

Eastern Great Landscapes

Most of Mongolia is off the beaten track. But by choosing this east-bound journey you will actually travel in the opposite direction of most travelers' paths: Into the East Gobi and the Eastern Steppes, the largest remaining pristine grasslands in the world. And onwards to the forests and meadows of the Onon River, a tributary of the mighty Amur River. You will travel through the heartland of Genghis Khan's Mongolia, where the great Khan was not only born and raised, but according to local lore and scientific research alike, might have even been secretly buried. Along the way there are plenty opportunities for great birding and wildlife watching, as well as close encounters with history and the lived-in reality of nomadic herding communities. We will start this rewarding journey on board a local train which takes us southeasterly into the East Gobi. From here we head by vehicle into the endless plains of Eastern Mongolia. We come through various Nature Reserves and across secluded historic sites, camp on the banks of great rivers and advance into the northern forest zone. We will stay in our own, fully mobile, private Wilderness Teepee camps for most of the journey. We use comfortable Tentipis, large Teepee style tents, which enable us to sleep off the ground on comfortable bed-cots. Because we like travelling in style, we also take showers, toilets and a marquee-style tent, which we use as a mobile restaurant.

Day 1: To Ulaanbaatar

Arrival in Ulaanbaatar. If you arrive by air or train, we will provide transfer to your hotel. In the evening there is a trip briefing followed by a welcome dinner.

Day 2: Train to East Gobi

In the morning we will board the train to the East Gobi (Dornogobi) province. We will travel on the Trans-Mongolian Railway line towards China. The gradual transformation from treeless steppe grasslands to the drier Gobi is apparent as we approach the town of Choir. We will disembark at a tiny railway station in the middle of the Gobi steppes and drive the last 40km to the Ikh Nart plateau and our secluded Ikh-Nart Rocks Ger Camp, where we will spend the next two nights.

Day 3: Ikh Nart Nature Reserve

We have the full day for exploration of this dramatic and rocky Gobi landscape. It's easy to get lost here. An estimated 1000 Argali Sheep (*Ovis ammon*), the world's largest wild sheep, are using the rocks as shelter, as are some 150 Siberian Ibex (*Capra sibirica*). Also wolves and lynx are hiding out here. Our first full day in the Gobi is dedicated to wildlife observation. The Argali Research Center of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences is conducting wildlife research here since 1997, therefore much is known about the Ikh Nart ecosystem. Although there is no guarantee, Argali and Ibex can usually be seen. Sometimes other ungulates such as Asiatic Wild Ass (*Equus hemionus hemionus* or Khulan in Mongolian) and Mongolian Gazelles (*Procapra gutturosa*) might be seen. In Ikh Nart you can also see numerous big bird's nests on cliffs and small trees, which usually are Cinereous Vultures (*Aegypius monachus*), the largest vulture of Eurasia. Its size is on par with the Andean Condor.





Day 4: To Gun Galuut

Today we will load up our Russian minivan, and drive north until we reach the Herlen River, making use of one of few tarmac roads in Mongolia. We spend the night near Gun Galuut Nature Reserve, a small, but highly diverse protected area, consisting of high mountains, steppes, rivers, lakes and wetlands. In the late afternoon there is a good chance of spotting the rare White-naped Crane (*Grus vipio*) and Swan Geese (*Anser cygnoides*) at the small lakes and marshlands, getting a foretaste of what birding will be like further east. We set up our Tepee camp on the bank of the Herlen River.

Day 5: To the Eastern Steppes

We continue our slow drive east on the tarmac road into Khentii province, passing its small capital Öndörkhaan, now renamed to Chinggis City, after Genghis Khan. We follow the Herlen River on its southern bank until we reach the endless grasslands of the Eastern Steppes, and drive on until Sukhbaatar province and Khar Yamaat Nature Reserve.

Day 6: Eastern Steppes

The first half of the day we will spend exploring Khar Yamaat Nature Reserve in Sukhbaatar province, which has recently been handed over for management to WWF Mongolia. In the afternoon we drive a few hours into Dornod province, Mongolia's easternmost province. The herding communities become scarcer and more isolated, and the grasses become higher beyond the roads and the riparian zones. We will probably see some stray or small herds of Mongolian Gazelles as well as foxes of various kinds. Crossing Toson Hulstai Nature Reserve, we reach our selected spot for the next two nights.

