

Call of the wild

Luxury stores and expensive cars may be starting to appear on the streets of Ulaanbaatar, but all around Mongolia's rapidly modernising capital city lies pristine wilderness, where the skies are big and a slow pace of life prevails. **TOM O'MALLEY** explores both sides of this beguiling country ▷



A shaft of yellow light pierced the tent as Bold, cardboard box under one arm, ducked inside. 'Eat soon,' the young herdsman announced. Taking a buck knife from inside his woollen coat, Bold set upon the box's mysterious contents like a surgeon. Moments later he tossed each of us an oval object. 'Do like this,' he said, rubbing his palms together. 'Good for health.' It was a hot, greasy stone.

The smell of fatty meat and woodsmoke cleared the cobwebs as we sat in our sleeping bags and stared at the most unlikely breakfast imaginable: a marmot, shot little more than two hours before on the grassy slopes that skirt Mongolia's Great White Lake. Toast and marmalade usually does it for me, but how often do you get the chance to try a traditional *boodog*? Essentially a Bronze Age barbecue, a *boodog* is as primitive as it is ingenious. The animal, be it marmot or goat, is cooked by stuffing it with scorching hot stones and singeing off the fur. Like many pursuits in Mongolia, it's the preserve of men. Not surprisingly, really, since there's fire involved – and no washing up.

The taste? Let's just say a dollop of ketchup wouldn't have gone amiss, but this was my first adventure in Mongolia and condiments hadn't featured on my packing list. Beginner's mistake.

Most visitors to the country touch down at Ulaanbaatar's Chinggis Khaan International Airport – and so begins your first of many encounters with Mongolia's most iconic man. The tyrant whose Mongol hordes sacked cities from Baghdad to Budapest is the focus of a revived sense of national pride after 90 years of Soviet occupation. Branded an imperialist by the Russians, Chinggis Khaan is now a brand in his own right, lending his name to everything from cigarettes to banks.

Under bulbous grey skies, Mongolia's sole city can feel like a wild, querulous outpost. Japanese sedans, bling Hummers and battered Russian Jeeps inch along potholed roads. Suited city-slickers mix with the migrant poor, the formerly nomadic detritus of Mongolia's

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infamously unforgiving winters, known as *zud*. The smell of mutton dumplings, called *buuz*, wafts out of utilitarian canteens, mingling with the just-baked sweetness of Korean chain doughnuts. Soviet-era apartments seem to crumble into the steppe just as gleaming, Chinese-built high-rises erupt like steel spores.

But then the sun comes out and the city takes on a new sparkle. A burgeoning restaurant and café culture has taken hold in the past few years: I discovered deliciously retro *mousse au chocolat* at Le Bistrot Français, on a leafy side street north of Sukhbaatar Square, and whiled away a pleasant afternoon on the sun terrace of Café Amsterdam, book in hand, nursing cappuccino and panini.

The city and the steppe

Shoppers are spoilt for choice. Fuelled by lucrative mining contracts, the booming economy has ushered in the likes of Louis Vuitton, Emporio Armani, Burberry and Hugo Boss, clustered around the glitzy Central Tower development east of the centre. Locally made luxury goods are heating up, too, and Mongolian cashmere is the

Clockwise, from top left: Yurts (or *gers*) between the steppe and the sky; a horse and his boy – Mongolian children learn to ride at an early age; a stern Chinggis Khaan watches over his old lands from his new statue complex; a nomadic hunter releases a golden eagle in search of prey; two ages of Ulaanbaatar nestle together in the heart of the city



Wildlife watching

Despite the harsh climate and nomadic hunting practices, wildlife flourishes in this huge, landlocked country. Here are some of the creatures you might be lucky enough to spot:

*** Takhi Horse (also known as Przewalski's Horse)** These animals became extinct in the wild in the 1960s, but are flourishing again thanks to assistance from zoos around the world. See them frolic in the water at Khustain National Park, just west of Ulaanbaatar.

*** Wolf** The Mongolians believe Chinggis Khaan was partly descended from a wolf. Called *chonno* in Mongolian, they are widely hunted because of the threat they pose to livestock.

