

Praise for *The Wolf Economy Awakens*

“Nylander’s book is a must read for Asia enthusiasts, as he once again gets under the skin of an economy and reveals the fascinating complexities and personalities that make it tick.

As one of the last genuine wild outposts in the modern world, and straddling the politics of both China and Russia, Mongolia is an economy that is barely understood, seriously under-reported and sitting on a literal goldmine.”

—*Rob Carnell, head of research and chief economist,
Asia-Pacific, ING Bank (Singapore)*

“I have read all about Mongolia, and have lived and run a business in the country for three decades. Johan Nylander’s book is by far my favourite read on contemporary Mongolia, and offers the best summary of Mongolia’s post-pandemic challenges.

The book is balanced and well narrated, and contains many conversations with prominent Mongolians of all persuasions and from all walks of life. It’s revealing for me even as a long-term resident.”

—*Jan Wigsten, CEO, 360° Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar)*

“Johan Nylander, a journalist with deep Asia experience, has interviewed Mongolian nomads, tech entrepreneurs, the country’s Prime Minister and opposition leaders. He’s well suited to write this book which asks this question: will Mongolia escape endemic corruption and the resource trap and become Asia’s next boom economy while maintaining its admirable democracy?

Well worth the read as Nylander ably integrates analysis and on-the-ground reporting talking to some of the fascinating

Mongolians caught up in this epic story, the outcome of which matters for the region and the world.”

—*Dexter Roberts, senior fellow,
The Atlantic Council’s Asia Security Initiative (Washington DC)*

“I never thought I would be caught up by a book on Mongolia, where I have never been, as if I were reading a detective story, but that is exactly what Johan Nylander has achieved with his amazing book, namely to incite my interest in the country, which happens to be a vibrant democracy landlocked between Russia and China. This ‘wolf economy,’ thanks to its vast natural resources, is transforming itself into a start-up nation and proof of what you can become if you really want it, no matter the geography.”

— *Alicia García Herrero, chief economist,
Asia Pacific, Natixis (Hong Kong)*

“Johan is one of the best storytellers and writers I know.”

—*Akash Karia, global keynote speaker
and bestselling author (Hong Kong)*

THE
WOLF ECONOMY
AWAKENS

MONGOLIA'S FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY, AND A GREEN AND DIGITAL FUTURE

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Introduction

Growing up in the town of Berkh in eastern Mongolia in the 1980s could be rough. The fluor spar mine was the heart of the community, and Mongolian miners worked side by side with Russians and Kazaks. Prisoners sentenced to hard labor were also sent down the shafts.

Located around 500 kilometers east of the capital, Ulaanbaatar, some 10,000 people called Berkh home in those days—a lot for a Mongolian administrative district, or *sum*. The facades of the workers' living quarters were decorated with the hammer and sickle, the Soviet symbol. There were a few restaurants, all serving traditional meaty dishes and vodka, and during the weekends the local cultural center opened its doors for music and dancing. In winter, temperatures would reach as low as minus 40 degrees Celsius, and the sky would turn dark from the burning of coal for heat. Outside the village, the dry grassy steppe stretched endlessly in all directions, occupied by roaming horses, cows and goats. The huff and puff of the mine, located just a few hundred meters from the town center, was like endless background music.

On warm summer days, living close to the countryside could be idyllic. But the harsh mining environment—a macho habitat that bore the rigors of heavy drinking—was not always easy. In fact, the threat of violence was never far away.

Late one afternoon, an 11-year-old boy was attacked by a drunken miner. The boy tried to fight the man off as best as he could, but the miner was strong and kept coming at him. “I’m going to kill you,” he shouted. He even tried to smash a bottle over the child’s head. The situation looked bad—very bad. Then, out of nowhere, one of the boy’s best friends came running, and together they fended the drunken man off and escaped to safety.

The following day, the two boys—Anar and Oyuka—were sitting on a stone wall in the morning sunshine when the miner walked past them. He looked embarrassed and humiliated. “Come here, and we’ll beat you again,” they shouted at him with newfound confidence. The miner lowered his gaze, apologized quietly, and walked off. The children had won the battle.

