



Mongolia: Steppes, Deserts & Nomads - Nadaam Festival Trip

Notes

Ways to Travel: Guided Group **16 Days** Flight Inclusive
Destinations: Mongolia **15 Days** Land only

Programmes: Culture



Leisurely / Moderate

18 Min age

Trip Overview

1 July 2018 (30 June 2018 ex-London) Itinerary

Rolling steppe make way to stark desert; small nomadic ger camp pepper this vast land where camels and goats are herded on horseback, fermented mare's milk is the tipple of choice, sand dunes are known to 'sing' and the first intact dinosaur eggs were found. Genghis Khan went forth from here on horseback to conquer the biggest land empire in history and, to this day, Buddhist and Animist traditions mix. In July, all over the country, people come together to compete in wrestling, archery, horse-racing and ankle bone flicking during the Naadam Festival but traditions can be witnessed throughout the year. We travel through steppe, mountain and the Gobi desert exploring the nature and culture of this fascinating, yet little known, country.

(for 8 July - 7 July ex-London - click here ([/ca/mongolia-holidays/culture/mongolia-steppes-deserts-nomads-nadaam-festival/acmb-10564](https://ca/mongolia-holidays/culture/mongolia-steppes-deserts-nomads-nadaam-festival/acmb-10564)))

At a Glance

- 6 nights hotel, all en suite, 8 nights ger camps
- Travel by 4WD vehicle, bus and one internal flight
- Some long drives through very remote country
- Also Eagle Festival and non-festival departures

Trip Highlights

- The spectacularly varied Mongolian landscape - vast rolling steppe, mountains and deserts
- Sleep in traditional style ger camps (Mongolian tents)
- Karakorum, the ancient capital of the Mongol Empire
- The rolling sand dunes and landscape of the Gobi desert
- One of the last remaining nomadic cultures in the world
- Wrestling, archery, horse-riding and bone-flicking at the Nadaam Festival

Is This Trip for You?

Mongolia is 6.5 times larger than the UK but with a population 21 times smaller. Understandably this means that large tracts of the country do not have much infrastructure. Much of our time is spent in areas where roads are barely tracks through the landscape. On this trip we go further into the wilderness than the average visitor to Mongolia and whilst this allows us to travel through stunning parts of the country, encountering few people other than the odd nomad, it does mean that some days involve long and bumpy drives. These drives are balanced out with some downtime to relax and just take in the incredible surroundings or often, with the option of going for a walk or even, at times a horse or camel ride. There are some scheduled hikes, looking for wild Taki horses, visiting the Singing sand dunes, Vulture canyon or the Flaming cliffs, for instance. These are relatively short, no more than one or two hours on mostly flat or undulating terrain. The Flaming Cliffs hike may not be recommended if you have an acute fear of heights and can involve some scrambling, however it's possible to still enjoy great views of the cliffs and opt out of the walk. The climate in central Mongolia is generally pleasant in summer when the trip runs.

In the Gobi Desert, however, temperatures can get well above 30°C, even approaching 40°C. This is a trip that goes off the 'tourist trail' and comes to the encounter of local nomads. It takes us through spectacular and diverse wilderness and gives us an insight into a fascinating country unlike any other.

Group

The trip is led by a local tour leader who will also be accompanied by an experienced Mongolian guide. Other trip staff will include drivers and local assistants as needed.

Adult min age: 18

Min group size: 4 Max

group size: 16

Itinerary

Land Only Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Ulaan Baatar.

Start in Ulaan Baatar. Those not travelling with the group from London will join us at the hotel. The scheduled flights normally arrive early evening. People who arrive early in Ulaan Baatar can explore some of the city's sites including UB's main square: Sukhbaatar Square, the National Museum and the landmark State Department Store.

Day 2

To Khustain Nuruu N.P.; trek to see Przewalski's horses; overnight in ger camp.

Before leaving UB we visit the Gandan Monastery, the largest functioning lamasery in Mongolia and the seat of Buddhist studies in the country. Here we may see monks praying and the 20m gold and bronze statue of Migjid Janraisig.

We then drive on the main road westwards towards Karakorum, making a detour to the Khustain Nuruu National Park, 2 hours west of Ulaan Baatar. Khustain Nuruu is famous for the re-introduction of Mongolia's wild horse. The Takhi Horse (also known as the Przewalski's horse) was once native to Mongolia and almost became extinct earlier in the 20th century. Through the efforts of several Mongolian and international organizations, these magnificent wild horses now roam in the steppes of the national park once again. We will visit the Project Information Centre and take a guided hike to see the wild horses. Tonight will be our first night staying in gers, traditional Mongolian felt tents.

Ger Camp

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 3

To Karakorum; visit Erdene Zuu Monastery.

