

# *The* LIGHT *fantastic*

Head to the Altai Mountains of West Mongolia for natural splendour, nomadic hospitality and swirling, luminous skies

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**Leading light**

The cloud-piercing light illuminates the yurts outside the *sum* (district) centre of Delüün with the main Altai ridge in the distance

## ‘I sought somewhere remote, where no-one understood the phrase ‘Instagrammability’

It was early evening in the Chigertei Valley when I found myself standing on a weathered buttress, cheering the sudden onset of clouds. A fresh weather-front was barreling in over the Altai massif, and now the clouds were pluming at the mountaintops, some of them wispy and translucent, others dark and throwing shadows, draping columns of rain. By now I understood what this foreshadowed.

Soon, the cloud-cover would fracture the dusk light, and sunbeams would daub chiaroscuro patterns on the land, transmuting the grasslands into prairies of gold. Far away, on the valley floor, smoke spiralled from yurt chimneys; a pair of boy-herders chivvied their sheep alongside a stream. But these were pin-pricks of humanity on a floodplain big enough to swallow Manhattan. Up here, I felt certain, the only sentient beings sharing this vantage with me were the snow leopards padding unseen on the ridgelines, and the raptors wheeling in the sky.

If you had questioned me on the Heathrow tarmac about my reasons for visiting Western Mongolia, I'm not sure I'd have been able to answer without sounding absurdly gauzy or grandiose. A couple of weeks before my trip, the world marked the 50th anniversary of the first Apollo moon landing. Neil Armstrong famously described the lunar surface as a “magnificent desolation.” That phrase approximated the palliative I sought: somewhere remote and unmarked, where humanity's incursion felt transitory, and no-one understood the phrase ‘Instagrammability’. Short of paying Musk or Branson several million dollars to visit outer space, West Mongolia, where the Altai Mountains provide a sublime backdrop to the most sparsely populated country in the world, seemed as good a bet as any.

But before flying westwards, photographer Marcus and I had arrived in Ulaanbaatar. Here shanties of *gers*, Mongolia's ubiquitous yurts, proliferated under the fumes of coal-plant smokestacks while new skyscrapers, assembled from the profits of the extractive industries, principally copper, glistened on the skyline.

On the advice of Jan Wigsten, a Swedish-born doyen of adventure travel in Mongolia, we'd opted to spend our week in the Khovd *aimag* (province), abutting the Chinese border. Jan said the mountainous west promised something more untouched than the better-known tourist spots around Ulaanbaatar, albeit one mostly populated by ethnic Kazakhs, herders who had migrated across the Altai Mountains over the course of the 19th century.

“It isn't really site-specific,” Jan had told me. “It's just a wonderful place to get lost in the great Mongolian void.” Void, meaning ‘vacancy; empty space.’ It wouldn't take long to realise that Jan was rather underselling it.

### Provincial life

The sharp-nosed Embraer aircraft touched down in Khovd, the provincial capital, in the early afternoon. There to greet us were driver Nurbat, and Berdigul, a grandmotherly figure in a pink cardigan, who also happened to be a polyglot, and a sage and patient guide.

Our ultimate destination was Delüün, a four-hour drive over pastel steppelands, first on the smooth new road built by the Chinese as part of their Belt and Road initiative, later on the unsealed tyre tracks that wove towards the main Altai massif. Dwarfed by its environs, overlooked by the magnificent saddle of Ikh Yamaat (also known as ‘Big Goat’ mountain), Delüün appeared like a tiny outpost in the vastness of a wide plain. But it turned out to be a supine town of 4,000 people, its dust-blown aspect enlivened by bright metal roofs in blue, pink and green. The high-street consisted of two shops, and a low-ceilinged restaurant where we would end up eating half our bodyweight in mutton dumplings.

We stayed in a wide, crumbly building where the friendly owner, Yelik, a national park ranger, had converted parts of the upstairs into guestrooms with gaudy throws and golden wallpaper. ►



**In plain view**  
Mongol horses grazing in a valley between Khovd and Delüün



**Moonlight on the plains**  
Kazakh girl Aisaule – which translates as ‘Moonlight’ – rides a horse in the Chigertei Valley; (right) driver Nurbat enjoys some traditional Kazakh hospitality

*‘Your gaze might be drawn to a distant ger, but then the plains would be empty again’*



◀ “And we have a Russian sauna!” Yelik said, pointing at an outhouse as we collected the bags from the car.

### Following the herd

Over the coming days, we typically set out after an early breakfast, and barrelled into one of the broad valleys radiating out from Deüün. There was seldom much of a firm plan or definite destination. Nurbat seemed to just direct the Landcruiser at a compass point and drive, sending ground squirrels and marmots scurrying for their burrows.

