

Destination Mongolia

Mix up vast landscapes of empty deserts, snowcapped mountains, dramatic gorges and sparkling lakes. Sprinkle in the felt homes of the nomad and the cry of an eagle. Add Buddhist temples, mysterious ruins, abundant wildlife and legendary hospitality. Then top it all off with a conqueror who started with nothing and ended up changing history.

If this description perpetuates your belief in an untouched country, then you also need the scoop on the new Mongolia. Add to the above internet cafés, herders chatting on mobile phones, Manhattan-style cocktail bars, eco-yurts and vegetarian cafés. The Humvees plying Peace Ave would probably have Chinggis Khaan turning green with envy.

Since the fall of communism, Mongolia has done just about everything in its power to open itself up to the world. While the old traditions survive and the wild nature is still mostly intact, Mongolia has also reached out to the West for economic and cultural ties. It's not uncommon to meet Mongolians with degrees from universities in the USA, Europe or Australia.

Along with Japan and South Korea, Mongolia is one of the only legitimate democracies in the whole of Asia. Elections have proven to be free and fair. A constant parade of street protests have forced policy change on everything from mining laws to bus fares.

Democracy has given foreign investors enough confidence to stick with Mongolia during hard times. Attractive investment laws have lured some of the big boys of the mining world – the major target of Mongolia's economic reformers. Despite their progression, Mongolia still faces enormous economic and social challenges; it remains one of the poorest countries in Asia, with typical salaries at less than US\$100 a month.

Tourism, along with mining and cashmere, has become a key feature of the economy. The poor infrastructure and short travel season have kept receipts small, but a growing network of ger camps cater to travellers seeking ecotourism adventures. Without fences or private property to restrict a traveller's movement, Mongolia is a perfect destination for horse trekking, long-distance cycling or hiking, or more leisurely activities such as fly-fishing, yak carting or camping out under a sprawling mass of stars.

Most travellers come for Naadam, the two-day summer sports festival that brings Ulaanbaatar to a standstill. But Mongolia's unique charm will always lie in the countryside where, rather than being a spectator to the wrestling, you may find yourself making up the numbers! Outside the villages it's easy to meet nomad families whose relentless sense of hospitality can at times be nothing short of overwhelming.

Mongolia is an up-and-coming Asian country with a young, well-educated population. The economy grows at a robust 7.5% per year – thanks mainly to China's insatiable appetite for Mongolia's raw materials. But Mongolia sits at a crucial crossroads: if the booming economy continues down the road of corruption, with a few getting rich and everyone else left behind, the country may never develop to its full potential.

As a travel destination, Mongolia is a special place for people who enjoy the outdoors and adventure. Heading out on the vast plains, riding horses and camping with nomad families, it offers the chance to step back in time to a simpler age and way of life. It is an invigorating and exhilarating place to visit, and remains one of the last unspoiled travel destinations in Asia.

FAST FACTS

Population: 2,576,000 (2007)

GDP: US\$2100 per capita, ranking Mongolia 125 out of 182 listed countries

Leading 2007 exports: copper, wool, gold, cashmere, leather

Literacy rate: 98%

Voter turnout: often over 80%

Horse-to-human ratio: 13 to 1

Average life expectancy: 64 years

Annual economic aid received: approximately US\$203 million

Telephone usage: 156,000 landlines; over 800,000 mobile phones

Proportion of people living below the poverty line: 36%

Head of livestock: 34 million

Getting Started

Mongolia offers plenty of scope for offbeat, adventurous and simply fascinating travels. While there are plenty of tourist attractions that are worth visiting, Mongolia is not the sort of place where travellers need a rigid sightseeing schedule.

An eight-day horseback trip through the mountains outside of Ulaanbaatar, done independently or with a group, can be just as rewarding as a driving tour to the country's best-known attractions, if not more so. What makes the journey unique is Mongolia's unbounded hospitality and nomadic culture; a visit to a herder's ger is often the best part of any trip to Mongolia and something that can be done without mounting a major expedition.

