

Gobi Steppe Ride with Naadam Games, 9 – 22 July

Itinerary

9 July: Ulaanbaatar

During the Naadam Games in Ulaanbaatar it will feel as if the entire population of Mongolia is in the city. The itinerary must be flexible to accommodate any changes in the Naadam programmes or changes of restricted areas. You must not expect everything to run precisely to time in this hectic environment.

Today you may explore the city on your own.

A local guide who speaks both English and Mongolian will accompany the group. Such is the bustling nature of the Games that it will be impossible for your guide to provide a running commentary. Instead they will be available to answer direct questions and escort you between the venues.

This is a time when the Mongolian government invites VIPs and other official guests to the city, so accommodation and transport is in short supply. Overbooking of hotels is likely but our partners in Mongolia have the experience of Naadam every year and know how to anticipate the problems. Nevertheless it is important that you appreciate that the itinerary must be flexible.

The minor archery competitions and training may have started already today. There are different styles such as children's archery, Buryat style archery etc. Training sessions allow for good photography since you can get closer and there are fewer people.



In the evening the horse trainers move their horses with their mobile camps near to the city, and pitch camp at the steppe area at Hui Doloon Hudag, 60km away from the city and Sukhbaatar Square.

You will meet other guests for a festive welcome dinner.

10 July: Ulaanbaatar

Today is a full day at the Naadam horse racing. Mongol horse racing is part of a living cultural heritage, similar to the equestrian tradition that brought the Mongol armies to faraway places during medieval times.



There are horse races at Hui Doloon Hudag, but also at several locations about 60 – 90km from the city. In the rural Naadam you will see the horse races at closer quarters, and have the added benefit of getting close to the wrestling.

11 July: Ulaanbaatar

In the morning, Naadam is opened officially by the President of Mongolia. Soldiers on horseback, sometimes dressed in Genghis Khan warrior regalia, will bring the nine white horsetail banners. They will get the banners at the Parliament where they are normally displayed and will then ride in procession through the city, later to be placed in the centre of the Stadium, from where you will be viewing the Opening Ceremony.



The first round of wrestling will start immediately thereafter. Usually 512 wrestlers from all across Mongolia will compete in the first round! But sometimes more than 700!

No judges, no time limits and no weight limits!

Later there may be an opportunity see the archery competitions (if not done the previous day) and later find our way out to the steppes area on the fringes of the city.

Here you can visit the nomadic tented camps that have sprung up, and experience a concentration of nomadic Mongolia all at one place. Herdsmen will have come with their horses and all the necessary provisions for their festivities, which include airag (koumiss; fermented mares milk) for the merry making.



Stroll around the area and you are likely to be invited in somewhere. You may also try your luck at the finals of the horse races, but prior instructions are necessary, since the approach of several hundred racing horses is potentially hazardous.



12 July: to Tseel

After breakfast you visit the Gandan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, the centre of the revival of Buddhist Lamaism in Mongolia.

Later drive south out of the city, with a picnic lunch on the grasslands, before continuing across the steppe to Tseel. Your nomad hosts will meet you at Tseel and introduce you to the horses. There should be time for an introductory ride before dinner. Overnight in tents here for two nights.



In the days to follow on the trail, your luggage will be loaded upon traditional wooden carts pulled by bactrian camels.

Please note that the riding itinerary may vary due to local conditions, but always with your best interests in mind. For operational reasons the trip may run in reverse



13 July: to Hoyd Önjuul

Today you ride west to the mountains of Hoyd Önjuul. In the surrounding area it is often possible to spot herds of Mongolian Gazelles also known as the White-tailed Gazelle. With luck you may even see the Black-tailed Goitred Gazelle, which is better adapted to the arid environment you are riding in; the transition zone of grasslands and desert steppes. In the mountain area Red Deer are sometimes seen. Wolves inhabit this area, you are seldom seen.



14 July: to Suman

After breakfast you break camp and load all gers, equipment and provisions on to the camel carts. A full day ride takes you south to the Bayan Hills area, where Siberian Ibex and Argali Sheep are sometimes seen.

Pitch camp at Suman. Usually there are many nomadic families in the immediate area, as there is a water source.



15 July: to Zorgol Hairkhan

Today the trail heads east to the mountains of Zorgol Hairkhan (Sacred Zorgol), which can be seen in the distance all day. It is a striking feature on the otherwise undulating and flat steppe.

