

Central Mongolia



Roll out of Ulaanbaatar in a Russian jeep 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 stretching to the horizon while magical light plays through clouds and across the valleys.

But central Mongolia offers more than steppes. Landscapes are broken by the forested hillsides of the Khan Khentii range, meandering rivers such as the Tuul and lunar-like lava fields spilling across central Arkhangai. The silhouette of a lone horseman on a hill or camels caravanning in the distance completes every perfect day.

The rivers and back trails of Gorkhi-Terelj National Park beckon the outdoor enthusiast. At Khustain National Park you can break out the binoculars and spot the reintroduced *takhi* horse. Alternatively, set out from Ulaanbaatar on foot, climb the holy Bogd Khan Uul to the south of the city, and camp out by Mandshir Khiid. Travelling by horse is another great way to get around the region. Travellers with more time on their hands can spend weeks exploring the ancient sites and remote areas of the mighty Khangai and its surrounding plains.

Central Mongolia's aimags (provinces), Töv, Arkhangai and Övörkhangai, are the most visited areas in the countryside. The roads and transport are far better here than in the rest of Mongolia, and there is plenty to see, including ancient monasteries, gorgeous lakes and many national parks. The people, mostly comprising the Khalkh majority, are accustomed to foreigners, and you can expect somewhat better services than in other parts of the country.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Saddle up and go on a horse trek to the beautiful but remote **Naiman Nuur Nature Reserve** (p119)
- Pedal your way over the hills and through the valleys of **Gorkhi-Terelj National Park** (p104) on a mountain bike and cap the experience with a night at a ger camp
- Focus your camera lens on the magnificent *takhi* (wild horse) at **Khustain National Park** (p115), where the wild horse roams free once again
- Hike into the forests to the splendid **Tövkhön Khiid** (p124), the site of religious leader and artist Zanabazar's workshop and meditation centre
- Camp by the striking **Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur** (p130), a volcanic lake offering great fishing and lovely sunsets



■ POPULATION: 289,100

■ AREA: 199,000 SQ KM

CENTRAL MONGOLIA



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History

The many deer and 'animal art' stele 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 715 AD. 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 (p129), located relatively close to Khar Balgas.

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.

The first eight Bogd Gegeens ruled from central Mongolia, and built up the most important religious centres, including Urga (now Ulaanbaatar), which shifted location along the Tuul Gol (river) for more than 250 years, until settling at its present site in the mid-18th century.

Climate

The central aimags lie in a transitional zone, with southern portions nudging into the Gobi and northern areas covered in Siberian taiga (larch and pine forests), with steppe inbetween. Winter daytime temperatures of -30°C to -15°C are typical, lasting from late November to early February. March and April suffer from strong, dry winds and changeable weather. July and August are good times to travel as the wet weather finally turns the

steppe into a photogenic shade of green. Summer temperatures reach from 24°C to 30°C. October will bring cool evenings and snow flurries before the onset of winter.

National Parks & Nature Reserves

Gorkhi-Terelj National Park (293,200 hectares) A playground for Ulaanbaatarites. The park contains numerous ger camps and two golf courses. It's more pristine north of the Terelj Gol.

Khangai Nuruu (888,455 hectares) Encompasses most of the Khangai mountain range, protecting crucial watersheds and a variety of animals including ibex and argali sheep.

Khögnö Khan Uul Nature Reserve (46,900 hectares) This nature reserve protects wolf and fox that inhabit the desert-steppe area.

Khorgo-Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur National Park (77,267 hectares) Protected area for migratory birds as well as fish. The park includes lakes, cinder cones and volcanic flows.

Khustain National Park (50,620 hectares) Important rehabilitation site for *takhi* horses. Also contains gazelle, marmot and wolf among other creatures.

Getting There & Away

A paved highway, running from Ulaanbaatar to Kharkhorin, is traversed by share jeeps, minivans and buses that depart daily from the Dragon and Naran Tuul bus stands in Ulaanbaatar.

If coming from western Mongolia to UB, the route through Arkhangai is more interesting than the dull journey via Bayankhongor – the main access point is via the town of Tosontsengel in Zavkhan.

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. Hitchhikers might find a ride on a logging truck heading north but the chances are slim. You'll save a lot of time by hiring 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.

For the other aimags, share jeeps will travel from the nearest provincial centre to other destinations, but off the main paved road traffic throughout these regions is light. In Övörkhangai, public transport will get you to Erdene Zuu Khiid, Khujirt and Arvaikheer, but if you want to visit Tövkhön

Khiid or Orkhon Khürkhree you'll need your own transport. Horse is the best way to reach Naiman Nuur. In Arkhangai, the main road is one of the few routes in Mongolia where hitchhikers can easily get to a few places of interest, including Taikhar Chuluu and Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur.

A jeep is fine for getting around, but travelling by horse grants the best access via the river valleys and into the mountains.

TÖV TӨB

pop 88,500 / area 81,000 sq km

Sitting atop the pine-clad, boulder-strewn slopes of the Khan Khentii range, it's hard to believe that Ulaanbaatar with its one million citizens lies just a mountain range or two away. The proximity of Töv to the capital has by no means spoiled its pristine landscape, allowing for easy access to the great outdoors.

Töv has some restored monasteries including the pretty Mandshir Khiid in Bogdkhan Uul National Park. It also has a few oddball sights; you can visit the excessively large Chinggis Khaan statue near Nalaikh, lunch at a mock-up 13th-century Mongol war camp and sleep in the bizarrely named Dresden Ger Camp.

A large portion of the aimag is made up of the Gorkhi-Terelj, Khan Khentii and Bogdkhan Uul National Parks, which mostly occupy the northern part of the aimag. The southern half of Töv is bland desert steppe

and most travellers pass through quickly on their way to Dundgov aimag.

Although Töv lies close to industrial Ulaanbaatar, its economy remains almost exclusively agricultural. This way of life has come under threat as poorer nomads are giving up and moving to the city; between 2004 and 2007 the population of Töv decreased by more than 20%.

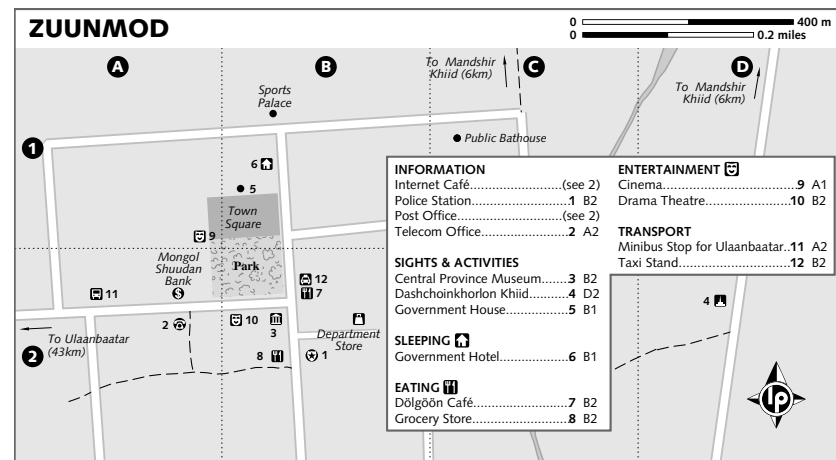
ZUUNMOD ЗУУНМОД

☎ 01272 / pop 14,300 / elev 1529m

In great contrast to the big city on the other side of the mountain, Zuunmod is a peanut-sized place that typifies the provincial capitals of Mongolia. There is little reason to linger in the capital of Töv but you'll probably pass through the town on the way to Mandshir Khiid or Bogdkhan Uul National Park. Phone calls can be made from the Telecom Office, which also has an **internet café** (☎ 22044; per person T600; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri).

Sights

The chief attraction in Zuunmod is the **Central Province Museum** (☎ 23619; admission T1000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm), 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).



Not in the same league as Mandshir Khiid but worth a brief visit is **Dashchoinkhorlon Khiid** (Дашчойнхорлон Хийд), a 700m walk directly east of the department store and across the creek. If you ask the monks, you can go inside the temple. Ceremonies start at around 11am on most days.

Sleeping & Eating

You can camp anywhere near town, although Mandshir Khiid is a better option than Zuunmod.

The large and refurbished rooms of **Government Hotel** (☎ 22184; s/d T10,000/15,000) are just about all that's on offer in Zuunmod. There's a bar and restaurant downstairs.

Offering an eclectic range of European, Mongolian, Chinese and Korean dishes, **Dölgöön Café** (☎ 9930 8344; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Sat) should have something to suit your tastes. There's a grocery store opposite the police station.

Getting There & Away

Minivans run through the pretty countryside (on a paved road) between Zuunmod and Ulaanbaatar (T1000, one hour, hourly) between 7am and 8pm, from Ulaanbaatar's old bus stand (Teeveriin Tovchoo). The bus stop in Zuunmod is just a short walk west of the main street.

A chartered taxi from Ulaanbaatar will cost between US\$10 and US\$13 one way. Taxis can be hired in Zuunmod from the taxi stand on the east side of the park. The fare should be the standard rate paid in Ulaanbaatar (around T300 per kilometre). Some drivers may want a waiting fee for hanging around Mandshir Khiid if you are going up there. This is reasonable as you may be there for an hour or two.

BOGDKHAN UUL STRICTLY PROTECTED AREA БОГДХАН УУЛ

Legend has it that Bogdkhan Uul (Map p107; 2122m) is the world's oldest nature preserve. It was founded in 1778 and for the next 150 years it was guarded by 2000 club-wielding lamas that protected the mountain from poachers. Lawbreakers were hauled away in chains, beaten within an inch of their lives, and locked inside coffin-like jail cells.

These days it's perfectly safe and legal to walk on the mountain and you can enjoy some terrific **hiking** and **horse-riding** trails. From Ulaanbaatar the mountain appears dark and

menacing but, once you're on top, the forests and rocky outcrops are a beautiful sight.

For information on hiking to the main peak from Zaisan Memorial (Map p107) or Mandshir, or combining the two in an overnight hike from Mandshir to Ulaanbaatar, see opposite. For details on renting a horse, see p108.

Entrance to the park costs T3000.

Sights

MANDSHIR KHIID МАНДШИР ХИЙД elev 1645m

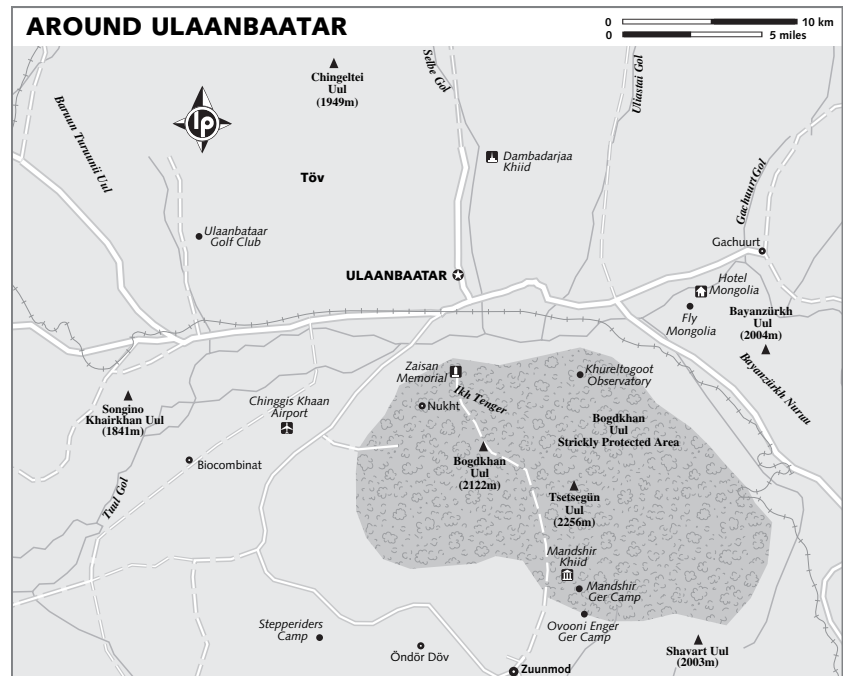
For the 350 monks who once called this place home, the gorgeous setting around this **monastery** (Map p107; ☎ 22764; GPS: N47°45.520', E106°59.675'; ☎ 9am-sunset) must have been a daily inspiration. Like most monasteries in Mongolia, Mandshir Khiid was destroyed in 1937 by Stalin's thugs, but was partially restored in the 1990s. Just 6km northeast of Zuunmod and 46km by road from Ulaanbaatar, the monastery is a perfect half-day trip from the capital, or can be used as a starting point for hikes into the Strictly Protected Area.

The main temple has been restored and converted into a museum, but the other buildings in the area remain in ruins. The monastery and museum are not as impressive as those in Ulaanbaatar – it is the beautiful forest setting that makes a visit worthwhile.

As you enter from the main road from Zuunmod you'll be required to pay an admission fee of T5000 per person, which covers the T2000 museum entrance fee and the T3000 national park fee. You'll have to buy both tickets even if you don't plan on entering the museum.

From the gate it's a couple of kilometres to the main area, where there is a shop, a lacklustre museum, a restaurant and several gers offering accommodation. Look for the huge two-tonne **bronze cauldron**, which dates from 1726 and was designed to boil up 10 sheep at a time.

The remains of the monastery are about 800m uphill from the museum. The caretaker lives in the compound next door and will open up the main building for you. The **monastery museum** has *tsam* masks, exhibits on the layout of Mandshir and some photos that show what it looked like before Stalin's thugs turned it into rubble. Look out for the controversial **Ganlin Horn**, made from human thigh bones.



