ABSOLUTENOMADS
ADVENTURE TRAVEL & TOURS

Beyond the Steppe: Naadam Festival Tour

Mongolia Tour

Overview

Our **Beyond the Steppe: Naadam Festival Tour** is a tour of many highlights. Flick through the pages of your nearest travel guide, and you'll see why.

Not only do we catch the country's most famous and well-known festival, **Naadam**, but we will travel further, stay with true Mongolian nomads, taste their food and enjoy their fantastic hospitality.

The summer is the best time to visit Mongolia. We'll journey across the steppe, hills and mountains, riding horses through lush alpine forests and travelling to remote glacial valleys with the aid of camels.

The adventure will not be easy, but we will do everything to make it enjoyable; if it's a traditional tour you're after, we can think of none better in Mongolia. There will be no need for social distancing as we journey to the country's far west, one of the least populated areas on the planet.

At the Naadam festival we will watch the famed three manly sports, **wrestling**, **archery** and **horseriding**, all of which are vital to saying you've truly visted Mongolia during Naadam.

If you want to see real Mongolia, then come with us. We've been following this route now for over nine years and, for us, we don't just stop by anyone's home, but those of our friends and family, which makes this adventure extra special. So, join us for twelve unforgettable Mongolian summer nights.

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What's Included?

Included:

- All Listed Meals
- All Listed Accommodation
- Internal Flights
- Local Guide / Tour Leader
- Visa Assistance
- Transport & Driver
- Water

Not Included:

- Flights to/from Mongolia
- Travel Insurance
- Snacks/Drinks/Extra Expenses
- Tips for Guides / Tour Leader



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Itinerary Overview

*Check out the brief overview of our **Beyond the Steppe: Naadam Festival Tour** – or scroll down to see the in-depth run through of each day of the trip.*

Day 1.	Arrival Day & Mongolian Introductions
Day 2.	Ulaanbaatar City Tour & Flight to Olgii
Day 3.	Khurgan & Khoton Lakes
Day 4.	Exploring Khurgan & Khoton Region
Day 5.	Tsagaan Gol & Shiveet Khairkhan Mountain
Day 6.	Trek to Potanin Glacier
Day 7.	Journey to Tsengle & Night with Wrestlers
Day 8.	Drive to Bayan Olgii
Day 9.	Drive to Tolbo Lake
Day 10.	Travel to Khovd & Visit a Shaman
Day 11.	Local Mongolian Naadam Festival
Day 12.	Return to Ulaanbaatar
Day 13.	Departure Day

Day 1

Arrival Day and Mongolian Introductions

Upon landing in Mongolia's capital, we make our way to our centrally located hotel to recharge before our adventure begins. If you're feeling energetic, you can take our optional walking tour to get your first taste of this fascinating city before returning for our **4pm hotel briefing**.

Here, we'll give you an overview of the country and culture along with some etiquette tips for visiting the homes of the Shamans, Kazakhs, and Tuvan people we'll meet along the way. Then join us for a city walk, this time by night. Get a glimpse of **Sükhbaatar Square**, named after the revolutionary hero **Damdinii Sükhbaatar**; the statues of **Genghis Khan** and other Mongolian generals are even more impressive when lit up at night.

Accommodation: *Hotel 9, Ulaanbaatar*

Included Meals: *Dinner*

For more information about the accommodation on this tour, check out the 'Accommodation' Tab on the Tour Page.

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Day 2

Ulaabaatar City Tour and Flight to Olgii

We start our day with a visit to **Gandantegchinlen**, Ulaanbaatar's largest Buddhist monastery, where we can see practising monks and learn about the role of Mongolia's largest religion.

After visiting **Ganden Monastery**, we'll head back to the city's heart, stopping for supplies at the **State Department Store**. Today privately owned, this is a throwback to the old Soviet sales system where everything is under one roof and you pay with multiple receipts before returning for your purchases. This is an ideal opportunity to stock up on trip supplies, even outdoor gear, so if you've discovered your sleeping bag has a hole, now's the time to upgrade.

After lunch, we'll take a two-hour flight to **Bayan Olgii** and pile into our **UAZ 452s**. We'll begin our drive as soon as we arrive, heading out into the **Altai Mountains** to **Khar Us Lake**. Bayan-Olgii (or Ulgii) Province, known locally as the 'Roof of Mongolia', is a remote land of glaciers and mountain peaks; travellers can go for days without seeing a soul. This area is home to the **Kazakh** people, practising Muslims and Mongolia's most significant ethnic group; here, we'll learn how nomadic life in the mountains differs from that on the steppe.

