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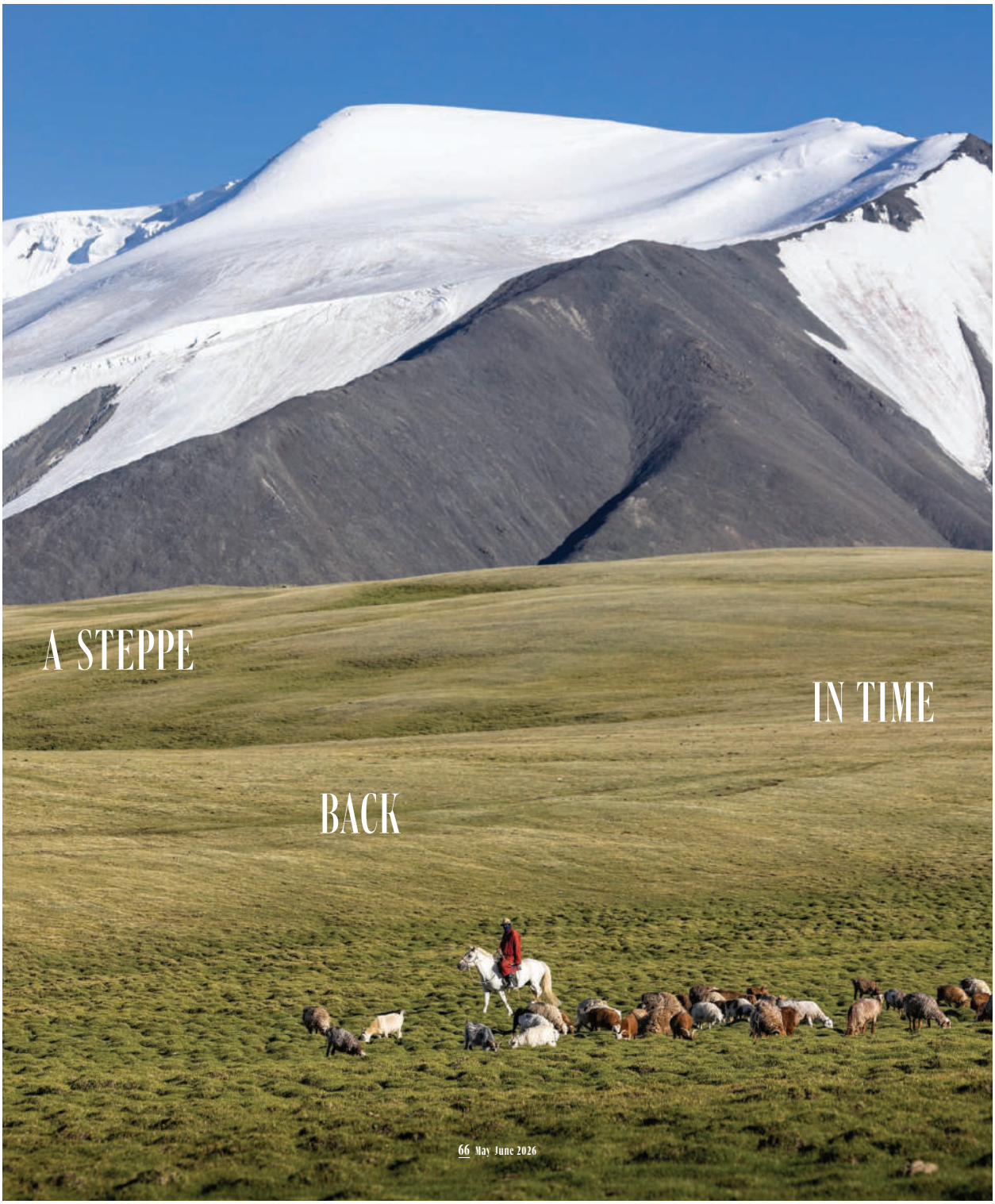


A STEPPE BACK IN TIME

Adventures with an eagle hunter and equestrian champions in the land of Genghis Khan.

