

# TRIPS!

TRAVEL NOW: GREAT GETAWAYS AND DISCOVERIES | Edited by Sheila F. Buckmaster

Galloping bare-back in a valley, local kids display traditional Mongolian horsemanship.



## Among Nomads

To truly understand—and enjoy—Mongolia, just follow its people. **By Margie Goldsmith**

**H**ow about that one?" I say to Badral, my guide. "Can we stop there?" We're bumping and bouncing along the wide open steppe of the Gobi Desert in a Russian UAZ jeep, and I'm ready for some stillness. Badral's gaze follows my finger. I am pointing at a ger, a round tent made of white felt, in the distance. Badral has explained to me that Mongolia's nomadic tradition centers on hospitality and assures me that we could drive up to the homestead of any Mongolian nomad family and receive a warm reception. I'm ready to put this to the test.

"Yes," he says, "but when we enter

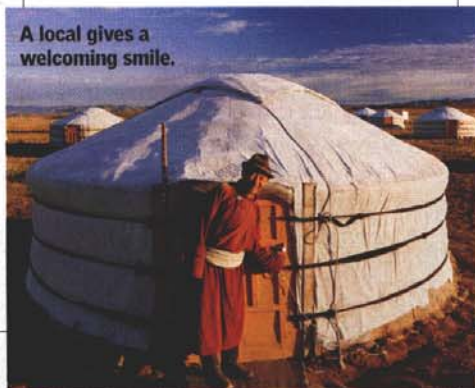
the ger, don't leave your hat on the bed. That would mean you plan to spend the night," he advises me. "And if you sit too close to the door, it means that you have very little time." Okay.

We haven't seen another vehicle for two hours. Occasionally a fur-hatted

herder wearing a traditional Mongolian *deel* (robe) or Western clothes, whoops in the distance as he drives his camels across the plain. It reminds me of the Old West. There are no hotels, just a few tourist ger camps. I'm staying at the most luxurious of the bunch, the

Three Camel Lodge, with a woodstove, bathhouse (hot showers!) and sun-powered electricity. Plus I have my own toilet, so I don't need to go out in the dark of night to "check on my horses," another strand of local lingo shared by Badral. My travel arrangements, handled by Nomadic Expeditions ([www.nomadicexpeditions.com](http://www.nomadicexpeditions.com)), are working out just fine.

A local gives a welcoming smile.



GORBON WILTSIE (TOP), PETER ADAMS/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)

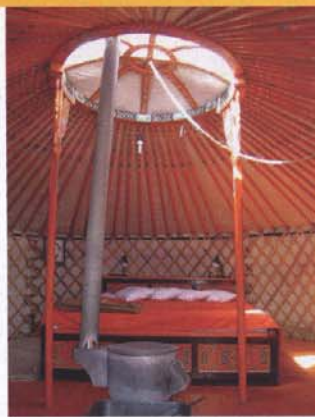
MARGIE GOLDSMITH (TOP), BRINDA MORSE/JANISKEET MARDON/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM LEFT), DAVID EDWARDS/INTERNATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION (BOTTOM RIGHT)

With some 2.7 million people and 28 million animals, Mongolia—tucked between China and Russia, and just a little smaller than Alaska—is the only country in the world where most people live in tents. About half are nomads who move up to four times a year. Until recently, visitors were the main source of news, but most Mongolians now have battery-powered radios and some have satellite dishes. And while most herders still round up their animals on horseback, motorcycles have begun to kick up dust as their riders lead camels toward better grazing land.

“*Nokhoi khor!*” (Hold the dogs) Badral calls in greeting as we approach the ger. A dog barks until a woman milking a goat stops to quiet him and welcome us. Tsetsge, in her early 20s, is polite but shy as she explains that her husband, Ariunbold, has gone to find three wandering camels. As soon as he returns, the two of them hold a mother camel as its baby suckles; then they pull the baby away so Tsetsge can milk the rest of the frothy liquid into a bucket. Mares are milked the same way—the baby

gets half. It takes two people to do the job.

We enter the small tent. Tsetsge adds dried camel dung to fuel a stove in the center. I see a wooden table, piled-up bedding, and things hanging on the walls: a stirrup, saw, comb, embroidered jacket, and pieces of drying lamb. I am given the seat of honor, a stool facing the



Tent accommodations at the Three Camel Lodge offer colorful comfort.

door. Badral and Ariunbold both sit on the floor as Tsetsge first pours us hot goat’s milk, then serves us goat cheese followed by camel cheese, fried cheese curds, *airag* (fermented mare’s milk), and camel’s milk. Between servings, she wipes our bowls clean. Those who visit the home of a nomad always receive milk tea and cheese, but Badral admits we’ve been served a feast.

