

Beyond the Steppe: Naadam Festival Tour | Mongolia

Overview

Our **Beyond the Steppe: Naadam Festival Tour** is an adventure of many highlights; striking west from the capital, **Ulaanbaatar**, we'll spend our time exploring the vast unknown of the Mongolian steppe, only to travel further to a land of vast crystalline lakes, ancient imperial capitals, and traditional festivals!

We'll pass the ancient city of **Kharkorum**, once the heart of the sprawling Mongol Empire, and visit the still-standing **Erdene-Zuu Monastery**. We'll camp alongside **Khyrgas Lake**, perhaps even going for a dip in these wild waters as we pass through the region. And we'll end our journey across the vast heart of Mongolia in the city of **Khovd**, an outpost of civilisation where we'll celebrate **Naadam Festival**.

The adventure will not be easy, but we will do everything to make it enjoyable; if it's a traditional tour you're after, we can think of none better in Mongolia. At the Naadam festival we will watch the famed three manly sports, **wrestling, archery** and horseriding, all of which are vital to saying you've truly visited Mongolia during Naadam.

If you want to see real Mongolia, then come with us. We've been travelling to the region now for over nine years and, for us, we don't just stop by anyone's home, but those of our friends and family, which makes this adventure extra special.

So, join us for an **unforgettable expedition!**

A true adventure and our flagship Mongolia tour, if this trip isn't enough for you, we've planned this adventure to align perfectly with our Explore the Gobi Desert Tour head to the stunningly beautiful Gobi region of southern Mongolia before joining this adventure to the far west!

Or, continue on after this trip to join our Land of Eagles: Explore the Altai' adventure to meet Kazakh Eagle Hunters and explore the natural beauty of Altai Tavan Bogd National Park.

Itinerary Overview

A brief overview of our **two-week** adventure into the **Mongolian Far West**. For more details, continue reading below for a day-by-day breakdown of the itinerary.

| | |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| Day 1 | Arrival in Ulaanbaatar |
| Day 2 | Modern Capitals to Ancient Capitals |
| Day 3 | Venture into Volcanic Landscapes |
| Day 4 | Visit Local Nomadic Yak Herders |
| Day 5 | Venture Deeper into the Wilderness |
| Day 6 | Crystal Waters of Khyrgas |
| Day 7 | Off-Road to Khovd |
| Day 8 | Celebrate the Naadam Festival! |
| Day 9 | Sacred Mountain of Tsambagarav |
| Day 10 | Living with Local Nomads |
| Day 11 | Return from the mountains |
| Day 12 | Flight to Ulaanbaatar |
| Day 13 | Departure Day |

Day 1 | Arrival in Ulaanbaatar

Ulaanbaatar | We'll begin our adventure in downtown **Ulaanbaatar** as the group meets at the designated rendezvous point for our optional walking tour of central Ulaanbaatar.

Sukhbaatar Square | We'll begin at the heart of the city, **Sukhbaatar Square**, home to grand statues of Khans and Communist revolutionaries.

Peace Avenue | From here we'll head along one of the city's main avenues, Peace Avenue, mixing in with the hustle and bustle of city life in Ulaanbaatar.

State Department Store | Making our way to the grand **State Department Store** – a chance to buy everything from weird souvenirs to washing machines. Most importantly, we'll have a chance to exchange money here.

Beatles Statue | Finally we'll head south to the **Beatles Statue** which graces downtown Ulaanbaatar, before walking back to the hotel along **Seoul Street** for a rest and some time to prepare for our pre-tour briefing and first group meal.

Accommodation: Hotel 9, Ulaanbaatar

Included Meals: Dinner

Day 2 | Modern Capitals to Ancient Capitals

Ulaanbaatar | This morning after a hearty breakfast, we'll depart early to escape the Monday morning traffic. Our destination for today is the ancient Mongolian capital of Kharkorum.

Countryside Drive | As we leave Ulaanbaatar, we will pass through its many residential, commercial, and industrial layers before entering the vast countryside—rolling hills, grass steppe, and rocky outcrops dotted with traditional Mongolian gers.

Mongol Els Dunes | We'll stop at this small but picturesque dune system for a scenic break and the chance to meet camel herders. A surreal desert-like patch surrounded by lush green steppe.