BY AARON GULLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JUDGE

A Naadam festival dancer and (opposite) herding goats in western Mongolia's Altai Mountains.

DECKED OUT IN A SNOW-WHITE SPYDER HOODIE

with red webs stitched across the shoulders and faux-fur platform Crocs, 16-year-old Aymoldyr Dayanbek flicks through her Instagram feed and rapid-fire messages with friends, seemingly oblivious to the backdrop of western Mongolia's glacier-licked Altai Mountains. But asked about falconry, the tradition of hunting with eagles practiced in these highlands for centuries, she ditches her phone and lights up.

She talks of her father, who took her on hunts even though they were historically men's domain, and she recalls clambering up cliffs with him to capture her own eaglet. She affectionately calls the now-adult eagle Ana ("mother") and hurries away to a nearby *ger*, or yurt, to retrieve the creature. What she doesn't mention is that she and Ana won Mongolia's Golden Eagle Festival in 2023, making Dayanbek only the second woman ever to take that honor.

Cofounded in 1999 by Jalsa Urubshurow of tour company Nomadic Expeditions, to preserve the local tradition of falconry, the festival came to widespread acclaim with the 2016 release of *The Eagle Huntress*. That documentary followed another teen eagle hunter, Aisholpan Nurgaiv, as she became the first woman to win the event. The film's exposure drove tourist travel to Mongolia. "Visitors used to be mostly interested in the Gobi," says Boulder, Colorado-based Virtuoso travel advisor Jessica Walker, who spent a month exploring the country. "But now the majority want to know about the Golden Eagle Festival."

Mongolia is a compelling destination: birthplace of Genghis Khan, one of the great – if most ruthless – leaders of all time; seat of history's largest contiguous empire; home to the planet's most intact grasslands and largest nomadic population; and full of empty landscapes. But with a fledgling tourist infrastructure, it's not for everyone. "Travel here isn't always seamless," Walker says. "It's definitely for the seasoned traveler looking to delve into the culture."

Autumn's Golden Eagle Festival in the Altai, along the western border with Kazakhstan and Russia, is one of the most obvious cultural lures, but so is Naadam, the July independence celebration of Mongolia's three traditional sports: wrestling, horse racing, and archery. These two events, along with the Gobi, which spans the country's southern border with China, are the country's largest tourist draws. Since spending time with eagle hunters is possible throughout the warmer months from roughly May to October, my wife and I planned our trip around the Naadam. Over ten days in July, we traveled from Ulaanbaatar, the central capital, to the Altai and Gobi to try to distill Mongolia's allures.

IN THE ALTAI, when Dayanbek emerges from her yurt, she's traded streetwear for brightly stitched satin beneath fox and rabbit furs. She carries Ana, nuzzling and stroking the bird to keep her calm. When they hunt, Dayanbek tells me, she rides on horseback with the 15-pound eagle on her arm until they find tracks, then she looses the raptor to triangulate from the sky. Once Ana locates a fox, she can dive at up to 150 miles per hour to dispatch her prey. Good training ensures that the creature returns to the hunter, a mandatory skill at the Golden Eagle Festival.

I ask Dayanbek whether she thinks she can win the festival again. "I don't really think about it," she says. "I like that people are interested in our traditions. But mostly I look forward to winter, when we can go to the mountains and hunt." Whether she knows it or not, her response captures the moment in Mongolia. With a rising tide of tourism, the country is contending with how to cater to visitors while remaining true to its heritage.

Visitors may flock to the Altai Mountains in October for the eagle festival, but in July, life goes on as it has for centuries. Nomadic Expeditions' Three Eagle Camp, at the foot of 13,783-foot Tsambagarav Mountain, is the region's only lodge, and for five nights my wife and I are its only guests. The 12-yurt camp is seasonal for now, though Nomadic is constructing a permanent structure. It's part of a plan to create camps throughout the country, allowing visitors to explore Mongolia via bush planes, without repeated connections through Ulaanbaatar.

