

Report





All with the **Light** of a Matchstick

Images from Mongolia –
photographed with the Zeiss Ikon

Four times larger than Germany and only 2.5 million inhabitants, one third of whom live in the capital Ulan-Bator – that is Mongolia, the steppe landscape between Russia in the north and China in the south. Breathtaking landscapes stretch from the foot of the four thousand meter high Altai mountain in the northwest to the Gobi desert in the southeast.

Photos from Sven Zellner





Mountain forests, grasslands and semi-deserts. Half of the country is covered by it. Since 1990, 5.3 million hectares have formed one of the earth's largest biosphere reservations. The region is shared by snow leopards, Gobi bears, Bactrian camels, saiga antelopes and 400 people living in a handful of settlements. These settlements generally consist of a few "ger," as the yurts are known

in the Mongolian language. They are barely discernible in the endlessness of this vast landscape. They seem to cower away from the flickering haze of the 40 degree midday heat under the huge expanse of the sheltering sky, away from the yellow-gray clouds which herald the advent of the fine, all-pervading dust of the next sandstorm.



Understanding the Language and Way of Life



A return to its cultural roots. In 1990 Mongolia was the first state in Asia to abandon communism and 70 years of a centrally

planned economy. Under a democratic constitution, the population re-embraced its old culture and tradition. Some of the inhabitants resumed their traditional form of existence and occupation as livestock raising nomads. Perfectly adapted to the barren landscape and extreme climatic conditions, they had lived and survived freely and without ties before being collectivized and compelled to lead a sedentary life.

Sven Zellner was attracted by this special breed of human being – self-confident, open and hospitable. Here, the German photographer found new friends. He returns to visit them time and time again. He has come to understand how they live and their language. This makes it easier for him to embark on his many excursions and explorations, far away from the beaten track. Sometimes he uses the mail bus, sometimes he travels in one of the heavily loaded trucks that link places and towns over long distances. Occasionally, when his friends make it possible, he takes a cross-country approach with their expert guidance.

Having a break in the dangerous quest for gold. The gold-diggers force tunnels and shafts into the rocky ground of the Gobi.



After the wrestler has won in the Naadam, a Mongolian festival, he presents himself to the public.

Note in his diary : “No roads, no signposts, not even dirt tracks! Nevertheless, my companions find their way with admirable certainty. We reach a maximum of 30 kilometers an hour and are constantly shaken around in our jeep. Water bottles and apples, our provisions for the journey, are stacked in heaps on the floor. Now and again, nomads pass by, with their entire possessions on the backs of their camels. Sometimes we can also see a herd of animals on the horizon. As dusk draws in, we head in that direction, reach the yurts of their owners and are greeted with great warmth and hospitality. The simple dinner consists of boiled mutton, accompanied by a type of yogurt and cheese from the milk of their sheep,

goats, camels and horses. During the night, the animals are kept close to the “ger”, away from the howling wolves in the background. We eat and sleep on the floor of the ger which has only one large room. In its center a fire blazes in a simple tin container. The dried dung of the animals is used as fuel. There is practically no firewood available in the steppe. Water is obtained from deep wells. The sparing use of resources is an absolute must. This is why our usual morning hygiene rituals are slightly shorter than usual. We then proceed into the first rays of the morning sunlight ...”

In the late summer of 2007 Sven Zellner visited the "Ninjas", the gold-diggers of Mongolia. The name is an allusion to the "Ninja Turtles" because the men are reminiscent of these comic figures when carrying their large metal gold panning dishes on their backs. But maybe the term means even more! Hidden to everyone and usually illegally, the gold-diggers fight what they consider to be a battle for a just cause. Sven Zellner photographed them with his *Zeiss Ikon* during their work, or during a