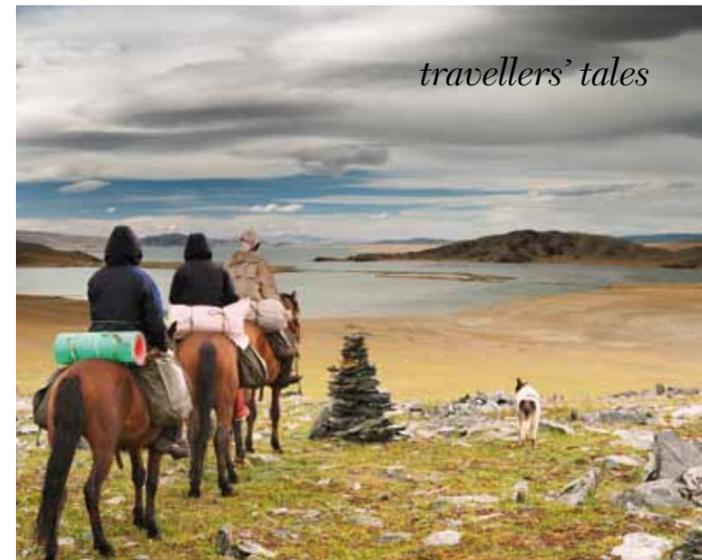
*** Gazelle** The far-eastern plains are still home to huge, migratory populations of wild gazelle, moving en masse in their thousands. Bring binoculars!

*** Eagle** Eagles abound on the steppe and, in the country's western reaches, nomadic 'eagle hunters' have domesticated these giant birds of prey to hunt for animals.

*** Reindeer** Herded by the ancient Tsaatan people close to the Siberian border, these animals are rapidly dwindling in number because of deforestation and other threats.

*** Wild camel** A small number of these animals (also known as Bactrian camels) still roam wild in the remotest regions of the Gobi Desert.





world's finest. Walk south from the Communist-style State Department Store and you'll find stylish boutiques selling scarves, sweaters and coats at prices far below those you'd pay back home.

It's here that you'll also find, of all things, a monument to the Beatles, one of Ulaanbaatar's quirkier delights. Wander west and you'll stumble on another: the finest LEGO shop outside Denmark, run by a local lady with a love for toy bricks.

Equally unexpected is the enormous pair of fossilised arms, tipped by 30cm hooked claws, that hangs from the wall of the sleepy Natural History Museum. 'Terrible hand', the monster these limbs belonged to, is one of the great unsolved mysteries of palaeontology. The arms were unearthed, along with many of the world's best dinosaur finds, in Mongolia's southern Gobi Desert.

Ulaanbaatar's traditional pursuits deserve a chunk of your itinerary, too. At the National Sports Stadium, wrestlers do battle each July in the Naadam Festival. The ramshackle Chojjin Lama Temple houses chilling depictions of Buddhist hell and stages a free daily performance of throat-singing in the temple courtyard.

But, of course, you don't come to one of the world's great unspoilt wildernesses to spend all your time in the city. Leave Ulaanbaatar in any direction and, in a matter of kilometres, it happens. You're out there. The steppe. Pristine emptiness. Bouncing along rolling grassland, usually in beefed-up Russian vans that look like VW campers on steroids, the terrain is mesmerising. Mongolia is where the gods play golf: boundless, borderless fairways, great lakes for water hazards, clear skies occasionally broken by the wings of the black-eared kite, and, best of all, not a pair of silly trousers in sight.

Bone-white domed tents, called *gers*, dot the landscape. Half of Mongolia's population still lives a pastoral lifestyle, tending herds of livestock on the steppe, following the rhythms of the seasons. Aside from the occasional solar-powered satellite dish or Russian

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motorcycle, it's a scene little-changed since the first bricks of the Great Wall were laid to keep these hardy nomadic folk at bay.