Three Eagle's yurts look traditional, but where nomads' digs are decked with carpets, furs, and sparse furniture, these have hardwood floors, en suite bathrooms, and hand-carved furnishings. One yurt functions as a lounge, with maps and literature about the region; another is the dining tent, where plated service belies the remote setting. Yet thanks to local hospitality, we'll eat fewer meals here than we'd planned.

Aymoldyr Dayanbek and her eagle, Ana.

Nomadic culture dictates that hospitality is unconditional for everyone, friend or stranger. Even if there's no one home at a yurt, the door will always be open – there's hot tea and food for the taking, and a soft bed for a snooze. Given the steppe's huge distances, a friendly shelter and nourishment can mean survival. The culture is so ingrained, it's said that Genghis Khan's father knowingly consumed a poison-laced meal rather than refuse his enemies' hospitality.

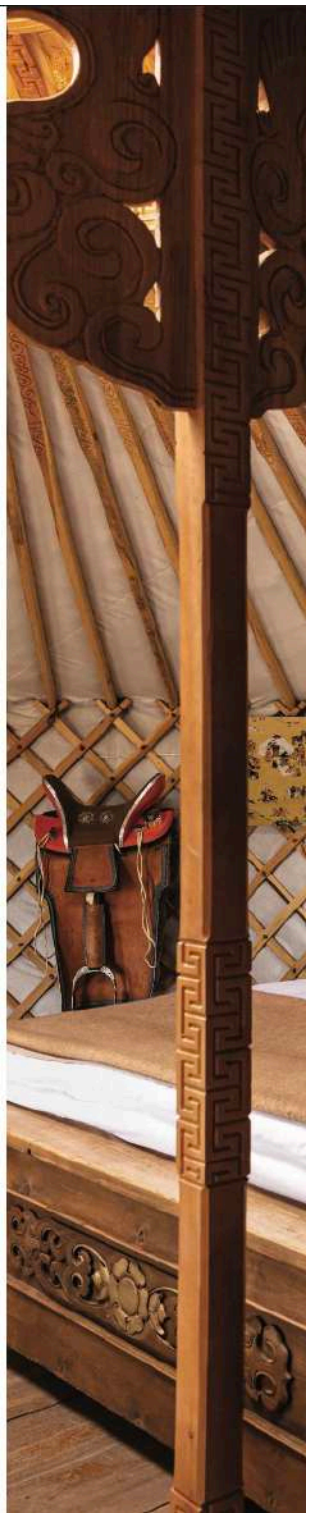
Our days in the Altai unfold on a revolving tour of nomads' homes. First up is a Kazakh family that has offered to demonstrate local equestrian games. On arrival, we're immediately offered plates of dehydrated yogurt chunks, fried dough biscuits, and mugs of *airag* (fermented mare's milk), followed by an ottoman-size platter of dried horse meat and mutton served over a mountain of rice.