Today we continue on our drive to the 13th century capital of the Mongol Empire - Karakorum - making a brief stop to see the dunes of the Little Gobi along the way. . Karakorum was established by Ogedei Khan and remained the Mongols power base until Khublai Khan established Beijing as the capital. Erdene Zuu (Hundred Treasures) monastery was the largest Monastery in Mongolia, built in 1586 under the direction of Abtai Khan on the ruins of the ancient capital. Much of the monastery was destroyed during Stalin's purges of the 1930's, but an impressive wall with 108 stupas and a number of temples still remain. After lunch, we visit the monastery, the modern Karakorum

Museum and the surrounding area **Ger**

Camp

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 4

Along northern edge of Gobi Desert to Arvaikheer via Shankh Monastery.

We continue along the paved road to Arvaikheer, the capital of Ovorkhangai Aimag on the northern edge of the Gobi Desert. On the way we will visit the Shankh Monastery, once the home of the great Mongolian theologist Zanabazar. We should arrive at Arvaikheer during the middle of the afternoon and check in to our hotel. In the afternoon there will be time to visit the local museum, which contains nature collections, stone figures and Turkic scripts and possibly go to a local market. **Arvaikheer Palace Hotel or similar, Standard Hotel**

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 5

To Bayan Gobi via Mt Ikh Bogd.

Today is a long day as we head properly off the tourist route into some of the wilder parts of the Gobi Desert. After an early breakfast we start our journey and rapidly leave the tarmac behind. The landscape changes as we head deeper into the Gobi and the majestic Ikh Bogd Mountain should be visible in the distance, the highest mountain in the Gobi Altai Mountain Range. Eventually, after about 9 hours travelling (with stops) we will arrive at our Ger Camp in the wilderness. This is the longest day's driving but is also a definite highlight of the trip as we pass through some of Mongolia's most spectacular scenery. **Ger Camp**

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 6

Cross the Gobi via White Cave.

After going over a desert pass and visiting the quartz rich 'White Cave' our journey continues through classic Gobi desert scenery of flat stony plains mixed with small rocky outcrops and patches of sand across the Khatan Suudal Steppe. We stop for a picnic lunch on the way, with views of Arts Bogd mountain to the north. We head off to the Kongoriin Els sand dunes and arrive there in the late afternoon.

Ger Camp

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 7

Visit 'singing' sand dunes, the largest dunes in Mongolia.

We have a full day to explore the sand dunes and surrounding area. The Khongoriin Els stretch for 200km and are as high as 300m in places. They are known as the 'Singing Dunes' because of the beautiful sound that resonates through the dunes on a windy day. The South Gobi has 100,000 camels, typically used by herders for transportation of their gers. We will have the opportunity today to visit a camel breeding family and get a glimpse of the way of life of the nomadic herders of these parts.

Ger Camp

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 8

Travel through rocky plains of Gobi Gurvansaikhan N.P.

This morning we will drive through the Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park. Gobi Gurvansaikhan means 'Three Beauties of the Gobi' and this range marks the eastern end of the Gobi Altai mountain range. The park's landscape is extremely varied, with rocky and sandy desert plains, precipitous cliffs and ravines, salt pans and oases. We visit a spectacular natural sight of this region - Yolyn Am. Yolyn Am means Vulture's Mouth and is a canyon so deep and narrow that even in the height of summer winter ice can remain on the valley floor. This region is also renowned for the diversity of its wildlife and many endangered species can be found here, including Khulan, Ibex, Argali and elusive Snow leopards. We visit a local museum and explore the canyon before transferring to a nearby ger camp for dinner and overnight.

Ger Camp

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 9

Hiking around the 'Flaming Cliffs' of Bayanzag.

Today we have time to relax in our luxury ger camp. Either in the morning or afternoon we take a short drive to Bayanzag (70 km). Known as the Flaming cliffs, the red/ochre colour can be striking and we have the opportunity for a short hike amongst colourful sands of red, yellow and orange. Bayanzag is a world-renowned dinosaur fossil exploration site, discovered in the 1920s by Mongolian and American palaeontologists. We are free to explore the region and may even be lucky enough to spot dinosaur fossils. We later return to our ger camp.

Ger Camp

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 10

Fly to Ulaan Baatar.

We leave the Gobi Desert behind and fly back to Ulaan Baatar. Depending on what time our flight is will determine what time we get back to Ulaan Baatar. **Bayangol Hotel or similar, Comfortable Hotel**

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Days 11-12 Naadam Festival

The Naadam Festival celebrates the 'three games of men' (or Erin Gurvan Naadam) which are wrestling, horse-racing and archery. More recently a fourth game, knuckle-bone flicking was added to the competitions. The festival is celebrated throughout the country but the biggest festival is in Ulaan Baatar.

