Guide to Mongolia 2020
Ulaanbaatar, meaning ‘red hero’ is the capital and largest city in Mongolia. Home to ¾ of the entire population. It is a city of massive extremes, from the towering cultural mountain of ‘Bogd Khan’ to central ‘Sukhbaatar square’; from the sprawling district of felt Gers to the modern skyscraper highrises of Zaisan.

Mongolia has an ethnicity that is dominated by Khalki Mongolians and the area around Ulaanbaatar in central Mongolia is where you will find the vast majority of traditional nomadic herders practicing a lifestyle that has changed very little over the years. If your wish is to see the beautiful grassland steppe in its true form and experience authentic nomadic culture that is still easily accessible, then a trip to Ulaanbaatar and its surrounding Aimags is a must for you!

Sights

City Sightseeing

If travelling around central Mongolia, you absolutely must spend at least a day in Ulaanbaatar. The key attractions include Bogd Khaan mountain, a mountain that is an ever present view from Ulaanbaatar city. The mountain possesses cultural significance to the Mongolians whom have adorned it with a chalk portrait
of their founding hero Chinghis Khaan (Genghis Khaan). Whilst the mountain is a strictly protected area it is possible to visit a monastery close to the summit of the mountain called ‘Manzushir’. Manzushir is located on the southern side of the mountain and must be approached from the town of Zuunmod, approximately 40 minutes by car from Ulaanbaatar. The monastery was largely destroyed during the early parts of the 20th century, however some temple houses remain and the view from the summit of the mountain is stunning.

At the foot of the mountain, on its northern slope facing Ulaanbaatar lies the Zaisan memorial. The zaisan memorial was built to commemorate allied Mongolian and Soviet soldiers that died during world war two. To reach the memorial one must climb three-hundred steps in order to reach the monument and the mural which depicts a series of scenes of friendship and accolade between the soviet state and Mongolian people. The monument is also a great place to get a view of the entire city!

Time to get a bit of culture in? Then let’s head over to Gandan monastery. Gandan is Mongolia’s largest functioning Buddhist monastery with a series of temples housing monks and locals performing their daily rituals. The main attraction of the temple however is the twenty-six-meter-high gilded statue of Migjid Janraisig.

Last but not least a true cultural highlight of the city has to be a performance at the National Theatre House. As far as cultural performances go, this has to be one of the world’s best. During this two hour performance you will be introduced to the intangible cultural heritage of Mongolian throat singing, long song, Murin Khur playing, Mongolian Buddhism and shamanism; all performed through song and dance. Tickets are easily purchased at the ticket booth outside of the theatre house and are at the time of writing 30,000 tugruks per person.
Terelj National Park

Located approximately one and a half hours drive from Ulaanbaatar city you will find Terelj national park. Terelj is a spectacular area of massive rock formations set between rolling valleys and large groves of trees and wildflowers. If you are staying for any period of time in central Mongolia then a visit to Terelj is a must, if only for the views. The popular sights in this area include two rock formations named after what they resemble; ‘turtle rock’ and ‘the old man reading a book’.

Kharkorum

Kharkorum is the ancient capital of the Mongol empire. Founded in 1220 Karakorum in its heyday was a hotbed for culture and trade. Legend tells that the courtyard of the city palace housed a tree made entirely of silver. Alas the palace no longer exists and nor does the city, however one can visit the unearthed remains of the ancient capital as well as visit the still functioning Erdenezuu monastery, the oldest Buddhist monastery in Mongolia.

Khustai National Park

Nature enthusiasts are spoilt for choice in Mongolia, but amongst the most interesting spot has to be the jewel of Khustai national park the ‘Takhi’ or ‘Przewalski’s horse’, this is the last remaining wild breed of horse alive in the world. After having gone close to extinction after the second world war the takhi were closely monitored and then protected. The park also holds a number of other animal species including gazelle, deer, boar, wolves and lynx.
Babaygobi semi desert

Literally a mini-desert set in the grassland steppe of Mongolia. This mini desert is 80km long but only 5km wide. This is the perfect place to come if you simply want a taste of the Gobi without affording the time to travel there. Amongst the myriad of photo opportunities, travelers are sure of having the opportunity to camel ride up these soft, steep dunes.

