

# Ulan-Ude to Beijing via Mongolia

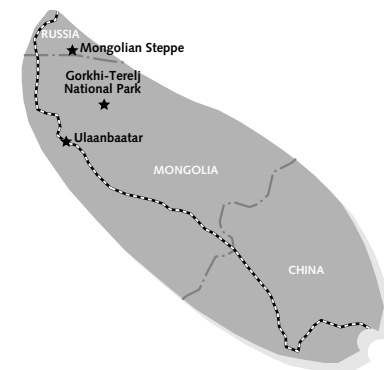
Branching off the Trans-Siberian just after Ulan-Ude, the Trans-Mongolian route follows the well-trodden path of the tea caravans between Beijing and Moscow in the 18th and 19th centuries. In those days, travellers and traders made the journey in no less than 40 days. Since the 7865km-long Trans-Mongolian railroad began operating in the mid-1950s, the journey has taken a week nonstop. However, with scenically beautiful and culturally fascinating Mongolia en route, you'd be crazy not to schedule a stop at its lively, friendly capital of Ulaanbaatar (aka 'UB').

This book can only give you a taster of what's on offer in Mongolia, a country that is a byword for all that is remotely exotic and adventurous. Many travellers spend around a month seeing the country's highlights ranging from Khövsgöl Nuur – a beautiful lake close to the Russian border – to the dusty dunes of the Gobi Desert. Even with only a few days at your disposal, it's possible to break out into the vast open spaces of the magnificent countryside. And then there's Mongolia's yearly highlight of Naadam, a spectacular sporting and cultural festival that drags in thousands of visitors, turning UB's streets into an international melting pot akin to Bangkok's Koh San Rd.

Before heading for Mongolia, pause to explore Ulan-Ude, where you could leave the train briefly for a minibus ride to the border, taking in the historic towns of Novoselenginsk and Kyakhta. Of course, the delights of Beijing, at the start or end of your journey, demand as much time as you can manage.

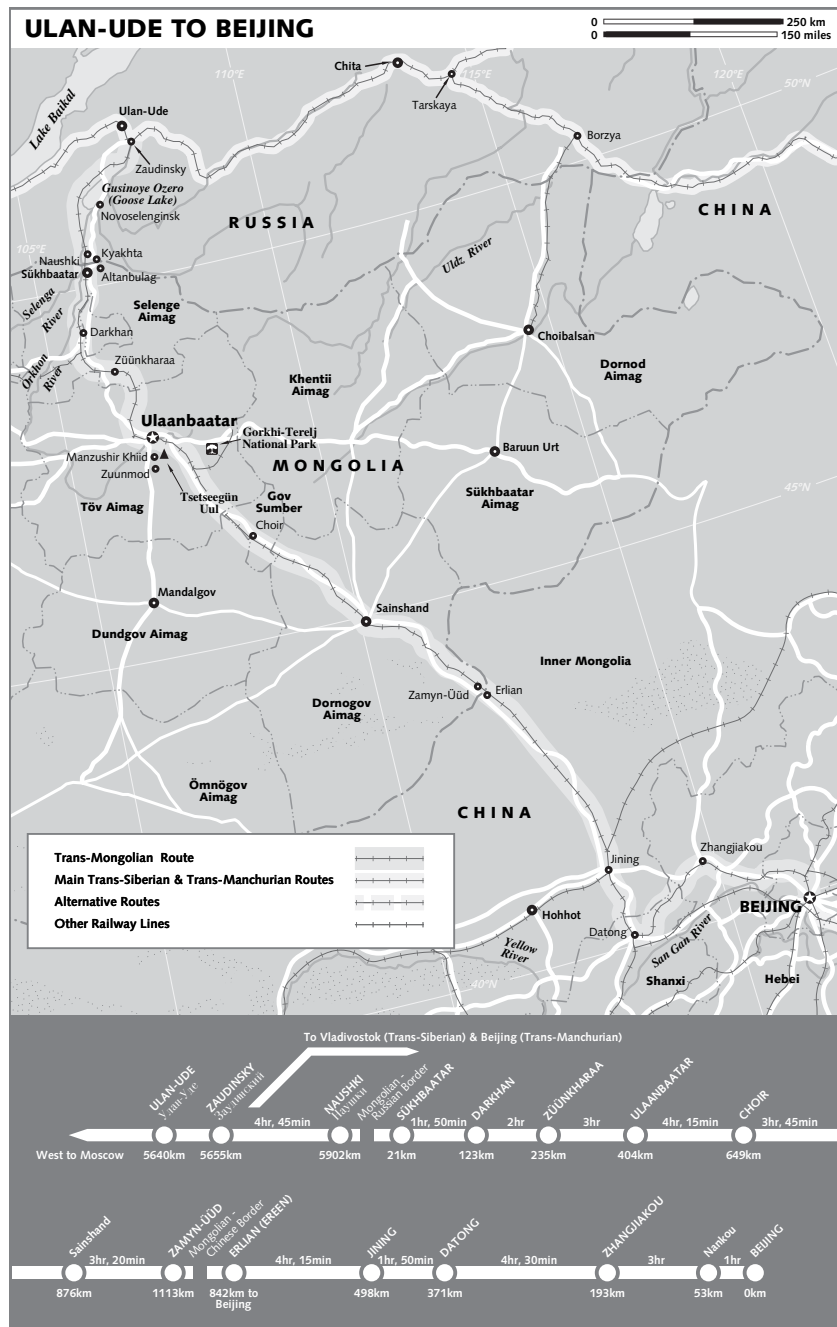
## HIGHLIGHTS

- Gaze from the train as the **Siberian taiga** south of Ulan-Ude transforms itself into the beguiling **Mongolian steppe**
- Witness a mystical ceremony at the country's largest and liveliest monastery, Ulaanbaatar's **Gandantegchinlen Khiid** (p260)
- Marvel at the dinosaur skeletons at Ulaanbaatar's **Museum of Natural History** (p261)
- Grab a seat for the sports and nomadic culture of the **Naadam Festival** (p262)
- Hike to the meditation retreat of Aryapala in **Gorkhi-Terelj National Park** (p268)



■ ROUTE DISTANCE: 2217KM

■ DURATION: TWO DAYS, 6¼ HOURS



## THE ROUTE

The Trans-Mongolian line branches off from the main Trans-Siberian route at Zaudinsky, about 13km east of Ulan-Ude. Mongolia and China each have their own kilometre markers. In Mongolia, the markers measure the distance to the Russian-Mongolian border, so 0km is the border town of Naushki. Once into China, the markers measure the distance to Beijing.