Summer among the ruins

The tourist season runs through Mongolia's fleeting summer, when streams gurgle and wildflowers dance on the breezy hillsides. Summer is also 'white season', a reference to the rivers of milk produced by the country's 17 million herd animals. Little girls in frilly dresses crouch by the roadside, hawking bottles of *airag* – fermented horse's milk of varying alcoholic intensity, and Mongolia's favourite tippie. Lip-puckeringly sour, it's the tonic of weddings, funerals or any other excuse for a knees-up.

A common Jeep excursion is to Karakorum, Chinggis Khaan's legendary capital, a few hours west of Ulaanbaatar. *The Secret History of the Mongols*, an epic poem written for Mongol royalty 800 years ago and, to date, the best source of Mongol history, describes a bustling centre of temples of all faiths, tents and great wooden halls, and, in the middle, a palace with a huge, ornamental fountain that spouted *airag*.

Today, all that is gone. Two weather-worn stele markers in the form of Chinese turtles – one on a windswept hillside – mark the boundaries where the city once stood. The Erdene Zuu Khiid Monastery nearby, the most important Buddhist site in the country,

was constructed from masonry from Karakorum. Partly destroyed by the Russians in the 1940s, it's still a fascinatingly complete temple complex in the loneliest of settings.

Buddhism came to Mongolia via China, but the country's far older shamanistic beliefs are in evidence across the landscape. On rocky crags and hilltops, little heaps of stones called *ovoos* are laced with horse skulls and strips of blue cloth, the colour symbolising sky worship. A few days on the steppe and you start to understand. The green grassland is a constant – it's the ever-changing 'eternal blue sky', with its great, puffy banks of buffeting clouds, rain, wind and blue stillness, that lends form to every vista.

Plain living

Head south from Ulaanbaatar and it's possible to reach the mighty Gobi in as little as five hours. The Ikh Nart Nature Reserve, a bleak, semi-desert landscape, is home to one of the last remaining populations of Argali sheep, with their giant, corkscrew horns.

Travel northwest from the capital and the landscape changes again as you ascend into the protected Khan Khentii, a mountainous wilderness on the Siberian frontier. Home to birch forests, fertile river valleys and wildlife such as brown bear and lynx, it's the perfect area for horse-trekking. And so it should be – this is where Chinggis Khaan was born and buried. The Mongolians' love of horses knows no bounds – they sing pop songs about them, and children learn to ride before they can walk. There's no better way to cross this landscape, and if, like me, you're a beginner, your guide will select a suitably docile beast and lead you by the reins until you get the hang of it.

Clockwise, from top left: Horse herders returning home after a festival in Karakorum; a man in traditional Mongolian garb, with a medal won during the Naadam Festival; the immensity of the landscape and the looming sky never ceases to astound travellers; the outer wall of the Erdene Zuu Monastery, near Karakorum

WHERE TO STAY

For further information and reservations, please visit www.SummitHotels.com

CHINGGIS KHAAN HOTEL

In the heart of the capital, the Chinggis Khaan Hotel is conveniently situated close to central Sukhbaatar Square and the luxury shopping of Central Tower. The hotel has elegantly understated guestrooms, complimentary internet and an international buffet breakfast in Temuujin Restaurant. An indoor



swimming pool, fitness studio and massage and sauna centre offer the perfect rejuvenating therapy after your excursions into the wild.

However you choose to discover Mongolia's countryside, you can count on several constants: the hospitality of herdsman and their families; the monotony of plain, boiled meat (remember the sauces!); and, more than anything, the space, stillness and sparkingly clean air. In daylight, the distant green hills take on a pale-blue wash, as if the sky itself has leaked into the landscape. At night, a billion stars appear so clear and close you could sweep them up in your hands.

Mongolia faces various threats to its ecology, from industry to over-grazing, but it remains the world's least densely populated country, with a way of life largely unchanged for millennia. Visiting is like a shot in the arm against the strains of the modern world, a rejuvenating reprieve from our hectic daily lives. With little telephone coverage outside the capital you're blissfully off the grid, and when you return to the city, senses and soul invigorated, the comforts seem almost ludicrously luxurious. A gourmet meal, a cold beer, a hot bath and a warm soft bed – they've never felt this good before.