

MONGOLIA



Homestay with Eagle Hunters February 2022



Homestay with Eagle Hunters

Flight from Stockholm via Istanbul to Ulan Bator. At first, they did not let me check in at Arlanda as I had not filled out a Health Affidavit document, but was eventually allowed to check in. This document is nearly always filled in on the last flight before arrival, as was the case here as well as I tried to point out to the over-achieving check-in officer. Mongolia has just recently opened to foreign visitors again after having had very strict Covid and quarantine regulations. They still recommend, but do not enforce apparently a 3-day self-quarantine routine. Covid-19, PCR-test, and Certificate of being fully vaccinated is however still required. We landed at the new international airport in Ulan Bator. Located some 70 km outside of UB.

My tour organizer and guide from **Blue Wolf Travel**, Bobby, picked me up at the airport. We set off to **the National Park of Gorkijh Terelj** some 1 ½ Hour drive from UB. We paid a visit to the **Genghis Khan Statue Complex** built back in 2009. It measures some 40 meter in height and one can take an elevator and a few stairs to have a view from within the statue up high. **Ariyabal Buddhist Meditation temple** was also on the route to visit. We were the only visitors today. We had a 2–3-hour drive back to UB and being jet-lagged it was nice to make a check-in at my hotel Ramada already around 3 PM. I had a couple of restaurant options from Bobby but decided to try the **Hanseng Korean restaurant** in the hotel.



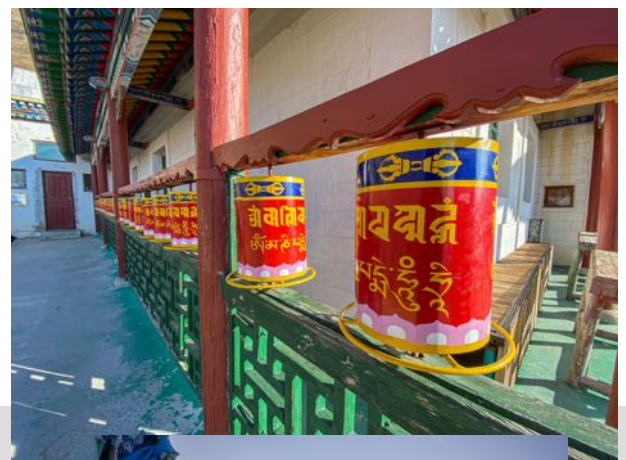
National Parks



Today we made a full day visit to the **Hustai National Park**, a 2-hour drive west from Ulaanbaatar. The first 1 ½ on tarmac road and the rest on dirt-roads. This together with the **Gorkijh Terelj N.P.** are among the top visits in and around the capital. It was completely empty of people and staff when we arrived at the main gate. Bobby, my guide, had to find someone in charge which took a while. It turned out we were the first people of the day to visit as well as the first foreign tourist to visit since the closedown due to the Corona virus back in 2020. This is a place usually filled with visitors, locals as well as foreign.

The main attraction during the winter-season is the deer and the **wild Takhi (Prewalski) horses**. We managed to see quite a few groups of these endangered horses roaming the empty fields. There are said to be an estimate of only some 2000 horses left in the world mostly in Mongolia.

Back to UB and resting up after a long day. It was quite cold today at around minus 25 degrees.





Bayan-Olgii region

An early flight to Khovd at 07:00 from UB. The small prop-plane took only 2-hours and we arrived at Khovd at around 09:00 local time (1-hour time difference from UB) in the Altai Mountain region. Kharnat, the father of Bobby and founder of the company, together with my guide Dauit picked me up. It was freezing cold when I got out of the plane – minus 36 degrees. We travelled in his very nice Lexus 4-wheel drive the 2-hour drive to the Kazakh house near Tolbo village, halfway to Ölgii on mostly very nice tarmac roads. All except the last 40 km which was off-road.

The Kazakh and Eagle Hunter Nortoghan and his family received us and welcomed me to their home. Kharnat told me I was the first western tourist since the Pandemic started 2-years ago to come and visit this part of the country. Nortoghan and his family, five children, grand-father and a brother lived together in very simple winter-house up on the foothill of a mountain with his Jaks, horses, sheep, and eagle. We spent the first day getting acquainted and were treated to lunch and the “milk-tea” which they seem to drink loads off (very salty) but good. Still jet lagged I took a little rest mid-day before being shown around. We took some very good pictures with the eagle, the Kazaks all dressed up. The feed the eagle and put on new shoes on the horse which I am to use for tomorrow's trek for reindeer.

We sat inside mostly as it was freezing cold outside. The small winter-house is coal heated, but in the early morning it was very little warmth left. Good thing I had my sleeping bag capable of taking up-to -20 degrees. They had also prepared a welcome dinner “boiled meat” which is a traditional dish mixed with lamb and horse meat, intestines, horse sausages, potatoes, carrots and more. It is served from a large dish hot and shared by everyone eating with the hands. Nortoghan entertained also by singing and playing the instrument Dombra.