We'll stop by **mud-brick winter houses** that Kazakhs use when the temperature drops below -30*C in the winter months and the famed Kazakh yurts can't keep out the cold. As we journey, we will cross high passes and trundle through beautiful picturesque summer valleys made all the more stunning as herds of yak frolic in the sun.

We will arrive at our host eagle hunting family in the late afternoon in time to pitch our tents before learning a little more about the Kazakh way of life.

Most families keep their **golden eagles** for hunting rabbits, hares, and even small deer; it is even claimed that many eagle hunters treat their eagles as well as their children.

Accommodation: *Tourist Ger Camp*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 3

Khurgan and Khoton Lakes

Today's journey takes us through the western Mongolian wildlands, over moraines (glacial debris) and ancient burial sites, with stone-age rock carvings of animals and hunting scenes covering the mountainside. The spectacular **Khurgan** and **Khoton Lakes** lie at an altitude of 2,073 metres, surrounded by snow-capped mountains.

We'll set up camp not far from the shore of Khoton Lake amongst the trees of the high alpine forest alongside a local family. Once the tents have been erected and our friendly hosts have greeted us, it's time to relax.

You may wish to spend the afternoon relaxing, exploring, or swimming in the crystalline waters of the nearby lakes. After dinner, should you wish, we will interact a little more with our Kazakh hosts, enjoying their hospitality around an evening bonfire all the while the mighty snow-capped Altai mountains silhouette our stay.

The Altai mountains are a rocky border that divides the untamed nomadic lands of Mongolia from its vast southern neighbour, China.

Accommodation: *Camping*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 4

Exploring Khurgan and Khoton Region

For some, today may be a day of leisure and further relaxation whilst for others a day of exploration, adventure and excitement in this beautiful yet secluded part of the world.

For those who wish, it's an early wake-up to help our host family round up the herd to complete the morning milking.

After breakfast, you'll have a chance to enjoy some independent hiking in the surrounding hills, go for a dip in one of the glacial streams that run past the family's yurt, or head back to the lakes with one of the drivers and try your hand at a spot of fishing. (If you don't catch anything, don't worry, neither do they!)

For those who wish, this afternoon is your opportunity to ride the Mongolian horse most famed of all Mongolian animals. Our journey takes us on a three-hour round trip as we ride up into the foothills of the Altai mountains. We'll pass local nomadic encampments, bubbling brooks and raging rivers, our destination, one of Mongolia's largest waterfalls, **Turgen Falls.**

Turgen Falls sit in a most picturesque setting surrounded by alpine forests ,lush green summer meadows, and framed by the snow-capped peaks of the Altai range. If the weather is good, you may feel that you have just entered a chocolate bar commercial.

After returning to camp we'll have a chance to repack and prepare for tomorrow's long drive to Tavan Bogd National Park.

Accommodation: *Camping*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 5

Tsagaan Gol and Shiveet Khairkhan Mountain

After breakfast, we'll bid farewell to our host family and work our way through the mountains to reach the mouth of **Tsagaan Gol** (White River), a mighty water source with enough limestone deposits to give the milky river its name.

We'll stop for pictures at the stunning **Shiveet Khairkhan**, home to some of the best rock carvings in Mongolia. Shiveet Khairkhan is an important mountain, especially to the indigenous **Tuvan** people and the wide variety of animals that call this remote mountain their home. Each year Tuvan shamans climb to Shiveet's summit and perform various rituals, making offerings to the local ghosts and paying ancestral respects. The Tuvan are traditional herders found across the region renowned for their archery skills.

As we draw nearer to the National Park entrance, we'll begin to catch glimpses of **Tavan Bogd (Five Saints)**, a mountain massif on the border of Mongolia, China and Russia, our destination.

Once we have passed through the park entrance, completing the formalities as needed, we'll build our camp for the night. The area is beautiful, surrounded by the region's most beautiful peaks, along with the roaring sound of the white river. After a bit of exploration and a visit to a local Tuvan family, we will tuck into another fine meal, served up in the warmth of our very own Ger.

Accommodation: *Camping*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 6

Trek to Potanin Glacier

We'll leave our vehicles and none essential luggage at the foot of the mountains today. The kit needed for our overnight stay is to be carried by our camels. We will then begin our trek up **Tavan Bogd** with the help of our local Tuvan guide.

The journey to the camp is around **15 kilometres**, located next to the stunning **Potanin Glacier**, Mongolia's largest. The hike is truly unique as we walk across lush alpine tundra, through mountain valleys and cross bubbling mountain brooks, all the while rewarded by views of untouched mountains. Once at our camp, we can relax and soak up the area's ambience; the distant rumble of mountain avalanches and the crackling can be heard in the distance.