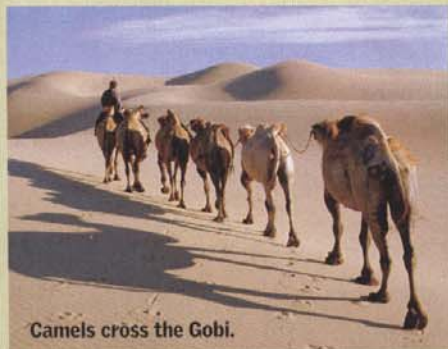
Tsetsge, Badral translates for me, spends her days milking, cooking, making cheese, cleaning, and washing and sewing clothes. Every day repeats itself,

she says. There are no days off. Ariunbold’s job is to look after the livestock—hundreds of sheep and goats—and try to keep them safe from wolves. Last night, we learn, a wolf showed up, tore off the nose of one of the dogs and killed the other. Their neighbor, Ariunbold adds, lost all their baby goats to the wolf.

As we say our goodbyes, Tsetsge shows us one final gesture of nomadic hospitality, handing us a plastic bag filled with fresh goat cheese. I return the hospitality by giving her a large silk scarf from Manhattan. And as for Ariunbold’s gift, if you should someday make your way to Mongolia, you might recognize him by the woolen “I ♥ NY” cap on his head.

**MARGIE GOLDSMITH** escapes her New York City apartment as often as she can to ride horses, climb mountains, and ski.

## Mongolia: Three More Archetypal Experiences



Camels cross the Gobi.

**Ride a Camel on the Sand Dunes:** Mongolians believe that “*Er huny jargal ezgyi heer*” (Man’s happiness is in empty, open space). It doesn’t get more empty or open than the 60-mile-long Khongoryn Els Sand Dunes, the largest in Mongolia. It takes about an hour to slog through the soft sand to the summit. From the top you’ll see the greatest expanse of unaltered grassland in the world. Wind whistles through the sand (they call these the Singing Dunes), while Bactrian (two-humped) camels bray below—little specks in the distance. In addition to providing transportation and highly insulating wool, a camel can carry up to 1,000 pounds. If you stop at a ger and ask to ride a camel, the owner will offer tea and either lend you his camel or find a neighbor who has one to ride—for

free or a small fee, say \$5.00 an hour. You’ll lope across the dunes, holding onto a shaggy mat of fur.

**Weave through Gorkhi-Terelj National Park on Horseback:** You aren’t a true Mongolian until you’ve ridden a horse. Any Mongolian will tell you that. After all, these are people who consider horses sacred. Children learn to ride almost before they can walk. Travelers can ride practically anywhere in the country, but it’s hard to top Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, in the area where Genghis Khan was born—50 miles northeast of the capital, Ulaanbaatar. You ride across grasslands surrounded by rock formations, pine forests, and mountains. Mongolian horses might have small legs, but they respond well to commands. Tell your horse *chew* (giddy-up), squeeze his belly with your feet, and, if need be, tap him on the flank with a stick, and you’ll be flying across the plains just like Genghis. To enrich your experience, read *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* by Jack Weatherford. It shines a light not only on the most famous Mongol of all but everyday folks, too.

**Witness the Eagle Festival in Bayan Olgii:** At 76, Humarkhan is the oldest of the 45 Kazakh eagle hunters who compete each October in

Bayan Olgii’s Golden Eagle Festival in northwest Mongolia. Created in the late 1990s to help preserve the Kazakh tradition of hunting small prey with eagles, the festival draws several hundred locals as well as a sprinkling of tourists. In one event, trained eagles are released from the top of a 1,000-foot-high mountain—to land on the arms of galloping hunters below. In another show of skill, eagles are again released from the mountain and must land on a fox skin dragged by a hunter on horseback. There are horse races (with some jockeys well under the age of ten), archery, and a tug of war on horseback between two men pulling a dead goat. On occasion—for the final event—a live wolf is released, giving the eagles the opportunity to demonstrate their keen hunting abilities. —M.G.



Mongolia’s annual Eagle Festival celebrates avian prowess.