If you have time, it's worth climbing up the rocks behind the main temple, where there are some 18th-century Buddhist **rock paintings**. The views from the top are even more beautiful, and you'll find yourself in the midst of a lovely pine forest.

Activities

HIKING

There are several trails but the best hiking route goes right over the top from Ulaanbaatar to Mandshir Khiid. Wherever you decide to go you'll be required to pay a national park fee of T3000. You can do this at the gate to the Bogdkhan Uul Strictly Protected Area or at Mandshir Khiid.

The highest point on the range is Tsetseegün Uul (2256m) although going here is not the quickest way over the top. The most direct route follows a path west of Tsetseegün.

There are numerous approaches to the summit, some easier than others; most go up one way and descend by another route. A popular option is to hike from Mandshir Khiid to Ulaanbaatar, either to the Zaisan Memorial (around a seven-hour walk) or the

Observatory (six hours). You'll need to get an early start or camp overnight in the park.

The trip is only really sensible from the beginning of June to the end of September. During the rest of the year, no matter how pleasant the weather is in the morning, sudden thunderstorms and icy winds can come out of nowhere (although this happens occasionally in summer as well). It's important to take a compass and know how to use it, as it's easy to get lost in the forest. Carry all the water you will need, plus extra food. Yellow paint on the trees marks the trail, but it can be hard to spot.

Some scrambling over fields of granite boulders is necessary, and the chance of slipping and injuring yourself should not be taken lightly. It would be wise to inform a friend or guesthouse owner in Ulaanbaatar of your itinerary and the time of your expected return.

Mandshir Khiid to Ulaanbaatar Route

This approach to Tsetseegün from the south side is the easiest route by far. As you face the monastery, cut over to your right (east) until you get to the stream. Just follow the

FOUR HOLY PEAKS

Recreational peak baggers will be pleased to note that Ulaanbaatar is surrounded by mountains and it's possible to climb what is considered the 'four holy peaks'.

The mountains include Bogdkhan, Chingeltei, Songino Khaikhan and Bayanzürkh Uuls which correspond, more or less, to the four points on the compass. Each mountain offers different landscapes, but between them you'll experience pine forests, rocky outcrops, meadows and spectacular views. Wildlife is becoming more difficult to spot but the mountains are still home to a few red deer, ibex and sable.

Weather on all the mountains can change rapidly in spring and summer, with occasional thunder, cloudbursts and even snow. Despite their proximity to the capital, locals don't often climb them so once you're on top you'll probably have the mountain to yourself. If you can't manage doing all four but want to try one, have a go at the biggest and best – Bogdkhan Uul.

stream until it nearly disappears and then head north. About three hours' walking should bring you out over a ridge into a broad boggy meadow, which you'll have to cross. If you've walked straight to the north, the twin rocky outcrops of the summit should be right in front of you. When you start to see Ulaanbaatar in the distance, you're on the highest ridge and close to the two large *ovoo* (a shamanistic pyramid-shaped collection of stones as an offering to the gods) on the summit (GPS: N47° 48.506', E107° 00.165'). From the *ovoo* you can return to Mandshir or descend to Ulaanbaatar.

A second route from the monastery begins from the left (west) side of the temples, passing a stupa on the way up to the ridge. This route, marked with yellow tags, is faster but you'll miss the *ovoo* on Tsetseegün.

Coming down from Tsetseegün the quickest way is to head due north, towards the Observatory and descend to the valley where you'll cross the train tracks. The road is close by and you can catch a taxi to town for around T3500. A longer route takes you to the Zaisan Memorial, on the southern fringe of the city. Be careful not to drop down too soon or you'll end up at Ikh Tenger, one valley short of Zaisan. Ikh Tenger is where the president lives with machine gun-wielding guards, who will be none too pleased if you drop by unannounced. If you see a flimsy barbed wire fence you are in Ikh Tenger; to get out, just continue west along the fence and over the next ridge.

Zaisan Route

It is more of an uphill battle to Tsetseegün if you start from the Zaisan Memorial. From the memorial, head up the road past the ger camp

and enter the forest. Look for the yellow trail markers, which veer left when you've reached the top. From here, the slope levels off and becomes an easy walk through a pleasant forest for the next two hours. If you stick to the yellow tags you'll follow the quickest route to Mandshir but will miss reaching Tsetseegün. All up, this is a 15km walk.

Observatory Route

This is the easiest route on the Ulaanbaatar side, mainly because you hit the fewest boulders. However, this route is also the least interesting. The walk to Tsetseegün and over to Mandshir takes about six hours.

The problem is that getting to the Observatory ('Khureltogoot' in Mongolian) is difficult. You could catch a bus to Nalaikh and get out at the toll gate, then walk the last 6km up the hill. Otherwise, you'll have to take a taxi.

HORSE RIDING

In summer, some of the ger camps around Mandshir Khiid rent out horses. Horses are also available from **Stepperiders Camp** (☎ 9988 3993, 9665 9596; www.stepperiders.com; GPS: N 47° 43.649', E106° 47.418'), just off the main Ulaanbaatar–Zuunmod road. Stepperiders is run by Minde, a recommended local horse guide who can give lessons, instructions and support to independent travellers planning their own expedition. This is a perfect place to test ride a Mongolian horse before a longer trip. Rides are great value at US\$35 to US\$50 per day and include pick-up, drop-off, guides, horses, food and even entry fees to the national park. As this camp is something of a hang-out for dedicated horse riders, you may be able to find partners for a trip.

Sleeping

The area around the monastery is one of the best camping spots near Ulaanbaatar. You should get permission from the caretaker at the monastery if you are camping nearby, or just hike off into the woods.

In a lovely spot amid trees about 200m northeast of the monastery's car park, the convenient **Mandshir Ger Camp** (Map p107; ☎ 01272-22535, 9192 4464; 4-bed ger T35,000) has hot showers but Mongolian-style toilets. There's a restaurant in the grounds, but it may only be open if a tour group is staying there, so take some food. Horse rental here is US\$5 per hour. Another good option is **Ovooni Enger Ger Camp** (Map p107; ☎ 9666 9964, 9930 9216; with/without meals US\$28/15), 800m off the road to Mandshir (look for the sign just after entering the park gate).

Getting There & Away

The most accessible entrances to the park are reached via Zaisan Memorial, the Observatory and Mandshir.

The monastery is easy enough to visit in a day trip from Ulaanbaatar or Zuunmod (from where it's a 7km drive; a taxi plus waiting time costs T5000). If you are walking from the north of Zuunmod it's 6km; you can either walk along the main northern road after visiting Dashchoinkhorlon Khiid, or save some time by walking directly north from Zuunmod, eventually joining up with the main road.

Trekking to Mandshir by horse is a good idea, but Zuunmod is not set up for tourists and it will require some effort to track a horse down. You could ask around the ger suburbs of town, at Stepperiders (opposite), or make inquiries from one of the guesthouses, such as Idre's Guest House (p82), in Ulaanbaatar. At Mandshir itself, wranglers from the nearby ger camps rent horses for US\$5 per hour.

MOTHER ROCK

During communism, visiting the sacred Eej Khad (Mother Rock) was a political crime, as it showed respect for religion, which was basically banned at the time. Some people, however, still went in secret.

Sometime in the late 1970s the communists decided to do away with the 'feudal' site once and for all. Workers tried dynamite to blow it up, and a tractor to haul it away, both to no avail. The next day workers awoke to find their tractor burnt and destroyed. Soon after the incident the official who ordered Eej Khad's destruction died and his family members became ill. It is said that all the other members of the team suffered a string of bad luck. Most Mongolians can recite a similar tale of provocation and retribution at the holy rock.

SONGINO KHAIRKHAN UUL СОНГИНО ХАЙРХАН УУЛ

This small mountain to the southwest of Ulaanbaatar has the unusual name of 'Onion Mountain', possibly because wild onions grow here. The mountain is close to the village of Biocombinat, about 5km west of the airport. From the village, cross the wooden bridge and follow the road as it veers left, past the **Songino Resort** (GPS: N47° 51.153', E106° 40.488'), towards the mountain itself. The road from the airport to Biocombinat is fairly busy so flagging down a taxi or bus shouldn't be problem.

EEJ KHAD (MOTHER ROCK) ЭЭЖ ХАД

Vanloads of pilgrims can be found venturing a rough 48km south of Zuunmod to the sacred **Mother Rock** (Map pp102-3; Eej Khad; GPS: N47° 18.699', E106° 58.583'). Mongolians often come here to seek solace and advice, and make offerings of vodka, milk and *khatag* (silk scarves). Pilgrims ask for three wishes to be granted, circle the rock three times and make three separate visits.

There are several sacred rocks nearby that are thought to generate good luck, including one called **Dog Rock**, which Mongolians rub their body against to cure ailments.

Minivans depart from Teeveriin Tovchoo (T6000 each way) at 9.30am. It's also possible to stop here on your way to the Gobi, but be prepared for some off-roading as the jeep trails south of here will quickly peter out.

There is nowhere to stay near Eej Khad. You can camp but, for a modicum of privacy, pitch your tent at least 500m from the rock (and crowds of pilgrims).

NALAIKH НАЛАЙХ

The poor village of Nalaikh, 35km southeast of the capital, is part of the Ulaanbaatar autonomous municipality because it once supplied

the capital city with its coal. Coal is now primarily supplied by Baganuur, as Nalaikh's mine closed down 15 years ago. However, small-scale private excavations (legal and illegal, and sometimes with child labour) continue in the mines. There's little reason to visit except to see a **Kazakh community**; in the 1950s many Kazakhs from Bayan-Ölgii were 'persuaded' to work in Nalaikh's mine.

To find Nalaikh's **mosque**, face the bright-blue town hall, turn 180° and walk about 25 minutes over a small hill. It's very basic and has a blue tin roof. Hourly buses (T500) depart from Teeveriin Tovchoo, the first at 7.30am and the last at 7pm.

Around Nalaikh

Around 19km southeast of Nalaikh is an 8th-century Turkic **stele of Tonyukok** (GPS: N47° 41.661', E107° 28.586'). The stele is covered in runic script and there are *balbals* (stone figures believed to be Turkic grave markers) and grave slabs nearby.

To get to the stele you'll need to have your own transport. From Nalaikh, take the main highway towards Baganuur and travel for 16km until you see a sign that says 'Tonyukok'. Turn right onto this track and travel another 10km to reach the stele. Just past the site, a huge hanger contains a few relics found around the site; you could ask the local watchman to let you inside, though there is little to see.

Halfway between Nalaikh and Erdene, you'll spot the rear end of an enormous metal horse topped with a statue of Chinggis Khaan (it looks slightly more dramatic if approached from the other direction). The privately built **Chinggis Khaan monument** (Map p112; ☎ 11-321 763, 9911 2846; www.genco-tour.mn; GPS: N47° 48.494', E107° 31.860'; admission T1000) stands 40m high and has a lift (elevator) rising up its tail, from where there are steps to the horse's head. The complex includes a museum, ger camp and an elaborate replica of a 13th century Mongol war camp, complete with towers and catapults. It also has workshops displaying the production of traditional clothing, jewellery, bows, arrows and battle gear. Rodeos and mini-naadams (games) are sometimes available; check the website.

TERELJ AREA ТЭРЭЛЖ

Terelj *sum* (district), about 55km northeast of Ulaanbaatar, is a playground for urban-weary Ulaanbaatarites. At 1600m, the area is cool and

the alpine scenery magnificent, and there are great opportunities for hiking, rock climbing, swimming (in icy cold water), rafting, horse riding and, for hard-core extreme-sports fanatics, skiing in the depths of winter.

Terelj was first developed for tourism in 1964 and 30 years later it became part of **Gorkhi-Terelj National Park**. A few of the tourist developments here are hard on the eyes and ears; some ger camps have concrete car parks, ugly electricity poles, TV antennae and discos at night, and locals overcharge for goods and services. But you can easily get away from all this if you want.

In late summer, the mosquitoes at Terelj can be appalling – at times, the worst in the country – so make sure you have insect repellent with you.

There is a T3000 entry fee to the park for each person, which you'll have to pay at the park entrance, 6km from the main road.

Terelj village (Map p112; GPS: N47° 59.193', E107° 27.834') is about 27km from the park entrance, at the end of a paved road. It's in a nice location near the river but there's not much here apart from a few shops, a café and a ger camp.

Günjiin Süm Гүнжийн Сүм

Surrounded by magnificent forests and not far from a lovely river, the Baruun Bayan Gol, the Buddhist temple of **Günjiin Süm** (Map p112; elevation 1713m; GPS: N48° 11.010', E107° 33.377') was built in 1740 by Efu Dondovdorj to commemorate the death of his Manchurian wife, Amarlangui. Once part of a huge monastery containing about 70 sq metres of blue walls, five other temples and a tower, Günjiin Süm is one of very few Manchurian-influenced temples in Mongolia to survive over the centuries. Only the main temple, and some of the walls of the monastery, remain.

Unlike most other monasteries in Mongolia, Günjiin Süm was not destroyed during the Stalinist purges, but simply fell into ruin from neglect, vandalism and theft.

The temple is not a must – there are many better and more accessible temples and monasteries in Ulaanbaatar and Töv – but more of an excuse for a great **overnight trek**, on horse or foot, or as part of a longer trip in the national park.

Günjiin is about 30km (as the crow flies) north of the main area where most of the ger camps are situated in Terelj. With a guide you

can hike directly over the mountains, or take the easier but longer route along the Baruun Bayan Gol to get there. You can reach it in a day on horseback, while hikers should allow two days each way for the journey.

Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area

To the northeast, Gorkhi-Terelj National Park joins the Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area (Khentii Nuruu; Map pp102–3), comprising more than 1.2 million hectares of the Töv, Selenge and Khentii aimags. The Khan Khentii park is almost completely uninhabited by humans, but it is home to endangered species of moose, brown bear and weasel to name but a few, and to more than 250 species of birds.

Activities

HIKING

If you have good maps, a compass and some experience (or a proper guide), hiking in the Terelj area is superb in summer, but be careful of the very fragile environment, and be prepared for mosquitoes and unpredictable weather.

For more sedate **walks** in the Terelj ger camp area, follow the main road and pick a side valley to stroll along at your leisure. From the main road, look out for two interesting rock formations: **Turtle Rock** (Melkhi Khad; Map p112; GPS: N47° 54.509', E107° 25.428'), in a side valley to the south of Terelj, which really looks like one at a certain angle; and the less dramatic **Old Man Reading a Book** (Map p112), which can be spotted on the left side of the road when travelling south from Terelj village. Head north 3km from Turtle Rock to reach the **Aryapala Initiation & Meditation Centre** (Map p112; GPS: N47° 56.121', E107° 25.643'; admission T2000) set on a spectacular rocky hillside.

Some suggested easier hikes are to Günjiin Süm or along the Terelj or Tuul Gols towards Khan Khentii. This is a great area for wildflowers, particularly rhododendron and edelweiss. Places of interest on more difficult, longer treks in Khan Khentii:

Altan-Ölgii Uul (2656m) The source of the Akhain Gol.

Khagiin Khar Nuur A 20m-deep glacial lake, about 80km up Tuul Gol from the ger camps at Terelj.

Yestii Hot Water Springs These springs reach up to 35°C, and are fed by the Yuroo and Yestii Gols. Yestii is about 18km north of Khagiin Khar Nuur.

HORSE RIDING

Travelling on a horse is the perfect way to see a lot of the park, including Günjiin Süm

and the side valleys of Tuul Gol. To travel long distances, you will need to have experience, or a guide, and bring most of your own gear. Horses can be hired through any of the ger camps, but you'll pay high tourist prices (around US\$35 to US\$40 a day). A mob of horse boys hang around Turtle Rock offering horse riding at US\$5 per hour, or somewhere between US\$12 and US\$20 for the day. Alternatively, approach one of the Mongolian families who live around the park and hire one of their horses, though they may not be much cheaper.

RAFTING

Tuul Gol, which starts in the park and flows to Ulaanbaatar and beyond, is one of the best places in the country for rafting. The best section of the river starts a few kilometres north of Terelj village, and wraps around the park until it reaches Gachuurt, near Ulaanbaatar. Nomadic Journeys (p81) runs rafting trips here for around US\$45 per day (minimum four people). You can also get a raft from the Seven Summits (p93).

SKIING

Some of the ger camps that stay open in winter cater to cross-country skiers – the season lasts from November to February. There are no set trails, so just take your own gear and ask the locals for some good, safe areas to try.

GOLF

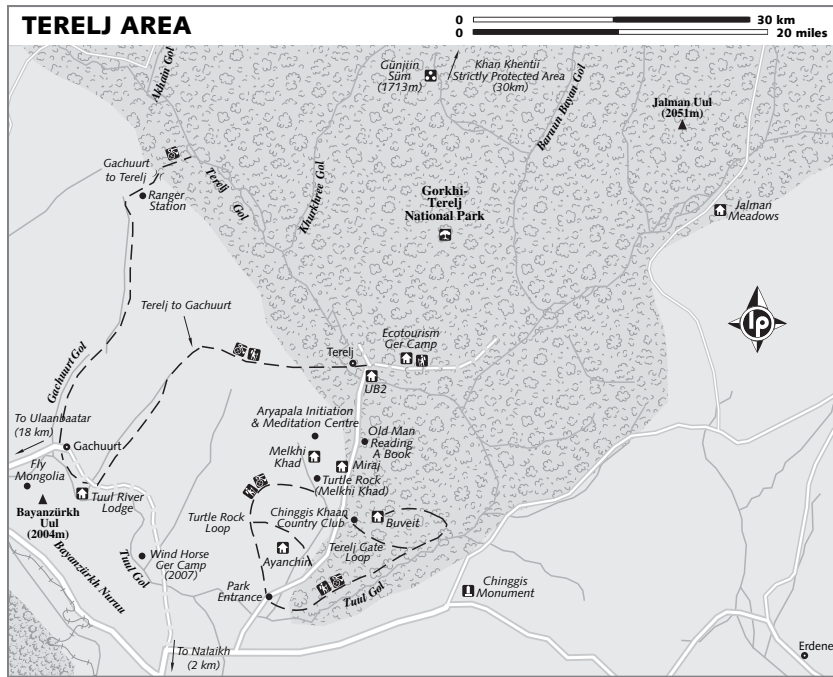
The **Chinggis Khaan Country Club** (Map p112; ☎ 9911 0707) is just off the road in Gorkhi valley. Green fee is T60,000, a caddy is T12,000 and club rental is T24,000. A second course is at the UB2 hotel.

Tours

Most foreign and local tour companies include a night or two in a tourist ger at Terelj in their tours. Several local agencies based in Ulaanbaatar, such as Nomadic Journeys and Nomads (p80), run some of the more interesting trips around Terelj.

Sleeping CAMPING

Unless you hike out into the hills it's best to get permission to camp, either from the nearest ger or, for a fee, a ger camp. Pitch your tent away from the main road, don't use wood fires and take all of your rubbish out.



GER CAMPS & HOTELS

During the peak season of July and August (and also at the more popular camps), it's not a bad idea to book ahead. Outside the normal tourist season (July to September), it's also a good idea to ring ahead to make sure the camp is open and serves food. A few places are open in winter, mostly for expats who want to ski.

If you are the only guests at a camp you may have to find staff to open up the restaurant, showers etc. The ger camps offer almost identical facilities and prices (about US\$30 with three Western meals, or US\$15 without).

Apart from the ger camps listed here, many individual families rent out a spare ger and/or hire horses, normally at cheaper rates than the ger camps. You'll have to ask around as none advertises.

Melkhi Khad (☎ 450 737, 9926 9670; 4-bed ger T20,000) This well-maintained camp has a cosy lodge. It's about 1km south of the Aryapala Meditation Centre. Don't confuse this with Domogt Melkhi Khad, the busy camp right next to Turtle Rock.

Ecotourism Ger Camp (☎ 9973 4710; bergroo@hotmail.com; GPS: N47° 58.702', E107° 29.837'; with/without meals

US\$16/6) For an offbeat experience, you could wade across Terej Gol and hike to a pleasant ger camp run by a Dutchman named Bert. You'll need to get directions from the Terej-Juulchin hotel (it's a 30-minute horse ride from here) or inquire about the place at Chez Bernard (p90) in UB. Bert sells homemade Dutch cheese and organises trips up to Günjiin Süm.

UB2 (☎ 9977 4125; ger bed T25,500, s/d T30,000/51,000, half-lux T35,000/52,500, lux T52,000/75,000) This large hotel complex and restaurant marks the end of the road, next to the village of Terej. It also has a par-three golf course (green fees US\$29, clubs US\$15 and caddie US\$10).

Miraj (☎ 325 188, 9919 3449; with meals US\$30) Located 14km along the main road from the park entrance, Miraj is in a prime area for hiking. Horses cost US\$5 per hour or US\$10 per day, and hot showers are available. There are a couple of other camps up this valley.

Buveit (☎ 322 870, 9911 4913; ger bed US\$35) About 13km along the main road from the park entrance, Buveit is in a beautiful secluded valley 3km east of the main road. It also has beds in a cabin for US\$2 more than the gers, and you can get three meals for US\$18

MOUNTAIN BIKING AROUND TEREJ

Gachuurt to Terej Gol (North)

This challenging route combines mountain, forest and river scenery. To reach the trailhead from UB, go to Gachuurt and turn left when you get to the bridge. Follow the valley for about 19km to the end of the road where there is an obvious car park (you could get a taxi all the way). Ride up the valley that leads in a northwesterly direction. There is a ranger ger in the valley that marks the boundary of Gorkhi-Terelj National Park. Here you need to pay park fees. The steady climb up to the peak is about 2km, from where you descend into a valley that winds for 7km to Terej Gol. Return the way you've come and then ride the 19km back to Gachuurt; it's downhill all the way. This route takes around five hours.

Terej to Gachuurt (Central)

This rugged route goes from Terej to Gachuurt, taking in two passes along the way. Get a ride all the way to the town of Terej and then start riding on the road that heads west; it's about 2km to the next small settlement of gers. The trail continues west and starts heading into the wilderness, up a valley with a forest to your left. The ridge tops out at 1859m and descends to another valley. The trail climbs again, slightly to the right, to another 1859m ridge, from where you begin a long descent towards Gachuurt. At the end of the valley (it's about 15km) you'll reach Tuul Gol, which you follow back to Gachuurt town. All up it's a 30km ride and should take around five hours.

Turtle Rock Loop

This is a convenient route as it begins and ends at Turtle Rock in the Gorkhi valley. From Turtle Rock ride west down the slope until the road goes right into a ger camp (they built the camp over the trail). Go around the camp (or through it) and then it's a 30-minute climb to the top of the hill. From the top you get some great views of the rock formations in the next valley. The trail continues south past several ger camps and eventually leads back to the main road and back to Turtle Rock. This loop is 15km.

It's possible to do a longer loop: before turning left out of the valley (towards the main road), just veer right up a slope, and then down a long narrow valley (one valley west of the main road), eventually reaching Tuul Gol. At the end of the valley, turn left to return to Turtle Rock, or right to leave the park. From Turtle Rock to Tuul Gol it's 14km. The full loop takes about four hours.

Terej Gate Loop

This is a nice route for those who don't have their own car. Get a lift to the park entrance and start cycling east, up the valley that contains the Tuul Gol. After 30 to 40 minutes the trail turns left, leaving the valley and heading towards a ridge. It's a one-hour climb up to the top and then a gentle ride into Gorkhi valley and the ger camps. From here you head back to the park entrance to complete the three hour loop.

extra. Marked rock-climbing routes are nearby and the camp might be able to supply climbing gear. It's run by Tsolmon Travel agency (p81).

Ayanchin (☎ 319 211, 9911 2611; ger bed US\$50, r US\$75) This American-built camp has a Western-style lodge and modern (but ugly) shower and toilet block. At meal times (meals US\$5 to US\$11), enjoy a steak, pasta, sandwich or burger on the sunny deck. It's about 10km from the main entrance, marked with a big billboard.

Jalman Journeys (4-day package per person US\$195) Nomadic Journeys runs this remote and low-impact ger camp in the upper Tuul valley, which makes a nice base if you are headed to Khagiin Khar Nuur, which is an eight-hour horse ride away. The camp has a library of books on Mongolia and a number of great activities, including mountain biking, yak carting, river boating and even portable saunas! You'll need to book well in advance for these trips. The price includes transfers to and from Ulaanbaatar.

Getting There & Away

BICYCLE

A mountain bike would be an excellent way of getting around some of the Terelj area if you could stand the 70km of uphill riding to get there and cope with the traffic in Ulaanbaatar along the way. The Seven Summits (p93) and Karakorum Expeditions (p81) in Ulaanbaatar both rent bikes.

BUS

The road from Ulaanbaatar to Terelj, which goes through part of the national park, is in pretty good nick. A bus departs at 4pm from Durvun Zam (Map pp70–1; corner of Peace Ave and Öндөр Geegen Zanabazaryn Gudamj) and goes to the centre of the park, a few kilometres past the turn-off to Turtle Rock. The same bus comes back directly to UB. The cost is T1500 each way. If this doesn't pan out you'll have to hitch.

HITCHING

Hitching out of Ulaanbaatar can be difficult because vehicles going to Terelj could leave from anywhere. The cheapest way to hitch to Terelj is to take a minivan for Baganuur or Nalaikh and get off at the turn-off to Terelj, where you are far more likely to get a lift.

Hitching back to Ulaanbaatar from along the main road through Terelj is not difficult, as almost every vehicle is returning to the capital.

TAXI

A taxi from Ulaanbaatar is easy to organise; jeeps aren't necessary because the road is paved all the way. You should only pay the standard rate per kilometre, which works out at about US\$25 one way, but the driver may understandably want more because his taxi may be empty for part of the return journey. You can also arrange with your taxi to pick you up later.

When there's enough demand shared taxis to Terelj sometimes leave from Naran Tuul market jeep station in Ulaanbaatar (off Map p64). This is more likely on summer Sundays when locals make a day trip to the area.

GACHUURT ГАЧУУРТ

Around 20km east of Ulaanbaatar, the town of Gachuurt offers the chance to quickly trade city traffic and bustle for riverside walks, horse riding, camping, fishing and rafting. The town is a rapidly growing suburb of the capital,

popular with wealthy Mongolians who build gated villas on the hills surrounding the town. Despite the increased development, it remains an idyllic setting and a popular half-day trip from Ulaanbaatar.

Activities

Adrenaline junkies may want to spend an afternoon at the base camp of **Fly Mongolia** (Map p107; ☎ 9919 7933), a burgeoning adventure centre run by local aviation enthusiast Alex Amiya. Tandem paragliding (US\$35) and ultralight aircraft tours (US\$100) are two popular activities. With more time you can take a four-day paragliding lesson (US\$180). Alex can teach in English, French, Russian or Mongolian. Note that spring is a dangerous time to paraglide in Mongolia because of the unpredictable winds. September is best for beginners. Fly Mongolia also has 4WD go-carts (per hour US\$15). The camp is off the main Gachuurt road, 1km before Hotel Mongolia (look for the wooden sign by the road). Be warned that the place is pretty disorganised (even by Mongolian standards) and Alex may not be available when you get there.

