RON GLICKMAN travels to Mongolia, where instead of yurts and yaks, he discovers a well-developed yearning for the good life.
ith a smattering of gel in his hair, Batkhuu is tall and ruggedly handsome. His clothes are stylish, expensive. Aside from his youth – he's just 29 years old – he could be the manager of an Emporio Armani store anywhere on the planet. But he gets upset when he sees those irritating postings on Facebook. “People write things like: ‘How can there be an Armani in Mongolia? What do they do there, pay in sheep?’”

Batkhuu accepts that such stereotypes are commonplace among outsiders viewing a largely agrarian country that ranks among the world’s poorest. Despite a size equal to Western Europe, the population numbers about 2.7 million people, but far more horses. And millions more sheep than shoppers.

Yet, swarms of spanking new Land Rovers and German cars on the clogged roads of the capital, Ulaanbaatar, attest to surging local wealth. Skyscrapers have sprouted over vast Sukhbaatar Square, almost as big as Berlin’s Alexanderplatz, and a stark, Stalinist reminder of the seven decades of Soviet patronage. Since tossing off the yoke of communism nearly two decades ago, Mongolia has finally buried bitter memories of shortages of everything from petrol to bread and matches. Experts predict that Mongolia will register some of the world’s fastest growing rates of wealth per capita over the next five years. Incomes are expected to quadruple within eight years, according to a recent report from the International Monetary Fund. Naturally, this marks Mongolia on the corporate GPS (global profit scanning).

Hence, Batkhuu has plenty of company on the main floor of Central Tower, a shimmering new glass-wrapped tower overlooking Sukhbaatar Square. Louis Vuitton opened a two-floor luxury showroom in the same building last year, and has since been joined not only by Emporio Armani, but also Ermenegildo Zegna, Hugo Boss and Burberry. Upstairs in the swank, 17-storey tower that claims some of the top clubs and restaurants in the capital, are Montblanc, Swarovski and L’Occitane. Cartier has also been scouting Ulaanbaatar, and Benetton has announced plans for its own showroom on the steppes.

Shanghai Tang recently sponsored a high-end polo week in a remote part of Mongolia (see sidebar) that brought jet-setters from around the globe – practically all making their first visit. Enthusiasm for this “last great place,” as Mongolia is often described, was infectious. Raphael le Masne de Chermont, executive chairman of the Hong Kong-based lifestyle company, confided that Shanghai Tang planned to open a shop there. “It’s not just about the money,”
he says with passion, “but also being a part of this special place.”

Why is so much attention being paid to this emerging but still tiny market? The numbers, at present, may not suggest a market with initiating various concepts of globalisation for a country that was once the repository of people who once ruled an empire that ranged from Korea to Europe – the largest the world has ever seen. That empire was carved out by cavalry – Ghenghis Khan’s fearsome hordes. More than seven centuries later, horses remain a central part of Mongolian life. Fermented mare’s milk is the national brew, horse racing is a national obsession and the horse is on the state seal.

Hence, when Louis Vuitton stocked its Ulaanbaatar showroom, the couches in the upstairs VIP room were covered in what looks like high-end horsehide. Place of honour in the main glass case is occupied by a kind horse saddle, studded with expensive gems. “It was custom made for Mongolia,” confides the shop manager.

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In some ways, it’s merely a return to form for a country that was once the repository of much of the world’s funny and is credited by many with initiating various concepts of globalisation in the 13th century. “Mongolia is becoming more sophisticated,” agrees Ekhke, owner and chef of Silk Road, its menu celebrating the movement of goods and recipes, along that ancient highway, and the new Saffron restaurant.

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“Mongolia is becoming more sophisticated,” agrees Ekhke, owner and chef of Silk Road, its menu celebrating the movement of goods and recipes, along that ancient highway, and the new Saffron restaurant. Easily the hottest home-grown culinary talent, his cooking and charisma has made him a celebrity TV chef, while his restaurants introduce new flavours and cooking ingredients. “Mongolia has become very modern,” he notes. “Mongolians nowadays like to try new things.”