



Nomading Mongolia

In the 13th century, Genghis Khan united the nomadic tribes of northeast Asia and founded the Mongol Empire. Today, Mongolia is a post-Soviet democracy where modern cities exist alongside mountainous terrain inhabited by nomads. TRICIA PEARSALL joined the latter, and journeyed across the Kharkhiraa Mountains via camel.

Hiring a camel man was absolutely essential to trekking in western Mongolia's Kharkhiraa Mountains, and he had to be a *nice* camel man, according to my flamboyant twenty-something college student guide-cum-cook, Shinee (pronounced she-nay): "Our last camel man was lazy, not *nice*, not good." Shinee was our trip liaison with Happy Camel Tours and Expeditions, the company I'd booked for the month-long adventure I was taking with my friend, Sigrid. For the first two weeks, we had zigzagged a more or less prescribed tourist route westward across the roadless steppes of Mongolia in the bouncy comfort of a Land Cruiser—owned and operated by Erka, our perpetually jolly Mongolian road jockey whose beaming grin seemed etched into his middle-aged face. Now, we were about to trek into the Kharkhiraa range, but no longer had a route plan or a local guide. This was unscripted nomading Mongolia.

From Ulaangom, the capital of Uvs *aimag* (province), Erka drove us south to Tarialan, a small *sum* (administrative center) at the head of the Kharkhiraa Valley. We stopped in front of a one-floor, two-window, white box of a building—a leftover from Mongolia's Soviet-era—and in strutted Shinee (clad in black tights overlaid with red socks, tie-up red leather sneakers and *une petite* skirt just dusting her *derrière*) to speak to the local magistrate. She emerged an hour later with a skinny man in knee-high work boots, and introduced him as the head of the local communist party (still a vital force in Mongolia, despite the nation's fledgling democracy). "He'll take us to a *nice* family man, who'll find us a *nice* camel man," Shinee explained. Fifteen miles later, Erka deposited us and our

gear at the solitary, solar-paneled *ger* (a large, circular, white-felted yurt) of the *nice* family man, Salbaa, a stout, ruddy bloke in black boots. He'd hunt for a pack camel guide, but tomorrow. Finding one at the end of August wouldn't be easy, Shinee told us, as most were moving their own families, *gers* and herds from the high mountains where they spent the summer, or were out harvesting hay in anticipation of the upcoming winter. Last winter's *dzud* (a catastrophic, killer cold, which has been happening every five to six years due to climate change) had wiped out over 12 million sheep, goats, horses, camels, cows and yaks in Mongolia. Proper preparation could mean life over death in this relentlessly harsh environment.

When Erka left to return to Ulaanbaatar, we gathered inside Salbaa's *ger* with his wife, sons, daughter, neighbors and his blind grandmother. The men sat together at the back politely exchanging snuff bottles while we were offered a bowl of *airag* (fermented mare's milk), the national beverage of Mongolia. Shinee took the bowl, dipped her middle finger into it and flicked a drop up to the sky, one out to the air and one down to the ground. She then tapped her forehead before imbibing. This offering to the blue sky, wind and earth—all considered gods by Mongolians—is

based in part on tradition, superstition and shamanism, as well as resurgent Buddhism. I opted to drink salty milk tea while we grazed on plates of *aarul* (dried curds) and *bootsog* (fried pastry), trying our best to observe the rules for impeccable Mongolian manners—balancing the tea bowl and eating with the right hand only, while sitting on the carpeted ground with our feet turned away from the others and nodding *bayarlalaa* (thank you). By my third or fourth *ger* visit, I felt fairly proficient at this etiquette dance. Mongolian hospitality is legendary, but we found it especially

Facing page: Family caravan heading to Ulaangom. **This page, clockwise from top left:** Erdene Zuu temple; Kazakh nomad preparing tea; Kazakh eagle hunter; ancient deer stone.



