



MONGOLIA

My 49th Country....loved it and one of my favorites so far! Some highlights:

Prettiest Place:	The Ancient Temple of Erdene Zuu
Best thing I tasted:	Yak's milk in my coffee
Worst thing I tasted:	Fermented Mare's Milk
Funniest Day:	Camel Riding in the mini Gobi
Scariest moment:	Getting stuck alone on a hike in thigh high in mud for two hours
Most Spiritual	Meditating with Monks at an ancient monastery
Most used gear:	Butane Camp stove
Least used:	Water filter
Wish I had:	Riding boots
Coollest person I met:	13 year old Calog who showed me all his horse tricks
Couldn't have lived without:	Cottonelle pre moistened wipes
Most Amazing View:	Shooting stars of the midnight Mongolian sky
Worst View:	Pit toilets
Missed Most:	Tie: Meat (they had nothin' but mutton which I hate) & Gin.

I arrived in late in Ulaanbataar...the capital city a 3 hour flight from via Seoul. UB is a cauldron of concrete, dust, and traffic. Actually they say the most dangerous thing in UB is crossing the street...which is completely true. There, cars have the right away. You stand at an intersection, close your eyes, say a prayer and go for it. There was very little to see in this city of a million. Mongolians were never much for city dwelling and are still mostly a nomadic people who stick to the steppes with their herds in the countryside. Population People: 2.5 Million; livestock: 35 Million! Therefore, there aren't many beautiful old historic buildings or interesting areas to really visit in the city.

Mongolia has a rich history. They have been ruled by nomadic clans, incorporated by China's qing dynasties and once dominated almost the entire east under the reign of the infamous Chinggis Kahn in the 1200's. Although it's been an independent country for 100 years, it was dominated by Stalin in the 20's when Mongolia allied itself with Russia in exchange for protection against the encroaching Qing dynasty. That alliance came with a price and eventually Russia imposed its communistic policies on the country and even replaced the Mongolian alphabet (which looks similar to Arabic) with its own Cyrillic one. Having finally broken free of Russia's grip after the iron curtain fell in 1990, Mongolia established its own true democracy. There is a renewed sense of nationalism as they reconnect with their past and have resurrected their Mongolian heroic icon: Chingis Khan. Despite the west's view the CK was only a barbaric warrior history proves contrary. He never built huge temples or cities named after himself. He established an entire network of trading posts across the empire and fit them out with inns in order to promote trade. He was also the first to establish a system of diplomatic immunity. It used to be when war broke out, the incumbent ambassadors were the first to be

killed. He stopped the process and actually implemented many smart policies that the West actually built upon.



After arriving in UB I went to the office of an outfitter recommended in my Lonely Planet guide. I arranged for a 5 day ger to ger excursion. A yurt is the physical structure that the Mongolians live in, but a Ger is considered a home. A ger to ger trip is when you basically make your way from one Ger to another by either car, horse, foot and camel....of which I did all. Sometimes you stay with the nomadic family in their Ger, others, they have guest Gers and sometimes you can just sleep in your tent next to the family Ger.





My tent!



