

# MY TRIP TO MONGOLIA

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**Abstract** This article discusses my trip to Mongolian capital Ulaanbataar and its surroundings. The first part is mainly about Ulaanbataar and its blend of communist regime remnants and new influences of globalization, clash of traditions and trends, and about the offer of food and drinks in the city. This section also touches the Mongolian way of life, prevalently tied to the city conditions. The second part deals with hiking to Bogd Khaan Mountain. This environment without too many people brought an opportunity to get to know some of them on a personal level and to learn more about Mongolian customs and traditions. This is emphasized in the third part where the main weekend getaways for people of Ulaanbataar are described along with the first-hand experience of the people, food and traditional way of life in the steppes.

**Keywords:**  
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## **Mongolia on my mind**

As a student, I used to work in a company that dealt with leasing and finances. The job was low paid, and the salary was just enough to cover my rent and groceries. I was not on a friendly base even with my own money, so other people's finances were not in my palette of interests. That said, there was no real future for me in that company. The only bright spot in that surroundings were conversations with my friend during lunch breaks. She also was not happy with her job, so we were always looking for a way to escape, even if it was just in our minds. We usually dreamt of traveling to all kinds of places. We even dared do make plans, although we could not afford it. The picture of riding a horse through the vast Mongolian plains was one of my favorites. I imagined an endless sense of freedom, just as endless was Mongolian steppe in my head. In reality, I was without money, without free time, I didn't know how to ride a horse and, in the end, had no idea how uncomfortable Mongolian horse saddles were.

Several years later, I had been without work for a month, when my neighbor came to me and asked if I want to go work with him. To Mongolia! He said I should think about it and decide in a few days, but my mind was immediately roaming through the Mongolian steppes. I knew that I was to go there to work and free time was questionable, nevertheless, I immediately agreed.

## **Who is this Red Hero?**

The six-hour flight from Moscow to Ulaanbaatar was, unfortunately, a night one so I could not see almost anything of Siberia, but while we were landing the sun was rising and shone a light on mostly bare mountains surrounding Ulaanbaatar. Two-thirds of Mongolia are covered in steppes (Sanders, Harris and Lattimore, 2019), dry and grassy plains. Ulaanbaatar is situated in one such plain between the Khentii Mountains in the north and Bogd Khan Uul in the south. The average height of the city is around 1300 meters above the sea level, which is not surprising as the whole Mongolia is a large plateau with heights between 1000 and 1500 meters (Climate – Mongolia, n.d.). This fact along with a great distance from the sea, are the major factors contributing to the harsh climate with large daily and yearly amplitudes in temperatures, which is typical of Mongolia. As I stepped outside of the airport,

which is of course named after Genghis Khan, I could feel this. The air was cold, but, although it was early morning, the mountainous sun was already very strong. The trip to the city brought up a first cultural shock. Not only I was sitting in a taxi with two Austrians and one German I had never met before, but the driving wheel was on the right side and in Mongolia, they also drive on the right side. It did not make much sense. I found later that it is a common thing there, as Mongolians mostly import used electric cars from Japan where they do drive on the left side of the road. I had read about chaotic traffic in Ulaanbataar and how people there usually do not care about traffic lights and lack a basic driving culture. I found out it was true to an extent and you must be somewhat more cautious, but it was not so extreme as people said it was. Another non-normal thing was we could smoke in the taxi, but that was some good news for us smokers after 13 hours in planes and airports and made this last part of the trip a little bit more bearable. Also, there were some interesting things along the way, like geoglyphs made from stones on the hill slopes presumably celebrating Mongolian history and mysterious heaps of stones alongside the road. I was to find later what these were.