Our main zone of exploration was the Chigertei National Park, a lattice of floodplains spilling down from the main Altai watershed. As we grew accustomed to the rhythms of the valleys, we learned that the best time to visit local Kazakh encampments was in the mid-afternoon, after the bustle of the morning and before the women went out in the evening to milk their yak and goat herds.

Encounters with local herders followed a ritualistic pattern. The first, at an agglomeration of gers at the head of Gants Mod Valley, set the tone. We drove up, and our approach sent children scampering ahead to notify the adults. Nurbat hopped out, sparked one of his slender Korean cigarettes and instantly lubricated proceedings, because Nurbat seemed to have some connection – either social or familial – to everyone. After some handshakes, we were invited into a Kazakh ger, larger than its Mongolian counterpart, and more ornamental, with vibrant embroidery draping the walls, and talismans made of eagle owl feathers hanging from the ceiling. The women festooned the floor with sweets and *aarul*, a sun-dried curd, as three or four generations gathered to drink bowls of buttery tea. Then Nurbat and Berdigul were drawn into a protracted discussion about the latest news, while Berdigul offered commentary on the side in a hushed tone.

“They are asking, ‘How was the winter.’”

“He is asking, ‘How are the sheep?’”

“She is asking why Nurbat missed their

daughter’s wedding.” (Poor Nurbat always seemed to be getting into trouble for things like this.)

This went on at least ten minutes before our hosts even broached the subject of what the two lanky white men waving clownishly at the baby were doing way out here.

The nomadic pastoralism of the local Kazakh herders is arguably the most authentic vestige of a lifestyle once practised in various iterations from here to Hungary. The Stalinist famines and coercive industrialization that benighted Kazakhstan in the mid-20th century meant that nothing like it survived in their homeland. Sure, most gers now had a solar panel or car battery to power a single bulb, and the camels, two-humped Bactrians once employed to transport camps and commodities, had been supplanted by trucks; now the camels ambled about the plains in semi-retirement, mostly farmed for their wool. But in the main the local habit of moving livestock with the seasons, at once impermanent and deeply venerable, had changed little since the days of the Great Khans. Often, on Berdigul’s bidding, we pulled over to find petroglyphs of animals carved onto a slate outcropping, or engravings of ibex on shafts of rock, so-called ‘deer stones’, lodged upright in the ground. Burial mounds, scattered with boulders and yak-skull votives, marked the graves of Bronze Age chieftains.

Despite all the evidence of current and former human presence, the valleys still permitted moments of exquisite isolation. Bundling along the remoter tracks, your gaze might be drawn to a distant ger, or a solitary truck dragging a halo of dust. But then the plains would empty again, and the sense of being the only people for miles around made your heart soar.

Under certain conditions, Mongolia’s outback felt less like solid earth than it did a series of moods, like the ripples of a cuttlefish’s skin-pigments transposed onto land. Marooned far from the moderating effect of any ocean, the ▶

**Hump day**  
A Bactrian camel  
herd near Delüün,  
with Ikh Yamaat  
mountain behind





**Eagle-eyed**  
Khuanitkhan, a Kazakh eagle hunter, shows off his golden eagle near the head of Chigertei; (below) a boy inside a Kazakh yurt with typical sweets and snacks on the floor

◀ country has a similar latitude to London but an average temperature more akin to Anchorage. Combined with the elevation – Delüün was 2,000m above sea-level, the surrounding mountains double that – the geography provoked temperamental high-pressure systems and swirling, luminous skies.

### To the skies

For this week in August, the weather was a relentless incantation. At times, the clouds would close ranks, grow monotonous. At others, the sky would clear entirely, washing out the mountains in glare. These were the moments to rest your eyelids, because you soon came to understand that it was only a matter of time before whatever old gods held dominion over this place would re-stir the atmosphere to conjure something new. Sometimes, I would turn to Berdigul to express my amazement, and she would smile and shrug, as if to imply that this kind of phantasmagoria was the most normal thing in the world.

On our third afternoon, we went walking on the windward wall of the main Chigertei plain. Down below, a braided river glimmered in the low sun,

and stick figures could be seen, legs apart, swinging body-length scythes to collect tall grass for the winter hay stocks. Towards the neck of the valley, patches of larch forest mosaicked the inclines. A day earlier, at the national park office in Delüün, Yelik had shown me footage of wolverines taken by camera-traps in these forests. Nearby, the same technology was being used to monitor snow leopards up on the high ridges.