For more on Mongolia, grab a copy of Lonely Planet’s *Mongolia* guidebook.

### Zaudinsky to Naushki

At Zaudinsky (5655km) the branch line turns south and continues to follow the Selenga River, crossing at around 5701km. The scenery here is characterised by herds of cattle grazing across low green hills and beside a wide, lazy river, and by villages of wooden houses with brightly painted window shutters and flourishing gardens that explode with fruits and flowers in summer.

After you pass the town of Zagustay (5769km) the train follows the shores of Gusinoye Ozero (Goose Lake), surrounded by thick woods of pine and birch that are usually prevalent further north. The train crosses the Selenga again at 5885km before stopping at Naushki (5902/0km), a small, uneventful town that serves as the Russian border post.

### Sühkbaatar to Zhamyn-Üüd

Sühkbaatar (21km) is Mongolia’s chief border town. Set at the junction of the Selenga and Orkhon Rivers, Sühkbaatar (population 20,030), the capital of the Selenge *aimag* (province), is a quiet place founded in the 1940s and named after the revolutionary hero Damdin Sühkbaatar (see p261).

Entering Mongolia brings a change of scenery; the forests thin out into the lush green pastures of the fertile Selenge Gol (Selenga River) basin. When you cross the river at 63km you may spot cranes, heron and other waterfowl in the marshy areas on the west side of the train.

Darkhan (123km) is Mongolia’s third-largest city with a population of 73,400, built only in 1961 to take pressure off a rapidly expanding Ulaanbaatar. A bleak and industrial place (its name means ‘blacksmith’), its

most interesting sight is Kharaagiin Khiid, an active monastery housed in a pretty log cabin. The train stops for about 15 minutes, so you can get out and admire the sheep heads and other local specialities being sold on the platform.

The scenery south of Darkhan is lovely, especially on the western side of the train. As the landscape becomes less verdant, *gers* (traditional felt tents) dot the wide grassy expanses, giving a glimpse of the grasslands to come further south. Birch and pine trees cluster on the hills in the distance. You spend 10 minutes in Züünkharaa (231km), where trains loaded with tree trunks and processed wood stop en route from Siberia and northern Mongolia.

North of Ulaanbaatar the rolling hills are covered come summer with wildflowers and grazing animals, making for exquisite scenery. However, around 384km you will be able to catch views of the smokestacks and urban sprawl of Ulaanbaatar (404km) as the train descends into the valley. The train stops in the Mongolian capital for 30 minutes, just enough time for you to sprint out to see a collection of steam engines, about 1km east of the station, where the tracks cross under the highway.

South of Ulaanbaatar, the line winds through the gently swelling hills of the Bogdkhan Uul mountain range. Trees eventually disappear and the landscape becomes a 180-degree panorama of steppe, the only interruptions being grazing horses and the occasional *ger*.

There’s a 15-minute stop at Choir (649km). A statue of the first Mongolian cosmonaut stands in front of the station. Prior to 1992 this grim town of 12,200 was home to Mongolia’s biggest Soviet military air base. After the Russians left, many of the buildings sat empty and were vandalised. Despite having declared itself a Free Trade Zone, Choir continues to languish.

The train continues south entering the flat, arid and sparsely populated Gobi Desert. In a good year, the desert sprouts short grass, which sustains a limited number of sheep, goats and camels for their ethnic Khalkh owners. In a bad year, the wells go dry, the grass turns brown and the animals die. From the train, the view of this desolate landscape is impressive. Any small bodies of water (such as at 729km on the western side

## BORDER CROSSINGS

### Russia–Mongolia: Nauski–Sükhbaatar

Russia and Mongolia both use the same rail gauge, so no bogie-changing on trains is required. However, the time saved is eaten up in drawn-out customs procedures and general hanging around – anything up to 11 hours!

In Naushki travellers must fill out customs forms in duplicate, and Russian border guards collect passports. Mongolian traders get the most attention from the customs officers. When you get back your passport, you can get off the train. You can change money here and there's a farmers market just outside the train station (walk to the southern end of the platform and cross the street). If you arrive in Naushki from Kyakhta (p218) it's possible to buy a ticket for the Naushki Sükhbaatar train for R230 *kupe* (*kupeyny*; compartmentalised carriage), often just a single carriage. When officially 'full', a suitably tipped *provodnitsa* (carriage attendant) may still be prepared to get you aboard for the one-hour hop across no-man's-land. Naushki to Ulan-Ude, for R210 *platskart* (*platskartny*; open carriage), is an attractive but excruciatingly slow ride; it may well be faster taking the more frequent *marshrutky* (fixed-route minibuses) from Kyakhta.

The customs and immigration process is repeated by Mongolian officials in Sükhbaatar where, if you need it, there should be no problem buying a ticket for the nightly train to Ulaanbaatar that departs around 9.20pm. The trip takes nine hours and costs T3300 *obshchy* (4th class) or T8400 *kupe*. Travellers on through trains from Irkutsk to Ulaanbaatar will have to wait for their carriages to be hitched to this service before they can continue on their way. There are some cafés near Sükhbaatar station, and moneychangers hang out around the station itself.

### Russia–Mongolia: Kyakhta–Altanbulag

You can avoid the extreme tedium of the direct train crossing by taking this alternative road route into or out of Mongolia. There's a through bus to Ulaanbaatar organised three times weekly by Buryat-Intour in Ulan-Ude (see p213). More interesting, though, is to make minibuses hops to the Mongolian border via Novoselenginsk (p218) and the once-opulent tea-route town of Kyakhta (p218). It's quite possible to briefly see both towns during the day, cross the border and still catch the nightly train to Ulaanbaatar.

