

A Thirteenth Century Ger

By Heather Daveno, 1987, amended from the original.

Contact: thedaveno@gmail.com

AugustPhoenixHats.com

The ger, or yurt as it is commonly called, is one of two forms of portable housing that have been used by Central Asian nomads for centuries, dating back to the Scythians. The ger remains today as the primary form of portable housing on the Himalayan Plateau and the Central Asian Steppes.

My study of gers reflects their usage by the nomads of Tibet, Mongolia and China during the time of Marco Polo.



The ger of the 13th century nomad was a circular structure measuring 12'-15' in diameter. Its 5' tall walls were a latticework called a khana, made of willow branches that were lashed together with yak or horsehair twine. Willow poles were lashed to the top of the wall section and were brought together at the top to form a conical shaped roof. A single upright pole supported the peak of the roof.

I do not know at what point the 'crown' or roof ring was developed. In small gers this advancement eliminated the need for a center pole as the roof ring provided the anchor point that kept the roof poles in place by tension. As gers became larger, the roof ring was supported by two posts, which sometimes served the dual purpose of supporting cooking equipment.

Traditional gers are covered with several panels of felt made of either goat or camel hair. The gers of 13th century Tibet were structurally the same as their Mongolian counterparts and were covered with felts made from yak hair rather than goat. The number of layers of felt varied, depending on the season. Felts were soaked in either tallow or milk to repel moisture. The felts were secured to the framework of the ger with ropes, and in later periods, ornately woven bands.

The gers of wealthier nomads were much larger and were coated with lime or white clay mixed with powdered bone, again white being a symbol of status. Those who were not as wealthy painted decorations around the smoke hole of their natural brown-black tents. The doorway, which always faced south, was covered with a flap of felt, which was either painted or appliquéd with multi-colored designs of birds, animals, vines and trees.

When entering a Mongolian ger, etiquette demanded that you always faced inward, and exited by backing out. The wooden threshold supporting the door was always

stepped over, and never stepped on. This reportedly gave European visitors some travail, as they attempted to back out of a ger without breaching this rule of etiquette.



The floor of the 13th century ger was covered with felts, skins and rugs, which were laid over a bed of dried grasses. A hearth or cooking area occupied the center. An opening in the center of the roof, where the poles met, served as a smoke hole and a source of light.

The right side of the ger was reserved for women and the equipment they needed to keep their household running. Glazed earthenware water jugs, wooden pails of milk, baskets of cheeses and strings of dried curd hung on the khana. A cutting board, butter box, dishrags and dishes, knives, cook pots and spoons were also stored in this area. A ger belonging to a member of the Kirghiz tribe would contain chests for tea, sugar and salt. Household furnishings in a Tibetan ger consisted of a brazier, a yogurt pot, a strap loom, a tsampa mill, and bowls and plates for eating. A salt box was kept on a low table, which was surrounded by cushions.

A low folding table, carved with religious symbols occupied the north side of the ger, which served Buddhist Mongolians and Tibetans of the 13th century as an altar. A Tibetan altar would contain clay or painted images of Buddha, a butter lamp, a bowl of holy water, another of tsampa, and holy scriptures wrapped in a yellow scarf.

The altar marked the division between the women's side of the ger, and the men's side on the left. Goat horns were embedded into the khana, from which meat was hung to cure. Leather bottles filled with kumiss, a beverage made from fermented mare's milk, weapons and other masculine items also hung from the khana on the men's side of the ger.

On the left side, near the altar, was the master's bed. To the left of the bed was a small square chest, which held clothing. On the wall above the master's bed hung a felt idol called "the master's brother"; above the wife's bed on the right side of the altar hung "the mistress" brother. Between the brother idols was hung the guardian of the house idol. At the foot of each bed were idols, which faced the servants, in order to oversee their work. On each side of the door hung felt idols that watched over the women who milked the cows, and the men who milked the mares. It was not uncommon for nomads of this time period to utilize aspects and objects of multiple belief systems; thus Buddhist objects and shamanistic idols would be found side by side and were used on a daily basis.