Arkhangai

This beautiful Mongolian province borders the Khangai mountains to the north with stunning mountain and valley scenery. When driving through Arkhangai province you are sure to be blown away by the vastness of the countryside and the remoteness of the occasional small settlement. Whilst technically part of Northern Mongolia, Arkhangai province is easily accessible on a week-long tour from Ulaanbaatar.

Spending time at White lake is highly recommended; this is a lake frequented by migratory birds and neighbored by a now extinct volcano, the khorgo volcano, of which you can hike to its summit.

National Festivals

Tsagaan sar

One of the largest festivals in the Mongolian calendar is Tsagaan Sar or ‘Lunar new year’. The Mongolian lunar new year is celebrated according to the lunisolar calendar, the celebration of which has ancient shamanistic influences. Modern day Mongolians celebrate by inviting family members to their home for a feast. Typically, older family members will travel to the home of younger
family members. Upon arrival the younger families will adorn the elder visitor with a ‘khadag’, a blue silk cloth that is a high act of respect. In the morning of the new year all family members are required to rise before sunlight and perform rituals determined by their birth year; an example of which would be to walk east thirty paces and touch the nearest item made of iron. Such a ritual is set by the Buddhist and shamanistic background of Mongolian culture.

Naadam

Naadam is the most widely watched festival in Mongolia, believed to have existed for at least one thousand years. It was originally used as a kind of ‘after party’ following weddings or spiritual gatherings and later served as a way to train soldiers for battle. In present day Mongolia it is annually held from July 11th to 13th to celebrate the 1921 revolution when Mongolia declared itself independent from China. The three central games of Naadam include wrestling, horse riding and archery. Any lucky visitors to the National sports stadium during Naadam will be treated to military parades, cultural performances and the buzz of supporters egging on their regional hero.

Must Do’s

Overnight stay with Nomadic family

An integral part of Mongolian culture is its nomadic lifestyle. A trip to Mongolia HAS to include an overnight stay with a nomadic family. Whilst Mongolia’s population is urbanizing, it is still possible to experience the lifestyle of real nomadic people. It is worth remembering however that whilst your stay with the Nomadic families is helping them, they are not reliant on tourism. As herders, their lifestyle is busy and hard, their livestock are valuable and herders are not poor by any means.
Cultural music and performances

As mentioned earlier, Mongolia has a rich heritage of music, it is recommended that you experience at least one of the following; Murin Khuur, throat singing, long song.

Horse riding

You are in Mongolia! Ride on a horse and imagine you are Genghis Khan leading your horde across the vast grassland. Mongolian horses are more akin to ponies, they are short and stocky and therefore easy to mount; however, as with any animal, care must be taken when riding them and instructions taken seriously by your guide before and during any horse riding activity.

⇒ Mongolian Etiquette

Never take food from a communal plate with your left hand.
KHUVSGUL

Introduction

Located at the border between Mongolia and Russia, lake khuvsgal is one of the seventeen ancient lakes of the world (a lake estimated to be over 2 million years old). It is the second-most voluminous freshwater lake in Asia, and holds almost 70% of Mongolia’s fresh water and 0.4% of all the fresh water in the world. Lake khuvsgal is surrounded by pristine taiga forest, giving it the label of the Switzerland of the east. Furthermore, wildlife enthusiasts have the chance to spot ibex, elk, wolves, brown bears, moose and sable.

Cultural enthusiasts also have the opportunity to meet the Tsaatan ethnic group who herd domesticated reindeer. A fascinating people who practice their shaman religion and reindeer herding today as they have done for centuries. Lake Khuvsgal has to be one of Asia’s best kept secrets; indeed, the whole area is a national park (Lake Hovsgol National Park) bigger than that of the famous Yellowstone National Park.
If you are brave enough to come to Mongolia in the grip of winter, you will be rewarded by the amazing snow covered land and in Khuvsgal a magically frozen lake like something from a Disney movie. During the two-day ice festival, the lake transforms into a winter playground with horse sleigh races, ice sculpting, ice sumo and Mongolians in traditional dress representing the twenty-one aimags of Mongolia. The region has deep shamanistic ties and thus a burning ceremony is conducted by local shamans to mark the occasion.

Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset

The annual Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset is a classic Khuvsgal sporting event that has been running now for over twenty years. Not for the feint hearted, this run is a 100km race that stretches along the lake shore and up into the surrounding mountains. It’s catch phrase is “the world’s most beautiful 42km and 100km trail run”.