This page, clockwise from top left: Inside a ger; Erdene Zuu blue prayer scarves; Ochiroo's tired camel; Mongolian food, and treasures left at an Ovoo; Ochiroo on horse in Kharkhiraa Mountains.

abundant and sincere in these mountains. As the heavy golden sun spread a deep shadow, we pitched our tent near the nice family's ger, and were surrounded at nightfall by the 800 sheep, goats and camels of Salbaa's original herd of 2,000 that survived the last dzud.

The next morning we met Ochiroo—the camel man Salbaa engaged—a seasoned herder in his late 30s with an impish twinkle in his eye who lived three or four miles across the steppe at the base of the mountains. He'd never worked with a tourist or trekker before, but had two sturdy pack camels with full humps, knew every inch of these ranges, and everyone in them, and seemed to be an extremely gracious gentleman. Before we set out, we stopped at Ochiroo's ger to meet his wife and four children and, naturally, share his yogurt and freshly-boiled sheep. Then up the hill we traipsed to be introduced to his sister and her family of five. More yogurt and fried pastry awaited us there. I'd been designated family portrait photographer, so the kids wiped at their noses and faces and put on clean shirts, while the

brother-in-law polished his motorcycle—a prized possession. Snap. Finally, we hit the trail on foot into the mountains—Ochiroo on his horse, and Shinee hiking in her red shoes.

For six days, we followed Ochiroo—looking rakish in his brown satin *del* (long tunic) girded with a lime green sash, the brim of his white open-weave cowboy hat cocked to one side—as he blazed an uncharted, remote circuit up and over passes, down into steep gorges, across barren steppes of every earth tone from crimson to ochre. The land reaped nothing but the bones of dead sheep and camels, victims of the *dzud*. We crossed the melt-rushing Kharkhiraa River first by horse, then again on camel, and stopped at every ger along the way for salt tea or homemade vodka. We trekked around ancient Bronze Age burial mounds, circled *ovoos* three times in keeping with custom and added rocks to these sacred piles of stones and wood, which were laden with *khadags* (blue scarves) and sacrificial offerings of money, sweets or abandoned crutches, which signify

healing. Hailstorms produced heavy snow on the peaks—signs of winter—as camels carried all the worldly possessions of families migrating from lofty summer grazing grounds to autumn pastures nestled amid the steppes. Even in transit, these nomads would stop and offer us tea as we passed by, and at night, a few came and squatted outside our tent door to give us the once-over, stare and smile.

When Salbaa's gray van—a Russian relic called a Furgon—crested the hill to collect us at the end of this part of the journey, I wasn't prepared for this spontaneous slice of honest Mongolia to end. But it was time for our drive westward to Mongolia's Kazakh province, Bayun-Ölgii, and the Altai Mountains' Tavan Bogd National Park.

Except for the capital, Ulaanbaatar, and a few small provincial cities, Mongolia is naked, forever-rolling plains broken by huge salt and freshwater lakes with the Gobi Desert to the south, Siberian forests along the northern border, and high-peak glaciated mountains to the west. The greatness of this land and the way

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Mongolians, nomads in particular, revere and own all of it, yet individually own none of it, explains in some part the resurgence of almost mythical veneration for the young herder, Temujin, who, in 1206, started uniting all the disparate tribes under one realm. As Genghis Khan (a title that means the Great Khan), he amassed the largest contiguous territorial conquest in world history, the Mongol Empire. Utilizing that spirit, as evidenced by the hundreds of stylized Genghis Khan banners waving throughout the country, the government hopes to lift up the new Mongolian democracy from the ravages of the tortured, repressive communist state, the former Mongolia People's Republic (1924-1990). In the countryside, this means 40 percent of the population have returned to nomadic life. (The Soviets had tried to order everyone into communities during their rule—something the Mongolians railed against.) In Ulaanbaatar, on the other hand, this means the slow conversion of the patchwork of dismal Soviet-era crumbling edifices, roads and ger-ghettos into an international center of modern complexes,

retail and smart development. When we arrived, we caught glimpses of high-rises under construction, including the 25-story, winged Blue Sky Tower multiplex, which features a five-star hotel, office space and penthouse residences. Haute retailers like Louis Vuitton, Armani and Hugo Boss now compete with the high-end cashmere boutiques. But this wasn't the Mongolia of the Great Khan nor the Mongolia we'd come to see, so we immediately headed west to the great monastery of Erdene Zuu, built on the ruins of Genghis Khan's city, Khara Khorum.

