

History

By Jack Weatherford & Dulmaa Enkhchuluun

Over the past 2000 years, possibly no other place on the planet has exported as much history as Mongolia. In three dramatic waves – Hun, Turk and, finally, Mongol – hordes of warriors rode their small but powerful horses down from the Mongolian Plateau to challenge and transform the world. The steppe warriors not only conquered nations, they swept up whole civilisations and reassembled them into intercontinental empires of a scale never before reached by any other people.

Although each of the three waves produced its distinctive influence, the name of Chinggis Khaan achieved a unique spot in the world's imagination. He created the nation in 1206 and named it after his Mongol lineage. Mongols still maintain an intimate tie to him, but beyond the use of his iconic image and name, there seems to be surprisingly little in the nation connected directly to him. Chinggis Khaan left behind a nation, but he did not leave a monument to himself, a temple, pyramid, palace, castle or canal, and even his grave was left unmarked in the remote area where he grew up and hunted as a boy. As he himself wished, his body could wither away so long as his great Mongol nation lived, and today that nation is his monument.

The lack of tangible ties to Chinggis Khaan presents both a challenge and an opportunity to visitors; Mongolia does not yield its history promiscuously to every passer-by. Its story is not told in great books, large stone monuments or bronze statues. A hiker crossing a hilltop can easily find etchings of deer with baroque configurations of antlers, soaring falcons or shamans without faces, but was the image etched last year by a bored herder, a century ago by a pious lama or 25,000 years ago by a passing hunter? A small stone implement could have been abandoned there centuries ago by a Hun mother preparing a family meal or by a Turk warrior on a raid; the modern visitor might easily be the first human to clutch it in 3000 years. The artefact does not come labelled, classified and explained. The stories of the steppe are incomplete, and history emerges slowly from the objects, the soil and the landscape.

HUNS: CHILDREN OF THE SUN

The first of the steppe nomads to make an impact beyond Mongolia were the tribe whom the Mongols now call the 'People of the Sun', the Hunnu, better known as the Huns. They created the first steppe empire in 209 BC under Modun, a charismatic leader who took the title *shanyu* (king) and ruled until his death in 174 BC. Modun created a disciplined and strong cavalry corps personally devoted to him, and used the corps to overthrow and kill his father.

Anthropologist Jack Weatherford wrote *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, for which he received the Order of the Polar Star, Mongolia's highest state honour.

Dulmaa Enkhchuluun graduated from Augsburg College in Minnesota and now owns Borijin Travel, a company devoted to culturally and environmentally responsible tourism and commercial development in Mongolia.

Khan means *Chief* or *King*; *Khaan* means *Emperor* or *Great Khan*.

TIMELINE

209 BC–174 BC

Reign of Modun, as *shanyu* of the Huns; the first great steppe empire of Mongolia stretches from Korea to Lake Baikal in Siberia and south into northern China.

AD 552–744

Succession of two Turkic empires; greatest ruler is Bilge Khan. Following his death in 734 a monument is erected near Lake Ögii.

744–840

The Uighur empire occupies central Mongolia until expelled by the Kyrgyz tribe; the Uighur move south into western China and control the Silk Route for nearly 1000 years.

Between the creation of the Qing dynasty in China in 221 BC and the collapse of the Han dynasty in AD 220, the Chinese became the dominant economic power in East Asia, but the steppe tribes under the Huns grew into a great military power. The Chinese and the Huns vied for dominance through protracted wars with intermittent truces, during which the Chinese bribed the steppe warriors with tributes of goods and women, including imperial princesses. Using the merchandise extracted from the Chinese, the Huns extended the trade routes connecting the civilisations around them.

Following the collapse of the Hun empire in the 4th century AD, various newly independent tribes left the Mongolian homeland, wandering from India to Europe in search of new pastures and new conquests. By the 5th century, one of these branches reached Europe and created a new Hun empire that stretched from the Ural Mountains to Germany. Under their most famous leader, Attila the Hun, they threatened Rome and ravaged much of Western Europe, and for the first time in history mounted archers from the Mongolian steppe created an intercontinental reputation for their fierceness and tenacity in battle.

TURKS: CHILDREN OF THE WOLF MOTHER

In the 6th century a new sense of order returned to the Mongolian Plateau with the rise of a series of tribes speaking Turkic languages. These tribes claimed descent from a boy who was left for dead but saved and adopted by a mother wolf who raised him and then mated with him, creating from their offspring the ancestors of the various steppe clans. Compared with both the Huns before them and the Mongols after them, the literate Turks sought to blend the traditional nomadic herding life with a sedentary life of agriculture, urbanisation and commerce; consequently, they left more physical remains than the others in the ruins of Turkic cities and ceremonial centres. Along the Orkhon Gol in central Mongolia they built their small cities of mud, the most famous of which were erected during the time of the Uighurs, the last of the great Turkic empires of Mongolia. The Turkic era reached its zenith in the early 8th century under Bilge Khan and his brother Kultegen, the military general. Their monuments near the Orkhon Gol are probably the oldest known examples of writing in a Turkic language.

Like the Huns before them the Turks moved down off the Mongolian Plateau, spreading from what is today China to the shores of the Mediterranean. Another invading Turkic tribe, the Kyrgyz, overthrew the Uighur empire in AD 840, destroying its cities and driving the Uighur people south into the oases of western China. But the Kyrgyz showed no inclination to maintain the cities or the empire they had conquered. With the expulsion of the Uighurs came another period of decentralised feuding and strife, before the greatest of all Mongolian empires arose at the beginning of the 13th century: the rise to power of Chinggis Khan.

The *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, by Christopher P Atwood, is an authoritative history reference book with special emphasis on Buddhism.

Anthropologist Chris Kaplonski maintains an excellent site devoted to Mongolian culture and history at www.chriskaplonski.com

Chinggis Khan never erected any statues or grand monuments to himself, but recent years have seen modern Mongolians trying to catch up in this area. Statues of Chinggis can be seen at Sükhbaatar Sq in UB, on the Ulaanbaatar–Khentii road, in Öndörkhayan and in Dadal.

THE FIRE CULT OF THE JESUS BUDDHA

During the Turkic empires from the 6th century through 9th century, the steppe nomads refused to convert to any of the major world religions, such as Islam, Buddhism or Christianity. They chose to follow the teachings of 3rd-century Persian prophet Mani, who was martyred for preaching a doctrine of dualism: good and evil represented through light and dark.

Manicheans accepted the teachings of Jesus, Hermes, Buddha and Zoroaster as well as those of philosophers such as Plato and Socrates. They sang hymns to 'Jesus Buddha' as well as to light, for which Christians dismissed them as idolatrous fire worshippers.

Manicheism spread as an underground religious movement from India to Egypt, but Christian and Muslim authorities persecuted followers and chased them to ever more remote areas until the religion made its last and most important refuge in Mongolia. When the Uighur king in central Mongolia converted in AD 763, the Uighur empire became the only nation in history to accept Manicheism as the state religion.

Manicheans compared their religion to a great world ocean, into which all rivers of knowledge flow, and this imagery persisted in Mongolian culture, as shown in the title 'Chinggis Khan' (Ocean King). Similarly, son Ögedei and grandson Guyuk used the title 'Dalai Khan' from the Mongolian *dalai* meaning *sea*. In the 16th century, Altan Khan bestowed this ancient title on a new line of Buddhist monks from Tibet, allowing them to call their leader Dalai Lama, meaning 'Sea of Wisdom'.

MONGOLS: CHILDREN OF THE GOLDEN LIGHT

The decline of the Turkic tribes gave the opening for a new tribe to emerge. Scholars offer varying explanations for when and where these new people arrived, but the Mongols ascribe their origins to the mating of a blue wolf and a tawny doe beside a great sea, often identified as Lake Baikal (in Russia). They further credit the origin of Chinggis Khan's own clan to a mysterious and sacred woman called Alan Goa, who gave birth to two sons during her marriage, and had an additional three sons after her husband died. The elder sons suspected that their younger brothers had been fathered by an adopted boy (now a man) whom their mother had also raised and who lived with her.

Upon hearing of their suspicions and complaints, Alan Goa sat her five sons around the hearth in her ger and told them that the three younger sons were fathered by a 'Golden Light'. She then handed each an arrow with the command to break it. When they had done this, she handed each a bundle of five arrows with the command to break them all together. When the boys could not do so, she told them that it mattered not where the brothers came from so long as they remained united.

No matter what the Mongol origin, the story of Alan Goa had a persistent and profound influence on the development of Mongolian culture, on everything from the role of women and attitudes towards sexuality to

A Mongol is a member of the Mongol ethnic group; a Mongolian is a citizen of Mongolia. Kazakhs of Bayan-Ölgii are Mongolians but not Mongols; the Kalmyks of New Jersey are Mongols but not Mongolians.

1162

Birth of Temujin, the child destined to become Chinggis Khan, near the Onon River. According to legend, Temujin emerges with a blood clot clutched in his fist.

1204

Chinggis Khan establishes the Mongolian state script based on the Uighur alphabet, which had Semitic origins but was written vertically from top to bottom.

1206

Chinggis Khan calls a massive conclave at Kherlen Gol and creates his empire to which he gives the name Great Mongol Nation.

1235

Ögedei Khan completes the imperial capital at Karakorum. In addition to a great palace, the city has Muslim mosques, Christian churches and Buddhist temples.

1260

The end of Mongol expansion with their defeat by the Mamluk army of Egypt at the Battle of Ayn Al-Jalut near the Sea of Galilee.

1271

Kublai Khan claims the office of Great Khan and also makes himself Emperor of China by founding the Yuan dynasty.

the political quest for unity and the herder's value of practical action over ideology or religion.

THE MONGOL EMPIRE

The Mongols were little more than a loose confederation of rival clans until the birth of Temujin in 1162. Overcoming conditions that would have crushed lesser men, Temujin rose to become the strongest ruler on the steppe, and in AD 1206 founded the Mongol empire and took the title 'Chinggis Khaan'. He was already 44 years old and since the age of 16, when his bride was kidnapped, he had been fighting one clan feud and tribal war after another. Frustrated with the incessant chaos, he began killing off the leaders of each clan as he defeated them and incorporating the survivors into his own following. Through this harsh but effective way, Chinggis Khaan forced peace onto the clans around him.

He named the new state Yekhe Mongol Ulus (Great Mongol Nation). His followers totalled probably under a million people, and from this he created an army of nine units of 10,000 and a personal guard of another 10,000. With a nation smaller than the workforce of a modern corporation such as Wal-mart, and an army that could fit inside a modern stadium, the Mongols conquered the greatest armies of the era and subdued hundreds of millions of people.

In battle Chinggis Khaan was merciless, but to those who surrendered without fighting he promised protection, religious freedom, lower taxes and a heightened level of commerce and prosperity. His law and incorruptible officials did more to attract people into his empire than his military power. Based on military success and good laws, his empire continued to expand after his death until it stretched from Korea to Hungary and from India to Russia.

THE DECLINE

After Chinggis Khaan's death, his second son Ögedei ruled from 1229 to 1241, followed by Ögedei's widow Töregene Khatun and the brief 18-month reign of Ögedei's son Guyuk from 1246 through 1248. Tensions began to develop among the branches of his descendants, and broke into open civil war when Arik Boke and Kublai each claimed the office of Great Khan after the death of their brother Möngke in 1259. Arik Boke controlled all of Mongolia, including the capital Karakorum, and enjoyed widespread support from the ruling Borjigin clan. Yet Kublai controlled the vast riches of northern China, and these proved far more powerful. Kublai defeated his brother who then perished under suspicious circumstances in captivity.

Kublai won the civil war and solidified his hold over China, but it cost him his empire. Although they still claimed to be a single empire, the nation of Chinggis Khaan had been reduced to a set of oft-warring sub-empires.

Rivers in Mongolia are female and may be called *ej* (mother). A river, spring or lake that never runs dry is called a *khatun* (queen).

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1395), recognised as the first book of poetry written in English, includes an early account of Chinggis Khaan in the 'Squire's Tale'.

CHINGGIS KHAAN: MAN OF THE MILLENNIUM

Known to the world as a conqueror, Mongolians remember Chinggis Khaan as the great lawgiver and proudly refer to him as the Man of the Millennium (a title bestowed on him by the *Washington Post* in 1995). His laws derived from practical considerations more than ideology or religion.

After the abduction of his wife Borte, Chinggis recognised the role of kidnapping in perpetuating feuds among clans and outlawed it. Similarly, he perceived religious intolerance as being a source of violence in sedentary society and so decreed religious freedom for everyone and exempted religious scholars and priests from taxes.

To promote trade and communications, Chinggis built an international network of postal stations that also served as hostels for merchants. He decreased and standardised the taxes on goods so that they would not be repeatedly taxed. Under these laws the Mongol empire formed the first intercontinental free-trade zone.

In an era when ambassadors served as hostages to be publicly tortured or killed during times of hostilities, Chinggis Khaan ordered that every ambassador be considered as an envoy of peace. This law marked the beginning of diplomatic immunity and international law. Today nearly every country accepts and promotes, at least in theory, the ideas and policies behind the 'Great Law of Chinggis Khaan'.

The Mongols of Russia became in effect independent, known later as the Golden Horde, under the lineage of Chinggis Khaan's eldest son Jochi. Persia and Mesopotamia drifted off to become the Ilkhanate under descendants of Kublai's only surviving brother Hulegu, the conqueror of Baghdad.

Kublai created a Chinese dynasty named Yuan, took Chinese titles and, while still claiming to be the Great Khan of the Mongols, looked southward to the remaining lands of the Sung dynasty, which he soon conquered.

Much of Central Asia, including Mongolia, pursued an independent course and acknowledged the Yuan dynasty only when forced with a military invasion or enticed with extravagant bribes of silk, silver and other luxuries. By 1368 the subjects had mostly overthrown their Mongol overlords, and the empire withdrew back to the Mongolian steppe where it began. Although most Mongols melted into the societies that they conquered, in some distant corners of the empire, from Afghanistan to Poland, small vestiges of the Mongols still survive to the present.

In 1368 the Ming army captured Beijing, but the Mongol royal family refused to surrender and fled back to Mongolia with the imperial seals and their bodyguards. Much to the frustration of the Ming emperors in China, the Mongols continued to claim to be the legitimate rulers of China and still styled themselves as the Yuan dynasty, also known as the Northern Yuan. Even within Mongolia, the Imperial Court exerted little power. Unaccustomed to the hardships of the herding life and demanding vast amounts of food, fuel and other precious resources for their large court

The English word 'horde' derives from the Mongol *ordu*, meaning 'royal court'.

The best source for information on the life of Chinggis Khaan can be found in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, which was written in the 13th or 14th century and was not made public until the 20th century.

1368

Yuan dynasty collapses in China but the Mongol government return to Mongolia refusing to submit to the newly created Ming dynasty. They continue ruling as the 'Northern Yuan'.

1448

Birth of Mongolia's greatest queen, Manduhai the Wise, who reunites Mongolia by the end of the century.

1449

Esen Taishi defeats the Chinese and captures the Ming emperor. His reign marks the rise of western Mongolia and the Oirat people as major powers of Inner Asia.

1585

Founding of Erdene Zuu, first Buddhist monastery in Mongolia, at the site of the Mongol capital, Karakorum (modern Kharkhorin).

1603

A descendant of Chinggis Khaan and great-great-grandson of Queen Manduhai is enthroned in Lhasa Tibet as the fourth Dalai Lama, the only Mongolian Dalai Lama.

1634

Death of Ligden Khaan, the last of Chinggis Khaan's descendants to rule as Great Khan. Eastern Mongolia becomes part of the Manchu empire, but western Mongolia holds out.