After lunch and a good old cup of tea, we'll follow our local guide for a hike up over the moraines to look at the natural marvel of the Potanin Glacier. From a distance, the moraines look small, but it will take over an hour to reach the glacier. Once there, should you wish, we would only advise walking on its frozen surface with the assistance of the local guide. Around the glacier, the ring of mountains makes this breathtaking journey truly awe-inspiring.

Once we have finished our exploration, it's back to camp for a well-deserved meal and rest as we bed down early, making use of our warm sleeping bags before the evening chill sets in.

Accommodation: *Camping*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 7

Journey to Tsengle and Night with Wrestlers

Today we'll make the journey back down the valley. For those who rented horses yesterday, you have the option again today, or you can walk with the others back to the Tsagaan Gol ranger station, where our trucks and drivers will be waiting.

As we walk down through these mountain valleys, it is truly amazing to see the small rivers and streams from the glacier forming into the mightly **White River**. Once repacked and refreshed, we'll continue the adventure and board our UAZs.

We'll retrace some of our journey down the long valley, eventually passing small local villages, now sparsely populated if at all. At one of these small habitations, we will stop to visit one of the caretaker families, with whom we will enjoy a cup of tea and see his central ward, the local school. We'll drive on to make camp in the beautiful **Tsengle Valley** tonight, close to the Khovd River, where we camp near another local family we have known for several years.

Tonight, our host family are locally known wrestlers, so should you be thinking about entering Naadam as a wild card entrant, I am sure our host will oblige with a few tips and pointers.

Before dinner tonight, there is the possibility of washing and freshening up in one of the small tributaries and enjoying a few drinks or snacks from the nearby village.

Accommodation: *Camping*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 8

Drive to Bayan Olgii

We bid farewell to our Nomadic friends and take a scenic **drive back to Olgii**, where we'll spend the night in a **Kazakh Tourist Camp**, stopping for pictures and greeting nomad families along the way. We may also catch a local festival nestled in this mountainous region if we're lucky.

This afternoon we will have time to explore **Bayan Ulgii's** capital, **Olgii** city. Olgii is an exciting place with a mix of Soviet period architecture and more recent builds.

Olgii Market is a perfect site to pick up a few bargains and souvenirs and if you don't need to shop, then people-watching and photography is also an excellent option.

From the market, we will continue to the **Central Mosque**, a great way to learn a little about the religion in this region. The Central mosque is a newer building, brightly coloured and welcoming, a true reflection of the people in this part of remote Mongolia.

The city centre is also interesting to explore the home to an ageing yet interesting Soviet period history museum and numerous newer built but refreshing coffee shops. After exploring the town, we will make one final stop at an impressive mountain viewpoint offering views over Olgii city and the surrounding countryside.

Our ger camp tonight is a real treat after the past few days under canvas - hot and cold running water, showers, and beds. This evening after an authentic regional Kazakh meal, we'll have the chance to listen to some **traditional Kazakh music** from a group of musicians trying to keep part of their Kazakh culture alive. They will serenade us playing Dombra and Jetigen.

Accommodation: *Tourist Ger Camp*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

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Day 9

Drive to Tolbo Lake

We'll leave **Olgii City** at a more leisurely pace, our drive made all the easier on one of the country's newer roads as we head east to the picturesque **Tolbo Lake**. Tolbo sits at an altitude of 2,080 meters. It is famous for its remote beauty, and as the site of a crucial 1921 battle between the Bolshevik and White Russian forces – the locals still find belt buckles and buttons in the field.

We will not only spend the night in gers by the side of the lake but have the chance for further enjoyment of the area. You'll have time to swim or bathe in the lake's clear waters, or just unwind and take in the mountain views. The site also boasts lovely hiking routes around the shoreline and over the protruding rocky outcrops, perfect for a bit of exercise or to catch some fantastic photos of the gorgeous surroundings.

In the evening our team will provide another delicious meal, after which you may choose to visit the on-site sauna or take an early night before tomorrow's adventure.

Accommodation: *Tourist Ger Camp*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

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Day 10

Travel to Hovd and a Visit a Shaman

This morning, the hardy amongst you may want to take a chilly early morning dip in the lake or sip on a coffee and watch the sunrise above Tolbo; no matter your choice, after breakfast it's back into our trucks as we journey on to the last leg of our adventure. We'll head east, leaving Bayan Olgii behind us and entering Khovd, our destination is Khovd city which will be our home for the next few nights.

