

STEPPE LIGHTLY • WILL GETHIN

# LAND OF BLUE HEAVEN

Mongolia – preserved or destroyed by tourism?



First snows, Arkhangai Aimag

**A**VAST, UNTOUCHED natural wilderness teeming with wildlife and sparsely populated by the last truly nomadic people on earth, Mongolia – the ancestral homeland of Genghis Khan – has fuelled the imagination of Western travellers for centuries.

Revered as a ‘Land of Blue Heaven’ because of its eternally clear sky, this country of endless rolling steppe is inhabited by herdsmen and women living in felt tents, migrating with their livestock in rhythm with the seasons. Reindeer tribes roam the northern Taiga forests, wild bear and camel dwell in the southern Gobi desert, and Kazakh eagle hunters ride through the western Altai mountains, magnificent birds of prey astride their fists.

And yet Mongolia was almost inaccessible to travellers for most of the 20th century; landlocked between Russia and China, it became an isolated Communist state until it finally opened its doors to the West in the 1990s.

Three times the size of France and with a population of 2.8 million, Mongolia – one of the world’s great unexplored final frontiers – is a new Shangri-La of adventure travel. Many Westerners living in increasingly crowded and stressful environments dream of escaping to remote corners of the Earth where primitive people inhabit vast open spaces beneath endless skies, simply following the natural flow of life.

Non-existent before 1990, Mon-

golian tourism has risen fast, focusing on the environment and nomadic life. 33,000 tourists visited in 2000 and figures rose to 386,000 in 2006 during the Mongolian State’s 800th anniversary. Foreign investment in tourism now accounts for 10% of Mongolia’s GDP. Yet, paradoxically, in seeking to visit one of Asia’s last bastions of nature wilderness and nomadism, are we not threatening to destroy its most precious culture?

Historically, Mongolians have conscientiously preserved their natural environment. Nomads realised that disturbing soil or water sources threatened viable pasture, and Shamanism – the country’s original spiritual tradition, rooted in nature worship – deemed ploughing and planting denigrating to the Earth spirit.

Travelling through Mongolia recently with Panoramic Journeys, I traversed endless vistas of pristine undulating grasslands – bathed in shifting light beneath coniferous mountains – one horizon rolling perpetually into the next, limitless and free.

I crossed snaking rivers, spotted eagles, wolves and wild takhi horses, picnicked and fished by vast lakes and roamed the edges of gorges and volcanoes. Nomads peacefully drifted behind their herds of camels, yaks, goats and horses, resplendent in trilbies and *dels* (traditional robes), brandishing their *urgas* (lassoing sticks) at an ocean of wispy blue sky. When we visited nomadic families in their round

tents, they proudly taught us how to milk and herd their animals and cheerily prepared classic Mongolian cuisine.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIO-political experts, however, point to a bleaker picture beneath this sunny veneer. They claim that since the collapse of Communism and the rise of the market economy, Mongolia’s environment and nomadic life have been declining. Mongolia’s steppe and desert are reported to be suffering the effects of climate change and overgrazing by livestock. Nomadic herders are said to be struggling to survive following the demise of the Communist collectives and with the depletion of their livestock through harsh winters and drought, leading many to abandon their way of life.

According to recent research from the Zoological Society of London, prized animals like the snow leopard and argali sheep are vanishing and 80% of large herbivores and 12% of carnivores are threatened with extinction. This is largely due to the breakdown of Soviet regulatory mechanisms to control hunting, and the subsequent rise of wildlife trade.

Tourism threatens to exacerbate these problems by impacting negatively on the environment in numerous ways: from littering scenic places, leaving human waste near water sources and overusing local resources like water, to causing soil erosion and air pollution with vehicles and threaten-



A family moving to winter pastures, Arkhangai Aimag, Central Mongolia

PHOTOGRAPHS: [www.panoramicjourneys.com](http://www.panoramicjourneys.com)

ing climate change with air flights.

But does tourism not also bring benefits? Dr Richard Reading, the scientist leading research in Mongolia for the environmental charity Earthwatch, who has been working to conserve the wildlife there since 1994, says tourists play a very positive role by visiting national parks. "They help pay to conserve wildlife and create local employment," he says.

Other benefits include the money tourists bring to local people by staying in their homesteads, using local guides and transportation and buying crafts. Many responsible tourists also sponsor local charities, or work as conservation volunteers or 'cultural tourists' helping to revive damaged sites such as monasteries.

Furthermore, 'responsible tourism' minimises the impact of tourists on the environment and local people. A leading responsible tour operator in Mongolia, Panoramic Journeys, who organised my recent trip, encourage all these benefits and many more. Panoramic have an intrinsic understanding of Mongolian culture. They use sustainably managed hotels and tour vehicles with minimum pollution; their drivers keep to existing tracks and they use horse and camel transportation where possible. They minimise water usage and encourage clients to collect litter on walks. They also provide opportunities to visit eco-projects and local charities like the Gobi Oasis Tree Planting Project.

Nyamdorj, who has been leading such tours in Mongolia since 1998, says tourism has significantly improved the quality of life for many Mongolians and he also believes cultural tourism can help sustain nomadic life: "Real nomads living in remote areas need schools so they don't have to move to cities," he says.

Tourists also help to preserve nomadic life when they stay in nomadic guesthouses and are interested in their hosts. But when they don't respect nomads, and flaunt expensive possessions, this is a threat to sustainability: "Then [their hosts] want to sell their sheep, get a city education and go to America," says Goyotsseg Radnaabazar, who has been working in Mongolian tourism for five years. "Compared to the tourists their lives seem boring and difficult and they crave a more adventurous life."

While tourism brings good and bad, the negative impact could be lessened by educating tourists about responsible travel. Guides need to be properly trained and guidebooks should include relevant information. But the foremost solution is to enforce tighter regulations.

Julian Matthews of Discovery Initiatives was among the first to run conservation tours in Mongolia in 1992, but has since ceased to operate in Mongolia due to diminution of wildlife. Matthews believes the problem can be salvaged by better regulation and suggests implementing a limited,

high-end tourism model like those of Bhutan and Botswana. "Mongolia needs quality, not quantity," he says.

Ukhnai, a spokesperson for Mongolia's Ministry of Tourism, says the purpose of Mongolia's tourism "is for sustainable development and for conservation of nature and culture". But Radnaabazar believes the government isn't managing sustainability effectively:

"The understanding of 'take only photographs, leave only footprints' is a long way away as the Government is just struggling to increase numbers of tourists and is not counting quality. Tourism is seen as an easy way to earn an income but if it's done without control, the country's prized nature will be lost forever."

So the warning signs are clear: urgent action is called for. Tourism in Mongolia needs to become much better regulated and more responsible before it's too late. 🌱

As a freelance travel writer, Will Gethin writes for the **Independent** and the **Evening Standard**. He also works as a communications consultant.

#### For more information:

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