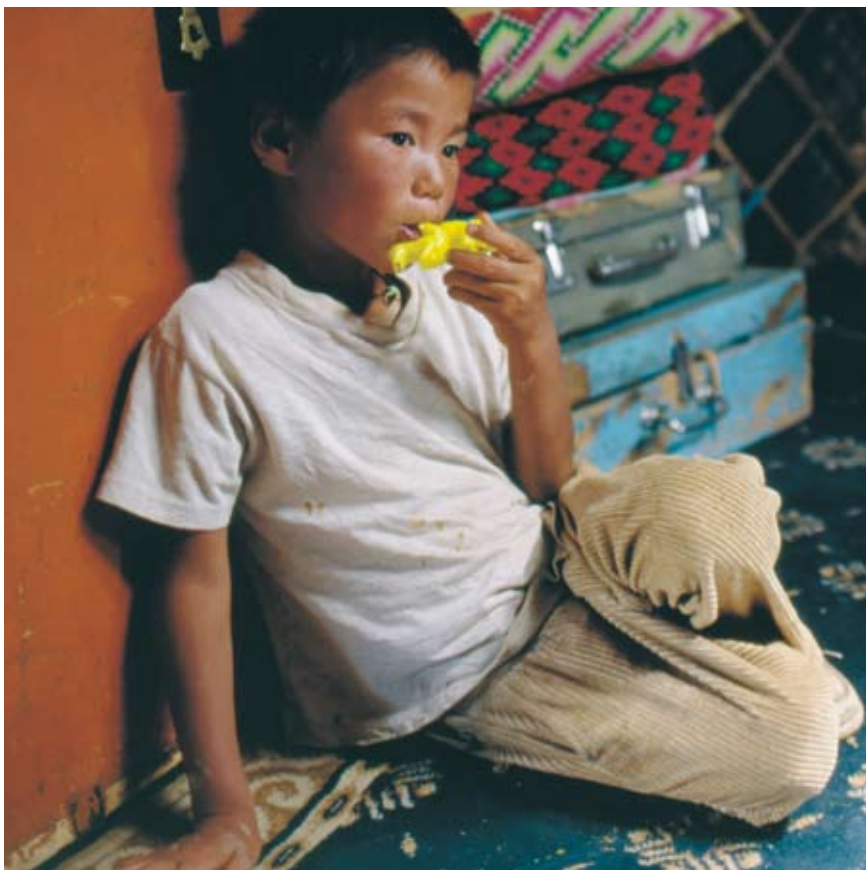
cigarette break, seven meters under the earth. The light of a matchstick had to suffice as a light source.

Future problems: "Ninjas" reveal a problem that endangers the nature of the steppe landscape and the culture of the Mongolian nomads: when one of the Earth's largest gold deposits was discovered in the Gobi region, but the state did not have the means and technology for the mining process, the mining rights were sold to foreign companies. This for-

eign exploitation triggered outrage in yurts right across the company. An unwritten law of the steppe says that everything that is offered by the barren earth belongs to those who live on and from it. It should be shared fairly. This sharing process is the ancient principle of survival and hence an important value in how the inhabitants see themselves and their existence. The nomads demand their share of the natural resources. Some are starting to dig for gold on their own initiative and are forcing unsafe shafts and tunnels into the earth. The number of accidents is increasing.

A further source of concern is also the high water consumption and the use of poisonous chemicals involved in both industrial and manual gold mining. The consequences are already evident. There is a shortage of drinking water, and the unique flora and fauna are suffering.

The photos taken by Sven Zellner in Mongolia were created with a *Zeiss Ikon* and the *Biogon 2.0/35 mm* and *Sonnar C 1.5/50 mm* lenses. Sven Zellner swears by the robust quality and good handling properties of the camera, which has never let him down – even after adventurous journeys through sandstorms or heavy downpours. He uses it primarily for spontaneous documentation. His images reflect not only impressive landscapes, but also – and with the same sensitivity – the reality concealed behind the more beautiful side of this attractive country.



Tired and exhausted: a nomad child after finishing its work in the yurt.

Manfred Schindler



A bright location: the rocks on the Kahn Bogt Mountain.

The person

Sven Zellner

Discovering countries and cultures and capturing their uniqueness for longer than a fleeting moment is the goal of photographer Sven Zellner, 30.

His travels have led him to almost all corners of the earth: Mongolia, Armenia, Israel, Latvia, Poland, Brazil, Tasmania. Australia, USA and Canada.

The former student of the University of Television and Film in Munich has received second place in the renowned BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award on two occasions (1995 and 2000). Zellner has published his photographs in numerous books and magazines. He also works as a documentary and movie cameraman.

Current projects of Sven Zellner include a new collection of photos on the subject of Mongolia, photographic work for a music video and a movie project as a cameraman in the USA.