

In the vast plains of the Gobi Desert, Mongolians continue their nomadic traditions.

# *Infinite Solitude*

SPRAWLING AND ENIGMATIC MONGOLIA IS A LAND OF STEPPES, DESERTS, CLIFFS AND MORE THAN A HANDFUL OF INTRIGUING CHARACTERS. **MADLINE GRESSEL** TRACKS THE COUNTRY'S CONSERVATION EFFORTS, ALONG WITH THE OMNIPRESENT GHOST OF GENGHIS KHAN.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARC CHAFIIAN



Goats, long a source of cashmere, on a sweep of plains. **Clockwise from top left:** Genghis Khan is a looming presence in modern Mongolian life; a young nomad's traditional boots; *ger* hospitality includes tea and biscuits; at Three Camel Lodge.



## FROM ABOVE,

Mongolia seems to exist in three colors: blue, white and brown. Sky, clouds, snow, earth. On the ground, the palette remains the same, but the gorgeous, infinite variations in earthy hue boggle the mind.

I am walking through Yolyn Am ravine in Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park, a 27,000-square-kilometer wilderness of mountain and sand that offers sanctuary to charismatic endangered species, such as the curly-horned Argali sheep. On either side of the ravine rise jagged, ancient hills, furred with the gold of dried grasses and leopard-spotted with sweet smelling juniper. Yolyn Am is named for the *yol*, or lammergeier, a large vulture of national pride whom I spot circling lazily overhead. “Birds can curse,” is the somber warning of Baagi, my informative guide and constant companion.

The largest, most alluring animal in the park is the reclusive and graceful snow leopard. The silver-spotted

leopard lives on the high cliffs of the Gobi, scaling sheer slopes daily in search of prey. Poaching, hunting, climate change and habitat destruction have decimated the animal's numbers—fewer than 1,000 remain in the wild. The Gobi park rangers, with training support from international groups such as the U.S.-based Snow Leopard Trust, work to protect the regal cat.

I ask a ranger why he chose his career path. Baagi translates to English from Mongolian, a gently guttural language, to the ear far closer to Russian than Chinese. “I didn't,” says the ranger. “It chose me. It was karma.”

Baagi explains: “This is traditional conservation—not fear, but deep respect for nature.” That could be the mantra of Epic Road Safaris, which runs bespoke journeys in Africa, the Arctic and now Asia and is part of a niche tourism segment offering ecologically minded travelers luxurious trips that nonetheless engage in such immersive activities as rhino tagging or distributing solar-powered electric lanterns in remote villages. I am in Mongolia with Epic Road to learn about the efforts and challenges of safeguarding the environment in a place that is practically *all* environment. In this huge land where cashmere was once king, I will visit paleontological sites, camp on the famed Eastern Steppe, meet modern-day nomads and

search out the rare Przewalski's horses—all of which are endangered by manmade tolls such mining, deforestation and urban expansion. So as not to compound the damage, the safari aims to be a low-impact, sustainable window to the country's still rich and unique biospheres.

Like the one surrounding this ravine. Fluffy pikas, a relative of the rabbit, overrun the grass, hopping from hole to hole. “Pika Fifth Avenue,” observes Baagi.

**MONGOLIA IS MELDING** into a goldmine. Mining, which now accounts for 80 percent of Mongolia's exports, has drastically changed the face of the nation. By some estimates, Mongolia is sitting on trillions of dollars' worth of recoverable gold—only discovered in the past two dozen years—as well as copper and coal, and average Mongolians, mostly traditional nomads, want a piece of the prosperity. “Ninja miners” dig small, illegal holes in search of gold, tearing up the terrain and using chemicals that create dangerous runoff, to earn US\$10 a day.

Ninjas move quickly. Non-Gobi ninjas are easier to catch, but the local nomads, who know the desert intimately, are near impossible. The rangers chase them and they disperse, always to return again. Sometimes there are gunfights. What has happened to traditional

Mongolian conservation—not fear but respect? “Their spirit is blocked by the gold,” Baagi explains.

We depart the national park office, a white wooden house with a red roof and green lintels on the dust-swept, yellow plains of Dalanzadgad, Gobi's fast-growing frontier capital. It's springtime. Across the desert creeps the green of growing grasses. Herds are everywhere: cows, goats, sheep, camels and horses, all roaming freely, each herd flush with kids, lambs, foals and calves.

Baagi says you can taste the freedom and happiness in the meat and cheese. Aren't their owners afraid they'll be stolen? “No,” Baagi says. Every animal knows its owners. Mongolia is a nation of livestock—at more than 30 million, that's 10 animals per person. My guides are amused by my delight. Each time we see a herd I beg to stop.