The **border** (☎ 9am–noon & 2–6pm) is open to bicycles and vehicles, and some officials speak English. You can't walk across, so pedestrians need to negotiate passage with private drivers. Start as close as possible to the front of the chaotic queue: processing takes about an hour with only a handful of vehicles allowed through at any one time. The going rate is R150 per passenger across no-man's-land; if you're heading into Mongolia it's well worth negotiating a ride all the way to Sükhbaatar train station (around R100 extra) rather than becoming prey to rip-off taxi drivers in Altanbulag, the dreary Mongolian border village.

### Mongolia–China

This border crossing takes about five hours no matter which direction you are travelling. Some trains cross the border at night, which guarantees that you won't get much sleep. In Zamyn-Üüd, Mongolian customs officials and border guards do their thing. Officials reserve most of their energy for Chinese and Mongolian traders. This process can take up to two hours.

In Erlian, Chinese customs and passport officials repeat the process (or start it, if you are travelling west). You must fill out customs forms and departure/arrival cards. The Erlian station is usually quite lively, even at night. Once your passport is returned, catch some fresh air and explore the station and surroundings where you can change money or get something to eat. If you do get off, you will not have a chance to get back on the train for about two hours while the bogies are changed.

As in Russia, Mongolia's trains run on a 5ft (1.5m) gauge, which is slightly wider than the standard gauge used in the rest of the world. Before the train can continue its journey, it must make a stop at the bogie-changing shed, where the carriages are raised and the bogies are replaced with the appropriate size. If you wish to watch the bogie-changing operations, stay on the train until it leaves the platform and gets to the shed. You may be able to watch and take photos. You can then walk or take a rickshaw back to the station.

of the tracks) attract wildlife, and you will probably spot horses, sheep and goats.

The train stops for around 15 minutes at **Sainshand** (876km), which means, ironically, 'Good Pond'. As the capital of the local province, Sainshand sports a couple of museums, a modern monastery and several hotels and *ger* camps, should you feel the urge to jump the train and get closer to the Gobi.

Back on the Trans-Mongolian route the bleak dusty landscape continues to the border town of **Zamyn-Üüd** (1113km), famed for being the hottest place in Mongolia!

### Erlian to Beijing

As the train approaches **Erlian** (842km) from the no-man's-land between Mongolia and China you won't fail to notice the giant rainbow arch at the road border post, proof of China's determination to build big and bold, even in the most inhospitable of environments. From here it takes about 13 hours to get to Beijing by direct train.

For the first several hours the train continues through the Gobi, now in the so-called autonomous region of Inner Mongolia. Mongolians make up only about 15% of the total population here and since 1949 the Chinese have done their best to assimilate them, eradicating their nomadic lifestyle even though they have been permitted to keep their written and spoken language.

Further south, green hills, valleys and more prosperous looking towns appear. There may be a stop at the main rail junction of **Jining** (498km) – this is the best place to change trains if you're not on a direct Ulaanbaatar to Beijing service (see p267).

You'll get your first glimpse of the Great Wall as the line passes through it at about 385km. This is now Shanxi province, one of the earliest centres of Chinese civilisation. The ancient capital of this region was **Datong** (371km), now an industrial metropolis of 2.7 million people. The train halts here for 10 minutes, but there are a couple of reasons for lingering longer: the awesome Yungang Caves, 16km west of the city, containing some 50,000 Buddhist statues carved between AD 460 and 494; and train fanatics will thrill to the Datong Locomotive Factory, the last in China to produce the 'iron rooster' steam engines until 1989. Inquire at the local **China Inter-**

**national Travel Service** (CTS; ☎ 0352-712 4882) at the station about tours to the caves and the factory. Note that onward tickets for trains not originating in Datong can be hard to secure; you might end up only being able to get a standing room only ticket on an already crowded train.

From Datong, the line turns east, entering Hebei province, primarily a coal-mining region, at around 300km. Hebei is characterised by its mountainous tableland where the Great Wall runs. There are good views of the wall on the eastern side of the tracks between 295km and 275km.

The train stops for about 15 minutes in the industrial city of **Zhangjiakou** (193km). Formerly known as Khaalga, which means 'door' or 'gate' in Mongolian, this town was the place where the ancient tea caravans crossed the Great Wall. From here the terrain becomes increasingly mountainous and the scenery is quite dramatic. At 99km the train crosses the San Gan River. At 95km, the mountains provide a spectacular backdrop to the vibrant blue waterway. Farms and orchards surrounded by mountains make for a visually stimulating ride.

Because of the steep ascent, the train requires a banking engine; the train stops briefly at **Kanzuang** (82km) to attach/detach it (depending on which direction you are travelling). Between 80km and 50km, the train goes through a series of thrilling tunnels that cut through the mountains. Each time the train emerges into daylight there's a fabulous view of the Great Wall and the surrounding mountains. The first is at **Badaling** (73km), immediately after the long 2km tunnel. The train then makes another, longer stop at **Qinglongqiao** (70km), where you can take photos from the platform.

The final stop is at **Nankou** (53km), where the rear engine is attached/detached. About an hour later, the train pulls into **Beijing**.

### ULAANBAATAR УЛААНБААТАР

☎ 011 / pop 800,000 / Moscow + 5hr

By no stretch of the imagination could Ulaanbaatar be called pretty. In fact the preponderance of jerry-built Soviet apartment blocks, polluting factories and general urban sprawl make it an ugly scar on an otherwise lovely country. However, there is much to recommend Mongolia's bustling capital, not least its friendly, switched-on

people and the fact that if you want to get out into the countryside this is the best place from which to arrange your trip.

On top of this, UB, as it's known to expats (but certainly not locals!), has enough worthwhile sights to comfortably fill several days and has far and away the best dining scene this side of Beijing. Built along the Tuul Gol and in the valleys of the Four Holy Peaks, UB is surrounded by some wonderful opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts. Hiking, biking, golf and horse riding are all possible within an hour of the capital – see p260, for outfits that organise these activities.

## History

The first recorded capital city of the Mongolian empire, Örgöö, was established in 1639 at the Da Khuree monastery, about 420km from Ulaanbaatar. The monastery was the residence of the five-year-old Zanabazar, who had been proclaimed the head of Buddhism in Mongolia. In keeping with the nomadic lifestyle, the capital was moved frequently to various locations along the Orkhon, Selenge and Tuul Rivers (with a name change accompanying each move).