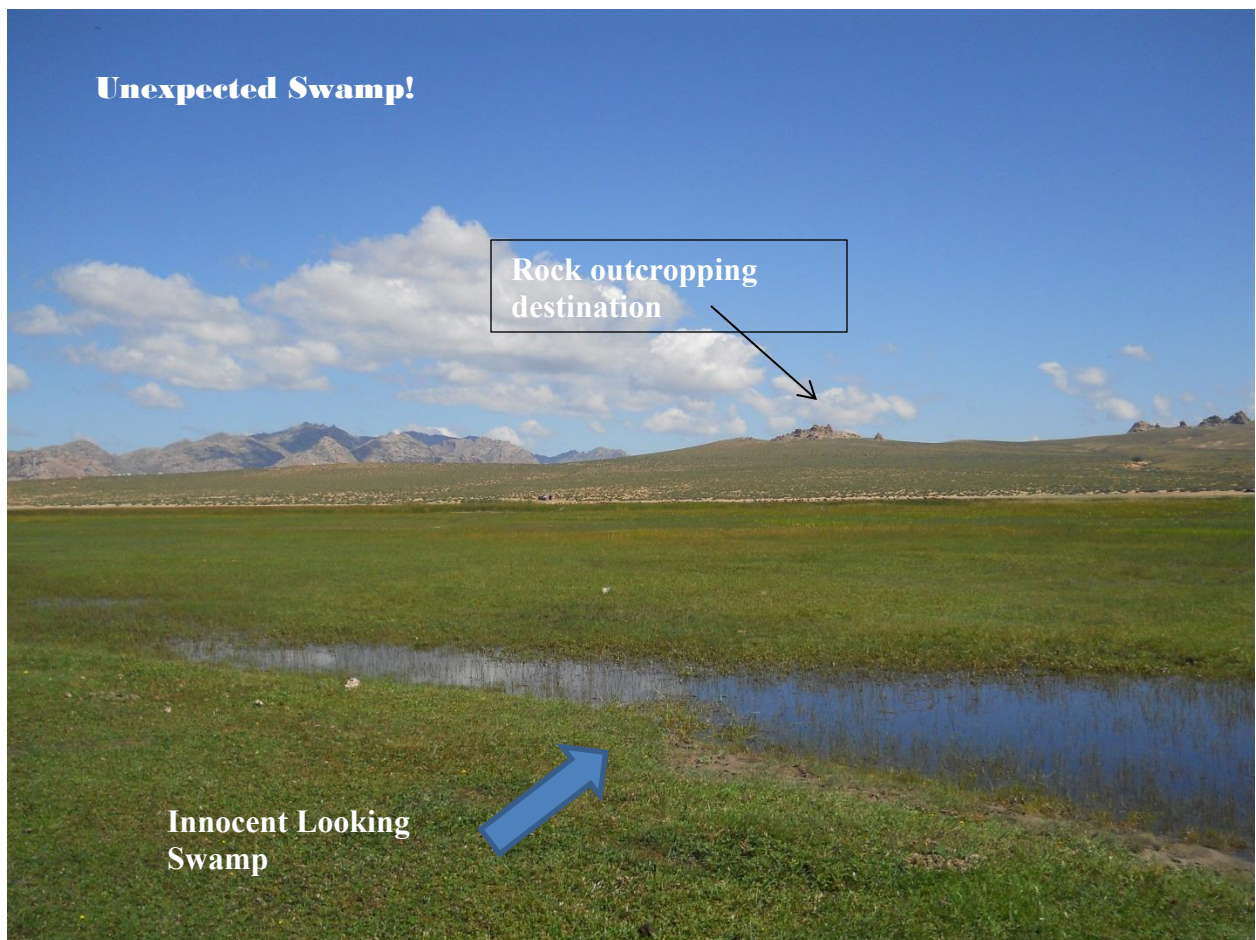
My first stop was at the Erdene Zu monastery which was amazing and well preserved. Unfortunately during the communistic periods many monasteries were destroyed, pilfered and monks were either killed or sent to labor camps. This is one of the few that survived fairly well and has now recovered into a fully working monastery. I spent several hours there and hung out with all the Buddha deities and did a little meditation.





I was able to avoid some major problems on this trip, but did manage a few mishaps. One started when I decided to hike across the steppe to an outcropping of rocks atop a small mountain about 6 miles away for a lunch picnic. The area was clearly visible from my host family's yurt. I packed my camp stove, my instant ramen noodles I brought from the States, my book, a half of a salami type sausage bought at the market and of course...a half a bottle of French Bordeaux in my stainless water bottle

