
MONGOLIA

THE LAND OF NOWHERE

Daniel Scheffler saddles up and sets out across the vast Gobi desert on a horseback tour of Mongolia





ABOVE Rural Mongolians are nomadic, although they still kit out their yurts with creature comforts like this satellite dish

The steppe spread endlessly
in every direction as we
charged across this
beautiful emptiness



ABOVE Herding on
the steppe
BELOW Modern
transport: horsemen
gather for a contest





My horse started to edge from its friendly trot to a freedom-inspiring canter across the verdant plains of Hoshoo Tsaidam. Now that I was used to the animal's rhythm, I was able to feel the vastness of the open spaces of Chinggis Khan's homeland. Although Mongolian horses are small, their speed is what makes them so wondrously appealing. That, and their cheekiness. Blue Eye, as I'd named him (since he had one blue eye), was stubborn and didn't like to listen to humans.

My hands felt thick as I clutched the leather reins, and my thighs were certainly getting their workout for the day. "You can see forever – and ever," shouted Zobi, my guide, with wild abandon. For the next few hours, nobody spoke and the landscape became the distraction. We charged across the beautiful emptiness of southwestern Mongolia, with the dry air coming off the Khongor sand dunes now out of our sightline and the steppe spreading endlessly in all directions. The legend of this land and its great hero, Chinggis Khan, were the draw for me to come here

and his story was actually unfurling, scene by scene, right in front of me.

Mongolia was once the largest empire on earth and today the locals celebrate this legacy with a reverence for Khan; he may have been feared, but he also granted religious freedom to his subjects, encouraged trade and banned torture. He comes up in every conversation you have with a local.

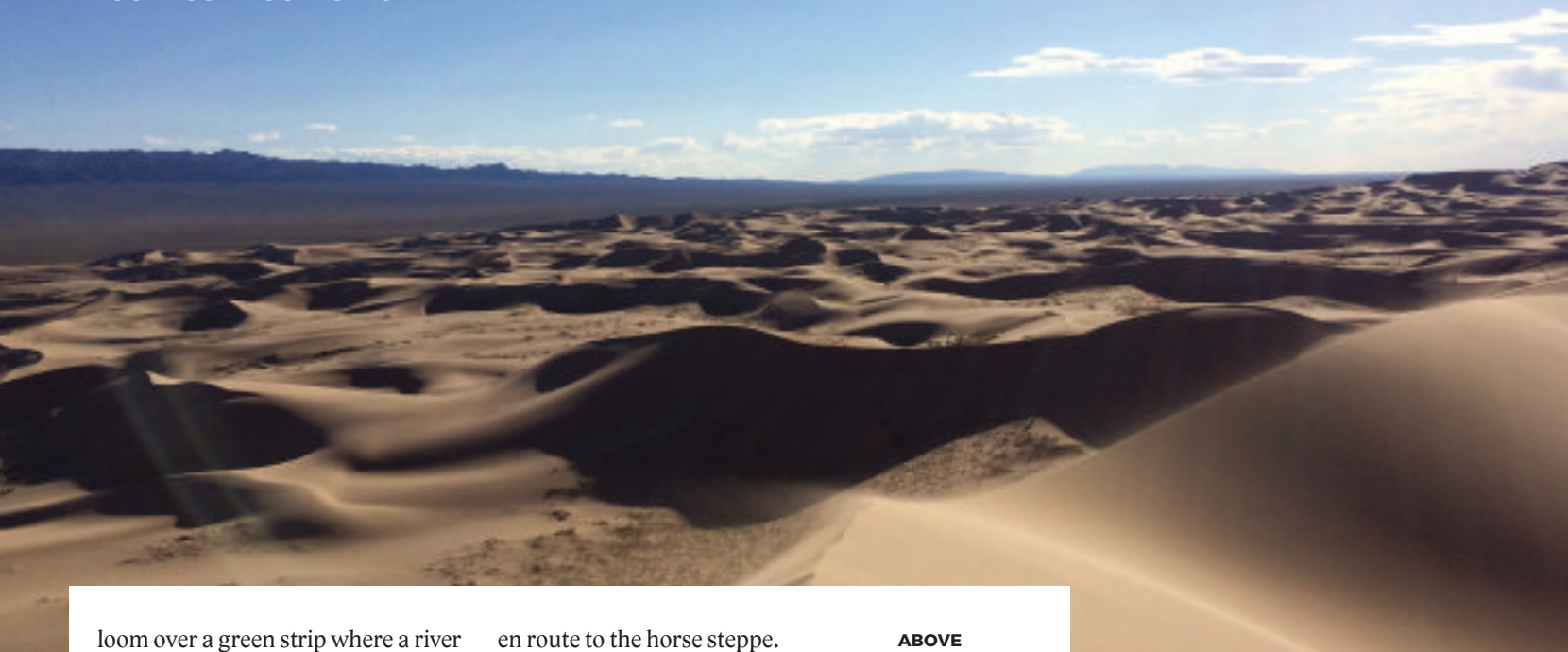
HIT THE ROAD

In order to ride around the Hoshoo Tsaidam area, a little north of the main Gobi desert, a few days' driving by 4x4 is necessary. A flight from the capital, Ulanbataar, to a much smaller town called Bayanzag, where the driving will commence in the Yolyn Am Valley, takes just over an hour. Both places have a marvellous sense of remoteness; I love their inaccessibility. We mount the 4x4 and, with some traditional Mongolian throat singing on the stereo, we hit the road.