Mongolian encampments, or 'ordos' of the 13th century were set up with families forming a circle open to the south, within a protective circle of wagons. If a khan, or tribal chieftain, had more than one wife, each wife had her own ger, and those who attended her often had their own gers and carts as well. The khatun, or chief wife of the khan, set up her ger at the west end of the camp; all other nomads of the ordos set up after the khatun according to their rank. Each ger was one stone's throw from the next, and one half a stone's throw from the nearest wall or wagon. Winter encampments in Mongolia were sometimes set up with groups of gers between two stone buildings.

In Tibet, winter encampments were surrounded by a dung wall, which I assume was used for fuel for their cook fires. Stockades and dung walls also acted as a windbreak, and gave some meager shelter to their livestock.

When it was time to move, it was the women's job to pack up the ger. The khana was collapsible, and a small ger could be dismantled in less than an hour. Each component of the ger had an appliquéd felt bag to pack it in, as did most of the household objects. The packing bags, food and blankets were strapped to the backs of packhorses and camels in Mongolia, or yaks in Tibet. Large equipment like pots and churns were strapped on to the top of these packed piles.



Chests, furniture and valuables were loaded into coffers. These coffers were square frameworks of split twigs with dome shaped roofs, covered with black felt and decorated with multi-colored designs. They were permanently secured to carts, and were never removed. They may have borne some resemblance to the gypsy carts of Europe or the conestoga wagons of the early Americas. One woman would drive up to thirty of these small carts, which were tied together single

file, and drawn by camels.

Wealthy khatuns often owned gers measuring up to thirty feet across. These structures were not dismantled, but were transported on wagons, which were drawn by as many as 22 oxen, arranged in two rows of eleven oxen each. William of Rubric noted in his journal that the axle for one of these carts was as big around as a ship's mast.

Marco Polo reported that the ger of Kuyuk Khan was made of white velvet, and was large enough for two thousand men to stand in. It was said to be supported by gold-plated columns, which were fastened to the beams with gold nails. The roof and walls were lined with brocades. Kuyuk Khan's ger had two doors, one facing south, and another facing west, the western door being reserved for the Khan himself. A wooden palisade that was painted with designs surrounded the ger.

Stories of a shelter belonging to Kublai Khan were even more fantastic. This day pavilion, located in the Deer Park at Chengdu, was said to be large enough to hold

10,000 men. It was supported by three timbers, which were carved and gilded, and supported with ropes of silk. Legend has it that it was covered on the outside with lion skins, and the inside was hung with pelts of ermine and sable.

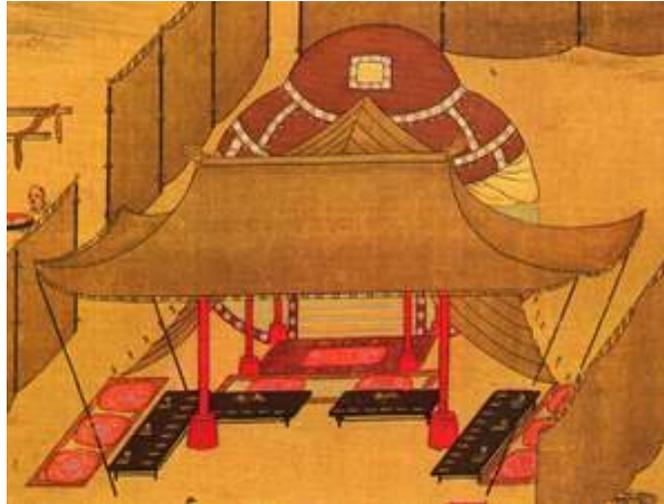


Photo Sources:

- Felt dolls: *The World of Man, Volume 7*, Creative World Publications, Inc, Chicago 1969
- Color ger plates: *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974

Text Sources:

- *Tibet* by Thubten Jigme Norbu and Rolin M. Thornbull, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1968
- *The Travels of Marco Polo* translated by R. E. Latham, Penquin Books, Harmondsworth, England, 1958
- *The Journal* by William of Rubric, edited by Samuel Purchas. Maclehuse, Glasgow, 1906
- *The Mongols* by E.D. Philips, Frederick A. Praeger Inc, New York, 1969