

# ULAANBAATAR CAPITAL OF CONTRAST

by Robert Watt



**T**here is nothing to see in Mongolia. I was told this a couple of times when planning a trip there last summer. In part, that's true. Mongolia has had a notorious history and legendary leaders, but in terms of what can be seen of that today, there is remarkably little. The tourist's checklist of iconic buildings, memorials and ruins are largely absent. The land too is empty; a vast grassland, devoid of trees and only sparsely populated by hardy nomads whose lack of possessions create a culture with a very weak material dimension.

So yes, if you're looking to collect Facebook posts that unmistakably place you in Mongolia, there really is little to see. But if you want to experience a unique culture, a natural environment and an ancient way of life, then Mongolia is a living museum. And at only two hours flight from Beijing it's an opportunity you shouldn't miss.

If there is one image of Mongolia it's the Ger. Their round, tented homes still dot the landscape like white specks in the camera lens. A Ger, surrounded by horses, lost in its vast surroundings, is a scene unchanged for a millennia. Despite decades of soviet

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influenced communism, and recently, the seductions of the market economy, half the population remain nomadic. Even in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, you can see Gers in back yards and on building roofs.

But then Ulaanbaatar is an unusual capital. It lacks the tall glass fronted buildings, the Starbucks and MacDonald's that you would expect in their largest city. It sprawls untidily along traffic clogged streets of shabby blocks of buildings and makeshift shanties. Small by any standard, but after the mega metropolises of China and the ornate architecture of other Asian capitals, it feels not just tiny, but as temporary as their tents.

Ulaanbaatar isn't a pretty city. There are some interesting buildings around Genghis

Khan square which reflect the Russian influence, there are also some Buddhist temples that are being hurriedly renovated after years of religious suppression. A better introduction to this country is the local beer and food which are served in generous quantities. Mongolian dishes are delicious, filling and meaty, but every cuisine of the world can be found here and being small, the restaurants, as well as bars, clubs, hotels and shops, are a short walk from the square.

The city also serves as the centre for exploring the huge country around it. Day trips and longer hikes can be arranged from the numerous travel agents. They're a must do. It's through these that you access the real Mongolia, where you get a feel for the tough, simple lives the majority still endure. The young guides that take you might live in the city, be studying at the university, have a smartphone and designer sunglasses, but you can see in their enthusiasm for horses and their pride for the families in the Gers that their heart remains in their traditions and their spirit belongs in their huge unsullied land.

For most of the year, blizzards and bitter winds whip unchecked across the plateau.



Temperatures sit stubbornly sub-zero. Then between June and August the weather warms and the country opens to its short outdoor season. We took a day trip on horse into one of the nearby national parks to see spectacular scenery, yak, wild horses, camels and big birds of prey. On longer treks into the mountains you can also see moose and brown bears and if you overnight you will be woken by the howls of wolves. There are places for rafting and canoeing, mountain biking, wrestling, motorbike tours, golf...

Another great experience we tried was visiting a nomad family for a traditional lunch in a Ger. We were driven down dry, mud tracks and across giant meadows of straw dry grass. A mile out of the city and we were completely alone, only a curious goat and an eagle, black against the bright sky briefly watched us. With so few markers, and a horizon so distant, it's hard to gauge how far we travelled; Kilometres from the capital, light years from London, centuries from today.

The Ger from the outside looked practical and sturdy, but plain. Inside however, it was light, colourful and clean. Dark wooden supports had been painted in bright orange patterns. On the floor lay rich rugs and the walls, lined with felt, were hung with tapestries

and covered with all the paraphernalia of their life - mirrors, utensils, plastic plates and a million flies. They dotted the undecorated white space of the walls to make the tent look like the interior of a generously currented bun. Their numbers had multiplied during the summer spent in one place entertaining tourists. This was the last week of the season and the weather was already cooling, soon the family and their animals would move on, leaving the tourists and the flies behind.

