



MONGOLIA

Mysterios Mongolia

Tackling The Land Of The Extremes



CENTRE

Prezwalski Horse, the Mongolian wild horse is the world's last remaining wild horse



LEFT

Running freely in the ever lasting gardens



Mongolia is one of the world's last undiscovered destinations dominated by sparsely populated steppes and semi deserts. It is the perfect unplugged destination where you can experience wide open expanses of fenceless grassland, eternal blue skies, evenings strewn with countless stars, forests, sand, crystal clear rivers and lakes, and the warm hospitality of the traditional nomads. It is a land of adventure where you will feel total freedom in trust when you're welcomed with open arms



in the homes of the nomadic families with a simple knock on the door.

Mongolia is truly a wonderful surprise for me. As an intrepid traveller, there may be no greater thrill than exploring a destination untouched by tourism. It is so unexplored out in the wilderness that I could almost picture Genghis Khan galloping on his horse across the steppes.

I travelled with my two young children for 12 days in a hired four wheel drive with a driver through central Mongolia covering almost 3000 km in distance. We camped under star-studded skies and stayed with the local nomads on most nights. Our driver, Barght did a fantastic job driving through treacherous routes, irregular terrain, and temperamental skies without any navigation or signposts; only relying on "Mongolian GPS-" the horizon, and maybe with the help of some ridges and cues from yurts.

FACTS ABOUT MONGOLIA

Mongolia is landlocked in Central Asia, bordered by China and Russia. It was once the heartland of the Mongol Empire founded by the greatest conqueror of the world- Genghis Khan, who majestically extended his empire from the Sea of Japan to the Hungarian plains.

The national capital, Ulaanbaatar is known as the coldest capital city in the world. It is bitterly cold in the winter and the temperature can drop to -40 degrees celsius. This city is highly visited mid-summer every year during the Naadam Festival, a celebration of the Mongolian Revolution and Independence.

The Mongolians are regarded as the best horsemen on Earth. Back in the 13th century, Genghis Khan had the horses to thank to establish his empire. Horses remain a vital daily aspect for the locals until today.



KEEP IN MIND

Planning a trip to Mongolia can be a challenging task, but totally worthwhile. You can't just rock up the country, swing by a travel agent and hop on a tour. Careful planning is required, but along with a bit of guidance, it will be an obtainable travel destination.

The following are some of my favourite aspects of traditional Mongolian culture and wilderness that shouldn't be missed, even if you are going to get a little lost in order to find them!

STAY WITH A NOMADIC FAMILY IN A YURT

You'll be drawn to the enticing soul of the nomadic families.

Inside a traditional yurt, 15 year-old Ulzii served us fermented milk (known as

Airag) and yak milk pastry. Ulzii proudly introduced herself, her friends and the number of sheep and goats her family owns. Her parents were away and she was back at the family yurt, on a school holiday with her friends. She cooked us a delicious Mongolian stew.

This seemed to be a norm in Mongolia; you could knock on someone's door and be welcomed into their homes. It was real and unscripted, unlike other well-organised home visits. You can get beautiful insight of the local culture. I admire this spirit of trustworthiness and warm hospitality, a culture that is long gone anywhere else in the world.

With a history of over a thousand years, a yurt is like a tiny circular studio apartment, made of wood lashed together with layers of felt and canvas. Everything is fitted in this small dwelling- a kitchen, beds, a shrine, a living room, and sometimes a TV. Easy to erect and dismantle, the yurt, its furnishings, and the stove inside can be carried by just three camels, or wagons pulled by yaks making it ideal for the nomadic way of life. The average yurt is small but spacious enough to provide adequate living space for a family. It is also wind resistant, and has good ventilation. As for toilets, they are generally just a hole in the ground outside.

TOP

Inside a Mongolian yurt

BOTTOM LEFT

A Mongolian yurt





TOP

Gobi Desert, the largest desert in Asia, stretches across Mongolia and China



CENTRE

Teaching the Mongolian teenagers to make BBQ marshmallows!



