

# Mongolia

## To yurts and blue yonder

Far from the frills of fancy resorts, and the pampering of plush lobbies, awaits a holiday of a lifetime adorned by bare necessities, the Mongolian nomad way. The check-in destination? A traditional Mongolian yurt.

words // Punita Malhotra

**G**enghis Khan, eagle hunting and Buzkashi may be wild fantasies, but the rest of the imagery is overwhelmingly real. Sun-drenched, green-carpet like steppes, punctuated with white edelweiss and clumps of blush strawberries. Desolate, barren hinterland, broken by shockingly azure lakes. Wide-angle blue mountain ranges and sparkling clear, crisp air speckled with low swooping birds of prey. Herds of lazily grazing livestock, contrasting with delicate dust swirls of fast and furious hooves of wild Przewalski. Broad-shouldered nomads wrapped in colourful coats and

bunches of herding children. Scenes from the exotic expanse of Gobi...a long ride from the dull capital, Ulaanbaatar...but worth every bump. After all, it's a blessed brush with 'pretence-nomadic life', in one of the many spectacular nature reserves nestled in the beating heart of still-pristine Central Asia. Camping bases are available in abundance at Khövsgöl Nuur National Park, Kharkhorin, Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur and Terelj for the whopping 500,000 adventure tourists that land in Mongolia every year. For those yet to experience it, the 'Land of the Blue Sky' continues to remain an ethereal whisper of a dream. Blink, most definitely, equals miss...in this case.







**ROOF OVER THE HEAD...**

Far from the frills of fancy resorts, and the pampering of plush lobbies, awaits a holiday of a lifetime adorned by bare necessities, the Mongolian nomad way. The check-in destination? A traditional Mongolian yurt or *ger* (translated 'home'). This portable cylindrical tent made up of a wooden lattice structure and covered with waterproof wool felt or animal skin of domesticated sheep, goats, or yaks, is sturdier than it seems, complete with a door frame, bamboo poles and a wheel as the main support. A hole in the centre of the roof for ventilation and a stove in the middle for heat are other essential elements. Fascinating, fully-functional, felt-lined abode of central Asian pastoralists, designed as a multi-purpose space with living, working and cooking areas, as well as, a sacred space for prayer. Small hand-carved cupboards to store family possessions (usually food, dishes and spare clothes), woven yak-hair wall hangings and handmade bed-throws on the beds, complete the decor. As a cultural symbol of Central Asia

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ESSENTIALS	<div>CAPITAL</div> <div>Ulaanbaatar</div>	<div>LANGUAGES</div> <div>Mongolian, Russian &amp; English</div>	<div>CURRENCY</div> <div>Mongolian Tögrög</div>	<div>TEMPERATURE</div> <div>38°C (max), -40°C (min)</div>
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for thousands of years, particularly Mongolia, a yurt can be a deep immersive cultural experience for the seeker of the offbeat. From a mattress on the floor in a home stay to a wooden bed in a family-run tourist *ger* camp, accommodation on offer is basic, but equipped with electricity, toilets and showers, central stoves, clean linen and warm blankets. What else does one need to survive?

#### FOOD ON THE FIRE...

From experiments in living style to trials of the palate...this is where local truly means local, whether it is the ingredients or cooking methods. The taste of a cup of *Airag* (fermented mare's milk) or a frothy bowl of *Suutei Tsai* (Mongolian milk tea) may take some getting accustomed to. As may homemade yogurt sprinkled with sugar and fresh *orum* (clotted cream). Wholesome defines the breakfast of silky *congee* (rice porridge) garnished with fresh herbs and house-made pickles. Lunches are often light, consisting of spiced greens, dumplings, or noodle stew. In contrast, richer barbecues are slated for dinner, where elaborately cooked lamb and goat meat are the usual fare. An unusual Mongolian specialty is *Bodok*, in which a whole goat stuffed with hot rocks is cooked for hours on flaming rocks, inside out. The dish best epitomises the utilitarian lifestyle of the Mongolian nomads, from the times when utensils or stoves had not been invented. A fulfilling communal meal, a satiated stomach and one last glimpse of the glittering starry sky outside, above the quiet wilderness of the grasslands. Best night's sleep ever.



## Local INSIGHTS



#### MAJESTIC CAMEL RIDES

No Mongolian experience is complete without a camel ride in the Gobi Desert. The vast expanse of these magical golden sands can be experienced best atop majestic Bactrian camels, as beautiful oases greet you on the way. For those wanting an additional taste of adventure, scale the largest sand dunes here, the Khongoryn Els or Singing Sands.



#### TSAM DANCING

Integral to the Tibetan Buddhism practiced in Mongolia, the Tsam Dance is a spectacle to be witnessed. Decked up in gigantic masks of common folklore characters, deities and animals, trained monks dance to the beats of percussion instruments, gracefully depicting the victory of good over evil.





### AND COWS FOR COMPANY...

It can be a refreshing change to wake up to the sound of mooing cattle and being greeted by the slow-moving herd sporting curious expressions, instead of zipping cars and pinging cellphones. For the active kind, it is an opportunity to slip into some semblance of pastoral lifestyle, if only temporarily. Brass tacks then. Early to bed, early to rise and the whole day tending to herds, milking cattle and helping make fresh dairy products. Yurt living is an introduction to a self-sufficient living model back in time, before the evils of mass food production, supermarkets and central heating took over the

planet. Aside from the demerits of losing precious time on internet or TV. But it's not all tedium and toil out there on the steppes. A host of adventure and leisure options await, from learning the basics of polo to embarking on trekking or canoeing expeditions, and mastering the art of mountain biking to hiking on silky sand dunes.

This is only the first taste...and a return trip seems inevitable, even when it is time to pack up and go home. Deep breaths of fresh air, pursuit of simple sustenance, minimal possessions and a carefree nomadic life...one could get so used to this. ✿