Must Do’s

Enjoy the lake by being as close to it as you can without swimming (the lake is cold even in summer). Taking a kayak out on to the lake is truly a spectacular way of taking in the beautiful sights of the area as well as enjoying the peace and serenity of the lake. Most tourist camps on the lake shore will be able to rent kayaks without much hassle.
Boat cruise

There are various cruise points from which you can cruise the lake, the most popular being from the lake shore town of Hatgal. A typical boat cruise will sail up to a small island in the middle of the lake called ‘wooden boy island’. This island is home to flocks of native lake birds which will no doubt begin flying alongside your boat during passage.

Meet the Tsataan people

One of the most renowned ethnic minority groups in Mongolia is the Tsataan. Renowned because of their reindeer herding heritage, the Tsataan have been herding and living off the local reindeer for centuries and their cultural traditions and practices have changed little during this time. A visit to the local tribe is highly recommended, however don’t expect an easy journey to visit them. The Tsataan migrate according to the needs of their reindeer and so will be found in different areas of Khuvsgul according to the seasons.

⇒ Mongolian Etiquette

When sleeping in a Mongolian home, make sure to keep your feet pointed towards the door.
The Gobi desert is famous for being a land of extreme temperature, reaching as cold as -45 degrees Celsius in Winter and as hot as +40 degrees Celsius in Summer. Straddling both Mongolia and China the Gobi desert stretches from the Altai mountains in the west to the North China plain at its far eastern point. The Gobi is romanticized with images of Bactrian camels laden with silk trekking in long lines along the silk road as well as being a treasure trove for the dinosaur enthusiast with some of the world’s best preserved fossils having been found in the Gobi. Less known are its legends for being the homeland of the Mongolian death worm and less so its diversity of wildlife, being home even to the elusive snow leopard. A journey into the Gobi is hard but well worth it.

**Sights**

**Baga Gazriin Chuluu**

Literally translates to ‘stone of the little place’. At the height of 1,751 metres this granite canyon has been eroded by the wind to create astonishing granite formations. Upon entering the canyon be careful you don’t lose yourself in the maze of granite formations. Deep inside the canyon can be found the ruins of a small
monastery. At the monastery one may use the stagnant water that has collated in the crevices of the granite to treat ocular illnesses.

**White stupa or Tsagaan Suvarga**

Tsagaan Suvarga which is known as the white stupa is a sixty-meter high, four-hundred-meter-long cliff sitting in the middle of the Gobi plain. When viewed from afar the cliff looks like an ancient ruined city. Ten million years ago this cliff was submerged under the sea and looking upon it now one can see the different colored layers of time ingrained in its stone.

**Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park**

The gurvan saikhan national park is named after the ‘three beauties’ referring to the three largest peaks of the area. Within this national park one has the pleasure of viewing two contrasting sights; the smooth yellow sand dunes of the Gobi desert and the snow-capped peaks of the three beauties.

As you head into the mountain area, the most scenic spot for trekking, wildlife and wildflower spotting is the Yol Valley. The Yol Valley contains a dramatic ice field several meters thick as well as grassy meadows, sheer cliff walls and small streams.

**Khongor Sand dunes**

Ready to experience magnificent rolling sand dunes? The best area for the most beautiful sand dunes is Khongor. These dunes are massive, with the tallest rising over three-hundred meters. Take a trek to the top of these dunes on a windy day and you will be treated to the phenomenon known as the ‘singing dunes’. When the wind blows off the top of the dunes it creates a humming sound similar to that of an airplane, hence the name ‘singing dunes’. 
Flaming cliffs or Bayanzag

The Gobi is famous for its preservation of dinosaur fossils and fossilized eggs. The hot spot for these discoveries has been the area on and around Bayanzag otherwise known as ‘the flaming cliffs’. The area is so named due to its red rock formations created from millions of years of erosion. Viewing the flaming cliffs during a bright sunrise or sunset is particularly beautiful.

Festivals in Gobi

Thousand Camel Festival

Are you wondering and imagining about the Gobi desert in the winter? Golden sands covered by white snow!