The woodland, when we delved into it, felt pre-human. There was no sign of wood-chopping up here; tree-cover is so sparse in the Altai that herders rely on a more readily available resource – their livestock's dried dung – for fuel. I was just pondering this pleasing idiosyncrasy when a sudden flurry of movement erupted behind us, and a black kite harrumphed into the sky, where it circled above the trees to shriek its displeasure. We found its meal, a marmot's head, sitting half-eaten on a stone. We soon left, and I couldn't shake the feeling that we had trespassed somewhere sacred, best left undisturbed.

The next day we got much closer to a bird of prey, though this one was larger, and its ankle was roped to a gauntleted hand. Thickset, leather-



*'A black kite harrumphed into the sky, where it circled above us to shriek its displeasure'*

jacketed, and with the face of a boxer, Khuanitkhan had suspended the day's hay collection to show us his golden eagle. Like some other Kazakh herders, he used her to hunt foxes in the winter. It's an age-old practice that has achieved recognition thanks to documentaries like *The Eagle Huntress*, and the BBC's *Human Planet*, and which is now being re-popularised, in part because of its potential as a magnet for cultural tourism. Over 1,000 people, many of them curious visitors, attended the Golden Eagle Festival in Bayan-Ulgii last October.

Slipping a hood back over her head, Khuanitkhan invited me to don the glove. Fearful of causing offence, I agreed, but I felt saddened by the feel of the talons pummelling the thick leather. It was clear from the way she kept unfurling her wings that she was desperate to fly. On an island further down in the stream, a younger eagle, freshly netted, was tethered to a boulder. Now and then, Khuanitkhan's eldest son would wade over to offer it meat, bonding the bird to its captor.

It was the one discordant note in a culture that otherwise exhibited an admirable symbiosis with the world around it. In my reverie, I had to keep reminding myself that the splendour of this place might pall in the depths of winter. Even now, it was cold in the night, and in a few short months the idyllic lakes would freeze from surface to floor. The sight of the herders' squat winter huts, which conjured images of families hunkered inside a single room for months on end, made me shudder.

However, if my impressions were coloured by a westerner's romanticism, it was only ever a reflection of the native sensibility. The people had nature-inspired names like Aisaule (meaning "Moonlight") and Chuluunbaatar ("Stone Hero"). Nurbat, who often looked hangdog despite his ribald humour, was at his happiest when we took a detour to 'say hello to his cows.'

As I reached the end of my time in West Mongolia, I was just grateful to be reassured that living within the boundaries set by nature is a thing not entirely beyond our ken, at least until China's steamrollers pressed on to Delüün.



Over the course of the week, I hardly saw a shred of litter, or any other tourists, or experienced any grief whatever. No-one responded to our intrusion into this remote world with anything other than warmth and generosity.

On our last day, taking the long-route back to Khovd along a steep-sided gorge, we dropped in to a ger camp one final time. Inside, over tea, I watched a ten-year-old boy in a Superman cap look through photos on Marcus' phone. Face glowing from its proximity to the screen, he chirruped with delight at images of Maasai tribesmen in Kenya, and walrus in the Arctic. A picture of a Botswanan bull-elephant made him jump from his seat.

"He has never seen these things before," Berdigul said. For the first time in ages, I understood the feeling well. ▶

**Nomadic lifestyle**  
(from top) The Chigertei River; aarul, a curd snack, dries on the roof of a truck; snapper Marcus shows travel images to a family



# Footnotes

## West Mongolia

### THE TRIP

Similar itineraries to the one described by the author can be arranged through the high-end tour operator **360 Degrees Mongolia** (+46 498 487105; 360degreesmongolia.com). Their 11-day *Altai Mountains and West Gobi* itinerary, which includes all transfers, food, hotels and mobile luxury yurt camps, starts from £4,425 per person. They also offer bespoke journeys throughout the rest of Mongolia.

Other companies arranging tours in the Altai Mountains region includes Nomadic Journeys, widely recognised as Mongolia's sustainable tourism pioneer. (nomadicjourneys.com; +976 11 330360)

### Vital statistics

**Capital:** Ulaanbaatar  
**Population:** 3.25 million  
**Language(s):** Mongolian, Kazakh, Russian  
**Time:** GMT +8  
**International dialling code:** +976  
**Visas:** One-month tourist visas can be applied for in person at the Mongolian embassy in London. Applications are usually processed within five days and cost £40.  
**Money:** Mongolian Tögrög or Tughrik (MNT), currently around 3,554 MNT to the UK£. ATMs and bureau de changes are available upon arrival at Chinggis Khaan



### WHAT TO BRING FOR NOMADS

**If you are welcomed into a nomadic family's home, it is customary to reciprocate hospitality with small gifts. Useful items include torches and AA or AAA batteries.**



**Home sweet home**  
 A family pack their gers onto a truck; (above) constructing a Kazakh ger in the Chigertei Valley

International Airport in Ulaanbaatar. ATMs are commonplace in provincial capitals, but travel with cash (preferably USD) in case of power outages.