Once home to 62 temples built inside a square wall linking 108 white *stupas* (Buddhist mound structures), only three temples remain there today. During the communist purge, all other temples were destroyed and more than 10,000 monks were killed. Now a museum, the remaining temples, with their celadon-glazed roofs and animal-silhouetted corner eaves evoke a collaborative Asian style of temple architecture—Beijing meets Lhasa. Many of the monastery's treasures, such as *tsam* masks and *thangka* paintings, which were

hidden from the Soviets in houses or buried in the mountains by sympathetic families and military officers, have resurfaced.

From Erdene Zuu, we crossed the steppes to the holy mountain of Otgontenger and visited volcanic craters and salt and freshwater lakes that seemed more like seas—some calm, some stirring up tempests. We also stumbled on a 35th high school reunion in Tsagaan Gol. (Mongolia's literacy rate is a remarkable 97 percent.) The event included wrestling matches and horse races, a tradition that predates Genghis Khan. Mongolian wrestling and WWE matches have much in common: strutting, swaggering and body bulk. The big guys, or pros, were clad in traditional open-front (to expose female imposters) long-sleeved red or blue jackets, very tight-fitting blue briefs and ornate upturned leather boots, topped by pointed velvet and silk hats. The matches we witnessed were decided in seconds, the pros “eating” the

Top: Mongolian herder with lasso.



This page, clockwise from top left: Family in Kharkhiraa Mountains; Otgontenger Uul (Holy Eternal Snow Mountain) with statue of Ochirvaani (Protector God of Mongolia) in foreground; Salbaa's son milking goats. Below: Mongolian wrestling match.



Above, left: Shinee after washing her hair and clothes in Kharkhiraa River. Above, right: Oehiroo and camels crossing Kharkhiraa River.



skinny local challengers, then prancing about rippling their muscles above their heads, tugging at their undies.

From Ulaanbaatar to Uvs *aimag*, we had covered almost 1,000 miles—some of it in the relative comfort of the Land Cruiser, but the last of it in a bare-bones Furgon that made a grinding sound like a teed-off camel with a broken nose stirrup whenever it went uphill in first gear. It ferried us to the Altai Mountains in four days. Adding to the torture, the last 20-mile stretch to the Tavan Bogd National Park entrance was over large, beach ball-sized river stones that fill the gorge of the narrow Tsaagan Gol (White River). Tavan Bogd, which means five saints, is a cluster of five prominent snow-capped peaks that form Mongolia's border with China and Russia. Roughly the height of Mount Whitney, they create a substantial glacier system with arctic tundra approaches, which had turned red and gold in the abbreviated autumn. Our guide, a 20-something Tuvan, brought us to his *ger* in the park, (nomads still live and graze within its boundaries) and offered us a taste of marmot meat while his new bride prepared *boortsog* pastry, which was fried in the animal's fat (this was the best fried pastry we had), before heading out to hike on the tundra.

The tundra's stunted mosses and grass sit like clumps of squishy sponge atop earlier desiccated tussocks, so hiking on it upright and not looking plastered drunk was nearly impossible. We continued beyond base camp and stopped at the

base of Malchin Peak, our next day's walk-up. For 24 hours, it rained, hailed and snowed, but the resulting prize was a fiery orange sunset finale. The next morning, the sun broke with clear skies and a leftover moon. Though we'd lost our climbing window, we couldn't just passively turn back. With my inner Genghis Khan throbbing, my friend and I took off without the guide, who was busy with his camels anyway. We assured Shinee, our stalwart guide, we'd catch up in an hour. We trudged about a third of the way up Malchin and traversed a snowfield to a barren plateau with spectacular vistas of the Tavan Bogd and distant glimpses of Russia. I discovered a scientist's telescopic camera, which was measuring glacial movement, and descended a slate slag precipice by foot-skiing more than 1,000 feet straight down. Exhilarated, we rendezvoused with Shinee four or five hours later, and she applauded the adventure.