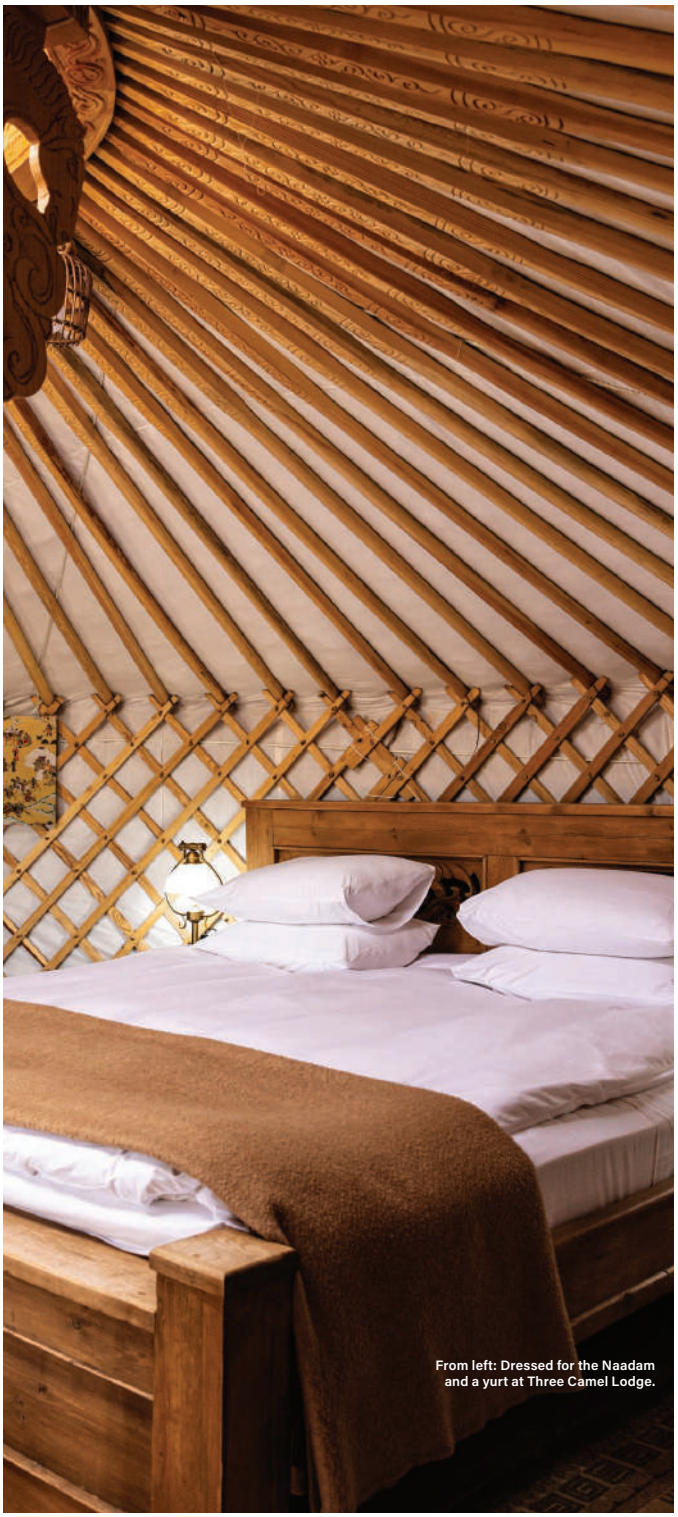
Equestrianism is a Mongol birthright stretching back to Genghis Khan's campaigns, and the family takes pride in showing their skills. First, Ayu Saylou, the family patriarch, and a brother-in-law play *khuk bar*, a tug-of-war over a goat skin where the biggest challenge is staying on the horse. Then there's *tenge ilu*, where Saylou snatches a coin from the ground at a full gallop. It's not only entertainment; every game builds riding skills. In the coming days, we'll encounter countless mounted shepherds pushing livestock over landscapes I didn't imagine horses could negotiate.

Though we don't leave Saylou's until late, we stop at another camp, where we're greeted by a stately gentleman in a gray *deel*, the traditional Mongolian robe. Dagvadorj Baatarkhuu, the local archery association chairman, has agreed to show us his craft – after milk tea and snacks. He and his brother craft traditional bows from ibex horns, bamboo, birch, and camel sinew, and he presents several he's finishing for the Naadam. After tea, he takes us outside to demonstrate the archery disciplines. Despite his credentials, he shoots and misses, shoots and misses.

Riders compete in a game of *khuk bar.*

Three Eagle Camp. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Ayu Saylou's horse-racing medals, archer Dagvadorj Baatarkhuu, Naadam wrestlers, and the festival's winning jockey.





From left: Dressed for the Naadam and a yurt at Three Camel Lodge.

His granddaughter cries, "You only hit two of 40!" Too much *airag* last night, Baatarkhuu confides. It's festival season after all.