Frenchman Côme Doerflinger runs adventure trips through his outfit **Xanadu** (☎ 9987 2912; www.mongolienomade.mn in French), based in Gachuurt. He mainly runs horse trips, and has French, Russian and English saddles. Côme also has kayaks and canoes that you can use to float down Tuul Gol, and mountain bikes which are great for excursions up Gachuurt's side valleys towards Terelj.

Sleeping & Eating

Gachuurt offers reasonable camping opportunities. About 2km before the town centre, near Tuul Gol, there are spots to pitch your tent. Just try to avoid the clusters of ger camps. For basic meals you could try the **Take Off Café** (☎ 9919 7933; meals T2000–3500; ☎ 10am–6pm) at the Fly Mongolia base camp (Map p107).

Tuul River Lodge (Map p107; ☎ 9909 9365; www.tuulriverside.com; per person US\$60–100) This upmarket option has en-suite gers that include bath and shower. Prices do not include meals but it does have a restaurant. It's about 10km past Gachuurt on the way to Terelj.

Hotel Mongolia (Map p107; ☎ 315 513; www.hotel-mongolia.com; ger s/d US\$60/80, s/d US\$80/120, ste US\$180–250) This ger camp would impress even Kublai Khaan. Hotel Mongolia is the unmissable walled palace resembling ancient Karakorum,

WIND HORSE: ECOFRIENDLY GER CAMP

Many ger camps claim to be ecofriendly, but by constructing septic tanks near rivers and building permanent structures in the virgin landscape they are leaving an irremovable scar on the land. As you travel, look out for less-developed camps that utilise solar and wind power and other ecofriendly devices.

In the Gachuurt–Terelj area, a leader in sustainable practices is the Wind Horse Ger Camp, about 12km southeast of Gachuurt (Map p112; the position on the map is a guide only – the owner may move the camp at any time if he finds a better location). In true bush-camp tradition, Wind Horse has built no permanent structures; it has a dining ger, a shower ger (heated with driftwood from the river) and a bathroom tent with chemical toilets. Gers are scattered in the glen, giving each a sense of privacy. There are no wires, pipes or poured concrete whatsoever. Solar panels provide a limited energy source.

Despite the rustic setting, you can expect gourmet cuisine and quality wine. Horses with western saddles are available to ride and the camp can organise pack trips in the direction of Terelj.

A bed and three meals starts from US\$60 per night (and can run up to US\$400 depending on what sort of wine and food is ordered). Reservations are required at the camp as space is limited. Contact Hamid Sardar at mongolwindhorse@gmail.com.

a few kilometres short of Gachuurt. Luxurious rooms have private bath and shower and the price includes breakfast. The hotel includes a business centre, souvenir shops and a field behind the walls where mini-naadams are held according to tour-group bookings. Even if you don't stay here, it's worth visiting for the kitsch ambience and excellent Asian-style restaurant (meals T2500 to T3500), which serves a few delicacies such as horse stomach.

Getting There & Away

Buses pick up passengers every hour or so from the east end of Peace Ave in Ulaanbaatar, near the Jukov statue, a couple of kilometres east of the city centre, bound for Gachuurt (T500, 25 minutes). You can also easily get a taxi from UB (T6000).

CHINGELTEI UUL ЧИНГЭЛТЭЙ УУЛ

To the north of Ulaanbaatar, Chingeltei Uul (Map p107; 1949m) has some pretty forests near the top. You can reach the base of the mountain by bus No 3, 16 or, best of all, 18 from Sambugiin Gudamj, near Liberty Sq, in Ulaanbaatar (T200). By taxi (T1500), you can go all the way up to a gate from where it's a 2km walk to the summit.

BAYANZÜRKH UUL БАЯНЗҮРХ УУЛ

This peak is in the Bayanzürkh Nuruu (Rich Heart Mountains; Map p112), to the east of Ulaanbaatar. There's a little forest at the

top, and views from the summit (2004m) are great. You can reach the base of the mountains by taking the bus from Ulaanbaatar to Nalaikh and getting off before the women's prison (*'emegtei shorong'* in Mongolian; let the bus driver know to let you off here). Of the four holy mountains, this is the best for mountain biking.

KHANDGAIТ ХАНДГАЙТ

About 40km north of Ulaanbaatar, **Khandgait** (Map pp102–3; GPS: N48° 07.066', E106° 54.296') is another lovely area of cow pastures, pine forests and wildflowers, surrounding the small village of the same name. Like Terelj, there are plenty of opportunities for hiking, rock climbing, and, in winter, ice-skating and cross-country skiing (it's possible to rent skis and sleds here in winter). If you're lucky, you might see some ice motorcycling at this time too. This is great countryside for camping. Just pick any site, preferably near a river, and enjoy, but be careful about wood fires and be sure to take your rubbish out.

Buses (T6000) go here from Container (Bömbögör) Market in Ulaanbaatar at 7am, 11am, 1pm and 5pm. A taxi (jeeps aren't necessary) from UB is easiest, but, naturally, more expensive at around US\$25 return, plus waiting time.

KHUSTAIN NATIONAL PARK ХУСТАЙН НУРУУ

Also known as Khustain Nuruu (Birch Mountain Range), this park was established in 1993 and is about 100km southwest of

TAKHI – THE REINTRODUCTION OF A SPECIES

The year was 1969 and a herder in western Mongolia spotted a rare *takhi* (wild horse) in the distance. It was an extraordinary find as so few *takhi* were left in the wild. Alas, it was also the final sighting; with no new reports thereafter, scientists had to declare the species extinct in the wild – the result of poaching, overgrazing by livestock and human encroachment on their breeding grounds.

All was not lost for the *takhi*, however, as a dozen individual horses were known to exist in zoos outside Mongolia – their ancestors had been captured by game hunters in the early 20th century. A small group of conservationists dedicated themselves to breeding the animals with the hope that one day they could be reintroduced to Mongolia.

The conservationists did not fare so well with Mongolia's suspicious communist government, but when democracy arrived in the early 1990s they were welcomed with open arms. By that time the worldwide population was around 1500, scattered around zoos in Australia, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Between 1992 and 2004 *takhi* were reintroduced into Mongolia at Khustain National Park, Takhiiin Tal in Gov-Altai, and Khomiin Tal in Zavkhan. Today there are more than 200 *takhi* in Khustain, 80 in Takhiiin Tal and 12 in Khomiin Tal. Given the political and logistical challenges to the project, their reintroduction is nothing short of miraculous, making it one of the best conservation stories of our times.

The *takhi*, also known as Przewalski's horse (named after the Polish explorer who first 'discovered' the horse in 1878), are now descended from the bloodline of three stallions, so computerised records have been introduced to avoid inbreeding. They are the last remaining wild horse worldwide, the forerunner of the domestic horse, as depicted in cave paintings in France. They are not simply horses that have become feral, or wild, as found in the USA or Australia, but a genetically different species, boasting two extra chromosomes in their DNA make-up.

Within the parks, the laws of nature are allowed to run their course; an average of five foals are killed by wolves every year in Khustain. The park gets locals onsite by hiring herders as rangers, offering cheap loans to others and offering employment at a cheese-making factory on the outskirts of the park.

For more info check out www.treemail.nl/takh.

Ulaanbaatar. The 50,620-hectare reserve protects Mongolia's wild horse, the *takhi*, and the reserve's steppe and forest-steppe environment. In addition to the *takhi*, there are populations of *maral* (Asiatic red deer), steppe gazelle, deer, boar, manul (small wild cat), wolf and lynx. A visit to the park has become a popular overnight excursion from Ulaanbaatar in recent years.

Entry to the park is a one-off fee of US\$5 (free for locals). It's worth spending at least one night in the park, as you are most likely to see *takhi* and other wildlife at dusk or dawn.

The park is run by the Hustai National Park Trust, which is supported by the Dutch government and the Mongolian Association for the Conservation of Nature and the Environment (Macne).

Orientation & Information

The information centre at the entrance to Khustain National Park has a ger with displays

on the park and the *takhi*, a small souvenir shop and videos that include a documentary on Mongolian horses featuring Julia Roberts. Ten kilometres south into the park's core area is the former park headquarters. Another 13km or so west is Moilt camp.

Sights & Activities

In an effort to make the park self-financing, horse riding, hiking and jeep excursions are offered. Several **hiking** routes have been established, including a good hike that takes you from the visitors centre to Moilt camp (22km) in about five hours.

A fun horseback trek takes you to **Turkic stone monuments** (Map pp102-3; GPS: N47° 33.201', E105° 50.991') southwest of the park and then on to Tuul Gol. Horse rental is US\$12 per day. Contact the park for details.

With your own jeep you can drive to Moilt camp. Park regulations require you to take a park guide (free within the park)

and stick only to existing tracks. Wildlife watching is best at dusk and at dawn. The *takhi* could be in any number of places, and park guides can direct your driver to the best spots.

The park runs a three-week volunteer program where you can help with research. See www.ecovolunteer.org for details.

A community-based tourism project at Khustain allows visitors to stay with nomad families, ride horses, learn felt-making and experience daily life in the countryside. See www.cbtn.mn for details.

Sleeping

Independent camping is not allowed inside the park so you have to camp outside the park boundary. The best place to go is the south side of the park by Tuul Gol.

There is a small **ger camp** (without meals per person US\$15, tent US\$5) at the entrance to the park (the payment for accommodation includes the park entrance). Rooms are available in the main building for US\$20 per person. There are also cabins at **Moilt camp** (per person US\$15). Meals are available at the camp (breakfast US\$3, lunch US\$8, dinner US\$6)

To book accommodation in the park contact **Hustai National Park Trust** (☎ 011-245 087, 245 881; www.hustai.mn; Hustai Bldg, 2nd khoroo, Bayangol District) in Ulaanbaatar. It is about 2km west of the State Department Store, off Peace Ave.

Getting There & Away

To get to the park travel 100km west from Ulaanbaatar, along the road to Kharkhorin, where there is a signpost pointing you the 13km south to the park entrance. A Russian minivan departs on Friday from Khustain Nuruu at 4pm and returns from UB to the park at 7.30pm (from Minii Zakh, near UB Palace). On Sunday the van leaves the park at 3pm and returns from Ulaanbaatar at 5.30pm. The cost is US\$10 one way and it's recommended to book ahead of time.

ÖVÖRKHANGAI ӨВӨРХАНГАЙ

pop 110,200 / area 63,000 sq km

Övörkhangaï contains one of Mongolia's top attractions, the Erdene Zuu monastery in

Kharkhorin. This is Mongolia's oldest monastery and it has become a regular stop on most tour circuits. But while travellers flock to this site and then rush off to the points west, many miss some of the best parts of Övörkhangaï, including the Naiman Nuur lake district and the spectacular Tövkhön Khiid. The southern part of the aimag, past Arvaikheer, is uninteresting desert steppe.

If travelling by rented jeep, it is easy to combine a visit to these sights with some other places that are clustered near the borders of Arkhangai, Bulgan and Töv aimags, including Khögönö Khan Uul Nature Reserve, the sand dunes of Mongol Els and Naiman Nuur. The paved road, which reaches Kharkhorin and the aimag capital of Arvaikheer, is also a definite attraction.

ARVAIKHEER АРВАЙХЭЭР

☎ 01322 / pop 23,400 / elev 1913m

A nondescript but friendly aimag capital, Arvaikheer is of little interest except as a place to eat and rest, refuel the jeep or arrange onward public transport. If you find yourself between rides, the museum is worth a look.

There is no need to go to Arvaikheer if you only want to visit Kharkhorin and northern Övörkhangaï, as a paved road runs to Kharkhorin from Ulaanbaatar. The police station is southeast of the town square.

Information

Bathhouse (shower/sauna T1100/4000; ☎ 9am-10pm Tue-Sun)

Internet café (☎ 22193; per hr T600; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) In the Telecom office.

Khan Bank (☎ 22040; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4.30pm)

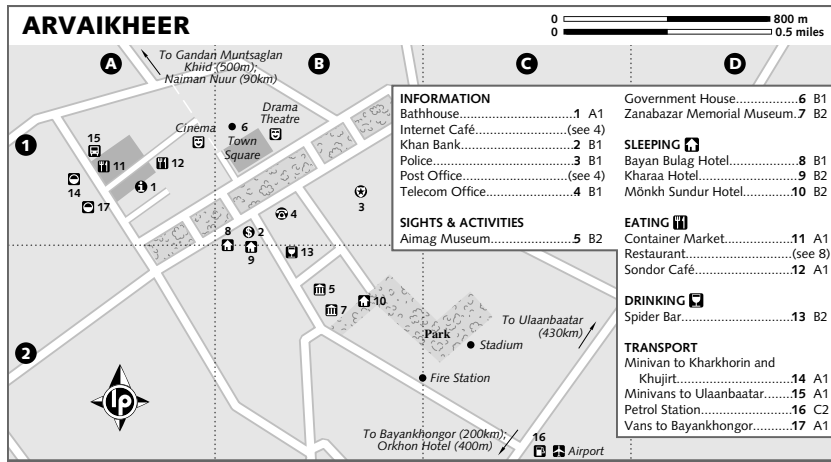
Telecom office (☎ 24098; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also here.

