ABSOLUTENOMADS
ADVENTURE TRAVEL & TOURS

Ride with the Tsataan Reindeer Herders

Mongolia

Itinerary Overview

Join us as we venture through the wild north of Mongolia in search of the elusive Tsataan peoples and their majestic reindeer. On this adventure we'll travel across the wintery landscapes of this beautiful country, passing Buddhist temples, frozen rivers, and visiting ancient ritual shaman.

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Day 1

Arrival in Ulaanbaatar

The adventure begins with your arrival in Ulaanbaatar's Chinggis Khan International Airport where one of our drivers will be there to meet you and transfer you to the group hotel in the heart of the nation's capital, just a stone's throw from the central square.

The group will meet in the hotel lobby today at 1pm and make our way through the city towards Narantuul Market, known locally as the Black Market, this covered market is home to everything from traditional clothes and nomadic riding gear to bicycles and jewellery. We'll spend our afternoon exploring the many weird and wonderful goods on sale and perhaps finding the odd souvenir from deep within the winding alleyways of the market.

After the market, we'll head back towards the city centre where we'll explore the city's central square, named Sukhbaatar Square after the revolutionary hero Damdin Sukhbaatar. The square is home to many important Soviet-era government and cultural buildings which have retained their beautiful architecture over the centuries.

Finally, we'll head out for our first group meal of the trip and have a pre-tour briefing to cover the many adventures that lie ahead!

Accommodation: *Hotel 9, Ulaanbaatar*

Included Meals: *Dinner*

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Day 2

Explore the Mongolian Capital

Today we have the whole day to explore the so-called 'Red Hero City' of Ulaanbaatar, capital of Mongolia. So, departing our hotel, we'll make our way to the west of the city to our first destination; the Gandantegchinlen Khiid, or Gandan Monastery.

Gandan Monastery is the centre for Buddhism in Mongolia, the country's most widespread religion. The centrepiece of the monastery complex is a the largest temple, which is actually Ulaanbaatar's oldest permanent buildings, inside which stands a huge sandalwood statue which truly needs to be seen to be believed. After mixing with local worshippers and experiencing the wonder of the Buddha statue, we'll head into the main, modern monastery building, where local monks and ordinary Mongolians will be praying, chanting, or paying their respects.

Heading back into the heart of the city, we'll make a stop at the Soviet-era State Department Store, known locally as Ih Delguur, literally meaning 'The Big Shop. This is a chance to pick up any last minute equipment before our adventure, buy souvenirs, cashmere, washing machines, anything you might want to pick up for the trip.

As we leave the department store, we'll pass by the intriguing and kitsch Beatles Statue before walking back to our hotel for final preparations for our city departure and check-out.

Leaving the hotel, we'll pay a visit to the National History Museum where we'll be able to learn a little about the history of Mongolia, and perhaps pick up some information about traditional culture and the many different ethnic groups which make up the population of this country.

Finally, we'll visit a local supermarket where you'll be able to pick up anything you want for dinner as tonight we'll be on an overnight train heading north from Ulaanbaatar.

The train will depart at 6pm, so after the supermarket we'll head directly to the capital's railway station, board our train, and settle in for the overnight trundle through the countryside towards our destination; Erdenet.

Accommodation: *Overnight Train*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch*

Day 3

Erdenet City

This morning we'll awake onboard our overnight train as we slowly pull in to the Erdenet City Railway Station. We're scheduled to arrive at 07:30am, so once we arrive and alight the train, we'll head into the city to find some breakfast.

After breakfast, we'll head into the city centre to explore the many treasures that Mongolia's second-largest city has to offer. From the grand Soviet-era monument dedicated to the communist icons Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx, to the grand Russia-Mongolia Friendship monument which celebrates the close relationship between Ulaanbaatar and Moscow.

Erdenet itself is a great industrial city, home to the country's largest copper mine. Before leaving the city, we'll head to a lookout point from where this huge mining operation can be seen – a testament to Mongolia's industrial heartland.

However, our journey must continue, and we'll leave Erdenet with another provincial capital as our destination, the city of Murun.

