

Mongolia: Golden Eagle Festival & Gobi Desert



Mongolia—over twice the size of Texas, but with a population of barely three million people—is one of most sparsely populated countries on earth. Nearly half of its citizens live in or around the capital—Ulaanbaatar. As a result there are extensive areas of little-populated wide-open spaces and “wildness.” Russia lies to the north and China to the south. Historically, both were ruled by one of the world’s most famous conquerors—the legendary Genghis Khan. The Mongol Empire became the largest the world has ever seen—stretching all the way from Manchuria to the east into ancient Persia to the west. Today, most of Mongolia remains wild and rugged, offering nature photographers an amazing variety of wildlife, beautifully diverse and vast landscapes, and exotic cultures.



One of the many highlights of our journey into this land rich with history is attending a Golden Eagle Festival. Traveling on horseback as far as 150 miles with their feathered predators, the Kazakh and Mongol eagle hunters ride to villages in far western Mongolia to demonstrate the speed and skills of these highly-trained “wolves of the sky.” As they travel, the eagle hunters—dressed in traditional animal furs—ride with their eagles perched on their right forearms. Because big female eagles can weigh up to 14 pounds, the hunters ride with their forearms resting in a forked cradle attached to the saddle. For the two days of the festival, these skilled hunters participate in a number of action-packed events seen nowhere else on earth. In one event, their winged warriors are launched from a nearby hillside, swooping down at over 100 mph to catch the skin of a fox being pulled along the ground at high speed by a horseman in an open area below—right in front of our cameras. In addition, we

arrange for several private photographic shoots to create striking portrait images of the hunters, their horses, and their fearsome birds—along with lifelong memories.

A compelling component of our photo tour is the massive Gobi region in the southern part of Mongolia. The Gobi is an area of over 500,000 square miles with spectacular landscapes of mountains, deserts, sand dunes, valleys and forests. We visit a wild and isolated region—the Ikh Nart—where our private ger camp is located at the base of beautiful red rock cliffs.

Traveling on a train toward China, we journey from Ulaanbaatar to a small village where we are picked up by 4-wheel-drive SUVs. As good photographic opportunities can develop at any moment, we put only three people, plus a driver, in each vehicle. In the Gobi we also travel by cart, foot, camel or horseback into areas of beautifully-sculpted red sandstone formations and sand dunes while always watching for wildlife. We should see the argali sheep—the largest wild sheep species in the world. The ram's massive horns, from one tip to the other, can be over three feet—much larger than any of the wild sheep species found in North America. Siberian ibex and many bird species can also be seen. One of the world's largest raptors—the cinereous vulture—lives here. Nearly the size of a condor it is a common nester in this part of the Gobi. Archeological sites, petroglyphs, and other remnants of ancient desert-dwelling cultures are also on our diverse agenda.

About a 2-hour drive from Ulaanbaatar is Hustai National Park, an area renowned for wildlife. Here, one of the greatest conservation stories in the history of humankind can be seen—the recovery of the Przewalski's horse, or takhi as they are known locally. Due to hunting and other pressures, these wild horses became totally extinct in the wild in the 1960s. Luckily, a captive herd was being protected and propagated in Europe. From this captive herd the highly endangered species was reintroduced into Hustai in the 1990s—and we have many



opportunities to photograph them. Eagles, falcons, vultures and shorebirds can be found here along the Tuul River, which flows through the park, and Mongolian marmots and red deer may also be seen.

No visit to a foreign land is complete without experiencing the local culture. On several occasions, we are invited into a family's ger to sample life in a nomadic culture unique to Mongolia. In Ulaanbaatar, we attend a Tumen Ekh folk concert. With close-up seating at the performance, we have excellent opportunities for photography. Traditional music, throat singing, dance, and incredible contortionists round out the evening. Visits to major monuments, squares, palaces, markets and museums enhance our exposure to traditions unlike those in the western world.

Join us for this exotic and productive photographic journey to the rugged realm of Mongolia's Kazakh falconers and the incredible vast Gobi Desert.