Sights

GANDAN MUNTSAGLAN KHIID

ГАНДАН МУНТСАГЛАН ХИЙД

This comparatively large monastery, about 900m north of the town square, contains a fine collection of *thangka* (scroll paintings), including one depicting the original monastery, which was destroyed in 1937. The current monastery was opened in 1991, and now has about 60 monks in residence. Visitors are welcome. To the left of the temple is a small shop selling religious items.



MUSEUMS

Since Övörkhangaï lies partly in the forested Khangai region and the Gobi Desert, the **Aimag Museum** (☎ 22075; admission T1500, photos T3500; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) boasts a better-than-average selection of stuffed mountain and desert animals. There are also some fossils and arrows, local artwork and leftovers from Karakorum.

Just around the corner is the **Zanabazar Memorial Museum** (admission T1500, photos T3500; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri), which has a collection of religious artwork connected to the master sculptor (p40). Ask at the Aimag Museum for the key.

Sleeping

Like most aimag capitals, camping is a better option than the dreary hotels, but in Arvaikheer you'll have to walk a kilometre or so to find a quiet place to pitch your tent. It's best to head out to the area north of the monastery or drive 5km southeast to Ongiin Gol.

Bayan Bulag Hotel (☎ 23374; dm T3500, r with/without shower 6000/8000, half-lux/lux T12,000/15,000) This place has five clean, carpeted rooms. The half-lux and lux rooms have clean bathrooms with 24-hour hot water. The attached restaurant is one of the best places in town to eat.

Mönkh Sundur Hotel (☎ 9932 9677; r T8000) All the rooms are the same here, each with TV, toilet and washbasin. It has a restaurant with good food, beer and drinks, as well as a billiards room. It's in a compound behind the museum.

Kharaa Hotel (☎ 23655; d US\$15, half-lux/lux US\$20/25) This place has standard three-bed rooms with a shared bathroom. If the hotel isn't busy, solo travellers should be able to pay for just one bed; at other times you'll have to pay for at least two beds for privacy. Half-lux and lux rooms include bathroom and shower. Hot water comes on for a couple of hours in the morning and evening – check the times with reception. The place is clean and bright but overpriced so try for a discount.

Eating & Drinking

There are quite a few basic restaurants around town, including a good one in the Bayan Bulag Hotel. There are also *guanz* (canteens or cheap restaurants) and *tsainii gazar* (tea houses) near the container market. The bustling daily market also has yogurt, *airag* (fermented mare milk) after June and sheepskins, as well as the normal range of packaged foods.

Near the market is a popular *guanz* masquerading as a café, **Sondor Café** (dishes T800-1000; ☎ 8am-8pm). A gang of friendly, young locals run the popular **Spider Bar** (☎ 9939 5338; ☎ 10am-midnight), a great place for a few drinks after a long day on the road. In the late night it becomes a lively disco bar.

Getting There & Away

You can travel quickly along the 430km paved road between Ulaanbaatar and Arvaikheer. (There are plenty of *guanz* along the way.) The paved road finishes just west of Arvaikheer; from there it is about another 200km along

the usual rough road to the next aimag capital of Bayankhongor. With a jeep, an experienced driver and lots of time you could venture south to Dalanzadgad, 377km away in Ömnögovi aimag, either via Saikhan-Ovoo or (more adventurously) via Guchin Us, Khovd and Khongoryn Els.

AIR

MIAT flies between Ulaanbaatar and Arvaikheer twice weekly for US\$66/117 one way/return, en route to/from Altai. The airport is less than 1km south of town.

HITCHING

The Ulaanbaatar–Arvaikheer road is one of the busiest in the country – at least one vehicle goes in both directions every minute. Hitching a ride on a truck or in a private car should be comparatively easy. Going further west along the main road to Bayankhongor won't be as easy, but it is possible (although it's a pretty uninteresting highway – the better route is through Arkhangai). In Arvaikheer, trucks hang around the market, so try there or at the petrol station on the main road.

JEEPS

If you want to hire a jeep to see the sights around northern Övörkhangaï, it's better to catch a bus from Ulaanbaatar to Kharkhorin and hire a jeep there, rather than go to Arvaikheer. Jeep hire is around T40,000, not including petrol.

MINIVANS

Minivans and smaller minibuses run along the paved road between Arvaikheer and Ulaanbaatar daily (T13,000, seven hours). Look for them on the north side of the market. At least one car a day will travel north to Khujirt (T6000, two hours); as usual, when the driver says departure time is 'now' that means around 4pm. These vehicles leave from the west side of the market.

NAIMAN NUUR НАЙМАН НУУР

The area of Naiman Nuur (Eight Lakes), which was created by volcanic eruptions centuries ago, is now part of the 11,500-hectare **Khuisiin Naiman Nuur Nature Reserve**. The **lakes** (GPS: N46° 31.232', E101° 50.705') are about 35km southwest of Orkhon Khürkhrée (waterfall), but the roads are often virtually impassable. Locals around the waterfall can rent horses for

the two-day trip to the lakes. It's also possible to get to the lakes from the Arvaikheer side by car, although only an experienced local driver could make it. Companies such as Nomads and Nomadic Expeditions (p81) run tours here, including horse-riding trips.

KHUIRT ХУЖИРТ

After a lifetime on the steppes, the last thing any nomad needs is a holiday in the great outdoors. Fortunately, there is Khujirt, where local Mongolians can come and put on a pair of slippers and a bathrobe, enter a mud bath, dip into metal tubs filled with spring water and get some vitamin injections. This may not sound so inviting to foreign tourists but the **spa resort** (☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) does make for an interesting stop if you are travelling through the Khujirt valley.

The 54km road between Kharkhorin and Khujirt is one of the best places in the country to see **falcons** and **hawks**, particularly the *sar* (moon) hawk. If you are ever likely to get a photo of one of these birds, this is the place.

Sleeping & Eating

Next to the spa resort, **Khujirt Tur** (☎ 9971 5262; per person T10,000) is the best choice in the area. The shower block has piping hot-water showers from the mineral springs. The Khujirt Tur ger camp serves meals for T4000. A cheaper *guanz* is in back of the resort.

Getting There & Away

Buses (T8500) run every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from UB's Dragon (Luu) Avto Vaksal bus stand. They return to Ulaanbaatar the following day, passing within 5km of Kharkhorin. Faster minivans also do the run daily for T10,000.

With the number of Mongolians using the Ulaanbaatar–Kharkhorin road to get to Khujirt in summer, it shouldn't be hard to hitch a ride between Kharkhorin and Khujirt.

SHANKH KHIID ШАНХ ХИЙД

Shankh Khiid, once known as the West Monastery, and Erdene Zuu are the only monasteries in the region to have survived the 1937 purge. Shankh was founded by the great Zanabazar in 1648 and is said to have once housed Chinggis Khaan's black military banner. At one time the monastery was home to more than 1500 monks. As elsewhere, the monastery was closed in 1937, temples were

burnt and many monks were shipped off to Siberia. Some of those that survived helped to reopen the place the early 1990s.

The **monastery** (GPS: N47° 03.079', E102° 57.236'; admission T1000, photos T1000) is exactly halfway along the main road between Kharkhorin and Khujirt, in the village of Shankh. If you have your own transport, it's a fine place to stop between both towns.

KHARKHORIN (KARAKORUM) ХАРХОРИН (КАРАКОРУМ)

☎ 013258 / pop 8000 / elev 1913m

In the mid-13th century, Karakorum was a happening place. Chinggis Khaan established a supply base here and his son Ögedei ordered the construction of a proper capital, a decree that attracted traders, dignitaries and skilled workers from across Asia and even Europe.

The good times lasted around 40 years until Kublai moved the capital to Khanbalik (later called Beijing), a decision that still incites resentment among some Mongolians. Following the move to Beijing and the subsequent collapse of the Mongol empire, Karakorum was abandoned and then destroyed by vengeful Manchurian soldiers in 1388.

Whatever was left of Karakorum was used to help build Erdene Zuu Khiid in the 16th century, which itself was badly damaged during the Stalinist purges.

The charmless Soviet-built town of Kharkhorin (and its gigantic flour factory) was built a couple of kilometres away from Erdene Zuu. There is nothing of interest in the town and it's a big disappointment if you've come expecting the glories of Middle Ages, but a surge in tourism has improved local infrastructure. There are even plans to move the capital here and build a modern planned city (you'll see a billboard in town with the layout). Although this isn't expected to happen anytime soon, it doesn't hurt for a small town to dream.

Information

Kharkhorin has no information office, but the guides at Erdene Zuu (right) can answer most tourist-related questions.

Internet café (per hr T600; ☎ 8.30am-9.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sun) Located in the Telecom office.

Khan Bank (☎ 2124; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Can change US dollars, euros and travellers cheques.

Mongol Shuudan Bank (☎ 2723; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Gives cash against Visa debit cards. Inside the Telecom office.

Telecom office (☎ 2444; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also here.

Xac Bank (☎ 2648; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Changes money and gives cash advances on MasterCard.

Sights

ERDENE ZUU KHIID ЭРДЭНЭ ЗУУ ХИЙД
Founded in 1586 by Altai Khaan, Erdene Zuu (Hundred Treasures) was the first Buddhist monastery in Mongolia. It had between 60 and 100 temples, about 300 gers inside the walls and, at its peak, up to 1000 monks in residence.

The monastery went through periods of neglect and prosperity until finally the Stalinist purges of 1937 put it completely out of business. All but three of the temples in Erdene Zuu were destroyed and an unknown number of monks were either killed or shipped off to Siberia and never heard from again.

However, a surprising number of statues, *tsam* masks and *thangkas* were saved from the monastery at the time of the purges – possibly with the help of a few sympathetic military officers. The items were buried in nearby mountains, or stored in local homes (at great risk to the residents).

The monastery remained closed until 1965 when it was permitted to reopen as a museum, but not as a place of worship. It was only with the collapse of communism in 1990 that religious freedom was restored and the monastery became active again. Today, Erdene Zuu Khiid retains much of its former glory, and is considered by many to be the most important monastery in the country, though no doubt it's a shadow of what it once was.

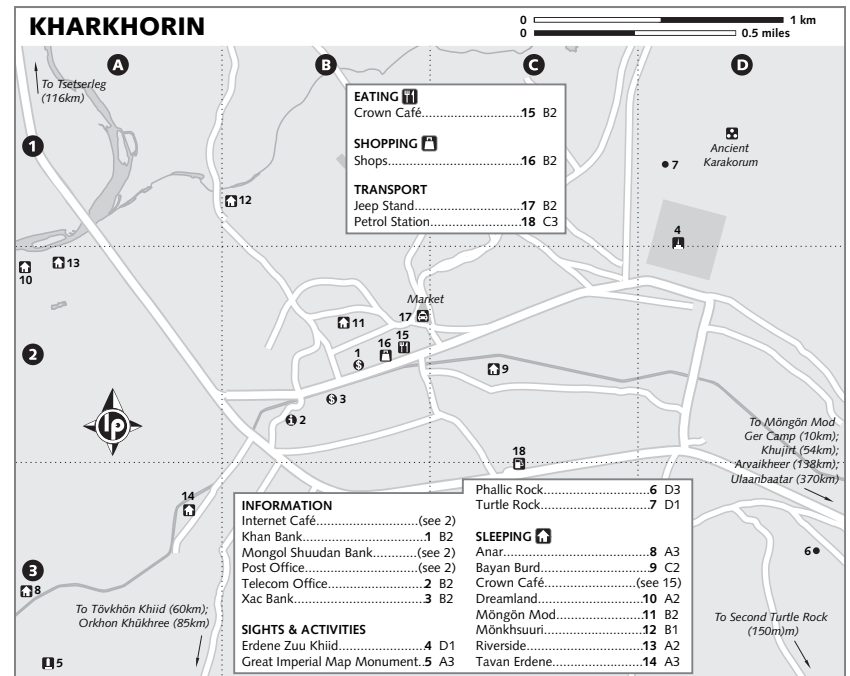
Information

Entrance to the **monastery grounds** (☎ 9am-6pm summer, 10am-5pm winter) is free. If you want to see inside the temples, however, you'll have to go to the **ticket desk** (☎ 2285, 9926 8286) and souvenir shop on your left as you enter the grounds from the south and buy a ticket for US\$3, which includes a guided tour of the site. Permission to take photos in the temples is an additional US\$5 and video is US\$10.

The monastery is an easy 2km walk from the centre of Kharkhorin.

Temples

The monastery is enclosed in an immense walled compound. Spaced evenly along each wall, about every 15m, are 108 stupas (108



is a sacred number to Buddhists). The three temples in the compound, which were not destroyed in the 1930s, are dedicated to the three stages of Buddha's life: childhood, adolescence and adulthood. See p37 for a brief description of some of the gods you will see in the monastery.

Dalai Lama Süm was built in 1675 to commemorate the visit by Abtai Khaan's son, Altan, to the Dalai Lama in Tibet. The room is bare save for a statue of Zanabazar and some fine 17th-century *thangkas* depicting the Dalai Lamas and various protector deities.

Inside the courtyard, **Baruun Zuu**, the temple to the west, built by Abtai Khaan and his son, is dedicated to the adult Buddha. Inside, on either side of Sakyamuni (the Historical Buddha), are statues of Sanjaa ('Dipamkara' in Sanskrit), the Past Buddha, to the left; and Maidar ('Maitreya' in Sanskrit), the Future Buddha, to the right. Other items on display include some golden 'wheels of eternity', *naimin takhel* (the eight auspicious symbols), figurines from the 17th and 18th centuries, and *balin* (wheat dough cakes, decorated with coloured medallions of goat or mutton fat),

made in 1965 and still well preserved. Look out for the inner circumambulation path leading off to the left, just by the entrance.