'City' may be a slightly too grandiose term for Murun, however, it serves as the capital of Khovsgol Province, one of Mongolia's most naturally beautiful regions and a popular holiday spot for Mongolian locals.

Arriving in Murun, we'll head directly to the city centre to experience the hustle and bustle of winter life in this far-flung settlement, before paying a visit to a buddhist monastery to contrast the grand monasteries of the capital with the intimate, local temples of the countryside provinces.

Finally, we'll finish the day's adventure with a visit to a nearby hill from where the entire settlement can be seen, before heading to dinner. Over dinner, we'll prepare for our departure from Murun tomorrow, and our trip deep into the untouched wilderness of Mongolia's far north.

Accommodation: *Hotel in Murun*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 4

Deer Stones & Taiga Forests

This morning we'll pack up, board our trusty vehicles and leave Murun, the final outpost of civilisation as we continue our adventure north.

Today is mostly a road trip through the wilderness of Mongolia. With regular stops for wildlife and nature photography, this drive will take around 6-7 hours and demonstrate how incredibly vast Mongolia truly is.

Our destination is a small village named Ulaan Uul, literally, 'Red Mountain' which will serve as a staging post as we make our way along the winding tracks towards the reindeer herders.

As we near the village, passing through taiga forests, we'll make a stop at a real highlight of the Mongolian countryside; Deer Stones.

Deer Stones are bronze-age carved stones which exist across Mongolia and date back to the first nomadic peoples who inhabited this region. Whilst most places around the world would hide their ancient artefacts in museums or behind protective glass, the sparse nature of Mongolia means these Deer Stones stand exactly as they did thousands of years ago when they were built.

Pulling into Ulaan Uul, we'll head directly to our guesthouse for some dinner and sleep before continuing our adventure tomorrow!

Accommodation: *Guesthouse (No Single Supplement Available)*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 5

Visiting the Reindeer Herders

This morning we'll wake early and get back on the road, continuing our off-road adventure in search of the nomadic reindeer herders. Today, we'll aim to reach these distant reindeer families, so our plan for today is to trundle along deeper into the wilderness, passing by remote villages, until we finally arrive at the reindeer encampment.

These people are not typical nomadic Mongolians – the reindeer herders are their own distinct ethnic group known as the Tsataan or Dukha. These peoples live in northern Mongolia and the adjascent part of Russian Siberia and have their own endangered language. They are considered some of the world's earliest domesticators of any animal, a lifestyle they continue to this day.

Arriving at the encampment, we'll meet with the families, learn a little about their culture and traditions, before settling into our sleeping quarters in their traditional encampment.

Accommodation: *Reindeer Encampment (No Single Supplement Available)*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 6

Day with the Tsataan Herding Family

Today we'll take a break from driving and spend a full day with the reindeer and their herders. A chance to not only learn about the lifestyle, but get hands-on experience of what its like to live nomadically in Siberia in the 21st century.

From helping the families with daily chores and asking questions about the traditions and culture, we'll also have a chance to try riding reindeer, and then riding more traditional horses alongside the nomads for a short exploration around their encampment to learn about the area these people have called home for centuries.

As the day continues, we'll join the family for lunch and dinner, before finally settling down once again in our sleeping quarters for another night amongst the nomads.

Accommodation: *Reindeer Encampment (No Single Supplement Available)*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 7

Winter Wonderland Forest River

Today we'll bid farewell to our local hosts, and (more importantly) their beautiful reindeer.

After breakfast we'll board our vehicles once again and depart the encampment, making our way towards the small, remote village of Renchinlkhumbe. After enjoying lunch in this far-flung town, we'll make an afternoon excursion to a hidden, beautiful corner of this majestic province.

Our destination this afternoon is the Jargant river. This river winds its way gracefully through the snowy taiga forests which blanket this region. The area we'll be stopping in has a true Winter Wonderland feel to it. The top of the river freezes over, however, beneath the ice the water continues to flow.

After spending time photographing, relaxing, and enjoying the stunning winter scenery of Khovsgol Province, we'll board our vehicles once more and head back to the village for our overnight stop in a local guesthouse.

Over dinner, we'll discuss our adventure so far, and prepare for another incredible excursion to Mongolia's most famous lake tomorrow!

