

THE LOST WORLD

Mongolia is one of the most sparsely populated places on Earth, a swathe of Asia that time forgot. For **Mike MacEacheran** it was an escape to freedom

Under an alien sky, I was standing somewhere out on the steppe when the fermented mare's-milk vodka began to take hold. To my right, a warrior-like Kazakh eagle hunter was dressed in fox- and marmot-skin pelts, yak wool vest and shouldering a rifle. He wore a fur-lined *toortsog* hat pulled down tight and was handing me a cracked teacup of homemade liquor.

In the dreamlike twilight, I took a nervous gulp. I shuddered. I belched. I felt the ground wobble, and very soon my host's face blurred into a picture of jabbering teeth and joke-shop eyes. Was I dreaming? What was I doing out here? He prompted me to drink more. Soon, I was zombie-drunk, my vision spinning. Through the dark I could sense a shadow boomeranging towards me. It was a mesmerising golden eagle with wings like a phoenix.

I certainly wouldn't favour *arkhi*, as this strangely medicinal moonshine is called, over an off-the-shelf French red. But on this sun-streaked evening, outside the huntsman's yurt camp and far beyond the reach of Google Maps, I lapped it up – to a point. Around us was a landscape of raw skies, empty plains and the eternally snowcapped Altai Mountains forming a broad, crumpled horizon. Above, another golden eagle spiralled and there was nothing but the wide open space of Bayan-Olgii province for hundreds of kilometres. Nothing but trackless land and untold adventures. And, the clincher: no other tourists.

Unexpected encounters like this are thick on the ground in deepest Mongolia. I've regaled more than one party with the time I was offered a dowry of scraggle-haired goats in return for marrying a shepherd's only daughter (frankly, animal wrangling just wasn't for me). On another afternoon, I sat beneath a glittering sand dune in the Gobi Desert playing chess with a nomadic horseman (I lost, but who cares?). The wild and unpredictable nature of the steppe is part of the deal. Mongolia is more out there – more alien, more absurd – than anywhere else I know.

This isn't the sort of adventure you book on a whim. I'd fantasised about getting out into its lonely landscapes for >



Face time: young Mongolian boy in traditional dress inside a ger



I ITCHED TO DIG DEEPER, TO TAKE THE ROUTE FAR LESS TRAVELLED. I DREAMT OF HORSES AND EMPIRE

years and the bone-dry plains, salt lakes and eagle-haunted valleys all lay on the fringes of my mental topographic map. But Mongolia needs a lot of planning, some excellent guides, openness to the weird and wonderful, and a stomach for curiosities. How about *bantan* (camel-meat porridge), or *suutei tsai* (salty tea)? The country remains medieval in the best sense of the word, demanding time, perseverance and flexibility to appreciate the immutable rhythm of Mongolian life.

You could let a tour operator do the hard work for you and take a whirlwind two-week guided tour of the highlights, from blistering Gobi dunes to ruined Karakorum, the once-upon-a-time capital of the Mongol Empire. But I itched to dig deeper, to take the route far less travelled. I dreamt of horses and empire.

Digesting a guidebook, I settled on a three-week, 4,800km road trip in late spring. The challenge was a *Mad Max* landscape six times larger than the UK, with unpaved roads and no motorway services. Some days required 400 bum-shaking kilometres, others needed nothing more than simply being and feeling. It was perfect: what I needed was time, and an abrupt end to a relationship that was going nowhere. And that gave me all the freedom I needed.

I started in the smoke-shrouded capital, Ulaanbaatar. The few thousand visitors mostly fly in via Istanbul or

Moscow in peak summer. I'd arrived by the Trans-Mongolian sleeper from Russia seeking solitude and silence. Ulaanbaatar has sacrificed likeability for mineral wealth and Chinese investment, so I soon decided to skip hastily built high-rises and exhaust-blowing traffic for purer, sunnier landscapes, and lots of dumplings.

Accompanied by Almagul Karagaz, an English-speaking Mongolian guide brought up on stallions and US sitcoms, we started south in a four-wheel-drive van built for the bump and grind. The capital still hazy in the rear view, we broke free from the road on to a vast sweep of plateau, with the only other traffic the endangered *takhi* horses living wild around Hustai National Park. I watched as they galloped carefree across the gravel. Unbroken, untamed, they ghosted across the plains.