The main and central temple is called the **Zuu of Buddha**. The entrance is flanked by the gods Gonggor on the left and Bandal Lham (Palden Lhamo in Sanskrit) on the right. Inside, on either side of the statues of the child Buddha, are (to the right) Otoch Manal, the Medicine Buddha and (to the left) Holy Abida, the god of justice. The temple also contains statues of Niam and Dabaa, the sun and moon gods respectively, a few of the *tsam* masks that survived the purges, some carved, aggressive-looking guards from the 16th and 17th centuries, and some displays of the work of the revered sculptor and Buddhist, Zanabazar.

In the temple to the east, **Zuun Zuu**, there's a statue depicting the adolescent Buddha. The statue on the right is Tsongkhapa, who founded the Yellow Hat sect of Buddhism in Tibet. The figure on the left is Janraisig (Chenresig in Tibetan, Avalokitesvara in Sanskrit), the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

As you walk north you will pass the **Golden Prayer Stupa**, built in 1799. The locked temple

THE ANCIENT CAPITAL

Mongolia's ancient capital may be gone, but Karakorum is certainly not forgotten. By piecing together the accounts of the city written by visiting missionaries, ambassadors and travellers we have some idea of what the imperial capital once looked like.

Frankly, it wasn't much. The missionary William of Rubruck (1215–95) dismissed the city as being no bigger than the suburb of Saint Denis in Paris. Giovanni de Piano Carpino (1180–1252), an envoy sent to the Mongols in 1245 by Pope Innocent IV, described the city vaguely as 'at the distance of a year's walk' from Rome.

The city never had much time to expand; it was really only the active capital for 40 years before Kublai moved the capital to Khanbalik (Beijing). Few Mongols even lived there, most preferring to stay in their gers several kilometres away on the steppe. It was mainly inhabited by artisans, scholars, religious leaders and others captured by the Mongols during their foreign raids.

Its main feature was a brick wall with four gates that encircled the city. Each gate had its own market, selling grain in the east, goats in the west, oxen and wagons in the south and horses in the north.

The Mongol khans were famed for their religious tolerance and split their time equally between all the religions, hence the 12 different religions that coexisted within the town. Mosques, Buddhist monasteries and Nestorian Christian churches competed for the Mongols' souls. Even powerful figures such as Ögedei's wife and Kublai's mother were Nestorian Christians.

The centrepiece of the city was the Tumen Amgalan, or Palace of Worldly Peace, in the southwest corner of the city. This 2500-sq-metre complex, built in 1235, was the palace of Ögedei Khan. The two-storey palace had a vast reception hall for receiving ambassadors, and its 64 pillars resembled the nave of a church. The walls were painted, the green-tiled floor had underfloor heating, and the Chinese-style roof was covered in green and red tiles. Whenever he was at court, the khan sat on a panther skin atop a great throne, to which stairs ascended from one side and descended from the other.

A team of German archaeologists recently uncovered the foundations of the palace, close to the stone turtle (opposite). You can also see a model of the palace in the National Museum of Mongolian History (p69) in Ulaanbaatar.

The most memorable aspect of the city was a fountain designed in 1253 by the French jeweller and sculptor Guillaume Bouchier (or Bouchee) of Paris, who had been captured by the Mongols in Hungary and brought back to embellish Karakorum. The fountain was in the shape of a huge silver tree, which simultaneously dispensed mare milk from silver lion heads, and wine, rice wine, *bal* (mead) and *airag* from four golden spouts shaped like snake heads. On top of the tree was an angel. On order a servant blew a pipe like a bugle that extended from the angel's mouth, giving the order for other servants to pump drinks out of the tree.

Rubruck disparagingly describes various pleasure domes and epic feasts (during one of which the Mongol guests guzzled 105 cartloads of alcohol). There were also quarters of artisans and traders, populated by a great mix of people brought back to Karakorum from all over Asia. So cosmopolitan was the city that both foreign and Mongol coins were legal tender.

next to this is said to be the first temple built at Erdene Zuu.

The large white temple at the far end is the Tibetan-style **Lavrin Süm**, where ceremonies are held every morning, usually starting at around 11am; the times vary so ask at the office. Visitors are welcome, but photographs during ceremonies are not.

Other Sights

Apart from the main temples, there are several other interesting things to see. The **gravestones**

of Abtai Khan (1554–88) and his grandson Tüshet Khaan Gombodorj (the father of Zanabazar) stand in front of the Dalai Lama Süm and are inscribed in Mongol, Tibetan and Arabic scripts. In the northeast of the monastery are the base stones of a gigantic ger (now called the **Square of Happiness and Prosperity**), set up in 1639 to commemorate Zanabazar's birthday. The ger was reported to be 15m high and 45m in diameter, with 35 concertina-style walls, and could seat 300 during the annual assemblies of the local khans.

STONE TURTLES

Outside the monastery walls are two stone turtles (also called Turtle Rocks). Four of these sculptures once marked the boundaries of ancient Karakorum, acting as protectors of the city (turtles are considered symbols of eternity). The turtles originally had an inscribed stone stele mounted vertically on their back.

One is easy to find: just walk out of the northern gate of the monastery and follow the path northwest for about 300m. Often, an impromptu **souvenir market** is set up next to one stone turtle. You'll need a guide or directions to find the other one, which is on the hill south of the monastery, about 600m past the phallic rock.

ANCIENT KARAKORUM

Just beyond the stone turtle, stretching for about 1km south and east, is the site of ancient Karakorum. The foundations of Karakorum's buildings are all underground and little has been excavated, so you need lots of imagination when contemplating the grandness of it all. The plain was littered with bricks, ruined walls and pillars until the mid-16th century when everything was picked up and used to build the walls and temples of nearby Erdene Zuu. Next to the stone turtle you can see an area of raised earth surrounded by a wire fence. This was the alleged site of Ögedei Khan's palace.

PHALLIC ROCK

Near Kharkhorin, a 60cm long stone penis attracts steady streams of curiosity-seekers. The 'phallic rock' (GPS: N47° 11.152', E102° 51.235'), which points erotically to something interestingly called a 'vaginal slope', is hidden up a small valley, about 2km southeast of Erdene Zuu Khiid. A giant penis, painted onto a sign by the road, 'points' you in the right direction.

Legend has it that the rock was placed here in an attempt to stop frisky monks, filled with lust by the shapely slope, from fraternising with the local women.

GREAT IMPERIAL MAP MONUMENT

This large new monument (admission T500), built in 2004, is on a hill overlooking Kharkhorin to the southwest. The three sides honour various empires established on the Orkhon Gol, including the Hunnu period (300–200 BC), the Turkic period (AD 600–800) and

the Mongol period (13th century). There are superb panoramic views from here.

Sleeping CAMPING

The rash of ger camps have taken over the best camping spots, but if you head out towards the main cluster of camps west of town near the Orkhon Gol you should be able to find somewhere to pitch a tent.

GER CAMPS

Kharkhorin is inundated with ger camps and the fierce competition keeps prices in check. Most camps are in a lovely valley 2km west of town.

Riverside (☎ 9975 3970; eastline@magicnet.mn; per person US\$12) About 1km from the road, towards the river, this decent camp has clean gers and hot showers. It's hidden in the trees and popular with groups. The hostess speaks English.

Anar (☎ 9665 8101; per person US\$15) This place is bigger and more commercialised than the others in the valley; it comes complete with Chinggis Khaan statues and a ger gift shop. Meals are also available (breakfast US\$2, lunch US\$7, dinner US\$3). It's in a great location in the southwest corner of the valley, and offers plenty of walking and horse-riding opportunities.

Dreamland (☎ 9191 1931; 3-bed economy ger US\$76, lux ger s/d US\$55/82, s/d US\$58/92 lux s/d US\$100/174; ☑) The nicest camp in Kharkhorin is owned and operated by a Mongolian sumo champion, and geared towards Japanese travellers. Dreamland consists of a log cabin-style lodge with immaculate rooms equipped with cable TV, fridge, balcony and little niceties like slippers and robes. Only the lux rooms come with attached shower and bath. It also has luxury gers, complete with air-con, carpets and comfy beds, or the option of standard gers. An internet ger offers free web access for guests. A beautiful Japanese-style sauna and bathhouse completes the picture. The restaurant is inside a huge ger and offers an excellent menu (dishes from T6000 to T12,000) designed by the California restaurant in Ulaanbaatar.

Möngön Möd (☎ 311 637, 99199134; www.intourtrade.mn; per person with 3 meals US\$30) Located 11km from Kharkhorin on the road to Shanhk Khiid, this place offers better-than-average services. Horse riding and tours are available for around US\$50 a day for guide and driver. Don't confuse it with the hotel of the same name in Kharkhorin.

GUESTHOUSES & HOTELS

Mönkhsuuri (☎ 9937 4488, 2031; monkhsuuri_gh@yahoo.com; GPS: N47° 12.125', E102° 48.718'; per person incl breakfast & dinner US\$5) This small, scruffy homestay is in the suburbs northwest of the market. It consists of several gers in a *hashaa* (fenced area), a pit toilet and a hot-water shower. Mönkhsuuri is a friendly and helpful host; she works as a guide at Erdene Zuu Khiid and is most easily contacted there. Call ahead as it's impossible to find on your own (unless you have GPS).

Tavan Erdene (☎ 9919 4452; zandankhuu_d@yahoo.com; GPS: N47° 11.334', E102° 48.461'; per person US\$8) This ger-guesthouse is a little cleaner and nicer than Mönkhsuuri but more expensive. It has hot showers and clean flush toilets. It's run by Zandankhuu, an English-speaking guide at Erdene Zuu.

Crown Café (☎ 9924 2980; purevdashd@yahoo.com; without meals T5000) Ger accommodation and hot showers are available behind this restaurant. The gers are OK but the yard is a mess and they only have pit toilets.

Bayan Burd (☎ 2315, 9909 7372; dm US\$6, half-lux/lux US\$9/11, shower/sauna T1500/2000) If you prefer a midrange hotel rather than a ger, this is the best choice. All rooms are clean and comfortable and the lux room with attached toilet is good value. No rooms have hot water but you can use the hot shower downstairs. The owner is usually willing to bargain.

Möngön Mod (Silver Tree; ☎ 2777, 9989 3883; ger T5000, d/tr T10,000/12,000) The building looks like it's about to collapse but the rooms inside aren't too bad. And most guests end up staying in one of the nicer gers outside. The hot-water shower is fairly reliable. Don't confuse this with the ger camp listed earlier.

Eating

All the ger camps serve meals, the best being the Dreamland Camp, which has a branch of Ulaanbaatar's California restaurant. **Crown Café** (☎ 9924 2980; meals T2500-4000; ☎ 9am-11pm) has a European-style menu that includes tasty items such as fried chicken and tomato soup. Some items, however, are pretty disappointing – the Hungarian goulash is similar to regular old Mongolian goulash. Service can also be very slow and the staff are not very forthcoming. On the plus side, it has homemade cookies and other sweets.

Getting There & Away

Erdene Zuu and the nearby sights are a 2km walk from town; otherwise ask around for a lift (about T500).

AIR

There are no regularly scheduled flights here, although EZ Nis sometimes does a charter package deal that includes flights, hotels and food.

HITCHING

Hitching along the main road between Ulaanbaatar and Kharkhorin is fairly easy, but remember that a lot of vehicles will be carrying tourists, so they may not want to pick up a hitchhiker. Getting a lift between Arvaikheer and Kharkhorin is less likely, but if you're patient something will come along.

Hitchhiking between Kharkhorin and Khujirt shouldn't be too much of a hassle; many Mongolians take the Ulaanbaatar to Kharkhorin road to reach the popular spa town of Khujirt. In Kharkhorin, ask around the container market, or just stand by the road.

MINIVANS & JEEPS

Minivans run daily to Ulaanbaatar (T10,000, eight hours) from the container market, leaving sometime after 8am, whenever they are full. As the road is all but sealed, this is one of the more bearable long-distance trips in the countryside. There are far fewer vehicles going to Khujirt (T2000) and Arvaikheer (T5000) – maybe one or two per day if any at all.

A post office van runs every Wednesday and Friday afternoon to Khujirt (T2000) and Arvaikheer (T4500). Inquire at the post office for details.

The road from Kharkhorin to Khujirt (54km) is being upgraded. The aimag capital, Arvaikheer, is 138km to the southeast. The 160km road between Kharkhorin and Tsetserleg is likewise being upgraded.

WEST OF KHARKHORIN**Tövkhön Khiid ТӨВХӨН ХИЙД**

Hidden deep in the Khangai mountains, this incredibly scenic **monastery** (GPS: N47° 00.772', E102° 15.362') has become a major pilgrimage centre for Mongolians seeking spiritual solace. Zanabazar founded the site in 1653 and lived, worked and meditated here for 30 years. The monastery was destroyed in

1937 but rebuilt with public funds in the early 1990s.

Situated at the top of Shireet Ulaan Uul, Zanabazar apparently liked the unusual formation of the peak; the rocky outcrop looks like an enormous throne. It was here that Zanabazar created many of his best artistic endeavours, some of which can be found now in the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts (p69) in Ulaanbaatar.

Several **pilgrimage sites** have grown up around the temple and hermits' caves, including one that is said to be Zanabazar's boot imprint. Locals will also instruct you to enter the rebirth cave although this is not recommended if you have a fear of heights (getting to the cave requires climbing up a steep precipice). The main temple closes after morning services (between 10am and 11am) and the complex shuts down by 7pm.

