

Gobi Horse Ride in Mongolia

Endless expanses, deserted steppes, back to our roots

Our destination for this trip was Mongolia. We wanted to experience something new and exciting and immerse ourselves in the vastness of the Mongolian steppe. We set off on Whit Monday and arrived safely in Ulaanbaatar after a stopover in Beijing. The transfer was organised smoothly and we reached our hotel early in the morning, tired and exhausted. A welcome letter was already waiting for us there – we were invited to a group dinner, where we had the chance to get to know our fellow travellers. As we still had some time to spare, we went into town, had a bite to eat and got a feel for the sheer size and bustle of the city. Just under half of Mongolia's rural population lives in the capital – hard to imagine, given that Mongolia has a total population of just under 3 million and is almost eight times the size of Germany! Truly impressive. Here you can buy cashmere and souvenirs, enjoy a good meal and stroll through the numerous shops.



But we were also already looking forward to our horse ride across the steppe! In the evening, our guide picked us up on time and we set off for our first dinner together. Our group was small, a colourful mix and very friendly – a Swede, a Finn, an Italian and the two of us Germans. Our guide introduced himself and explained the important details for the coming days. After a leisurely dinner, we headed back to the hotel.

We wanted to go to bed early to help us cope with the jet lag. The next morning, a lovingly prepared buffet awaited us at the hotel before we packed our things and looked forward to the drive out to the steppe. On the way, we drove to Gandan Monastery. The variety of colours and the large number of prayer wheels were impressive. We were lucky enough to witness the monks' morning chanting and attend a short service. Outside, Mongolians were bustling about, praying or spinning the prayer wheels.



These are always turned clockwise to bring body and mind into harmony. Inside the prayer wheels are scrolls containing prayers, which are believed to take effect as the wheels turn.

Back in our small coach, we set off on the longer journey into the steppe. We stopped along the way for a light snack. We drove past many herds of livestock as well as a large number of horses. After about four hours' drive, we reached our destination: our first camp. We tried to lend a hand, and soon our man-sized tents of Swedish origin were erected. They were quite large, with room for one or two people, and we had the comfort of a camp bed with a mattress topper and a blanket.



A short while later, we set off on our first, shorter ride to the waterhole to water the horses. Each of us was assigned a horse, and we set off on our first ride. We were told to be careful; it was the first tour of the year and the horses were still fresh, lively and hardly used to human contact. I was given a small chestnut horse, whom I came to appreciate more and more as the tour went on. He was forward-going, absolutely manageable, strong-willed and, as the days went by, quite open to being stroked. Horses in Mongolia lead a free, independent life. They know nothing of farriers, vets or Western pampering such as concentrated feed and mineral supplements, blankets and stables in winter. They live on the sparse grass that grows on the steppe, are given water once or twice a day and otherwise lead a truly natural horse's life.



It takes about 30 minutes to break in an ordinary horse here on the steppe; by then, it has got used to the saddle, bridle and rider for the time being. A somewhat rough approach in our eyes, yet at the same time very close to nature. Only the strongest survive on the steppe – and Mongolian winters are harsh! Nevertheless, our horses are already well-fed, fit and lively, and give every impression of being anything but unhappy. Our first ride was supposed to be a walk, but after just a few minutes we broke into a trot and, shortly afterwards, our first canter. After all, the best way to get to know a horse is through all three basic gaits. Over dinner together – which always consisted of four courses – the group got to know one another, and the atmosphere was usually cheerful and lively. Over the following days, we rode out into the steppe.

Hardly a tuft of grass, vast expanses as far as the eye could see, the occasional small hill – otherwise almost deserted. We kept coming across flocks of sheep or goats, occasionally accompanied by a shepherd, but these were the only living creatures we encountered on our rides. Now and then we spotted wild sheep and gazelles and could even make out marmots. Mice and little ground squirrels kept scurrying back and forth across the path.



In the mornings we rode for about 4 hours, and after lunch for another 3–4 hours. We enjoyed brisk, long gallops, and our horses always moved forward eagerly. I never had to urge my horse to keep up with the group. They were all hardy and keen to ride. During the rides, we enjoyed the silence and the wind, which kept surprising us and provided a welcome cooling breeze. It would blow, sometimes softly, sometimes loudly, past our tents in the evenings and at night, and sweep across the steppe as we rode. The wind was particularly strong at a dried-up salt lake we visited. Nothing could be heard there except the whistling of the wind.

We were grateful, as there is hardly any shade on the steppe and the wind offered a bit of cool relief. Our crew looked after us brilliantly with delicious meals – in the mornings with sausages, cheese, toast, Mongolian pancakes and fresh eggs. At lunchtime we had meat with rice or buckwheat, and in the evenings a four-course meal awaited us, comprising salad, soup, a main course and dessert. Everything was always freshly prepared, and we marvelled at the delicacies our cook and her assistant were able to conjure up in their rather small yurt. As agreed, we didn't move camp every night, so we were spared the hassle of packing every now and then. A comfortable shower (sometimes hot, sometimes cold) was available to us almost every evening. And everyone looked forward to washing off the dust and grime in the evening and turning up for dinner feeling fresh and cool.

One afternoon, we decided to climb the sacred mountain. It took a while for the whole group to reach the top – the ascent was quite steep and rocky, after all. The view, however, was breathtaking. Pure nature as far as the eye could see! And not a single soul in sight apart from our camp at the end of the valley.