CAPITALS OF THE MONGOLS

- **Avarga** – the first capital of the Mongols consisted of a nomadic camp with a few storage buildings where the Avarga stream joins the Kherlen Gol in Khentii aimag. Originally known as Khödöö Aral, Avarga later became a shrine for the cult of Chinggis Khaan.
- **Karakorum** Needing a larger, more permanent centre, Chinggis Khaan's son Ögedei Khan built Karakorum (modern Kharkhorin), the place of black walls, and used it as his capital until his death in 1241. The city had temples of all the major religions and included workmen from around the empire, the most famous of whom was the French goldsmith who sculpted a large silver tree with four fountains. Little of ancient Karakorum remains above the ground other than one large stone tortoise.
- **Khanbalik and Shangdu** By 1266 Kublai Khan located his base of operations in northern China, as close to Mongolia as possible yet connected by canal to the Yellow River in order to obtain goods from throughout China. Over the next decade he created his winter capital Khanbalik (modern Beijing). In the summer the court moved out on the steppes to Shangdu, also called Xanadu.
- **Uliastai and Ulaanbaatar** In 1733 the Manchus founded Uliastai in modern Zavkhan aimag, and it served as the capital of Outer Mongolia until 1911. When Mongolia broke from the Manchus, Mongolia's religious leader, the Bogd Khan, moved the capital to its present location, then called Urga or Ikh Khuree. In 1924 the communists changed the name to Ulaanbaatar Hot, meaning 'Red Hero City'.

and retainers, the Mongol rulers devastated their own country, alienated the increasingly impoverished herders and eventually became the captive pawns of the imperial guards.

In the 15th century, the Mongols united with the Manchus for the new conquest of China and the creation of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Initially, the ruling Manchus treated the Mongols with favour, gave them an exalted place in their empire and intermarried with them. Gradually, however, the Manchus became ever more Sinitised by their Chinese subjects and less like their Mongol cousins. The Mongols were reduced to little more than a colonised people under the increasingly oppressive and exploitative rule of the Manchus.

REVOLUTIONS

In 1911 the Qing dynasty crumbled. The Mongols broke away and created their own independent country under their highest Buddhist leader, the Jebtzun Damba (Living Buddha), who became both spiritual and temporal head of the nation as the Bogd Khan (Holy King). When the Chinese also broke free of the Manchus and created the Republic of China, the new nation claimed portions of the Manchu empire, including Tibet and Mongolia.

Voltaire's *The Orphan of China*, the first European play on the life of Chinggis Khaan, debuted in Paris in 1755.

WARRIOR QUEENS OF MONGOLIA

Chinggis Khaan's greatest disappointment in life was the quality of his sons, but his greatest pride was in the daughters. He left large sections of his empire under the control of his daughters, although they gradually lost power to his sons.

The Mongol women presented a strange sight to the civilisations they helped conquer. They rode horses, shot arrows from their bows and commanded the men and women around them. In China, the Mongol women rejected foot-binding; in the Muslim world, they refused to wear the veil.

At Ögedei's death, probably in an alcoholic stupor, in 1241 his widow Töregene assumed complete power. She replaced the ministers with her own, the most important of whom was another woman, Fatima, a Tajik or Persian captive from the Middle Eastern campaign. In addition to the rule of Töregene and Fatima from Karakorum in Mongolia, two of the other three divisions of the empire also had female governors. Only the Golden Horde of Russia remained under male rule. Never before had such a large empire been ruled by women.

Töregene passed power on to her inept son Guyuk in 1246, but he died mysteriously within 18 months and was replaced by his widow Oghul Ghamish, who had to face Sorkhokhtani, the most capable woman in the empire. With the full support of her four sons, whom she trained for this moment, Sorkhokhtani organised the election of her eldest son Möngke on 1 July 1251. So great was her achievement, a Persian chronicler wrote that if history produced only one more woman equal to Sorkhokhtani then surely women would have to be judged as the superior sex.

While Kublai Khan ruled China, his cousin Khaidu continued to fight against him from Central Asia and, true to the Mongol tradition, Khaidu's daughter Khutlun fought with him. According to Marco Polo, who called her Aiyaruk, she was both beautiful and powerful. She defeated so many men in wrestling that today Mongolian wrestlers wear an open vest in order to visibly distinguish male from female wrestlers.

After the fall of the Mongol empire, the men returned to squabbling over sheep and stealing horses, but the women kept the imperial spirit alive. In the late 15th century, a new conqueror arose determined to restore the empire. Known to the grateful Mongols as Manduhai the Wise Queen, she took to the battlefield and united the scattered tribes into a single nation. She fought even while pregnant and was once injured while carrying twins. She and the twins survived, and her army won the battle.

Faced with Manduhai's tenacity and skill, the Chinese frantically expanded the Great Wall. Although she left seven sons and three daughters, the era of the great warrior queens of Mongolia had passed, but Mongolians still watch and wait for a new Manduhai.

In May 1915 the Treaty of Khyakhta, which granted Mongolia limited autonomy, was signed by Mongolia, China and Russia.

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 came as a great shock to Mongolia's aristocracy. Taking advantage of Russia's weakness, a Chinese warlord sent his troops into Mongolia in 1919 and occupied the capital. In February 1921, retreating White Russian (anticommunist) troops entered

1639

Zanabazar, a direct descendant of Chinggis Khaan and the greatest artist in Mongolian history, is recognised as the first Jebtzun Damba, the supreme religious leader of Mongolia.

1644

The Manchus expel the Ming dynasty and with the support of their Mongolian allies create the Qing dynasty over China.

1696

The Manchus defeat Galdan Khaan of Zungaria and claim western Mongolia for the Qing Dynasty, but some western Mongolians continue to resist foreign rule for several generations.

1911

Mongolia declares independence from the dying Manchu empire and sets up religious leader Bogd Khan as the head of state.

1915

Treaty of Khyakhta is signed by Mongolia, China and Russia, granting Mongolia limited autonomy.

1921

The mad Russian baron, Ungern von Sternberg, briefly conquers Mongolia but the Red Army and Mongolian forces under D Sükhbaatar defeat him.

THE MAD BARON

An unusual character in Mongolia's history was Baron Roman Nikolaus Fyodirovich von Ungern-Sternberg, a renegade White Russian officer who believed he was the reincarnation of Chinggis Khaan, destined to restore the Mongol warlord's previous empire. Contemporaries paint a fine picture of Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, later known as the Mad Baron, describing him as haunted-looking, with a psychotic stare that fixed on people 'like those of an animal in a cave'. He spoke with a high-pitched voice and his bulging forehead bore a huge sword scar, which pulsed with red veins whenever he grew agitated. As a finishing touch, one of his eyes was slightly higher than the other.

The Bolshevik victory in Russia forced the Baron east, and he slowly accumulated a desperate army of renegade mercenaries. He enforced discipline with a reign of terror, roasting deserters alive, baking defiant prisoners in ovens and throwing his rivals in locomotive boilers. He was also a fervent Buddhist, convinced that he was doing his victims a favour by packing them off to the next life sooner rather than later.

With an army of 6000 troops (and tacit backing of the Japanese), the Baron crossed the Mongolian border in the summer of 1920 with the aim of establishing a Pan-Mongol empire. By October his forces attacked Urga, but were driven back four times before finally taking the city. He freed the Bogd Khan (who had been imprisoned by the Chinese), but Mongol joy turned to horror as the next three days saw an orgy of looting, burning and killing. In May 1921 the Baron declared himself the Emperor of Russia.

After only a few months, the Bolshevik advance forced the Baron to abandon Urga. Out on the steppes, his own followers tried to kill him, shooting him in his tent, but he managed to escape. A group of Mongolian herders later found him dying in the grass, tortured by biting ants. He was eventually taken by the Bolsheviks, deported to Novosibirsk and shot on 15 September 1921, presumed mad. Dr Ferdinand Ossendowski, a Polish refugee living in Mongolia in the early 1920s, offers an excellent account of the Mad Baron in his book *Beasts, Men and Gods*.

Modern composer N Jantsannarav created a series of symphonies and other musical works covering Mongolian history including Chinggis Khaan and Queen Manduhai.

Russian Cossacks adopted the Mongol battle cry of 'hurray!' and spread it to the rest of the world.

Mongolia and expelled the Chinese. At first the Bogd Khan seemed to welcome the White Russians as saviours of his regime, but it soon became apparent that they were just another ruthless army of occupation.

Mongolian nationalists believed their best hope for military assistance was to ask the Bolsheviks for help. The White Russians disappeared from the scene when their leader, Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, was captured, tried and shot. In July 1921 Damdin Sükhbaatar, the leader of the Mongolian army, marched uncontested into Urga (modern-day Ulaanbaatar) alongside Bolshevik supporters. The People's Government of Mongolia was declared and the Bogd Khan was retained as a ceremonial figurehead with no real power. Led by a diverse coalition of seven revolutionaries, including Sükhbaatar, the newly formed Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), the first political party in the country's history (and the only one for the next 69 years), took the reins of power.

SOVIET CONTROL

After Lenin's death in Russia in 1924, Mongolian communism remained independent of Moscow until Stalin gained absolute power in the late 1920s. Then the purges began in Mongolia. MPRP leaders were disposed of until Stalin finally found his henchman in one Khorloogiin Choibalsan.

Following Stalin's lead, Choibalsan seized from aristocrats their land and herds, which were redistributed to nomads. Herders were forced to join cooperatives and private business was banned. The destruction of private enterprise without time to build up a working state sector had the same result in Mongolia as in the Soviet Union: famine. Choibalsan's policy against religion was just as ruthless – in 1937 some 27,000 people were executed or never seen again (3% of Mongolia's population at that time), of whom 17,000 were monks.

Choibalsan died in January 1952 and was replaced by Yumjaagiin Tsendenbal – no liberal, but not a mass murderer – and Mongolia enjoyed a period of relative peace. With the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, the Mongolians sided with the Soviet Union. The Mongolian government expelled thousands of ethnic Chinese and all trade with China came to a halt.

Throughout the 1970s, Soviet influence gathered strength. Young Mongolians were sent to the USSR for technical training, and Tsendenbal's wife, a Russian woman of modest background named Filatova, attempted to impose Russian culture – including food, music, dance, fashion and even language – on the Mongolians.

THE GREAT TRANSITION

The unravelling of the Soviet Union resulted in decolonisation by default. In March 1990, in sub-zero temperatures, large pro-democracy protests erupted in the square in front of the parliament building in Ulaanbaatar. Hunger strikes were held and in May 1990 the constitution was amended to permit multiparty elections in July of the same year.

The political liberation of Mongolia from the Soviets came as an economic disaster for Mongolia because of the heavy subsidies that the Soviets had paid to keep Mongolia as a buffer state between itself and China. The Mongols lost much of their food supply and, unable to pay their electrical bills to the Russian suppliers, the western districts were plunged into a blackout that lasted for several years. The economy of Mongolia withered and collapsed.

The harsh conditions called for stringent measures and Mongolians created a unique approach to the new challenges. They began a radical privatisation of animals and large state-owned corporations. Unlike the other Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that expelled the communist party, the Mongolians created a new democratic synthesis that included both the old communists of the MPRP and a coalition that became known as the Democrats. Freedom of speech, religion and assembly were all granted. The era of totalitarianism had ended.

VI Pudovkin's Soviet masterpiece *Storm over Asia* was the first Mongolian film and contains the best extant images of herders and monasteries in the early 20th century.

During WWII, Mongolia donated 300kg of gold and more than six million animals to supply Soviet and Allied forces. More than 2000 Mongolians died fighting Japan.

The Blue Sky, by Galsan Tschinag, presents a beautifully written story about a remote Tuvan herding family in Mongolia during socialist times.

1924

The Bogd Khan, the eighth reincarnation of the Jebtzun Damba, dies; the People's Republic of Mongolia is created on 26 November.

1939

Japan invades Mongolia from Manchuria in May. With help from the Soviet Union, and after heavy fighting along the Khalkh Gol, the Mongols defeat Japan by September.

1944

The Soviet Union annexes Tuva from Mongolia; many Tuvans flee to Mongolia (and remain a minority ethnic group in Mongolia to this day).

1945

In a UN-sponsored plebiscite, Mongolians vote overwhelmingly to confirm their independence but the USA and China refuse to admit Mongolia to the UN.

1956

The Trans-Siberian railroad through Mongolia is completed, connecting Beijing with Moscow; the Chinese and Russian trains still operate on different gauges, requiring a long delay to change the wheels at the Chinese-Mongolian border.

1961

Mongolia admitted to the UN as an independent country, but the Soviet Union continues to occupy Mongolia with troops and run the country as a satellite state.

THE MONGOL WHO SLAPPED STALIN

In 1932 P Genden became the ninth prime minister of Mongolia, and he used the slogan 'Let's Get Rich!' to inspire Mongolians to overcome the troubled fighting since the break up of the Manchu Empire and the establishment of an independent country. Mongolia was the second communist state, after the Soviet Union, but at this time Genden was trying to keep Mongolia as an ally of the Soviets rather than a colony or satellite.

Genden resisted Stalin's demands that Mongolia purge the Buddhist monks and charged the Russians with 'Red Imperialism' for seeking to send Soviet troops into Mongolia. Amidst much drinking at a reception in the Mongolian embassy in Moscow in 1935, the two men clashed, literally. Stalin kicked Genden's walking stick; Genden slapped Stalin and broke Stalin's trademark pipe that always accompanied him.

Stalin held Genden under house arrest until he was convicted as a Japanese spy and executed by firing squad on 26 November 1937 – a day of great symbolic importance to the Mongols because it was the date of their declaration of independence and creation of the Mongolian People's Republic.

In 1996 Genden's daughter G Tserendulam opened the Victims of Political Persecution Memorial Museum (p73) in Ulaanbaatar in memory of her father and all those who died in defence of Mongolian independence.

The Mongolians gradually found their way towards the modern global economy and embraced their own brand of capitalism and democracy that drew heavily on their ancient history while adjusting to the modern realities of the world around them. Despite difficult episodes, such as the unsolved murder of the Democratic leader S Zorig in 1998 and some heated demonstrations between government and citizens, Mongolia managed to move forwards with tremendous cultural vigour. While maintaining staunch friendships with old allies such as North Korea, Cuba and India, Mongolia reached out to Europe, South Korea, Japan and, most particularly, to the USA, which they dubbed their 'Third Neighbour' in an effort to create a counterpoint to China and Russia.

The traveller in Mongolia today sees a country that plays an increasingly important role in world affairs, yet it is a country where any one of the earlier rulers such as Modun, Bilge, or Chinggis could return today and feel completely at home in a ger with a herding family. They would know what tasks needed to be done and they would easily recognise the food, language, music and dress because with only slight modifications the Mongolians have maintained their traditional ways while slowly moving into the modern world. Probably no country today preserves as much of its ancient way of life as Mongolia, but that past is so alive that for many of us it is difficult to see it. Perhaps this is the true gift of Chinggis Khaan to Mongolia and the world: that, as he so ardently prayed, his body died but his nation survived.

In the mid-1950s Howard Hughes cast John Wayne as Chinggis Khaan in *The Conqueror*, one of the worst films ever made by Hollywood.

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1990

Democracy demonstrations break out in Ulaanbaatar. The Soviets begin withdrawal in March, and in June the first free, multiparty elections are held, with the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) winning 85% of the vote.

1996

First noncommunist government is elected in Mongolia (although the 'ex-communist' MPRP is returned to office in 2000).

2005

N Enkhbayar of the MPRP becomes Mongolian president; George W Bush becomes the first US president to visit Mongolia.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Mongolians call themselves Asian by ethnicity but Western by culture. As abstract as that might sound, your first encounters with Mongolians might knock back a few preconceptions. It could be the European influence in which their Russian masters immersed them throughout the 20th century, or perhaps the long hours they now spend glued to CNN and MTV. But the Mongolian likeness to Western thinking – and the distance the country has put between itself and the rest of Asia – probably owes more to its nomadic past and its environment than it does to any external influences.

The freedom to move about with their herds, the timelessness of the land and the delicate relationship with the earth and its resources have all had a profound effect on the Mongolian character. These persuasions have made Mongolians humble, adaptable, good-humoured, uncannily stoic and unfettered by stringent protocol; this causes visitors to wonder if these are the same people who for centuries were vilified in the West as the 'scourge of God'.

The great emptiness of their landscape and the vast distances gave birth to a horse culture that is inseparable from Mongolian life. Reverence towards the land, a product of shamanic beliefs, has attuned them to nature; the thought of degrading the land or altering nature strikes many locals as profane.

The empty steppes have also made hospitality a matter of sheer necessity rather than a social obligation. It would be difficult for anyone to travel across the steppes without the hospitality that has developed, as each ger is able to serve travellers as a hotel, restaurant, pub and repair shop. As a result, Mongolians are able to travel rapidly over long distances without the weight of provisions. This hospitality is readily extended to strangers and usually given without fanfare or expectation of payment; foreigners are often perplexed by the casual welcoming they receive at even the most remote of gers.