The temple is in **Khangai Nuruu National Park** (admission T3000) and best reached with your own vehicle. A good 4WD can drive the steep road up to the monastery in 20 minutes, but old Russian jeeps and vans can't make the trip so you'll have to walk (one hour) up the hill through the forest. From the car park it's 2.5km. The route is obvious and in summer locals offer horse rides (T1000) to the top. Swarms of flies will probably plague your ascent; wrap a T-shirt, bandana or towel around your head to keep them away. A small shop at the top sells bottled water and snacks.

It's not possible to camp at the monastery, but there are a couple of ger camps by the entrance to the national park. The **Tövkhön** (☎ 9191 3025; per person US\$13) has hot showers and flush toilets. Nearby **Guruv Khangai** (☎ 9119 7254; 3-bed ger T15,000) is a cheaper option with basic facilities.

The monastery is around 60km from Kharkhorin. Just follow the Orkhon Gol southwest for around 50km and turn north, up a side valley. You can also get here from Khujirt.

Orkhon Khürkhree Орхон Хүрхрээ

From Tövkhön Khiid, you could continue onto this magnificent seasonal **waterfall** (GPS: N46° 47.234', E101° 57.694'), also called Ulaan Tsutgalan (Улаан Цутгалан). A little way downstream from Orkhon Khürkhree, you can climb down to the bottom of the **gorge**; it's 22m deep and dotted with pine trees.

Despite heavy promotion by the tourist industry, the waterfall often disappoints visitors as it's dry for about 10 months of the year. Late July and August are the best times to see it. When it does run, the roads leading to it are often washed out, making transport here very difficult. Even in dry weather the road is pretty rough. Inquire about the status of the falls and the roads when you get to Kharkhorin or Khujirt.

In summer, a handful of nomad families open up a guest ger, charging T3000 per person. More formal ger camps in the area include **Möngön Khürkhree** (☎ 9910 3185, 9111 4444; www.bayangobi.com; per person without food US\$8), which has hot shower and flush toilets.

If you have a rod and reel, you could try catching your dinner. Good spots for catching lenok trout can be found downstream from the waterfall.

EAST OF KHARKHORIN

There are several interesting places between Kharkhorin and Khustain National Park (p115) en route to/from Ulaanbaatar.

Khögnö Khan Uul Nature Reserve**Хөгнө Хан Уул**

Although it's just off the main Ulaanbaatar–Kharkhorin highway, this nature reserve sees relatively few visitors. Its arid terrain of rocky semi-desert is good for short hikes and there are a few old temples to explore, both ruined and active. At the southern foot of the mountain are the ruins of **Övgön Khiid** (Өвгөн Хийд; GPS: N47° 25.561', E103° 41.686'; admission T1000), built in 1660 and destroyed (and the monks massacred) by the armies of Zungar Galdan Bochigtu, a rival of Zanabazar's in 1640. About 10 monks reside here in the summer months. The head lama is a charming woman who professes soothsaying abilities.

The mountain is in Bulgan aimag but most easily accessed from the Ulaanbaatar–Arvaikheer road.

The ruins of the earlier **destroyed monastery** (GPS: N47° 26.267', E103° 42.527') are a lovely 45-minute (2km) walk along a well-defined path up the valley to the right. The surroundings belong to the 46,900-hectare **Khögnö Khan Nature Reserve** and you might spot ibex, wolves and many varieties of hawk. There are lots of **hiking** possibilities around here.

SLEEPING

Camping is excellent in the valley, though the only water comes from a hard-to-find well at the lower end of the valley. All of the following ger camps have horses for rent for about US\$3 per hour.

Övgön Erdene Tour Camp (Monastery Ger Camp; with meals US\$25) This well-built ger camp and wood lodge is a short walk from the temple. It is run by the monks at the Övgön Khiid.

Khögnö Khan (with/without meals US\$30/15) Located 4km southwest of Övgön Khiid.

Bayangobi (with meals US\$40) Some travellers have stayed for about US\$15 without meals when the camp isn't busy. The camp can be reached by branching south for 6km off the main road, 3km west of the turn-off to Khögnö Khan Uul.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Khögnö Khan Uul from Kharkhorin by jeep, turn north off the main road, 80km east of Kharkhorin. The road passes several ger camps until, after 8km, you reach Khögnö Khan ger camp, where you turn right for the remaining 4km or so to the monastery ruins. There is a shortcut if you are coming from Ulaanbaatar (turn right after the Bichigt Khad ger camp).

There is no public transport to the monastery but you can take a Kharkhorin-, Khujirt- or Arvaikheer-bound minivan from Ulaanbaatar, get off at the turn-off on the main road (T5000) and then hitch (or more likely walk) the remaining 12km.

Mongol Els МОНГОЛ ЭЛС

As you approach the border of Övörkhangaï from Ulaanbaatar, one surprising sight that livens up a fairly boring stretch of road is the sand dunes of Mongol Els. If you don't have the time to visit the Gobi (where there are not a lot of sand dunes anyway), these are certainly worth wandering around.

ARKHANGAI
АРХАНГАЙ

pop 96,100 / area 55,000 sq km

Arkhangai is all about wild nature, nomads and downhome hospitality. The magic of this wild aimag reveals itself at every turn, from sunsets viewed from the top of volcanic craters to rushing streams where fish seem to leap

onto your hook. It's also a great place for the classic 'Mongolian experience', with many opportunities to visit nomad camps, go horse riding and photograph the odd yak caravan plodding slowly along ancient trails.

Arkhangai lies mostly on the northern slope of the Khangai mountains, an undulating range with several peaks more than 3300m. The mountains are by no means impenetrable and it's possible to travel through the passes on horse and jeep trails to Bayankhongor aimag. In winter, nomads use the passes on traditional *otors* (treks) to find grazing land for their animals.

Travellers often hurry through the centre of Arkhangai on their way to Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur. With a bike or horse, however, there are plenty of valleys and remote trails to explore both north and south of the main road. You barely need this book to find beautiful and interesting places; just head off into the hills and see what you can discover. Along the way you'll be invited into plenty of gers for cups of *airag* and hot tea to keep you full until you reach the next valley.

TSETSERLEG ЦЭЦЭРЛЭГ

☎ 01332 / pop 17,900 / elev 1691m

Nestled comfortably between rugged mountains, with tree-lined streets and a quaint temple overlooking the town, Tsetserleg gets our vote for Mongolia's most beautiful aimag capital.

Tsetserleg is a perfect place to break up your journey if you are combining a visit to Kharkhorin or Khujirt with a trip to Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur or Khövsgöl Nuur. There are some decent restaurants and hotels, busy temples and a striking aimag museum. Nature lovers will appreciate the hiking opportunities and good camping spots. Tourist activities revolve around the Fairfield Café & Guesthouse, an attraction in its own right.

Information

Internet café (☎ 21110; per hr T440; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 8pm Sat & Sun) In the Telecom office.

Mongol Shuudan Bank (☎ 22673) Changes cash and allows you to withdraw money from debit and credit cards.

Strictly Protected Areas office (☎ 21179; khangainuruu@yahoo.com; ☎ 9am-6pm) Has information on Arkhangai's national parks and can give advice on tourist sites, fishing licences and park fees.

Telecom office (☎ 21108; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also here.

Sights

The **Museum of Arkhangai Aimag** (☎ 22281; admission T2500, exterior/interior photos T2000/T5000; ☎ 9am-6pm) is one of the best in the country. It's housed in the temple complex of **Zayain Gegeenii Süm**, which was first built in 1586 but expanded in 1679, when it housed five temples and up to 1000 monks. Miraculously, the monastery escaped the Stalinist purges because it was made into a museum.

The main hall concentrates on features of traditional Mongolian lifestyle, with exhibits of costumes, traditional tools, a ger, musical instruments, weaponry and saddles. The displays have some useful English captions. The second hall concentrates on religious icons. The other two rooms of the former main prayer hall are empty, while the last hall focuses on local artwork.

Further up the hill, the **Galdan Zuu Temple** has been renovated with donations given by the locals. It stands behind an impressive 7m statue of the Buddha. Behind the temple is a large, nearly vertical, rocky hill called **Bulgan Uul**, where there are some **Buddhist inscriptions**.

At street level the **Buyandelgerüülekh Khiid** (Буяндэлгэрүүлэх Хийд) is now the town's main functioning monastery. The temple has an atmospheric clutter of assorted religious artefacts, and religious services are held regularly, either in the main hall or in a ger next door.

In the north of town a trail leads to the pretty **Gangin Gol**, which offers great **hiking** potential. At the mouth of the valley is a ger camp and a pitiful **nature museum** of stuffed animals, which isn't worth the T1000 the caretaker will demand.

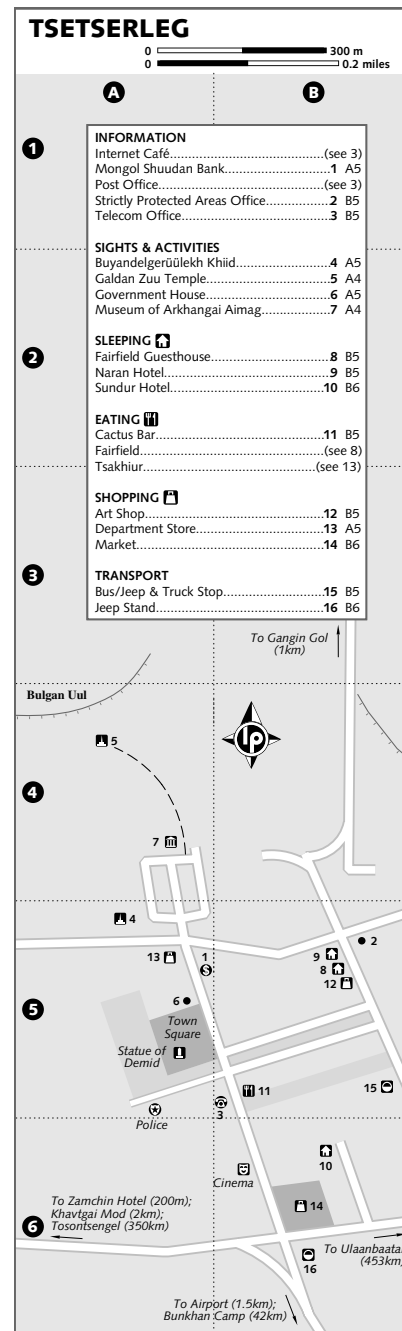
Sleeping
CAMPING

Gangin Gol has some great camping spots, though someone may come and collect a dubious 'fee' for camping in a 'nature reserve' (it's not). A few hundred metres past the ger camp is a grassy enclosure that's perfect for camping.

There are some nice spots a few kilometres south of town on the banks of the river.

GER CAMPS

Khavtgai Mod (☎ 9911 8262; without meals T3500) On a hillside a couple of kilometres out of town to the west, this camp has a good location in the forest and valley views. It's fine for a quick



night's sleep but the facilities aren't great and there is no shower.

HOTELS

Our pick **Fairfield Guesthouse** (☎ 21036, 9909 8612; per person incl breakfast T12,000) Attached to the restaurant of the same name, this nine-room guesthouse is a popular choice and one of the only hotels in the countryside where you need a reservation in summer. Nonattached rooms are clean and cosy and there is an excellent breakfast. The hotel is a travellers' hub with a book exchange and a popular café. It's a great place to pick up advice on regional travel.

Naran Hotel (☎ 9933 2900, 9908 9343; r per person T4000, half-lux/lux T8000/16,000) Although only a few years old, this seven-room hotel is already breaking down. Further complicating matters is the noisy Neptune Club in the same building. Standard rooms use a shared bathroom down the hall while lux rooms have an attached shower and bath.

Sundur Hotel (☎ 22359; r US\$8, half-lux/lux US\$15/20; 🚻) The cheapest rooms here have only a toilet and no shower, but all others have nice bathrooms with hot water (at fixed times of the day only – check the times with reception). Internet access is free for guests and there is a decent restaurant downstairs that serves Mongolian food.

Zamchin Hotel (☎ 22274; d/tr US\$8/12, half-lux/lux US\$22/28; 🚻) A reliable place, Zamchin has a restaurant, sauna and hot shower. Rooms are spacious but it's away from the centre, on the western road out of town.

Eating

Our pick **Fairfield** (☎ 21026; meals T2000–6500; 🕒 9am–6pm Mon–Sat) This British-run café is one of the highlights of Tsetserleg and should feature prominently on your itinerary. Sit down at one of the wooden tables, order a meal and leaf through a copy of *Time* or the *Economist* while you wait. A full English breakfast (T6500) consists of bacon, sausage, eggs, toast and pancakes – a real treat in this part of the world. Lunch and dinner options include lasagne, burgers with Indian mutton, chilli con carne, beef in beer sauce and Cornish pasties. Pastries are served all day long and are great snacks to take with you on the road. The café is also a good place to ask about travel conditions and look for a ride if you are hitching around the country.

Cactus Bar (snacks T500–1000; 🕒 10am–10pm) Hot *khuushuur* (fried mutton pancakes) by day

and beer by night seems to be a standard course of events at the Cactus. It is opposite the Telecom office.

Tsakhur (meals T1300; 🕒 11am–11pm) A little fancier than other places, this upmarket restaurant (it has tablecloths) is near the department store on the north end of town. It serves local favourites such as goulash and *puntutste khuurag* (clear or glass noodles).

