

The 4x4 adventure of a lifetime

A group of South Africans traverse Mongolia's Gobi Desert, discover camels, yaks and deer, visit Buddhist monasteries and chill with the locals, recounts **Evan Naudé**.

Few countries are more pristine than Mongolia. It is the least densely populated country in the world and a place that has largely escaped urban development. In fact, it's twice the size of Namibia with barely three million people, half of whom live in cities. This, together with an incredible landscape, unique animals and an iconic nomadic culture, places the country at the top of any adventurer's wish list.

Here in SA, we also have a strong outdoor culture and many of us would agree that the best way to properly explore a place is via the back roads. So, that's exactly how a group of South Africans tackled the wide steppes of Mongolia on an 18-day tour with Live The Journey.

THE TOUR GROUP, with its members hailing from Vereeniging, Sandton, Paarl and Cape Town, meet in Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar after spending a day or two in the air. We stay in a hotel in the city centre, and after dinner we hit the sack to combat the jet lag.

The first day of the tour is a tranquil one so everyone has a chance to recover before we start covering some proper distances. Our local tour guide, the cheerful and knowledgeable Baatar Navaan, uses the day to tell us more about his country.

We ride a minibus to a 40 m statue of Mongolia's most famous leader, Genghis Khan, about 54 km outside the city. Khan ruled practically the whole of Asia with an iron fist. Under the statue is

a museum depicting the history of the ger, a traditional round hut. Over the years, this structure's building materials have improved, but the basic form still survives today and many Mongolians live in them.

Back in the city, we buy local SIM cards, exchange cash and visit the Mongolian Natural History Museum in the afternoon. We marvel at the city's shiny new skyscrapers, dilapidated Soviet-era factories, the long chimneys of power plants pumping out colossal smoke clouds, the impressive Sükhbaatar city square and the hundreds of Toyota Prius cars that look to be the most popular transportation choice in the country.

THE NEXT DAY, we're up and about before sunrise. In the hotel's parking lot are three Land Cruisers and a Lexus 470,

each equipped with a roof tent. Baatar's car is a dark green UAZ-469, a 2,2 l military 4x4 petrol vehicle built in Russia. They're reminiscent of the old Willys Jeep with a short wheel base: just as sturdy and uncomfortable. "But you can drive it anywhere and it's easy to fix," says Baatar.

We check the vehicles one last time, load our luggage and test the two-way radio in each one. A member of the Mongolian team has left a few white splashes on our front tyres. "Milk," explains Baatar. "For happiness."

We head off and out of the city. Before long, we leave behind traffic, skyscrapers and factories, and the landscape slowly unfolds around us. The weather is beautiful today and for the first time we see exactly how sprawling



Baatar Navaan
MONGOLIAN GUIDE

"I've been to South Africa and your country reminds me a lot of Mongolia, except you have fences everywhere and we don't. South Africans are very generous and you are survivors with a love of nature. Much the same character as us Mongolians."





the leafy grassland really is over here. It is a scene that a Karoo farmer couldn't imagine in his wildest dreams. "Hey people, this is the real Mongolia now," Baatar proudly chuckles over the radio. "This is my country, how do you like it?"

For the rest of the day, the convoy keeps south, passing heavy laden coal trucks and groups of gers along the road, where locals sell fermented horse milk, a popular drink called "arak".

When we reach our campsite near the Baga Gadzrin mountain range in the northern Gobi Desert by late afternoon, we are surrounded by grassy plains that extend all the way to the horizon. The scent of wild herbs surround us and there is no fence, notice board or any other sign of civilisation to be seen.



Later, around a campfire – the Gobi has no trees – we look up at the same magnificent Milky Way that the mighty Genghis Khan must have stared at hundreds of years ago.

'WATER FOR EYES', says a blue sign in the middle of nowhere the next morning as we drive southeast on a twin track. "People around here believe the fountain's water has healing properties," explains Baatar.

At one point, a herd of dzereen, a Mongolian antelope somewhere between a springbok and an impala, runs across the road, and soon there are large herds of horses along the way. Baatar has heard about a local festival being held today and so we head toward Baga Gazariin Chuluu, a nature reserve in the Dundgovi province.



“... we look up at the same magnificent Milky Way that the mighty Genghis Khan must have stared at...”

WELCOME TO MONGOLIA Away from the hustle and bustle of the capital, the rolling grasslands open up and the mountains offer prime vantage points. There are no trees in the Gobi, and therefore nothing that can block the bright night sky from lighting up your campsite.