Note: *The Golden Eagle Festival is an amazing experience for adventurous travelers—but it is not for everyone! Please consider that this tour includes some Spartan accommodations and unusual and often lackluster food, with no vegetarian options at some locations,—and will occasionally find us in relatively unfamiliar situations. If occasional uncomfortable and exotic surroundings are not your forte, we recommend you consider a different tour.*

Tour Itinerary

Day 1

Depart from home for Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. For this tour it is highly recommended that you give yourself an extra travel day due to long flights and time zone changes and plan to arrive prior to Day 2, below.

Day 2 (Sept 5 in Ulaanbaatar)

Arrive at Chinggis Khaan International Airport in Ulaanbaatar and transfer to our hotel. Meet in the hotel lobby at 6:30 PM for our orientation dinner. (D)

Day 3

We transfer to the railway station and board our train for a six-hour rail journey over grasslands and into the arid Gobi steppe. Train travel is a great way to start our adventure as it provides strong first impressions of the vastness and sparse population density of the country. Photography from the train can be interesting and varied. We disembark at the small village of Dalanjargalan, in southeastern Mongolia, where we are met by our drivers. We travel the last 25 miles to the Red Rock Ger Camp by car. (BLD)

Days 4–6

Our remote ger camp is located at the base of beautiful red rock cliffs. We, and our support staff, are the only ones there. For three days we explore the Ikh Nart area by 4-wheel-drive vehicle, on foot, or by horse or camel. The surrounding rocky outcrops harbor various kinds of wildlife including argali sheep, Siberian ibex and many bird species. Three ongoing research projects by Mongolian and international scientists focus on these

species, as well as cinereous vultures, lesser kestrels, and various small carnivores and their prey. We visit a range of archeological and historical sites from various epochs, including petroglyphs inscribed on rock outcrops, burial sites and temple ruins. We may have a chance to meet local herding families. Reliant on fresh pastures and precipitation, the hardy and hospitable Gobi herders frequently migrate in and out of the area with their livestock. (BLD)



Day 7

After breakfast we leave camp and drive toward Choiriin Bogd Mountain, where we photograph ancient Buddha statues in the rock faces. We have a picnic lunch here, and drive for about four hours back to Ulaanbaatar on a good paved road. We stop for photos whenever we see the potential for interesting images. (BLD)

Day 8

We have a full day in Ulaanbaatar to explore Sukhbaatar Square, the National Museum of Mongolia, Gandan Lamasery, Bogd Khan Winter Palace and the Zaisan Memorial. Before dinner tonight we enjoy the Tumen Ekh folk ensemble in a traditional performance filled with photographic opportunities. If you have never heard “throat singing” before, be ready for a sound like nothing else on earth. (BLD)

Day 9

Internal flights in Mongolia are notoriously notorious! In the early morning we will likely transfer to the airport and fly 3½ hours to Ölgii in the far western part of Mongolia—or, alternatively, to Hovd. Hovd, at the foot of the Altai Mountains, was occupied Manchurian times prior to 1910, is home to several ethnic minorities, largely Mongol, and has both mosques and Buddhist temples. If our flight lands in Hovd, we will have a scenic drive of four hours to Ölgii, among the striking Altai Mountains rising on both sides of the road with Hökh Serkhiin Nuruu and Tsambagarav Uul national reserves in the background. One way or the other we will end up in Ölgii! (BLD)

Day 10

We explore Ölgii and the surrounding countryside. Nestled in the Altai Mountains, the small city of Ölgii was established in the 1840s by Kazakh bandits fleeing the expanding Russian Empire. With approximately 29,000 inhabitants, the population is mainly Kazakh, but also with Tuvan and Uriankhai ethnic groups. Kazakh is the principal language spoken. Ölgii has four mosques, a bazaar, and is known for its Kazakh music, embroidery and art. The golden eagle festival is held nearby. (BLD)



Days 11–12

The Altai Golden Eagle Festival starts today near the village of Sagsai. We shoot the spectacle of diving eagles as they are released by their Kazakh falconers from the hills high above the village, hunting for a fox skin towed behind a galloping horseman below. The eagles are the same species of golden eagle found in North America. These rugged eagle hunters riding on their horses while holding their massive birds on their forearms, make for absolutely stunning images. Their traditional attire

made of the skins of wolves, foxes and other fur bearing animals is beautifully pieced together—and highly photogenic.

