging from the model prominently displayed on the first floor of the museum, is due to be extended even further. Not far from here a hippomorphic bronze monument to the deportations – the Kalmyk Guernica – stands alone like an isolated piece at the end of a game. Opposite here are residential buildings. The proud Kalmyk nation has abandoned the steppes, to sleep in shabby rented flats. But in other areas the Kalmyks are integrating the traditional with the modern. Kalmyk women pay particular attention to their appearance. They never go out in flat shoes. The pressures of fashion make themselves felt in a more uniform, more oppressive and more demanding way than in the trendy cities of the west and generally there isn't much room for eccentricity or individuality. But Inna, my interpreter, takes me to see the Miss Kalmyk competition, an event that was bound to showcase some spectacular dresses. The range is astonishing, with traditional Mongol dress alongside sexy R&B-inspired outfits – they seem determined to include ancestral culture in western fashion. Stage fright is intense in the wings of the Elista theater, an unexceptional building that from the outside might be mistaken for a sports hall. People are running around all over the place – stage managers, dressers, dancers, and make-up artists bustling about in a creative chaos. The excitement is contagious. The rather conventional show is somewhat amateur and provincial. But who cares, because when the winning names are announced, the crowd's excitement is at fever pitch. People are having fun, and at the same time taking it all most seriously. One young woman, Yulia, seems to have escaped this trend. She is not the only one, but certainly one of few to have devoted herself entirely to a religious calling. After several years studying Tibetan Buddhism in Dharamsala, India, she came back to Kalmykia to continue her vocation. She has the shining face and eyes of those who radiate a peaceful wisdom. She laughs heartily when I ask why she chose this path and explains that this is simply what she feels is right for her. When as a child she went to temple – and it wasn't yet the great Elista temple – she found herself fascinated by the rituals. The chants of the monks penetrated the deepest recesses of her soul. From the age of 13, she knew she would become a nun. Did she realize the amount of work and study she would have to undertake to achieve her goal? What she would miss out on, compared to her school friends? “Yes, but I'm not missing out, this is what I want to do. I don't miss so-called normal life.” When I ask her how many years of study she still has to go, she replies with her timeless smile that following a religious calling means never ceasing to study. Her dream is to one day open the first women-only Buddhist convent in the Republic of Kalmykia. When she declares it, the dream has an almost tangible reverberation. As the words leave her lips, one can almost touch her dream. And one would wish nothing less for the lovely Yulia.

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