Soon after the incident, the boy who had been attacked, Anar, moved to another town with his family, and the two friends lost contact. It would take another 30 years until they reconnected, at a meeting in Ulaanbaatar. By then, the fluorspar mine had closed, the population of Berkh had fallen to a fraction of its level during the boom years, and most of the restaurants, shops, and local businesses had shut down. The hammer and sickle on the facades of the old working quarters now seemed emblematic of the collapse of the Communist regime, and Mongolia had become a liberated democracy.

The two boys, meanwhile, had grown into men: both had just turned 40 and had families of their own. And what brought them together at this meeting in the capital was that they had both, in different ways, become vital drivers and even symbols of a new Mongolia.

Anar Chinbaatar is today the country’s most famous tech startup entrepreneur. His cutting-edge fintech group AND Global has

branches and investors across Asia, as well as in the San Francisco Bay Area, and he's aiming for "unicorn" status (a valuation of \$1 billion or more.) He's also one of the "sharks" in the local version of the American business reality television series *Shark Tank*, a celebrated motivational speaker and TED Talker, and a major sponsor of several NGOs aimed at nurturing the next generation of young tech wizards.

Luvsannamsrai "Oyuka" Oyun-Erdene, meanwhile, is the prime minister of Mongolia. When he was inaugurated in 2021, at the age of 40, he was one of the youngest leaders in the world. A graduate of Harvard University, where he studied public policy, he spent his early career fighting for social development and campaigning against corruption, and he is the architect of Vision 2050, a long-term roadmap for modernizing Mongolia's economy and creating a greener, more equal, more digital society.

The two men were (re)introduced by officials from the newly established Ministry of Digital Development and Communications. Unaware of the history the two men shared, the ministry wanted the prime minister to get to know one of the country's foremost tech innovators. Little did they know that they were about to spark fond reminiscences of the pair's younger days. Recalling their shared experiences in Berkh, they embraced and laughed about the drunken miner and about how "tough" they had been at the age of 11. Neither did it escape them that they had both come a long way.

This tale of Anar and Oyuka is more than just an amusing anecdote. It also tells us quite a lot about the overall development of Mongolia.

First, it's a story about social mobility. In Mongolia, you don't have to be born into a wealthy or powerful elite to get to the top. Of course, rising above the socioeconomic circumstances you're born

into is never exactly easy, but not being defined by your parents' status is often an important indicator of a healthy, functional society and economy. There has traditionally been a concentration of power in Mongolia, a few dozen families said to control much of the country's politics and business. That two boys from a rough mining town were able to break through barriers and succeed—on parallel tracks—speaks well, however, of Mongolia as a place of equity and opportunity.

During a trip to Berkh in mid-September 2022, I visited the local primary school the prime minister attended as a child. With its long corridors and tiny desks, it looked like almost any other primary school in the world. And, as in other schools, photos of notable alumni were proudly displayed in a glass cabinet. Among the former students to have “made it” were not only the prime minister but an Olympic athlete and a famous wrestler.

In the classroom in which Oyun-Erdene had been schooled, I spoke to the boy who now sat at his old desk—a privilege of which the boy was unaware. “This is where the prime minister sat,” I said to him. “Now it’s your desk. You never know what can happen if you’re ready to study and work hard.” I could see his eyes open wider, as the thought occurred to him, possibly for the first time, that someday he too might lead his country.

Another thing the story of Berkh reveals, however, is about the shortcomings of mining dependency, or the so-called “resource curse.” It highlights how quickly a boom town can become a run-down rust-belt area when the resources it depends on run out—something that’s especially true when not enough money is reinvested back into the local community during lucrative times. This is true, of course, not just on the local level but for whole nations too.

Investments in diversified industries, such as agriculture and tourism, are finally being made in Berkh today. It should and could have happened decades ago, but as the saying goes, “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; the second-best time is today.” Similarly, the Mongolian government today aims to diversify the country’s economy, cut mining dependency, and scale up in other sectors such as technology and green energy.

A third aspect of the story is collaboration. Only together could the boys fight off the drunk miner. During an interview I was granted with the prime minister, he referred to Badmaanyambuugiin Bat-Erdene, the greatest traditional Mongolian wrestler of the modern era. “Alone, no one could beat him; but two men—no, perhaps six men—could take him down,” he said with a chuckle.

