



Aparina Mukherjee

SMALL HORDE: Not even Ghengis Khan got this far

Mongol Invasion

Gigantic men in tiny loincloths wrestle their way into New York's Central Park

NEW YORKERS don't look twice at the parade of joggers around Central Park's main reservoir, but even the most jaded urbanite will slow down for behemoth men wearing scanty gold-trimmed shorts as they grapple on a patch of artificial turf.

In May, Manhattanites saw a cornerstone of their city transformed into a scene much like the one that occurs around Ulan Bator each July, when Mongolia celebrates Nadaam, a three-day blowout featuring wrestling, archery and horse-racing, the "three manly games" that form the backbone of its rugged sporting culture. On a rain-soaked field in the shadow of Fifth Avenue's Museum Mile, haunting notes from the morin khuur, a two-string fiddle, heralded the start of the Festival of Mongolia, a month-long government effort to boost the country's cultural profile.

Naturally, the transplanted event required modification: horse-racing was out—Ulan Bator's young jockeys need anywhere from 15 to 30 kilometres of open space in which to hurtle around. Still, an abbreviated version of the archery competition was manageable. The judges in this event

stand hair-splittingly close to the targets. As two slim, bow-toting women fired heavy-tipped arrows at a small row of targets, stocky Mongolian judges wearing loovuuz hats—round, pointed headgear—raised their hands and sang each time the small cups were toppled.

"Their bows were as heavy as mine," says Luigi Kapaj, an archery enthusiast from Staten Island, looking down at his own Mongolian-made bow. Kapaj says exposure to Mongolian culture in his own backyard—prompted in part by his girlfriend, an Ulan Bator native who's studying for a master's degree in computer science in New York—has whetted his appetite to visit Mongolia.

"We know Mongolia is not very well known abroad," says Jargalsaikhany Enkhshaikhan, the country's ambassador to the United Nations, who chatted with expatriate Mongolians attending the festival. "You cannot become the centre of attention across America all at once," he says, tucking his mobile phone under the folds of his deel, a herder's garment.

The nearly 60 Mongolian artists and athletes competing at the Nadaam also staged performances at the American Museum of Natural History, where the new "Fighting Dinosaurs" exhibition of dinosaurs from the Gobi Desert recently opened. The Gobi specimens were excavated in a joint expedition of Mongolian and American paleontologists, among the first opportunities for U.S. scientists to return to one of the world's most important fossil repositories. The Gobi had been closed to them from the 1930s until the end of communist rule in the 1990s.

Across the park from the prehistoric display, the sight of champion wrestler Usukhbayar, a massive, 1.98-metre-tall man with a cauliflower ear and an amiable smile for his fans, was enough to put Mongolia at the forefront of anyone's mind.

While expatriate Mongolians marvelled at the appearance of their homeland amidst Midtown Manhattan's concrete canyons, talk of home had a sombre side. Like the festival organizers, Mongolians living abroad are hoping scientific exchanges and tourism will reduce the country's isolation at a particularly crucial time. At least 2.5 million head of livestock died last winter, prompting concerns about the adequacy of food supplies and the economic health of the country's nomadic herders.

Despite predicting a five-year economic lag from the die-off, Chuluun Ganbold, a government adviser who spent two years organizing the event, says any attention his country gets from its New York foray will have value. "It's a cultural event, but it has other connotations," he says. ■

WILL SWARTS

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FIGHTING DINOSAURS will be at the American Museum of Natural History until Oct. 29. Call (212) 769-5200 for ticket details. For Festival of Mongolia information, check <http://www.undp.org/missions/mongolia/festival-form.htm> Major festival events run until June 19.

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