The capital was finally established in its present location in 1778 and grew quickly as a religious, commercial and administrative centre. Its architecture remained predominantly *gers*, earning the capital the name 'City of Felt'. Further name changes accompanied invasions by the Russians and the Chinese. In 1924 the city was renamed Ulaanbaatar (Red Hero) in honour of the communist triumph, and declared the official capital of an 'independent' Mongolia (independent from China, not the Soviet Union).

In 1933 Ulaanbaatar gained autonomy and separated from the surrounding Töv aimag.

From the 1930s the Soviets built the city in typical Russian style: lots of ugly apartment blocks, large brightly coloured theatres and cavernous government buildings. Tragically, the Soviets also destroyed almost all of the monasteries and temples.

## Orientation

The station is in the city's southwestern corner around 1km from the centre. Most of the city spreads east–west along the main road,

Enkh Taivny Örgön Chöölöö, also known as Peace Ave. The centre is Sükhbaatar Sq – at the time of research there was a chance that it might be renamed Chinggis Khaan Sq after Mongolia's most famous leader.

## MAPS

The 1:10,000 *Ulaanbaatar City Map* is updated yearly – buy it at the **Map Shop** (Ikh Toiruu; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat), near the Elba Electronics shop.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Xanadu Books & Fine Wines** (☎ 319 748; www.xanadu.mn; Marco Polo Bldg; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Sat) Mongolia's only real English-language bookstore stocks some Lonely Planet titles.

### EMERGENCY

It may take a few minutes to get an English-speaker on these numbers.

**Emergency aid & ambulance** (☎ 103)

**Fire** (☎ 101)

**Police emergency** (☎ 102)

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are scores of Internet cafés, all charging around T800 per hour; expect to pay double that for hotel business centres. Connections are generally good. You can scan photos in many places for around T200.

**icafé** (☎ 313 316; fax 320 616; Baga Toiruu west; per hr T600; ☎ 9am–10pm Mon–Fri, 11am–10pm Sat & Sun) Located at the southern door of the National Information Technology Park, here you can also send and receive faxes.

**Internet Centre** (☎ 312 512; Tserendorjiin Gudamj 65; per hr Mon–Fri T700, Sat & Sun T600; ☎ 9am–1.30am)

**Za Internet** (☎ 320 801; Peace Ave 62; per hr T700; ☎ 24hr) Located 100m west of the State Department Store.

### MEDIA

Pick up the English-language weekly newspapers the **Mongol Messenger** (www.mongolmes.senger.mn) and the **UB Post** (http://ubpost.mongolnews.mn), each T500 per issue, for local news and entertainment information.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

If your situation is not an emergency, consider travelling to Beijing, where the range and quality of service is much better.

**Yonsei Friendship Hospital** (☎ 310 945; Peace Ave; ☎ 9am–4.30pm Mon–Fri) This South Korean-sponsored clinic provides the best medical service.

## ULANBAATAR

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0 300 m  
0 0.2 miles

**4**

**5**

**6**

To Airport (16km); Zuunmod (40km); Manzushir Khiiid (45km)

To Tereji (78km)

To Naran Tuul Market (200m); Bus Stand (200m)

To Zaisan Memorial (1.5km)

## MONEY

ATMs (accepting Visa cards only) are popping up across the city; find them in the lobbies of the major hotels and in many banks.

**Masterfoods supermarket** (Seoul St; ☎ 24hr) Has an ATM.

**State Department Store** (Peace Ave 44) You can change money in the lobby.

**Trade & Development Bank** (☎ 327 020; cnr Juulchin Gudamj & Baga Toiruu; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) Cash advances in US dollars are available here, and travellers cheques can also be cashed for tögrög or US dollars.

## POST

**Central post office** (☎ 313 421; cnr Peace Ave & Sükhbaataryn Gudamj; ☎ 7.30am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat & Sun)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist Information Visitor Centre** (☎ 311 423; www.mongoliatourism.gov.mn) The useful main office is in the central post office, on the corner of Peace Ave and Sükhbaataryn Gudamj. There are also booths at the train station and the airport.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

Ulaanbaatar has no shortage of tour operators who can help organise excursions or obtain train tickets. Most guesthouses offer their own range of tours, too.

**Air Market** (☎ 305 050; www.air-market.net; Urguu Plaza) South of the corner of Peace Ave and Chingisiin Örgön Chölöö. Good for flight tickets.

**Blue Bandana Expeditions** (☎ 329 456; www.active.mongolia.com; btwn Peace & Seoul Aves; ☎ 10am-6pm) In the Seven Summits camping supplies shop.

**Juulchin** (☎ 328 428; www.juulchin.com; Chingisiin Örgön Chölöö 5B, Bayangol Hotel) Former state-owned company, now privatised and quite competent.

**Karakorum Expeditions** (☎/fax 315 655; www.gomongolia.com; Gangaryn Gurav Bldg) Behind the State Circus. Rents mountain bikes (per day US\$25).

**Legend Tour** (☎ 315 158; www.legendtour.ru; Seoul St, Sant Asar Trading Centre, 2nd fl) Not great service but about the only place that may be able to secure you a Russian visa if you need it (for a price).

**Nomadic Expeditions** (☎ 313 396; www.nomadicexpeditions.com; 76 Peace Ave) Organises Gobi Desert tours.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Ulaanbaatar is a reasonably carefree and easy-going city. However, pickpockets and late-night muggings are a recent and growing problem. Theft is seldom violent against foreigners, just opportunistic.

## Sights

### GANDANTEGCHINLEN (GANDAN) KHIID

Mongolia's largest and most important **monastery** (☎ 360 164; www.gandan.mn; Öndör Geegen Zanabazaryn Gudamj; admission free; ☎ 9am-9pm) is a lively place that you shouldn't miss. The name translates roughly as 'the great place of complete joy'. Built in the mid-19th century, the monastery survived the communist purges of the 1930s. Today there are over 150 monks in residence and in its main building, the **Migjid Janraisig Süm** (admission T2500; ☎ 9am-6pm) you can view the 26.5m-tall gilded statue of Buddha, a replacement for one moved to St Petersburg in 1937.