On a more serious note, he also referred to an old folk tale that all children in Mongolia are told. It’s the story of Alan Gua, “Alun the Beauty,” a mythical female figure who features in the nation’s oldest surviving work of literature, *The Secret History of the Mongols*. It goes something like this:

Queen Alan Gua had five sons, but none of them got along with the others. The queen was at a loss as to how to resolve the siblings’ conflicts. Then she called her children together and handed each of them an arrow. She instructed them to break the arrows, and they all succeeded immediately. She then gathered five arrows together in a bundle and asked them to break them, but none were able. “Sons, you are like these arrows,” she said. “If you are on your own, you will break easily. But when you are together, you are unbreakable.”

From this tale, one can draw many different lessons about communication, leadership, and conflict resolution—and about solidarity and unity.

According to several reports and indicators, today Mongolia stands on the edge of becoming Asia's next boom economy and of replicating the progress made in many other nations in the region.

I've been covering economic and social development in Asia (including Mongolia) for the last two decades, and in that time I've witnessed mind-blowing development occur across the continent. I've seen disruptors from Seoul to Jakarta create astonishing new economic value that has pushed the region to the forefront of global economic expansion. I've seen China transform itself from a polluted industrial complex to a tech superpower. And I've seen the countries of Southeast Asia become some of the world's most vibrant consumer markets, people using "super apps" in their daily lives that have scarcely been imagined in the West. I've also interviewed legendary founders such as Alibaba's Jack Ma, Huawei's Ren Zhengfei, and Stan Shih of Acer, as well as the leaders of many of Asia's top startups and venture capital firms—and they all agree the future belongs to Asia in economic power. The global gravity of GDP (gross domestic product; put simply, where you have most economic activity in the world) tilts no longer to the West but to the East, just as it did during the era of the Silk Road. In purchasing power, Asia is set to overtake (if it hasn't already) the rest of the world combined, marking the "inflection point when the continent becomes the new center of the world," according to the *Financial Times*. Asia is already home to half of the world's middle-class population, a demographic that is increasingly eager to exercise its spending power.

So, why not Mongolia next?

The elements for its success are clearly there: a wealth of subsoil resources such as copper, gold, and rare earth metals; a growing number of cutting-edge tech and lifestyle brands; an educated population (Mongolians are consistently among the world's top students

in mathematics competitions); and enviable diplomatic relations with countries both in its immediate vicinity and around the world. Mongolia's vast steppe landscape lends itself not only to herding and renewable energy production but to tourism and filmmaking. The country also stands firm on its democratic principles, which bodes well for well-ordered, socially inclusive development. If administered well, and if corruption and political nepotism can be rooted out, Mongolia—as this book will show—stands every chance of becoming Asia's next success story.

Observant readers will have noted the recurrence of the word “if” in the previous sentence. The consultancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) stated in its 2022 Doing Business in Mongolia report that “abundant natural resource wealth and agricultural production make Mongolia's population one of the potentially richest countries per capita in the region.” The authors were then careful to say that converting this potential into reality requires many critical factors to function in unison.

These conclusions compare with other assessments of Mongolia's economic and political situation contained in reports by development organizations such as The World Bank, The Asian Development Bank, The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the United Nations, as well as other international banking or analyst groups.

Onereport, by the *Harvard International Review*, found that Mongolia is on the “verge of a mining miracle” and could even become as wealthy per capita as Hong Kong and South Korea over the coming decades. The Oyu Tolgoi copper mine in the Gobi Desert—the fourth biggest in the world and a major supplier of what is a key mineral for many renewable energy systems and in the production of electric vehicles—is about to reach full capacity

in its operations, an outcome that will bring significant revenues (at least some of which are likely to be reallocated toward developing other megaprojects in the country.) Mineral-rich Mongolia has been called the “wolf economy,” and for good reason.

Mongolia’s mining sector contributes a vast amount to its economy and exports, but the government is also working toward diversifying the country’s economic base and attracting foreign investment in other sectors. As a result, a variety of new opportunities for businesses and investors has emerged, most notably in technology, infrastructure, cashmere production, and renewable energy.

Concurrently, the government has enacted policies to crack down on corruption, introduce greater transparency, and create a more business-friendly environment. Indeed, at the time of writing this book, more than 100 high-ranking politicians and business executives were under investigation in the biggest corruption crackdown in the country’s modern history.

According to the UK government’s Department for Business and Trade, “Mongolia has more than a goldmine; Mongolia’s opportunities in infrastructure, education, finance and green energy are just as alluring.” It adds: “From raw materials to city-building, Mongolia’s potential is vast, and represents a great opening for British businesses looking to discover—and be a part of—the next success story.”