Zorgol Hairkhan is mentioned in The Secret History of the Mongols, the oldest surviving Mongolian language literary work, which chronicles the life and genealogy of Genghis Khan. The Khan himself is said to have wintered here while in conflict with a competing leader.



There are more nomads and livestock emerging now and hopefully you will meet some during the ride. At Zorgol there are also breeding population of Cinereous Vulture, the largest of the Eurasian vultures, its size on a par with the Condor of the Americas. The nests are quite low, on rocks and small trees.

Camp tonight will be at the larger massif, called Ikh Zorgol Hairkhan Uul.



16 July: to Baga Hairkhan

Continue riding east, passing the small Gobi lake Hariin Nuur, with chances for spotting some interesting bird species. The lake acts as an “island” for waterfowl flying across this ‘sea of grass’.

You cover about 25 km to reach the smaller, but still impressive, Baga Zorgol Hairhan Mountains. Usually the pastures are excellent here, and you should encounter some nomadic families with their livestock in the area.

Pitch camp here and scan the ridges of these spectacular rock formations for Siberian ibex and Lammergeiers.



17 July: to Övör Burd

The Gobi steppe in this area is quite variable. You are riding through the transition zone of the Gobi: true steppes, semi-arid steppes, sand dunes and also giant rock formations. Today you will have an opportunity to pass archaeological grave sites dating back to the Hunnu empire, from the time before the Christian era.



You ride for c.25-30 km east across the steppe.

You can see the Zorgol Hairkhan giant rock formations behind you in the distance. Several hundred metres high, they create a dramatic feature in the middle of the steppe.



18 July: to Shine Khudag

Today’s ride turns north, a shorter distance to Shine Hudag, meaning ‘New Well’. Water sources are important in the Gobi grasslands.

As on other days, camp is loaded onto the camels. Sometimes you will ride alongside them, but often you take a less direct route to camp in order to explore interesting landscape features or for great views.



19 July: to Arburd Sands

A full day's ride for c.25-30 km towards Arburd Sands, passing several nomadic families. The human feature of this open and vast landscape is perhaps one of the most interesting, since all the families in the area are nomadic herdsmen.

A sahara-like landscape in the middle of the Gobi grasslands, the sand dunes of Arburd extend for about 20km and are often a hideout for numerous wolves.

You stay this night at Arburd Sands Ger Camp, which is located next to the dunes.



20 July: Arburd Sands

You stay at the ger camp of Arburd Sands for another night, allowing for an opportunity to ride out and visit some nearby families over the day. Nomads here have large herds of cattle and cashmere goats.

You may also choose to stay back and just relax at camp and enjoy the scenery.



21 July: to Ulaanbaatar

During the morning you return back to Ulaanbaatar.

In the afternoon you may explore the capital city on your own. The local guide is available to direct you to where the points of interest are located. Lunch is to your own account today.



In the evening you have a farewell dinner which is normally followed by a performance of folk and traditional Mongolian music, song, dance and contortion.

Overnight at the hotel.



22 July: Departure

You will be transferred from your hotel to the airport for your flight home, or to continue your holiday in Mongolia.

Accommodation

When in Ulaanbaatar you stay centrally in a modern hotel of reasonable standard with ensuite bathrooms. This is usually the Bayangol Hotel (Chingis Khan Avenue 5. Tel: 976 11 312 255).



On the trail you have two nights in a semi-permanent ger camp, and for the remaining seven nights you stay in spacious teepees (two people sharing each teepee). You are provided with a sleeping cot and blankets, but you will need to take your own sleeping bag.



If you feel the cold easily or your body is small, you should take some care in the selection of your sleeping bag. During cold spells early and late in the season, there is a very good chance of night temperatures below zero. Frost at these times is likely, and can sometimes happen even during the summer. A good four season sleeping bag is definitely necessary early and late in the season.

A loo tent will be erected. Washing facilities are limited and you are asked to bring only biodegradable toiletries.

The kitchen (and dining room) will be in a ger, the practical and typical Mongolian dwelling. (The word "yurt", which is in fact a Turkish word, is used in many countries to describe the ger). Four people assemble a ger within half an hour and helping to erect it is all part of the experience of being in Mongolia. Once constructed, the wooden frame of the latticework and roof poles, surrounded with layers of felt and canvas, keeps the ger warm inside, even during the harsh Mongolian winter. A stove is usually placed in the middle, particularly welcome early and late in the season.



The ger is for everyone to use. On cold or wet evenings you will eat in the ger and, although it may be crowded when the team also come to eat, you should stay on and use this opportunity to get to know the whole team and have fun practising your Mongolian.