Kharkorum | Once the capital of the Mongolian Empire, ruled by Ogedei Khan, son of Genghis Khan. Though little of the original city remains, it was once central to the world's largest land empire.

Erdene Zuu Monastery | Our first stop in Kharkorum. Once part of a much larger complex, it remains a highlight, and we'll aim to catch the monks during their afternoon prayers.

Kharkorum Museum | Visit the archaeological museum to view unique artefacts and recent discoveries from the area.

Ger Camp | Arrive at our accommodation for the night – a traditional Mongolian ger camp, where we'll sleep in cosy felt tents under the stars.

Accommodation: Kharkorum Ger Camp

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 3 | Venture into Volcanic Landscapes

Kharkorum Market | After breakfast, we begin the day with a visit to the local Kharkorum market. Mostly housed in disused shipping containers, the market offers an authentic glimpse into local life and great opportunities for candid photography.

Orkhon River Valley | With supplies in hand, we travel westward, following the path of the UNESCO-listed Orkhon River Valley, one of Mongolia's most culturally significant and scenic regions.

Nomadic Heartland | We journey deep into Mongolia's heartland, passing nomadic herders and their gers scattered across the expansive steppe, offering insight into traditional Mongolian life.

Chuluutiin Gol Gorge | Stop at this striking 30-metre-deep canyon carved by the River of Pearls. A geologic wonder and a dramatic reminder of the region's volcanic history.

Central Mongolian Landscapes | Multiple stops along the way to explore and photograph the diverse scenery—thick forests, open steppe, rolling hills, rivers, lakes, and valleys all blending together.

Khorgo Mountain | Arrive at this dormant volcano, one of a few in the region. Adventurous travellers can hike its treelined slopes to peer into the sulphurous crater. A perfect panoramic view awaits before we descend to set up camp.

Accommodation: Camping

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 4 | Visit Local Nomadic Yak Herders

Khorgo Region | This morning we'll enjoy a more relaxed start as we awake surrounded by the natural beauty of the region.

Visit Local Family | Once we've had our morning coffee and adjusted to the day, we'll pay a visit to a nearby nomadic herding family whose ancestors have been herding yak on the Mongolian steppe for centuries; they continue living in this traditional style to this day, despite the additions of some modern comforts.

Nomadic Life Experience | During our visit, we'll learn traditional ger etiquette, meet their animals, and find out about life on the steppe and the harsh lifestyle of nomadic herding. We'll also have the chance to try some traditional Mongolian snacks.

Yak | Yak are a common animal in this region of Mongolia – the higher altitude means they're perfectly at home, and their thick coats help to keep them warm in the freezing Mongolian winters and are sheared in summer for the nomads to turn into socks, clothes, and sell to local people.

Free Afternoon | After lunch, the afternoon is yours – whether you're keen to hike up the volcano, passing lava tubes and basalt rock to peer into the caldera, or relax at the camp site and enjoy the surroundings, we'll take this opportunity to have a well-deserved rest before our adventure continues tomorrow!

Accommodation: Camping

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 5 | Venture Deeper into the Wilderness

Departure from Khorgo | As we leave Mongolia's volcanic heartland, you may think that the scenery cannot get any better—although you'd be wrong.

New Landscapes | Moving on from stunning craters, canyons, and lakes, we enter a new terrain of granite mountains, pine forests, and alpine fields, with the iconic Mongolian **ger** still dotting the landscape.

Scenic Stops | We'll make stops along the way for essential photographs and meaningful interactions with locals.

Remote Towns | Visits to some of Mongolia's more remote settlements will give us the chance to stock up on supplies and witness everyday life in these isolated communities.

Cultural Insight | Some villages may resemble wild west towns, but each one is a proud home to Mongolian families, offering a unique glimpse into rural lifestyles.

Campsite Search | Our goal today is to locate the perfect area to set up camp. With Mongolia's natural abundance, the challenge isn't finding a spot—it's choosing just one.

Afternoon Activities | With a shorter driving day, we'll have extra time to explore the area: hike through pine forests, breathe in the mountain air, and watch marmots dart across the land.