Smart observers know potential when they see it. But of course, Mongolia’s success won’t come for free and can’t be taken for granted. Quite the opposite. It will require great efforts.

In many ways, this book is about everyone in Mongolia who, like Anar and Oyun-Erdene, has a vision for the country’s future. It’s about the people who are fighting for a better life for the next generation of Mongolians, sometimes against opposition and headwinds, and those who are trying to build stability and solidarity.

Another man with a vision for Mongolia is Gantumur Luvsan-nyam, leader of the country's opposition Democratic Party and a former minister for education and science. He told me in an interview that with greater economic liberalization, allied to investment in education and free-trade zones, Mongolia has the potential to become a giant of science and technology. His ambition is to bring about a "Silicon Steppe."

Different parties may have competing visions, but what is recurrent across the political spectrum—and indeed across many different sections of Mongolian society—is a sense of real possibility. Indeed, over several trips to Mongolia for research, I met many people just as inspiring as the protagonists mentioned. The cast list includes individuals fighting to strengthen the country's democracy, innovators aiming to realize its promise as a hub for renewable energy, tech and lifestyle entrepreneurs who are shaking up traditional industries, people who have left high-flying jobs on Wall Street to return to the country they love and play their part in moving it forward, and a new generation of kids dreaming big dreams of a brighter tomorrow.

Adding to my motivation for writing this book was a sense that they do things differently in Mongolia. I could see that people were exercising their democratic rights to demonstrate outside the government building against corruption, and that both the government and opposition parties were listening and responding to people's demands, not something that would ever happen in neighboring China or Russia. During these events, the prime minister even went out on the street to speak face to face with protesters—a rare sight in almost any country. Mongolia's unique political culture, in addition to its economic and diplomatic prospects (as outlined), make it a compelling story for any Asia watcher. Before deciding to write this

book, however, I consulted a German journalist friend in Hong Kong who has traveled to and covered Mongolia for almost two decades. He didn't hesitate: "Mongolia is a fascinating place that definitely deserves more international recognition." Today, I can only agree.

I hope you'll find the book stimulating and thought-provoking and that it will give you an idea of what Mongolia is—and (more importantly) what it might become.

Before we come to that, though, let's hope the drunken miner in Berkh eventually sobered up and was able to find some peace in life.

About the author

Johan Nylander is an award-winning author and Asia correspondent. His work has been published by CNN, Forbes, Sweden's leading business daily *Dagens Industri*, and many other international media outlets.

His most recent book is *The Epic Split – Why 'Made in China' Is Going out of Style*, a report from the frontline of the US-China trade war. He is also the author of *Shenzhen Superstars – How China's Smartest City Is Challenging Silicon Valley*, which became an Amazon bestseller. He is a cowriter of *Shenzhen: China's Southern Powerhouse*, a coffee table-sized book of photos published by Odyssey Books, and the author of an acclaimed management book titled *Simplify* (Förenkla, Liber publishing).

Nylander frequently gives speeches about Asian and Chinese business and tech trends, including geopolitical risks in the region and how to navigate a new world of trade wars and decoupling.

In 2021, he was named a “guardian of free speech” by the Susanne Hobohm Foundation. During the 2008 financial crisis, Nylander was stationed as a foreign correspondent in London. He has an MBA from the University of Gothenburg.

Nylander lives with his family in Hong Kong.

For more about him, and to stay informed about his next book, visit johannylander.asia.

1

Visionaries and peacemakers

|| *Mongolia’s “young tigers” are leading the country’s battle against corruption, standing up for democratic values, and upholding a long tradition of neighborly diplomacy.*

If places could speak, Sükhbaatar Square, at the heart of Ulaanbaatar, would have many tales to tell. For decades, people have gathered here over the warm summer months for picnics and music events. It’s been a place for lovers’ meetings, for national celebrations, and for violent demonstrations—all shaping the future of individuals, families, and society. Oh, the stories this square could tell.