### When to go

**March-April:** Nomadic herders move livestock out onto the steppe for summer. April in particular is dry and dusty, with strong winds.

**May and September-October:** Travel to most areas is usually possible in the shoulder months.

**June-August:** Most tourists visit Mongolia in the summer, when day-time temperatures hover around 20°C. Rains sweeping in from early July through August bring respite from the winter dry, and make for incredible skylscapes. Bring rainproof and layered clothing as nights can be chilly.

**November-February:** Winter sees very few visitors. Temperatures in Ulaanbaatar can drop below -30°C.

### Health & safety

Hepatitis A and Tetanus are usually advised (fitfortravel.nhs). Others to consider include Hepatitis B, typhoid, rabies and tick-borne encephalitis. The summer rains bring mosquitoes to the western plains, especially around the shores of lakes, so bring repellent.

### Getting there

There are no direct flights between the UK and Mongolia, so most visitors will fly from London to Ulaanbaatar via Europe. Regular services are available with **Aeroflot** via Moscow (aeroflot.ru; 0800



026 0033) and **Turkish Airlines** via Istanbul (turkishairlines.com; 020 7471 6666). Fares tend to start from around £600 return, with the shortest journey time around 12 hours. Cheaper fares are often available with **Air China** via Beijing (airchina.co.uk; 00800 86 100 999) though flight times are longer.

If you have time, consider taking the **Trans-Siberian Express**, which takes four days to traverse the 4,634km between Moscow and Ulaanbaatar (trainsrussia.com). Expect to pay around £340 for a second-class berth, one-way.

### Getting around

Vast distances and an **underdeveloped road network** means most travellers will need to take one or two internal flights. The two main domestic carriers are **Aero Mongolia** (aeromongolia.mn; +976 7010 3030) and **Hunnu Air** (hunnuair.com; +976 7000 1111). Both offer regular flights to several provincial capitals, including Ölgii and Khovd (both two to three hours, from around £130 return).

### Cost of travel

Vast distances and scarce public transport options can make travelling too far from Ulaanbaatar difficult for independent travellers. Most local group tours cost from £120 to £200pp per day.

### Accommodation

Ulaanbaatar has accommodation to suit most tastes and budgets, from hostels like **Top Tour Guesthouse** (toptoursmongolia.com; +976 9900 1041; dorms from £6) to ►

## West Mongolia Highlights

### 1 Altai Tavan Bogd National Park

This national park, due west of Ölgii, sits in the shadow of Tavan Bogd Uul, Mongolia's highest mountain, which straddles the Mongolia-Russia-China border. Home to flocks of Siberian ibex and some of the country's best petroglyphs.

### 2 Khovd (city)

The *aimag* (province) of Khovd's capital of the same name is the gateway to the southern Altai, and an inevitable stop-off for travellers stocking up on supplies before heading

into the mountains. The Khovd Aimag Museum contains some interesting petroglyphs and ethnographic curios.

### 3 Khar Us Nuur National Park

An hour's drive south-east from Khovd, this national park encircles three connected lakes, which are a magnet for migrating bird-life. The sand dunes near Lake Dörgön mark the northern boundary of the Gobi Desert. The park's vast steppelands are home to elusive saiga, a type of antelope known for its fleshy nose.

### 4 The Eagle Festival

An increasingly popular draw for tourists since its establishment in 2000, Ölgii's annual eagle festival celebrates Kazakh herders' unique method of hunting with golden eagles. The event usually takes place in late September/early October. Accommodation in the area is limited, so booking at least one year ahead is advisable.

### 5 Chigertei National Park

A network of valleys, spreading east from the *sum* (district) centre of Delüün, Chigertei

incorporates part of the Altai Mountains bordering the Chinese state of Xinjiang. You will need a border-line permit to visit; these can be arranged by your tour agency, or through the national park office in Delüün.

### 6 Nadaam Festival

Mongolia's largest cultural festival is centred on the three national sports of horse-racing, wrestling and archery. It is held in and around Ulaanbaatar on 10-12 July every year. However, most western *sums* (districts) host their own smaller versions throughout the summer.

◀ international hotels like **The Blue Sky** ([hotelbluesky.mn](http://hotelbluesky.mn); doubles from around £95 per night).