BOTTOM LEFT

Yak predominantly live in the mountainous area in Mongolia



Sometimes the greatest memories are made in the most unlikely places, proving that spontaneity is more rewarding than a meticulously planned life.

The experience of staying with the local nomads to me is possibly the biggest highlight of Mongolia. The camaraderie of sharing a yurt, the beautiful surroundings, the authenticity and romanticism of the experience is truly memorable.

If you prefer an experience without getting too much out of your comfort zone, then you may opt for tourists yurts. They are often equipped with basic facilities like toilets and showers.

GOBI DESERT

Beautiful silky blue skies that stretched seamlessly across my vision, from flat lands to dunes to mountains with sunsets that blew my mind apart from double hump camels rummaging aimlessly.... these are the images of the Gobi Desert that is carved in my mind. It is unbelievably beautiful. The 7-hour journey across bumpy roads to witness the stunning beauty of the largest desert in Asia was totally worthwhile.

We visited the Flaming Red Cliff en route to Gobi. In 1920, a famous American palaeontologist unearthed fossils and eggs of 100 dinosaurs dating back over 70 million years ago. My little Indiana Joneses

We had an unforgettable time staying with Ulzii and her friends. My children taught them the flossing dance, a popular way of dancing amongst children, made BBQ marshmallows, and threw frisbees. They ran around aimlessly through the everlasting gardens. I had a chance to take the four wheel drive for a spin through the open steppe, while a 15 year-old teenager rolled in his 1970s motorbike and offered to let me ride it across the fenceless grounds. I took the offer without hesitation of course! We wrapped up the evening dancing to Mongolian music and staring at the sky erupted by a billion shimmering stars as the milky way soared above our heads.



MONGOLIA

TOP RIGHT

The Flaming Red Cliff

CENTRE

Beautiful rock formations at Baga Gazryn Chuluu

BOTTOM LEFT

Wild Bactrian camels (double humped) roaming freely in the Mongolian steppes

BOTTOM RIGHT

You might be greeted by a goat, yak or camel when camping in the wild!



roamed around the cliffs with hope to replicate this feat and find a teeny weeny bone.

Four days around Gobi was perfect; enough for body- boarding down the sand dunes endlessly, witnessing the magnificent sunset from the singing dunes of Khongoryn Els, and riding the famous double hump camels of Mongolia.

BAGA GAZYRN CHULUU

Arriving here is like landing on Mars. This area studded with rock formations is worshipped by the locals because Genghis Khan camped here before journeying to the Gobi Desert. We

stopped here for a picnic and my mind went wild imagining the warrior camping in the exact area over 700 years ago.

YOL VALLEY

Famous for its dramatic rocky cliffs and icy canyons, this valley remains lush and green despite being in the heart of the Gobi Desert. It is a unique destination for hikers. Ibexes roam in the gorges in warmer climes. We hiked through the canyons spotting 'peekaboos', little squirrels that truly enjoyed playing hide and seek with visitors. They were

uber cute, we had fun looking out for them through the rocks.

MONGOLIA OUGHT TO BE ON YOUR TRAVEL RADAR

While the nature is expansive, it's the lifestyle here in Mongolia that left me in awe. There is an unbridled freedom in the way of living. If you're keen on travelling to somewhere so removed from the rest of the world, a non-touristy destination that's filled with abundance of nature, quiet, unforgettable night skies, fenceless spaces, having eagles and vultures soar overhead, Mongolia is definitely for you. It'll make you feel like you're in a totally different planet.



ABOUT THE WRITER

Shannim Pym is a wanderlust and travel enthusiast. She has eternal cravings for adventure. Writing is her therapy. Follow her on Instagram, Shannim Pym @epicadventuress and her blog epicadventuress.com. You may also reach her at shannimpym@gmail.com.