Organising a trip is surprisingly easy, and you'll make some headway by connecting with tour operators and hotel owners ahead of time. Russian Cyrillic is widely used and not too difficult to pick up, making street signs relatively easy to read. In Ulaanbaatar, an English speaker is never too far away. Trips can be made to suit all budgets, though backpackers should expect to pay slightly more than they would in south Asia; jeep-hire costs can add up. Vehicle breakdowns, petrol shortages, extreme weather and shocking roads present their own challenges. But the country is also stunning, safe and relatively healthy; with a bit of resolve and patience, any amount of travel is possible.

WHEN TO GO

Mongolia has an extreme continental climate; it is so far inland that no sea moderates its climate. Only in summer does cloud-cover shield the sky. Humidity is usually zilch and sunshine is intense. With more than 260 sunny days a year, Mongolia is justifiably known as the 'Land of Blue Sky'.

The travel season begins in mid-May. Ger camps start opening their doors and more travellers are around to share vehicles. The weather is generally fair although early May can still see snowfall, especially in the north.

June weather is fine and generally dry throughout the central and southern regions. The mountains and northern areas can still be cold.

July is the time to see the Naadam Festival (p96). Unfortunately, this is also the peak tourist season when Ulaanbaatar's inadequate accommodation and creaky transport is stretched to breaking point. It's a good time to look for travel partners and get out of the city. Gobi temperatures this month can hit 40°C.

See Climate Charts (p252) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A good pair of binoculars and a high powered lens for your SLR camera. Distances are vast in Mongolia and both of these will help when spotting wildlife.
- Camping gear. Tents, sleeping bags and other equipment are available in Mongolia, but you'll save money by bringing your own.
- Chapstick, sun block, sunglasses and anything else that protects you from Mongolia's relentless sun, dust and wind.
- English-language travel literature and books.
- New US dollars; it's difficult to change bills that pre-date 2000.
- A1 steak sauce, spice packets or jar of mustard to flavour up your boiled mutton.
- Studying your phrasebook. You'll find that LP's *Mongolian Phrasebook* is worth its weight in gold.

MONGOLIA IN WINTER

Visiting Mongolia in winter is not as crazy as it sounds. While you may imagine everything is buried under snow, the country does still function; museums will be open, transportation runs unabated and other facilities like shops and restaurants will still be up and running.

One advantage is a big reduction in Ulaanbaatar hotel prices – over 30% for most top-end hotels. Another benefit of winter travel is that vehicles in northern areas can reach places that are otherwise difficult to access. For example, thanks to the frozen ground, lakes and rivers, cars can drive from Khatgal over Jigleg Pass and onto to Renchinlhumbe; in summer this area is just boggy marsh, only accessible by horse.

In winter, ger camps will be closed (except for a few in Terelj). Other disadvantages include thick air pollution in Ulaanbaatar and shorter daylight hours (it will be dark by 4pm or 5pm).

In the countryside, activities such as hiking and horse riding won't really be feasible because of the cold. However, you could try ice fishing, cross-country skiing or even offbeat adventures like dog sledding.

Wind of Mongolia (p82) runs dog-sledding trips in Terelj from December to February and then on Khövsgöl Nuur in March and April.

In Ulaanbaatar, LG Guesthouse (p83) runs winter star-gazing tours. Winter is also the time to watch the Kazakh eagle-hunters in action; contact Blue Wolf Travel (p224). Hard-core ice-skaters can join a long-distance ice-skating trip on Khövsgöl Nuur, organised by Nomadic Journeys (p81).

August can see lots of rain in the northern and central areas. This weather fills up rivers and brings fresh grass to the steppes, but it can also bog the roads with mud and attract mosquitoes. Still, it's a great time to travel in Mongolia.

September is another fine month. Cooler weather brings relief to the Gobi and the changing colours in the northern forests make for spectacular scenery. Flies and mosquitoes start to disappear.

October is cool and sees the occasional snow flurry up north but is still fine for travel, especially in the Gobi. Weather patterns at this time are particularly vulnerable to change. One minute you're walking around in a T-shirt, the next you need an overcoat and boots, then it's back to T-shirts.

The cold season runs from November to February. Read the boxed text (above) for details.

Mongolians, especially nomads, consider March and April the worst months. After the long winter, livestock will already be thin and a lack of rain means many will die, causing financial and psychological hardship. If the spring is a harsh one, staying with a nomad family at this time is not recommended.