We walk around the festival's colourful tents. Apart from a few bright traditional outfits and the language, we may as well be at a show in the South African platteland: there is a row of stalls, kids eat candyfloss and ice cream, you can try to win a teddy bear in a game, and over on the side, a bunch of guys are having a braai behind their car.

We are invited into a ger and are seated in a circle. In the middle of the room is a large pot of arak, a plate of steamed meat and a tower of cheese. In turn, each of us gets a bowl of arak. The taste is... different,

like when you have a spoonful of yoghurt turned sour, but after a few swallows you overcome it – there is, after all, a touch of alcohol in it. The cheese, a hard affair almost like a strong parmesan, is less overwhelming – provided you love exotic cheese. "This is the traditional welcome in our culture," explains Baatar. This is how families, friends and strangers gather and break bread, he says. On the rest of the tour we often find ourselves in a circle inside someone's ger. And every time out of decency, as we were brought up, we have a sip of arak and chew the cheese.

In recent years, large quantities of gold and copper have been discovered in the Gobi. The mining industry, Mongolia's largest economic driver, is still growing. Dalanzadgad is full of tall buildings and even more are under construction. "All built in the last 10 years," says Baatar.

That afternoon we reach a ger camp near the Yolyn Am Valley, or the Lammmergeier Valley (Yol means bearded vulture), in the Gurvan Saikhan Mountain. Mongolia is covered in these tourist camps where you spend the night in varying levels of luxury in your own ger. Inside are beds and a fireplace, the bathrooms are en suite or shared ablution facilities, and at night you dine in a restaurant – sometimes in a colossal ger.

The next day we aim west along the foot of the mountain range. It's a long day on the road, but it's an interesting journey: we visit a Bronze Age graveyard, cross several dry riverbeds, drive past deserted nomad winter stables and stop and greet a few locals. We drink arak, we eat cheese.

After lunch, we drive down a very long corrugated road in a broad valley in the direction of Bayandalai and then aim for



Luzanne van Niekerk and Jack Eksteen
PAARL
"Our first impression was that Ulaanbaatar is ugly. The country's beauty certainly lies outside the city. It's a soul-cleansing experience and there's so much variety on the tour. It's definitely a country for looking far and wide."

Tonight's campsite is close to Tsagaan Suvarga, a series of impressive sandstone cliffs against an escarpment that has been weathered by centuries of erosion down to colourful layers.

WE GET TO A TAR ROAD late the next morning and drive to Dalanzadgad, a large mining town in the south of the country.



George, Yvonne and Ivy Michlo
SANDTON

"It's a fantastic tour, different to any other place we've visited. We're not campers, but we really enjoyed the camping. Nature's beauty and variety is incredible and the people are exceptionally friendly."

Khongoryn Els, a 100 km dune strip in the south of the Gobi. The cream-coloured dunes contrasts with the green landscape.

With our tents at the foot of Mongolia's largest dunes and the sun setting across the Altai mountain range, you can almost imagine you're camping somewhere in the Namib and overlooking the Saag

full of tourists from the surrounding ger camps. We pass a convoy of Vespas, a bunch of Italians who have driven up from Ulaanbaatar. Their spines must be suffering on this road.

We camp near the site where, in 1971, a team of paleontologists discovered the fossil of two dinosaurs that are over 80 million years old, the so-called Fighting Dinosaurs. They died in the middle of a fight and hold onto each other in a death grip for all eternity.

THE NEXT DAY we fill up in Bulgan, a town surrounded by vegetable fields, before heading north again. Our next destination is Bayanzag, or the Flaming Cliffs (the cliffs glow bright orange at sunset), where another historic dinosaur discovery was made. This is where American paleontologist Roy Andrews discovered the first dinosaur eggs in the 1920s, along with a large variety of skeletons.

We continue north on the awful road, past more ger camps, arak and cheese, as this is the main tourist route to the north. The vegetation along the road is sparse and reminiscent of parts of the Karoo, but the landscape feels even more stretched and the horizon farther than anywhere else.

Tonight we sleep in a lovely ger camp on the banks of the Ongi River. We visit the ruins of the Ongi monastery on a hill near the camp. Once upon a time, hundreds of monks lived and studied here before the monastery, like so many others in Mongolia, was destroyed by the communist Soviet Union in 1939.