The courtyard on the right of the main entrance contains two temples, the **Ochirdary Süm** and the smaller **Golden Dedenpovaran Süm**. If you come in the morning you can witness the fascinating ceremonies that take place here.

### WINTER PALACE OF THE BOGD KHAAN

Mongolia's eighth living Buddha and last king, Jebtzuun Damba Hutagt VIII, lived for 20 years in this **palace** (☎ 342 195; Chingisiin Örgön

## ULAAABAATAR IN...

### One Day

Catch a morning ceremony at the **Gandantegchinlen Khiid** (above). Walk back to town for lunch at **Stupa Café** (p265) before an afternoon exploring the **Natural History Museum** (opposite) and **National Museum of Mongolian History** (opposite), both close to Sükhbaatar Sq. Dinner at the **Silk Road Bar & Grill** (see p265) is a must, topped off by a pint at **Khan Brau** (p266).

### Two Days

On your second day, visit the **Winter Palace of the Bogd Khaan** (above) before huffing it up to the **Zaisan Memorial** (opposite). In the afternoon, visit the rather atmospheric **Monastery-Museum of Choijin-Lama** (opposite), then be entertained by the **Tumen Ekh Song and Dance Ensemble** (p266).

### Four Days

Get out into the countryside with a visit to **Manzushir Khiid** (p267) or **Terelj** (p268), spending the night in a *ger* (traditional felt tent) camp.

## SÜKHBAATAR, AXE HERO

Despite an impoverished background, Damdin Sükh (meaning 'axe') learned to read and write and excelled at horsemanship as a child. In 1911 he was conscripted into the army, where he developed nationalist convictions and gathered a loyal following of like-minded soldiers. His courageous performance combating the Chinese earned him the title *baatar* (hero).

When his unit was disbanded by the Chinese in 1919, Sükhbaatar used his network to form a nationalist army. He eventually joined forces with the revolutionary Khorloogin Choibalsan, who had close contact with the communist movement in Russia. With the assistance of the Soviet Red Army, they succeeded in defeating both the Chinese and the White Russians. On 11 July 1921, Sükhbaatar declared the People's Government of Mongolia.

Sükhbaatar was known as the 'people's warrior', and was also considered to be a true Mongol. At the 1922 Naadam Festival, which celebrated the first anniversary of the revolution, the new governor is said to have delighted the crowds when, riding down the field at full gallop, he leaned from his saddle to pick up silver coins from the ground. The following year – at the age of 30 – Sükhbaatar died of undetermined causes. Still visible astride his horse at the centre of Ulaanbaatar, he lives on in Mongolian history as an unrivalled national hero.

Chölöö; admission T2000; ☎ 9am-5.30pm daily May-Sep, 9am-5.30pm Fri-Tue Oct-Apr). The grounds house six ornate temples; the white building on the right is the Palace itself. It contains an eclectic collection of gifts received from foreign dignitaries and an extraordinary array of stuffed animals. Take bus 7 or 19.

### MONASTERY-MUSEUM OF CHOIJIN LAMA

This beautiful **museum** (☎ 324 788; admission T2400; ☎ 9am-5pm Jun-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-May) is also known as the Museum of Religion and hasn't operated as a monastery since 1938. There are five temples within the tranquil grounds and a concrete *ger* with a good selection of souvenirs and books about Buddhism and Mongolia.

### MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

The best reason for visiting this old and rambling **museum** (☎ 321 716; cnr Sükhbaataryn Gudamj & Sambugiin Örgön Chölöö; adult/student T2000/1000; ☎ 10am-5.30pm daily May-Sep, 10am-5.30pm Wed-Sun Oct-Apr) is to see the massive dinosaur fossils and skeletons dug up from the Gobi. The museum houses two impressive complete skeletons of a *Tarbosaurus* and a *Saurolophus*, as well as petrified dinosaur eggs and fossils.

### AROUND SÜKHBAATAR SQUARE

Big changes are slated for UB's central Sükhbaatar Sq. The statue of the revolutionary hero Damdin Sükhbaatar (see above) is to be moved to Liberty Sq, while his remains, once in the mausoleum in front of

Government House at the northern end of the square, have been removed to the Altan Olgii burial ground on the city's edge. The restructured south face of Government House will become the Chinggis Khaan Memorial Complex, and a statue of the Mongolian legend will stand on the plinth vacated by Sükhbaatar.

No changes are planned for the Palace of Culture (p266), which contains the **Mongolian National Modern Art Gallery** (☎ 313 191; admission T2000; ☎ 10am-6pm), on the northeast side of square, nor to the **National Museum of Mongolian History** (☎ 325 656; cnr Juulchin Gudamj & Sükhbaataryn Gudamj; admission T2500; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Tue-Sat) opposite the northwest corner. This museum contains exhibits (with English captions) on ancient burial sites, folk art and culture, Buddhist ceremonial objects and the Mongol horde, and is worth a visit.

### ZANABAZAR MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

This **art museum** (☎ 326 060; Juulchin Gudamj; adult/student T2500/400; ☎ 9am-5pm May-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Apr) has an excellent collection of paintings, carvings and sculptures, including many by the revered sculptor and artist Zanabazar. It also contains other rare religious exhibits such as *thangka* (scroll paintings) and Buddhist statues, representing the best display of its kind in Mongolia.

### ZAISAN MEMORIAL

This memorial is the tall, thin landmark on top of the hill south of the city. Built by the Russians to commemorate 'unknown

soldiers and heroes' from various wars, this masterpiece of socialist realism offers sweeping views of the city and surrounding hills, as well as a work-out on the climb up. Bus 7 from Bayangol Hotel will get you here.

### Festivals & Events

**Ikh Duichin** On 18 May, Buddha's birthday is marked by dancing in Gandantegchinlen Khiid in Ulaanbaatar and by special services in most other monasteries.

**Naadam** Mongolia's No 1 festival draws the multitudes to Ulaanbaatar on 11 and 12 July. There are also many smaller Naadams around the country at the same time.

### Sleeping

New guesthouses are opening up all the time in Ulaanbaatar. Touts meet all international

trains arriving at the station – some may offer good options, but be sure to check the location before you commit. All room rates include breakfast, although at the budget places this may just be tea, coffee and some bread and jam.