Ulaanbaatar is possibly the coldest capital city in the world. Temperatures generally start to drop below 0°C in late October, sink to -30°C in January and February and remain below freezing until April. July through September is pleasant, but it can still turn suddenly cold and, unfortunately, most of the city's rain falls in this period. Summer daylight lasts until 10pm.

HOW MUCH?

Local newspaper T500

Can of Chinggis beer
T1000

Guanz (canteen) lunch
T2000

Internet per hour T700

Taxi from the airport to
Sükhbaatar Sq T6000

Souvenir T-shirt T12,000

Best seat at the Naadam
opening US\$25

COSTS & MONEY

Within Mongolia, travellers on organised tours spend around US\$100 per day (more for extra luxuries). Independent travellers can see the same sights and stay in midrange accommodation for around US\$80 per day. Sharing the cost of a private jeep or minivan and camping rather than staying in more-expensive ger camps can bring this down to about US\$25 to US\$40 per day. (For more information on tourist ger camps see p249.) If you are hitching and using public transport around the countryside, allow about US\$10 to US\$15 per day for this.

TOP 10

Ulaanbaatar •
MONGOLIA

ROAD-TRIP DELIGHTS

There are certain essential factors that make every road trip complete:

- 1 Hot-water bathhouses
- 2 Paved roads
- 3 Drivers named Bold or Dorj
- 4 Spare parts found by the roadside
- 5 Yak cream with fresh blueberries on Russian bread
- 6 Yogurt delivered by passing nomads
- 7 Getting a lift
- 8 Ability to sing at least one song in English and Mongolian
- 9 Stomach for blowtorched marmot
- 10 Mars Bars

SURVIVAL PHRASES

While bouncing around in your jeep or entering a nomad's ger, bear in mind these key phrases:

- 1 Hold the dog! *Nokhoi khorio!*
- 2 When will you move your ger next? *Tanakh khetzee nukh ve?*
- 3 Exactly what time are we going to leave? (ask while jabbing at your watch, and emphasise the word 'Yag', or the answer will invariably be 'now') *Yag, kheden tsagt yavakh ve?*
- 4 May we camp near your ger? *Tanaa khajuud maihantaigaa honogloj boloh uu?*
- 5 Are your sheep fattening up nicely? *Mal sureg targan tavtai uu?*
- 6 Not too much, please (food, tea, vodka). *Dunduur. Or, jaakhan, jaakhan.*
- 7 Where is a good spot for fishing? *Yamar gazar zagas ikhte ve?*
- 8 I would like to ride a calm (nonaggressive) horse. *Bi nomkhon mori unmaar baina.*
- 9 In which direction is ___ town? ___ *sum ail zugt baina ve?*
- 10 Please write down your address and I will send your photo later. *Ta nadad hayagaa bichij ogno uu. Bi tand zurag ilgeene.*

BEST FESTS

Festivals offer a great chance to meet locals and enjoy local customs. Try to make it to one of the following:

- 1 Tsagaan Sar in Bulgan *sum* (village), Ömnögov (January or February)
- 2 Khatgal Ice Festival (28 February)
- 3 Camel Polo Festival in Ulaanbaatar (mid-March)
- 4 Navrus in Bayan Ölgii (21 March)
- 5 Roaring Hooves Music Festival (late June)
- 6 Naadam in any *sum*, better than a big city (mid-July)
- 7 Yak Festival in Tariat (early August)
- 8 Gongoriin Bombani Hural at Amarbayasgalant Khiid (9 to 11 August)
- 9 Airag Festival in Dundgov (late August)
- 10 Eagle Festival in Ölgii or Sagsai (first Sunday in October)

Accommodation and food will cost at least US\$10 per day in Ulaanbaatar, but allow up to US\$20 per day for half-decent accommodation, some tastier, Western-style meals and trips to the theatre and museums.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Dateline Mongolia: An American Journalist in Nomads Land, by Michael Kohn, is a memoir and travelogue written by the author of this guidebook. It recounts his memorable three years working as a reporter for the *Mongol Messenger*.

Lost Country: Mongolia Revealed, by Jasper Becker, describes the author's travels in Mongolia in the early 1990s and his attempts to uncover the secrets of the purge years that plagued Mongolia in the 1930s.