Not even the Land Cruisers' soft seats can protect our lower backs from the long, bumpy, corrugated road as we head further north. Nevertheless, we say goodbye to the Gobi, and by lunchtime we find ourselves in Central Mongolia.

After lunch, a traditional braai at a restaurant (no arak and cheese), Baatar leads us to Karakorum. Shortly before we reach the town, we see for the first time signs of big farms when fields of golden yellow canola suddenly appear.

Karakorum was once the capital of the Mongol Empire and this is where Genghis Khan apparently recruited his soldiers for his later campaigns. The country's oldest Buddhist monastery, the Erdene Zuu, was founded in the 16th century and still stands outside the town today. In the late afternoon we visit the monastery before we find a campsite on a hill near the village.

"**TODAY, THERE'S A SHORTER DISTANCE,** but the driving will take longer," Baatar tells us the next morning. After a quick visit to the Archaeological Museum in Karakorum, we depart for the Arkhangai Province.

The Orkhon Valley is one of Mongolia's most beautiful places. "It is in this valley where Mongolian culture was born," Baatar says proudly. The Orkhon River meanders through vast flat pastures covered in barley and thousands of livestock. Here and there are herds of yaks. "Guys, they look just like a cow with a skirt!" declares Jack Eksteen over the radio.

Down in the valley, we take pictures at the 20 m high Orkhon Waterfall, Mongolia's highest, before turning back, crossing the river and turning north across the Khangai Mountains. The higher we climb, the more beautiful it gets, and later we drive through pine forests with carpets of wildflowers next to the road. We can't stop staring and take countless pics.

At the Tsenkher Hot Springs, we sleep in a ger camp, this one with many local tourists rather than just foreigners. In the one pool, a group sits chatting while drinking beer, and another pool is filled with large guys in their underpants. Later, when it's dark, you hear families singing as they sit around the fireplaces in the family-sized gers. We also light ours before we go to bed, because the farther north we travel, the colder it gets at night.

FIELDS OF WILDFLOWERS and forests of Siberian larch lead us further north over the Khangai Mountains. Baatar aims for Tsetserleg, the largest town in central Mongolia. It is a place filled with colourful buildings and huge stretches of abandoned Soviet-era factories. After a museum visit and a stop at a coffee shop, we leave the town on a busy, steep and dusty dirt road pass that groans under lorries and Priuses.

Before long, we leave the provincial borders of Central Mongolia and move into the north. We camp at the top of a bend in the Orkhon River with the clear ice water flowing far below us in the gorge. When we finally go to bed, it's not long before the rain comes down.

It's cold and overcast when we leave the following morning and head west past Terkhiin Tsagaan Lake. There was once was a volcano here, Baatar explains, showing where you can still see the volcanic layers of the Khorgo Crater. We drive through several water crossings and the track is full



WARM WELCOME Traditional gers are nonetheless equipped with modern comforts (middle) and the friendly residents (left) will invite tourists in for a bite of cheese (insert) and a sip of arak (above).

of mud as we turn north after the lake and begin to climb a mountain pass. Then we drive through a beautiful valley on our way to Jargalant.

When we leave the town, we cross the Ider River and another mountain pass has us climbing higher than 2 100 m. Here the gers make way for timber homes, because this area gets heavy snow in winter. "Sometimes this part is called the Switzerland of Mongolia," Bataar says. "In winter it can reach -40°C."

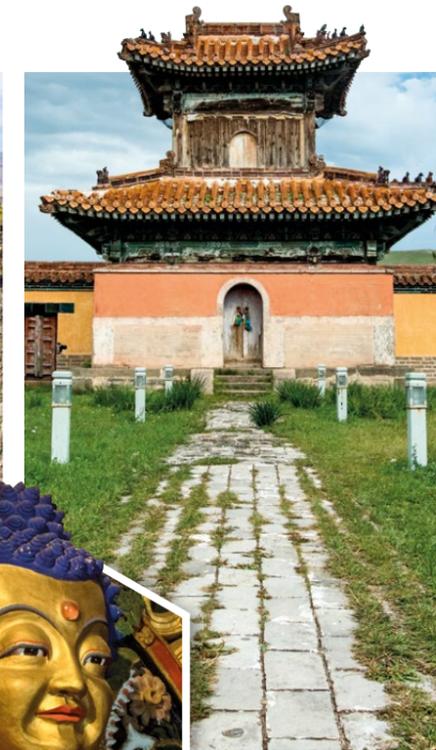
BY LUNCHTIME THE NEXT DAY we find ourselves in Moron, the capital of northern Mongolia. It's a busy place with lots of traffic and so we soon leave the town on a tar road and aim for Lake Khovsgol in the far north.