Accommodation: *Guesthouse (No Single Supplement Available)*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 8

Frozen Khovsgol Lake

This morning we'll leave our guesthouse and its hosts and strike out once again into the countryside. Today, our destination is Khovsgol Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Mongolia, known as Khovsgol or Khuvsgul Lake.

Our drive today will take us over the picturesque Jigleg mountain pass, after which, the distant blue shine of Khovsgol will become visible.

Khovsgol Lake is known locally for its extreme natural beauty and is a popular holiday excursion destination for the Mongolian people. During the summer, vacation activities populate the region, and during winter, the area is outstanding in its natural views. From deep blue ice covering the lake itself to the snow-covered trees lining the banks.

Upon arrival, weather-permitting, we'll drive out onto the lake – the thickness of the ice means during the winter its perfectly safe to walk, sled, or drive on the surface of Khovsgol.

Finally, we'll head to our local ger camp on the shores of the lake – a chance to stay in a traditional Mongolian ger, similar in design to the more-famous yurt, and a dwelling used in Mongolia for centuries.

Accommodation: *Local Ger Camp*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 9

Horse-Sledding, Frozen Ships & Traditional Shaman

Today we have a full day to explore and enjoy Khovsgol Lake. Aside from the incredible natural beauty, there's plenty to do.

We'll have the option to jump on to a horse-sled and venture out onto the ice under traditional Mongolian horsepower. We'll also head to visit the frozen ships, boats and ships which traverse the waves of the lake during the summer which have been frozen in place by the winter ice.

Despite being a landlocked country without need for a navy, Mongolia does have an informal navy with only seven men and one ship named the Sukhbaatar III which will be frozen on the lake during our visit.

We'll also pay a visit to so-called fisherman's island, not much of an island during the winter, before heading back to camp for a rest before our late afternoon activity begins – a visit to a local shaman.

Shamanism in Mongolia is one of the most widely-practised spiritual beliefs, alongside Buddhism. These shamans practice a traditional form of spirituality, contacting spirits, healing local people, and telling the future. The experience of a traditional shamanic ritual is an unforgettable one, and certainly a highlight of our visit to Khovsgol, if not of the entire trip!

Accommodation: *Local Ger Camp*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 10

Return to Erdenet City

This morning its time to bid farewell not only to the frozen lake, but to the wilderness altogether as we begin our journey south.

Today is another long drive as we make our way back towards Erdenet city. As we travel, we'll make sure to stop for photos as the vast taiga forests make way to the grand, snow-covered steppe of Central Mongolia.

Arriving in Erdenet city, we'll head straight to the hotel for a chance to relax after our action packed winter adventure. The adventure isn't over though! Tomorrow we'll make one more incredibly impressive stop before our return into the city.

Accommodation: *Hotel in Erdenet*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 11

Amarbayasgalant Monastery

This morning we'll awaken to our final full day in Mongolia. Our plan for today is to return to the nation's capital, Ulaanbaatar. However, besides the wonderful scenery on the drive, we have one more highlight to stop at before ending the trip.

Between Erdenet and Ulaanbaatar sites the Amarbayasgalant Monastery, a remote monastery located on the vast Mongolian steppe. Built in the 1700s on the orders of the Qing Emperor, the monastery was designed as a mausoleum for Zanabazar, the first Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, spiritual Buddhist leader of Mongolia. The design is distinctly Chinese, compared to other monasteries around the country which display a mixture of Tibetan and east-Asian styles. Supposedly built on this spot to commemorate the location where Zanabazar was camped at the moment of his death.

As we finish our spiritual exploration of the monastery, we'll begin our final drive back into Ulaanbaatar.

Upon arrival, we'll have our final group meal – a chance to share stories of our adventure, swap photos, and chat about our incredible experiences.

Accommodation: *Hotel 9, Ulaanbaatar*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 12

Departure Day

Today is departure day. We hope you'll be heading home with a phone full of incredible photos and a head full of unforgettable memories.

We'll provide airport transfers between the group hotel and Chinggis Khan International Airport. Alternatively, speak to your tour manager if you'd be interested in extensions to visit other parts of Mongolia.

END OF TOUR

Included Meals: *Breakfast*