

## Mongolia

Facts and Impressions

Rhonda Cole July 2023

Mongolia is land locked between Russia to the north and China to the south and east. It stretches 2392 km west to east and 1259km north to south. The population is 3.42 million with most people speaking dialects of their own Mongolian language although the western province of Bayan Ulgii it is mainly Kazakh from the Muslim Kazakhstan influence. They use the Cyrillic ( Russian) alphabet. Most of the country is Buddhist with historical Shaman connections still evident. The official currency is Tunrug with only notes (no coins), for a rough conversion when shopping I would knock off the 3 zeros and halve the number (so 50000MNT is about \$22Aus). You had to carry a great wad of notes.

A brief history – Mongolia has been largely nomadic through out history. Probably because of the terrain/ climate. Wide open Steppes and the various Gobi areas and snow covered much of the year. The Turks dominated for much of the first 1000 years of the CE , then Chinggis Khan unified the Mongolian empire followed by his 4 sons who ruled of a huge area taking in across the Ukraine, Persia, Armenia, Pakistan Burma, China ,Russia. This was taken over by his grandson Kublia khan and after only about 160 years imploded similarly to the roman empire. After this followed 4 Ming invasion and a Manchurian incursion from China. In the 1920's the soviets came in with communism until the 1990's when the USSR collapsed. The Soviets had seen off the Japanese from the eastern fringes early in 1930/40s.

The timing of my trip was to coincide with the Naadam Festival which is the national event celebrating largely around horse riding, their particular wrestling, archery and a very different game of knuckle bones! We had front row seats for the opening ceremony which was a spectacular event. The pageantry and sense of pride that went with it! Present day service men on horseback in full dress immaculately turned out but my favourite were those dressed in battle armoury from the great Khan empire time. Picture if you will, a guy (with a 'biscuit ' of hay on his back )at full gallop being shot at with arrows by another rider at full gallop while they ride around the arena ...and the four arrows stuck ! I even enjoyed the wrestling more skill and less theatrics than the 'hulk hogan' type. These guys really are local heros. Further along in our travels we witnessed the celebrations for locals who had won at the festival in Ulaanbaatar. The knuckle bone competition is too hard to explain here but I guess it came about from being stuck in a ger through a cold snowy winter.

Ger ...( in Turkey they call them yurt ) ..a circular tent of felt or skins on a collapsible framework. We spent 10 nights touring and staying in these white mushroom shaped tents. They where set in little camp sites with central buildings for ablutions and restaurant.

We travelled in comfort- 4 black 4wd Lexus v8 and 1 white 4wd Landcruiser. The drivers spoke no English but the guide rotated thro cugh our vehicles. On the first day out of the city I was lucky to have the Biologist from Hastai National Park in my car. This is where some of the worlds last wild horses roam. The takhi or Przewalski's horse is native to the steppe grasslands and had nearly vanished. This park has reintroduced the species with a successful

Captive breeding program for these stocky, coffee-coloured horses that have never been domesticated.

And so our days continued watching, learning, sharing as we met people like the lady who milks 17 yaks twice day then uses the milk to Scalded cream (yum) ,yogurt , 3 different cheeses ( I liked the ricotta / feta type ) and a clear spirit (alcohol made in a home made wooden still ) all made in her little ger . She even spins the yak hair. Others also milk goats, sheep, camels and horses. Fermented mare's milk is a national drink and was sold in stalls at the festival, it is about 3%alcohol. I didn't try it the smell was enough for me. The mares are milk every 2hours throughout the day and the foal is on them at night. I suspect there are more animals than people. Much of the Gobi has had low rainfall for a number of years and this shows through in the condition of the camels particularly. Being just past the summer solstice they were shedding their winter coats and had very 'droopy' humps ( Bactrian Domesticated ...2 humps ) .

Most roads are non-existent and are just tracks heading in the general direction if it gets rough or wet you just make a new one! Only saw 3 bitumen roads after we left the city one going west from Ulaanbaatar and one coming in from the south ,the other was built by RioTinto mine supplies. Bogged once, drivers walked though running water on a few occasions , they changed brake pads , brake lines along the way, carrying supplies with them . Quite an adventure. Also visited a cashmere factory, wish I lived in Melbourne to justify the beautiful coats. The traditional Mongolian song and dance performance was enjoyable and interesting with their throat singing but I think I enjoyed meeting and 'talking' with the country folk we met the most. Interestingly I felt the throat singing sounded rather like a digeridoo without an instrument. Bumped into Kevin's cousin ( Hannah Chitty's g.aunt) at the Naadam festival , you can't go anywhere! So much to think about and I haven't even followed up on my notes to myself for further research yet! I hope you enjoyed my snap shot.









