

Encyclopedic Entry

yurt

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A **yurt** is a moveable, circular **dwelling** made of a **lattice** of flexible wood and covered in **felt**. They are a sturdy, **reliable** type of tent. Yurts have been the **primary** style of homes in Central Asia, particularly Mongolia, for thousands of years.

Yurts take between 30 minutes and 3 hours to set up or take down, and usually house between five and 15 people. They are usually a little over 2 meters (6 feet) high, with a slightly **domed** top rising another 2 feet. A wood-burning iron **stove** sits in the middle of a traditional yurt, with a long **chimney** reaching up past the **roof**.

The lattice of a yurt is divided into sections, called **khana**. Each khana is a collapsible series of crisscrossed wooden poles. The poles are made of light wood, such as willow, **birch**, or **poplar**. Khana are attached to each other with leather ties.

The roof of a yurt is the most complex part of the structure. The central part of the roof is called the **crown**. The crown is a ring to which roof poles are attached. The crown is partially open, so air can **circulate** and a chimney can **penetrate**. The crown's pattern of wood, reeds, or fabric can be handed down for generations. The khana and felt may be replaced, but the crown may last for years. The felt that covers the yurt is usually made from **wool** from **sheep**, **goats**, or **yaks**.

There are two main types of yurts, gers and **bentwood yurts**. The only difference is their roof. A **ger** is the older, traditional style of yurt. In fact, "yurt" is a Russian word for what the Mongolian people call ger. The roof of a ger is made of straight poles attached to the circular crown. Gers have a very gently sloping roof.

Bentwood yurts are a later development. Makers of bentwood yurts use **steam** to bend the roof poles before attaching them to the crown. Bentwood yurts have a steep roof and a taller, domed shape.

Modern yurts are popular in North America and Europe. Some consumers choose to use native **hardwoods**, such as **ash** or **chestnut**, for their yurts. More consumers use **high-tech** material, such as **aircraft cables**, for a more secure construction. Unlike traditional yurts, these modern yurts are meant to be relatively permanent.

Yurt History

Yurts have existed for thousands of years in Central Asia, in virtually the same form as they exist today. They are ideal dwellings for the **nomadic** cultures of the Central Asian **steppe**. A steppe is dry, flat **grassland** with no **trees** and a cooler climate than other types of grasslands, such as **savannas** and **prairies**.

The steppe is a very windy **biome** because no trees, **shrubs**, or **tall grasses** serve as windbreaks. The circular shape of yurts makes them able to resist winds from any direction. Only the door of the yurt is **vulnerable**, and yurt doors are very strong and modern. They're often made of a wooden frame, and sometimes the door itself is made of wood, as opposed to a flap opening in the felt. This strengthens the door, and the yurt, against the strong winds of the steppe. The sloping, aerodynamic shape of the roof also means winds are unlikely to tear off **roof beams**.

Mongolian nomads historically moved three to four times a year. Not only did gers make this easy by being so fast to set up, they were also very light. Large family gers could be entirely **dismantled** in an hour and hauled on two or three **pack animals**, such as **horses**, **camels**, or **yaks**. Farther west, in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan,

nomads used [donkeys](#) as pack animals for gers.

Because the steppe has no trees, nomads had to trade with residents of river [valleys](#) for wood. [Merchants](#) would sell ger construction materials in different forms. For the least amount of money, they would sell logs of willow or birch. For a medium price, consumers could buy pre-cut poles. For the highest price, they could buy complete khana.

The thick felt, or non-woven wool, used to cover the ger came from the nomads own animals. Central Asian nomads were [herders](#). They had sheep, goats, and [yak](#). [Cashmere](#), for instance, one of the softest, lightest wools, comes from Mongolian goats.

Yurts have been well-[documented](#) through history. The earliest evidence of yurt dwellings is found in [Bronze Age](#) rock [etchings](#) in [Siberia](#). The Greek historian [Herodotus](#) wrote about yurts used by the [Scythian](#) people around 440 BCE. Scythians were nomadic people from the land surrounding the Black and Caspian Seas. Italian explorer [Marco Polo](#) detailed the gers used by Mongols in the time he lived with them, between 1274 and 1291.