Ulaanbataar means Red Hero in Mongolian. The city was named so in 1924. after the People's Revolution supported by Russians and became the capital of the newly established People's Republic of Mongolia which lasted until 1992 (Clemmons (Ed.), 2018). Ulaanbataar kept its name and remained the capital of Mongolia after the change of the political system. Now it is the main Mongolian industrial center (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). The city center is characterized by broad avenues, large squares, modern high rises and western franchise restaurants like Burger King and Pizza Hut. These are clear examples of modern development and globalization processes. On the other hand, there are obvious remnants of the previous system. Most of the apartment buildings in the city center were made in the communist era, before the 1990's, and from the outside, they seem neglected (Figure 1). It is also the case with infrastructure, like sidewalks and roads, which is in a rather bad condition.



**Figure 1: Ulaanbataar city center**

Source: Personal archive, 2018

Ulaanbataar is the largest Mongolian city with around one million people (Sanders, Harris and Lattimore, 2019). To put this number into perspective, this is one-third of the whole population of Mongolia. Opportunities in the city along with years of industrialization and insecurity of rural life were causing constant abandonment of rural habitats and traditional agriculture and migrations to urban centers (Sanders, Harris and Lattimore, 2019). Accommodation demands in this urban centers, especially in Ulaanbataar, exceed the accommodation capacity so there is a large number of people who live in traditional nomadic homes, called gers, within slum-like settlements, which often lack any kind of infrastructure (Sanders, Harris and Lattimore, 2019). These settlements are prevalent in the outskirts of the Ulaanbataar, but what surprised me they can also be found almost in the city center, just a block from the main city avenue crammed with luxury shops. I must admit I was not so brave to enter in one of these alone, because I heard the westerners are not very welcomed. This is understood because a lack of basic living conditions in the urban setting, with a lack of jobs and money, potentiates deviant behaviors like alcoholism and criminal activity. Although I had just one negative experience with a drunk man who aggressively tried to get drinking money from me, the large number of similar-looking men in the city was a clear hint of the social problems the city is facing.

The traditional Mongolian beverage is airag, fermented mare's milk, which was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019 (UNESCO, n.d.). I was told that, although it has a content of alcohol around 3 percent, airag is also drunk by children. I assume this is the case in rural areas, where drinking water is scarce. Observing the situation in pubs and on the store shelves I came to the conclusion that, despite the traditional connection to airag, the beverages of choice for Mongolians are vodka and beer. Mongolian beers are not really worth mentioning, except maybe Chinggis beer, which was just mediocre and not so dull as others. Although tap water is generally safe to drink, active coal was my best friend.

The stores are filled with western products, especially from the German retail chain Edeka, which surprised me a lot. Exception from this is dairy and meat products, which is understandable because harsh Mongolian climate does not support agriculture except livestock herding. According to Sanders, Harris and Lattimore (2019), livestock herding makes around four-fifths of the value of agricultural production. Mongolian diet is naturally based on this foundation with influences of other Asian cuisines, especially Chinese. In general, Mongolian cuisine could be described as rich with meat and dairy and vegetable in traces. I tried some of the street food dishes like Shashlik or lamb on skewers or Khuushuur, which is lamb filled fried dumpling. There were also some dishes for which I did not know their name nor content due to the language barrier. My favorite dish there was Tsuivan, noodles with beef and vegetables (Figure 2). Except for Mongolian restaurants, there were other choices we could pick, like Chinese, Japanese and, our favorite, Turkish. Nevertheless, I had a feeling that the smell of mutton is omnipresent. On the streets, in the stores and even in the hospital where we worked.



**Figure 2: Mongolian dish Tsuivan**

Source: Personal archive, 2018

As I already said, Ulaanbataar kept its name from the communist times, but to me, it was not much of a hero. Its derelict infrastructure and cold and unkempt architecture made this city unattractive. I would like to say it was interesting, but the most interesting thing there was trying new food and buying unknown things in the shops. It did not inspire me to explore it, instead, I wanted to get out of it.

### **In the hall of the Mountain King**

Bogd Khaan Uul is the mountain situated to the south of Ulaanbataar. It was named after a Mongolian leader who declared independence from China in 1911. Unlike most of the mountains surrounding the city, this one is mostly covered in forests. The reason for this can be found in the early conservation of this area. The mountain was proclaimed sacred and hunting and logging activities were prohibited as early as the twelfth century. In 1778 it was officially taken into protection and in 1996 it was designated a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2019). I watched this green mountain every day from the seventh floor of the hospital building we were working at. I wanted to go there but there was not enough time on the weekdays and the weather was not too good also, so I had to wait.