Wild East, by Jill Lawless, is a tightly written, very funny account of the author's experience in Mongolia, during which she spent two years editing the *UB Post*. This lightning-fast book serves as a good armchair read before visiting Mongolia.

Hearing Birds Fly, by Louisa Waugh, describes the year the author spent living in Tsengel, a Kazakh village in western Mongolia. Waugh does an outstanding job of describing the stark landscapes, personal stories and ironies in one of Mongolia's most remote areas.

Eagle Dreams: Searching for Legends in Wild Mongolia, by Stephen J Bodio, describes the remote and enchanting Bayan-Ölgii aimag. It gives a good account of Kazakh contemporary life and the 'eagle-hunters'.

Among the Mongols, by James Gilmour, was written by a Scottish missionary who travelled to Mongolia in the late 19th century. Some of his observations of life at the time are remarkably compatible with modern Mongolia.

For more book ideas see www.mongoliacenter.org/bookstore.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Living in Mongolia (www.living-in-mongolia.com) News and information site geared towards expats living in Mongolia.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Includes info on Mongolia with links to other websites, and the Thorn Tree travellers' forum.

Mongol Uls (www.mongoluls.net) Cultural articles, links and handy language tutorial.

Mongolia Expat (www.mongoliaexpat.com) Up-to-date website with sights and activities in contemporary Mongolia.

Mongolia National Tourism Centre (www.mongoliatourism.gov.mn) Includes lists of hotels, ger camps and travel agencies.

The Mongolia Society (www.mongoliasociety.org) An excellent resource with lots of links.

Mongolia Today (www.mongoliatoday.com) A colourful online magazine covering all aspects of Mongolian culture.

Mongolian Matters (www.mongolianmatters.com) Blog by a UB expat, commenting on important news stories in Mongolia.

Shaggy Yak (www.shaggyyak.com) A great starting point, with handy tips on visas, planning and logistics for a trip to Mongolia.

UN in Mongolia (www.un-mongolia.mn) Development news and links to UN agencies.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTE

THE BIG LOOP

Three Weeks / Ulaanbaatar to the Gobi & the North

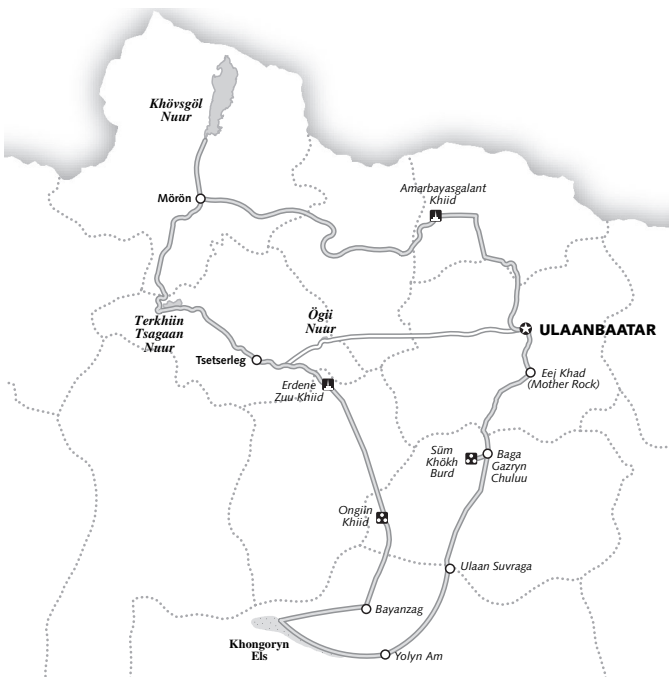
From Ulaanbaatar, head south to the eerie rock formations of **Baga Gazryn Chuluu** (p197) and the ruined castle at **Süm Khökh Burd** (p197), stopping at **Eej Khad** (Mother Rock; p109) en route. From Süm Khökh Burd, stop by **Ulaan Suvraga** (p198) on your way south.

At least three days are needed to explore Ömnögov: the spectacular ice canyon at **Yolyn Am** (p208), the massive sand dunes at **Khongoryn Els** (p209) and the dinosaur quarry at **Bayanzag** (p208).

From Bayanzag go north to the ruins of **Ongiin Khiid desert monastery** (p197), a perfect place to organise a camel trek.