Shopping

The **Art Shop** (☎ 9933 6851; 🕒 10am–7pm) sells Mongolian *dels* (traditional coats) and jackets, plus locally produced art and artefacts. It's next to the Fairfield Guesthouse. The Fairfield also has a fair-trade gift shop.

Everyday goods are best bought at the department store at the northern end of town.

The daily market (*khunsnii zakh*), on the corner of the main road and the road to Ulaanbaatar, has enough products for a pre-trekking shopping trip.

Getting There & Away

There are no flights to Tsetserleg, so the only way here is by bus or shared vehicle.

BUS

A daily bus departs Tsetserleg at 8am for Ulaanbaatar (T10,500, 11 hours). Purchase the ticket at least one day ahead. Make inquiries at the Fairfield café.

HITCHING

All types of vehicles go to/from Tsetserleg and, generally, along the main road through Arkhangai. Wait on the main road into and out of town (heading east or west) and something will eventually stop.

MINIVAN & JEEP

Microbuses and minivans run between Tsetserleg and Ulaanbaatar (T15,000, 10 hours). In Tsetserleg, try the minivans at the jeep stand opposite the market. Drivers in Tsetserleg have developed a dual-pricing system so that tourists are charged twice as much as locals. Bargaining hard doesn't help much and you may have to pay their 'tourist prices'.

There are two routes between Tsetserleg and Ulaanbaatar – directly east via Ögii Nuur (453km) or along the longer but better road via Kharkhorin (493km). Tosontsengel is a mere 350km to the northwest.

If you are travelling from Tsetserleg to Mörön (for Khövsgöl Nuur), the quickest route is due north via Erdenemandal. However, if you've come this far (and have a couple of days to spare), it's worth heading a bit further west through central Arkhangai to Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur, before heading north to Mörön via Jargalant.

TSENKHER HOT SPRINGS

ЦЭНХЭР ХАЛУУН РАШААН
Located 27km from Tsetserleg, these **hot springs** make for an easy detour from the main road. Three ger camps have been built around the springs; each pumps water into splash pools that cost around US\$5 to enter. The pool at **Tsenkher Jiguur** (☎ 9914 5520; www.visit2mongolia.mn; GPS: N47° 19.241', E101° 39.411'; ger US\$16) is the cleanest and hottest of the bunch; it is lined with rocks (rather than concrete) and connected to a well-maintained bathhouse. There are separate pools for men and women. For directions from Tsetserleg ask at the Fairfield café.

ÖGII NUUR ӨГИЙ НУУР

On the road between Ulaanbaatar and Tsetserleg, near the border with Bulgan aimag, this **lake** (GPS: N47° 47.344', E102° 45.828') is a wonderful place for birdlife. Cranes and ducks, among other species, migrate to the area around late April. The lake is also renowned for its fishing (and the bugs by the shore!).

The lake and Khar Balgas ruins can only be reached from the direct road linking Tsetserleg with Ulaanbaatar. The lake makes a nice overnight stop with plenty of camping spots. A ger camp on the east shore serves meals.

If you are travelling west of Ögii Nuur you might want to carry onto the **Beaten Paths Ger Camp** (☎ 5033 1020, 5033 7376; rshore@gail.com) in Battsengel *sum* (region). The camp was set up with the help of a local Peace Corps volunteer and offers horse riding among other activities. The camp is halfway between Ögii Nuur and Tsetserleg.

KHAR BALGAS ХАР БАЛГАС

The ruined citadel of Khar Balgas (Kara Balgasun in Turkic) is in Khotont *sum* on the banks of the Orkhon Gol. The city was founded in AD 751 as the capital of the Uighur Khaganate, which ruled Mongolia from 744 to 840.

There's not much to see except the outer walls (with gates in the north and south), a

Buddhist stupa and the ruler's **kagan** (castle), in the southwest corner. From the walls you can see the rows of stupas on either side of the walls and the remains of irrigated fields in the surrounding countryside. The city had an elaborate plumbing system, which brought water into the city from the nearby river.

The **ruins** (GPS: N47° 25.782', E102° 39.490') lie east of the road connecting Ögii Nuur and Khotont and aren't easy to get to. If you are travelling to/from the Kul-Teginii Monument, the best place to cross the river is 6km northeast of Khar Balgas; anywhere else and it's bog city.

KUL-TEGINII MONUMENT

КУЛ-ТЭГИНИЙ ХӨШӨӨ

When Chinggis Khaan decided to move his capital to Karakorum, he was well aware that the region had already been the capital to successive nomad empires. About 20km northeast of Khar Balgas lies the remainder of yet another of these pre-Mongol empires, the Turkic *khaganate* (pre-Mongol empire). All that's left of the *khaganate* is the 3m-high inscribed monument of Kul-Tegin (684–731), the *khagan* (ruler) of the ancient empire. The **monument** (GPS: N47° 33.837', E102° 49.931') was raised in AD 732 and is inscribed in Runic and Chinese script. You can see a copy of the stele in the entrance of the National Museum of Mongolian History in Ulaanbaatar (p69).

Just over 1km away is another **monument to Bilge Khagan** (AD 683–734), older brother of Kul-Tegin. Ten years after the death of Bilge, the Turkic *khaganate* was overrun by the Uighurs.

A Turkish-funded archaeological expedition, based out of a huge hanger near the site, is working on making reproductions of the monuments. If you don't see the monuments where they should be, ask the friendly caretaker to let you into the hanger.

The two monuments are 25km northwest of Khashaat in a region called Tsaidam, about 47km north of Kharkhorin, and are hard to find. Amateur historians who relish a challenge are best off packing a GPS into their jeep; otherwise ask at gers en route from either Khashaat or Ögii Nuur.

ТАЙХАР CHULUU ТАЙХАР ЧУЛУУ

The nondescript town of Ikh Tamir is 22km along the main road west of Tsetserleg. The reason to stop here is to inspect the enormous

RETREAT TO THE KHANGAI

Horse lovers, poets, writers, photographers, yogis, Buddhist practitioners or plain old refugees of commercialism are all welcome at the Bunkhan Camp, a lovely ger camp set deep in the Khangai mountains. The camp, 42km south of Tsetserleg, is operated by an American couple, anthropologist Carroll Dunham and photographer Thomas Kelly, and their Mongolian partners Gerlee and Toroo.

Workshops lasting two weeks include wilderness poetry, meditation, yoga and photography, with space for 10 to 12 people at a time. It's a great place to unwind, meet like-minded people and commune with nature. Horses are available and visitors can go on pack trips to nearby Blue Lake. The camp is kid-friendly, with plenty of options for fishing, archery and horse riding. Costs average out to US\$150 per day for adults and US\$80 per day for kids. For more information see www.wildearthjourneys.com or contact carrolldunham@yahoo.com.

Taikhar Chuluu rock formation. The rock is the subject of many local legends, the most common one being that a great *baatar* (hero), crushed a huge serpent here by hurling the rock on top of it. Locals claim there are some ancient Tibetan inscriptions on the rock, though you'll be lucky to spot them through 30 years of Mongolian graffiti. There is even an *ovoo* at the top.

You could camp anywhere along the Khoid Tamir Gol. **Taikhar Ger Camp** (☎ 9919 8512; per person US\$12), next to the rock, has hot-water showers and flush toilets.

Taikhar Chuluu is about 2km north of Ikh Tamir along the river – you can see it from the main road.

KHORGU-TERKHIIN TSAGAAN NUUR NATIONAL PARK ХОРГО-ТЭРХИЙН ЦАГААН НУУР

Amid volcanic craters, pine-clad lava fields and the occasional herd of grazing yaks, the Great White Lake, as it's known in English, is the natural highlight of Arkhangai aimag. According to legend, the lake was formed when an elderly couple forgot to cap a well after fetching water. The valley flooded with water until a local hero shot a nearby mountain top with his arrow; the shorn top covered the well and became an island in the lake (Noriin Dund Tolgoi).

The freshwater **Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur** is not as forested or as large as Khövsgöl Nuur, but it is closer to Ulaanbaatar, relatively undeveloped and just about perfect for camping (though there are a few flies in summer). The lake, birdlife and mountains are now protected within the 77,267-hectare Khorgo-Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur National Park. The national park fee of T3000 applies.

The lake, which was formed by lava flows from a volcanic eruption many millennia ago, is excellent for **swimming**, though a bit cold in the morning – try the late afternoon, after the sun has warmed it. Hidden along the shore are stretches of sandy beach, perfect for lounging with a book or fishing line.

The **fishing** is great, though you should get a permit for around T3000 per day. There are several park rangers who sell permits but they can be hard to find; try asking at the park entrance by the bridge in **Tariat** (also known as Khorgo), or at the government building in Tariat.

One must-do excursion takes you to the top of **Khorgo Uul** volcano. A road leads 4km from Tariat village to the base of the volcano, from where it's a 10-minute walk up to the **cone** (GPS: N48° 11.187', E99° 51.259'). The volcano is in the park so you'll need to pay the park fee of T3000 if you haven't already.

There is also the option of exploring the lake by boat. A rowing boat and a motorboat cost around T5000 per hour to hire. Inquire at the Khorgo I ger camp.

Information

Tariat village has an **internet café** (per hr T600; ☎ 9am-9pm).

Festivals

If you've got a taste for yak cream or are keen on yak racing, plan a visit to Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur in the second week of June, when **Tsolmon travel company** (☎ 011-322 870, 9929 5732) hosts its annual **Yak Festival** by the lake.

Sleeping CAMPING

Except for a few annoying flies, Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur is an excellent place for camp-

ing. There is good fishing, endless fresh water, and flat ground for pitching a tent. The western end of the lake, where it joins the Khoid Terkhiiin Gol, is muddy. The best place to camp is the northern part, away from the ger camps. The area is cold year-round, and often windy, so a good sleeping bag is vital.

GER CAMPS

Several camps are built up along the shore of the lake, but they are all fairly spread out so it's not too crowded.

Tunga's Ger Camp (www.tungaguesthouse.com; GPS: N48° 09.318', E99° 45.206'; per person T6000) The only camp on the southern shore of the lake, this basic place is 12km west of Tariat. The price includes breakfast and hot shower; horse trips are also organised. It's run by local English teacher Tunga, who also has a guesthouse in Tariat.

Khorgo I (☎ 011-322 870, 9916 2847; GPS: N48° 12.246', E99° 50.834'; with/without meals US\$30/14) In a lovely location in the Zurkh Gol Khundii (Heart River valley) by the northeast section of the lake, Khorgo I is run by Tsolmon Travel in Ulaanbaatar (p81). The camp has hot showers and there is excellent hiking nearby. To get there take the road north of Tariat into the park and take the branch to the right when you get near the volcano.

Tsagaan Nuur (☎ 9981 7465; GPS: N48° 10.621', E99° 48.691'; without meals US\$10, meals T2500) This is the first camp on the north shore of the lake. Horses are T3000 per hour. The owners also rent fishing rods.

Further around the lake you'll see some 'ger hotels' that charge T4000 per person. There is also a shop nearby selling soft drinks, confectionary and fishing equipment.

Maikhan Tolgoi (☎ 9911 9730, 9908 9730; GPS: N48° 10.821', E99° 45.725'; without meals US\$15) Set on a headland on the northern shore of the lake, this is perhaps the most attractive camp on the lake. It has flush toilets, hot showers and a cosy restaurant.

GUESTHOUSES

Tariat village, about 6km east of the lake, is the only town in the area. Accommodation is basic, with just one run-down hotel and a couple of guesthouses. **Tunga's Guesthouse** (☎ 9928 5710, 9983 6144; www.tungaguesthouse.com; GPS:

N48° 09.245', E99° 53.351'; per night T5000) is convenient if you want to do things like charge batteries and get your laundry done. Tunga speaks English. Guest gers are available behind the **Ma Bagsh** (☎ 9962 7615; per night US\$5) restaurant.

Eating

All the camps around the lake provide reasonably priced meals. Self-caterers can stock up on supplies in either Tariat or the shops by the lake. In Tariat, you could try **Ma Bagsh** (☎ 9962 7615; meals T1500; ☎ 9am-midnight), a better-than-average restaurant serving mainly Mongolian meals. It's near the bridge.

Getting There & Away

Occasional minivans run to/from Ulaanbaatar and Tsetserleg. From anywhere else you are better off hitching.

From the lake to Tosontsengel (179km), the main road climbs over Solongotyn Davaa, a phenomenally beautiful area. You can see patches of permanent ice from the road. The road has been upgraded to an all-weather gravel road but is still rough in patches.

For the route to Mörön, see p162.

AROUND TERKHIIN TSAGAAN NUUR

There are a number of scenic areas in the environs of Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur that are worth exploring on horseback. These include **Noyon Khangai National Park** (Ноён Хангай), a mountainous area rich in wildlife and **hot springs** (GPS: N47° 44.607', E99° 24.861') covered by wooden huts (the water is 33°C). By road it's a rough 78km from Tariat; the area is a national park so you may need to pay a T3000 entry fee, although there is rarely anyone around to collect the fees.

Around 60km northeast of Tariat village, **Choidogiin Borgio** (Чойдогийн Боргио), where the Chuluu and Ikh Jargalantiin Gols converge, is a fine **hiking, fishing and camping** area. The road here is even worse than the one to Noyon Khangai, which makes it a great destination by horse or bike but a lousy trip by car.

About 30km east of Tariat is the dramatic **Chuluut gorge**, which makes a pleasant picnic stop. Near the gorge, look out for a sacred tree, **Zuun Salaa Mod** (GPS: N48° 07.936', E100° 16.420'), draped in prayer scarves and debris.

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