The Mongolian ger plays a vital role in shaping both the Mongolian character and family life. The small confines compel families to interact with one another, to share everything and work together, tightening relationships between relatives. It prevents privacy but promotes patience and makes inhibitions fade away. It also creates self-sufficiency; ger dwellers must fetch their own water and fuel, and subsist on the food they themselves produce.

The weather and the seasons also play a significant role in shaping the Mongolian character. Spring in particular is a crucial time for Mongolians. Because the country's rainy season comes towards the end of summer, spring is dry, dusty, windy and unforgiving. This is the time when the weaker animals die and, it is said, when people die. Despite the severe temperatures, it is during winter that Mongolians feel most comfortable. After a difficult summer filled with chores and tending to livestock, winter is a time of relaxation.

Modern politics, economics and external forces further combine to complete the Mongolian psyche. As an outward-looking people, Mongolian culture was greatly affected by Russian influences during the communist period. The USSR's implementation of universal education brought literacy to every man, woman and child. In recent years, the age of democracy has led to globalisation, and a Brave New World of mobile phones, the internet and material excess. Having been isolated for millennia, Mongolians are hungry for all that the world offers and many dream of living and studying overseas.

As a small country, Mongolia is eager to show itself on the world stage and has sent peacekeeping forces to conflict zones worldwide. It was one of



The *soyombo* is the national symbol of Mongolia and signifies freedom and independence. Its components symbolise many other characteristics. Legend attributes the *soyombo* to Zanabazar, the Living Buddha.

the first countries to join the 'coalition of the willing' when the US invaded Iraq in 2003. A surprising number of people still support that decision and Mongolia may be the only country on earth that did not vehemently protest a visit by George W Bush (in January 2006). There is a less-favourable attitude towards the war in the predominantly Muslim Bayan-Ölgii.

More than anything, an open Mongolia has brought a rekindled interest in Mongolian culture, national pride and most of all, Chinggis Khaan. In Ulaanbaatar, and even in many parts of the countryside, the modern world has found a place alongside the traditional.

LIFESTYLE

About half of all Mongolians live in a ger, the one-room round felt tent traditionally used by nomads. The other half live in Russian-style apartment blocks. Only since the late 1990s have Mongolians started constructing more elaborate Western-style homes; most of these are upgraded dachas found outside of Ulaanbaatar.

Apartments are rabbit-hole affairs, usually two or three rooms with Russian furnishings and large carpets hanging from the walls. Gers are often equipped with traditional furnishings painted bright orange with fanciful designs. Set out in like manner, gers have three beds around the perimeter, a chest covered with Buddhist iconography at the back wall and a low table upon which food is set. Everything revolves around a central hearth, with the women's side to the right and the men's to the left. The head of the household sits at the northern end of the ger with his most honoured guest to his right. The area near the door is the place of lowest rank and the domain of children.

In ger districts, people get their water from a central pump house and cart it home in metal jugs. Each *hashaa* (fenced area) has a pit toilet. Those in need of a shower may visit the apartment of a friend or relative, or stop by a public bathhouse. Given the lack of water in most areas, regular bathing is impossible for most nomads.

Nomads tend to move two to four times a year, although in areas where grass is thin they move more often. One nuclear family may live alone or with an extended-family camp of three or four gers (known as an *ail*); any more than that would be a burden on the grassland.

A livestock herd should contain around 300 animals to be self-sustaining, although some wealthy herders may have 1000 head of livestock. Nearly all families have a short-wave radio to get national and world news, and these days many families also have satellite TV, DVD players and mobile phones. In winter the children of the ger go to school in the nearest town (where they live in dorms), visiting their parents during holidays and summer.

Regular schooling has brought near-universal literacy – you'll frequently see nomads reading out-of-date newspapers. Despite the distances, people remain connected to markets, selling their goods in towns or to traders who drive around the countryside, swapping sacks of flour or other goods for skins, meat and wool. Doctors also make house calls, driving ger to ger to give check-ups. Traditional medicine is not widely practised, except for centuries-old home remedies and some specialised clinics in the capital.

ECONOMY

Mongolia has done much to erase the legacy of its Soviet-era command economy. Around 80% of the GDP is now produced by private companies, and foreign investment is on the rise, with 40% of investments coming from China.

As it has for centuries, livestock herding remains the backbone of the economy. Around 40% of the population manages to herd the nation's

Modern Mongolia, Reclaiming Ghengis Khan, edited by Paula Sabloff, is a pictorial account of recent developments in Mongolia. Written with a sometimes controversial edge, it discusses the economy, ger etiquette, social issues and Chinggis Khaan's principles, and suggests these are the foundations of modern Mongolia.

Women of Mongolia, by Martha Avery, contains a string of interviews in which local women speak about the changes and challenges affecting both nomadic and urban women.

More Mongols live outside Mongolia than in it. Around 3.5 million ethnic Mongols are citizens of China and nearly a million are citizens of Russia. Descendants of Mongolian armies can still be found in Afghanistan and on the shores of the Caspian Sea.

RESPONSIBLE CULTURAL TOURISM

The chief attraction of Mongolia is not its historic places of interest but rather the nomadic culture and its people. Keep in mind the following tips for acting responsibly when visiting a ger and interacting with locals.

- Hospitality is an old custom on the steppes; visitors are invited in without question on arrival at a distant ger. While you should enjoy Mongolia's unique hospitality, please do not take advantage of it. If you spend a night and have a meal leave a minimum of T5000 or a useful gift such as rice, children's books in Mongolian or AA- or D-size batteries.
- Mongolians are not keen on bargaining and don't play the bargaining game. When haggling for a hotel room or jeep, never expect to get the price you demand. If you're lucky you may be able to knock down a price by 10% but not more.
- Don't pay to take a photo of someone, or photograph someone if they don't want you to. If you agree to send someone a photograph, please follow through on this.

When visiting a ger, note the following customs and habits. See also p46 for some hints about eating etiquette.

- Say hello (*sain bai-na uu*) when you arrive (but repeating it again when you see the same person later that day or even the next day is considered strange to Mongolians).
- Avoid walking in front of an older person or turning your back to the altar or to religious objects (except when leaving).
- If someone offers you their snuff bottle, accept it with your right hand (as if you were shaking hands). If you don't take the snuff, at least sniff the top part of the bottle. But don't grab the bottle from the top.
- Try to keep ger visits to less than two hours to avoid interrupting the family's work.

Bear in mind the following superstitions and religious habits:

- When offered some vodka, dip your ring finger of your right hand into the glass, and lightly flick a drop (not too much – vodka is also sacred!) once towards the sky, once in the air 'to the wind' and once to the ground. If you don't want any vodka, go through the customs anyway. Then put the same finger to your forehead, say thanks and return the glass to the table.
- Don't point a knife in any way at anyone; when passing a knife pass it handle first; when cutting (eg from a chunk of meat held in one hand) use the knife to cut towards you, not away.
- Don't point your feet at the hearth, at the altar or at another person. Sleep with your feet pointing towards the door.
- If you have stepped on anyone, or kicked their feet, immediately shake their hand.
- Don't stand on or lean over the threshold.
- Don't lean against a support column.
- Don't touch another person's hat.

34 million head of livestock (which accounts for 20% of the GDP). Most of the meat is used for domestic purposes while the bulk of the skins, wool, cashmere and leather are exported to Russia and China. Cashmere is the country's biggest moneymaker – Mongolia exports 3000 tonnes of the stuff per year, which is 21% of the world market. Other sectors are catching up, notably mining, and many herders have swapped their horse whips for gold pans. In some cases Mongolia's fierce climate has dictated where people work – when storms decimate livestock, as they did in 1999–2002, herders are forced to seek alternative employment, often in illegal mining camps.

The 2006 film *Tuya de hun shi* (Tuya's Marriage) describes the troubled life of shepherdess Tuya, an Inner Mongolian woman forced to find a new provider after her husband is crippled by an explosion. It's an Inner Mongolian film directed by Qunan Wang and winner of the prestigious Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival.

More organised and legal forms of mining are also taking shape. It's predicted that within the next two decades the Mongolian economy will grow 10 times on the back of its mineral resources, heavily sought after by China. GDP is only US\$2100 per person but that could be up to US\$15,000 by 2021. While these may seem like pie in the sky figures, the projections are mainly based on the expected output of Oyu Tolgoi, which could spit out 450,000 tons of copper annually (4% of global output).

Of course, these riches may end up in the pockets of a few robber barons and government insiders. Corruption is rife in Mongolia and there seems to be no limit to its extent. Democracy, which has allowed the media and civil society to act as watchdogs, has at least prevented the formation of a total kleptocracy.

While Mongolians watch and wait for some of the biggest mines to provide returns, the country remains mired in poverty. Unemployment hovers at 30% to 40% although precise figures are difficult to determine as so many Mongolians work as unregistered drivers or traders. Tourism is another important sector and now accounts for 18% of the economy – not bad since it really only functions for three months a year.

Despite the unemployment rate, money still flows around the country and few people go hungry. You'll find most Mongolians live in a healthy, robust state even if they have been out of work for months or even years, supported by strong family networks. One family member with a decent job has the responsibility to distribute his wealth among siblings.

Relatives working abroad also send remittances – approximately 100,000 Mongolians work overseas, about 8% of the workforce. In Ulaanbaatar, government salaries are less than US\$100 per month while salaries in the private sector can be two or three times higher (sometimes much more).

THE CULT OF THE GREAT KHAAN

In early 2006 Ulaanbaatar unveiled a daring piece of modern architecture – the US\$10 million frontal portage to Government House, an enormous wing of marble columns, arching glass and the *pièce de résistance*, a glowering bronze statue of Chinggis Khaan.

The grandiose monument is only the latest chapter in a long and storied obsession with the khan we know as Ghengis. Worship of Chinggis began under the reign of his grandson Kublai Khaan, who established a sort of Chinggis travelling museum in the Ordos Desert (now Inner Mongolia). Spirit worship of the great khan has taken place in other parts of Mongolia including Shankh Khiid (Övörkhangaï; p119) and Burkhan Khalduun (Khentii; p172).

Chinggis Khaan had been outlawed during communism, a time when the Soviets thought Mongolians needed to move forward into a great Socialist future. But since the early 1990s the Mongolians have brought Chinggis back, often into pop culture – a rock band and brewery have been named in his honour and you'll spot Chinggis Khaan T-shirts, coffee mugs and key-chains in souvenir shops. As evidence of his godlike status, one can commonly see pictures of Chinggis on the family altar, flanking those of Buddhist deities.

Why all the hype? Chinggis has suffered from 800 years of bad press in the West but to Mongolians he embodies strength, unity and law and order. He introduced a written script in the Mongolian language and preached religious tolerance. Chinggis is the young king who united the warring clans and gave Mongolians a sense of direction, not to mention more wealth than the country had seen before or since. This is what postcommunist Mongolia looks for today – a leader in the mould of Chinggis who can rise above confusion and uncertainty.

None of Mongolia's current crop of politicians has galvanised the nation as Chinggis once did, but there remains hope for the future; according to a prediction by Nostradamus (in the 16th century), an incarnation of Chinggis Khaan was born in September 1999. While that may sound like bad news for the rest of us, the Mongolians, an optimistic lot, look ahead with great expectations.

POPULATION

Of Mongolia's population (around 2.6 million people), 50% live permanently in urban areas and around 25% are truly nomadic. Another 25% are seminomadic, living in villages in winter and grazing their animals on the steppes during the rest of the year. With population growth at an all-time low (having fallen from 2.4% to 1.4% over the past 15 years), the government offers economic benefits for newborns and newlywed couples.

In recent years the population has shifted from the countryside to Ulaanbaatar, as Mongolians search for work opportunities not available in rural areas. Since 1999, internal migration to the capital has increased by around 13% per year – the city hit the one million mark in 2007.

The majority (about 86%) of Mongolians are Khalkh Mongolians (*khalkh* means 'shield'). Clan or tribal divisions are not significant social or political issues in modern Mongolia. The other sizable ethnic group, the Kazakhs, make up about 6% (110,000) of the population and live in western Mongolia, mainly in Bayan-Ölgii aimag.

The remaining 8% of the population are ethnic minority groups. These groups are located along the border areas and in the far west, and their numbers range from some 47,500 ethnic Buriats who live along the northern border to just 300 Tsaatan, the reindeer people of northern Khövsgöl aimag.

SPORT

Mongolian sports – wrestling, horse racing and archery – are an extension of the military training used for centuries by Mongolian clans.

Wrestling is still the national pastime. The Mongolian version is similar to wrestling found elsewhere, except there are no weight divisions, so the biggest wrestlers (and they are big!) are often the best. Out on the steppes matches can go on for hours, but matches for the national Naadam have a time limit – after 30 minutes a referee moves the match into something akin to 'penalty kicks' (the leading wrestler gets better position from the get go). The match ends only when the first wrestler falls, or when anything other than the soles of the feet or open palms touches the ground.

The biggest wrestling tournament is the national Naadam Festival (p96), which has 512 contestants and is held in Ulaanbaatar on 11 and 12 July. Other tournaments are held throughout the year at the **Wrestling Palace** (Map p64; ☎ 456 443; Peace Ave; admission T1000-5000). Wrestling events are the same elsewhere – small matches held during the year and a big one for Naadam.

Mongolia's second-biggest sport is horse racing. Jockeys – traditionally children between the ages of five and 12 years – race their horses over open countryside rather than around a track. Courses can be either 15km or 30km and are both exhausting and dangerous – every year jockeys tumble from their mounts and horses collapse and die from exhaustion at the finish line.

Winning horses are called *tümnii ekh*, or 'leader of 10,000'. Riders and spectators rush to comb the sweat off the best horses with a scraper traditionally made from a pelican's beak. The five winning riders must drink some special *airag* (fermented mare milk), which is then often sprinkled on the riders' heads and the horses' backsides. During the Naadam Festival, a song of empathy is also sung to the two-year-old horse that comes in last.

The third sport of Eriin Gurvan Naadam (Three Manly Sports) is archery, which is actually performed by men and women alike. Archers use a bent composite bow made of layered horn, bark and wood. Usually arrows are made from willow and the feathers are from vultures and other birds of prey. After each shot, judges who stand near the target emit a short cry called *uukhai*, and raise their hands in the air to indicate the quality of the shot. See www.atarn.org for articles on Mongolian archery.

Mongolia has the world's lowest population density at just 1.4 persons per sq km.

Mongolians tend to use just one name but, to differentiate themselves from people with the same name, they sometimes add their father's name. A recent government registration system has encouraged the use of clan names as surnames – the most popular is Borjigan, the clan of Chinggis Khaan.

A Mongolian legend recounts that one Amazonian-type female entered a wrestling competition and thrashed her male competitors. In order to prevent such an embarrassing episode from happening again, the wrestling jacket was redesigned with an open chest, forcing women to sit on the sidelines.

Sumo wrestling has grown as a spectator sport as Mongolian athletes dominate the Japanese circuit – all tournaments in Japan are broadcast on Mongolian TV. The best-known Mongolian wrestler is Dolgersuren Dagvadorj. His nickname, the ‘Bathub Brawler’, was bestowed after a punch-up with another wrestler while the two bathed after a match.

In 1903, when the British invaded Tibet, the 13th Dalai Lama fled to Mongolia and spent three years living in Gandan Khaid in Urga (modern-day Ulaanbaatar).

Religions of Mongolia, by Walther Heissig, provides an in-depth look at the Buddhist and shamanist faiths as they developed in Mongolia.

According to legend, the sport of polo began when Chinggis Khaan’s troops batted the severed heads of their enemies across the steppes. Whether true or not, polo has recently been revived in Mongolia with the help of foreign players. It hasn’t quite caught fire yet, but there may be an exhibition in summer. Likewise, matches of polo on camelback are organised for some Gobi naadams (games).

Basketball and other Western-style sports are increasing in popularity. There is now a professional basketball league in Ulaanbaatar, and even at the most remote gers you’ll find a backboard and hoop propped up on the steppe.

RELIGION Buddhism

The Mongols had limited contact with organised religion before their great empire of the 13th century. It was Kublai Khaan who first found himself with a court in which all philosophies of his empire were represented, but it was a Tibetan Buddhist, Phagpa, who wielded the greatest influence on the khaan.