As dusk falls like a purple rain over the desert, Three Camel Lodge, Mongolia's only luxury lodge, appears before us like a mirage, nestled cozily in the shadow of a hill, spilling a welcome yellow light. On the outskirts we pass the large well, where sheep and goats wine and dine on water and long grasses, escorted by a pensive young boy with a stick. I'd been warned about Mongolian cuisine (meat, meat, meat) but I am served a delicious variety of food—pumpkin soup, fried lamb dumplings, salad and

cupcakes—while Baagi spins ancient tales of Genghis Khan and his queen, Börte.

Three Camel is composed of a main lodge and 20 *gers*, traditional tents built from beautifully latticed wood and bound in felt, each with an en suite bathroom. My homey *ger* is warm from the little wooden stove that has been lit in my absence. The walls are soft and round, and held up with intertwined orange beams, each painted with flowers in the traditional Buddhist style. There's a skylight, through which I can see a sparkling smear of constellations. I settle into my fluffy bed and quickly drift off to the softly crackling flame.

**WE ARE ON THE LOOKOUT** for dinosaur bones. Few places on Earth hold as rich a fossil record as the Gobi Desert. Not only is there a great diversity of species, the specimens unearthed are often well-preserved, offering fascinating glimpses of prehistoric daily life. In the 1920's, paleontologist Roy Chapman Andrews, said to be the inspiration for Indiana Jones, found the first dinosaur eggs. Later came the discovery of two creatures locked in combat, perfectly preserved.

Mongolia's epic proportions make long stretches of driving a necessary and interesting evil. The desert's emptiness is an illusion. Pikas and ground squirrels scurry past. Larks glide and snap in their wings. We pass a young cowboy, his mouth hidden behind a black bandanna, training his horse to race—perhaps for the annual



1,000-kilometer Mongol Derby, the longest race in the world. *Gers* dot the distance, none too close together.

We reach a stretch of barren white cliffs where fossils are often found. Five minutes walking and... there it is, the white skull and spine of a small dinosaur, just poking out of the sand. Why doesn't someone just spirit this away? To quote Dr. Jones, this belongs in a museum. Baagi explains there are simply too many, with no new insights to impart to the world. I am flabbergasted.

Today, the weather can't decide. The sky shifts from sunny and crisp to grey and ominous. Fat raindrops hit the ground as we pull up to the muddy remains of Ulaan Lake. It used to be the largest lake in the region, and the final destination of Onggi River, a large waterway supporting 60,000 people and one million livestock. Thanks to desertification—the result of deforestation, overgrazing, and the depletion of water that comes with unregulated hydraulic mining—it's now tessellated with deep cracks. Every year, the Gobi expands at alarming rates, encroaching upon the rich grassland lining Mongolia's southern border with China. Within the last 20 years, 1,500 rivers and 300 lakes have disappeared.

In ways large and small, Mongolia's nomads are fighting to protect their lives and their livelihoods. There's the country's most famous conservationist, Tsetsegee Munkhbayar, whose Onggi River Movement is slowly helping to heal Ulaan Lake—but this year he was sentenced to a startling 21 years in prison for “terrorist acts” after bringing firearms to a protest. And there are people like the old woman who lives in this *ger*, standing out in the windy wilderness, beneath a crop of black cliffs. She invites us in, offers us yak milk tea, shows us family photos and tells us about her life. She has a herd of goats a hundred strong; like many nomads, she ekes a living from their hair, which is woven into cashmere. Outside the *ger*, a kid is wagging its tail furiously while nursing.

She has begun planting trees nearby, as part of a government incentive to create a greenbelt to contain the spread of the desert. At first she planted for money. But now she has come to treasure the trees, for their shade, for the protection they provide from the wind, for the vegetable garden growing beneath the boughs.

Our final destination of the day is the flaming cliffs, a crimson wasteland of peaks and gorges. The Gobi is far from monolithic. Here it is yellow, flat and tufted; here red, hot and jagged, spiked with cliffs; here green and brown, with soft, rolling hills and a cool sense of idyll; here golden and undulating pure sand dunes, like Arabia. This is a landscape of return, at once ancient and apocalyptic. We trek the canyon and then sit and sip white wine, watching as the setting sun sets the cliffs on fire.

**LOCALS TEASE THAT THE NATIONAL AIRLINE**, MIAT, stands for “maybe I'll arrive tomorrow.” As if in on the joke, our flight to Ulaanbaatar is canceled. Instead, we make the arduous, but scenic, drive from the Gobi. Our route takes us out of the desert through kilometers of muddy steppe, into the

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On the Eastern Steppe, young boys practice wrestling, the national sport. **Opposite:** Once exclusively for men, Nadaam, Mongolia's midsummer games, allow women to compete in archery.

snowy mountains flush with birch and conifers, and through the open plains west of the capital. We drive for hours without encountering another car.

