Mongolia – a horserider's paradise

Vast steppes, mountains and lakes in the nomadic land of central Mongolia (Arkhangai Province)

The anticipation is huge, the trip has been planned for months and finally the time has come – my journey to Mongolia begins. However, between here and the starting point in central Mongolia, there are still two hours by train, ten hours by plane and five hours by minibus. Quite exhausted, we finally arrive in Ulan Bator at 7 a.m., where our friendly translator Ogi is already waiting for us. First, we need to exchange money, as the local currency, the tugrik, cannot be imported. However, this is not so easy, as the exchange office does not open until 9 a.m. Not particularly business-minded, considering that most international flights arrive between 5 and 7 a.m. Fortunately, there is still a bank and, of course, cash machines, so we manage to get hold of some money after all. We then meet the driver team, Dschimbat & Dschimbaya, and cook Chara. The two minibuses that will accompany us over the next few days are already fully loaded and we are about to set off on our journey into the steppe. As soon as we have left the shabby houses and dirty streets of Ulan Bator behind us, we take a break in the steppe and are served breakfast while the notorious Mongolian wind sweeps over our heads.
At least the sun is shining; in Germany, the summer has been quite rainy so far. At lunchtime, we take another break in the open air and enjoy Chara's vegetable stew, which also tastes great in the vegetarian version without mutton. Our cook is the heart and soul of the team and, in addition to her excellent cooking skills, also has a degree in Chinese medicine. On the road, she also offers us painful but extremely soothing massages.

Our first destination is a well-kept yurt camp at the foot of a rocky mountain, the Khogno Khan, which rises steeply from the steppe. The road there is bumpy with numerous potholes, one of the few paved roads in Mongolia. The notoriously harsh and long winter obviously takes its toll on the roads. For five hours, we drive through the endless expanse, where only two or three yurts appear from time to time. Again and again, our driver has to honk his horn to make his way through large herds of cattle, horses, sheep and goats. The animals look at the few cars with complete composure and move only hesitantly off the road.

In the evening, we go on a short hike with Ogi to the other side of Khogno Khan, where there is a small Buddhist monastery complex. The view of the vast golden-yellow steppe along the way is enchanting: on one side are massive rocks, and in the distance, a long sand dune rises out of the steppe, glowing in the evening sun.

In the morning, we enjoy one last lukewarm shower before having to do without for the next 10 days. Then we head first to Erdene Zuu Monastery, the pride of the former capital Karakorum, once the cultural and economic centre of the entire East. Since Russia destroyed large parts of the Buddhist temple complexes during its rule over Mongolia, we can consider ourselves lucky that so many buildings have been preserved here. The colourful, curved temples house numerous treasures such as paintings and gilded Buddha statues.

After lunch, we get back into the minibus and continue through the steppe until Dschimbaya suddenly stops at a group of tethered horses. Yay – our ride begins! After a quick glance and two or three words from our translator, our two young riding guides assign the horses. The allocation proves to be ideal and we are all completely satisfied with our horses. Now it's time to saddle up, but the guides don't let anyone interfere with their work. The Russian saddles, with their simple wooden tree and unpadded leather cover (weight approx. 2 kg), don't exactly look comfortable. However, the minimalist frames soon prove to be quite comfortable and I ride the entire time without sheepskin. Once our guides Njama and Baska have come to terms with the long stirrups of our 1.80 m tall fellow rider, we are ready to go. They would have loved to shorten her stirrups by at least 10 cm, so now her feet reach the pony's "knees". Our first short ride takes us at all gaits to a pretty riverbank where we pitch our tents. On the way, we encounter a colourful herd of horses roaming freely in the steppe – a wonderful sight, especially as there are now many little foals among them at the beginning of June. When we arrive, our guides put foot restraints on three horses, and the rest are simply tied to the necks of these horses with ropes. Immediately, the horses lay their heads on their neighbours' shoulders and wait patiently for two hours until after our dinner. While in Europe the horses are always taken care of first, here it is clearly the people who come first. We will get used to it; the animals have long since done so. In the evening, we enjoy our first campfire under the clear, sparkling starry sky of the steppe. Only once do two of the horses, which have now been tethered, try to steal away. Baska quickly jumps onto the back of another horse and