We photograph Kazakh horseback games, including the central Asian game of buzkhasi—a tug-of-war with a goat carcass that can get quite wild at times. At the festival we will be positioned in the best possible locations for photography. We have also arranged for several private photo shoots. The eagle festival can be likened to an American rodeo—but with camels, horses and eagles participating in a series of intriguing events unique to the Kazakh world. (BLD)

Day 13

Following breakfast we transfer to the Ölgii airport and (hopefully) fly back to Ulaanbaatar. If no flight departs from Ölgii today, we may drive to Hovd or Ulaangom to spend the night before flying out the next day. Flights around Mongolia are an adventure in themselves! (BLD)

Day 14

From Ulaanbaatar we drive to Hustai National Park and arrive at our ger camp, situated on the border of the park, by lunchtime. This afternoon we photograph the intriguing Nestorian Christian stone graves that date back to the 6th century. Later, we travel along the Tuul River where a variety of bird species inhabit the riparian willow thickets.

In the evening we drive into the rugged countryside to look for the remarkable Przewalski's horse. These wild equines were totally wiped out in the wild largely due to overhunting—they were a good source of food for the nomadic tribes of the region. However, from a small captive herd held in Europe, they were reintroduced into Hustai during the early 1990s. Here, they have thrived



—one of the greatest conservation stories from the last century! Every Przewalski's horse presently living is descended from nine of the thirteen horses captured in 1945. In 1992, sixteen horses were released into the wild in Hustai, followed by additional animals a few years later. Reintroduction of captive-bred animals currently continues in several countries. Today, there are an estimated 2,000 Przewalski's horses in the wild—the majority of them are found in Hustai. (BLD)

Days 15–16

We explore the diverse habitats of Hustai National Park as we travel by Toyota Land Cruiser and on foot. Starting out from the ger camp we hike up ridges for views over the distant Moltsoq Els sand dunes, as well as the partially-forested Hustai Mountains. Here we have a reasonable chance to see red deer, cinereous vultures, and numerous raptors, such as eagles and falcons. (BLD)

Day 17

This morning we visit one of the local villages situated on the fringe of Hustai National Park. We photograph traditional village life as well as the livestock that sustains these rugged people and enjoy a local lunch called buuz. Buuz is the national dish of Mongolia and consists of small steamed dumplings typically filled with mutton or beef. After lunch we drive back to our hotel in Ulaanbaatar. (BLD)

Day 18

The magnificent Chinggis Khaan (Genghis Khan) statue begins to appear on the horizon long before you actually arrive. The statue, over 200 feet tall and built of stainless steel, is the largest structure of this kind in the world. It is a fitting monument to the mighty warrior who once reigned from China to much of the Middle East and Europe. An elevator takes you up to a viewing platform behind the horse's head—where the vastness of the Mongolian countryside is spread below.

Several miles beyond the statue, we visit a 13th-century complex which, through a number of ancient buildings and elaborate gers, shows Mongolian life during the time of the great Khaan rulers. We return to Ulaanbaatar for a farewell dinner. (BLD)

Day 19 (Sep 22)

Depart Chinggis Khaan International Airport in Ulaanbaatar for flights home. (B)

Trip Details

Sep 04 - Sep 22, 2019

Fee: \$8695 from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Deposit: \$800

Limit: 10 participants

Activity Level: Moderate

CONTACT US ABOUT THIS TRIP

Tour Leader



PERRY CONWAY

SUBSCRIBE!
To Our eNewsletter
(click here)