Accommodation: Camping

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 6 | Crystal Waters of Khyrgas

Journey to Uvs Province | After breakfast, we're on the road again; continuing our adventure, we head into the remote province of Uvs, a land of lakes, mountains and dunes. Our destination is Mongolia's answer to an ocean in the form of Khyargas Lake. Khyargas Lake was formed many thousands of years ago by glacial action; today, its high salt content and sheer size mean it's much like an inland sea. The area is a popular destination for locals to holiday but is rarely visited by western tourists.

Encounters Along the Way | As we journey through Uvs Province, we will stop to photograph the stunning scenery and make a few impromptu stops to visit local Nomadic families. As Uvs Province is so remote and not well connected to the rest of the country, many of its inhabitants have never met and interacted with foreign visitors, making it an exciting and unique visit.

Arrival at Khyargas Lake | Upon reaching Khyargas Lake, we will be sure to stop for a plunge into its salty waters and experience an ocean swim about as far away from the sea as you can imagine! It may be a little bracing at this time of year, but a perfect wash before we set camp and enjoy an evening BBQ, hopefully catching the setting sun on the lake's shimmering surface.

Evening by the Lake | Tonight we'll stay in a local ger camp set out on a spit of land jutting into the lake, the perfect vantage point to see some local fishing, and catch the stunning sunset as the day draws to a close, casting flickers of yellow and orange onto the surface of this mammoth body of water.

Accommodation: Ger Camp

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 7 | Off-Road to Khovd

Off-Road to Khovd | As we bid farewell to Khyargas Lake, we also say goodbye to the comfort of a tarmac road for the morning, as today we're off towards Khovd city. We'll be embarking on a true off-road adventure through many different types of terrain – sand, steppe, mud, you name it, we'll be driving across it. Eventually, we'll draw closer to the city, rejoin the tarmac, and wind through the final few valleys until we arrive in the city.

Approaching Khovd | Driving into Khovd, we'll be arriving at the height of summer, passing hundreds of gers dotting the banks of the Khovd River, where local families move during the warmer months to enjoy the pleasant weather. While Khovd may be the Khovd Province's regional capital, like most settlements in Mongolia, it still has a pleasant small-town feel. We will make Khovd our home today and enjoy a little luxury as we stay in the town's newest hotel.

Exploring the City | Upon arrival, we'll visit the town centre to see more of this far-flung settlement—a chance to catch local people going about their business in the heart of this tiny city on the edge of civilisation. We will call at the city square and even take a quick look at some small shops surrounding the area, venture down small roads, through winding alleys, and find the secret corners of this city which are rarely visited by travellers.

Evening Meal with Locals | This evening before bed, we make one final stop at a local family to enjoy a traditional Mongolian meal. This time we sample the delight known as **Khorkhog** (authentic Mongolian barbeque). Everyone in the city will be preparing for tomorrow's Naadam festivities, so we'll arrive perfectly on time to join in the celebrations!

Accommodation: Ger Camp

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 8 | Celebrate the Naadam Festival!

Naadam Festival Day | Although there have already been many highlights on this adventure, today is an important one as it is the **Naadam Festival**; this annual event takes place all across the country, drawing many nomadic folk from their isolated existence to designated hubs to celebrate. Naadam is held in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, provincial capitals, small towns, and even pre-arranged points out in the middle of nowhere.

A Truly Local Experience | Ulaanbaatar's Naadam is the most widely known, but that is now the domain of overcrowded tour buses, overpriced tickets, and a tad sterile. For us, a world-famous cultural event such as this should be celebrated at its roots with the real, local people. **Khovd's Naadam** is still a truly local affair, virtually unchanged over generations. Khovd town is a rural town for many Mongolians gathering for this fantastic event.

Festival Highlights | Naadam in Khovd draws people from all over the region, with some locals even returning from overseas. To compete in the traditional events is a real honour – especially **wrestling, horse racing, and archery**, as well as lesser-known events such as **ankle bone shooting**. Naadam is also a time for families and friends to reconnect, share their news, eat their favourite foods, and maybe even find a future husband or wife!

Cultural Insights | Whilst attending, we'll learn a lot more about the events, such as the unusual wrestling costume of undershorts and an open waistcoat. Legend has it that a woman in disguise once outwrestled all the men and so, to prevent future humiliation, the outfits were altered.