In 1578 Altan Khaan, a descendant of Chinggis Khaan, met the Tibetan leader Sonam Gyatso, was converted, and subsequently bestowed on Sonam Gyatso the title Dalai Lama (*dalai* means ‘ocean’ in Mongolian). Sonam Gyatso was named as the third Dalai Lama and his two predecessors were named posthumously.

Mass conversions occurred under Altan Khaan. As Mongolian males were conscripted to monasteries, rather than the army, the centuries of constant fighting seemed to wane (much to the relief of China, which subsequently funded more monasteries in Mongolia). This change in national philosophy continues today – Mongolia is the world’s only UN-sanctioned ‘nuclear-free nation’.

Buddhist opposition to needless killing reinforced strict hunting laws already set in place by shamanism. Today, Buddhist monks are still influential in convincing local populations to protect their environment and wildlife.

Buddhism in Mongolia was nearly destroyed in 1937 when the young communist government, fearing competition, launched a purge that wiped out nearly all of the country’s 700 monasteries. Up to 30,000 monks were massacred and thousands more sent to Siberian labour camps. Freedom of religion was only restored in 1990 with the dawn of democracy.

Restoring Buddhism has been no easy task as two generations had been essentially raised atheist. Most people no longer understand the Buddhist rituals or their meanings but a few still make the effort to visit the monasteries during prayer sessions. Numbers swell when well-known Buddhist monks from Tibet or India (or even Western countries) visit Mongolia.

As they have for centuries, Mongolians believe that monks have the powers to heal or altar the course of future events; they will often pay hard-earned money for the reading of appropriate prayers to secure better test scores, improved business or marital security.

Islam

In Mongolia today, there is a significant minority of Sunni Muslims, most of them ethnic Kazakhs, who live primarily in Bayan-Ölgii. These Kazakhs have connections with Islamic groups in Turkey and several have been on a hajj to Mecca.

Christianity

Nestorian Christianity was part of the Mongol empire long before the Western missionaries arrived. The Nestorians followed the doctrine of Nestorius (358–451), patriarch of Constantinople (428–31), who proclaimed

IMPORTANT FIGURES & SYMBOLS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

This brief guide to some of the deities of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon will allow you to recognise a few of the statues you’ll encounter in Mongolia, usually on temple altars. Sanskrit names are provided as these are most recognisable in the West; Mongolian names are in brackets.

The Characters

Sakyamuni The Historical Buddha was born in Lumbini in the 5th century BC in what is now southern Nepal. He attained enlightenment under a *bo* (peepul) tree and his teachings set in motion the Buddhist faith. Statues of the Buddha include 32 distinctive body marks, including a dot between the eyes and a bump on the top of his blue hair. His right hand touches the earth in the *Bhumisparsa Mudra* hand gesture, and the left hand holds a begging bowl.

Maitreya (Maidar) The Future Buddha, Maitreya is passing the life of a bodhisattva (a divine being worthy of Nirvana who remains on the human plane to help others achieve enlightenment) and will return to earth in human form 4000 years after the disappearance of Sakyamuni to take his place as the next earthly Buddha. He is normally seated with his hands by his chest in the *mudra* of ‘turning the Wheel of Law’.

Avalokitesvara (Janraisig) The Bodhisattva of Compassion is either pictured with 11 heads and 1000 pairs of arms (*chogdanjandan janraisig*), or in a white, four-armed manifestation (*chagsh janraisig*). The Dalai Lama is considered an incarnation of Avalokitesvara.

Tara The Saviour, Tara has 21 different manifestations. She symbolises purity and fertility and is believed to be able to fulfil wishes. Statues of Tara usually represent Green Tara (Nogoon Dar Ekh), who is associated with night, or White Tara (Tsagaan Dar Ekh), who is associated with day. White Tara is the female companion of Avalokitesvara.

Four Guardian Kings Comprising Virupaksa (red; holding a snake), Dhitarasra (white; holding a lute), Virudhaka (blue; holding a sword) and Vaishrovana (yellow; sitting on a snow lion), the kings are mostly seen guarding monastery entrances.

The Symbols & Objects

Prayer Wheel These are filled with up to a mile of prayers and are turned manually by pilgrims to gain merit.

Wheel of Life Drawings of this wheel symbolise the cycle of death and rebirth, held by Yama, the god of the dead. The six sections of the circle are the six realms of rebirth ruled over by gods, titans, hungry ghosts, hell, animals and humans.

Stupas (suvrag) Originally built to house the cremated relics of the Historical Buddha, they have become a powerful symbol of Buddhism. Later stupas also became reliquaries for lamas and holy men.

that Jesus exists as two separate persons – the man Jesus and the divine son of God. Historically the religion never caught hold in the Mongol heartland, but that has changed in recent years with an influx of Christian missionaries, often from obscure fundamentalist sects.

Mongolian authorities are wary of these missionaries, who sometimes come to the country under the pretext of teaching English. In Ulaanbaatar, there are now more than 50 non-Buddhist places of worship. Mormons, the most recognisable, have built modern churches in Ulaanbaatar, Nalaikh, Choibalsan, Erdenet and other cities. The Catholics, also here in large numbers, have constructed an enormous church on the eastern side of Ulaanbaatar.

The online magazine www.mongoliatoday.com has several interesting articles on Mongolian culture, religion, society and ethnography.

Ovoos, the large piles of rocks found on mountain passes, are repositories of offerings for local spirits. Upon arriving at an *ovoos*, walk around it clockwise three times, toss an offering onto the pile (another rock should suffice) and make a wish.

Around 80% of Mongolians claim to be Buddhist of the Mahayana variety, as practised in Tibet. Some 5% follow Islam (mainly Kazakhs living in Bayan-Ölgii aimag). Approximately 5% of Mongolians claim to be Christians, Mongolia's fastest-growing religion, and around 10% are atheist (the creed of the former communist state).

The website www.uulaanbaatar.net has links to the Mongolian National Modern Art Gallery (p76); click on Mongol Arts and then Museums.

Shamanism

Whether shamanism is a religion is open to debate (there is no divine being or book of teachings), but it is a form of mysticism practised by some Mongolians in the north, including the Tsaatan, Darkhad, Uriankhai and Buriats. It was the dominant belief system of Chinggis Khaan and the Mongol hordes but has now been pushed to the cultural fringes.

Shamanism is based around the shaman – called a *bo* if a man or *udgan* if a woman – who has special medical and religious powers. If a shaman's powers are inherited, it is known as *udmyn*; if the powers become apparent after a sudden period of sickness and apparitions it is known as *zlain*.

One of a shaman's main functions is to cure any sickness caused by the soul straying, and to accompany the soul of a dead person to the other world. Shamans act as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds, and communicate with spirits during trances, which can last up to six hours.

Shamanist beliefs have done much to shape Mongolian culture and social practices. The lack of infrastructure during the course of Mongolia's history can be traced to shamanic rules on maintaining a balance with nature, ie not digging holes or tearing the land. Even today when nomads move their camps they fill in any holes created by horse posts.

Sky worship is another integral part of shamanism and you'll see Mongolians leaving blue scarves (representing the sky) on *ovoos*. Sky gods are likewise honoured by flicking droplets of vodka in the air before drinking.

ARTS

From prehistoric oral epics to the latest movie from MongolKino film studios in Ulaanbaatar, the many arts of Mongolia convey the flavour of nomadic life and the spirit of the land. Influenced by Tibet, China and Russia, Mongolia has nonetheless developed unique forms of music, dance, costume, painting, sculpture, drama, film, handicrafts, carpets and textiles.

There are several art and music festivals every year, one of the biggest being the **Roaring Hooves Music Festival** (www.roaringhooves.com). In late October you could check out the Altan Namar (Golden Autumn) festival, usually held at the circus.

For more information on the arts in Mongolia, contact the **Arts Council** (☎ 011-319 015; www.artscouncil.mn) in Ulaanbaatar.

Literature & Poetry

The heroic epics of the Mongols were all first committed to writing more than 750 years ago. Later, Mongolia developed an enormous amount of Buddhist literature. Surprisingly, the National Library of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar holds the world's largest single collection of Buddhist sutras (almost all of it confiscated during the 1937 purges).

Only recently have scholars translated into English the most important text of all – *Mongol-un nigucha tobchiyan* (The Secret History of the Mongols). The text was lost for centuries until a Chinese copy was discovered in 1866 by the implausibly named Archimandrite Palladius, a Russian scholar and diplomat then resident in Beijing. Intriguing structural comparisons have been made between *The Secret History of the Mongols* and the Bible, prompting theories that the Mongolian author was strongly influenced by the teachings of Nestorian Christianity.

While fiction has never enjoyed much popularity, Mongolians have always been fond of poetry. Dashdorjiin Natsagdorj (1906–37), Mongolia's best-known modern poet and playwright, is regarded as the founder of Mongolian literature. His works include the dramatic nationalist poems *My Native Land*

and *Star* and his famous story, *Three Fateful Hills*, which was adapted into an opera that is still performed in Ulaanbaatar.

The most prolific poet to look out for is Danzan Ravjaa (1803–56), a monk from the Gobi Desert known for his poems of wine and love. A collection of his poems, *Perfect Qualities*, translated by Simon Wickham-Smith can be found in Ulaanbaatar.

The best-known contemporary writer is Ochirbatyn Dashbalbar, a nationalist, politician and xenophobe who died under mysterious circumstances in 2000.

Cinema

During communism, Mongolia had a vibrant film industry led by Moscow-trained directors who excelled at socialist realism. MongolKino's most famed directors, L Vangad and D Jigjid, directed many communist-era films, including *Serelt* (Awakening), one of the all-time classics. This anti-Buddhist film describes the life and times of a young Russian nurse sent to Mongolia to set up a hospital in a rural area. It starred Dorjpalam, the mother of Democratic leader Sanjaasurengiin Zorig (p74). Other classic films that still bring a tear to the Mongolian eye are *Tungalag Tamir* (directed by Ravjagiin Dorjpalam) and *Sikhbaatar* (directed by IE Heifits).

The biggest star of the new generation is Byambasuren Davaa, whose touching tale *The Weeping Camel* went from obscurity to award winner in 2004. Her second effort, *Cave of the Yellow Dog*, describes the life of a nomad family and the changing life on the steppes.

Mongolians are avid movie watchers. The best place to catch a film is the three-screen multiplex Tengis (p93), which is next to Liberty Sq in Ulaanbaatar.

Music MODERN

Western music, mainly alternative rock and hip-hop, is popular with young Mongolians in Ulaanbaatar, but they also enjoy listening to local groups, who sing in the Mongolian language but have definite Western influences. These include alternative rockers The Lemons and Nisvanis, and old-school pop bands Hurd and Haranga. Ballad singers are also popular, including female vocalists Otgoos, Ariunaa and Saraa. Recent years have seen a profusion of one-hit-wonder boy bands and hip-hop acts; the latest big acts are Lumino and Tatar. Some bands have taken to incorporating traditional instruments in their music; one such band, Legend, performs frequently at Ulaanbaatar's History Club (p93).

TRADITIONAL

Get an urbanised Mongolian into the countryside, and they will probably sing and tell you it is the beauty of the countryside that created the song on their lips. Mongolians sing to their animals: there are lullabies to coax sheep to suckle their lambs; songs to order a horse forward, make it stop or come closer; and croons to control a goat, milk a cow or imitate a camel's cry.

Traditional music involves a wide range of instruments and uses for the human voice found almost nowhere else. *Khöömii* (throat singing) found in Mongolia and neighbouring Tuva, is an eerie sound that involves the simultaneous production of multiple notes. See the boxed text (p236) for more details.

Another unique traditional singing style is *urtyin duu*. Sometimes referred to as 'long songs' because of the long trills, not because they are long

The US\$30 million Japanese blockbuster *Aoki Okami: chi hate umi tsukuru made* (Genghis Khan: To the Ends of Earth and Sea), was filmed on location in Mongolia and released in 2007. The making of the film required some 30,000 local extras to don Mongol warrior garb for the battle scenes.

The Weeping Camel (2004), directed by Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falomi, is a moving documentary about a camel that has rejected its offspring and how the family that owns the camels attempts to reconcile their differences.

Chinggis Blues (1999), directed by Roko and Adrian Belic, traces the inspirational journey of a blind American blues singer from San Francisco to Tuva to learn the secrets of *khöömii* (throat singing).

songs (though some epics are up to 20,000 verses long), *urtyen duu* involves extraordinarily complicated, drawn-out vocal sounds, which relate traditional stories about love and the countryside. The late Norovbanzad is Mongolia's most famous long-song diva.

Several souvenir shops in Ulaanbaatar, including the State Department Store, sell recordings of traditional music. Anyone who takes a long-distance trip on public transport will hear impromptu Mongolian folk songs – normally when the transport breaks down.

Architecture

Constructing permanent buildings is contradictory to a nomadic society. Ulaanbaatar, largely a Soviet creation, is filled with Brezhnev-era apartment blocks and Stalinist government buildings. The only constructions that can be considered old are Buddhist temples, which were largely designed by Chinese and Tibetan architects between the 17th and 20th centuries. Traditional Mongolian architecture consists solely of the ger, a well-designed home for nomadic use.

Gers can be erected in about an hour and are easily packed up and moved. The circular shape and low roof are well suited to deflect wind. The door always faces south, providing protection against the predominantly northern winds. The felt used to make the ger is traditionally made by the herders themselves, often in late summer, from the wool from their own flocks. At some ger camps, tourists sites and even the back of bank notes you might find gers set on giant wooden carts. Your guide may proudly explain that this was how the khaans moved around during the imperial age, but recent findings have proven this to be a historical myth. Despite the great desire for more modern apartments, demand for new gers also remains high (thanks to expanding ger suburbs in Ulaanbaatar) and the average price for a ger has doubled in recent years from US\$300 to US\$600 or more.

Painting & Sculpture

TRADITIONAL PAINTING & SCULPTURE

Much of Mongolian traditional art is religious in nature and closely linked to Tibetan art. Traditional sculpture and scroll painting follows strict rules of subject, colour and proportion, leaving little room for personal expression. Tragically, most early examples of Mongolian art were destroyed during the communist regime.

Mongolia's best-known painter is Balduugiyn Sharav (1869–1939). He spent his childhood in a monastery and later travelled all around the country. His most famous painting is *One Day in Mongolia*, which you can see in the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts (p69). It is a *zurag* (painting), a classic work of Mongolian landscape storytelling, crowded with intricate sketches depicting just about every aspect of the Mongolian life, from felt-making to dung-collecting.

Zanabazar was a revered sculptor, politician, religious teacher, diplomat and Living Buddha. Many Mongolians refer to the time of Zanabazar's life as Mongolia's Renaissance period. His most enduring legacy is the sensuous statues of the incarnation of compassion, the deity Tara. Some of Zanabazar's bronze sculptures and paintings can be seen today in Ulaanbaatar's Gandan Khiid (p73), the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts (p69) and the Winter Palace of Bogd Khaan (p75). For more on the man, see p142.

Religious scroll paintings (*thangka*) grace the walls of monasteries all over the country. They are tools of meditation, used by practitioners to visualise themselves developing the enlightened qualities of the deities depicted.

One of the most enduring images of communism was a socialist-realism painting of a young, wide-eyed Sukhbaatar meeting a lecturing Lenin. You may even see a copy of it in some offices. While many still assume the incident occurred, contemporary historians now disregard the story as mythical propaganda.

Mongolian scroll paintings generally mirror the Tibetan variety, but you can notice distinctive regional features such as the introduction of camels, sheep and yaks in the background.

Appliqué scroll paintings, made from Chinese silks, were popular at the turn of the 20th century. There are some fine examples in the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts (p69).

Gandan Khiid's master artist, Purevbat, has revived Buddhist art since the late 1990s, after receiving training from masters in India and Nepal. Purevbat has displayed his art at exhibitions overseas but is currently concentrating his efforts on Mongolia, in particular the reconstruction of Demchigiin Khiid (p207) in Ömnögov.