When the day came, I went by myself, as none of my colleagues wanted to go. It was a good thing in the end because otherwise I probably would not have met so many people. I had to take the bus to the Zaisan district of Ulaanbataar, but I was having problems buying bus ticket due to the language barrier. A group of Mongolian students helped with this and we continued our journey to Zaisan together. They

took me to the Zaisan Monument, which was erected to celebrate the brotherhood between the Mongols and the Russians. Although this monument also dates back to the time of communism, unlike the city's cold architecture, it was an interesting sight. These students were studying in Ulan Ude in Russia, so some connection still exists. here we split up and I headed to the mountains.

As I was walking up the hill, I saw something in the distance that seemed like an animal. I immediately remembered the news I had read a few days before about a wolf descending into the city. When I got closer, I realized it was just some man collecting herbs (Figure 3). One of the few phrases I knew in Mongolian was how to say hello. So, I greeted the man. We somehow started talking in some kind of broken Russian. This nice man was telling me about this wild onion flowers he was picking, and he gave me to try it. It was refreshing with expectedly onion-like flavor. He also gave me some homemade Aaruul, which is dried curd. It tasted like that, milky and a bit sour, but rich in proteins. In exchange, I gave him Snickers. It was just a month that Croatia had won second place in the Football World Cup and I think this man knew more about the Croatian football team than me. We also exchanged phone numbers, which was somewhat weird to me, as we just met. I later found out it was not an unusual thing to do in Mongolia. It was very interesting talking to this man, but I had to go on.

Although I still had a thought or two about that wolf, walking by myself through the unknown was a great experience. I had time to reflect. Reaching the mountain peak and seeing Ulaanbataar from above I felt content with my decision to go hiking. I found another heap of stones. The students I had met before told me these were altars tied to traditional Mongolian folk religion. Although the Mongolians are prevalently Buddhists, they still mix in some of the old beliefs in their religious practices. The custom is to walk three times around this heap and put a stone on it in order to have a safe trip. I did so and started to descend from the mountain, as it was already late.

On the way down, I met three men sitting on the grass talking. I greeted and they kindly offered me a cup of vodka. That is, I had to drink three cups. I realized there is a lot of Mongolian customs connected with the number three. One of the men spoke English and we talked about the Nadaam. It is a large festival held every year where Mongolians compete in three disciplines: wrestling, archery and horse racing.

This man owned racing horses and one of his riders had won second place that year. Although these men were a nice company, I had to catch the last bus for the city.

I was drunk a little bit, but I ran as fast as I could because I did not want to walk all the way to the city. The bus was just about to leave, but I managed to catch it. Sitting on the bus, still a bit mellow, I felt fulfilled with all the experiences of that day.



**Figure 3: Man collecting wild onion flowers**

Source: Personal archive, 2018

### **Leaving the city one more time**

Few days before our departure, another chance of going out of Ulaanbataar came up. Tsundi, our contact in the hospital, borrowed a four-wheel-drive van and took four of my colleagues and me to the Gorkhi-Terelj National Park. It is situated around seventy kilometers from Ulaanbataar to the East. As we left the city behind our backs, the cruelty of Mongolian nature became obvious. There were a lot of free-roaming sheep, goats, yaks and horses on the hillsides and plains, but there was also a large number of decomposed remains of these animals by the road. Some of them were roadkill and some were just weak animals that died from harsh conditions.