The meal was warm and flavoursome and of course plentiful. Freshly baked bread and clotted cream, cakes and cups of hot tea made on the wood burning stove. The food was simple, with that delicious, rustic texture that home cooked food of my childhood had. And although flies plagued the dishes in a constant attack that no amount of polite hand waving deterred, the outdoor air had made me ravenous enough not to care. I asked if they had any Airag, a drink made from fermented mare's milk that I was keen to try. They poured me a bowlful from a plastic bottle in which a large fly immediately died. I'd read Airag was an acquired taste and one lunchtime was clearly not enough time to acquire it. The guide said no foreigner can drink it. While I'm always up for a challenge he was right. The half bowl I managed grumbled in my stomach all afternoon.

One place you're bound to be taken to, either on the way somewhere or on your return, is the colossal statue of Genghis Khan sitting sternly on his horse. At 40 metres high, it's the tallest equestrian statue in the world. If you hadn't noticed, after a pint of Khan Beer and a Genghis burger in the Khan pub, this polished stainless steel structure punches home the importance that the founder of the largest contiguous empire in history has to this country. Though nothing remains of his

palaces and fabled gardens, his notoriety is once again leading his nation; this time to attract tourism. Tourists can take an elevator to the top and photograph his mighty mug on their ipads. While he is impressive, its newness, its permanence and its clinical cleanliness contrast starkly with the lives of his people. There's an irony that this modern image of the long dead Khan commemorates an ancient culture that is still very much alive. The empire has long gone, but the temperament it was built on, forged by this hard country, endures. Don't think there is nothing here, if it lacks anything, it's only what is easily found anywhere else.

## 神秘的乌兰巴托

去年夏天我想着去蒙古玩一圈，但当我做计划的时候，朋友们却不止一次的告诉我说“蒙古没什么可看的”。没有古建筑遗址，没有名人纪念碑，有的只是一望无际的广袤草原和那粗犷的游牧人民。诚然，这并不是它的全部。

网络上关于“蒙古”的游玩帖子也不是很多，所以理应它不是一个最佳的旅游目的地。但倘若你想体验一种前所未有的独特文化或是一种古老的生活方式，那么蒙古就绝对是你不可错过的地方。蒙古——一个不折不扣的鲜活博物馆。从北京出发，大概只需两个小时，你就能即刻拥有一段不一样的旅程。

蒙古，好似一副波澜壮阔的画卷，如果非要用一种形象来描绘它，那一定非蒙古包莫属。那些零零散散遍布在空地之上的小白点，在镜头前面煞是好看。一个蒙古包，配以万马奔腾的辽阔草原，即使是在千年以后，它也始终保有自己固有的姿态，不受外界干扰。

乌兰巴托是一个不太寻常的首都，它没有高大的玻璃建筑，没有星巴克，没有麦当劳，没有任何你本该在正常的大城市里见到的普通事物。拥挤的街道上凌乱的夹杂着破旧的楼房以及点点的临时棚户。乌兰巴托也称不上有多漂亮，但围绕在成吉思汗广场附近的有趣建筑物，也绝对值得你驻足参观。

来到这个城市，如果不来一场说走就走的徒步旅行，那一定会是你的遗憾。当然，只有体验过了简单粗暴的生活方式，你才算真正的到过乌兰巴托。这个民族的每一个人都深深的热爱着他们的文化，热爱着他们一望无际的大草原。在乌兰巴托，除了骑马游玩，你一定不要忘记到它的蒙古包里去体验一把真正的游牧生活。

尽管从外表看过去，蒙古包既简单又粗糙，但一旦你进去之后，就会发现，里面其实别有洞天。蒙古包的内部装饰色彩明亮，干净又整洁，起支撑作用的深色木料也被粉饰成鲜艳的橙色图案，地面上铺着好看的毛毯，墙壁上挂着各式各样的日用品。每到季末的最后一周，这里的温度就会转凉。然后居住在里面的人们就会转移到别的地方以维持生存。

游牧民族的传统午餐，味道相当丰富。新鲜出炉的面包配上奶油，再加上热腾腾的奶茶，既简单又美味，这样的美餐让我不禁想到了童年的时光，幸福又美好。帝国早已远去，但它昔日的气场还深深的埋藏于这个顽强民族的人民心中。别用常人的眼光看待这里，我说过，蒙古根本不是一人云亦云的国家。

