

Mongolia's steppes

For the great outdoors at its wildest, head to Mongolia's steppes. John Hemming follows in Genghis Khan's hoof-prints

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Mongolia is a nation of herders. There are more horses than people here, and about five times as many sheep and goats. There are no fences, walls or hedges. Herds roam across the grasslands, with horses galloping freely, and the odd group of shaggy two-humped camels or yaks.

This year the country is celebrating the 800th anniversary of the Great Mongolian State, when Genghis Khan united the Mongol tribes and embarked on his amazing conquests. Travelling with my family, our destination was Kharkhorin, once the capital of the empire but now just grassy mounds in the middle of nowhere. The celebrations culminated with a naadam (fair) and the unveiling of a monument. To us, it seems odd to honour a mass-murderer who should have ended his days at the medieval equivalent of a war-crimes tribunal. Not so for Mongolians. I asked one why. "Because Chinggis" (as they call him) "united our people, he started to conquer the largest continuous empire the world has known and was a wise ruler. He also invented passports."

Wise ruler? Passports? It transpired that Chinggis and his successors were wise in lawmaking and remarkably tolerant - at least of their Mongol horsemen and peoples who accepted their rule. All religions were allowed to practise at the tented metropolis of Kharkhorin, and one khan invited the various priests to try to convert him. The only conditions were that they must not revile one another too aggressively, and they must be brief. None of them won. The "passports", meanwhile, turned out to be metal tokens carried by the couriers who relayed messages across the empire.

We reached Kharkhorin after a bumpy nine-hour drive west from the capital, which the Mongolians call Ulaanbataar. None of us expected the emptiness and beauty of this land. We

covered only a fraction of a nation that is three times the size of France, but we saw vast sweeps of rolling steppes, usually with low, jagged hills in the distance.

The 800th anniversary naadam was delightfully rustic, with the cheerful ambience of a rural point-to-point. The president of Mongolia was there - elegant in the national dress of a long coat and fedora. There was a polo match; a competition for rounding up wild horses; scooping a lasso up at full gallop; a concours d'élégance of couples in matching silk robes on paired ponies; and a 20km cross-country race with child jockeys - Mongolians are born to the saddle, and these lads were splendidly competitive.

Everything was free and there was no betting of any kind. Even the winners seemed to get no cups or prize money. You could sit in the presidential tent if you could find an empty plastic chair. Mongolians struck me as the least mercenary people I have met. There were a few stalls selling handicrafts and bric-a-brac; but the vendors stood diffidently behind their wares, there was no bargaining, and no touts or beggars.

Other naadams feature the nation's two other sporting passions: archery and wrestling. In the Gobi we went to a village fair to celebrate the good rains and grazing. The wrestlers were tremendous, muscular hulks who grappled one another like elephant bookends. Their machismo contrasted with extraordinarily camp outfits: pointy-toed pixie boots, embroidered Superman-style Y-front shorts, and boleros that leave their chests and bellies bare - so as to expose any beefy woman who might be tempted to compete with the men.

The monument to Chinggis Khaan - an ugly affair of three curving walls surrounding a pile of logs - was unveiled on a hill above Kharkhorin. Each wall has a mosaic map showing the extent of the empire under Chinggis and his conquering successors. It stretched from Turkey to China, dwarfing those of Alexander the Great, the Romans and the Persians. These khans carried the principle of "you are either with us or against us" to the extreme: the inhabitants of any city or tribe that resisted were slaughtered and their buildings razed. Victim cities included Samarkand, Khiva, Merv, Herat, Tabriz and other central-Asian and Persian trading oases.

Mongolians excuse these annihilations as deterrents. They certainly achieved their aim. Most peoples surrendered to the invincible Mongol horsemen, who could ride down any cavalry, shoot from the saddle more powerfully than any longbowman and were fearless in siege warfare. By 1241, Mongols had occupied eastern Europe. The knights and clerics of the Holy Roman Empire could see no way of stopping this horde from sweeping to the Atlantic; then the Mongols miraculously disappeared. What saved western Europe was democracy. The Great Khan Ogedei died, and every horseman rode home for thousands of kilometres to have his say in the election of the successor.

As nomadic herders, most Mongolians still live in a circular tent, or ger. Which is also where tourists stay. Ours was delightfully cosy, with two beds on either side of a wood-burning stove. The only drawback was the sprint across the campsite to a communal washhouse. Ger design has not changed since Chinggis Khaan's day. The wall is a circular lattice, the low door always faces south, the roof is a hundred brightly painted spokes radiating down from a hub where the stovepipe escapes. This roomy pillbox is covered in thick white felt. It can easily be dismantled and carried by a couple of camels. It is warm in the harsh Mongolian winter and said to be cool in summer - although we found it torrid for siestas.

The mighty Mongol empire lasted for two centuries but because it was tented, modern Mongolia has almost nothing man-made to attract architecture-loving tourists: just three or four Buddhist monasteries, all damaged in a Stalin-inspired purge in the 1930s. It is an outdoor country, offering splendid riding, trekking, fishing and white-water rafting. Visitors all fall in love with this beautiful, wide-open land, largely because of its amiable and attractive people. My much-travelled daughter rated it one of her three favourite countries, up there with Peru and Ethiopia. I asked her why. "Because it has its own strong personality, its heritage is still alive, and its people are gentle."

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

GETTING THERE

The writer travelled with Panoramic Journeys (01608 811183; www.panoramicjourneys.com), which offers 11-day trips in Mongolia from £1,420. This includes full-board accommodation at hotels in Ulan Bator and at ger camps, internal flights, transfers and guides. The writer flew to Beijing with KLM then travelled by train to Ulan Bator. The Trans-Mongolian (020-8566 8846; www.trans-siberian.co.uk) travels from Beijing to Ulan Bator in just over a day. There are no direct flights between the UK and Mongolia. However, you can reach Ulan Bator, non-stop from Berlin on MIAT Mongolian Airlines (00 49 30 284 981 42; www.miat.com) or via Moscow from Heathrow on Aeroflot (020-7355 2233; www.aeroflot.co.uk). To reduce the impact on the environment, you can buy an "offset" from Climate Care (01865 207 000; www.climatecare.org). The environmental cost of a return flight from London to Ulan Bator, in economy class, is £14.70. This funds sustainable energy and reforestation projects.