

MONGOLIA

Gobi Desert, Hustai, Karakorum & the Naadam Festival

13 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Ulaanbaatar

Today we arrive in Ulaanbaatar and transfer to our hotel.

Situated in the landlocked plateau of Central Asia between Russia and China, Mongolia covers a territory larger than that of Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy combined. Mongolia's considerable size comprises a great array of untouched landscapes, and a nomadic people whose lives in many ways are unchanged from the days of Genghis Khan and the mighty Mongol Empire. Here, the nomadic herders still depend on nature for survival, and treasure their open landscape and wide steppes!

Ulaanbaatar, also Ulan Bator or simply just UB, is the capital and, with a population of around 1,450,000, also the largest city in Mongolia. In fact, according to recent estimates, this means approximately 45% of the country lives here. Ulaanbaatar has a long history, and is only now undergoing an industrial revolution. As traditionalists, Mongolians love their capital. One part of the population lives in condominiums in the central part of the city while the majority of the population lives in what is called as ger districts. These districts, traditionally home to many of the city's blue and white collared workers, has recently also become a home to many migrating ex-nomads who in recent years have come to the city to find work after severe winters have killed their livestock.

Overnight in Ulaanbaatar.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Ulaanbaatar City Touring

This morning we visit Gandan Monastery, housing a 26-meter-high gilded statue of the Buddha. The 150 resident monks make the temples lively with plenty of chanting and ceremonies, and you may have the chance to take part in the morning chants. Gandan is the seat of Buddhism in Mongolia, and most of the temples and monasteries, along with their belongings, were destroyed during the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s.

Gandantegchinlen Khiid survived because the communists kept it as a showcase to impress foreigners. Roughly meaning 'the great place of complete joy', Gandan is one of Ulaanbaatar's most amazing sights. Within it are several glorious temples adorned with gold and jewels.

Here we visit the National Museum of Mongolia, which has a number of fascinating displays of traditional Mongolian clothing and weaponry, as well as exhibits charting the course of Genghis Khan's empire-building. The main square of Ulaanbaatar that has a statue of Genghis Khaan and Sukhbaatar – 2 national heroes of Mongolia.

We enjoy lunch at a Mongolian restaurant after which we visit the Bogd Khan's Palace Museum and the Buddha Park.

Overnight in Ulaanbaatar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Ulaanbaatar - the Ancient Capital Karakorum

This morning we head to the north through the green grasslands of Central Mongolia. We will visit a nomadic family, where we will see how the nomads produce dairy products such as Airgag – the famous Mongolian fermented horse milk drink. Today, approximately half of Mongolia's population is still roaming the vast plains living in their mobile ger camps and changing location several times a year. Nomadic life thrives in summer and just 'survives' during the winter. For centuries the Mongolian people have developed such qualities as strength and resilience that are essential for survival in this harsh nature. Over the past years the number of nomads has significantly decreased as many have moved to the capital city being compelled by the necessity to search for alternative means of subsistence.

We will reach Kharkhorin village in the early evening.

Overnight in Kharkhorin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 4 Karakorum Touring

Located in Outer Mongolia, Karakorum is a small settlement with a glorious past. The site of Karakorum may have been first settled about 750. In 1220 Genghis Khan, the great Mongol conqueror, established his headquarters there and used it as a base for his invasion of China. Despite its relatively small size, Karakorum was one of the most important cities in the history of the Silk Road. Although founded by Genghis Khan in 1220, Karakorum's development as capital of the Mongol Empire occurred in the 1230s under his son Ögedei.

Today we will visit the legendary monastery of Erdene Zuu. Founded in 1586, this was the first Buddhist monastery in Central Mongolia. In the afternoon we will visit the newly established Museum of Karakorum which provides a great introduction to Central Mongolia, its' history and the UNESCO world heritage site in the Orkhon River Valley.

This evening you will have the chance to watch and learn how the famous Mongolian dish, "khorkhog" is made.

Overnight in Kharkhorin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 5 Karakorum - Mongol Nomadic Heritage Camp (Via Hustai National Park)

This morning we travel towards the Hustai National Park with lunch at a Ger Camp along the way.

Along our route to the National Park we will stop at the Elsen Tasarkhai -- a picturesque combination of rocky mountains, green grasslands, pretty lakes and sand dunes. The Mongolian Government declared Hustai National Park as a Specially Protected Area in 1993 after the reintroduction of the Przewalski's horse (Dzungarian horse), a rare and endangered subspecies of wild horse. The park covers over 50 hectares of land and is home to many species of plants, lichens, moss and mushrooms. 44 species of mammals have been recorded here, including Mongolian gazelle, wild sheep, Ibex, Mongolian marmots and the Eurasian badger. Over 215 species of birds have been recorded in the park. In 2002 the National Park was designated as a UNESCO protected biosphere reserve.

We will visit the National Park Information Centre where we watch a documentary about the park and the Takhi wild horses. We also hope to have the chance to witness these beautiful wild horses and other wildlife in the wilderness, and we will enjoy a light hike in the surrounding area.

Overnight at Hustai National Park.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Terelj National Park

This morning we drive to the beautiful Terelj National Park. Along our route we will make a stop at the giant Genghis Statue - the newest landmark of Mongolia. To Mongolians Genghis Khan is a national hero, a larger-than-life figure and the symbol of Mongolian culture, and for good reasons. Genghis Khan founded the Mongol Empire, which became the largest contiguous empire in history, revived the Silk Road, united warring tribes and cemented the position of Mongols on the world's map. In 2008, a gigantic statue of Genghis Khan riding on horseback was erected on the bank of the Tuul River at Tsonjin Boldog, 54 km east of the Mongolian capital where, according to legend, he found a golden whip. The statue is 40 meters tall and wrapped in 250 tons of gleaming stainless steel.