follows them across the river. Riding with only a halter, he quickly catches the two runaways. As I am about to crawl into my tent at 11 o'clock, I hear another loud splash just a few metres away. No doubt, it must be our horses, who are apparently trying to escape their work as trail riding horses. I wake the guides and sure enough, we only count 7 of the 9 horses. They immediately swing themselves back onto the backs of two horses and disappear into the pitch-dark night. They don't want my headlamp – Mongolians can probably find their way even blindfolded and without a bridle. Before I hear them come back, I fall asleep.

The next morning, the two runaways are back in place, but now another horse is missing, presumably having run back to its herd. Its rider is given the replacement horse for the time being, and we set off for Hoton, where we visit an ancient historical yurt. The small "museum" is nice, but the huts in the village are shabby and we are somewhat horrified by the amount of rubbish that has been swept into the depressions in the steppe by the wind. After Hoton, however, we climb a mountainside across wide meadows and as soon as we are away from the settlement, it is already much better. We enjoy long stretches of trotting and galloping across the pathless terrain. As some in our group like to ride very fast, while others prefer a more moderate pace, our small group sometimes spreads out over a kilometre, without the horses or guides being bothered by it. Later in the forest, I even have the feeling of being completely alone for a few kilometres, as I can see neither the riders in front of me nor behind me. I enjoy the silence as my little gelding bravely finds his way between the swamp and the rocks.

The ponies, which are between 1.35 m and 1.50 m tall, are extremely sure-footed and run without shoes. These would be a hindrance on the stony paths in the forest anyway, and they would certainly get stuck in the swamp. Supplementary feed is unknown here; the horses feed only on grass and always quench their thirst when we come to a stream. Nevertheless, the horses march tirelessly through any terrain; there is hardly a more undemanding horse than the Mongolian ponies.

On the fourth day of our journey, we reach the home pastures of our horses in the Santtal valley, where our two guides also live with their families during the summer. Here we meet up again with our runaway. The ride was short and in the afternoon there is enough time to bathe in the warm springs near the yurt camp. We are all excited about the springs in the Santtal valley. I had already bathed in hot springs in Iceland, which was a great pleasure. However, the hot springs turn out to be a simple bathing spot for the locals, which was clearly not set up for tourists: two pipes flow out, one with water at 60 °C and the other with cold water, which you mix in a tub you bring with you and then retreat to one of the four rickety wooden cabins to wash.
But it feels good and we take the opportunity to do some laundry. Afterwards, we want to buy some treats (sweets and vodka) in the small shop nearby. It's not that people drink vodka all the time here like in Russia, but since our guides have already treated us to a bottle, we now want to return the favour. Besides, 1-2 glasses are excellent for combating the night-time chill. The small corner shops in the steppe don't have specific opening hours, but apparently the owners live "right

next door," as Ogi explains to us. So we ask at the yurts next door (using sign language, of course, because we haven't learned anything more than "hello" yet). We are sent over the hill, which means another short walk. Of course, if you're Mongolian and don't walk 100 metres, it's still "next door", but we tourists don't always have our saddled horses parked in front of the yurt, so we're a little envious. When we arrive at the yurts, Njama's grey horse is already standing in the horse parking area, which consists of two long poles with a rope between them and can be found in front of every yurt. Usually there are 2-3 horses standing in these parking areas, waiting patiently, sometimes for a few hours, for their owners. A young woman is already waiting for us and accompanies us to the shop. Together with our guide, the news of our request has probably already arrived. When we return from our excursion, 15-year-old Baska is waiting for me with his motorbike, the new pride of the rural population. Of course, for his sake, I accept his invitation to take a short spin through the steppe, although I naturally prefer horses...