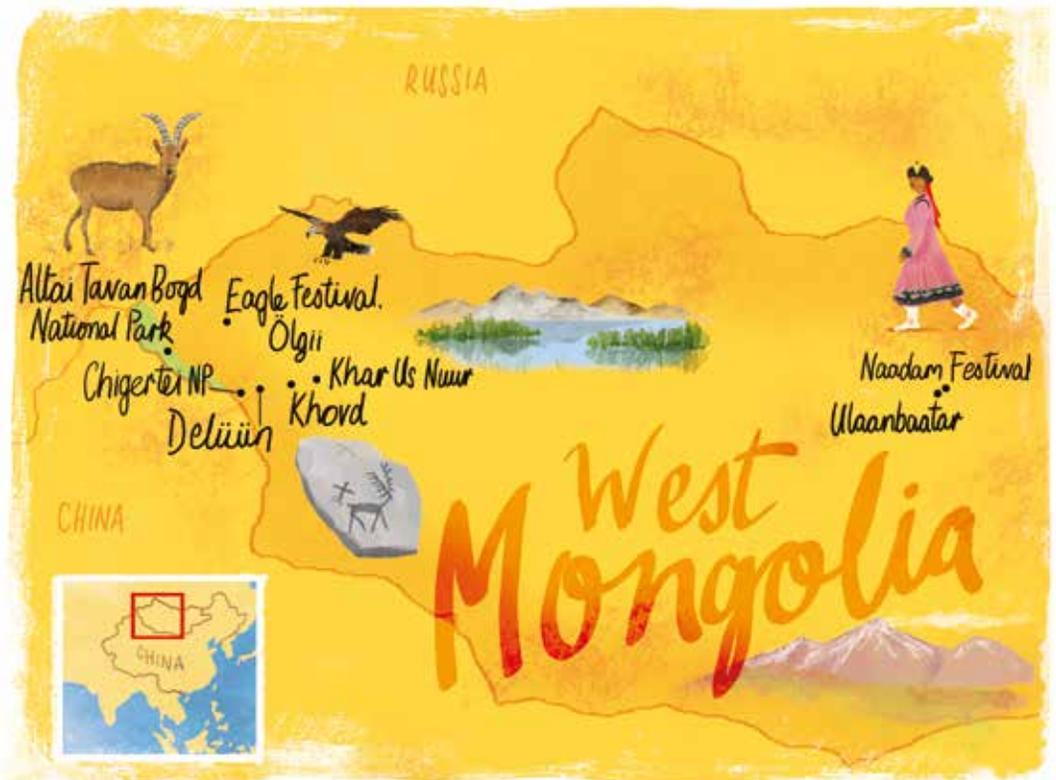
The new **Steppe Hotel** ([facebook.com/SteppeHotel](https://www.facebook.com/SteppeHotel); +976 7043 9999; doubles from £45) is the stand-out option in the city of Khovd.

Several tour companies have yurt camps set up in the summer, in particular in the steppelands around Ulaanbaatar, like Jalman Meadows, in the Tuul River Valley, run by **Nomadic Journeys** ([nomadicjourneys.com](http://nomadicjourneys.com); +976 11 330360), where a four-day tour costs \$700pp (£538). Only the higher-end **360 Degrees Mongolia** ([360degreesmongolia.com](http://360degreesmongolia.com); +46 498 487105) has mobile camps that can be erected and dismantled in different locations.

### Food & drink

Most towns and *aimag* (tribe) capitals will have one or two *ganz*, simple restaurants serving traditional staples like *buuz* (mutton dumplings) and *shuulte khool* (mutton broth). Expect **nomadic hospitality** of tea, sweets and savoury *aarul* (dried milk curds).

Ulaanbaatar boasts an array of cuisines. Good stop-offs include **BD's Mongolian Barbeque** ([modernnomads.mn](http://modernnomads.mn); +976 11-311191), and the posher **Asiana Restaurant** ([facebook.com/AsianaCentralUlaanbaatar](https://www.facebook.com/AsianaCentralUlaanbaatar); +976 7715 1060).



### Further reading & information

**Mongolia** (Lonely Planet 8th edition, July 2018) - most up-to-date guide on Mongolia.

**Mongolia** (Bradt 3rd edition, October 2013) - great context.

**On the Trail of Genghis Khan** (Bloomsbury, November 2014) for history and culture.

**mongolia.travel** - Online travel guide

### TOP TIP

**It is polite to drink tea as soon as you are given it. Do not put the cup down on the table before taking a sip!**

### More online

Visit [www.wanderlust.co.uk/205](http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/205)

### Planning guides

Mongolia Travel Guide  
Archive article

- Exploring Mongolia – issue 145
- Mongolia's snow leopards – issue 83
- Nadaam Festival – issue 77