It was a beautiful clear day and I set out about 9:30 am with the camp dog in tow who refused to stay back. All was going well. I was surprised to find a small stream in the middle of what looked like a dry grassy land. The stream was wide, but very shallow...5 inches deep at the most. I had my LL bean hiking sandals on which can take water easily, so instead of jumping I tromped through. I immediately sank post ankle deep. Here, the mud is similar to cement...extremely fine and dense. Both feet were instantly stuck and I had to work them out of the mud to move on...therefore...not to self: Next time try to jump...mud is very soft. As I moved on, I noticed the grass was getting wetter...more squishy between my feet until I finally realized I was essentially in a swamp. I took another step...oh shit....down I started to go...past the ankles...mid calf....over the knees, until finally resting thigh high in mud. Crap. The first thought that came to my mind was I should have studied about quicksand....is it here? Could this be it? Once I stopped sinking, I relaxed a bit. Then, I tried to move and was paralyzed. I could wiggle my toe about 2.5 feet under and that was it. At first, I wasn't too stressed. I was only about 1.5 hours from the Ger and I could actually see it from where I was although not sure they could see me in the high grass. Furthermore, like an idiot, I didn't bring my compass or panic whistle or first aid kit in my pack. It was just that it was so clear, and visible, it never occurred to me to have a problem.....not to self...looks are deceiving and danger can always be lurking about it. Long story short, after about 45 minutes I was able to free one leg and an hour and a half later, the other one, only after I managed to navigate my foot out of my sandal. I had a little assistance from my ger dog who I often used as leverage as being about 100 pounds lighter than me had no sinking issues! After finally freeing myself with one shoe on, I started making my way back to camp. Then I got mad. I got Marine...I LEAVE NO SHOE BEHIND. One, these were one of my fav pairs, two, they weren't cheap and three, making my way back unfooted through all the swamp and herding piles was not an attractive idea. I turned around, navigated back to my spot....laid on the edge of the sand pit and dug my arm in the mud shoulder high feeling for my shoe. Five minutes later I was about to give up when I felt a strap...then a heel, and low and behold I pulled up the LL Bean trek sandal from the belly of the Mongolian steppe, rinsed it off, put it back in and made my way back to camp....it was now about noon and I was not about to abort my mission. Through my animation and my host families broken English I was able to communicate that I couldn't cross the steppe because of the swamp...yes, they know...its very wet...it rained the day before...too bad the whole language barrier exempted them from telling me that before I set about! Long story short, they showed me another way to go (of course longer) but I finally arrived around 3pm at my destination and those MSG filled noodles never tasted so good...Koolpa my camp dog who followed me on the second summit attempt still of course earned himself half of my salami...here are the pics:





My following days were filled with Horse and Camel riding to various Ger's and Yurt camps. I love the camels...they are so huge and so laid back and much friendlier than those I have ridden in Morocco or Egypt. The horses on the other hand...short and stubborn! I set off on one of the family's horse for a short 3 mile ride down to the river. About 1 mile out Kahoolgi just stopped. I kicked and kicked and yelled "CHU CHU"(which means GO in Mongolian) to no avail. I was about to dismount and then drag his ass back to the Ger when another rider came along. I asked him where do I put another quarter in....of course, speaking no English he just laughed his "silly American girl stuck on her horse laugh" Then, he gave me his whip! That was the key to obedience of any Mongolian horse...one little tap on the fanny and shazam! Kahoolgi broke out in a cantor! I finally got him under control and we came to an understanding....he could sense me just lifting my arm before I would even crack the whip and he would accelerate.

Me and my Stationery Horse...Pre-Whip!



Camel Hugs...much better than Camel Toe





Mongolia is the type of place you go if you love the outdoors and want to play outside....hiking, riding, biking, camping, etc. The people are extremely friendly and accommodating. Hospitality is a requisite element of their survival as they move around every yurt along the way serves as a restaurant, trading post, supply store, repair shop etc....although it can be a bit more expensive to fly there, once you arrive you can expect to pay a mere \$80 a day tops for an outfitter excursion which included transportation, lodging in a ger, food and all the camel and horseback riding your inner thighs can handle. I definitely cannot wait to go back and explore some of the other areas of this great country and eat some more Yak Yogurt in my Yurt!



Sheep herds at night....private eyes....are watching you...



**MONGOLIAN
BATHROOM!**



**HOME SWEET
HOME**



Mama and baby YAK