Leaving the Gobi, your first stop is **Erdene Zuu Khiid** (p120), the country's oldest monastery. Head west to **Tsetserleg** (p126), a good place to break the journey, before proceeding to **Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur** (p130) for fishing, swimming, hiking or horse riding.

An additional five to seven days are needed for a trip north to spectacular **Khövsgöl Nuur** (p152). On the route back to Ulaanbaatar don't miss **Amarbayasgalant Khiid** (p140), an architectural gem.



Welcome to Mongolia 101, the starter route for most first-timers keen to see the top attractions and a wide range of landscapes. This 2600km route gives you the best of the best: sand dunes, alpine lakes and the ancient capital Karakorum. Although seemingly on 'main routes', this is still a rough, remote and unpredictable journey.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

WESTERN MONGOLIA

One Month / Khovd to Uliastai

The western aimags offer adventurous travel and exploration. Adrenaline junkies can break out the mountain bike, kayak or mountaineering gear.

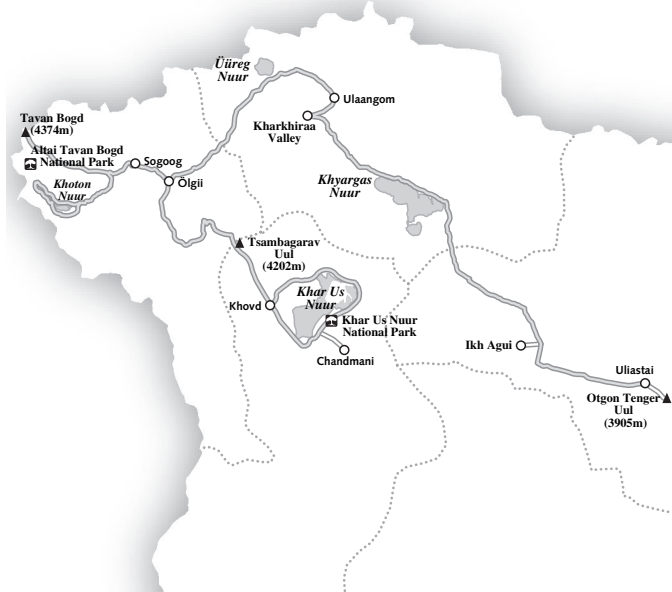
Start with a flight to **Khovd** (p232), from where you can hire a jeep and driver for a bird-watching and wildlife expedition at **Khar Us Nuur National Park** (p235). At nearby **Chandmani** (p236) visit the renowned throat singers. Looping back through Khovd, continue northwest to the beautiful pastures and valley around **Tsambagarav Uul** (p228). You could easily spend a couple of days here before moving on to **Ölgii** (p223), a great place to recharge your batteries.

Heading west from Ölgii, spend at least five days getting to, from and around **Altai Tavan Bogd National Park** (p229). With more time, consider doing a horse trek around **Khoton Nuur** (p230). With proper equipment, permits and some logistic support, it's even possible to scale Mongolia's highest peak, the 4374m **Tavan Bogd** (p231), though a visit to the base camp and glacier is more feasible.

On the way to Tavan Bogd, stop in at **Sogoog** (p229), the only village in Mongolia with an espresso machine!

From Ölgii, the main road winds northeast, passing **Üüreg Nuur** (p240) en route to **Ulaangom** (p237). Allow a week for trekking around **Kharkhiraa Valley** (p241). An experienced driver can get you from Ulaangom to **Uliastai** (p243), visiting **Khyargas Nuur** (p242) and **Ikh Agui** (p246) en route. From pretty Uliastai you can get a flight to Ulaanbaatar, but not before mounting a horse or hiking to **Otgon Tenger Uul** (p245).

This 1500km journey takes you to the 'wild west', a dreamy landscape of mountains, glaciers, lakes and rushing rivers. Your inner adventurer will be satiated with the remoteness of the landscape and its unique inhabitants: throat singers, eagle-hunters and the odd cattle rustler. You'll need at least 10 days in the area; more for trekking in the Altai Mountains.



EASTERN MONGOLIA

12 Days / Ulaanbaatar to Khentii,
Dornod & Sükhbaatar

Eastern Mongolia offers a delightful romp through grasslands, forest and some unique historical sights. Best of all, it's almost completely devoid of tourists.