MODERN ART

Mongolian painting in the 20th century was dominated by socialist realism but has recently spread to embrace abstract styles. There is a vibrant modern-art scene in Ulaanbaatar. A couple of artists to look out for are M Erdenebayar and his wife S Munkhjain; he paints abstract scenes of horses and she paints the female figure. In galleries you'll also spot work by S Saransatsralt whose conceptual paintings are occasionally provocative. Ancient beliefs and customs are often incorporated in the work of S Tugs-Oyun. More pieces can be found by following the links to Mongolian Masterpieces at www.khanbank.com and clicking on Community Collections. In Ulaanbaatar you can see contemporary pieces at the Mongolian Artists' Exhibition Hall (p76) diagonally opposite the post office.

Theatre & Dance

The extraordinarily talented Danzan Ravjaa (see p201) is the patron saint of modern Mongolian theatre.

In the 1820s Ravjaa organised a theatre group at Khamaryn Khiid (see p202), based on the Chinese-style operas and Tibetan dramas he had witnessed while studying in Inner Mongolia. His major achievement was the production of *Saran Khöökhöö Namtar* (Story of the Moon Cuckoo), an old Tibetan play that describes the troubled life of a prince betrayed by his best friend. The theatre group performed the play at various monasteries the Gobi and it continued to be performed after the death of Danzan Ravjaa until the 1920s.

The Russians brought European theatre and ballet to Mongolia in the 1920s, and every village built during the Soviet period included a requisite drama theatre. Ballet became a popular form of dance, as did the waltz, although Mongolia does have a traditional form of dance (*bujig*) that involves much leaping and bounding by the performers. Performances of theatre, opera and ballet are frequently held at Ulaanbaatar's Opera House (p92) and Drama Theatre (p92) but very rarely at theatres outside the capital. You'll need to personally visit the theatres in aimag capitals and ask around for what's on, as advertising is almost nonexistent.

The website www.mon.golart.mn explores the culture of Mongolia, with pages on music, art, theatre, dance, film and religion.

The website www.uma.mn has links to virtually every member of Ulaanbaatar's artistic community.

Food & Drink

The culinary masters of Mongolia's barren steppes have always put more stock in survival than taste. Mongolian food is therefore a hearty, if somewhat bland, array of meat and dairy products. Out in the countryside, green vegetables are often equated with animal fodder and spices may be an alien concept.

The reasons for this stem from the constraints of a nomadic lifestyle. Nomads cannot reasonably transport an oven, and so are prevented from producing baked goods such as bread. Nor can nomads plant, tend to or harvest fruits, vegetables, spices or grains. They can, however, eat the food that their livestock produces.

Mongolian food is seasonal. In the summer months, when animals provide milk, dairy products become the staple food. Meat (and copious amounts of fat) takes over in winter, supplemented with flour (in some form) and potatoes or rice if these are available.

Flour and tea were only introduced into the Mongolian staples after the Mongols established trade links with China. The Chinese have been particularly influential in Inner Mongolia (now in China), where the mixing of cuisines resulted in 'Mongolian barbecue', or 'Mongolian hotpot'. Although unheard of in most of Mongolia, the dish has recently found its way into a few restaurants geared towards tourists.

Menus have been expanding over the past decade thanks to the government-sponsored 'Green Revolution', which allows urbanites to grow vegetables in small, private garden plots. (Most vegetables sold in markets come from China.) Increased trade has brought in packaged and processed food products, as well as international restaurants; the vast array of high quality, foreign-owned restaurants in Ulaanbaatar comes as a pleasant surprise to visitors expecting a mostly muttonish diet.

STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

Almost any Mongolian dish can be created with meat, rice, flour and potatoes. Most meals consist of *talkh* (bread) in the towns and cities and *bortzig* (fried unleavened bread) in the gers, and the uncomplicated *shölte khool* (literally, soup with food) – a meal involving hot broth, pasta slivers, boiled mutton and a few potato chunks.

Buuz (steamed mutton dumplings) and *khuushuur* (fried mutton pancakes) are two of the most popular menu options you'll find in restaurants. *Buuz*, similar to Chinese *baoza* or Tibetan *momo*, are steamed pasta shells filled with mutton and sometimes slivers of onion or garlic. Miniature *buuz*, known as *bansh*, are usually dunked in milk tea. *Khuushuur* are best if prepared in the form of small meat envelopes, but are less tasty if squashed into a pancake.

Other dishes include *tsuivan*, lightly steamed flour slices with meat, and *khuurag* (fried food), which can be prepared with *buudatei khuurag* (rice) or *nogotei khuurag* (vegetables).

The classic Mongolian dinner staple, and the one most dreaded by foreigners, is referred to simply as '*makh*' (meat) and consists of boiled sheep bits (bones, fat, indiscernible organs and the head) with some sliced potato, served in a plastic bucket. Utensils include a buck knife and your fingers. The head is considered a delicacy. If you're having trouble identifying what part of the sheep you're munching on, just ask your host. This is still the most common food in rural areas, but rarely served in an urban household.

The other main highlight of Mongolian cuisine is *khorkhog*, made by placing hot stones from an open fire into a pot or urn with chopped mutton, some water and sometimes vodka. The container is then sealed and left on the fire. When eating this meal, it is customary to pass the hot, greasy rocks from hand to hand, as this is thought to be good for your health.

Borts (dried meat) is very popular among Mongolians, and many jeep drivers like to take it on long-distance trips to add to soups.

Mongolians don't concern themselves much with breakfast; a bowl of hot *süütei tsai* (milk tea) and some pieces of *bortzig* (fried unleavened bread) will usually suffice. Desserts are equally uncommon, although *süütei будаа*, made from rice, sugar and milk, is an occasional treat.

In summer, you can subsist as the Mongols do on *tsagaan idee* (dairy products; literally 'white foods'): yogurt, milk, fresh cream, cheese and fermented milk drinks.

Süü (milk) may be cow, sheep or goat milk and the *tarag* (yogurt) is always delicious. *Khoormog* is yogurt made from camel milk. When you visit a ger you will be offered dairy snacks such as *aarul* (dried milk curds), which are as hard as a rock and often about as tasty. You may also be served a very sharp, soft, fermented cheese called *aarts*.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Mongolians are big tea drinkers and will almost never start a meal until they've had a cup of tea first, as it aids digestion. However, Mongolian tea (*tsai* in Mongolian; *shay* in Kazakh) tends to be of the lowest quality. In fact, it's mostly 'tea waste': stems and rejected leaves that are processed into a 'brick'.

Süütei tsai, a classic Mongolian drink, is milk tea with salt. The taste varies by region; in Bayan-Ölgii you may even get a dollop of butter in your tea. If you can't get used to the salty brew, try asking for *khar tsai* (black tea), which is like European tea, with sugar and no milk. (The word 'Lipton' is often understood and used in restaurants as an alternative to black tea.)

Traveller Dan Bennett describes his adventures dining with a Mongolian family, and the challenges of eating sheep head, at www.fotuva.org/travel/potato.html.

It is customary to flick spoonfuls of milk in the direction of departing travellers. This goes for people travelling by horse, car, train or plane.

Imperial Mongolian Cooking: Recipes from the Kingdoms of Ghengis Khan (2001), by Marc Cramer, describes a variety of recipes from Mongolia, China, Central Asia and other lands that were once part of the Mongol empire. Many recipes are from the author's grandfather, who worked as a chef in Siberia.

The well-researched www.mongolfood.info includes notes on Mongolian cuisine, plus cooking techniques and recipes to dispel the myth that Mongolian menus stop at 'boiled mutton'.

TASTY TRAVEL

One taste of fresh *öröm* (sometimes called *üürag*) and you'll soon find yourself scraping away at the bottom of the bowl. This rich, sweet-tasting cream is made by warming fresh cow milk in a pot and then letting it sit under a cover for one day. Yak milk (which contains twice as much fat as cow milk) will make an even sweeter cream. Another excellent treat, available in summer, is Mongolian blueberry jam. Most regions produce a sour version but the blueberries from around Khövsgöl Nuur are as sweet and tasty as you'll find anywhere.

We Dare You

Got a hankerin' for blowtorched rodent? Pop into a ger and ask around for some *boodog*, the authentic Mongolian barbecue. This summer delight first involves pulling the innards out of the neck of a goat or marmot. The carcass is then stuffed full of scalding rocks and the neck cinched up with wire. The bloated animal is then thrown upon a fire (or blowtorched) to burn the fur off the outside while the meat is cooked from within. The finished product vaguely resembles a balloon with paws.

Like most things involving a blowtorch, preparing *boodog* is true men's work. Furthering the adventure, it's worth noting that the bubonic plague, or Black Death as it was known to medieval Europe, can be passed by handling marmot skins. Most cases occur in August and September.

Other regional delicacies include *kazy* (salted horse-meat sausages), prepared by Kazakhs in Bayan-Ölgii aimag. Gobi people occasionally eat camel meat; the cut might be a bit gamey as it is the older camels that are usually killed for their meat.

Alcoholic Drinks

Mongolians can drink you under the table if you challenge them. There is much social pressure to drink, especially on males – those who refuse to drink *arkhi* (vodka) are considered wimps. The Russians can be thanked for this attitude, which started in the 1970s. Mongolian women prefer to drink beer more than vodka. Western women will be gently encouraged to drink but it's unlikely to be forced on them.

Locally produced beer labels such as Mongol, Chinggis and Khan Brau are growing in popularity as most young people consider it trendier to drink beer rather than go blind on the hard stuff preferred by their parents. Popular vodkas include the very smooth Chinggis black label which costs just US\$8 a bottle.

While it may not seem obvious at first, every countryside ger doubles as a tiny brewery or distillery. One corner of the ger usually contains a tall, thin jug with a plunger that is used for fermenting mare milk. The drink, known as *airag* or *koumiss*, has an alcohol content of about 3%.

Although you aren't likely to get drunk from *airag* alone, many Mongolians distil it further to produce *shimiin arkhi*, which boosts the alcohol content to around 12%. Go easy on the *airag* from the start or your guts will pay for it later.

CELEBRATIONS

Tsagaan Sar, the Mongolian New Year, is a festival for a new beginning. Everything about the holiday is symbolic of happiness, joy and prosperity in the coming year, and it is food that represents many of these rites.

Mongolians are an optimistic lot – a full belly during Tsagaan Sar is said to represent prosperity in the year ahead; *buuz* (steamed mutton dumplings) in their thousands are therefore prepared and consumed during the holiday. Likewise, the central meal of the holiday must be the biggest sheep a family can afford to buy; pride is at stake over how much fat will appear on the table.

The *buuz* itself carries one of the most important symbols of the holiday – one dumpling will hide a special silver coin that represents wealth to the lucky individual who finds it (watch your teeth!).

During Tsagaan Sar, food even plays a role in the decoration, as the centrepiece is made from layers of large biscuits called *ul boov*. Young people stack three layers of biscuits, middle-aged folk five layers and grandparents seven layers. Littering the table are chocolates and boiled sweets, decorations and the sheep itself, representing wealth in the year ahead.

Mongolians rarely need encouragement to drink or eat but birthdays are another time to celebrate. In cities these are usually held at restaurants. Mongolians also have a special party for three-year-olds, whose heads are shorn as part of the festivities.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The most basic Mongolian eatery is the ubiquitous *guanz* (Гуанз), or canteen. *Guanz* are usually found in buildings, gers or even in train wagons, in aimag capitals, a few *sums*, all over Ulaanbaatar and along major roads where there is some traffic. They usually offer soup, *süütei tsai* and either *buuz* or *khuushuur*.

In the countryside, the ger *guanz* is a great way to see the interior of a ger and meet a family, without the lengthy stops and traditions expected with normal visits. These are scattered along main roads.

In the countryside most *guanz* seem to close for dinner (and often lunch as well). In reality, opening hours are often at the whim of staff. The city

guanz, a good option for budget travellers or people in a hurry, will sometimes masquerade under more alluring names, including *tsainii gazar* (tea house). Some of the ones on main streets now stay open 24 hours, but the usual hours are 10am to 7pm.

Restaurants, usually open 10am to 10pm daily, are nearly always more hygienic than *guanz* and therefore a good choice for children and families. Some stay open to midnight but the kitchen will close by 10pm.

You will probably be assigned an overly attentive waiter or waitress who will polish your silverware to perfection and pour your drinks. In Ulaanbaatar, many restaurants – especially the good ones – will be busy and often full between about 1pm and 2pm. It pays to get a table before 12.30pm to beat the rush.

Menus are usually in Cyrillic but use the decoder on p46 and point to what you want. Listed menu items are often not available (*baikhgui* means 'we don't have any') so you may need to make a few attempts.

Meals prices range from US\$1 to US\$3 for a basic meal to US\$5 to US\$8 for something at a Western-style restaurant. At some of the best places you may end up spending US\$15 to US\$20 or more, but this is rare. A value-added tax (VAT) will be added to your bill. Tipping is not required but is appreciated.

Quick Eats

The concept of the street café is new in Mongolia and many Mongolians feel awkward about eating on the pavement where, they claim, car exhaust and dust can pollute their meal. Likewise, Mongolians don't eat while on the go, with the exception of ice cream.

Some Mongolians, however, have warmed to the idea of shashlik (grilled meat kebabs). This delicious snack, served with bread and slices of onion and cucumber, is usually prepared by expat Uzbeks, but only in summer. While they may look very tempting, avoid the more itinerant-looking shashlik sellers as their meat is often low grade or old.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Mongolia is a difficult, but not impossible, place for vegetarians. If you don't eat meat, you can get by in Ulaanbaatar, but in the countryside you will need to take your own supplements and preferably a petrol stove. Vegetables other than potatoes, carrots and onions are rare, relatively expensive and usually pickled in jars, so the best way for vegetarians to get protein is from the wide range of dairy products. In aimag capitals you can patch together a meal by poking around the shops. In villages you should be able to track down instant noodles and hot water. Hygiene can be an issue so it's best to boil or fry your vegetables.

Vegans will either have to be completely self-sufficient, or be prepared to modify their lifestyle for a while.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

While traditions and customs do surround the dinner table, Mongolian meals are generally casual affairs and there is little need to be overly concerned about offending your hosts.

In a ger in the countryside, traditional meals such as boiled mutton do not require silverware or even plates; just trawl around the bucket of bones until a slab catches your fancy. Eat with your fingers and try to nibble off as much meat and fat as possible; Mongolians can pick a bone clean and consider leftovers to be wasteful. There'll be a buck knife to slice off larger chunks. A common rag will appear at the end of the meal for

Scientists claim that drinking a few cups of *airag* (fermented mare milk) on a consistent basis can improve health, clear the skin and sharpen the eyesight.

A chunk of salt inside your *buuz* during Tsagaan Sar means safety and protection. If too much flour is used when preparing the dumplings and there are meat leftovers, it's a sign that the family will have enough clothing in the year ahead.

William of Rubruck's description of 13th-century Mongolian cuisine is at <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad> (search for 'Rubruck Mongolia'). Based on his writings, it would seem the Mongols have been partial to a drink for the last 750 years.

Mongolia's major brewing labels include APU (which produces Mongol-brand beer), Chinggis Beer and Khan Brau. In 2007 Tiger Beer opened a US\$20 million brewery in east Ulaanbaatar.

Mongolia Expat magazine has an article describing the different types of Mongolian vodka. Go to www.mongoliaexpat.com and download the Naadam Festival issue from the archives.

Each year Mongolians consume 26L of alcohol per person. Of that, just 0.9L is beer.

DOS AND DON'TS AT THE TABLE

Do

- Cut food towards your body, not away.
- Accept food and drink with your right hand; use the left *only* to support your right elbow if the food is heavy.
- Drink tea immediately after receiving it; don't put it on the table until you have tried some.
- Take at least a sip, or a nibble, of the delicacies offered even if they don't please you.
- Hold a cup by the bottom, and not by the top rim.
- Cover your mouth when you are using a toothpick.

Don't

- Point a knife at anyone; when passing the knife, offer the handle.
- Get up in the middle of a meal and walk outside; wait until everyone is finished.
- Cross your legs or stick your feet out in front of you when eating; keep your legs together if seated or folded under you if on the floor.

you to wipe off the grease (have a bandana ready if you are fussy about hygiene).

Most other meals in the rest of Mongolia are eaten with bowls, knives, forks and spoons. Chopsticks are only used at Chinese restaurants in Ulaanbaatar.

It is always polite to bring something to contribute to the meal; drinks are easiest, or in the countryside you could offer a bag of rice or sweets for desert. 'Bon appétit' in Mongolian is *saikhan khool loorai*.