The next day, we flew back to Ulaanbaatar where entrepreneurs, politicians, prosperous bankers and the well-to-do pay *tögrögs* (Mongolian currency) for their urban accoutrements. I find it very difficult to condense my journey into this mammoth, expansive and gloriously raw land—where each personal encounter is an occasion of note—into any sort of seminal conclusion. Instead, perhaps it's better to just let loose a big, chest-thumping, ululating holler. ●

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Going to Mongolia?

Tips for the intrepid traveler looking for a taste of the Mongolia Tricia Pearsall experienced.

HOW TO GET THERE

Most direct flights into Ulaanbaatar are from Beijing, Tokyo, Moscow, Seoul and Berlin. From Ulaanbaatar, take MIAT Mongolian Airlines (Mongolia's largest airline), Air China, or Air Mongolia into Chinggis Khaan International Airport. Or take the Trans-Siberian Railway, which runs from Beijing to Moscow, stopping in Ulaanbaatar along the way.

TOUR OPERATORS

Abererombie & Kent: Small group travel, private journeys, tailor-made trips and extreme adventure exploration options paired with the choice to visit a variety of locations in Mongolia. Package prices range from less than \$5,000 up to \$10,000. AbererombieKent.com

Adventure Mongolia: Tailor-made trips that can combine a wide variety of activities and experiences (trekking, hunting, fishing, camel riding, national and regional events). Package prices vary. AdventureMongolia.net

Happy Camel Tours and Expeditions: Tours and expeditions from three days up to 32 days, with a variety of experiences and regions and landmarks visited. Price varies depending on tour preferences and amenities. HappyCamel.com

Selena Travel: Active-adventure tours, cross-country tours, wildlife safaris, community-based tours, cultural tours, winter tours and discovery tours. Package prices range from \$350 to \$5,000. SelenaTravel.com

WHEN TO GO

The sun shines 200 days of the year, but bitter cold winters that average minus 9 degrees Fahrenheit make traveling during the warmer months between June and September optimal. July and August are the mildest and wettest times of the year.

For more information, go to MongoliaTourism.gov.mn

WHAT TO SEE

The Thousand Camel Festival: This 12-year-old event includes camel races and performances by traditional Mongolian musicians and dancers. Held in late January to February.

Tsaagan Sar Festival: One of Mongolia's oldest festivals, it is held over three days to celebrate the end of winter and the beginning of spring. Held in January or February.

The Golden Eagle Festival: On festival days, watch as Kazakhs hold Golden Eagle competitions based on speed, agility and accuracy. Traditional Mongolian games like Kokbar, archery and horse racing. Held in October.

Naadam Festival: Mongolia's largest national festival showcases the three "manly sports" of horse racing, archery and wrestling. Held in July.

CULTURAL TIPS

- Remove your gloves when shaking hands with a Mongolian.
- No need to remove your hat when entering a *ger*, but lift it as a sign of greeting instead.
- Inside a *ger*, walk in a clockwise direction only.
- Avoid leaning against support columns, furniture or walls inside a *ger*.
- Resist the temptation to whistle inside a *ger*.
- Sit cross-legged, with your feet underneath you.
- Always sleep with your feet pointing toward the door.
- Refuse nothing! Always take at least a sip or nibble of anything offered.
- Receive food or gifts with either both hands or with the right hand supported at the wrist or elbow by the left hand.
- Take food from a plate with your right hand, even if you're left-handed.
- When passing anything to a Mongolian, use more than two fingers.
- Leave a small gift for your hosts, something other than money.