The Gobi Camel Festival, is fast becoming one of the most famous winter festivals in the world. The festival is organized by a local non-governmental organization working to protect and preserve the Bactrian camel population, which has been steadily declining over the past twelve years. Nomads from far and wide wear their best traditional costume and ride their best camels for this festival. A Guinness world record, the festival has seen 1,108 camels cross the finish line of 1,115 registered to the race. The race itself is just over 15 km. The camel festival also includes a series of other performances including a camel polo tournament, a beauty contests and of course a series of cultural Mongolian folk performances.
**Must Do’s**

Ride a Bactrian Camel

Bactrian camels are the two humped cousin of the Arabian dromedary camel. Bactrian camels have a high tolerance to cold, drought and high altitudes and have been domesticated and used as a pack animal since before the time of the silk road caravans. Riding these majestic camels is not difficult and due to your positioning between the two humps, pretty comfortable. However Bactrian camels are huge animals and thus needless to say, care and respect should be given if choosing to ride one.

Watch the sunrise

When coming to the Gobi you MUST watch at least one sunrise. Mongolia is guaranteed at least three-hundred blue sky days a year, thus you are almost guaranteed a clear sunrise. Mix the hues of the sand with the golden rays of sunlight and you have yourself a magical scene.

⇒ Mongolian Etiquette

Never put water on, step on or put rubbish on a fire. Fire is sacred in Mongolian culture.
Altai Mountains

Introduction

The Altai mountains are a mountain range that joins Mongolia, China, Russia and Kazakhstan. The mountain range is little known or explored by the outside world and thus it makes for a spectacular cultural trip as well as natural sight-seeing trip with five of the most notable mountains stretching above 4,000 metres. Within the Mongolian quarter the mountain area is inhabited by three ethnic groups; Kazakhs, Tuva and Uriankhai, with ethnic Mongolians constituting the minority in this area. The Altai mountains is a truly wild, rugged and ‘off the beaten track’ destination. Arriving in Ulaanbaatar you will need to fly a further two hours on a local flight to Bayan Olgii and then drive a further three hours before you are truly in the Altai mountains area.

Sights

Tavan Bogd

The Tavan Bogd mountain massif is located at the juncture between Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan which interestingly due to the inaccessibility of the tripoint border; being located on a mountain covered in perpetual snow, the three states agreed not to install a physical border marker. Tavan Bogd’s highest point on the Mongolian side is the Khuiten peak (literally cold peak) which reaches a scary 4,374 metres.
Potanin Glacier

The best sights of Altai can be found within the ‘Altai Tavan Bogd National Park’. The park is the area surrounding the massive Tavan Bogd mountain massif. Within the park can be found many glaciers, most notable of which is the Potanin glacier, Mongolia’s longest stretching glacier at 14km in total length.

Tsagaan Salaa

The national park also contains the culturally precious Tsagaan Salaa rock paintings, approximately 10,000 pictorials depicting livestock and big game dating from the Neolithic to the Bronze age. This is the most complete and best preserved visual record of human prehistoric representation in existence and is named by the UNESCO Heritage Sites as “The Petroglyphic Complex of the Mongolian Altai”.

Festivals

Eagle Festival

The festival that draws much attention to the area is the annual eagle festival. Taking place during the first weekend of October, local Kazak eagle hunters congregate to take part in a series of competitions including ‘best turned out eagle and owner’, ‘best eagle at hunting prey’, ‘best eagle at locating its owner from a distance’. Tourists coming to witness the festival are treated to an opening ceremony, parade, cultural exhibitions, demonstrations and handicrafts as well as horse racing, archery and the hugely popular ‘bushkashi’, (tug of war on horseback).
Must Do’s

Trekking through Tavan Bogd

Tavan Bogd National Park is a truly stunning area with a massive host of wildflowers and wildlife amongst which it is possible to spot red deer, moose, snow cock and golden eagles. The park is also home to three picturesque lakes khoton, khurgan and dayan.

Kazak Eagle Hunters

It may be surprising to some that visiting Kazak eagle hunters in Mongolia would be such an attraction, why not in Kazakhstan? Present day Mongolian Kazakhs are the descendants of a people who were pushed into Mongolia upon the rise of the Russian empire. They were accepted into Mongolia and settled in the Altai mountain region. Since that time they have been free to practice their traditional lifestyle which has gone unchanged over the centuries. Conversely, in Kazakhstan there are much fewer people who practice the eagle hunting lifestyle and so the Western Mongolian Altai Mountains have become a hot destination for exploring this amazing relationship between man and bird.

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