Meals are occasionally interrupted for a round of vodka. Before taking a swig, a short ritual is employed to honour the sky gods and the four cardinal directions. There is no one way of doing this, but it usually involves dipping the left ring finger into the vodka and flicking into the air four times before wiping your finger across your forehead.

The woman of the household may offer you a variety of small food items. Try to taste everything you have been offered. An empty bowl is a sign to the host that you want more food. If you are full, just leave a little bit at the bottom of the bowl. If you are eating with Kazakhs, covering the bowl with your right hand means you are done.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Mongolian language is a scrambled-up soup of lispy vowels and throaty consonants. Get behind the cuisine scene by getting to know the language. For pronunciation guidelines, see p293.

Useful Phrases in Mongolian

I don't eat meat.

Can I have a menu please?

How much is it?

What food do you have today?

When will the food be ready?

bi makh id-deggui

bi khool-nii tses avch

bo-lokh uu

e-ne ya-mar ü-ne-tei ve

ö-nöö-dör ya-mar khool

baina ve

khool khe-zee be-len

bo-lokh ve

Би мах иддэггүй

Би хоолны цэс авч

болох уу?

Энэ ямар үнэтэй вэ?

Өнөөдөр ямар хоол

байна вэ?

Хоол хэзээ бэлэн

болох вэ?

Food Glossary

<i>airag</i>	айраг
<i>aaruul</i>	ааруул
<i>baitsaani zuush</i>	байцааны зууш
<i>banshtai shöl</i>	банштай шөл
<i>banshtai tsai</i>	банштай цай
<i>bifshteks</i>	бифштекс
<i>boodog</i>	боодог
<i>budaatai</i>	будаатай
<i>budaatai khuurag</i>	будаатай хуураг
<i>buuz</i>	бууз
<i>guriltai shöl</i>	гурилтай шөл
<i>goimontoi shöl</i>	гоймонтой шөл
<i>khoniny makh</i>	хонины мах
<i>khool</i>	хоол
<i>khoormog</i>	хоормог
<i>khorkhog</i>	хорхог
<i>khuurag</i>	хуураг
<i>khuushuur</i>	хуушуур
<i>luuvangiin zuush</i>	луувангийн зууш
<i>makh</i>	мах
<i>niislel salad</i>	нийслэл салат
<i>nagoon salad</i>	ногоон салат
<i>nogootoi</i>	ногоотой
<i>öröm</i>	өрөм
<i>rashaan us</i>	рашаан ус
<i>shar airag</i>	шар айраг
<i>sharsan öndөг</i>	шарсан өндөг
<i>sharsan takhia</i>	шарсан тахиа
<i>shnitsel</i>	шницель
<i>shöl</i>	шөл
<i>süü</i>	сүү
<i>süütei будаа</i>	сүүтэй будаа
<i>süütei tsai</i>	сүүтэй цай
<i>talkh</i>	талх
<i>tömstei</i>	төмстэй
<i>tsai</i>	цай
<i>tsagaanidee</i>	цагаан-идээ
<i>tsötsгii</i>	цөцгий
<i>tsuivan</i>	цуйван
<i>zagas</i>	загас
<i>zaidas/sosisk</i>	зайдас/сосиск

fermented mare milk
dried curds
cabbage salad
dumpling soup
dumplings in tea
patty
meat roasted from the inside with hot stones
with rice
meat with rice
steamed mutton dumplings
handmade noodle soup
noodle soup
mutton
food
camel yogurt
mutton, water and hot stones cooked in a pot
fried food
fried meat pancake
carrot salad
meat
potato salad
vegetable salad
with vegetables
cream
mineral water
beer
fried egg
fried chicken
schnitzel
soup
milk
milk with rice
Mongolian milk tea
bread
with potato
tea
white food (dairy)
sour cream
fried slices of dough with meat
fish
sausage

Because of his failing health, the advisors of Ögedei Khaan (a son of Chinggis) suggested that he halve the number of cups of alcohol he drank per day. Ögedei readily agreed, then promptly ordered that his cups be doubled in size.

The tradition of dipping the ring finger into vodka began centuries ago; if the silver ring on the finger changed colour after being submerged it meant that the vodka was poisoned.

Environment

Mongolia is the sort of country that naturalists dream about. With the world's lowest population density, huge tracts of virgin landscape, minimal infrastructure, varied ecosystems and abundant wildlife, Mongolia is rightfully considered to hold the last bastion of unspoiled land in Asia. Mongolia's nomadic past, which did not require cities or infrastructure, along with Shamanic prohibitions against defiling the earth, have for centuries protected the country from overdevelopment.

Traditional beliefs, however, are always at odds with modern economics. The environmental situation started going downhill when the Soviets introduced mining, railways, factories and power plants, but compared with the disastrous environmental record evoked in China or neighbouring Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Mongolia emerged from this period relatively unscathed. The new threat is capitalism. With no more subsidies coming from the USSR, Mongolia has spent nearly two decades looking for ways to earn revenue, and the easiest solution has been the sale of its resources. Consequently, the wildlife and landscape are now being degraded at an alarming rate, but there is hope among conservationists that ecotourism will provide a new direction for government fiscal policy.

THE LAND

Mongolia is a huge landlocked country. At 1,566,500 sq km in area, it's about three times the size of France, over twice the size of Texas and almost as large as Queensland in Australia. Apart from the period of Mongol conquest under Chinggis Khaan and Kublai Khaan, Mongolia was until the 20th century about twice its present size. A large chunk of Siberia was once part of Mongolia but is now securely controlled by Russia, and Inner Mongolia is now firmly part of China.

The southern third of Mongolia is dominated by the Gobi Desert, which stretches into China. Only the southern sliver of the Gobi is 'Lawrence of Arabia-type desert' with cliffs and sand dunes. The rest is desert steppe and has sufficient grass to support scattered herds of sheep, goats and camels. There are also areas of desert steppe in low-lying parts of western Mongolia.

Much of the rest of Mongolia is covered by grasslands. Stretching over about 20% of the country, these steppes are home to vast numbers of gazelle, birdlife and livestock. The central, northern and western aimags (provinces), amounting to about 25% of Mongolia, are classed as mountain forest steppe. Home to gazelle and saiga antelope, they have relatively large numbers of people and livestock.

Mongolia is also one of the highest countries in the world, with an average elevation of 1580m. In the far west are Mongolia's highest mountains, the Mongol Altai Nuruu, which are permanently snowcapped. The highest peak, glaciated Tavan Bogd Uul (4374m), towers over Mongolia, Russia and China. Between the peaks are stark but beautiful deserts where rain almost never falls.

The far northern areas of Khövsgöl and Khentii aimags are essentially the southern reaches of Siberia and are covered by larch and pine forests known by the Russian word 'taiga'.

Near the centre of Mongolia is the Khangai Nuruu range, with its highest peak, Otgon Tenger Uul, reaching 3905m. On the northern slope of these mountains is the source of the Selenge Gol, Mongolia's largest river, which flows northward into Lake Baikal in Siberia. While the Selenge Gol is the

largest in terms of water volume, the longest river is the Kherlen Gol in eastern Mongolia.

Just to the northeast of Ulaanbaatar is the Khentii Nuruu, the highest mountain range in eastern Mongolia and by far the most accessible to hikers. It's a heavily forested region with meandering rivers and impressive peaks, the highest being Asralt Khaikhan Uul (2800m). The range provides a major watershed between the Arctic and Pacific oceans.

Mongolia has numerous saltwater and freshwater lakes, which are great for camping, bird-watching, hiking, swimming and fishing. The largest is the low-lying, saltwater Uvs Nuur, but the most popular is the magnificent Khövsgöl Nuur, the second-oldest lake in the world, which contains 65% of Mongolia's (and 2% of the world's) fresh water.

Other geological and geographical features include caves (some with ancient rock paintings), dormant volcanoes, hot and cold mineral springs, the Orkhon Khürkhee (Orkhon Waterfall), Great Lakes Depression in western Mongolia and Darkhad Depression west of Khövsgöl Nuur.

WILDLIFE

In Mongolia, the distinction between domestic and wild (or untamed) animals is often blurry. Wild and domesticated horses and camels mingle on the steppes with wild asses and herds of wild gazelle. In the mountains there are enormous (and horned) wild argali sheep and domesticated yaks along with wild moose, musk deer and roe deer. Reindeer herds are basically untamed, but strangely enough they can be ridden and are known to return to the same tent each night for a salt-lick.

Animals

Wildlife flourishes in Mongolia despite a number of impediments: an extreme climate, the nomadic fondness for hunting, the communist persecution of Buddhists who had set aside areas as animal sanctuaries and a penniless government that lacks the political will to police nature-protection laws. Your chances of seeing some form of wildlife are good, though the closest

Roy Chapman Andrews wrote several excellent books on Mongolia's flora and fauna following his research expeditions across the country in the early 1920s. Look out for his classic titles *Across Mongolian Plains* and *On the Trail of Ancient Man*.

Conservation Ink (www.conservationink.org) produces maps and postcards dedicated to Mongolia's national parks. The website contains links, information and beautiful photography.

Mongolia's Wild Heritage (1999), by Christopher Finch, was written in collaboration with the Mongolian Ministry of Nature & Environment. This outstanding book contains excellent photos and brief but relevant information on Mongolia's fragile ecology.

THE GREAT ZUD

The winters of 1999–2000 to 2001–02 were the coldest and longest in living memory. They were classed as *zud*, a Mongolian word that can mean any condition that stops livestock getting to grass; in this case heavy snowfall and an impenetrable ice cover. Unusually early snowfalls compounded an earlier summer drought and rodent infestation, which left animals emaciated and pastures degraded before winter even hit. Other causes for the *zud* trace back 10 years; the move towards capitalism promoted the boom in livestock that caused overgrazing, leaving pastures tired and depleted. After three bad winters the livestock population plummeted from 33 million to 24 million.

In the worst-hit areas of Dundgov, Bayankhongor, Arkhangai and Övörkhongai, herders lost a quarter to half of their livestock (their only form of income, food, fuel, security – almost everything, in fact). The disaster was equal to the great *zud* of 1944, when 7.5 million livestock were lost, but at that time herders had the safety net of the communist collective. During the recent freeze, only a handful of international agencies came to the aid of the herders.

Some analysts have suggested that the disaster was exacerbated by the inexperience of numerous new herders, who chose not to embark on the traditional month-long trek (*otor*), which takes herders to other pastures in autumn. Tragically, the poorest herders were the most affected, just when they least needed it. In the years since the *zud*, many of the affected herders migrated to Ulaanbaatar to seek work (see the boxed text, p77) or entered the field of illegal gold prospecting (p147).

you will realistically get to a snow leopard (*irbis*), argali sheep (*argal*) or moose (*khandgai*) is in a museum.

Despite the lack of water in the Gobi, numerous species (many of which are endangered) somehow survive. These include the Gobi argali sheep, wild camel (*khavtgai*), Asiatic wild ass (*khulani*), Gobi bear (*mazaalai*), ibex (*yangir*) and black-tailed gazelle (*khar suult zeer*). In the wide open steppe you may see the rare saiga antelope, Mongolian gazelle (*tsagaan zeer*), several species of jerboa (*alag daaga*), which is a rodent endemic to Central Asia, and millions of furry marmots (*tarvaga*), waking up after their last hibernation or preparing for the next.

Further north in the forests live the wild boar (*zerleg gakhai*), brown bear (*khuren baavgai*), roe deer (*bor görös*), wolf (*chono*), reindeer (*tsaa buga*), elk (*khaliun buga*), musk deer (*khuder*) and moose, as well as plenty of sable (*bulga*) and lynx (*shiluus*), whose furs, unfortunately, are in high demand. Most of the mountains are extremely remote, thus providing an ideal habitat for argali sheep, ibex, the very rare snow leopard and smaller mammals such as the fox, ermine and hare.

BIRDS

Mongolia is home to 469 recorded species of bird. In the desert you may see the desert warbler, saxaul sparrow (*boljmor*) and McQueen's bustard (*toodog*), as well as sandgrouse, finch (*byalzuu hai*) and the cinereous vulture (*tas*).

On the steppes, you will certainly see the most charismatic bird in Mongolia – the demoiselle crane (*övögt togoruu*) – as well as the hoopoe (*övöölj*), the odd falcon (*shonkhor*), vulture (*yol*), and golden and steppe eagle (*bürged*). Other steppe species include the upland buzzard (*sar*), black kite (*sokhor elee*) and some varieties of owl (*shar shuvuu*) and hawk (*khartsaga*). Some black kites will even swoop down and catch pieces of bread in midair if you throw the pieces high enough. These magnificent raptors, perched majestically on a rock by the side of the road, will rarely be disturbed by your jeep or the screams of your guide ('Look. Eagle!! Bird!! We stop?') but following the almost inaudible click of your lens cap, these birds will move and almost be in China before you have even thought about apertures.

In the mountains, you may be lucky to spot species of ptarmigan (*tsagaan yatuu*), bunting (*khömrög byalzuu hai*), woodpecker (*tonshuul*), owl and the endemic Altai snowcock (*khoilog*). The lakes of the west and north are visited by Dalmatian pelican (*khoton*), hooded crane (*khar togoruu*), relict gull (*tsakhlai*) and bar-headed goose.

Eastern Mongolia has the largest breeding population of cranes, including the hooded and Siberian varieties and the critically endangered white-naped crane (*tsen togoruu*), of which only 4500 remain in the wild.

FISH

Rivers such as the Selenge, Orkhon, Zavkhan, Balj, Onon and Egiin, as well as dozens of lakes, including Khövsgöl Nuur, hold 76 species of fish. They include trout, grayling (*khadran*), roach, lenok (*zebge*), Siberian sturgeon (*khilem*), pike (*tsurkhai*), perch (*algana*), the endemic Altai osman and the enormous taimen, a Siberian relative of the salmon, which can grow up to 1.5m in length and weigh up to 50kg.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

According to conservationists, 28 species of mammals are endangered in Mongolia. The more commonly known species are the wild ass, wild camel, argali sheep, Gobi bear and ibex; others include otter, wolf, saiga antelope and some species of jerboa. The red deer is also in dire straits; over the past

two decades its numbers have dropped from 130,000 to just 8000 (and falling). Brown bears have also been hit hard by poachers – in October 2000, Vietnamese smugglers were caught trying to leave Mongolia with 80 brown-bear gall bladders (each worth up to US\$200).

There are 22 species of endangered birds, including many species of hawk, falcon, buzzard, crane and owl. Despite Mongolian belief that it's bad luck to kill a crane, the elegant white-naped crane is threatened with extinction due to habitat loss. German ornithologists have recently conducted surveys on the crane and estimate there are just 5000 breeding pairs left in the wild. The best place to see them is in Dornod's Mongol Daguur Strictly Protected Area (p174).

Every year the government allows up to 300 falcons to be captured and sold abroad; the major buyers are the royal families of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. A licence for each bird costs US\$4600. On top of this, unknown numbers of other falcons (possibly in their hundreds) are illegally smuggled out of the country. As a direct result, breeding pairs dropped from 3000 to 2200 over the past five years.

One positive news story is the resurrection of the *takhi* wild horse. The *takhi* was actually extinct in the wild in the 1960s. It has been successfully reintroduced into three special protected areas after an extensive breeding program overseas. For more on the *takhi* see p116.

In preserved areas of the mountains, about 1000 snow leopards remain. They are hunted for their pelts (which are also part of some shamanist and Buddhist traditional practices), as are the leopards' major source of food, the marmot. For details on the attempt to save the snow leopard see p216.

Each year the government sells licences to hunt 300 ibex and 40 argali sheep, both endangered species, netting the government more than US\$500,000.

Plants

Mongolia can be roughly divided into three zones: grassland and shrubland (55% of the country); forests, which only cover parts of the mountain steppe (8%); and desert (36%). Less than 1% of the country is used for human settlements and crop cultivation. Grasslands are used extensively for grazing and, despite the vast expanses, overgrazing is not uncommon.

Forests of Siberian larch (sometimes up to 45m in height), Siberian and Scotch pine, and white and ground birch cover parts of northern Mongolia.

In the Gobi the saxaul shrub covers millions of hectares and is essential in anchoring the desert sands and preventing degradation and erosion. Saxaul takes a century to grow to around 4m in height, creating wood so dense that it sinks in water.