Day 7: Eastern Steppes

The full day can be used for hikes and exploration drives through the heartland of the Eastern Steppes. This is the classical habitat for the Mongolian gazelle. Immense herds are roaming the grassland, but are elusive at times. They do not migrate in regular patterns like the big ungulate herds of East Africa, but rather randomly follow precipitation which provides for good grazing. Often none are seen, but herds of tens of thousands can be seen at times. Rarely as much as 80 thousand. In 2007 a mega herd of 250 thousand has been seen. There are also small lakes with possible sightings of White-naped Cranes (*Grus vipio*) and the even more rare Siberian Crane (*G. leucogeranus*). The morning and late afternoon can be used to relax at our tiny, cozy camp or hike in these great landscapes. It'll be a thousand stars hotel to-night!

Day 8: To Onon River

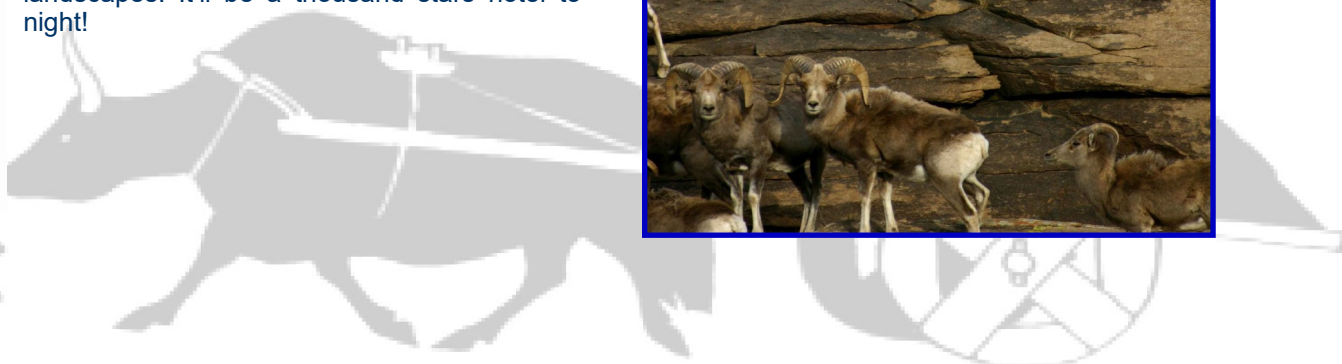
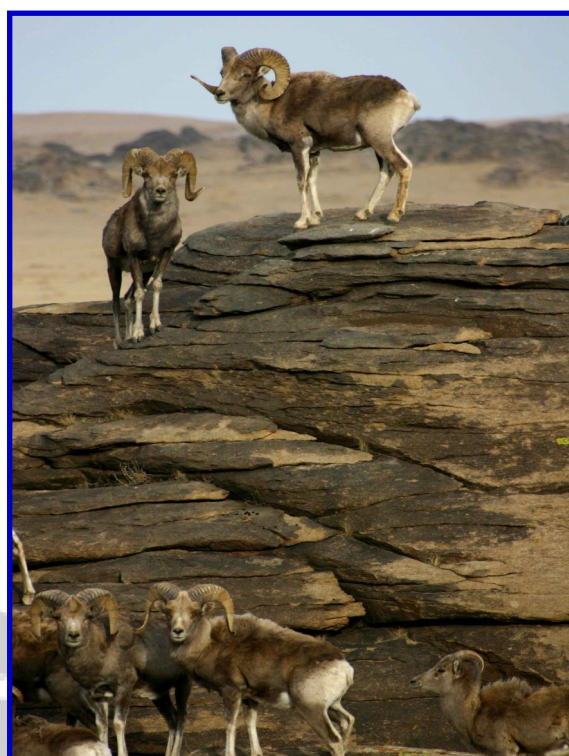
We continue our drive north until the Onon River, a tributary of the mighty Amur River, that forms the border between the Russian Far East and North-eastern China. Together the two rivers form the longest free flowing river system in Eurasia. We now re-enter Khentii province and drive north through Norovlin district. Having traversed the undulating, flat grasslands for the past few days, we will now start noticing small ridges of mountains and birch forests, which indicate the proximity of Siberia and what locally is called the Hangai region (as opposed to the Gobi), which consists of mosaic forests of larch and birch. Our camping spot for the next two nights is in the vicinity of Ölziit Hairkhan, a dramatic landscape of rocks, near the riverside.