### BUDGET

The private rooms at guesthouses offer far greater value than those at the midrange hotels, plus you get the added benefit of clued-up hosts who can arrange tours and the company of fellow travellers. Many guesthouses are in apartment buildings and can be difficult to find; however, most will send someone to meet your train if you call or email ahead.

### THE NAADAM FESTIVAL

The highpoint of the Mongolian year is the Naadam Festival, held on 11 and 12 July. Part family reunion, part fair and part nomad Olympics, Naadam (meaning 'holiday' or 'festival') has its roots in the nomad assemblies and hunting extravaganzas of the Mongol armies.

Smaller Naadams are held throughout the country and are well worth attending if you want to get close to the action, witness genuine traditions, and even make up the numbers during a wrestling tournament! That said, UB's Naadam is the biggie, with parades, cheesy carnival events and souvenir salesmen outside the Nadaam Stadium (located around 1km south of Sükhbaatar Sq). The colourful and lively opening ceremony is well worth catching even if you're not interested in the three traditional 'manly' sports of wrestling, archery and horse racing, as well as the quirky anklebone shooting.

Get yourself to Sükhbaatar Sq just before 9am on day one to see a fantastic ceremony outside State Parliament House, complete with mounted cavalry and full military band. You can then follow the cavalry on its stately clop towards the stadium where the opening ceremony kicks off around 11am, lasting about 1½ hours.

### Wrestling

The wrestling starts at the stadium immediately after the opening ceremony. The final rounds on day two, just before the closing ceremony, are the most exciting matches. Mongolian wrestling has no time limits; a match ends only when a wrestler falls (or any body part other than feet or hands touches the ground). It also has no weight divisions, so the biggest wrestlers (and they are big!) are often the best.

The 'eagle dance' is performed beforehand by contestants to pay respect to the judges, and again afterwards by the winner. The loser must walk under the right arm of the winner, symbolising peace between the wrestlers. Another special feature of wrestling is the uniform, complete with heavy boots, tiny tight briefs and open midriff-baring vests.

### Archery

Archery is held in an open stadium next to the main stadium. The sport of archery originated in the 11th century and modern-day competitors still don traditional garb to compete. Archers use a bent composite bow made of layered horn, bark and wood. Arrows are usually made from willow branches and vulture feathers.

The target is a line of up to 20 or 30 colourful rings on the ground. Male contestants stand 75m from the target while female contestants stand 60m from it. After each shot, the judges emit a shout and raise their arms to indicate the quality of the shot. The winner who hits the targets the most times is declared the best *mergen* (archer).

**UB Guesthouse** (☎ 311 037, 9119 9859; www.ubguest.com; cnr Baga Toiruu & Juulchin Gudamj; dm/d US\$4/12; ☑) Expect a friendly welcome and some of the cleanest dorms and bathrooms you've ever seen at this long-running guesthouse. Located above Golomt Bank on Baga Toiruu west; the entrance is around the back.

**Khongor Guesthouse** (☎ 316 415, 9925 2599; http://get.to/khongor; Peace Ave 15, Apt 6; dm/s/d US\$4/10/12; ☑) Knowledgeable English-speaking Toroo offers reasonably well-appointed accommodation in three separate buildings, each convenient and central. The entrance of the main guesthouse is around the back of the third building west of the State Department Store.

**Bolod's Guesthouse** (☎ 9919 2407; www.bolodtours.com; Peace Ave 61, Room 22, Door 20; dm US\$5; ☑) More spacious than most other apartment guesthouses, Bolod's is a good-value option with a cosy atmosphere and a great location between the central post office and National Academic Drama Theatre. Bolod is a gracious host and provides good tours and visa support if you're stuck. Enter through the white and grey gate opposite the post office.

**Hostel Sandwich** (☎ 342 512, 343 185; www.newhostel.mn; Chingisiin Örgön Chöölöö 10; dm US\$15; ☑) Overpriced but extremely well appointed is this purpose-built new place bang opposite Naadam Stadium and not far from the Winter Palace. It's hardly Mongolian

### Horse Racing

Horse racing is held about 28km west of the city on an open plain called Hui Doloon Khutag. The only way to get out here is by taxi (about T14,000 return). Your hotel or guesthouse can probably arrange a vehicle, or ask at Chez Bernard restaurant.

Horse racing, which takes place not on a track but on the open steppe, has six categories, based on the age of the horse and distance of the race (either 15km or 30km). Before the race the jockeys – children aged five to 12 – parade their horses in front of the judges to show respect, and the audience often sings traditional songs.

The races are gruelling and dangerous – sadly, every year horses and jockeys die. Around the finish line, spectators wait breathlessly as contestants speed across the hill side in a cloud of dust. The winning horses and riders are then the subject of laudatory poems and songs performed by the crowds. The five winning riders must drink some special *airag* (fermented mare's milk), which is then sprinkled on the riders' heads and horses' backs.

### Anklebone Shooting

Held in a large tent next to the archery stadium, this entails flicking a sheep's anklebone at a small target (also made from anklebones) about 3m away. Apart from providing some shade, the tent has an electric atmosphere as competitors are spurred on by the yodelling of spectators.

### Tickets

Admission to the stadium (except for the opening and closing ceremonies), archery and horse racing are free, but you'll definitely need a ticket for the opening ceremony and possibly the last round or two of the wrestling and closing ceremony. Ticket costs vary per section; the north side of the stadium (which is protected from the sun and rain by an overhang and has the best view of the opening event) is more expensive with tickets going for T30,000 (valid for both the opening and closing ceremonies). These tickets are distributed via the tour operators and hotels.

Alternatively you can get a ticket for as low as T2000 from scalpers who hang around the stadium or even from the police at the gates. The original price will be printed on the ticket; you can expect to pay twice this for the service charge. Guesthouse owners normally help their guests to buy tickets. A cheap ticket will get you through a designated gate, but these sections are grossly oversold and there is no guarantee you'll get a seat. If you are a lucky seat holder you may soon find a granny or kid on your lap.

To find out what is going on during the festival, look for the events program in the two English-language newspapers; there are often sports matches and other events in the lead-up to the main two days.

in atmosphere, but it's clean, and will fit the bill if you're looking for somewhere that's quiet.