On the way to the Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, we stopped to ride camels, which, I must say, was a very comfortable experience. These Bactrian camels, unlike their Arabian cousins, have two humps and the space between them seemed like a natural and very pleasant saddle. Just a few kilometers away we had another stop at the oversized stainless-steel statue of Genghis Khan on his horse. The statue, with its base where the museum is located, is around 40 meters high (Levin, 2009). There was an elevator that took us to the top of the horse's head. The view of the steppe was undoubtedly extraordinary. A few kilometers from the monument there was a ger village, but Tsundi explained that this was not a real settlement but rather a tourist accommodation. Apparently, there was a booming market for that kind of experience, where tourists sleep in gers, while having almost the hotel-like comfort, with toilets, showers and other benefits.

Gorkhi-Terelj National Park is one of the most visited places in Mongolia due to its proximity to Ulaanbataar ("Gorkhi-Terelj national park", n.d.). As we arrived there, this became obvious. The popular places were filled with people, predominantly Mongolians, which was a sign of it being a weekend getaway place for many of the urban population. I was also surprised how the hotels were built at the time near the main attractions of the Park. It then occurred to me how there was a similar situation in Croatia at the Plitvice Lakes National Park. We visited some of the main attraction in the Park like curious rock formations, that were fun to climb, and a Buddhist monastery in the hills. Unfortunately, there was not enough time to climb some of the surrounding peaks.

We were supposed to visit Tsundi's brother and his family in the steppe and that was a long drive. First, we drove on the road, but when we reached the outskirts of the town called Zuunmod, the roads disappeared. We headed south over the great grassy plain. The severe lack of any kind of tree made this scenery somehow surreal. It seemed like someone put a gentle green blanket over a relief and occasional ger or horse herd were like children's toys on it (Figure 4). What surprised me was that steppe smelled nice, somewhat spicy. There was another surprise that followed: Tsundi was not sure exactly where his brother lived. Eventually, we found him and his family.



**Figure 4: The mongolian steppe**

Source: Personal archive, 2018

We arrived at hill where this family lived in a ger surrounded just by a horse herd, some sheep and goats. There were four of them: Tsundi's brother, his pregnant wife and two adorable little children. There was no car, just a motorcycle. We were welcomed into the ger. In the middle, stood a stove, a large bowl with boiling content on it. We were informed that the fuel for the stove was dried horse excrement that children and women usually gather. On the floor, there was some meat drying. I found out which kind of meat it was when I saw a goat's head in another part of the ger. There were one bed, a table and two colorfully decorated dressers, with a little shrine and a solar-powered TV on one of them. There was also a barrel filled with airag, that was served to us on the welcome. It tasted like sour milk with a little bit of sharpness, just like you would expect from fermented mare's milk to taste. As it was custom, every one of us was supposed to drink three cups of it. The diner followed, which was the meat of the aforementioned goat, boiled in water, without any kind of vegetable. After all this, I felt unrest in my intestines and headed to the fresh air to calm the situation or find the solution. The problem was there was no place to hide and I was asking myself how do they do this here. My question got answered not to long after this when the pregnant wife came outside, took a few meters of distance and just squatted. And it occurred to me how normal that was. I do not know how these people really live. I saw just a small glimpse of their lives and it was in that unnatural situation when we were guests at their home. Are they poor? Do they live a good life? How could something like this be measured? I did

not get answers to these questions, but I saw smiles on these people's faces. Mine also returned when a few shots of vodka calmed my stomach down.

After the diner, we finally rode horses with our host. It was not a ride into the sunset through the vastness of the steppe. Just a few circles in the proximity of the ger. At least it was during sunset. Mongolian horses were rather small, and the wooden saddle was extremely uncomfortable, so I would have quit very fast anyway. All in all, it was a great conclusion to that great day.

### **Somewhat cliché conclusion**

Few days after our trip to the steppe, we departed from Mongolia. I am glad I took the opportunity to go there, although my free time was largely determined by the working schedule. I believe I used that time the best I could. Nevertheless, I would like to there again. There is much more to discover about it and its people.

All these experiences made me think about some aspects of my life in a different way. I also gained new perspectives, which, I believe, gave me an opportunity to approach other people and their lives in a less judging way and with a more open mind. Nevertheless, I would like to go to Mongolia again. I feel like there is much more to discover about myself too.

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