

Trip Review



Nomadic Mongolia

Travel in the steppes of Chinggis Khaan

By Will Weber, JOURNEYS Director

Eight JOURNEYS travelers joined me on a trip to Mongolia specially timed for the country's great national festival, Nadaam. Using Ulan Bataar as a hub, we flew Air Mongolia to Lake Hovsgol National Park near the Russian border and to the Gobi Desert in the far south. We also visited Hustain National Park and Karakoram. Mongolia still basks in the glory of Chinggis Khaan (preferred local spelling of Ghengis Khan) who united Asia during the 13th century in the largest empire the world has ever known. While the empire is history, the nomadic traditions of the Mongolia people prevail over a vast land of taiga, steppe and desert which looks now much as it looked to the Mongol conquerors.

Delightful Surprises in Ulan Bataar

Our small group entered the country on a flight into Ulan Bataar, the capital and largest city, where 1 million of the nation's 2.5 million people live. While unmistakable vestiges of Mongolia's former alliance with the Soviet Union remain in the form of solemn statuary and architecture, there is at the same time a growth and new vibrancy in daily life. Dressed in colorful modern clothes, the people of Ulan Bataar are driving Japanese and Korean SUVs, uncertain about their future but energetic and smiling nonetheless. We visited the Cultural Museum and the Museum of Natural History for insight into the context for our experience.



In a drab auditorium with an unpretentious set, we witnessed a delightful performance of the National Cultural Ensemble. It was an impressive virtuosity on horse head fiddles, zithers and Mongolian trumpet horns, unbelievable vocal acrobatics of "throat singers" who appear to be as still as stone, and stunning demonstrations by physical contortionists. These are the favorite performing arts of the Mongolian people, and our Ulan Bataar introduction was a harbinger of wonderful entertainment treats throughout our trip. Mongolian music CD's became one of the most popular trip souvenirs.

Where We Slept & How We Traveled

We had only a small taste of rough roads, and the weather was blessedly unseasonably cool. Our traditional ger accommodations were more comfortable than expected. We slept 2-3 persons to each felt-walled ger.



There was always a stove, electric light and an outlet to plug in battery rechargers (220v). The roof had an adjustable opening for ventilation or light. We had comfortable beds, stools, night tables and lines for hanging clothes. Indeed, most of the people of Mongolia live their entire lives in gers nearly identical in size and design to the ones we slept in. Some ger camps offered attached bath and toilet, other ger camps offered very well maintained and clean shower and toilet buildings. Living in gers was a great part of the trip's fun.

Our Guide, "Jack"

We were charmed by friendly locals everywhere, but our number one Mongolian was "Jack" Tugsjargal, our extraordinarily capable guide. He knew we enjoyed our introductory cultural show so he arranged private performances of musicians at two of our ger camps. We visited five Mongolian families in their ger homes in different environments in the taiga, steppe and Gobi Desert. With Jack as interpreter we conversed with families about their lives. Nomadic living seems to be a more sustainable and have less environmental impact than many lifestyles. While the horse is the basic form of transportation, some of the nomads now own motorcycles or even small pickup trucks to help manage their herds which may range from hundreds to thousands of goats, sheep, horses, cattle, yak and camels, depending on the location. Overall population density is low. We drove for many miles across unfenced steppe meadows stretching a surprising green to the distant horizon. In the motion-induced reverie I imagined ten thousand mongol warriors galloping across the steppe toward China, Russia or Europe. Today's landscape is probably much the same as 800 years ago when the warrior Tamuchin assumed the named Chinggis Khan and was granted the title of Emperor.



The Gobi Desert

Very few people live in the Gobi Desert where it almost never rains and temperatures may reach 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Ironically, during our trip at the height of the hot and dry season, we had scattered showers and cool temperatures. Our exploration was concentrated at the Flaming Cliffs dinosaur fossil site and the Yol Valley of Guran Saikhan National Park.