Heading east from UB, you'll pass the new **Chinggis Khaan statue** (p110) on the way to **Khökh Nuur** (p171), a pretty alpine lake that saw the coronation of the great khaan. Continue northeast, visiting **Baldan Baraivan Khiid** (p171), **Öglöchiin Kherem** (p171), **Batshireet** and **Binder** (p171) as you travel through Khentii's scenic countryside. **Dadal** (p173) is a good place for horse trekking or just kicking back with some locals, and is an excellent destination for Naadam.

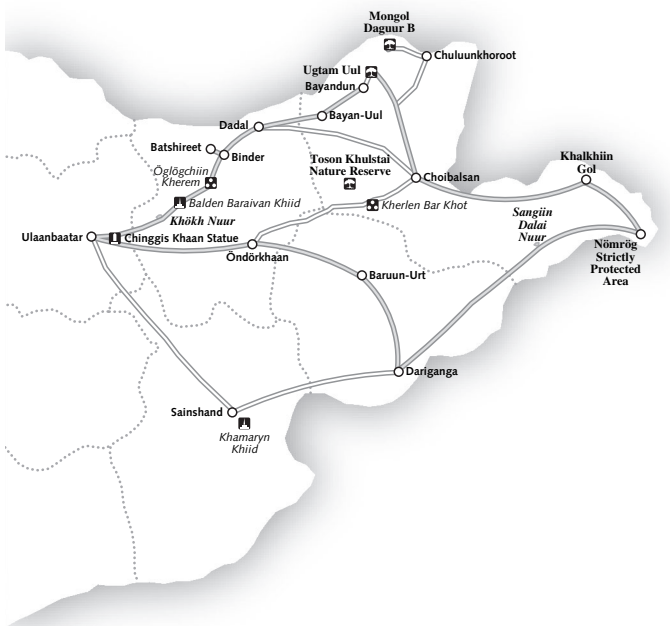
Following the Ulz Gol further east you'll pass pretty Buriat villages, such as Bayan-Uul and Bayandun, and nature reserves including **Ugtam Uul** (p178) before turning south to **Choibalsan** (p175).

An alternative route to Choibalsan goes via the nature reserve **Toson Khulstai** (p175) and ancient ruins at **Kherlen Bar Khot** (p177).

From Choibalsan take the train to **Chuluunkhoroot** (p178) to visit **Mongol Daguur B** (p178), a protected area for wader birds, or travel across the empty steppes to **Khalkhiin Gol** (p179), a remote landscape of lakes, rivers, wildlife and historical sights. Highlights include giant Buddha statues carved into a hillside and monuments dedicated to soldiers who died here during WWII.

You'll need another couple of days to visit the lush **Nömrög Strictly Protected Area** (p174) and **Sangiin Dalai Nuur** (p179).

The **Dariganga region** (p182), with its sand dunes, cinder cones and scattered stone statues, requires two or three days. Horse trekking is also possible here. Return to UB via **Baruun-Urt** (p180) and **Öndörkhaan** (p168), or travel to **Sainshand** (p199) for a taste of the Gobi and a visit to **Khamaryn Khiid** (p202).



Eastern Mongolia is a perfect place for trailblazers. Very few tourists take this 2300km loop so you'll have the enormous steppes, fish-filled lakes and forests to yourself. The region is rich in wildlife and with a serious zoom camera you can photograph some fleet-footed gazelle.

TAILORED TRIPS

EAGLES, WOLVES AND GAZELLE, OH MY!

Patience, luck and a pair of binoculars are essential items for wildlife spotting in Mongolia. You're unlikely to see much on a quick tour but head out to the furthest reaches of the country and you'll be in for some surprises.

The plains of **Dornod** (p174) and **Sükhbaatar** (p180) aimags are home to hundreds of thousands of gazelle – their migrations can rival those on the Serengeti. A tripod and a lens of at least 600mm will come in handy if you're hoping to photograph them.

Khustain National Park (p115), 100km west of Ulaanbaatar, is home to dozens of *takhi* horses (Przewalski's horse – the world's only purely wild horse).

Southeast of here, at **Ikh Nart** (p198), you stand a good chance of spotting argali sheep. While in remote Gov-Altai aimag the **Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area** (p218) is home to wild asses, wild camels and Gobi bears.