Over the next two days we attend the grand opening ceremony before we watch Mongolians compete in all four sports. We also get to mingle with hordes of Mongolian spectators as the grounds around the stadium (where wrestling, archery and bone-flicking takes place) and the horse races are filled with stands selling food, games, flags and various other things.

The atmosphere is a big part of the experience and many Mongolians dress in their best traditional clothes for the occasion.

In 2010 the festival was entered into the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list and is great celebration of the Central Asian nation's culture. **Bayangol Hotel or similar, Comfortable Hotel**

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 13 Terelj National Park; Genghis statue; Ulaan Baatar

We leave Ulaan Baatar and head for Terelj National Park.

Terelj National Park is a large protected area of green mountain meadows filled with edelweiss and other wild flowers. The contrast to the Gobi Desert is striking and it feels like being in a different country.

We visit the Tibetan-style Aryabala temple, a meditation centre located on a mountain side with sweeping views over the national park. As we follow the walk up to the temple there are inspirational sayings on placards every few steps. The climb to the temple is not difficult but does involve many steps and can be tiring.

Tonight we have our final night sleeping in a ger.

Ger Camp

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 14

Return to Ulaan Baatar.

As we make our way back to the city we visit the giant Genghis Khan statue at Tsonjin Bolog. Standing 40m tall, the statue depicts the Mongolian ruler astride his horse and sits atop the visitor's centre (itself 10m tall). It is possible to climb up onto the horse's head to get a closer look of Genghis Khan's face.

This afternoon there should be some free time for some last minute shopping or site-seeing.

Bayangol Hotel or similar, Comfortable Hotel

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 15

End Ulaan Baatar.

End Ulaan Baatar

Meals included: Breakfast

Accommodation

Hotels & Ger Camps



We use hotels in Ulaan Baatar and Arvaikheer and ger camps elsewhere. Gers are similar to yurts, generally airy and comfortable with beds and, normally, a stove (though in the summer the stoves are not normally needed). The bathrooms are normally shared and all have hot water (however due to the remoteness of the camps this can, at times be erratic). Many of the ger camps now have 24hr electricity in the ger itself for charging batteries. If there is no charging facility inside the ger itself then there are charging facilities in the common area (though this may during limited periods of the day only when the generator is turned on). There will normally be no more than two people per ger, however in some cases, due to availability issues we may need to have triples in the ger. There may also be rare occasions when a single cannot be guaranteed in a particular ger camp. Single supplement from 1,140.00 CAD

Food & Transport

Eating & Drinking

Traditional Mongolian diets are very meat and dairy heavy. Whilst there will be opportunities to try some of these products such as dry-curd and fermented mare's milk, the meals provided in the ger camps are generally western meals, at times with an Asian influence. There will normally be some form of soup and salad as well as a main course and desert. Vegetarians are generally well catered for, if you are vegetarian or have other dietary requirements please make sure to inform us in advance. Breakfasts can vary from place to place, some are buffet style whilst others are set, normally cereal, bread and possibly a hot dish will be provided. On some days a pack lunch will be provided, this is often still a proper meal (though without the soup). Water is provided and will generally be from 5L water-containers so make sure to bring a water bottle to decant into. Tea, coffee, soft drinks, beer, vodka and (most of the time) wine are available to buy at the ger camps. There is opportunity to buy snacks in Ulaan Baatar and on a couple other occasions along the way when we drive through towns or villages.

Transportation

We travel around in a convoy of 4WD vehicles as we make our way around central Mongolia and the Gobi Desert. These are generally 6-seater (including the driver) vehicle but we normally will use them for 4 passengers (plus the driver). Driving in the wilderness can be hard going on the vehicles and they sometimes may get a puncture or may need to be cooled down from overheating so please come with an open mind. We may also use a coach for getting around Ulaan Bator and Terelj National Park. We also use one internal flight.

Weather & Seasonality

When to go

July and August are summer months and daytime temperatures should be a pleasant 20degC in Ulaan Baatar and central regions. Temperatures can reach a maximum of 33degC in the capital and 35degC in the Gobi desert in July and although the average is lower, clients should expect some very warm weather.

Weather Information

July and August are summer months and daytime temperatures should be a pleasant 20°C in Ulaan Baatar and central regions. Temperatures can reach a maximum of 33°C in the capital and high 30s in the Gobi desert in July and although the average is lower, clients should expect some very warm weather. Evening temperatures are uniformly 15 to 20°C. Humidity is very low. These months are also the wet season and over a trip of this duration you should expect some rain but showers are not normally long lasting and the total rainfall during this period is very low. (June - 28mm, July - 76mm & August - 51mm).