At 2 760 km², the Khovsgol is the second

largest freshwater lake in the country. It extends over 130 km and is the younger sister of the world's largest freshwater lake, the famous Lake Baikal in Russia, barely 200 km northeast from here. After a long and tough drive, we camp on the edge of a forest near the southern tip of the lake.

We spend the next day at the lake and sleep at a ger camp about 30 km away. It's a welcome break before we head south again the next day. In the afternoon, we explore the lake by boat and even meet a family who farms with red deer (the kind that pulls Santa's sleigh). They show us these interesting animals, tell us about their lifestyle, and we enjoy arak and some cheese, of course.

It rains during the night – and the next day our route is full of water crossings and mud tracks. Nevertheless, we follow



GOT ALL THE GREEN Mongolia is a water abundant country and you cross several rivers, alongside dams like Erkhel Nuur (bottom) and waterfalls like the Orkon (left). On the way you'll come across ancient stone obelisks upon which depictions of deer have been engraved.

a scenic route back toward Moron which leads us across wide grasslands to Lake Erkhel Nuur. "People, I just want to say, for a farm boy like me, this is just incredible," comes Jack Eksteen's voice over the radio.

Late that morning we drive through a landscape reminiscent of the Wild Coast. If you replace the gers with thatched huts and the yaks with goats, you have the same undulating green hills.

After lunch in Moron, the convoy drives east on a tar road. "Boring, right?" teases Bataar after we've been driving on dirt roads for so many days. The road, however, runs through beautiful scenery and you'd struggle to get bored. Pastel green pastures lie on either side of the Selenge River, which meanders through clumps of forests. Pure white clouds are stacked over folding mountains in the distance, and everywhere you look it is green and lush. It looks a bit like the Overberg after good winter rains. Later, we drive past wheat and canola fields in a somewhat flatter landscape that reminds me of the Swartland, and then we set up camp near Khutag Undur, a small village along the Selenge River.

THE PENULTIMATE DAY of the tour takes us through the towns of Bulgan and



Erdenet to the Amarbayasgalant Monastery in the Iven Valley, about 350 km northwest of Ulaanbaatar. This monastery is one of few that partially escaped the Soviet Union's devastation, and the original old buildings full of colourful decorations, statues and prayer flags are something to behold. On a hill above the monastery sits a golden Buddha overlooking the valley.

Tomorrow, it's back to the city and then home. So I go for one last long walk in this lush green landscape with its endless vistas full of grass, friendly people, camels and cows in skirts. And, of course, hard cheese and arak. A sense of calm washes over me as I say goodbye to it all and I know: this enchanting country will see me again one day.

A PLACE OF CALM If you can't find inner peace in the scenic landscape and spectacular campsites (top middle), perhaps you'll be enlightened at one of the Buddhist temples (top and insert) along the way.



I also want to go!



What will you drive? Each couple, group or family gets their own Toyota Land Cruiser or a similar 4x4 with low range and diff lock.

What is provided? All meals, lodging, vehicle, fuel and park, toll and guide rates are included. Each vehicle is equipped with the necessary camping equipment.

What should I bring? Outdoor clothing for hot and cold weather, battery chargers and adaptors, a headlight, insect repellent, personal medication and a valid international driver's license.

Where will I sleep? In Ulaanbaatar, you sleep in a hotel and in the countryside, accommodation varies between camping in the rooftop tents, and formal tourist camps where you sleep in your own ger.

What about meals? The food your guides prepare as well as the restaurants in the ger camps are adapted for Westerners (also vegetarians), although there are traditional dishes on the menu as well.

Do I need a visa? Yes. It costs around R450 and the tour operator helps with the paperwork.

For how long? The tour lasts 17 nights and 18 days.

When? The next tour is 5-25 August 2020.

Contact [livethejourney.co.za](http://www.livethejourney.co.za)

weg@livethejourney.co.za

021 863 6400

Josef and Nelie Coetzee

VEREENIGING

"Mongolia feels like that old-world country where our grandfathers lived. What we will remember best is the treelessness of the Gobi Desert, the green undulating landscape, the undisturbed animals, the rough roads and the double-humped camels. It's an incredible sensory experience!"