Flaming Cliffs is the most famous dinosaur fossil site in Asia. Surprisingly, there is no restriction on poking around in the sandstone sediments in search of your own dinosaur fossil, though no easy pickings seem to remain. We found an oblong stone we imagined might be an egg, a coprolite (fossilized feces) and a few stones with tiny formations that the most imaginative among us made into dinosaur parts. Research in nearby areas indicate many discoveries are yet to be made in the Gobi. (Note that you are not allowed to take any fossils out of Mongolia without special permits.) In the Yol Valley, Jack demonstrated yet another of his myriad

talents. He's a trained hunting guide and he was able to spot numerous ibex which would have eluded our own scans. Ibex are goat-like mammals with massive ridged horns that curl back in a semi-circle approximately 5 feet in diameter. We also saw white-tailed gazelle, marmots and smaller mammals, and numerous raptors, including the fabled lammergeir or bearded vulture, saker falcon, cinnereous vulture, upland buzzard and golden eagle. One path led deep into a narrow canyon to a permanent ice field, quite an anomalous feature to find mid-summer in the Gobi Desert.

Lake Hovsgol & Hustain National Park

Lake Hovsgol was a dramatic contrast to the Gobi. Hovsgol is like a little sister to the famous Lake Baikal in Siberia, about 200 miles away. Baikal is much larger and has more endemic species, but Lake Hovsgol (2,760 sq. km.) is upstream from Baikal and the water is clearer and the immediate watershed much less developed. The taiga forest of larch trees covers much of the park. Mountain peaks rise above 7,000' were still snow clad in July. Jack caught some fish, and some of us went horseback riding, boating or hiking. I enjoyed birding, finding nesting populations of yellow and citrine wagtails and a variety of larks and buntings actively singing and displaying. Our fourteen days in Mongolia included one more National Park, Hustain, in the steppe lands about two hours from Ulan Bataar. The Przewalski's horse was re-introduced here in the 1990's and is now thriving in small herds. This species lives wild only here and in a couple of other places in Mongolia. Hustain is a good park for hiking, and our ger camp offered unlimited opportunities for climbing to hilltops for views of the sunset, moonrise and an approaching electrical storm.



Naadam!

The next morning we moved on to Bayangobi for the Naadam (Nah-DAHM) Festivities. Here, at the regional level, the wrestling, horse races and other pageantry are much more readily and closely observable than at the massive events in Ulan Bataar. We all felt rewarded by our decision not to celebrate the national day in the capital. To our surprise the horse riders are all children ages 7-12. Most are boys, but we cheered a few girls, too. The race is 15-20 kilometers long over a straight but rolling, grassy course. Riders check in at the finish line and trot in a loose group to the starting line which is defined spontaneously when a referee signals the riders to turn around and race. I was amazed to see how fast and sustained the children raced, some of them bare back. There were great cheers and honors for the winners at the finish line.



Mongolian wrestling is the national sport. Somewhat more like sumo than olympic wrestling, the match begins with a graceful dance and thigh slapping. Then two wrestlers, under the watch of two referees, try to gain tactical advantage and leverage to throw the opponent so that his knees or elbows touch the ground. Unlike sumo which takes place in a small ring, Mongolian wrestlers, in this land of nomads, are unbounded, except by the size of the field or stadium. There were also cowboy-type, horseback riding skill contests, a shamanistic dance, and student drill team performances. We loved it. I took as many pictures in this single day as I took in the rest of the trip.



Our final destination, Karakoram, was the ancient capital founded by Chinggis's son, Ogedei Khan. Sacked consecutively by the Chinese and Stalinists, little remains of the legendary city, but with the renewal and magnification of the great era of the Khaans, there is now talk of again moving the national capital here sometime in the next decade. A fragment of the contents of the great Buddhist Monastery of Erenezuu have been preserved in a few buildings spared by the Communists during the religious purges and massacres of the 1930's. The beautiful tankhas, Buddhist statues and altars seem to be cherished by many Mongolians who see a value in restoring Buddhist principles to their lives and governance. We saw few monks in Mongolia in the course of our trip, although those we did see were very active, performing rituals for local people who called upon their services.

Future JOURNEYS In Mongolia

Based on the success of this expedition, we plan to offer more group trips in the future. Our local operator can also easily make private arrangements to fit individual dates. While we traveled much of the time in a rugged 20 passenger bus, the basic vehicle for private trips and very small groups in the more remote areas is the 4x4 Land Cruiser or the Russian equivalent of a 4X4 mini-van. By flying to Gobi and Hovsgol, we saved about three days of rough road driving. If you have the time, temperament and skeletal integrity, driving will show you more, a little more cheaply. Plane travel, however, is safe and comfortable and may soon permit connections between remote areas without returning to Ulan Bataar. The best weather in Mongolia is from mid-May to mid-October, and International access is via Tokyo, Seoul or Beijing.



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