With few paved roads, we followed their dust trails into what already felt like the borderlands. It had me wide-eyed with wonder, especially when Almagul arranged to have me lifted on to a sheepskin saddle that evening for an introductory ride around. I'd never mounted a horse like this before – one so dumpy, with a mohawk-shock haircut. But bathed in the pale light of the moon, I rode, chased by a pack of barking strays, then stopped in my tracks as a toddler rode past bareback. Rude to stare, undoubtedly, but sometimes there's nothing else you can do.

WRITER RECOMMENDS
Gandantegchinlen Monastery, a miracle of mysticism amid the metropolis, offers a snapshot of Ulaanbaatar as it was centuries ago. Built in 1727, the complex houses dazzling white stupas, golden temples and scores of ruby-robed monks

Desert delight: above, Khongoryn Els sand dunes. **Opposite:** Kazakh eagle hunter; door detail at Erdene Zuu Monastery; traditional *gers* under the Milky Way

'Many nomads teach their children to ride before they can walk – some as young as three,' Almagul said, proudly. 'Horsemanship runs through our veins.' She wasn't wrong. Jockeying a pale-bellied beauty, Genghis Khan-style – all while pulling a bow – is practically a human right on the steppe.

We travelled without restriction by road, the days passing, sunbeams piercing the splintered windscreen and radio crackling. Towards Dalanzadgad, in the country's isolated south, the land becomes so flat you could watch your dog run away for weeks. Spaced apart tented camps appear as if by magic, each nomadic shepherd often seeking pastures new before the blazing summer or frigid winter hits. Above all, this is a land shaped by a culture of migration.

Night after night, Almagul arranged for us to sleep in a homestay-style *ger* – a Glastonbury bell tent meets ethnographic museum display. The *ger* is an appealingly unfamiliar concept with a woodsy 19th-century vibe. Picture a whistling teapot over the coals, yak-wool socks knitted by firelight, an outside toilet with a million-star view. It was too gripping for just looking, so I learnt how to herd thick-bearded goats into night enclosures, before returning to hand-roll dumplings in shadowy nooks. Often vodka was passed round. Often I woke, unsure which century I was in. >



After some time, the flatlands suddenly crumpled, pitching upwards. We parked at Yolyn Am, a shadow-throwing gorge in the Gurvan Saikhan mountains, then clambered deep down into a new world of measureless caverns, tongues of ice and cathedral-like silence. It was a breathless transition from sand to snow, and Narnia-esque in its brevity. The mineral colours, at first geography-map green and brown, turned alabaster, silver and blizzard blue. We had a full-on snowball fight.

One geographical oddity I'd fingered on my map around this area was the surreal flaming cliffs at Bayanzag, where I'll always remember the steppe crumbling from unforested grasslands into a fiery crucible of sandstone buttes, chessboard-piece rock pinnacles and sunken

valleys. All of a sudden, it was powder red and sunburnt orange, the land fully-coloured in, yet bleak, barren and drained of life. The grand reveal was that more dinosaur bones and fossils have been found here than anywhere else on Earth. It was what you might call a Jurassic perk.

I climbed to the top of a skewwhiff outcrop to survey it all. Below me, a vast prairie seemed to say welcome to Jupiter. Beyond that, empty and eerie dunes ran amok and the horizon looked like the edge of the known world. It was utterly extraterrestrial in its scope. Later, Almagul told me we were the first visitors to the cliffs for a week. No good roads connect Bayanzag to the rest of the country, so consider a self-drive out of the question.

DRINK DEEP

Airag (fermented mare's milk) is a ubiquitous national tipple, but in the south it's made using camel milk. Most households 'distil' their own — if invited to sup, be brave and embrace the glam night out on the steppe