Our guide, Zaya, translated a great deal for us and went out of his way to act as an interpreter between the guides, the crew and us. Whilst the Mongolian lads who helped with setting up and taking down the camp and looked after the horses were quite quiet and shy at first, they became more open as time went on. We asked them questions; they were interested in our Western way of life. We particularly came to appreciate the humour and jokes of our guide Otka, who made us laugh time and again. The whole group was relaxed, enjoying the peace and quiet of the Mongolian steppe, and we all loved the brisk, long gallops on our horses.



In the evenings, the horses were fitted with leg restraints so that they could graze and walk in small steps, but not stray too far from the camp. In the mornings, one of the guides would ride away from the camp at a brisk pace to round up our horses. Not a single one went missing during the tour. Taking down all our tents and the very sturdy yurts (living/dining area and 'kitchen') usually took a good two hours each morning until everything was dismantled and loaded onto the camel carts. The song 'And the caravan moves on...' came to mind almost every morning. The camel caravan made its way in a straight line from one camp to the next, whilst we enjoyed the landscape as we rode in a wide arc during our daily ride. On our last evening together in the tent, we asked for a little Mongolian performance. We were allowed to dress up and try on the traditional Mongolian robes, and familiarise ourselves with the Mongolian saddle. It took a bit of getting used to the short stirrups and the short, high saddles. But it was really good fun and everyone had a good laugh.



One evening, the lads put on a little ring competition, with the loser having to do the washing-up. On another evening, two of the guides showed us how to pick up a stick from the ground whilst galloping at full speed. In a world without TV or the internet, people still know how to appreciate nature and focus on the skills you learn in the rugged steppe: herding livestock, finding water sources, slaughtering, gutting and preparing animals, as well as making other foodstuffs. Children learn to ride at an early age – in Mongolian races, children usually start as young as 4 or 5. They also invent games inspired by nature that don't require much: through our guide, we learnt games using 'ankle bones' – small sheep ankle bones marked with different symbols: horse, camel, sheep and goat. By throwing and flicking them, a winner can be determined by whoever collects the most bones, or through a 'horse race'. Life on the steppe is simple, but thoroughly fulfilling. People here live with what they have, and in Mongolia, a man who owns many animals is considered rich and respected. This is hard to imagine for Western civilisation, with its status symbols such as houses or cars.

One evening, we witnessed a sandstorm brewing. It was slowly getting dark, and we watched the cloud of sand approaching us slowly and steadily. It was a somewhat oppressive and unsettling feeling. We packed up our things and waited – composure is one of the things you learn in Mongolia. You face your fate head-on and wait for whatever is to come. We were spared; the sandstorm passed us by. It was our last evening in the tents, and our whole crew had prepared a proper feast for us, with freshly cooked meat, plenty of salads and

a delicious cake to finish. We all sat together and enjoyed a wonderful, fun-filled evening!

The next morning we set off and soon found ourselves back in the dunes. Sand as far as the eye could see. A magnificent landscape. We climbed up sand dunes, rode in a straight line and trotted across the deep sand. It was strenuous for the horses, but they showed no signs of tiredness or exhaustion. We rode through the dunes for almost the whole day – a truly amazing experience!



During our lunch break, we sat in the shade, with a direct view of a buzzard. Not far away, two little buzzard chicks were waiting in their nest for their mother, looking down at us curiously from above.



We spent the last two nights at the permanent yurt camp 'Arbud Sands' – in large yurts with a lovely restaurant and two yurts set aside for showering. From there, we set off on a longer horse ride through the surrounding countryside and enjoyed some more wonderful, long gallops. Late in the morning, we visited a nomadic family. We were invited in, were able to ask questions and were served fresh milk and small cheese pastries. We were keen to try the Mongolian national drink (airag – fermented mare's milk), as we'd heard so much about it. However, we were 1–2 weeks too early; the airag wasn't made until after we'd left. We were deeply impressed by Mongolian hospitality. We were made to feel very welcome, and they immediately showed us the neighbouring herd of horses and how they work with them. Since March, the nomadic family had already moved eight times – that's almost every two weeks. Each time, everything is completely dismantled, rebuilt and refurnished, whilst the herds of livestock move on with their owners. In the early evening, a sheep was slaughtered for us. Our guide wanted to show us the Mongolian method of slaughter. Although it was brutal to watch, it was done quickly and without much suffering. Afterwards, the skin was removed and the entrails taken out. Everything is utilised and prepared in Mongolia.



In the afternoon, we set off on our return journey to Arbud Sands and had to say goodbye to our faithful companions. We watched the horses as they rolled around at length before trotting off. They had their freedom back! We, on the other hand, set off back to civilisation. We said goodbye to the whole crew and boarded the coach. After a few hours in the quiet coach (everyone lost in their own thoughts), we reached Ulaanbaatar and set off together on a little shopping trip. In the evening, there was traditional singing and dancing on the programme. It was very touristy with lots of people, which came as quite a shock after the peace and quiet of the past few days. However, the various performances – such as acrobatics, traditional dance, ‘throat singing’ and the many colourful costumes and masks – were very interesting and varied. Afterwards, we met up for one last dinner together before saying our goodbyes that evening. We all set off for home in different directions and were sad to have to leave this brilliant group, our wonderful guide Zaya, the marvellous horses and the impressive landscape behind us. We’ll be back!

You can find all the information about the programme at
<http://www.equitour.com/mgs012.htm>

June 2017, Angelika Kaiser