The constant encounters with locals make this adventure feel like travel from a different time, when you could wander a landscape and interact with people going about their lives. Where itineraries in overtouristed destinations often feel canned, this is genuine discovery. Even when we climb high into the mountains to hike or spot argali sheep, shepherds on stout Mongol horses emerge from the landscape to brew tea on an open fire and chat.

"So much of travel today has become overcrowded," Urubshurow tells me. "But rural Mongolia isn't much different than it's always been. Food, shelter, and hospitality – it's still our unwritten code."

WHILE THE GOBI conjures visions of black stony plains, golden sand dunes, echoing canyons, and paleontological dig sites, the first thing you notice is the grass. A tawny carpet of needlegrass and swishing sage stretches in every direction to the horizon. This prairie is as inextricable from Mongolia's fortunes as its equestrian heritage. The open plains allowed Genghis Khan to feed the livestock that propelled his ambitions and covered the distances expansion required. In his push for empire, he sought silk, precious metals, and gemstones, and princesses for marriage. But the greatest plunder of all was the grasslands.

Urubshurow took this history to heart at Three Camel Lodge, Nomadic Expeditions' signature eco-resort in the Gobi. Huddled at the center of 40 guest yurts, the beam-and-stone lodge flanks a flaxen mesa with unobstructed prairie views. It's more permanent than Three Eagle, with guest rooms comprised of double yurts and a colonial-feeling lounge with porch swings.

The morning after our arrival, we speed across the prairie to Dalanzadgad, the regional capital, for the Naadam. The opening ceremonies are a cross between

an Olympic procession – participants lap the track to great fanfare – and a Disney-like extravaganza of performers in traditional costumes. It's a distinctly Kentucky Derby vibe, with spectators in white suits, satin *deels*, fedoras, and fascinators.

Best costumes go to the wrestlers, who sport shiny blue briefs, red boleros, and calf-high leather boots that would make Lil Nas X envious. Prior to the matches, each sumo-size wrestler performs the Eagle Dance, hopping around in slow motion with arms outstretched like wings. Then they pair off and engage, the goal being to knock your competitor to the ground. When these enormous men hit the grass, you can almost feel the quake.

At the horse races, the earth actually trembles. From the packed bleachers, a murmur rises from the crowd and people point west. A faint puff of dust appears on the horizon like an approaching sandstorm. A mob of horses and riders comes into focus. As the procession draws closer, I note the jockeys are boys, maybe 10 to 13 years old, chosen for their diminutive statures. Though they've been racing for 18 miles, two horses enter the arena neck and neck. Sweat glints in the afternoon sun, hooves thunder the ground, and the crowd is on its feet and screaming. The winner edges his competition by half a length. It's pandemonium in the stands.

Is there any greater honor in Mongolia than winning a horse race on the open steppe? You can almost see him channeling his inner Khan.

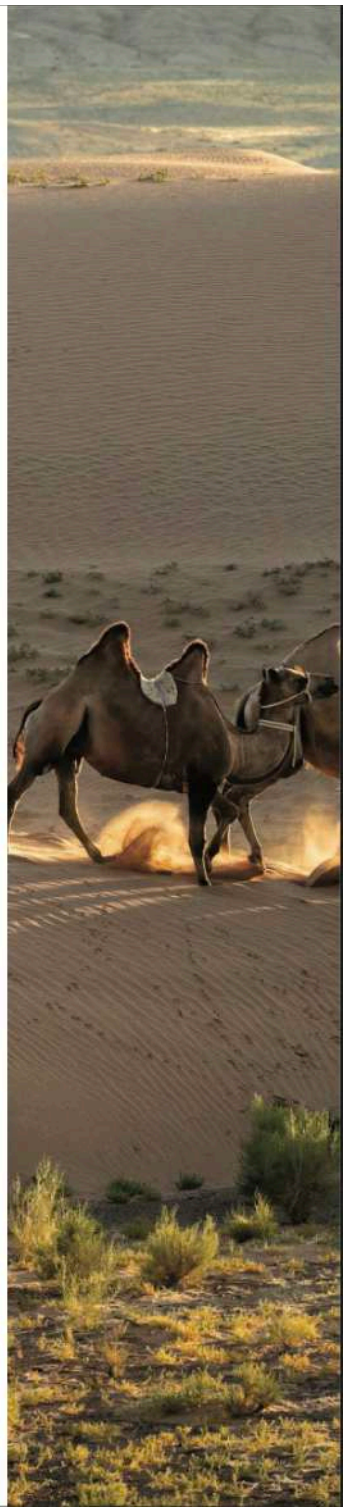
One big surprise of the Naadam is just how few tourists attend. At the country's most important cultural festival in its biggest tourist hub, you'd expect throngs of visitors, though I learn later that most take in the event in the capital. Here, it's overwhelmingly locals. As in the Altai, it feels like I've stumbled back a century.