Khentii aimag and some other parts of central Mongolia are famous for the effusion of red, yellow and purple wildflowers, mainly rhododendrons and edelweiss. Extensive grazing is the major threat to Mongolia's flowers, trees and shrubs; more than 200 species are endangered.

PROTECTED AREAS

The Ministry of Nature & Environment (MNE) and its **Special Protected Areas Administration (SPAA)** (☎ 011-326 617; fax 328 620; Baga Toiruu 44, Ulaanbaatar) control the national park system with a tiny annual budget of around US\$650,000. With this budget and substantial financial assistance and guidance from international governments and nongovernmental organisations, the animals, flora and environment in some parts of the country are being preserved. Unfortunately, in many protected areas the implementation of park regulations is weak, if not nonexistent.

The Wildlife Conservation Society's Mongolia programme strives to address wildlife conservation issues through various approaches that reach local communities, wildlife biologists, provincial governments and national ministries. Read more at www.wcs.org/Mongolia.

Mongolians consider wolf parts and organs to contain curative properties. The meat and lungs are good for respiratory ailments, the intestines aid in digestion, powdered wolf rectum can soothe the pain of haemorrhoids and hanging a wolf tongue around one's neck will cure gland and thyroid ailments.

Mongolia's river monsters, known as taimen, are the ultimate strike for some anglers. Taimen Conservation Fund has created an enlightening video on YouTube (www.youtube.com and search for 'Mongolia taimen').

Silent Steppe: The Illegal Wildlife Trade Crisis (July 2006), published by the Netherlands-Mongolia Trust Fund for Environmental Reform (NEMO), is an important publication that highlights the decimation of wildlife in Mongolia. You can download the document by going to the World Bank website (www.worldbank.org/nemo).

The *takhi* horse also goes by the name Przewalski's horse. It was named after Colonel Nikolai Przewalski, an officer in the Russian Imperial Army who made the horse's existence known to Europe after an exploratory expedition to Central Asia in 1878.

American actress Julia Roberts stepped out of her usual star-studded element in 2000 to host a documentary on the horses and nomad culture of Mongolia. The programme was filmed by Tigress Productions (UK) and can be viewed at the Khustain Nuruu information centre (p115).

THE FIVE SNOOTS

Mongolians define themselves as the 'people of five animals' (*tavan kosighu mal*): horses, cattle (including yaks), sheep, goats and Bactrian camels. The odd one out is the reindeer, which is herded in small numbers by the Tsaatan people (*tsaa* means 'reindeer') near the Siberian border. Chickens and pigs are rare in Mongolia. A rough ratio exists for the relative values of the five animals: a horse is worth five to seven sheep or seven to 10 goats. A camel is worth 1½ horses.

The horse (*mor*) is the pride of Mongolia and there are few, if any, nomads who haven't learned to ride as soon as they can walk. Mongolian horses are shorter than those in other countries (don't call them ponies – Mongolians will be offended). They provide perfect transport, can endure harsh winters and, importantly, produce that much-loved Mongolian beverage: fermented mare milk, or *airag*. Mongolians have more than 300 different words to describe the country's two million horses, mostly relating to colouring.

Together, cows (*ükher*) and yaks (*sarlag*) number around two million, and are used for milk, meat (especially *borts*, which is dried and salted meat) and for their hides. Most yaks are actually a cross between a yak and a cow (known as a *hainag* in Mongolian), as *hainags* supply more milk than thoroughbred yaks.

Fat-tailed sheep (*khon*) are easy to herd and provide wool for clothes, carpets and ger insulation, as well as meat (the ubiquitous mutton) – every nomadic family wants to own at least a few sheep. Goats (*yamaa*) are popular for their meat and, especially, for cashmere wool. There are around 11.5 million sheep and 11 million goats in Mongolia.

Camels (*temee*) are used for long-distance (though slow) transport, and once crossed Mongolia in large caravans. Considered valuable for their adaptability and their wool, they number about 260,000. They're considered proud, intelligent creatures and actually quite athletic – Mongolians have recently put them to use as charges in a new camel-polo club.

The MNE classifies protected areas into four categories (from most protected to least):

Strictly Protected Areas Very fragile areas of great importance; hunting, logging and development is strictly prohibited and there is no established human influence.

National Parks Places of historical and educational interest; fishing and grazing by nomadic people is allowed and parts of the park are developed for ecotourism.

Natural & Historical Monuments Important places of historical and cultural interest; development is allowed within guidelines.

Nature Reserves Less important regions protecting rare species of flora and fauna, and archaeological sites; some development is allowed within certain guidelines.

The 60 protected areas in Mongolia now constitute an impressive 13.8% of the country (21.52 million hectares). The strictly protected areas of Bogd Khan Uul, Great Gobi, Uvs Nuur Basin, Dornod Mongol and Khustain Nuruu are biosphere reserves included in Unesco's Man and Biosphere Project.

At the time of independence in 1990, some proposed that the *entire country* be turned into a national park, but the government settled on 30% (potentially creating the world's largest park system). This goal, however, has stalled in recent years as the government has given favour to expanding mining operations and the sale of mining rights.

Permits

To visit Mongolia's parks – especially strictly protected areas, national parks and some monuments – you will need a permit, either from the local SPAA office or from rangers at the entrances to the parks. The permits are little more than an entrance fee, but they are an important source of revenue for the maintenance of the parks.

Mongolians collect various wild herbs and flowers for their medicinal properties: yellow poppies to heal wounds, edelweiss to add vitamins to the blood, and feather grass to cure an upset stomach.

The area around Bogd Khan Uul, near Ulaanbaatar, was protected from hunting and logging as early as the 12th century, and was officially designated as a national park in 1778.

National Parks	Features	Activities	Time to visit
Altai Tavan Bogd National Park (p229)	mountains, glaciers, lakes: argali sheep, ibex, snow leopard, eagle, falcon	mountaineering, horse trekking, backpacking, fishing, eaglehunting (in winter)	Jun-Sep
Gorkhi-Terelj National Park (p104)	rugged hills, boulders, streams	river rafting, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, camping, cross-country skiing, horse riding	year-round
Gurvan Saikhan National Park (p208)	desert mountains, canyons, sand dunes: Gobi argali sheep, ibex, black-tailed gazelle	hiking, sand-dune sliding, camel trekking, bird-watching	May-Oct
Khorgo-Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur National Park (p130)	lake and mountains: wolf, deer, fox	fishing, hiking, horse trekking, bird-watching	May-Sep
Khövsgöl Nuur National Park (p152)	lake, mountains, rivers: fish, moose, wolverine, bear, sable, elk, roe deer	mountain biking, kayaking, fishing, hiking, horse trekking, bird-watching	Jun-Sep
Khustain National Park (p115)	rugged hills and the Tuul river: <i>takhi</i> horse, gazelle, deer, wolf, lynx, manul wild cat	trekking, wildlife spotting	Apr-Oct
Otgon Tenger Uul Strictly Protected Area (p245)	mountains, rivers, lakes: argali sheep, roe deer, wolf	horse trekking, hiking, swimming	May-Sep

Entrance fees are set at T3000 per foreigner and T300 per Mongolian (although guides and drivers are often excluded).

If you are not able to get a permit and are found in a park without one, the worst penalty you're likely to suffer is being asked to leave or pay a fine to the park ranger.

If you think you might need permits for conducting research in a park, it's best to contact the MNE's SPAA department directly. The ministry is located just behind the Ulaanbaatar Hotel (Map pp70–1) in UB.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Mongolia's natural environment remains in good shape compared with that of many Western countries. The country's small population and nomadic subsistence economy have been its environmental salvation.

However, Mongolia does have its share of problems. Communist production quotas in the past put pressure on grasslands to yield more crops and support more livestock than was sustainable. The rise in the number of herders and livestock has wreaked havoc on the grasslands; some 70% of pastureland is degraded and near village centres around 80% of plant species have disappeared.

Forest fires, nearly all of which are caused by careless human activity, are common during the windy spring season. The fires destroy huge tracts of forest and grassland, mainly in Khentii and Dornod aimags. In 1996 alone around 80,000 sq km of land was scorched, causing up to US\$1.9 billion of damage.

Other threats to the land include mining, which has polluted 28 river basins in eight aimags (there are more than 300 mines in Mongolia). The huge Oyu Tolgoi mine in Ömnögovi will require the use of 360L of water *per second*, which environmentalists say might not be sustainable. China's insatiable appetite for minerals and gas is opening up new mines, but the bigger threat is China's hunt for the furs, meat and body parts of endangered animals. Chinese demand has resulted in a 75% decline in the number of marmots and an 85% drop in the number of saiga antelope.

The World Wide Fund for Nature website at www.wwf.mn has relevant news on Mongolia's environment and topical information that affects the country. It also includes statistics, data and conservation threats.

In 2007 Tsetsegee Munkhbayar, a herder from central Mongolia, was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for his efforts to block aggressive mining on the Ongii River. You can watch a short video on his heroic story at www.goldmanprize.org/node/606.

RESPONSIBLE ECOTOURISM

Mongolia's environment, flora and fauna are precious. Decades of Soviet exploitation, urban sprawl and development have greatly affected the ecology; Mongolia does not need tourism to exacerbate the problems. Please bear the following pointers in mind as you travel around the country. If camping or hiking, please note the boxed text on p60. In protected areas or areas of natural beauty try to keep to existing jeep tracks rather than pioneering new trails, which quickly degenerate into an eroded mess.

- Patronise travel companies and ger camps that you feel advance sustainable development, safe waste management, water conservation and fair employment practices.
- When on a jeep trip have a designated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Don't buy goods made from endangered species.
- Don't engage in or encourage hunting. It is illegal in all parks and reserves.
- Don't spend all your money with one company (easily done on a tour) but spread your money through the economy. Support local services, guides and initiatives.
- When fishing, buy a permit and practise standard 'catch and release' policy. Use barbless hooks.

While browsing through Ulaanbaatar souvenir shops keep an eye out for two great ecology books: *Lake Khövsgöl National Park – A Visitor's Guide* (1997), published by Discovery Initiatives, and *The Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park*, written by Bernd Steinhauer-Burkart.

Urban sprawl, coupled with a demand for wood to build homes and for heating and cooking, is slowly reducing the forests. This destruction of the forests has also lowered river levels, especially the Tuul Gol near Ulaanbaatar. In recent years the Tuul has actually gone dry in the spring months due to land mismanagement and improper water use.

Large-scale infrastructure projects are further cause for concern. The 18m-tall Dörgön hydropower station, currently being built on the Chon Khaikh Gol in Khovd, will submerge canyons and pastures. The dam threatens fish and will only run in summer when electricity is in lower demand compared with winter.

Conservationists are also concerned about the 'Millennium Rd' which will likely cut through important gazelle migration routes in eastern Mongolia. Its completion is sure to increase mining and commerce inside fragile ecosystems.

Air pollution is becoming a serious problem, especially in Ulaanbaatar. At the top of Zaisan Memorial in the capital, a depressing layer of dust and smoke from the city's three thermal power stations can be seen hovering over the city. This layer is often appalling in winter, when all homes are continuously burning fuel and the power stations are working overtime. Ulaanbaatar has also suffered from acid rain, and pollution is killing fish in nearby Tuul Gol in central Mongolia.

Mongolia Outdoors

Mongolia is a giant outdoor park. With scattered settlements, few roads and immense areas of steppe, mountain and forest, the entire country beckons the outdoor enthusiast. But the lack of infrastructure is a double-edged sword: while there are many areas that have potential for eco-tourism, only a few (ie Khövsgöl Nuur, Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur and Terelj National Park) can really handle independent travellers. Signing up with a tour group, on the other hand, gives you instant logistical help. Tour agencies can act like mobile support centres, using vans, trucks and helicopters to shuttle clients and their gear around. Independent travellers hoping to explore remote areas of the country will need to be completely self-sufficient. This chapter provides tips on how to deal with these logistical hurdles.

CYCLE TOURING

Mongolia is an adventure cyclist's dream. There are few fences, lots of open spaces and very little traffic. Roads are mainly dirt but the jeep trails are usually hard-packed earth, allowing you to cover 40km to 50km per day. Overlanding by bike does require careful planning and thought; you'll need to be totally self-sufficient in terms of tools and spare parts. Other factors include washed-out bridges, trails that disappear into rivers or marshland and, in late summer, heavy rain and mud. On the plus side, locals will be pleasantly intrigued by your bike. You'll have lots of chances to swap your bike for a horse and go for a short canter, but don't forget to show your Mongolian counterpart the brakes! A few more tips to keep in mind:

- Dogs can be ferocious and will chase you away from gers. If you stop and hold your ground they will back off; it helps to pick up a rock. The faster you cycle away the more they want to chase you.
- Cyclists usually follow river valleys. However, in Mongolia it's often better to go over the mountains. Roads along rivers are usually sandy or consist of loose stones that make riding difficult.
- Most cyclists consider the best trip to be a cross-country adventure but in Mongolia (where there are vast areas of nothingness) consider focussing on one small area and doing a loop. There are great routes to explore in Khövsgöl and Bayan-Ölgii aimags.
- Bring all the spare parts you may need, including brake pads, cables and inner tubes. Spare parts are hard to find in Mongolia, but you could try the Seven Summits (p93) in Ulaanbaatar.

Gear, Bike Hire & Tours

Mountain bikes are most suitable for Mongolia's rough terrain. But if you are planning on doing a long-distance trip, a touring bike with wide wheels will also suffice. Bring all your equipment from home as the stuff on offer in Mongolia is often unreliable, poor quality or may not be available. Otherwise, you could try renting a bike from the Seven Summits, Mongolia Expeditions (p81) or Karakorum Expeditions (p81) in Ulaanbaatar. Guided tours are led by **Bike Mongolia** (www.bikemongolia.com). In summer, Korean-made bikes are sold in the plaza opposite the State Department Store.

Routes

The following trips require several days. They can be made solo provided you are equipped with a tent, sleeping bag, food, tools and spare parts. Another option is to use vehicle support; hire a jeep and driver to take you

Planning a cycle tour of Mongolia? Have a look at Freewheelers Mongolia Route website (www.geocities.com/aliingi/mongolia/mongoliaroute.html), which has day-by-day details of usual bike routes in Mongolia.

ABANDON JEEP

In the past, most travellers rocked up to Mongolia with one plan in mind: hop into a jeep, set off across the steppes and tour the major sights, stopping to stay in ger camps, ride horses and meet nomad families. While the jeep is still a valid travel option, there are many alternatives, including the following:

- Volunteering – Join a volunteer project in Ulaanbaatar's ger districts with Rinky Dink Travel Mongolia (p81)
- Ger to Ger programme – Walk, horse trek and raft between nomadic families (p59)
- Dog sledding – Join guide Joel Rauzy on a winter dog-sled trip in Terelj or Khövsgöl (p82)
- Rock climbing – Grab some granite in Terelj (p112) or Dundgov (p198)
- Ranch work – Bust some Broncos at the Anak Ranch (p144)
- Yak carting – Available in Terelj through Nomadic Journeys (p81)
- Backcountry walking – Trek near Kharkhiraa Uul (p241) in Uvs aimag or do the Khövsgöl Lake-to-Renchinlhumbe route (p156)
- Cycle touring – Pedal your way across the country (p55)
- Dune-buggy tour – Kick up some dirt with a buggy; contact Vast Gobi (p251)

out to the best biking areas and keep all your gear in the vehicle while you ride unhindered. For this type of trip, a vehicle will cost around US\$35 to US\$40 per day, plus petrol costs. This small investment will definitely make life easier and will also provide security; it makes a lot of sense if you are travelling in a group.

Note that these routes are only starter suggestions. You could cycle around many areas of northern, eastern and western Mongolia; consult with travel experts in Ulaanbaatar about the possibilities (p80). Mongolia Expeditions, Seven Summits and Tseren Tours are places to start. Gobi areas, due to their lack of water and facilities, are places to avoid.

OUT OF ULAANBAATAR

The roads out of Ulaanbaatar are busy with cars and trucks so try getting a lift 100km out of town until the traffic thins out. Remember that you can also ride on the dirt tracks to the side of the modern highways. Heading west, if you are travelling to Tsetserleg, take the route that goes to Ögii Nuur and Tsetserleg (the direct route from Dahinchinlen to Kharkhorin is an awful mess of sand and mud).