The next day, we keep our saddled horses company at their parking spot for a full hour while Njama "quickly" fetches something from home. Not without fortifying himself once again with some airag and other things, it seems. Time is irrelevant here; people have enough of it, and wristwatches are not in fashion. We set off when everyone is ready, usually between 10 and 11 a.m. We get up when the voices from the kitchen tent get louder or, at the latest, when Ogi more or less gently shakes our tent. When Njama finally comes galloping back, he is riding a handsome black horse. We leave the wide green Santtal valley and ride through a long side valley towards the forest, past several wooden winter stables.

our guides spend the long winter with their families in the sheltered valley. Incidentally, the nomads in Mongolia only move 2-3 times a year, which certainly involves a lot of effort with the yurts and large herds of cattle.

We get an impression of what it's like to move with yaks during our 4-day pack tour to the 8 Lakes Nature Park. At the Orkhon waterfall, we meet our yak guides Zogo and Bargi, aged 27 and 16. Our first impression of the two is rather negative, as they are quite rough when catching the four yaks. It seems as if they want to impress us with this. In addition, Zogo, with his styled and dyed hair, faux leather jacket and baggy jeans, seems a little too cool for our taste. This is in stark contrast to our two riding guides, who ride in traditional deel coats and leather boots in all weathers.
After watching the yaks being caught for a short while, we turn away disappointed. Apparently, Bargi and Zogo have understood the hint and are now treating the animals more kindly. The first ride on the yaks is interrupted after a short time because the luggage is hanging crookedly on one of the animals. Since the yaks are running freely in front of us, the animal in question must now be caught again. However, it has no desire to do so and plays catch with the guides for 20 minutes, running through the undergrowth. In the meantime, one of the other yaks joins a herd of free-roaming yaks. The calves come running over curiously and jump up and down next to the loaded newcomer, as if amused by its strange appearance.

We continue across a damp meadow and suddenly we are riding through snow, even though it is already well over 20 degrees Celsius. This is my first snow ride in 1.5 years, as it hasn't snowed properly in Basel for ages. Here, however, at a good 1,500 metres above sea level, the last snowfields still lie in June. Winter must be really harsh here, and probably no one will take up Njama and Baska's playful invitation to visit them in their winter quarters...

We ride across wide lava fields and idyllic pastures, where ancient trees tower above the boulders scattered everywhere. While we rest in the shade of the trees, our yaks simply trot on. This has the advantage that we can catch up with them again at a trot or gallop. The landscape in Arkhangai Province is extremely varied: the first few days we enjoyed long gallops (and even a little race) across the wide steppe, then we followed the old lava fields along the Orkhon, whose banks are lined with red rock faces. Our yak tour will now take us across lush flowering meadows and through the forest to Naimaan Nuur and the other lakes. Meanwhile, our drivers are waiting for us at the Orkhon.

We spend the nights in the forest by idyllic streams or a lake. Here we wash ourselves in the cold, clear water; luckily, it is sunny and warm almost the entire time. We spend the evenings around the campfire, where the vodka we brought with us helps us learn a little Mongolian. By the end of the tour, we can say "moer" (horse), good afternoon, good morning, how are you, and of course, the usual swear words. Every now and then, one of the guides disappears into a yurt to say hello to friends and relatives. Later, he simply catches up with us at a gallop. In the evening, the guides' horses usually remain saddled, because even then

short visits to the surrounding area are on the agenda. The boys gallop proudly away on their ponies. Once they return to the campfire with large holes in their clothes. In addition to riding, the boys compete mainly in wrestling, tearing their trouser legs and, preferably, their sleeves. Without further ado, our Swiss fellow rider opens a mobile "sewing studio" and mends the clothes in turn. In doing so, she gradually becomes aware of the full extent of the destruction.
But Baska cleans and oils her ankle boots in return.

Yak guide Zogo soon wins us over with his incredible charm. Around the campfire and while riding, he delights us with his enchanting clear voice, singing Mongolian horseman and love songs for us. We are absolutely thrilled. During a strenuous climb in the forest, our lively, always cheerful travel companion suddenly jumps off his horse to delight us five women with a forget-me-not or one of the many other mountain flowers. Although our guides unfortunately don't speak a word of English or German, and we can only communicate verbally with the help of Ogi, we have a wonderful time together.

