



Mongolian nomad



Nomad children



The inside of a ger tent

STEPPEING OUT

David Bannister discovers the majestic landscapes of a little-known land.

FACT FILE

A few places are still available on the 'Mongolian Odyssey' escorted small group tour, departing in late June 2006, priced at £2,325 for a 16 day trip. Please contact David on 01869 276 266 for details of this or a tailor-made trip to Mongolia.



WEB PLUS

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For more images of Mongolia's landscapes

As a schoolboy, I knew Mongolia only as a blank space on the map, a realm from where no news came and to which nobody travelled. As time went by I learned of the Gobi Desert and Genghis Khan's vast Mongol Empire but I still had no image of the land or the people. As it turns out, I had no idea what I was missing until I set out from London, bound for Beijing and onward to Mongolia, where I was to spend two weeks exploring the country.

The first traces of Mongolia can be found before entering the country – Beijing was founded by the Mongols, who in the 12th century ruled the largest land empire in history, covering all of China, most of Russia and all Asia north of the Himalayas. A short flight took me across the border to Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia's capital. Almost half of the country's two million inhabitants live here, in suburbs that often consist of felt 'ger' tents. The remainder of the population live a nomadic life in the outlying countryside.

My route through Mongolia started in the deep Gobi, a short flight south from Ulaan Baatar. From here on, travel would be overland, the ideal way to truly appreciate the fabulous variety of Mongolian landscapes. The Gobi is a land of arid plains stretching to the distant Gobi Altai

mountain range, dotted here and there by the ger tents of nomads and the cashmere goats they herd from horseback. Dune ridges run for hundreds of kilometres before petering out in the mountains, where deep canyons hold ice through the summer in spite of high temperatures. This area is part of the Gurvansaikhan National Park, and is home to many birds of prey and wild animals, including ibex, argali sheep and Gobi wolf.

From the Gobi we drove north, passing into the great steppe plains that stretch the length of Central Asia. Here was the ancient capital of Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire, Karakorum, its ruins now buried beneath a Buddhist monastery. In this central region the landscape is a sea of grass, studded with rock outcrops and horse herds, overhung by an endless expanse of blue – it is for good reason that Mongolia is known as 'Land of the Blue Sky'.

After the plains of Karakorum we continued north into the rolling grassy hills and deep river valleys of the Khangai mountains. The Khogno Khaan National Park here is home to volcanoes, hot springs, and the crystal clear Lake Terkhiin. From Terkhiin the roads lead to the shores of Khuvsgul, Mongolia's greatest lake, lying at the northern edge of the country where Siberian forests reach



The Steppe

south and cover the surrounding mountains. After Baikal across the border in Russia, Lake Khuvsgul is Asia's biggest lake and I ended my journey there, taking boat journeys, picnicking on pebble beaches and walking through the forests with the Tsataan people, a nomad group who still live in tepees and practise shamanism.

Throughout my journey I travelled overland in comfort, staying in ger-tent encampments that are best compared to African safari-camps. While Mongolia is supremely wild, it is not uncivilised. It's a country with a rich history, very hospitable people, a culture that has not changed in centuries and landscapes that defy belief. For me it was the landscapes that made the greatest impression – unspoilt, deserted, humbling in their scale and grandeur and varying hugely throughout the country. All these factors combined to make a journey that was rewarding in so many ways, and was certainly no hardship.

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Mongolia Specialist