The Terelj National Park is the third largest protected area in Mongolia, and one of the most beautiful places in the country. Today we will enjoy lunch at a Ger Camp in the Terelj, and then take part in a traditional Mongolian archery session with an archer or two. Afterwards we will visit the Turtle Rock and the Temple of Meditation, and enjoy some light walking/hiking in the wilderness.

Overnight at Terelj Lodge.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 7 Terelj - Ulaanbaatar Touring

This morning we will transfer back to Ulaanbaatar and begin our day with a visit to the newly-opened Genghis Khan Museum. Afterwards, we will enjoy some lunch at a local restaurant and then continue onto the Fine Art Museum. Late this afternoon we will transfer back to the hotel and enjoy some leisure time.

Overnight in Ulaanbaatar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Flight to the Gobi Desert - Yoliin Am Gorge & Khavtsgait Petroglyphs

After breakfast, we depart for our flight to the Gobi Desert. The Gobi, one of the world's great deserts, covers much of the southern part of Mongolia. Unlike the Sahara there are just a few sand dunes in the Gobi. Here you find large barren expanses of gravel plains and rocky outcrops. Many visitors regard the Gobi as a remote, exotic and mystical place. While it is some of those things, it is also mainly grass, shrubs and rocks. Oases and sand cover only about 3% of the desert. The word Gobi refers to a shallow, wide basin.

Upon arrival we drive to the glacial Yoliin Am Gorge. Our route passes the 'Three Beauties', the final peaks of the range, and then cuts through the range itself. Eagles overhead scour the desert for prey, while below families of nomads gather for felt-making or stand in groups beside their livestock at the scattered wells.

Yolinn (Yolyn) Am was first established to conserve the birdlife of the region, but today it is more famous for its dramatic rocky cliffs and narrow, heavily shaded canyons that allow sheets of blue-veined ice to survive well into the summer. Here we will walk in the narrow gorge where we hope for some wildlife sightings.

On the way back to camp, we visit the Khavtsgait petroglyph and have a bit of a walk in the area.

Dream Gobi Camp.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Naadam Festival in the Gobi Desert

After breakfast, we will transfer to the local Naadam Festival venue (1hr drive) to experience a full day of the Naadam Festival. This will feature the fabled wrestling, horse racing, archery and ankle bone shooting competitions of the Mongols. The Naadam Festival is a major Mongolian holiday and a wonderful time to experience the culture and people of this amazing land. The festival has its roots in the nomad wedding assemblies and hunting extravaganzas of the Mongol Army.

Locals from near and far wear their best clothes and ride their best horses or camels to attend the festival. This is a time for music, dancing and singing. It is not all about watching sporting events, as there is plenty to see and do outside -- food, music, crafts or just watching people and culture. This is the best time to see the Mongolian people!

NOTE: It is important to note that the games do not really operate on a strict schedule, but rather on a fluid basis that sometimes seems to be made up as they go along. Your local guide will have their "ear to the ground," however, and will be able to tailor our overall Naadam experience to maximize interest, though our days here may seem a little "on-the-fly."

Dream Gobi Ger camp.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 10 Khongor Sand Dunes & Oasis

This morning we enjoy a drive to the Khongor sand dunes -- Mongolia's largest and most beautiful sand dunes that stretch over 180km in the arid Gobi Desert. These isolated dunes are also known as the Duut Mankhan (Singing Dunes) from the sound that they make when the sand is moved by the wind or as it collapses in small avalanches.

Our drive to the dunes at Khongoriin takes us through vast desert badlands that span out into the furthest distances, where remote mountains line the horizon. Today there will be many opportunities to stop and take photographs of the landscapes and people. We will visit the sand dunes and enjoy a short camel ride (+/- 30 minutes) at a nomadic camel breeder's family.

We later head to a ger camp near the sand dunes in order to enjoy lunch.

You will have some free time at the dunes until the early evening when we return to the Dream Gobi camp for dinner.

Dream Gobi Camp.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 Cooking Class & Bayanzag Flaming Cliffs

After breakfast we visit a nomadic family for a cooking class and lunch. We will learn to prepare 2 kinds of Mongolian dishes -- steamed meat dumplings and potato salad/noodle soup at a local family in the Gobi Desert. This opportunity allows us a unique glimpse into the home life/lifestyle of a nomadic family; the experience will provide an education about the traditional Mongolian diet as well as the local 'food culture'.

Our class lasts about 3 hours, after which we watch a documentary about the Flaming Cliffs and their importance. We then drive for about 45-minutes and visit the cliffs! This is the place where American explorer Roy Chapman Andrews found dinosaur eggs for the first time. Here we enjoy the wilderness and witness the unique natural formations. There will be plenty of time for you to wander and explore, and we will enjoy a walk in the forest.

Dream Gobi camp.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 The Gobi Museum and Flight to Ulaanbaatar

After having breakfast and some leisure time, we will visit the Gobi Museum. Then, after having some lunch we will transfer back to the airport for our late afternoon flight to Ulaanbaatar. Upon arrival, we will have our farewell dinner.

Overnight in Ulaanbaatar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 13 Departure

Departure from Ulaanbaatar.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast