

Big Five Presents
Mongolia
The Private Collection

Ancient monasteries, the haunting natural beauty of the Gobi Desert, wild horses and intriguing cultures - Mongolia offers extraordinary opportunities to see and experience the living history that is Mongolia.

In our own rapid-fire, always changing world, Mongolia is one of those increasingly rare places that seems to belong to another time; somewhere far off on the edges of what we know. It calls up images of nomadic tribesmen on the wind-swept Mongolian steppes, the Silk Road stations in the Gobi Desert and herds of rugged wild horses. Beneath such simplistic images, however, are a legendary past and people that once dominated the world stage in the 13th and 14th centuries. At its peak, the Mongol Empire was the largest contiguous land empire in human history! It reached across central Asia to encompass lands from Eastern Europe to the Sea of Japan and south into India.

By the 17th century, Tibetan Buddhism became the dominant religion in Mongolia, replacing, for the most part, indigenous shaman practices. In the Mongolia of today, modernity is beginning to remodel the country as high-rise buildings crop up next to 18th-century monasteries. By the same token, Mongolians respect their history, traditions and the deep roots put down by their ancestors. Around the country, reconstruction and preservation projects are underway to preserve that history. Priceless artifacts that were so long hidden away for safekeeping are now being returned to monasteries. And it is still possible to set out on a journey that encounters nomadic clans, exquisite landscapes and unique wildlife. This is an exciting time to discover Mongolia, its captivating culture and some of the most wonderfully hospitable people you will ever meet.



Suggested Itinerary

Day 1: Ulaanbaatar Mongolia

The Mongolian capital is a captivating city with museums and shops and cultural encounters just waiting to be explored.

Day 2: Ulaanbaatar

Tibetan-Buddhist traditions, Buddhist monasteries, amazing fossils from the Gobi Desert are in easy reach from here.

Day 3: Ulaanbaatar / Hustain Nuruu National Park

This park is home to the last remaining species of wild horse – Przewalski's horse.

Day 4: Hustain Nuruu National Park / Hogno Han Mountains

Explore sand dunes and surrounding area; and visit a nomadic horse-breeding family.

Day 5: Hogno Han Mountains / Kharakhorum

Few traces remain of Kharakhorum, center of the 13th-century Mongolian Empire. Nearby Erdene Zuu is Mongolia's largest monastery.

Day 6: Kharakhorum / Tovkhon Monastery

The 17th-century Tovkhon Monastery is on top of a mountain with several temples and a small cave.

Day 7: Kharakhorum / Ongiyn Hiid

The 17th century Ongiyn Hiid, now in ruins, was one of the largest monasteries in Mongolia.

Day 8: Ongiyn Hiid / Hongoryn Els Sand Dunes

The magnificent "Singing Sands" are the Gobi's most magnificent sand dunes.

Day 9: Hongoryn Els Sand Dunes / Gobi Desert

Enjoy an encounter with the family of a camel breeder to learn something of their lives.

Day 10: Gobi Desert / Yol Valley National Park

On a hike through Yo Valley, discover habitat for vulture-like lammergeiers, Altai snowcocks, ibex, yaks and more.

Day 11: Gobi Desert / Havsgait Valley / Flaming Cliffs

Bayan Zag, "Flaming Cliffs," are known both for the glowing colors at sunset and as the site where dinosaur eggs were found.

Day 12: Gobi Desert / Ulaanbaatar

Zanabazar Fine Arts Museum features one of the best collections of Buddhist art and artifacts in the world.

Day 13: Ulaanbaatar / Depart

Custom Options

Lake Hovsgol (3 nights)

This is one of the oldest and purest lakes in the world; and home to nomadic people and amazing endemic wildlife.

Uighur Mongolia (4 days)

This region is home to many of Mongolia's ancient ethnic groups; and it is explored using tented camps.

About Mongolia

Gobi Desert: The Gobi is the fifth largest desert in the world. Much of the terrain is not sandy but composed of bare rock. The Gobi was part of the great Mongol Empire, and was known for several important cities along the Silk Road. The Gobi Gurvansaikhan Protected Area was established in 1993 and is the largest national park in the country. The protected area safeguards the Mongolian portion of a largely undisturbed part of the vast Gobi Desert. The park is home to abundant wildlife such as snow leopard, ibex, Argali, wild donkey, gazelle, vulture, gopher, northern pika, lizards, lynx, and Mazalai, and Gobi bear. The area is great for wildlife viewing, hiking and mountain climbing. Of its many peaks, canyons, and valleys, one of the province's most revered sites is the IkhBogd Mountain, the highest in the Gobi Altai range at 3,957 meter / 12,982 feet. BichigtKhad is a world-class petroglyph site, with rock paintings dating back to the Bronze Age. The nearby Tsagaan Aguior White Cave is believed to be the place of the earliest human inhabitation in Mongolia, with evidence of human presence reaching back 700,000 years. The "Flaming Cliffs" site is a region of the Gobi Desert where major fossil discoveries were first made by American paleontologist Roy Chapman Andrews in the 1920s. The area is most famous for yielding the first discovery of dinosaur eggs,

and later specimens of Velociraptor. Paleontologists have done further excavations in the Nemegt Basin in northwestern Gobi, noted for its fossil treasures, including early mammals, dinosaur eggs, and prehistoric stone implements, some 100,000 years old. The Gobi's towering sand dunes of Hongoryn Els run about 797 kilometers / 60 miles alongside the Gobi Altai Mountain range. The "Singing Sands" reach upwards of 183 meters / 600 feet. Due to its isolation, the area's beauty has been kept safe for thousands of years.

Hustain Nuruu National Park: The park provides refuge for the last remaining species of wild horse – Przewalski's horse. Mongolia is one of the last horse-based cultures in the world, and horses remain an important part of Mongolian life and art. The government declared the park a "Specially Protected Area" in 1993, one year after the reintroduction of the horse to the park. It supports an amazing variety of species, including 459 species of vascular plants, 90 species of moss and 33 species of mushrooms. Some 44 different mammals have been recorded, including red deer, Mongolian gazelle, Roe deer, wild boar, wild sheep, Ibex, Mongolian marmots, grey wolves, lynx, Pallas cat, red fox, Corsac fox and Eurasian badger. The 217 species of birds include golden eagle, Lammergeier, great bustard, whooper swan, black stork and Daurian partridge. From 16 types of fish to 29 species of grasshoppers, it is little wonder that UNESCO's "Man and Biosphere Reserves" organization certified the park as a member of the world biosphere network of natural reserves. Within the reserve are also Turkic graves and khun chuluu, stone men - pre-Mongolian stone statues.



Kharakhorum: Once the capital of Mongolia, it was established by Chinggis (Genghis) Khan in 1220 in the Orkhon Valley. This was the center of his empire and remained the capital of the United Mongol tribes until the Chinese destroyed it in 1391. Today, only ruins remain of this once vital crossroads on the Silk Road. In 1586, Erdene Zuu, the first Buddhist monastery in Mongolia, was built close by. Vast walls and 108 stupas surround the monastery. It has been a place of Buddhist activity for more than 500 years. Still in use today, it carries only the traces of its former glory. But the monastery provides insight into the rich religious and cultural past of Mongolia. The temples feature Buddhas, Buddhist art and architecture. Behind the monastery, archaeologists are excavating the site of Kharakhorum.

Lake Hovsgol: The highlight of Mongolia's northern provinces, an alpine region bordering the forests of Siberia, is pristine Lake Hovsgol, known as Mongolia's "dark blue pearl." It is the second-most voluminous freshwater lake in Asia, and holds almost 70% of Mongolia's fresh water and 0.4% of all the fresh water in the world! And it has some of the purest water on the planet. It is surrounded by several mountain ranges. The surface of the lake freezes completely in winter. Khövsgöl is one of 17 ancient lakes worldwide that are more than two million years old. Not as deep as its sister lake, Lake Baikal, it is part of the Baikal Rift System, which resulted from the collision between India and Asia some 55 million years ago. The area is a national park and considered sacred. The park protects wildlife such as ibex, argali, elk, wolf, wolverine, musk deer, brown bear, Siberian moose and sable. Locals usually have a small ice festival after the new year but before spring. This is still a land rarely visited but those who venture here are richly rewarded with incredible scenery, home visits with traditional nomad families, horseback riding and kayaking.

Uighur Mongolia: Like stepping back in time, this region is home to Mongolia's ancient ethnic groups; and it is explored using tented camps for accommodations. The Altai Mountains, Mongolia's highest mountain range, is the territory of rare and elusive snow leopards and ethnically diverse inhabitants including Uriankhai, Kazakh, Torguud, Zahchin, Ould and Myangad descendants. On the southeastern shore of Lake Durgun, a set of cairns has traditionally served as border markers. It was also the site of sacrifices to the local deities that symbolized the link between the land and the men who occupy it. Lake Durgun is also home to critically endangered saiga antelopes. Chandmana soum is where the ethnic Khalkhas live. They are known to be one of the earliest people to practice traditional throat singing. This unique form of vocalizing is when the singer produces two or three separate vocal lines at the same time. In Uvs Province, areas of the steppe are protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Ubsunur Hollow is a fragile mountain basin on the border of Mongolia and the Republic of Tuva in the Russian Federation, named after Uvs Lake, a large, shallow, saline lake in the basin's center. Here, the world's most northern desert meets the northern hemisphere's most southern tundra zone. Ubsunur Hollow is also a UNESCO World Heritage. The Uighurs lived on Kharkhiraa Mountain in the eighth century, but fled their homeland to settle in areas around modern Xinjiang. They became known as teachers of literacy especially during the rise of the Mongol Empire. A group of Uighurs settled in Tarialan soum around the 15th century. This region offers a wealth of opportunities to learn about lifestyles that are rapidly vanishing in the world today.

Ulaanbaatar: The contrast between ancient traditions and the dawning of a 21st century democracy is most visible here in the capital city, where traditional gers and Buddhist monasteries coexist with modern high-rises. The city has the country's only international airport and a single international rail line, the north-south Trans-Siberian railway. It is home to Gandan Monastery, the seat of Buddhism in Mongolia. Woven throughout Mongolia's nomadic cultures are rich Tibetan-Buddhist traditions with ancient Shamanist practices still evident. Buddhist monasteries were either destroyed or converted into museums during the 1930s Stalinist purges. But Gandan Monastery survived as it was used by government officials. Mongolia's spirituality remained strong, and saw resurgence in 1990 when Mongolia became a democracy. At Gandan Monastery, the low tones of horns calling the lamas to the temple are heard throughout the grounds. Visitors can see the lamas' daily rituals, including the reading of sutras (teachings of the Buddha). Significant renovation projects are underway at Chenrezi and Kalachakra Temples. The magnificent statue of Migjid Janraisig ("the lord who looks in every direction") is a 25-meter / 82-foot-high statue, gilded in pure gold and clothed with silk and precious stones that completely fills the biggest of Gandan's temples. The Natural History Museum showcases fossils found in the Gobi, including dinosaur eggs, a duck-billed dinosaur, Stone and Bronze Age artifacts, historical costumes of Mongolia's minority tribes and sacred religious relics. The 18th-century Winter Palace was the home of Mongolia's last king, Javzan Damba Hutagt VIII. Zanzabazar Fine Arts Museum features works by Mongolian artists, sculptors and painters as well as rock inscriptions, graphic arts, Buddhist tankas, embroideries, and unique Tsam dancing costumes. The museum was named after the great sculptor and artist of the 17th century, who was also the first theocratic ruler of Mongolia.

Best Time To Go

Winter runs November to February; spring from March to mid-May; summer from mid-May to late August; and autumn September and October. The cold weather in the far north can last a month or two longer than the desert areas. The travel season begins in mid-May, when Ger camps start opening. July is the peak tourist season. The Gobi can reach 40°C / 104°F this time of year. August can see lots of rain in the northern and central areas, while September brings cooler weather to the desert, and a change of colors in the northern forests. October is cool with occasional snow flurries up north but is still fine for travel. Weather is changeable at this time so be prepared.

*\$500 to \$4000 per person per day
Land only, double occupancy*

Consider enhancing your adventure by including the following destinations: China (p53-56), Nepal (p57-62)