On a Sunday afternoon in early September, the air still mild and comfortable, wedding parties can be seen lining up to have their photographs taken in front of the Government Palace and the majestic statue of Chinggis Khan (better known in the West as Genghis Khan). Children run and play all around, filling the square with laughter, their parents struggling to keep up. Some visitors are clothed in the traditional *deel*, a loose calf-length tunic often worn by nomadic herders. Others ride around on rented tandems, while local merchants try to flog paintings and souvenirs to tourists. Across the street from where kids in Thrasher and Wu-Tang Clan T-shirts

perform flips and ollies on skateboards, elderly men proudly display their military medals, testament to their glory days. On an artificial lawn, groups of teenage boys and girls play volleyball: I count at least a dozen balls in the air at one point; some bounce away and hit other people picnicking nearby, but they're returned with smiles. One can see young couples holding hands, leaning closer in discreet whispers.

Along the edges of the square, food trucks sell ice cream and *khuushuur* (meat dumplings). Some days the square hosts events, ranging from nomadic markets and hip-hop concerts to a green energy expo and demonstrations of Korean or French gastronomy and culture. But the square's atmosphere—warm and inviting, a microcosm of Mongolian society—is a consistent feature. (At least when the weather allows, that is. Returning in January, when the temperature plummets to as low as minus 40 degrees Celsius and the sky looks like a brown-yellow soup from heavy coal burning, there tends to be a lot fewer picnics.)

Strolling around the square and observing its statues and monuments also offers something of a quick guide to the country's political history.

In the middle of the square stands a statue of Damdin Sükhbaatar, a communist revolutionary. It was somewhere around here that he declared the independence of Mongolia from China in July 1921. The square still bears his name, and the capital itself is named in honor of the "Red Hero" who liberated the country. The words Sükhbaatar pronounced at the moment of independence are engraved on his statue: "If we, the whole people, unite in our common effort and common will, there will be nothing in the world that we cannot achieve, that we will not have learnt or that we will have failed to do." The communist revolution saw the establishment

of the Mongolian People's Republic, making Mongolia the first Asian country, and only the second place in the world after Russia, to adopt communism. The regime's close ties to the Red Army allowed Mongolia to fall easily under Russian control, however, and eventually it became a Soviet satellite state. If Sükhbaatar were alive today, he might be pleased to see Mongolia happily independent once again even though it has shaken off communism.

To the west of the government building stands a reminder of the hardships endured under Soviet rule, in the shape of a monument dedicated to the victims of the Kremlin's Great Purge (or Great Terror). During the late 1930s, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin ordered the killing of tens of thousands of Mongols he accused of promoting Tibetan Buddhism or having ties to pro-Japanese spy rings. Buddhist monks made up most of the victims, alongside intellectuals and political dissidents, and their elimination left a deep scar in Mongolia's collective memory. Seizures of private property and forced relocations of nomadic herders also led to widespread unrest—which was brutally crushed. Mass graves containing hundreds of executed monks and civilians were still being discovered as recently as 2003.

Indirectly echoing Sükhbaatar's words about "common effort and common will," the square was also where the first protests were held in 1989 that eventually led to the demise of Soviet rule in Mongolia and steered its transition to parliamentary democracy. Thousands of Mongolians defied a prohibition on demonstrations by gathering in the square to demand freedom and human rights. Banners proclaimed an old Mongolian war cry, "Mongol Brothers and Sisters, to your horses!" Fortuitously, however, those battle cries were not a portent, as the police made no attempt to break up the protests. In fact, there was no bloodshed whatsoever, not even a fistfight or a window smashed.

The political drama didn't end with the fall of communism, though. Right off the southwestern corner of the square, in a tiny park, stands a statue of Sanjaasürengiin Zorig, a prominent Mongolian politician and one of the leaders of the country's democratic revolution. In 1998, he was assassinated—stabbed sixteen times, including three times to the heart. In the days following, mourners crowded Sükhbaatar Square, holding candlelight vigils. The murder is said to have been politically motivated although this has never been proven conclusively. The statue faces the Government Palace, indicating Zorig's morning walk toward his workplace.

In the corner diagonally opposite Sanjaasürengiin you will find a somewhat less disquieting monument. Here, a group of goats balances on a rock, representing the nomadic herder lifestyle and the livestock that yield Mongolia's famous cashmere yarns. Herding is a way of life for over a fifth of Mongolians and defines much about the country's spirit and character. It's probably no coincidence, either, that this goat sculpture is located outside Gobi Cashmere, the city's flashiest cashmere fashion store.