On the way, we search for the Przewalski's horse, or *takhi*, in the rolling golden fields of Hustai National Park. Przewalski's horses are the world's only surviving wild horse subspecies; they are also the most critically endangered animals in Mongolia. Possibly fewer than 300 remain in the wild. We catch a herd of 12 roaming the valley at sunset. From a distance they seem like stout, cuddly ponies, all reddish fur, spiky manes and round white muzzles. Up close, however, they exude palpable power and grace. As we watch them canter and graze, a rainbow stretches overhead.

Our second stop is Karakorum, the ancient capital of the Mongol empire. It is mostly empty space now, with a lovely little museum and a large Buddhist monastery, but it has a glittering history. Built in 1235 by Genghis Khan's son and successor Ögedei, the palace encircled a legendary silver tree, twined with golden serpents, hung with silver fruit, and topped with a mechanical trumpeting angel. When the Khan wanted to summon his guests, the angel raised his trumpet, and out gushed alcohol from the serpents' mouths.

Genghis Khan, pronounced *Chinggis Khaan* locally, is a name on every Mongolian's lips, every day. Every toast, proverb and platitude leads back to him. It seems odd that such an ancient figure holds such deep relevance in modern Mongolian culture; imagine if Europeans were constantly invoking Charlemagne.

After a week here, however, I begin to understand. The average Mongolian nomad's life has changed little since the time of Genghis Khan. They still live in the same *gers* Genghis Khan did, herd the same animals, battle the same winters. They are mobile, self-reliant, weathered and free.

In a country with little global influence, Genghis Khan is a symbol of national character and strength. Few chapters of recorded history have matched him or his empire, the largest contiguous empire ever—the majority of humans alive today live in countries conquered by the Mongols. To name a few examples of Genghis Khan's brilliance: he revolutionized warfare, promoting his soldiers on merit, making gunpowder more explosive and assigning a dedicated medical corps; he built one of the first international post systems; his was the first empire with religious freedom. His rule shaped the modern world.

Entering Ulaanbaatar, or UB, the striking quality is *newness*. It's a city still wobbling on its first legs, in a perpetual state of frenzied construction. Inside the city center, it's glitzy and cosmopolitan, with international restaurants, karaoke bars, and a skyline sliced down the middle by the shark fin-shaped Blue Sky Hotel. The young dress in black skinny jeans and boots. I expected the city to look like a mini Beijing, but it's remarkably Soviet, complete with charmless apartment blocks, Cyrillic signs,

puffed-up neoclassical buildings, statues of Lenin, and terrible, terrible traffic.

The lifestyle that has served Mongolians for nearly a millennium does not translate well to the city. So used to infinite space and solitude, Mongolians do not adjust easily to close quarters. They are not team players, Baagi tells me: "Everyone wants to be a Chinggis Khaan."

**ONE OF THE LAST TRUE WILDERNESSES** on Earth is the Eastern Steppe. Here on the world's largest expanse of unspoiled grassland, stretching 246,000 square kilometers (about the size of Laos) from Ulaanbaatar to Shenyang in China, we spend two days luxe camping. The steppe isn't exactly featureless, but one can tally its features fairly quickly on one hand: grass, sky, ungulates, and the fluffiest clouds I have ever seen.

Every once in a while, enormous herds of gazelle fly over the plains in a current, like a striped tsunami. In autumn, the gazelles undertake one of the planet's great migrations, across here and the larger Eurasian Steppe, which extends one-third of the way around the globe. Most of this land is government owned, swaths patrolled by a Nature Conservancy-supported corps of local rangers, who fend off ninja miners.

Our tented campsite is on the golden crest of a grassy hill. I'm a child again, infinitesimal against the vast reality of nature. A plane drones overhead, distant and alien. I feel sad for its passengers that none of them can enjoy the wild tranquility below. Overcome by wanderlust, I strike out for a lake on the horizon. Baagi gives me a reluctant glance. "It's hard to navigate the steppe!" he warns, in the world's biggest understatement. I never reach the lake. The distance is impossible to divine. But I am content simply walking among the happy cacophony of buzzes and chirps. With all the untamed terrain spread out before me, begging to be explored, I just want to be Chinggis Khaan. +



*Epic Road; 1-646-580-3080; epicroad.com; "Endless Mongolia and the Gobi Desert" trip from US\$600 per person per night including all accommodation, intra-Mongolia flights, transfers, meals, translators, private guides, and activities such as camel- and horseback-riding.*