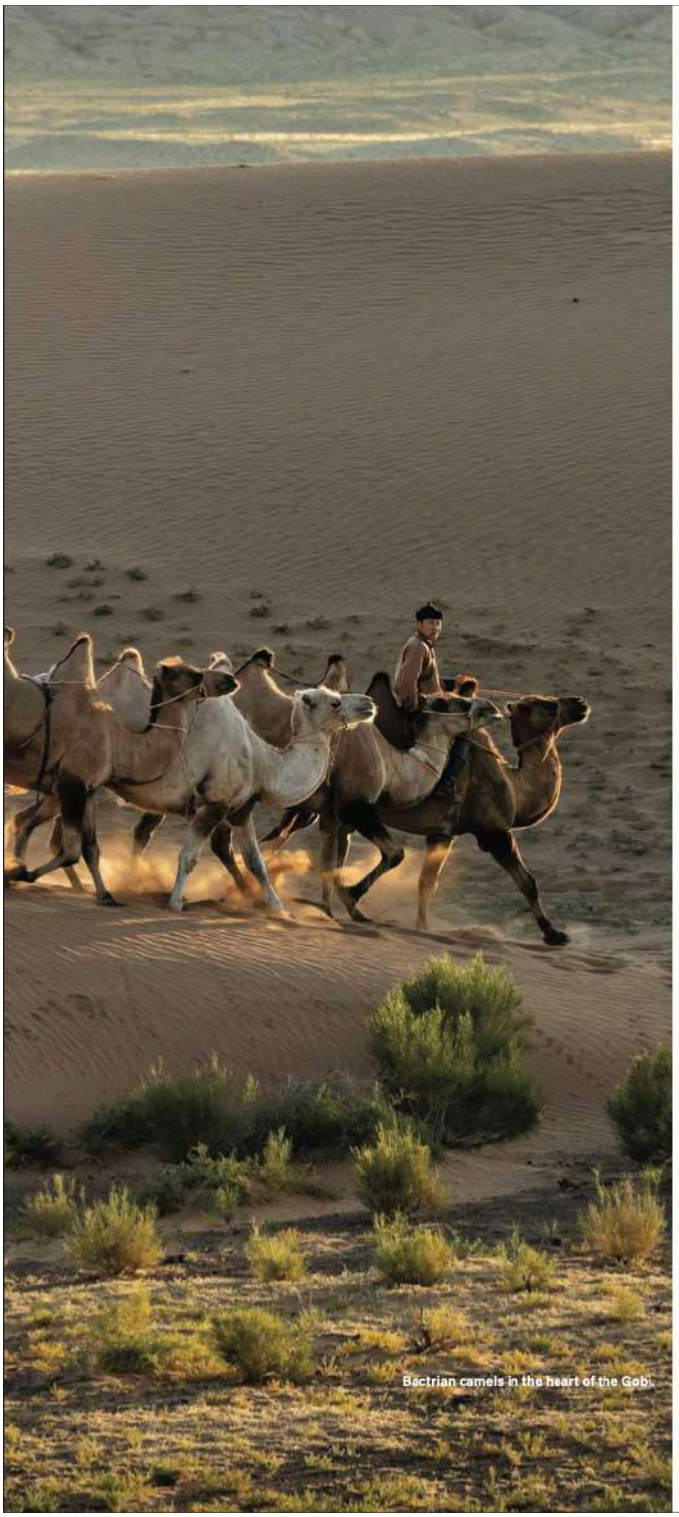
After the dust settles, a middle-aged man in a pink *deel* parades by on a bay steed. He's the owner of the horse that won, someone says. He asks if we'd like his photo, then sits up tall on his bay, chin jutted with pride. Is there any greater honor in Mongolia than winning a horse race on the open steppe? You can almost see him channeling his inner Khan.

