

# Changes in Central Asian Nomadic Life

By **JAMESON HARTIN** lives and works in Central Asia

Few things are as recognizable in Central Asia as the high summer pastures or meadows, areas of green grass often surrounded by mountains and dotted with yurts. Nomads regularly ascend the roads leading to the highlands each May, bringing their herds to cooler weather for grazing during the summer months. This has been their practice for generations, and while familial lands have stayed the same, the routine has changed a bit.

Decades ago, families would move four times a year, leaving the village at the beginning of summer for a slightly higher and cooler area. Then, in July or August, they would move again to a much higher altitude for the hottest part of the year. Once the weather began to cool, they would travel back down, making the same stops in reverse.

Today, they only move twice—once in May from the village up to their family's pasture, and a second time at the end of summer from the pasture back to their home village. The practice of moving fewer times came about slowly over the seven decades the Soviets occupied Central Asia.

Early on during occupation, the number of nomadic families was such that multiple summer pastures were needed to feed all the animals. Once a pasture's grass was eaten through, the nomads and herds moved on, and by the time they came back, the pasture had regrown. By the time Central Asian republics had declared their independence, the number of nomadic families, and therefore herds, had decreased significantly.

Differing from their ancestors, contemporary Central Asian nomads must balance their daily lives with tourism—from foreign and local tourists alike. As more and more nationals work and live in the cities, they yearn for the cooler temps and clean air of the high

meadows from their youth, so during summer, they regularly travel out for rest. Foreign tourists also are attracted to the scenery and atmosphere, in addition to seeing a more traditional nomadic way of life that includes eating and possibly sleeping in a yurt.

Earning a living solely from herding is also more difficult today, so for some nomads, increased tourism has offered a promising side business. Families are routinely raising more yurts or even building small chalets to house tourists in a “posh” option. Some entrepreneurs have developed larger plots in the high meadows with resorts featuring pools and saunas. To keep up with the trends, a few nomadic families have begun installing portable camping showers, solar-powered lights, or Wi-Fi to cater to tourists.

While dabbling in the tourist market has been enough income for some nomads, other families send the husband to a nearby city for part of each week to work a second job. The wife and children stay in the meadow, feeding tourists, making fermented horse milk, and taking care of the animals.

As nomadic families in Central Asia change with the times, something that hasn't changed is their religion. Islam remains the dominant faith, and while Christ is known in some areas, there are far more where His name is not yet known. Large areas of Central Asia—particularly where the nomadic lifestyle persists—remain unreachable, with no churches for hundreds of kilometers. In many of these regions, only one or two believers may be known, or rumors of secret believers, scared of persecution, are shared in church circles.

Continue to pray for the nomads of Central Asia, that God would advance His name throughout the mountains and valleys. 