

Mongolia is so much more than a bucket-list destination

By Andrew Sessa

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A performer plays a limbe (flute) in traditional Central Asian garb.

Photo: Nomadic Expeditions

Mongolians call their country “*munkh khukh tengeriin oron*” — “land of the eternal blue sky” — and driving across the Gobi desert, deep in the nation’s south, it’s easy to see why. A ceiling of nearly cloudless cerulean curves overhead, from horizon to horizon, extending over the flat, softly verdant landscape like a dome. Despite being the world’s fourth-largest desert — “gobi” even means “desert” in Mongolian — in the wetter season, the ground sprouts green here, like the African savannah after the rains.

As for that horizon, it’s clearly visible for 360 degrees, 20, 30 miles in the distance, demarcated in the furthest stretches only by the bruise-colored silhouettes of low mountain ranges. As the heat picks up, your eyes tell you that placid lakes shimmer at

the base of these ridges, and you'll swear they're right until the lakes never get any closer, and you realize they were only a mirage.

Mongolia can sometimes seem more like an idea than an actual place, a name you conjure when trying to think of the most out-there, far-flung destination you could go, a land of bucket-list bragging rights, a Place To See Before You Die. People go to say they've gone without really knowing what they're going to see. These people may find themselves disappointed, for the pleasures of Mongolia aren't like those of similarly heralded exotic locales. They're not the colors and swirls of India or Morocco, the big game of East Africa, the calving glaciers and soaring icebergs of Patagonia or Antarctica.

Mongolia's joys are quieter, more subtle, found in the sweep of the arm of a nomadic archer as she take aim, or in a slow ride on a double-humped camel between golden desert dunes, or in the glow of the first sliver of the full moon as it rises, like a giant Chinese lantern, on that distant desert horizon.

I started my Mongolia trip, as most do, in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city. But the adventure really began on my last evening in New York, when friends who'd already been to the country gave me a series of dire warnings: Pack a sleeping bag (nomadic hospitality, while genuine, doesn't extend to bed linens, or even necessarily mattresses). Don't eat the food (unless you fancy gristly, greasy mutton and fermented mare's milk). If you do eat the food, bring soy sauce (everything, they said, is better with soy sauce).

They also offered a reading recommendation, the memoir-cum-travelogue "[Wild East](#)," by Jill Lawless, a Canadian journalist who spent a few years in Mongolia in the mid-'90s, just after seven decades of Soviet Communism fell here. Her harrowing, often hilarious, stories of expat life, which I read on the plane on the way over, surpassed even those of my friends' holiday.

Upon arriving, however, and over the course of my week in Ulaanbaatar and the Gobi, I found that the rumors of Mongolia's miseries had been greatly exaggerated. (Of course, there were always indications of luxer leanings given the country's robust cashmere economy; Mongolia stands among world's top produces of the sought-after wool, which is one of its primary exports.)

These days, the capital has gotten its first true five-star hotel, [the Shangri-La](#) (from \$238/night), where I stayed, in quarters that combine ancient Mongolian motifs and materials with every thoughtful comfort and convenience you'd expect from an Internet-age international brand.

And, thanks to the work of [Nomadic Expeditions](#) (10-day trips from \$4,595) — a full-service high-end travel outfitter founded by a Mongolian-American, which organized my trip — the Gobi has thoroughly comfortable eco-camp options: [Three Camel Lodge](#) (doubles from \$670) is comprised of some 40 luxed-up *gers*, the country's typical round nomadic dwellings equivalent to yurts; as of this year, most of those *gers* even have hot water and flush toilets in their ensuite local-stone bathrooms. Neither the Shangri-La nor Three Camel serves Mongolian food at its most traditional, and they're the better for it.

In Ulaanbaatar, a capital planned for 270,000 but now home to nearly half the country's 3 million inhabitants, buildings sprawl from a center of glass skyscrapers and pastel-hued government buildings (designed in an often bombastic style known as Stalin Gothic) past mid-century housing blocs to felt-sided *gers* that ring the periphery.

The touristic must-sees I saw seemingly sought to remind visitors that Mongolia under Genghis Khan — here known as Chinggis — and his progeny were once the center of the world, even if it now feels a bit caught in the middle of Europe and Asia. While nodding to communism, the National Museum celebrates Chinggis and his sway over the two continents, and even the Central Museum of Mongolian Dinosaurs, despite being unceremoniously constrained by temporary quarters in a mall basement — turn left at the gelato kiosk for the fossils! — asserts the country's import as the home of the greatest beings to have ever walked the earth.

The city has been slow to slough off its Soviet past, however, even as it propels itself forward. In the main square, a relatively new statue of Chinggis, for whom the plaza is now named, sits in the façade of the parliament building, but in the middle is a statue of Sükhbaatar, the square's previous namesake, who led the communist revolt against the then-colonizing Chinese in the 1920s, and came to be called “the Lenin of Mongolia” by the Soviets.

And at the 200-year-old Tibetan-style Gandan Monastery — one of only a handful allowed to remain open by the communists, who otherwise destroyed the buildings and killed thousands of monks and lamas — a massive, 85-foot-tall golden Buddha, serenely standing under intricately painted wooden rafters, dates only to 1996, when it replaced the one Moscow ripped out in the 1930s.

Plans are underway now for a huge temple complex on the city's outskirts, a sprawling, Jetsonian development crowned by a 35-story stupa and a Buddha taller than the Statue of Liberty. In a city of big construction cranes, and even bigger dreams, a city very much in a state of becoming, anything is possible.

I traveled 300 miles southwest towards the Chinese border. Off the grid in the Gobi, clambering up a rocky hillside to spot petroglyphs that range in age from 2,000 to 10,000 years old, watching nomads as young as seven hoot and holler as they race their ponies, or just looking out the bright orange door of myger at Three Camel across a seemingly endless green expanse punctuated only by herds of goats, I remember Ulaanbaatar as a metropolis.

From the top of a sand dune or a plateau of the craggy, rust-colored Flaming Cliffs — where in the 1920s an American Museum of Natural History scientist happened upon the first fossilized dinosaur nest ever to be discovered — the city and the plush Shangri-La seem impossibly, wonderfully far away, even though they're just a 90-minute flight and a few hours' drive away. Even surprise sunset cocktails and a pop-up four-course dinner, served safari-style under an open-sided canvas tent at the base of the cliffs can't make civilization seem any closer.

In the early morning hours of our final day in the Gobi, as we ride across the desert back to the airport in **Nomadic Expedition**'s fleet of Land Cruisers, the silvery full moon still hangs above the horizon to our right as the sun rises on the left, silhouetting a caravan of camels. It's an in-between, both-and moment that strikes me as just right for Mongolia right now. Go soon, before it picks a side.