Mongolian leader [Genghis Khan](#) commanded his entire [empire](#) from a large ger. That empire stretched throughout all of Central Asia, from the Korean Peninsula in the east; through China, Tibet, and Iran in the southwest; and through Georgia and Russia in the north. Genghis Khans ger was mounted on a huge, wheeled cart pulled by 22 oxen. The ger was 9 meters (30 feet) in diameter and guarded at all times by Mongolian soldiers and [cavalry](#).

As the [Mongol Empire](#) expanded, it eventually reached eastern Europe. The steppe of what is now Turkey, Hungary and Romania was conquered by the [successors](#) of Genghis Khan. As the Mongols expanded their empire, they brought their yurt culture with them. Yurts were very common in Turkey until the 1960s and 1970s, and they are still found in rural areas of Hungary.

Yurts Today

Yurts are still most often associated with the country of Mongolia. This makes sense, as more than three-quarters of the [population](#) of Mongolia live in gers today.

Even large cities, like the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbataar, have "yurt quarters." Ulaanbataars [yurt quarter](#) has about 40 percent of the citys population. Yurt quarters have more dwellings than just gers, although the lifestyle is shared. The yurt quarter lifestyle is much more [communal](#) than traditional city life. Large families share dwelling spaces and meals. Gers or other dwellings in yurt quarters are rarely connected to the citys water supplies, so [saunas](#), spas, and [bathhouses](#) are shared by the community.

Mongolias yurt quarters are becoming more controversial because they contribute to [air pollution](#). The traditional iron stoves that sit in the middle of gers release large amounts of [smoke](#) into the air.

Mongolia isnt the only country for which yurts are important. Nations throughout the Central Asia steppe regard the yurt as a [cultural symbol](#). A region in northern China is called Inner Mongolia. (The country of Mongolia itself is Outer Mongolia.) Mongolians and Chinese who live there use gers. The Siberian nomads of Russia, the Tuva, also use gers as they follow the [reindeer](#) herd.

As you travel farther west in Central Asia, you are less likely to find gers and more likely to find bentwood yurts. Nomads in the dry steppes of Iran and Iraq use bentwood yurts.

The yurt has also become a unifying symbol of "[the Stans](#)": Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The flag of Kyrgyzstan features the pattern of a yurt crown in the center of its design. The coat of arms of Kazakhstan is also built around a knotted yurt crown.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
aerodynamics	noun	the study of how air moves.

aircraft cable	<i>noun</i>	type of very strong wire rope.
air pollution	<i>noun</i>	harmful chemicals in the atmosphere.
ash	<i>noun</i>	type of hardwood tree.
bathhouse	<i>noun</i>	facility often featuring hot springs, spas, medicinal treatments, or swimming pools.
bentwood yurt	<i>noun</i>	Central Asian dome-shaped tent dwelling made of bent wooden poles.
biome	<i>noun</i>	area of the planet which can be classified according to the plant and animal life in it.
birch	<i>noun</i>	type of lightweight hardwood tree.
Bronze Age	<i>noun</i>	time period between the Stone Age and the Iron Age. The Bronze Age lasted between 3000 BCE and 500 BCE.
camel	<i>noun</i>	type of large pack animal with one or two humps on its back.
cashmere	<i>noun</i>	type of fine, soft material made from wool of the cashmere goat.
cavalry	<i>noun</i>	military unit that serves on horseback.
chestnut	<i>noun</i>	type of hardwood tree with an often edible nut.
chimney	<i>noun</i>	narrow structure that transports smoke or other airborne material from an indoor structure to the air outside.
circulate	<i>verb</i>	to move around, often in a pattern.
cloth	<i>noun</i>	fabric made by weaving or otherwise manipulating material such as cotton, wool, or other fiber.
communal	<i>adjective</i>	shared.
cone	<i>noun</i>	shape that is circular at its base and narrows to a point, often looking triangular.
cotton	<i>noun</i>	cloth made from fibers of the cotton plant.
crown	<i>noun</i>	partly open central part of the roof of a yurt.
cultural symbol	<i>noun</i>	structure that represents the traditional beliefs, behavior, and identity of a group of people.
dismantle	<i>verb</i>	to take apart.
document	<i>verb</i>	to keep track of.
dome	<i>noun</i>	shape that is half of a sphere.
donkey	<i>noun</i>	type of domesticated mammal used as a pack animal. Also called an ass.
dwelling	<i>noun</i>	a place to live.
empire	<i>noun</i>	group of nations, territories or other groups of people controlled by a single, more powerful authority.
etching	<i>noun</i>	design produced by cutting into, but not through, a surface, such as rock, metal, or glass.
felt	<i>noun</i>	type of fabric made by applying moisture, heat, and pressure to wool.
Genghis Khan	<i>noun</i>	(1162-1227) founder of the Mongol empire.
ger	<i>noun</i>	Mongolian circular tent dwelling.

