

Saving their heritage with... Horse Power

They can ride like the wind but the galloping hooves of time threatened to dilute, perhaps obliterate, their nomadic traditions.

Meta Mertens calls it her horse heaven...the sweeping plains of Mongolia, where she is proud to play a part maintaining centuries of equine history.

She has witnessed the country's primary nomadic lifestyle resist a drift into the cities for work.

"The fall of communism, a resulting severe economic depression and the coincidental death of his famous horse-training father in 1990 persuaded my friend Jamsran Ganbold to move his wife and two children to the countryside," says Meta.

"He wanted to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors and work

Nyamsuren Geserbadam, better known as Nyama, is 29 and Selena's managing director. She says: "We have been dedicated to preserving nomadic lifestyle through responsible tourism since 2001 and we bring in 1,200 visitors each year. We strive to support local communities by involving them in activities to earn cash to keep themselves and their customs alive.

"I am Mongolian from the Gobi desert, the southern part of Mongolia. My grandparents were nomads and I did not want to see these people suffer.

"My experience with Raleigh International Expedition, the British

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with horses. He has been successful and his string has won many medals in Mongolian races, known as Naadams.

"I have stayed with Ganbold and his family for six years and have found a kindred spirit in him. He typifies the guardians of Mongolian traditions. His presence, with others like him, is revitalising Gun-Galuut Reserve. They keep out poachers, build and repair fences and bird outlooks, protect endangered species and ensure good grazing opportunities for the nomads' livestock. "Responsible eco tourism provides jobs which are difficult to find for young people without advanced education.

"It has also been an influencing factor in bolstering people such as 46-year-old Ganbold, a former truck lift driver.

"Next summer Selena Travel, which introduced me to Ganbold, opens the first Mongol Horse Center as part of the responsible tourism programme. I'm assisting with this project and we expect to create several jobs."

charity organisation, influenced me to pursue a career in tourism. I joined Selena just after finishing university, majoring in English.

"Mongolia's population is about three million and one third lives in the capital Ulaanbaatar. Roughly 1.4 million are nomads or semi-nomads. Eking out a living is tough and, of course, youngsters have been lured away.

"The nomads did not have enough cash outside of selling dairy products, cashmere wool and livestock. We have helped to ease the problem after forming a mutual co-operative triangle with them and the local administration office. Thirty per cent of all tourism income goes into the village's annual budget and they invest in conservation schemes at the reserve.

"Our Steppe Nomad eco tourist Camp on River Kherlen is wind and solar power driven. It provides jobs and locals, including Ganbold, rent us their animals and his sons provide horse, camel and fishing guide services.

"The wives keep the camp's kitchen stocked with meat, cheese and milk from family goats, sheep and cattle.

"As our top repeat client, Meta has seen families' fortunes change for the better."

Meta's association was triggered because she decided to start part-time lecturing after adding a master's in geography to her degree in environmental studies.

"I had moved to San Francisco, USA, from Holland and until then my professional life was exclusively in the corporate world," she says. "Then in my first class as teacher I had to discuss Central Asia and realised I knew little about it. My research meant I discovered Mongolia and two things instantly caught my attention – horses and wide open spaces. These had been the quest of my life. I can't explain why because there is no family connection but I have been fascinated by horses since a toddler. I first rode aged six."

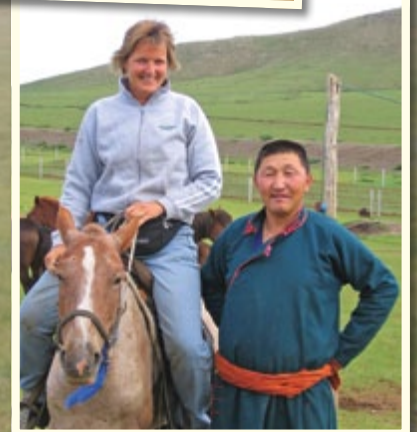
Meta, now 53, adds: "I go to Mongolia for up to six weeks every summer. "Horse racing is extremely popular but changing somewhat because of cross breeding.

"Ganbold has 200 horses and is part of a Gal – a close-knit co-op of trainers – and they have made me a member. It's an honour to help prepare our horses for competition. They consider me 'family' and I can't imagine life without them and their support. "Ganbold and his partners Batbayar and Byamba are Gun-Galuut Community Association Board management officials empowered by the local government to conserve eco-systems, preserve nomadic culture and develop sustainable, community-based tourism.

"Each September, backed by Selena, they organise Nomads' Day with games, rituals, sports and music."

Ganbold's two sons are university graduates, his 11-year-old daughter an A-grade pupil and wife Altai, ex-sales clerk, has opened a butcher's shop that is supplied from their 1,000 plus livestock collection.

They started out with just a few head. Their example shows what hard work – and tourism – can do.



Main picture: Only kids (from about 4 to 14 years old) ride in the Naadams. Up to 350 horses take part, at speeds of 40kph over distances of 27km. Above: Meta is welcomed like family by the trainers and she sits on her horse Ambassador, given to her by Ganbold (pictured right)