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Ger to Ger Goes for Gold in Mongolia

NATASHA ROBINSON

7 MAY 2010

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With two wins under its belt in the Ashoka's Changemakers 2009 [Geotourism Challenge: Power of Place – Sustaining the Future of Destinations](#), Ger to Ger – the self-styled 'market-driven social enterprise' based in Mongolia – is definitely doing something right. Founded in 2005 by Mr Zanjan Fromer, a native Alaskan with extensive experience in tourism and development, [Ger to Ger](#) has in a few short years managed to generate the kind of buzz for which many similar enterprises earnestly and sometimes vainly strive.



At a naadam (traditional festival) in Terelj National Park, Mongolia, travellers try their hand at archery and can even compete with locals. Local men shoot at targets 75 meters away and women from 65 meters, although, for visitors, distances can be set according to ability.

Building a Sustainable Future for Mongolia's Rural Populations

Ger to Ger aims to give travellers the ultimate, authentic [Mongolian experience](#) through homestays, trekking and horseback expeditions along nomadic trails, all involving local people in rural areas, often far from the tourist crowd. Rural nomadic herders are encouraged to become 'custodians of nomadic culture and heritage' and pass on their knowledge and experience to tourists. In turn, it is hoped the travellers, now [savvy](#) to the benefits of local and responsible travel, will be more likely to veer off the beaten path and spread word of their positive experiences to others. Of course, their valuable tourist dollars provide vital supplementary income for nomadic herders, 65% of whom live at or below the poverty line, struggling to make ends meet in increasingly harsh economic and environmental conditions, especially the very harsh most recent (2010) *zud* (winter storm).

Ger to Ger pursues an innovative two-pronged approach to tourism that immediately sets it apart. The website states that the organisation "systematically enables rural communities to responsibly and sustainably tap the tourism industry to generate sustainable livelihoods through vocational training (Foundation) and market linkage development (Agency)." In other words, the [Ger to Ger Foundation](#) teaches people in rural communities how to make a living from tourism and the [Ger to Ger Agency](#) gives them the opportunity to put this new knowledge into practice and develop sustainable business ventures.

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Visitors and locals watch Mongolian-style wrestling during a naadam (traditional Mongolian festival). The sport is somewhat similar to Greco-Roman wrestling: the first man to touch the ground with anything but his feet loses, there are no weight classes and no time limits. The tradition two-piece costume consists of a tight-fitting vest (zodog) and shorts (shuudag).

It is this successful marriage of socio-economic development and commerce that gave them the edge over 610 other worthy entries from 80 other countries and saw them get shortlisted as a finalist in the 2009 Geotourism Challenge and then take top honours in the other two associated prizes – the inaugural [Urban Adventures Prize](#) and the [Tourdust Scholarship](#).

The Ger to Ger Story

Zanjan Fromer first became acquainted with Mongolia during his travels that started over 16 years ago. He was immediately taken with the warmth and openness of the country's people, to which, as an Alaskan Indian, he felt an immediate connection.

"I was amazed by the people of Mongolia... [they're] genuine, loving, happy," said Fromer. "When I travelled out to the countryside, it was the first time I actually saw a lot of connection between Mongolians and Indians and how similar they look, like my own relatives. For the first time, even though in Mongolia I'm considered to be part of the minority, when I looked at other people that looked like my family, my relatives, I felt part of the majority. It was homely for me."



A visitor and guide cross the Tuul River in Terelj National Park, Mongolia, while moving along a nomadic travel route. Ger to Ger trips move by horse, ox cart, camel and foot, so that you can really sense the land, the people and the traditions.

There were other parallels between his adopted home and his native country: both Mongolia and Alaska are constrained by geography and offer their inhabitants limited scope for making a living. "I was born and raised in Alaska, where you either work for the government or you work in tourism, you don't have a lot of choice – the private sector is very small," commented Fromer. "We basically grew up on tourism and we see how tourism is being developed and there are a lot of lessons learned in Alaska, such as how to involve industry and also the locals."

With this motivation, Ger to Ger took shape as a result of Fromer's previous experiences in socio-economic development projects in Mongolia, which brought him into rural areas and introduced him to the nomadic peoples and their daily struggles to survive. He then used his experience of tourism initiatives in Alaska and Mongolia, as well as his knowledge of the local culture, land and people to develop something truly customised and unique Mongolian experience, one that really benefits rural nomadic communities and strengthens the symbiotic relationship between the nomads and villages.

Attracting the attention of donors was difficult at first, but as funding did eventually start rolling in, Ger to Ger succeeded in establishing self-sustaining and even profitable programs. That was when the two distinct wings of the enterprise – the Agency and the Foundation – emerged.





On a Ger to Ger cultural homestay program in Mongolia, visitors live and learn with rural communities and nomadic families. Here, inside a typical ger, a visitor learns how to sew with a nomadic woman in Terelj National Park. Other common activities include nomadic naadam (festivities), training Kazakh eagles, learning horse-head fiddle and more.

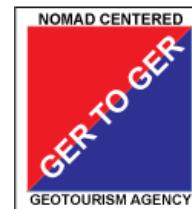
"It was decided that we would need a social enterprise – the business aspect, the Agency – and the Foundation, which would carry out the socio-economic work in rural areas," explained Fromer. This makes it very transparent for the donor agencies and it becomes clear which funding goes where. What happened before we got into a paradox when the project became too successful... The donor agencies would say 'No, you're too successful, we're not going to continue funding you' and the private sector wasn't initially interested in investing as we were a non-profit project at the time. We were really in a difficult situation. There was no more funding coming in and I had to sacrifice over a year's salary to ensure that the national staff earned a living and the program continued in hopes it could reach it sustainability."

This is the dedication and drive that led Fromer and his team – Ms Bayarsuren Yalalt, the General Agency Manager, and Mr Raja Govindaraju, the General Foundation Manager – to enter Ger to Ger in the 2009 Geotourism Challenge, as the organisation is always keen to pursue opportunities that strike a chord with the motivations underscoring what drives Ger to Ger.

"When I saw the Geotourism Challenge and what it stands for, its goals and its mission, it really appealed to me, as, holistically speaking, it's basically what we've been doing here at Ger to Ger," said Fromer. "We're designing activities right now that are more in line with what [Urban Adventures](#) is aiming for. Our goal is to involve our communities in activities that centre on Urban Adventures' criteria."

The Road Ahead

The future sees no slowdown in Ger to Ger's efforts. The US\$2000 purse awarded as part of the Urban Adventures Prize has already been earmarked for the development of marketing and public relations materials and/or rural socio-economic development works. Other plans include the development of Community-Based Information and Ticketing Centres (CITC) throughout the country, which will provide online training and resources (thus eliminating the long-term expense of trainers repeatedly having to go to remote rural locations), as well as community asset mapping and market linkage development. It is hoped that these will become financially self-sustaining, as has been the case with a number of the Ger to Ger nomadic travel routes.



In summing up, Fromer describes the essence of Ger to Ger as "Passionate people that love the country and culture, who have a general interest in travel, socio-economic development and are making a commitment to developing the industry."

So far, this has proven to be a winning recipe for success!

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