South of the palace stands a symbol—in the shape of an open heart—of Mongolia's important (and often overlooked) role as a regional and global mediator in peace talks and in dialogues for cooperation. It was raised for the 2016 Asia-Europe Meeting, a platform for the two continents to tackle global challenges together. Being a neutral country with strong diplomatic relations both across the entire region and with “third neighbors” such as the US and the EU, Mongolia has been referred to as “the Switzerland of Asia.” (Ulaanbaatar was shortlisted to host the 2018 talks between former US President Donald Trump and North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, for example, and Mongolia has hosted leaders from both countries.) The inside walls of the monument are full of graffiti tags and

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Empowering the great outdoors

Digital nomads, organic lifestyle brands, biofuel, and simulations of space exploration: Mongolia's countryside offers more than breathtaking scenery and traditional tourism.

The door swings open to the nomadic tent in which we've spent the night. A man pops his head inside the room and asks, enthusiastically, "Wanna see gazelle?"

I roll out of bed, grab my boots, and run after Batbayer, our host. He points to a bright green and sun-soaked hillside a short distance away. But there isn't just one Mongolian gazelle. At least a hundred of these medium-sized antelopes are on the move, slowly and gracefully, and seemingly unconcerned by the humans gazing at them. For the local nomads, such scenes are not uncommon. But for this outsider, it's a magical moment.

Then, from the opposite direction, another group of animals comes strolling toward us, equally uninterested in our presence although without the gazelles' effortless grace. It's Batbayer's flock of sheep, baaing and munching on grass as they go. In less than an hour, the gazelles and sheep have moved on to new valleys, beyond our sight.

Batbayer has a cheerful face, but with the deep creases and leathery tan that come from long hours working outdoors, giving him the look of a sailor from an Ernest Hemingway novel. He lives with his wife, Enkhmaa. Together with his brother, they own much of the livestock they look after as they wander the vast, Mongolian landscape.

Out here, there are no other people around. The steppe of the northeastern Khentii province seems to stretch endlessly in all directions, making the world feel bigger but also somehow simpler. It's only now that I feel I truly understand what they mean by the "endless blue sky." The white nomadic *ger* is equipped with a TV, a satellite dish, and some digital devices, and powered with a mix of solar panels and a diesel generator. Parked beside it are a four-wheel drive and a motorbike. Apart from such conveniences, however, the family is entirely at the mercy of nature.

I ask Batbayar if he's worried that the sheep will run off. There are no fences here, just land without boundaries. He smiles, explaining patiently to the naive city boy that the flock roams freely, typically returning in the evening or the following day. This reminds me that he mentioned the previous evening that he and his brother also had horses. Where are they? Pointing in a wonderful everywhere-and-nowhere gesture, he says he hasn't seen them for three months.

"They like to wander around," he says. "It makes them happy. But they always come back, or I'll find them with help from friends.

"Sometimes," he adds, his sunburned face beaming, "there are more of them when they return because they've had foals."

Mongolia is home to one of the world's few remaining truly nomadic cultures. About a fifth of the population are herders, and nomadism is intricately woven into the country's very spirit. Even its

modern-day democratic values can be seen as reflecting Mongolia's nomadic traditions—freedom, independence, and pluralism.

This way of living and interacting with animals and the natural environment—and having respect for both—is not easy for an outsider to fully comprehend. Spending time with people who live a truly nomadic life is eye-opening. It's like entering a parallel universe that is barely visible to the untrained eye and that has almost nothing in common with the hectic, urban lives of most of the world's population. On average, only two people live in each square kilometer of Mongolian territory. Given that more than half the population is crammed into the capital, the chances of running into another human being out on the steppe are remote. The US, with all its wild and open spaces, has 36 people per square kilometer. Japan has 330, Hong Kong almost 7,000. What's more, large parts of the steppe have no regular internet connection, liberating life here from the anxiety and stress caused by the intrusions of all-pervasive social media.

The night before, we feasted at the family home on one of the country's unique and tasty dishes, *khorkhog*, or mutton cooked using hot rocks. This came served with pickled cucumber, a variety of berries, and curdled milk, besides more plates of meat, all from the family's own livestock. A bowl of vodka was passed around, and constantly topped up. (I had been told that it's impolite to refuse, and that a bottle must be finished once opened. I did what I could to accommodate local traditions.) Some neighbors and other family members joined us from their encampments an hour or two's drive away, and we sat jammed up in beds or on small stools around the central stove, listening as Batbayar told stories.