Day 9: Onon River

Ölziit Hairkhan is a sacred place, where in recent years shamans have revived ceremonies for the local mountain spirits. We will do some hiking in this beautiful area. Local herders belong to Halkh and Buryat ethnic groups, nearby Dadal district is almost all Buryat. The Buryats are a Northern Mongolian group, who lead a more settled lifestyle in log cabins. They keep cows and horses, rather than sheep and goats. We may hike in the vicinity or drive to Dadal village, where WWF Mongolia's work for the conservation of the Onon River is centered. There are claims that Genghis Khan was born here.

Day 10: To Daurian Steppe Lakes

We drive full day through Bayan-Adraga and Binder districts until Binder Ovoo (155km), one of the most significant sacred cairns, believed to have been here since Genghis' times. We set up camp on the edge of the Hurkh Steppe, home to many nomads and famous horse trainers. In the vicinity are the Daurian Steppe Lakes, kept in place by underlying permafrost. They are habitat to several crane species, in fact five of the world's crane species may be seen here including the rare



Day 11: To Öglögch Wall

Today we drive into the forest steppe zone, bordering the vast Khan Khentii Special Protected Area, a forested wilderness three times the size of Yellowstone. Here stands the mysterious Almsgiver's Wall (Öglögchiin Herem), believed to date from the 8th century. More than 2m wide and up to 3m high it skirts through the forests for more than 3km near Daichin Mountain. Recent archaeological digs have identified at least 60 ancient graves within the walls, indicating that it may once have been a royal cemetery. Both American and Japanese joint Mongolian expeditions have searched for the grave of Genghis Khan in the area, but the work was aborted without results. We also visit Rashaant Had, a large rock with numerous types of petroglyphs depicting animals and people, as well as inscriptions in various ancient scripts. It is widely believed to possess special energy, water flowing directly out from the rock face, why it therefore attracts Mongolians from afar, who come for meditation.

Day 12: Baldan Bereeven and Hangal Lake

Today we turn west to visit Baldan Bereeven Monastery, which was founded in 1654 and soon became one of the most significant monasteries of eastern Mongolia with up to 8000 resident lamas. It was destroyed in the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s, but the main temple has undergone some renovation. The monastery grounds are surrounded by scenic and sacred mountains the monastery itself is backed by the steep cliff of Munkh Ulziit mountain where many Buddhist petroglyphs can be found. We drive on through the forest zone and set up camp near Hangal Lake.

Day 13: To Ulaanbaatar

We drive back to Ulaanbaatar and enjoy a picnic lunch on the way. You will be transferred to your hotel before dinner time.

Day 14: Fly Out

Our service ends after breakfast. If you leave Mongolia today, we will supply transfer to the airport or railway station.

Practicalities

Transport: This tour is supported by a jeep or minibus depending on number of travellers. We will have a Russian 4wd minivan as a support vehicle.

Accommodation: During this trip we will stay in spacious tentipis, with foldable bed-cots. We take along a Mongolian tent to serve as our mobile restaurant, as well as showers and compost toilets housed in traditional marquee style tents. For the first two nights you will stay at our low-impact ger camp at Ikh Nart Nature Reserve.

Staff: An English-speaking Mongolian guide will accompany you at all times. Other language guides such as Russian, French, German, Italian, Korean etc. available at additional cost, upon request.

Meals: Our cook will prepare the meals. We pride ourselves in having excellent cooks adept at both western and Mongolian cooking on our trips. There is no problem accommodating vegetarians on our trips. We can usually buy fresh milk and yogurt from local herdsman.

Trip Extension: Before reaching Ulaanbaatar you may add days to the trip by turning north to the upper Tuul River and Jalman Meadows. We recommended to stay there for 2-3 overnights to fully enjoy the dramatic scenery of this broad river valley with its surrounding mountains and meadows.

PRICES ex Ulaanbaatar:

2 - 8 members: **USD 2950 per person**
Single supplement (13n): **USD 520**

Includes: Guide, all meals outside Ulaanbaatar. All overnights a hotel and in tents. All local transport and entrance fees.

Excludes: Beverages. Lunch and dinners in Ulaanbaatar. Air or train tickets in and out Mongolia.

DATES 2020 ex Ulaanbaatar:

Daily mid May to end of September.

