



# Central Mongolia

POP 274,100 / AREA 199,000 SQ KM

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## Best for Hiking

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## Why Go?

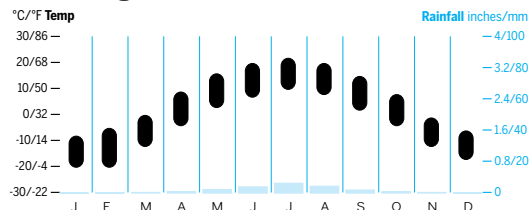
Roll out of Ulaanbaatar (UB) in a Russian jeep, or even just on a public bus, and you'll only need to put a hill or two between yourself and the city before the vast steppes of central Mongolia begin to unfold before your eyes.

Verdant swaths of empty landscapes are sprinkled with tiny gers (traditional yurts) stretching to the horizon while magical light plays across the valleys. This is the Mongolian heartland, loaded with both historical sites and natural beauty, with plenty of scope to horse trek in forested mountains, camp by pretty lakes or soak in hot springs.

Because the region is relatively close to Ulaanbaatar (and many sights are right beside the city), infrastructure is a little better than in other areas, with many places reachable by public transport. The most scenic sub-region is the Khangai Mountains, but you'll find beautiful scenery even if you only venture as far as Terelj.

## When to Go

### Tsetserleg



**Mid-Jul** Naadam festivals in many *sums* (districts) and aimag capitals.

**Aug** Good for horse treks, hiking and biking.

**Feb** Experience Tsagaan Sar (Mongolian New Year) with a family of herders.

## History

The many deer and 'animal-art' steles found in the valleys of Arkhangai aimag are evidence of tribal existence here around 1300 BC, but the region really came into its own in the 3rd century BC, when the nomadic Xiongnu set up a power base in the Orkhon valley. Various 'empires' rose and fell in the Xiongnu's wake, including the Ruan-Ruan, the Tujue and the Uighurs, who built their capital at Khar Balgas in AD 715. These Turkic-speaking peoples held sway over vast portions of inner Asia and harassed the Chinese (whose attempts to defend the Great Wall were never really successful). They had their own alphabet and left several carved steles that describe their heroes and exploits. The most famous is the Kul-Teginii Monument, located relatively close to Kharkhorin.

Chinggis Khaan and his merry men were only the latest in a string of political and military powers to use the Orkhon valley as a base. Chinggis never spent much time here, using it mainly as a supply centre for his armies, but his son Ögedei built the walls around Karakorum (near present-day Kharkhorin) in 1235, and invited emissaries from around the empire to visit his court.

Centuries after the fall of the Mongol empire it was religion, rather than warriors, that put the spotlight back on central Mongolia. Erdene Zuu Khiid (Buddhist monastery) was built from the remains of Karakorum and, with Manchu and Tibetan influence, Buddhism pushed the native shaman faith to the fringe of society.

## Getting There & Away

At the time of research, paved highways heading west and southwest from Ulaanbaatar had reached just beyond both Tsetserleg and Arvaikheer.

If you're travelling from western Mongolia to Ulaanbaatar, the route through Arkhangai is more interesting than the journey via Bayankhongor.

If you are travelling in the Gobi and heading towards northern Mongolia, go to Bayankhongor and pick up the scenic 210km road over the mountains to Tsetserleg. Local vehicles are rare on this route so it's best to have your own vehicle.

## Getting Around

Töv aimag has a network of good unpaved and paved roads, so you can easily use public transport to make day or overnight trips from the capital.

Further afield, you can also reach places such as Kharkhorin, Tsetserleg and Tariat by public bus.

Off the main paved roads, though, traffic is light. In Övörkhangaï, for example, you'll need your own transport to visit Tövkhön Khiid or Orkhon Khürkhee falls, and horse is the best way to reach Naiman Nuur.

Hitchhiking is relatively easy all along the main road from UB to Tariat, a route which takes in a number of worthwhile sights.

## TÖV

AREA 81,000 SQ KM / POP 88,889

The 'Central' province surrounds Ulaanbaatar, and its forested mountains offer a welcome escape from the city. Popular but picturesque Gorkhi-Terelj National Park is great for horse-trekking, hiking and camping, and it's only an hour or so away by bus! Further afield, you can spot *takhi* (wild horses) at Khustain National Park. For something a little surreal, check out the 40m-tall, silver statue of Chinggis Khaan outside Nalaikh.

## TӨВ

## Zuunmod

## Зуунмод

 01272, 7045 / POP 86,800 / ELEV 1529M

In great contrast to the big city on the other side of the mountain, Zuunmod is a peanut-sized place, even smaller than most Mongolian provincial capitals. There is little reason to linger in the capital of Töv but you'll probably pass through on the way to Mandshir Khiid in the Bogdkhan Uul Strictly Protected Area.

The main sight in town is the **Aimag Museum** (admission T1000; ☀ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm), about 200m beyond the bus stand, and opposite the southeast corner of the park – look for the sign in English. There are exhibits on local history and a section of stuffed animals including an enormous moose. It also has some interesting black-and-white photos of Mandshir Khiid, including the once-regular *tsam* (lama dances, performed by monks wearing masks during religious ceremonies).

A minibus runs on a paved road to Zuunmod (T2000, one hour, hourly, 8am and 8pm) from Ulaanbaatar's Dragon Avto Vaksal (p94). From the bus stand in Zuunmod, keep walking straight and the museum will be on your right. Mandshir Khiid is a pleasant 6km hike northeast of here (beyond the town and up to your left).