What We'll See | Our aim today is to view the **opening ceremony**, watch the **wrestling, archery**, and **ankle bone shooting**, which all take place in the same location. Once all of the excitement is over, we will head back to our **ger camp** for one more treat of local **Mongolian Throat Singing**.

Accommodation: Ger Camp

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 9 | Sacred Mountain of Tsambagarav

Naadam Horse Racing | This morning we'll head out for one final part of the **Naadam festivities**: horse racing. Traditional Mongolian horse racing is not held in a stadium or racecourse—instead, the horses run in a straight line for a predetermined distance across the vast Mongolian grasslands. The jockeys are young children, typically aged between 5 and 12, who train with their families to become herders, and so learn the skill of riding from an early age. These races take place in the morning, so we'll head to the **finish line** to cheer them as they arrive at the end of the race alongside Khovd locals.

Departure from Khovd | As the racing ends, we'll board our vehicles and depart the city, making our way to a nearby **sacred mountain** known as **Tsambagarav**.

Arrival at Tsambagarav | When we arrive at the mountain, we'll meet up with our hosts: a local **nomadic family** living in the mountainous area. Despite being only one day post-Naadam, these families can't leave their home for long as their animals need constant tending, despite the national holiday.

Nomadic Life in the West | Here we'll have a chance to learn more about life in Khovd Province, comparing the nomadic experience in the far west with our previous hosts in Central Mongolia – learning about the **similarities and differences** between nomadic life in these disparate parts of the country.

Accommodation: Camping

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 10 | Living with Local Nomads

A Day of Rest and Immersion | Today we'll enjoy a well-earned break – spending our time enjoying our surroundings, learning about traditional life and culture with our host family, and making the most out of our last day in the far west.

Morning with the Family | If you're up early enough, you might even have a chance to **tend to the animals** alongside the local family – a rare chance to get your hands dirty and gain some insight into what it takes to live like a true nomad!

Free Afternoon | In the afternoon, feel free to **relax, hike, photograph**, or do anything you want. The western region is known locally as one of the most beautiful parts of the country, and today you'll have **free rein to explore** the stunning natural wilderness.

Accommodation: Camping

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 11 | Return from the Mountains

Morning Departure | This morning we'll bid farewell to our local hosts as we board our vehicles and head back down the mountain towards the city. We'll arrive in time for a **final free afternoon of city exploration**, allowing time to pack and prepare for our early morning flight back to Ulaanbaatar tomorrow morning.

Accommodation: Ger Camp

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 12 | Flight to Ulaanbaatar

Return to Ulaanbaatar | Today we'll say goodbye to the western region of this amazing country as we board our **internal flight** back to the nation's capital, **Ulaanbaatar**. Upon arrival at Chinggis Khan International Airport, we'll transfer back to our **group hotel** in the city centre, agree a time for our final group meal, and then enjoy a **free afternoon**.

Afternoon at Leisure | Whether you want to **take a nap, explore the city, shop for souvenirs**, or anything else, you'll have the time this afternoon to do so at your own pace.

Farewell Dinner | Finally, we'll regroup for our **farewell dinner**—a chance to share stories, reflect on our journey, and celebrate the unforgettable adventure we've had together.

OR

Optional Extension | You're welcome to join our *Land of Eagles: Explore the Altai* adventure, where we'll head to **Olgii city**, meet up with the rest of the group, and continue the adventure into the **Altai region** to meet with **eagle hunting families** and explore the rugged beauty of the far west in all its glory!

Accommodation: Hotel 9, Ulaanbaatar

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 13 | Departure Day

Pack your souvenirs, dirty clothes, and have a safe trip home; we hope you'll be leaving us with a phone filled with photos and a head full of memories!

For those hungry for more adventure, we have two more adventures which line up perfectly with this trip; our pre-tour 'Gobi Explorer' adventure into the vast expanse of the Gobi Desert, and our post-tour 'Land of Eagles: Explore the Altai' expedition to the far western region of Altai Tavan Bogd and meet the Kazakh eagle hunters who make the region famous!

Included Meals: Breakfast

END OF TOUR