Khovd City is the province's capital, established in the early 17th century. Khovd has a rich history and it is home to 10 ethnic groups and not commonly on the tourist trail so it makes for an interesting stop on our adventure.

Once we have pulled into town and checked into our gers, we'll immediately use our time by visiting the local **Uriankhai Shaman**.

Although predominantly a Tibetan Buddhist country, Shamanism is still an essential part of many people's everyday life in Mongolia, especially in these more rural parts. We will witness some of the ancient and mysterious rituals that the community still holds dear such as mirrors that repel evil spirits or sacred fire and water.

Following our Shamanistic introduction to Khovd, we will also call at the **local monastery**, which is in a picturesque setting on the city's outskirts, home to a few resident monks, and a perfect stop to learn further about the religion of the region.

From temple to market we go as we stop at another important local institution; **Khovd Market** is found at the heart of the city and will likely be busy as many locals prepare for tomorrow's big holiday, **Naadam**. Naadam sees most locals wanting to look their best, opting to wear their traditional dress, the Deel, and prepare a few meals for friends and family from afar. We will call at the local market and check out the best dress shop in town, perfect for photographers and those into local traditions alike. They may not have time to suit and boot you, but its great to see.

After our slice of local life, we'll return to our ger camp in time to charge those all-important batteries ready for tomorrow's big day, Nadaam!

Accommodation: *Toruist Ger Camp*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 11

Local Mongolian Naadam Festival

Although there have already been many highlights on this adventure, today is an important one as it is the **Naadam Festival**; this annual event takes place all across the country drawing many nomadic folk from their isolated existence to designated hubs to celebrate.

Naadam is held in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, provincial capitals, small towns and even pre-arranged points out in the middle of nowhere.

Ulaanbaatar's Naadam is the most widely known, but that is now the domain of overcrowded tour buses, overpriced tickets and a tad sterile. For us, a world-famous cultural event such as this should be celebrated at its roots with the real, local people. **Khovd's Naadam** is still a truly local affair, virtually unchanged over generations. Khovd town is a rural town for many Mongolians gathering for this fantastic event.

Naadam in Khovd draws people from all over the region, with some locals even returning from overseas. To compete in the traditional events is a real honour – especially wrestling, horse racing and archery and even lesser-known events such as ankle bone shooting.

Naadam is also a time for families and friends to reconnect, share their news eat their favourite foods, and maybe even find a future husband or wife.

Whilst attending, we'll learn a lot more about the events, such as the unusual wrestling costume of undershorts and an open waistcoat. Legend has it that a woman in disguise once outwrestled all the men and so, to prevent future humiliation, the outfits were altered.

Our aim today is to view the **opening ceremony**, watch the **wrestling**, **archery** and **ankle bone shooting** which all take place in the same location. Following a local Naadam lunch, we will head out of town to catch a few of the **long-distance horse races**.

Once all of the excitement is over, we will head back to our ger camp for one more treat of local **Mongolian Throat Singing**.

Accommodation: *Tourist Ger Camp*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

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Day 12

Return to Ulaanbaatar

Leaving our horses, camels, and Russian jeeps behind for good, we'll board our plane and return to **Ulaanbaatar**. The flight takes us out across central Mongolia, from where the views from the plane will drive home how vast this country really is.

We should arrive back in Mongolia's capital around lunchtime; after we havetransferred to our hotel, you'll have the rest of the day free.

This afternoon, time permitting, you can shop 'til you drop at the **city market**, the **State Department Store** or search out one of the many souvenir shops. Cheap cashmere, felt curios, leather bags and purses, and Soviet antiques are often the pick of the day,

History lovers can stop by one of the many museums found in the capital or walk to the beautiful **Winter Palace of the Bogd Khan** (1869-1922), who became Khagan (theocratic ruler) when the country split from China in 1911.

If none of the above appeal after our nomadic expedition, you may just wish to chill and relax with a coffee or cocktail at an outdoor café and watch this fascinating city unfold before you.

Before we say goodbye, we'll have one more meal together at one of Ulaanbaatar's popular haunts where we will enjoy a mix of food and a few goodbye drinks to boot.

Accommodation: *Hotel 9, Ulaanbaatar*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 13

Departure Day

Pack your souvenirs, dirty clothes, memories, and have a safe trip home!

For those adventurous souls that can't stop travelling, you'll have the option to join our **Gobi Explorer Tour**. If you wish to add this, don't hesitate to contact your tour manager for more information.

END OF TOUR