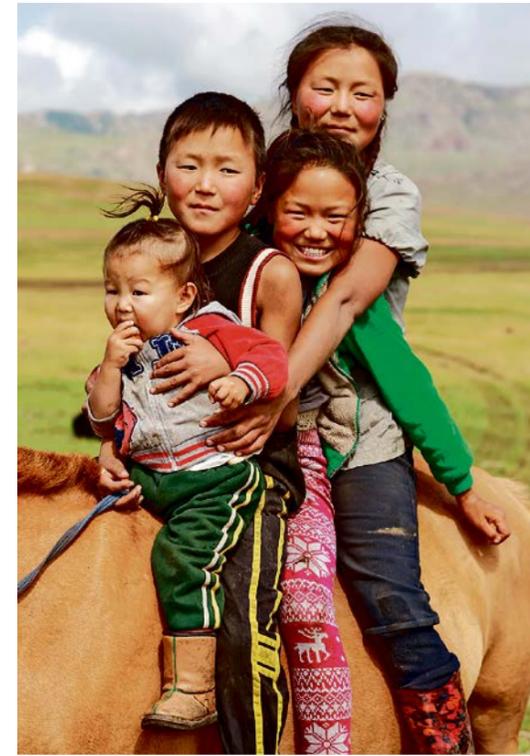
Mongolia is called the land of the blue sky, but evenings in the Gobi Desert are filled with blood-red sunsets and low-hanging gold stars. One evening at the top of the Khongoryn Els sand dunes, the most gloriously trippy view awaited us: the ridges howled to us in the wind, while the sandy crests danced in psychedelic waves as if to a pulsing bassline. At sunset, we sat in the afterglow on an exposed rib to drink warm beer, the sandy air whooshing up our noses and into our hair. I tried to imagine what Genghis Khan would have made of it all, his steely eyes staring back at me from the beer can. Then the night closed in and I skidded down the dune on a smashed-up sandboard. If I had the chance again, I'd stay for a week. >



Hunting party: an eagle and its handler; traditional yurt ceiling decoration. Opposite: a group of nomad siblings



MYSTERIOUS BIRDS WERE WAITING AND ANOTHER STRANGE ADVENTURE IN THIS WILD LAND WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN



As for legendary citizen Khan, his lifeblood lingers further north. In Kharkhorin, the modern town built beside the 13th-century capital, Karakorum, Khan retains godlike status. Chinggis, as the Mongols know him – or ‘the punishment of God’ as he called himself – rode from the steppe to India and China, before overthrowing the Turks and every ruler in the spaces between, from Kiev to the Korean peninsula. He was a stony-hearted predator, fathering thousands, and killing his half-brother in cold blood for stealing a fish from his plate when he was a child. So Almagul said. Honestly, they don’t make warlords like they used to.

Karakorum came as a shock after this intimidating build-up. Atlantis-like, it has disintegrated over time and tells the history of the Mongol Empire in fragmented stone. Apart from one or two unkempt sculptures, the emptiness let my imagination fill in the blanks. I thought of Mongol kingdoms and Xanadu palaces, battlegrounds and mounted warriors, but all I found amid the desolate grassland was two piddly chiselled turtles. ‘They are symbols of eternity,’ Almagul said. ‘Not that they helped Chinggis.’ The surrounding scene was stark and remote, with an out-of-focus softness to it. A complicated place to conquer the world from, I thought. Or so it was once.

That night, away to the far west, lay the land of the eagle hunters and our final journey on the long road ahead. Mysterious birds and moonshine were waiting and another strange adventure in this remote, wild land was about to begin. Thinking back on it now, the sense of freedom I found out there was incomparable. And I’m left with a goosebump realisation that little of Mongolia’s badlands will change any time soon. In days like these, to be out on the dreamlike steppe, driving across a ger-dotted wilderness, feels like heading in the right direction. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: AWL IMAGES; GETTY IMAGES; ROBERT HARDING

Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

Fly into Buyant-Ukhaa International airport in Ulaanbaatar with **Turkish Airlines** via Istanbul from £509 return. **Aeroflot** connects via Moscow, from £607 return. Unless you buy your own horse (don’t laugh, people do it) travel outside the capital is impossible without a guide and driver. For expert-led budget tours, try the **Golden Gobi** (goldengobi.com). British passport holders need a 30-day visa before travelling to Mongolia. See consul.mn/eng.

Go packaged

Responsible Travel has a 15-day family holiday, including stops at Karakorum, the Gobi Desert, Flaming Cliffs and Khongoryn Els. It costs from £1,750pp, based on a family of four, excluding flights (responsibletravel.com).

For a visit to the land of the eagle hunters, **Wild Frontiers** has a 13-day group tour, taking in the Golden Eagle

Festival against the backdrop of the remote Altai Mountains, from £2,725pp, excluding flights (wildfrontierstravel.com).

Where to stay

You won’t get the chance elsewhere, so for a splurge in Ulaanbaatar, try the **Shangri-La** (shangri-la.com; doubles from £152, room only).

When to go

Extreme continental climates mean Mongolia’s weather swings wildly from Siberian cold to Saharan heat. Travel in May or September to find the sweet spot. Naadam, the country’s annual national holiday, is a Rio-esque carnival of archery, horseback riding and belly-out wrestling. It takes place every mid-July in Ulaanbaatar and lures the overwhelming majority of visitors to the country during three to four days of revelry (naadamfestival.com).

Further information

See mongolia.travel.