To reach the Park of the 8 Lakes, we have to cross a steep pass. The horses make their way through scree and over roots without hesitation. We are now at an altitude of between 2,000 and 2,700 metres above sea level. In the afternoon after the ascent, we explore the remaining lakes, stopping at the large, rugged Naimaan Nuur. This is also a great place to swim.
However, we prefer to climb the rock face by the lake and are rewarded with a magnificent panorama of the lake and mountains. On the last day of our yak tour, the luggage of one of the yaks slips off again. Now a wild yak chase begins across the wide open meadow, during which we try to corner the animal with the horses. But it manages to break free and now gallops across the steppe until the luggage finally lies completely on the ground.

steppe until the luggage is finally completely on the ground. Finally, with the help of the local nomads, we manage to catch the wild yak and reload it. Meanwhile, we keep the remaining yaks at bay and already feel like real Mongolians. Since yaks, like all other animals, live semi-wild in large herds, they are not exactly tame, but once caught, they immediately surrender to their fate and we women willingly hold the buffalo-like animals until the luggage is properly secured.

Back at the yak breeders' camp, a traditional Mongolian feast awaits us. A sheep has just been slaughtered and is now cooking in a milk can filled with hot stones over the fire. Unfortunately, we are not good guests, as two of us do not eat meat and the third is in bed with stomach cramps. She owes this to another Mongolian speciality, the infamous airag. This fermented mare's milk can cause problems for European stomachs and should therefore be enjoyed in moderation. Apart from this one incident, we are all doing very well and enjoying the invitations from the nomads along the way. Once, the nomads near our camp give us a whole bowl of delicious fresh yoghurt in the morning and evening.
In general, the people are very friendly and cheerful; it seems as if the simple country life makes them happier. However, life in the remote steppe naturally has its very hard sides, especially in winter or when someone falls ill. Often there is no doctor within a radius of 100 km. Our cook Chara is called to a sickbed twice while we are on the road. We are happy to help with the medicines we have brought with us, and fortunately, the patients soon feel better.

After the yak tour, our ride comes to an end all too quickly. On our penultimate day of riding, Njama suddenly disappears again into a yurt. In the evening, acquaintances bring him back to our camp by car. As it turns out, he has just sold his black horse, complete with saddle and bridle, for the equivalent of 1,200 euros. He can now buy four foals with the money and is happy. The next morning, we set off on our last short ride along the Orkhon. Njama is now riding one of the replacement horses without a saddle or bridle, as he has sold them. He demonstrates his Mongolian riding skills in a final little gallop across the steppe, which he wins with ease. Then it's time to say goodbye to the two riding guides and the wonderful horses. One by one, they are released and they all trot purposefully towards their home 25 km away. Baska swings himself onto his impatient chestnut horse with some effort and disappears at a gallop with the herd. Njama, on the other hand, still has more horse business to attend to and is picked up by a friend on a moped.

For us, the journey continues by minibus, which, unlike horse riding, is an extremely bumpy mode of transport. We jolt across the steppe along the washed-out track. It's hard to imagine that some tourists book a jeep tour through Mongolia and spend hours every day being shaken around. For us, it's clear that anyone who wants to travel through Mongolia should only do so with sufficient riding experience. The long gallops through the endless steppe and the challenging wild terrain of the nature parks leave nothing to be desired for riders. Before we fly back, we are already making plans for our next riding holiday in the land of our riding dreams. At least it won't be quite so hard to say goodbye after two days in Ulan Bator (grey, dirty and ugly). At least I have a few Mongolian stirrups as a souvenir, which I bought on the black market for the equivalent of €6. Let's see if this makes riding on the local bridle paths feel a bit Mongolian, perhaps if we are allowed to ride across the stubble fields soon...

Jessica Kiefer, 27 June 2012

Link to the programme: www.equitour.com/av-wmnri01.htm