Travel in northern **Khövsgöl** (p148) aimag and you will eventually spot wolf, fox and, with luck, the odd deer or moose.

Bird-watchers shouldn't miss Khetsuu Khad, an enormous rock on the southern shore of **Khyargas Nuur** (p242), where hundreds of cormorant birds roost in summer. Other great places to see birds include **Khar Us Nuur** (p235) in Khovd and in **Bayan-Ölgii** (p222) where Kazakhs keep eagles for hunting purposes.



BUDDHIST HERITAGE

After viewing UB's two exquisite monasteries, **Gandan Khiid** (p73) and **Chojjin Lama** (p75), take a short trip south near Zuunmod to see **Mandshir Khiid** (p106), located on a forested flank of Bogdkhan Uul. Add to the pilgrimage by traveling there on foot over the mountain from UB, a seven-hour hike.

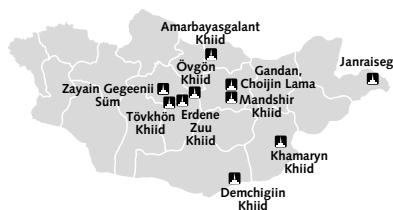
In the east of the country, the legacy of Buddhism is not a monastery at all but an enormous statue of **Janraisag** (p179) carved into the hillside in Dornod.

Heading west from UB, travel on a decent road to **Övgön Khiid** (p125), located at the foot of the pretty Khogno Khan Uul. From here you are just a couple of hours from Mongolia's oldest monastery, **Erdene Zuu Khiid** (p120).

From Erdene Zuu Khiid swing southwest to the lovely mountainside hermitage of **Tövkhön Khiid** (p124), where the famed Buddhist artist Zanabazar had a workshop and retreat.

Returning on the same road, proceed to Tsetslerleg and the **Zayain Gegeenii Süm** (p127), now converted into one of the country's nicest museums. Heading back east, visit the jewel in this class, **Amarbayasgalant Khiid** (p140).

With more time and a sturdy jeep, head into the Gobi for a special pilgrimage to the sights associated with the famed mystic monk Danzan Ravjaa, including **Khamaryn Khiid** (p202) and **Demchigiin Khiid** (p207).



On the Road



MICHAEL KOHN *Coordinating Author*

Our trekking guide to Tavan Bogd (p229) was a young Tuvan man named Ganbaatar. Despite not bringing any food, water or warm clothes, Ganbaatar led us into the mountains with storm clouds threatening overhead. When we reached the first glacier the clouds parted to reveal a spectacular amphitheatre of mountains and glaciers.

MY FAVOURITE TRIP

A man, an eagle and a horse, melded together into a medieval WMD; now that was something I had to see. This incredible hunting force, the 'eagle-hunter', could only be found in mystical Bayan-Ölgii and the hunt would only take place in winter. After a four-hour propeller-plane ride from Ulaanbaatar, I landed in Ölgii and proceeded west in -20°C temperatures to Altai Tavan Bogd National Park (p229), where I came to know half a dozen local men who proudly showed me their eagles. They invited me for the hunt and set me up with a horse to follow them as they scoured

the valleys and ravines for prey. By night we ate communal dinners of boiled sheep parts, and huddled around the stove to fend off the cold. Ten days and an equal number of numb toes later, I finally witnessed a kill – two golden eagles swooping down from the sky to converge on an unfortunate fox. I am no hunter myself but to be witness to an ancient rite that has not changed for a couple of millennia, and one even described by Marco Polo, was something truly spectacular.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael first arrived in Mongolia in late 1997, when he was hired to work at the *Mongol Messenger* in Ulaanbaatar. His three-year stint at the paper included freelance work for the Associated Press and BBC, a gig as a talk-show host on Mongol Radio, a starring role in a Mongolian film and a short run as a local TV news broadcaster. His travels have led him through all 21 aimags, occasionally by bicycle or in the back of a truck with sheep, and other times in helicopters or Humvees with politicians and diplomats. Michael's articles on Mongolian culture, politics and history have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *San Francisco Chronicle*. He is also the author of two books, *Dateline Mongolia* and *Lama of the Gobi*. Find him on the web at www.michaelkohn.us.



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