Homestay with Eagle Hunters

The cabin was very cold when I got up early this Sunday morning. Alma our “brought along” cook had prepared breakfast for us. I am so happy I again brought along my urine plastic bottle, not having to stick my nose, or anything more vital outside the door during the night at -30 degrees. This as the toilette turned out to be a hole in the ground some 100 meters from the cabin where we stayed.

We had three full nights (four days) with the Kazak family in this homestay and were so well received and looked after. The Brother Northoghan is the farmer and stays home looking after the sheep, cattle, horses and jaks, whereas the brother Saya is the Eagle Hunter. The grandfather i.e., the father of these two brothers is also staying with the family, now 80 and retired eagle hunter as well. All the kids were also home as school has been closed during the pandemic. So quite a full house of activities.

We had three full days of horseback riding – 5-6 hours per day. Exhausted every day coming back home. With all the layers of clothes and coves, one is not very mobile getting on/off the horse – that’s for sure. Very cold weather, but thankful I had brought along some warm clothes, gloves, hat, and balaclava to cover my face from the wind. The first day was in search of reindeer. No luck, however. We did however see many rabbits, foxes, mice, wolf-tracks, and free roaming horses and jaks. A stunningly beautiful landscape, but quite demanding to maneuver on a horseback up through the sometimes quite steep mountain passes.





Hunting with Golden Eagles

The second day was with two eagle hunters and a "fox-chaser". The hunters were beautifully dressed up in their traditional dresses and had one eagle each with them. Very exciting to see how they had one horseman trying to chase out a fox while the eagle hunters were high up on the mountain ridge waiting to release their eagles. We tried many times and had only one fox, who however went hiding under a rock so no luck catching any with the eagles. They did however make a couple of "dry-runs" with their eagles letting them sit up high and then calling them to a catch a fox-skin dragged from the horseback. We got to see how they did dive down to catch the "prey" when the hunters rode on their horses. Spectacular. The Eagles were then well compensated with some fox-meat for their efforts. We got some good photos during the day.





Moving Jaks

On the third and last day on a horse-back we went up a different route in the mountains also hearing a large group of black jaks. With a blue sky and sunshine, this was just amazing feeling. The going up was ok but coming down a different side of the mountain it was steep and quite scary on the back of a horse not being skilled like the eagle hunters are on a horse.

The cabin, very simple indeed was coal-heated – thank God for that, but by early morning as they had not been refueling during the night hours it was quite cold in the rooms. I am thankful for having brought my sleeping-bag capable of coping with up to minus 20 degrees. We exchanged gifts with the family. I had brought along a large bag of candy and other goodies for the children, chocolate for the mother and a bottle of vodka for the man of the house. I was given a lovely and decorated coat and hat + a fox-skin to bring back home.





Looking for Argali and Ibexes

Khanat from Blue Wolf Travel came and picked us up at around lunch we were invited for a second lunch this day at another Eagle Hunters home. We arrived back in Ulgii at around 4 PM and checked in to the Eagle Hunters Dream Hotel, also owned by Blue Wolf Travel. They had to unlock the front door and let me in as I was the only and first guest since the pandemic. We had dinner and shared a few beers together and made an early evening.

Day two was spent in two different areas ca: 1 – 1 ½ hours' drive from Ulgii. The first trip was to locate some earlier seen Argali (mountain sheep). The local Eagle Hunter who was engaged to meet up with us and to show us the place was not to be found. We managed on our own however to locate 3 Argali Mountain sheep on a mountain slope, but quite far away to get good photos of. We drove back towards Ulgii to pick-up another Eagle Hunter who joined us with his eagle. We then headed north-east of Ulgii to try and locate some Ibexes. We came to a place quite far away and difficult to reach and saw a group of ca: 20 Ibexes very high up on a mountain ridge. We parked the car and sent up the eagle hunter and our guide – Dauit – to the mountain top trying to scare them towards the other side of the mountain. We then drove around and tried to catch them once they were heading our way and succeeded. I got a couple of shot of them, but still quite far away. On the way back to town we stopped for a couple of photo-shoots with the Eagle Hunter and his eagle and managed some good shots. I invited Dauit to a restaurant in town where we took dinner.





Sightseeing in Ulaanbaatar

The two full days before departure was spent partly with Boby who took me around and showed me Gandan Mosque, a few department stores, the main Bazaar, a viewpoint overlooking the city and the winter palace. On the last day I decided to see UB on foot, cold yes, but this way I got to see some interesting sights in my own leisure. I revisited the Gandan mosque and got to talk to some monks. I also went to see the dinosaur museum, but this was a waste of time. Restaurant visits included the Itaewon Tasty Korean, The Hanseng Korean and a Sushi restaurant.

Sunday morning the flight back to Stockholm via Istanbul took off after 10 full days in Mongolia.