goat	<i>noun</i>	hoofed mammal domesticated for its milk, coat, and flesh.
grassland	<i>noun</i>	ecosystem with large, flat areas of grasses.
hardwood	<i>noun</i>	the strong, dense wood, of flowering trees.
herder	<i>noun</i>	person who controls and takes responsibility for a group of animals such as sheep, cattle, or horses.
Herodotus	<i>noun</i>	(about 484 BCE to 425 BCE) Greek historian.
hide	<i>noun</i>	leather skin of an animal.
high-tech	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with advanced technology.
horse	<i>noun</i>	type of domesticated mammal used for riding and hauling.
khana	<i>noun</i>	section of the lattice wall of a yurt.
lattice	<i>noun</i>	strips of wood or other material assembled in a crisscross pattern.
Marco Polo	<i>noun</i>	(1254-1324) Italian explorer.
merchant	<i>noun</i>	person who sells goods and services.
Mongol Empire	<i>noun</i>	(1206-1368) area of Asia and Europe conquered and ruled by Mongolian leaders. Largest contiguous land empire in history.
nomad	<i>noun</i>	person who moves from place to place, without a fixed home.
pack animal	<i>noun</i>	domesticated animal used by humans for transporting goods.
penetrate	<i>verb</i>	to push through.
poplar	<i>noun</i>	type of lightweight hardwood tree.
population	<i>noun</i>	total number of people or organisms in a particular area.
prairie	<i>noun</i>	large grassland; usually associated with the Mississippi River Valley in the United States.
primary	<i>adjective</i>	first or most important.
reindeer	<i>noun</i>	type of large arctic deer. Also called caribou.
reliable	<i>adjective</i>	dependable or consistent.
roof	<i>noun</i>	the top of a building.
roof beam	<i>noun</i>	strong, straight piece of wood or metal used as a main support for the top of a building.
sauna	<i>noun</i>	room in which steam causes visitors to sweat.
savanna	<i>noun</i>	type of tropical grassland with scattered trees.
Scythia	<i>noun</i>	prehistoric land stretching from the eastern Black Sea to what is now Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.
sheep	<i>noun</i>	type of mammal with thick, strong wool used for cloth.
shrub	<i>noun</i>	type of plant, smaller than a tree but having woody branches.
Siberia	<i>noun</i>	region of land stretching across Russia from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.
slope	<i>noun</i>	slant, either upward or downward, from a straight or flat path.

smoke	<i>noun</i>	gases given off by a burning substance.
spa	<i>noun</i>	facility, usually with mineral hot springs, offering health benefits.
steam	<i>noun</i>	water vapor.
steppe	<i>noun</i>	dry, flat grassland with no trees and a cool climate.
stove	<i>noun</i>	device that supplies heat for warmth, cooking, or other purposes.
successor	<i>noun</i>	person who comes next.
tall grass	<i>noun</i>	type of grass that stands an average of 1.5 meters (5 feet) tall, such as switchgrass.
the Stans	<i>noun</i>	collective term for the Central Asian countries of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.
tipi	<i>noun</i>	type of conical tent dwelling used by Native Americans of the Great Plains.
tree	<i>noun</i>	type of large plant with a thick trunk and branches.
Tuvans	<i>noun</i>	people native to the region surrounding northern Mongolia, including parts of Russia and China.
valley	<i>noun</i>	depression in the Earth between hills.
vulnerable	<i>adjective</i>	capable of being hurt.
wigwam	<i>noun</i>	Native American hut made of a rounded frame covered with mats, hides, or other material. Also called a wickiup.
wool	<i>noun</i>	thick, soft hair of some animals, such as sheep.
yak	<i>noun</i>	Central Asian ox.
yurt	<i>noun</i>	portable circular dwelling made of a criss-crossed wooden frame covered in felt and popular in Central Asia.
yurt quarter	<i>noun</i>	section of an urban area made up largely of yurt dwellings.

For Further Exploration

Websites

- University of Washington: Yurt Building for Everyone



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