ERDENET TO TERKHIIN TSAGAAN NUUR

This multi-day adventure takes you from the rolling, forested hills of Bulgan to the more rugged Arkhangai. Start by taking the train or bus from Ulaanbaatar to Erdenet. If you ride to Erdenet don't miss a side trip to Amarbayasgalant Khiid.

From Erdenet, travel due west of the town to Bugat, a 27km ride, then continue west on what is essentially the road to Khövsgöl. It will take about three days to cover the 160km of trails that connect Bugat to Khairkhan, just inside Arkhangai aimag. You'll find rolling steppe and hard roads the whole way.

From Khairkhan it's another two days to Ikh Tamir (approx 140km). From Ikh Tamir you can follow the Tamir River west, then follow the road when it splits from the river and continue to the town of Chuluut. From here you can continue down the Chuluut River to Tariat and Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur.

CHINGGIS KHAAN TRAIL

This trail in northern Khentii offers plenty of cultural heritage and nice riding terrain. Get a ride from Ulaanbaatar to Tsenkhermandal in Khentii aimag, then cycle north to Khökh Nuur, buried deep in the Khentii Mountains. Continue northwest to Khangal Nuur and the very bumpy road to Balden Bereeven Khiid; another 17km brings you to the deer stones and then Öglögchiin Kherem. Continue to Batshireet, Binder and finally, Dadal. This trip takes four to six days. From here, either return to Ulaanbaatar or continue your trip into northern Dornod and the towns of Bayan-Uul, Bayandun and Dashbalbar.

ULAANGOM TO ÖLGI

It's difficult to get lost on this route in northwestern Mongolia, which follows the main jeep trail from Ulaangom to Ölgii city. You'll pass by lakes, over mountain passes and through dramatic canyons. From Ulaangom, travel northwest to Üüreg Nuur. Veer south over Bairam Pass and then onto the coal mining town of Khotgor. Cycle to the southeast corner of Achit Nuur (where there is a bridge over the river) and follow the road to the Khovd Gol canyon. The section from Achit Nuur to the canyon is hot, dry and buggy so you'll want to move quickly through this area. The 18km stretch through the canyon is the most scenic part of the trip. It's another 17km from the end of the canyon to Ölgii. From Ölgii you could continue on to Altai Tavan Bogd National Park. Get a ride into the park from a local driver, explore the area with your bike and then cycle back to Ölgii.

KHÖVSGÖL AIMAG

Khövsgöl is a great area for cycling; there are numerous attractions and various route options. A nice route leads south from Mörön to Tariat in Arkhangai, via the towns of Shine-Ider, Galt and Jargalant. The more popular route is from Mörön up to Khatgal and then along either side of Khövsgöl Nuur. The slightly more adventurous could cycle in the spectacular Chandman-Öndör area.

TSETSERLEG TO BAYANKHONGOR

This 200km route, from Tsetserleg in Arkhangai to Bayankhongor city, takes four days and involves lots of river crossings and loose stones. This is a difficult and challenging trip with rugged terrain, travelling over alpine passes in Khangai Nuruu National Park. On the first day it's 32km from Tsetserleg to Bulgan *sum* centre; camp near the town or just past it. On the second night plan on camping around 10km south of the last pass. On the third day it's downhill but you'll need to cross the Tüin Gol a few times. There are plenty of camping spots near the river as you head south towards Erdenetsogt. On the fourth day you pass through Erdenetsogt before reaching Bayankhongor; this is the most difficult day with lots of rocks before Erdenetsogt.

ÖLGI TO ULAANBAATAR

This mammoth 1450km expedition will take three or four weeks. In summer, the prevailing winds in Mongolia travel from west to east, which means that you'll enjoy tailwinds if you start in Ölgii and end in Ulaanbaatar. Ending in UB also gives you something to look forward to – a cold beer at Dave's Place (p91)! The northern route, via either Mörön or Tosontsengel, is more interesting than the southern Gobi route.

Cyclists should pick up a copy of *Where the Pavement Ends*, by Erika Warmbrunn, which describes the author's sometimes harrowing account of biking through Mongolia, China and Vietnam. It's well written and provides useful cultural insight for cyclists travelling across the steppes.

FISHING

With Mongolia's large number of lakes (*nuur*) and rivers (*gol*), and a sparse population that generally prefers red meat, the fish are just waiting to be caught. The best places to dangle your lines are at Khövsgöl Nuur (p155), for grayling and lenok, and Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur (p130), which has a lot of pike. The season is mid-June to late September. You can get a fishing permit from the national park office. Permits are valid for two days or 10 fish, whichever comes first. For the truly intrepid, visit either lake in winter for some hard-core ice fishing.

Serious anglers will want to try out Mongolia's rivers – the fly-fishing is some of the best anywhere. The major target is taimen, an enormous salmonid that spends its leisure time hunting down unfortunate marmots attempting to cross the river. These monsters can reach 1.5m in length and weigh 50kg. Unfortunately they are also prized by poachers and are thus carefully guarded by locals along the river. To avoid any problems, you must fish for taimen with a reputable outfitter. Catch and release is standard practice. Outfitters run fishing trips on the Ider, Chuluut, Selenge, Orkhon, Eg, Onon and Delgermörön Gols.

While it's relatively easy to get a fishing permit in a national park, buying one for other areas is much more difficult. Anglers must have a special permit authorised by the **Ministry of Nature & Environment** (☎ 011-326 617, fax 011-328 620; Baga Toiruu 44, Ulaanbaatar), which costs US\$50 a week. But to get the permit you need a contract with the *sum* where you plan to fish and approval by the aimag. Obviously this is not possible for casual tourists – the whole system has been set up so that it can be effectively managed by tour operators. Before signing up, make sure your outfitter has the necessary agreements and permits; some take the risk of fishing illegally which can get you in big trouble if you're caught.

If you fish without a permit you will be fined and have your equipment confiscated. Killing a taimen brings more problems than you want to deal with – locals believe such an offence brings misery to 999 human souls.

Four responsible fly-fishing tour operators are **Mongolia River Outfitters** (www.mongoliarivers.com), **Fish Mongolia** (www.fishmongolia.co.uk), **Sweetwater Travel** (www.sweetwatertravel.com/mongolia.htm) and **Nemekh Tour** (www.nemekh.com). The cost for two people on an 11-day package trip will be in the neighbourhood of US\$3500 all-inclusive, more if you take a Cessna flight direct to the camps from UB.

It's possible to buy equipment in Mongolia but, to ensure you have the best quality stuff, bring it from home (use barbless hooks to protect the fish). In many places, all you need is a strong handline and a lure.

HIKING

As a country with few cars or paved roads, hiking opportunities abound. The biggest obstacle faced by hikers is finding transport to the mountains once they get far afield from Ulaanbaatar. However, in the regions around Bogdkhan Uul (p107) and Terelj (p111), which are not far from Ulaanbaatar, there are enough mountains to keep hikers busy for a few days.

Pay any fees and procure any permits required by local authorities. Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment. Decent maps are hard to come by. The 1:1,000,000 topographic maps available in Ulaanbaatar are your best bet.

Mosquitoes and midges are a curse. The situation is at its worst during spring and early summer, with the marshy lakes and canyons in the western deserts the most troublesome areas.

In western Mongolia, prime hiking areas include the Altai Tavan Bogd National Park (p229) around Khoton Nuur or between the lakes and Tavan

Outside magazine carries a touching article on its website about fly-fishing in northern Mongolia. Go to <http://outside.away.com> and enter 'fly-fishing Mongolia' in the site's search engine.

Responsible outfitters concerned with poaching have started the Taimen Conservation Fund (www.taimen.org), which works with local communities to protect the rivers. Efforts are being made to ensure that locals benefit from tourism (some are hired as guides and wranglers).

Anglers heading out to the rivers and lakes should pack a copy of *Fishing in Mongolia*, published by the US-based Avery Press.

GER TO GER

As the most innovative tourism concept in Mongolia, the **Ger to Ger programme** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 313 336; www.gertoger.org; Arizona Plaza, Suite 11, Baruun Selbe 5/3, Ulaanbaatar) should be near the top of every traveller's wish list. By combining hiking, sports, Mongolian language and visits with local families, the experience promises total cultural immersion.

The concept is simple. Travellers can choose one of several routes in Dundgov, Arkhangai, Bulgan or Terelj, or do a combination of routes if they have more time. Prior to departure they are educated in local social graces, culture and appropriate Mongolian phrases. Transport is organised to the starting point and then the trekkers begin walking from ger to ger, which can be anywhere from 5km to 20km apart. Once the trekkers have reached the appointed ger, the local family prepares a meal and helps them set up camp (tents and gear are carried by pack animals).

Activities are available at each ger. The Arkhangai route, for example, carries the theme 'three manly sports'; participants learn archery, wrestling and horse training at one or another ger.

Because distances vary between gers, there may be different modes of transport between them – you may take a yak cart for one stretch or go by horse on another. The programme is not forced on the host families; they are still nomadic and may move their ger if they have to (gers along the route keep in regular contact and will know the location of other families). Participant families are also paid fairly (many have tripled their incomes) and a portion of the proceeds goes to community development.

You pay for your entire trip in Ulaanbaatar, which means you won't have to pull out your wallet each hour to pay for goods and services. But you may want to bring along some extra cash because part of the trip includes a visit to a local cooperative where you can buy products made by herders (you can get some great bargains on handmade cashmere sweaters and the like).

Bogd. In Uvs aimag try the Kharkhiraa and Türgen uuls (p241), which have hiking trails of three to seven days.

In northern Mongolia there is great hiking in the Khövsgöl Nuur area (p155). Down in the Gobi, it's possible to hike in Gurvan Saikhan National Park (p208), especially around Yolyn Am.

HORSE & CAMEL TREKKING

Horse treks in Mongolia range from easy day trips with guides, to multi-week solo adventures deep in the mountains. Inexperienced riders should begin with the former, organising their first ride through a ger camp or tour operator. The prettiest, most accessible places to try are the camps at Terelj and Khövsgöl Nuur, where you can normally hire a horse and guide for less than US\$20 a day.

Even the most experienced riders will benefit from a lesson in how to deal with a Mongolian horse. The local breed is short, stocky and half-wild; Mongolian horsemen can provide instruction on saddling, hobbling and caring for a horse. You'll also get tips on the best places to ride and on purchasing saddles and other equipment. Try Stepperiders (p108) in Töv aimag. For further tips see the boxed text, p281.

Of the dozens of possible horse treks, several are popular and not difficult to arrange. Tsetserleg to Bayankhongor (p57) is a rugged wilderness trip that crosses a series of alpine passes. In the east, try the Binder area (p171) of Khentii aimag, which can include a ride to Dadal near the Siberian border.

The most popular horse-trekking area is Khövsgöl Nuur (p152), largely because there is such a good network of guides and available horses. Some travellers have horse-trekking from Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur to Khövsgöl Nuur. By land (following the twisting river valleys) it's around 295km and takes at least two weeks by horse. Closer to Ulaanbaatar, the areas of Terelj and Bogdkhan are both excellent if you don't have a lot of time.

While hiking, it will also be handy to have a working knowledge of appropriate phrases, such as 'Can I cross the next river?' (*Ter gollig gatlag bolohuu?*), 'Where am I?' (*En yamar nertei gazar ve?*) and 'Is that dog dangerous?' (*En nokhoi ayultai uu?*)

Travelling by Mongolian Horse, by Bekhjargal Bayarsaikhan, is required reading for anyone planning their own expedition. The book gives invaluable tips on horse care and riding.

RESPONSIBLE CAMPING & HIKING

To help preserve the fragile ecology and beauty of Mongolia, consider the following tips when camping and hiking.

Rubbish

- Carry out all nonbiodegradable items and deposit them in rubbish bins in Ulaanbaatar (other villages and towns won't have proper methods of disposal). Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel and cigarette butts. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover, and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons and condoms should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.
- Don't rely on bottled water. Disposal of plastic bottles can be a major problem. Use iodine drops or purification tablets instead.

Human-Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is no toilet, choose a spot at least 100m from any water source, bury your waste at least 15cm deep, and bury or burn toilet paper, if possible. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.

Washing

- For personal washing and teeth cleaning, use biodegradable soap and toothpaste and a water container. Perform your ablutions at least 50m away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully before it seeps back to the watercourse.
- Don't use detergents within 50m of watercourses, even if they are biodegradable. Try to wash cooking utensils 50m from watercourses and use a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails and avoid short cuts.
- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid disturbing the plant life that keeps topsoil in place.

Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't rely on open fires for cooking and use a petrol stove whenever possible. Avoid stoves powered by disposable butane-gas canisters. If you *have* to make an open fire, use existing fire rings wherever possible; only use dead, fallen wood and remember that fire is sacred to Mongolians (so don't pee on it). Use minimal wood – just enough for cooking purposes. Dried dung burns with great efficiency.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and douse them with water.
- If you are hiking with a guide and porters, supply stoves for the whole team. In alpine areas, ensure that all members are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not a necessity for warmth.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR HIKING

Before embarking on a walking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Be aware that weather conditions and terrain vary significantly from one region (or even one trail) to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any trail. These differences influence the way hikers dress and the equipment they carry.
- Don't forget about Mongolia's notoriously changeable weather – a sudden wind from the north will make you think you're in the Arctic rather than the Gobi. Only from June to August can you expect balmy temperatures, but this is also when it rains the most.
- Essential survival gear includes emergency food rations and a leak-proof water bottle (take a minimum of 2L of water a day, and more during summer).
- It's best to hike with at least one companion and always tell someone where you're going. Refer to your compass frequently so you can find the way back. A GPS is also a handy tool.
- Unless you're planning a camping trip, start out early in the day so that you can easily make it back before dark.

In Western Mongolia there is great horse trekking around Otgon Tenger Uul (p245); it can take six days to circle the mountain. In Altai Tavan Bogd National Park (p229), try a horse trek around Khoton Nuur. There is also horse trekking around Tsast Uul and Tsambagarav Uul. Tour operators in Ölgii can help set something up, or just turn up in any nearby village and ask around for horses.

At touristy places such as the ger camps at Terelj and in the south Gobi you can ride a camel, though these are more like photo sessions than serious sport. Some of the ger camps at Ongiin Khiid (p197) can arrange a multiday camel trek.

KAYAKING, CANOEING & RAFTING

Mongolia's numerous lakes and rivers are often ideal for kayaking and rafting. There is little white water but, during the summer rains, rivers can flow at up to 9km/h.

One of the most popular river trips is down the Tuul Gol, from the bridge at the entrance to Terelj and back to Ulaanbaatar.

There are more adventurous options that begin in Khövsgöl aimag. It's possible to put a boat or kayak in the Eg or Delgermörön Gols (on the Eg you could start at Khatgal; on the Delgermörön, Bayanzürkh) and continue downstream to Sükhbaatar city in Selenge aimag. From Mörön it's a 14-day trip and towns along the way are two to four days apart. From Sükhbaatar you can take the train back to Ulaanbaatar.

In Bayan-Ölgii it's possible to raft down the Khovd Gol from Khurgan Nuur, past Ölgii city and onto Myangad in Khovd aimag.

Rafting is organised along the Tuul and Khovd rivers by agencies based in Ulaanbaatar (p80), including Juulchin, Khövsgöl Lodge Company and Nomadic Journeys. Another good contact is a small outfit called Mongolia Canoeing (www.mongoliacanoeing.com), which offers multiday trips on the Orkhon and Tuul rivers.

There is nothing stopping you from heading out on your own. The Seven Summits (p93) rents inflatable kayaks for about US\$25 a day. If you're serious, bring your own gear.

The best time for kayaking is in summer (June to September); the best time for rafting is July and August, after some decent rain.

In the Empire of Ghengis Khan, by Stanley Stewart, is an account of the author's travels across Mongolia by horse. Despite its persistent sarcasm, the book does present a vivid picture of Mongolia and what it's like to travel by horse.

Lost In Mongolia, by Colin Angus, describes the first descent of the Russian river the Yenisey, completed by the author and three friends in 2001. While only half of the book actually takes place in Mongolia (the other half is in Russia), it stands as a thrilling account of exploration in one of the more remote parts of the country.

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