OUR FINAL GOBI STOP is Bayan Zag – the Flaming Cliffs – famed as the location of the 1923 discovery of the first known fossilized dinosaur eggs. We climb around on Moab-like iron-red outcrops until our guide steers us off the path to the dunes below, where we meet Ulziitseren Sanjaadash, a Mongolian paleontologist who is waiting for us.

Sanjaadash squats beside a boulder and scratches at the sand with metal sculpting tools, then uses a paintbrush to reveal the white of bone. He soon unearths the skull of a *Protoceratops*, a four-legged dinosaur that ranged these lands 80 million years ago. Bayan Zag is considered played out by paleontologists, but Sanjaadash still pokes around and turned up the fossil a month ago. "There are more than 200 sites in Mongolia where we can dig for bones, but we can only afford ten expeditions annually," he says. "The potential is amazing. But we don't have the infrastructure." It's not unlike tourism in Mongolia. The country's travel network is still a little rough around the edges, but for anyone after a genuine, rugged cultural experience, that's a boon that won't last forever.

Sanjaadash is still awaiting permission to exhume the skull, which he anticipates hides an eight-foot skeleton beneath. So he gently re-covers it, then stacks stones on top to keep it safe. It will remain just another of Mongolia's hidden secrets – at least for now.





Bactrian camels in the heart of the Gobi.

MAKE FOR MONGOLIA

STAY The **Shangri-La Ulaanbaatar** is Mongolia's only luxury hotel, serving as a respite from the country's wild landscapes with 290 guest rooms decked in sleek wood and local fabrics. The breakfast buffet is a spectacle, and Hutong Restaurant serves the most authentic Chinese cuisine this side of Beijing (don't miss the spicy Sichuan pork ribs). *Virtuoso travelers receive breakfast daily and a $100 dining credit.*

GO **Nomadic Expeditions** not only runs the country's top lodges, it also provides some of the most plugged-in cultural experiences, from a private horsehead-fiddle concert to local performance art at Bayan Zag. A custom 12-day tour can include one-on-one experiences with eagle hunters in the west, meeting camel herders and viewing wildlife in the desert, and front-row seats at Ulaanbaatar's Naadam festival. *Departures: Any day through 2026. Naadam departures: July 3, 2026, and July 4, 2027.*

Natural Habitat Adventures' 11-day journey focuses on Mongolia's untamed landscapes and wildlife. At Hustai National Park, guests track elusive Mongolian wolves and *takhi*, one of the planet's last free-ranging horses. In the northern Gobi's Ikh Nart Nature Reserve, daily hikes bring face-to-face encounters with Eurasian griffon vultures and argali sheep. And in the Altai Mountains' Yamaat Valley, there's the chance to look for Siberian ibex and even snow leopards. *Departures: Multiple dates, May 24 through June 16, 2027.*

Abercrombie & Kent's ten-day Mongolia trip provides deep cultural insight with minimal domestic travel. Guests ride camels and discover ancient rock art in the south, delve into history with a day at Ulaanbaatar's Chinggis Khaan National Museum and a music-and-dance performance featuring local throat singers, and witness archery, wrestling, and horse-racing competitions. *Departures: July 4 and 9, 2026 and 2027.* ⚲