After we drained the vodka, Batbayar magically fished out a bottle of Jack Daniel's, and the atmosphere grew even more jolly. At midnight—to my great surprise—our hosts fired up a karaoke

connects travelers with nomadic families, offering authentic cultural experiences while promoting sustainable and responsible tourism. The Three Camel Lodge is an eco-friendly luxury getaway in the Gobi Desert that emphasizes sustainability, cultural preservation, and community development. These examples demonstrate that sustainable tourism initiatives in Mongolia not only contribute to environmental and cultural preservation but also create economic opportunities, while raising awareness about the country's unique heritage and natural resources.

New life for an old mine

This book started in the mining town of Berkh, where some of our main protagonists grew up, and we'll end it there too. As mentioned in the introduction, the town highlights how mining can bring wealth and prosperity to a region—but also how quickly this can turn to despair when the deposits run out and not enough money or efforts have been invested in other sectors.

Now, after decades of slumber, the old fluorspar mine in Berkh is being brought back to life. And so, hopefully, is the local economy.

During a visit to the town in September 2022, I was invited to visit the site of the mine, which is now being turned into a museum, more than 50 meters below ground. Wearing hardhats, headlamps, and warm jackets, we squeezed into the mine's old lift, which squeaked and rattled as it took us down the shaft. An engineer assured us it was all safe.

Down there, it's cold and damp. The snaggy, cavernous tunnel stretches in both directions, lit by LED string lights. Water drips from the ceiling, creating small puddles. In the dim light, stone

statues of mine workers look like real people approaching from the depths of the darkness.

For all the obvious reasons, it's hard not to think about the tunnels collapsing, or what would happen if the lights suddenly went out, or if we couldn't find our way back through the warren-like passages, or . . . the imagination starts spinning. This is a high-adrenaline museum; no doubt about it.

Naturally, safety is the priority for the museum's engineers—just as it was when the mine was active—something we're repeatedly reminded of.

Walking along seemingly endless tunnels brings us face to face with the working conditions these miners endured and the harsh realities of mining through the centuries. Monuments and machinery along the walls provide a record of the industry's evolution: from its reliance on horses and human muscle to more modern technology. Being down in a real pit makes it easy to grasp how hard it must have been for workers toiling away deep underground, breathing toxic fluorite dust, their lives on the line if anything went wrong. At the same time, it's also a chance to appreciate the huge technological advances the industry has made in automation and safety. In the most advanced mining operations, internet-connected remotely controlled robotic equipment and vehicles have removed or limited the dirtiest and most dangerous work.

Our tour is led by Enkh Javkhlan, the governor of Berkh, and we're accompanied by several mine workers to make sure we're safe. At the time of publication, the site was still being renovated.

"When the mining museum is open, we will have many people coming here," the governor tells me. "This will blow new life into our community. We'll also benefit from the many other tourist

attractions that are being established in the region, including the Chinggis Khan tourist project.”

When it opens, the museum—officially called the Mongolian Underground Mining Museum, Research and Training Center—will have cafés, music and entertainment halls, conference rooms, and souvenir shops, as well as exhibition rooms sponsored by Rio Tinto and other international mining players. Why not also hotel rooms, one might ask.

The ground-level compressor building will house those parts of the museum that aren’t deep underground. Meanwhile, the education center will be based in the mine’s second shaft and its administration building—and will be a vital facility for students majoring in mining and mineral engineering.

Enkh Javkhlan explains that students from local and international mining universities are expected to stay weeks or even months at the site, to experience what things used to be like and learn about modern mining technologies.

He adds that the winds of change are already being felt in the town. New, modern residential apartments are under construction, and a local school has signed an affiliation agreement with a British university. A local poultry factory, specializing in a particular type of smaller egg that’s regarded as a delicacy, is also investing to increase production for exports. People are slowly moving back.

During the weekends, residents are even going dancing at the Cultural Center—just like during the boom years. At the center’s entrance stands a large Soviet-style sculpture of the old mine, made of fluor spar: a reminder of the old days. Snatches of hip-hop and electronic beats, played by local youngsters after school, tell a different story—of a new era.

THE WOLF ECONOMY AWAKENS

“I have a very bright view of the future,” Enkh Javkhlan says, and his face beams with hope at the prospect of a better tomorrow for his town and people.

For more information and gallery
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