In the distance, the Altai Mountains create a divide between the desert and China, somewhere over the horizon. High sand dunes →

ABOVE
Horses and tradition are integral to everyday life in Mongolia

High sand dunes
loom over a green
strip through
which a river
sometimes flows



loom over a green strip where a river sometimes flows. Tucked into these mountains are glaciers that have changed shape and started melting in recent years, thanks to global warming. I marvel at their formations.

Locals venture into these fissures to lay down rocks and blue ribbons, called Ovoo, as a Shamanistic worship to rock and sky. “I come with my family every few months to circle the rocks three times and pour some holy milk next to them,” says Sani, who is visiting from the capital to spend the rest of her summer in a nearby yurt with her family. For her, this escape from the big city is a break from her usual life. An invitation to visit her family yurt, or ger, follows.

In winter, most of Mongolia is covered by permafrost that makes creating any kind of infrastructure out of the question – hence the lack of development. It’s also too cold for the kind of riding we’re doing. Summer is the best time to visit, with chilly nights and days that are glorious and cloudlessly sunny. The roads that have been forged down here in the south are dust and pebbles; my driver, Nara, calls it “the Mongolian massage”. We follow our new friends, whose camp is close to where we will be spending the night

en route to the horse steppe.

Entering a ger camp is done with no knocking; Mongolians have an open door policy for all. We are a motley crew but we sit down with an extended Mongolian family – uncles, aunts, grandparents and a host of toddlers and newborns. Russian or Mongolian are offered, but speaking neither, I settle for a translated version from Zobi. Food here is simple, heavy on the meat and dairy, and handed out in big portions. The usual “Are you married?” chitchat is thrown around by our hosts but in Mongolia, an even bigger question is: “Can you ride a horse?”

FERMENTED MILK

Nomads cook a lot of cashmere goat, boiling the meat or roasting it on an open fire with herbs from the steppe. This is the only Asian country that really celebrates milk, too, and it filters into every meal and snack. Fermented mare’s milk sits in waiting as you enter a Buddhist temple; and as a sign of welcome, the almost alcoholic watery fluid is handed around to visitors arriving at a ger camp. Mongolians love to snack on ‘boortsog’ (cookies), too; simply milk curd dried in the sun, then sometimes fried and dried again. →

ABOVE

A sand sea stretches across the steppe

RIGHT Daniel on his horse





The frank beauty of Mongolia is best understood from the plains around the greater Gobi desert. The country's emptiness is its most striking quality. There are no road signs here, no real roads even – just the steppe, the sky, and every so often, a dust tornado. And then, in all this apparent emptiness, we'd suddenly come upon a ger tent, its smiling occupants waving us by.

For a country of such wide-open spaces, chancing on the Buddhist temples, wild horses and the family-held Naadam Festivals (Mongolian 'Olympics' of archery, wrestling and, of course, horse riding) is tricky, but they're there if you keep your eyes and ears open. The main Naadam festival takes place in July in Ulan-

bataar but smaller, less structured competitions are everywhere, often a result of one family issuing a challenge to another.

Legend goes that Khan drew his landlocked borders, on horseback of course, for his country around natural resources (most of which in Mongolia are unexploited, even today), and in such a way as to be protected from any natural disasters. In fact locals call the north, with a few lakes and mountains, 'little Switzerland'.

From where I sit, these borders seem so far away and this country so vast that I have no concept of its actual size. Horseback is without doubt the best way to explore; in fact, in a land so unchanged by time and development, it's the only way. ①

ABOVE Horses on the steppe
RIGHT Blue ribbons, or oovo, are a shamanistic symbol
BOTTOM RIGHT Mongolians consume a lot of milk, whether from horse, goat or camel



WAY TO GO

Daniel Scheffler travelled as guest of **Wild Frontiers**, which operates both small group tours and tailor-made holidays to Mongolia. A 10-night Mongolia Highlights tour costs from £2,375, excluding international flights (020 7736 3968, wildfrontierstravel.com).

Panoramic Journeys specialises in handmade and small group journeys to Mongolia, including cultural events such as Naadam and the Eagle Festivals (01608, 676821, panoramicjourneys.com).

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