Also recommended:

**Idre's Guest House** (☎ 316 749, 9911 2575; www.idre.tour.com; Teeverchidiin Gudamj; dm/d US\$3.50/9; 📺) Walk behind the old long-distance bus station, turn right and look for the nine-storey apartment block. It is building 23, entrance 2, door 44 on the 3rd floor.

**Zaya Backpacker Hostel** (☎ 316 696, 9918 5013; www.maginet.mn/~backpackza; Peace Ave 63; dm/s/d US\$4/10/16; 📺) Located inside a courtyard off Peace Ave, next to Za Internet.

### MIDRANGE

These hotels offer guaranteed privacy and, usually, your own shower.

**Natural Hotel** (☎ 324 090; Baga Toiruu; s/d without bathroom US\$20/25, d with bathroom US\$30). About the best value for what it offers, which are simply furnished small rooms with TV and showers. The location, behind Art Kino Cinema, is central and it also has a sauna, snooker table and karaoke.

**Zaluuchud Hotel** (☎ 325 544; www.zh.mn; Baga Toiruu 43; s/d/ste US\$35/65/90) The spiffy rooms here have been renovated to a modern, simple design and are equipped with TV, fridge and kettle. It's popular with Chinese and Russian businessmen.

**Genex Hotel** (☎ 326 763; www.generalimpex.mn; Choimbolyn Gudamj 10; s/d from US\$35/50, half-luxury US\$48/80; 📺) Near the Elba Electronics shop on Ikh Toiruu, this clean, modern hotel has appealing rooms in the half-luxe category. Standard rooms include a washbasin and toilet only.

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Gana's Guest House** (☎ /fax 367 343; www.ganasger.mn; Gandan Khiid ger district, house No 22; dm in r/ger US\$3/5, s/d without bathroom US\$12/15, d with bathroom US\$20; 📺) This may be Ulaanbaatar's oldest travellers' hang-out, offering dorm beds in *gers* (traditional felt tents) as well as one large regular dorm, but it has stayed ahead of the pack by upgrading double rooms with ensuite showers and cosy decoration. Friendly service, an outdoor terrace and an airy perch overlooking downtown UB are also pluses, as is its proximity to atmospheric Gandan-tegchinlen Khiid.

### TOP END

Expect 15% Value-Added Tax (VAT) to be tacked onto your bill.

**Bayangol Hotel** (☎ 312 255; www.bayangolhotel.mn; Chingisiin Örgön Chölöö 5; s/d from US\$76/97; 📺) Popular with upmarket organised tours, the Bayangol comes closest to offering a true upmarket hotel experience. Bathrooms are small but otherwise rooms have contemporary furnishings. The location is spot-on and there's a great range of bars and restaurants on-site.

**Ulaanbaatar Hotel** (☎ 320 620; www.ubhotel.mn; Sükhbaatar Sq 14; s/d from US\$60/90; 📺) One of the very few hotels that was built and flourished during the communist era, the Ulaanbaatar harks back to that time but still has decent rooms. Excellent facilities include a sauna, billiard room, business centre, travel agency, coffee shop, two restaurants and even a practice golf range on the 6th floor.

**Tuushin Hotel** (☎ 323 162; www.ulaanbaatar.net; Amaryn 2; s/d from US\$66/88; 📺) With a great location directly north of the Palace of Culture, the Tuushin offers pleasant service and spacious rooms with 1970s furnishings. There's a good gift shop in the lobby.

### Eating

Ulaanbaatar's restaurants offer a surprisingly decent variety of cuisines and atmospheres. Enjoy the choice and quality because out in the countryside it's another matter entirely!

### RESTAURANTS

**Taj Mahal** (☎ 311 009; Chingisiin Örgön Chölöö 5, Bayangol Hotel, Tower A, 3rd fl; meal with drink T10,000; 🍷 noon-midnight) Excellent Indian cuisine, including a great-value *thali* (set menu) meal for T6500, is served in this restaurant that's decorated with a papier-mâché elephant and reconstruction of the Taj Mahal's façade. Amiable owner Babu is sure to check you're having a good time.

**Le Bistro Français** (☎ 320 022; Ikh Sarguuliin Gudamj 2; meal with wine T15,000; 🍷 8am-11pm) The choice of businessmen and diplomats, this relaxed bistro with an open frontage in summer serves fine but pricey French-style cuisine, all of which can be washed down with good wine.

**California** (☎ 319 031; Seoul St; meal with drink T9000; 🍷 8am-midnight Mon-Sat, 9am-midnight Sun) One of UB's most popular restaurants, this place

stands out for its American-style breakfasts, burgers, steaks, salads and a few things you can't get anywhere else, like a properly made iced tea.

**UB Deli** (☎ 325 240; Seoul St 48; main dishes T3500-5000; 🍷 9am-midnight) This challenger for the title of top American-style restaurant is an un-deli-like place. Expats and clued-up locals scarf chicken Caesar salad, grilled sandwiches and burgers washed down with its signature iced strawberry tea.

**Chinggis Restaurant** (☎ 321 257; Baga Toiruu; buffet T10,000; 🍷 11am-midnight) Although the food is Korean the interior is decidedly Mongolian, plus there's singing and dancing performances in the evenings. The house speciality is *kalbitan* (beef-rib soup) while the buffet includes a healthy salad bar.

**Marco Polo** (☎ 318 433; Seoul St 27; pizzas T3500; 🍷 noon-midnight) This place gets our vote for the best pizza in town. Its outdoor terrace is popular in summer, while the strip show upstairs pulls in the punters year-round.

More for atmosphere than fine dining are a couple of restaurants set in giant *gers* and geared towards tour groups. A set meal at either of the following places will cost around T12,000 and you must make a booking:

**Abtai Sain Khaanin Örgöö** (☎ 9988 8090; B Dorjiin Gudamj; 🍷 10am-10pm) Near the US embassy, it's decked out with snow leopard pelts and bear skins.

**Chin Van Khandorjiin Örgöö** (☎ 320 763; Seoul St; 🍷 10am-10pm) Classy and central, it's tacked onto an authentic 19th-century aristocrat's home.

### CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

For fast Mongolian fare, cheap, tasty *buuz* (steamed meat dumplings) or *khuushuur* (fried mutton pancakes) are sold at kiosks and modern canteens around town; try Zochin Buuz, which has least 10 outlets across the city, including on Peace Ave near Chez Bernard, or Khaan Buuz opposite the State Department Store. Both are open 24 hours, ideal for when that late-night *buuz* craving strikes!

**Chez Bernard** (☎ 324 622; www.happycamel.com; Peace Ave 27; breakfast T6000; 🍷 7am-2am) *Le tout* UB meets and greets at this long-running Belgian-owned café that dishes up excellent European-style breakfast platters, along with a good selection of bakery items. The owners organise trips and there's a travellers noticeboard.

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Silk Road Bar & Grill** (☎ 9191 4455; Jamiyan Guunii Gudamj; meal with drink T12,000; 🍷 noon-11pm) Swoon over the view from this cool restaurant-bar's balcony, which looks across the mystical Chojjin Lama monastery. Then turn your attention to the very decent European-style menu, with chicken shish kebabs, barbecued lamb and pepper steaks plus a good selection of soups and salads.

**Millie's Espresso** (☎ 330 338; Marco Polo Bldg; snack & drink T3500; 🍷 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Tops with consultants, aid workers and journalists sipping excellent shakes and freshly squeezed orange juice. Also excellent are the steak sandwiches, lasagne and lemon pie. It also has a small branch serving coffee and cakes in Ulaanbaatar Hotel.

**Sacher's Café** (☎ 324 734; Baga Toiruu west; breakfast T2000; 🍷 8am-10pm) Indulge yourself with the excellent Austrian-style cakes, pretzels and breads, including Chinggis Beer bread. It also offers filtered coffee, German magazines and indoor and outdoor seating.

**Stupa Café** (☎ 9911 9765; Juulchin Gudamj; Builder's Sq; snack & drink T2000; 🍷 9am-8pm Sun-Fri) Attached to a Buddhist cultural centre, this very appealing café is ideal for a quiet pit stop and has some great handmade souvenirs as well as newspapers and a free English library.

### SELF-CATERING

Stock up for your train ride or a trip to the countryside by visiting the ground floor of the State Department Store or the neighbouring **Dalai Eej Market** (🍷 10am-8pm) and **Merkuri Market** (🍷 10am-8pm), which are both off Seoulyn Gudamj not far from the State Circus.

### Drinking

Locally brewed beers have taken off in UB. Most bars are open 11am to midnight daily and all serve food of the meat-and-potatoes variety.

**Ikh Mongol** (☎ 320 450; Tserendorjiin Gudamj; 🍷 closed Tue) Opposite the State Circus, this new brewhouse serves up very decent dark and hops and malt beers from T1200 a glass. On warm nights the crowds gather on the large outdoor deck while live music entertains those inside.

**Dave's Place** (☎ 316 798; Sükhbaatar Sq) Located on the patio of the Cultural Palace and run by an Englishman named Dave, this is a great place to observe the comings and goings of central UB. Head here for Thursday's 'Quiz Night', starting at 9.30pm (tip: read up on the local news first) and on Friday for live music. In cool weather the whole operation retreats to the basement bar.

**Brau Haus** (☎ 313 172; Seoul St) This flash and spacious bar and restaurant combo is part of the Khan Brau family. There's live music on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

**Khan Brau** (☎ 324 064; Chingisiin Örgön Chölöö) At some point you'll most likely wash up at this lively central bar with outdoor seating and live music most nights. Note the dark beer is way better than the *shar* (light).

**Chinggis Club** (☎ 325 820; Sükhbaatarын Gudamj 10) The beer is recommended at this German-run microbrewery, with a lively atmosphere and good German-inspired grub.

## Entertainment

Check the English-language weeklies for events (see p258). The **Arts Council of Mongolia** (☎ 319 015; www.artscouncil.mn) produces a monthly cultural events calendar that covers most theatres, galleries and museums.

**State Circus** (☎ 320 795, 9918 1134, 9525 8788; admission T5000) Come to the circus, formed in 1940, to see the impressive acrobatics, juggling and extraordinary contortionists. Performances are sporadic so check the local media or Arts Council. The circus is closed during August.

## TRADITIONAL MUSIC & DANCE

A performance of traditional music and dance will be one of the highlights of your visit to Mongolia and should not be missed. The State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble performs throughout the summer in the **National Academic Drama Theatre** (☎ 310 466; cnr Seoul St & Chingisiin Örgön Chölöö; admission T6000; ☎ 6pm May-Sep). Shows are less frequently staged at the **Palace of Culture** (☎ 321 444) on the northeast corner of Sükhbaatar Sq.

**Tumen Ekh Song and Dance Ensemble** (☎ 327 916; State Youth & Children's Theatre, Nairamdal Park, admission T6000; ☎ 6pm) This nightly performance is the most popular cultural show in Ulaanbaatar.

**State Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 322 854; Sükhbaatar Sq; admission T5500; ☎ Sep-Jul) Stages produc-

tions in Mongolian of many of the classics, as well as works by Mongolia's most famous poet and playwright Natsagdorj.

## NIGHTCLUBS

**River Sounds** (☎ 320 497; Olympiin Örgön Chölöö; admission T3000-5000; ☎ 8pm-3am) UB's only dedicated live-music venue usually hosts jazz and occasionally rock bands.

## CINEMA

**Tengis** (☎ 313 105; www.tengis.mn; Liberty Sq; regular show T2500, matinee T1500) Mongolia's first multiplex cinema screens local movies and Hollywood blockbusters (shown in English with Mongolian subtitles) in its three comfy air-conditioned halls.

## Shopping

UB abounds with shops selling tacky tourist souvenirs as well as locally produced cashmere clothing and blankets. A few of the better places for that special Mongolian keepsake:

**Egshiglen Magnai National Musical Instrument Shop** (☎ 312 732; Sükhbaatarын Gudamj; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) This is the place to get your *morin khuur* (horse-head fiddle).

**Moda Mongolia** (☎ 232 925; Tserendorjiin Gudamj; ☎ 9am-8pm) Offers slightly more stylish cashmere clothes than elsewhere, although it's far from cheap.

**Mongolian Wool Craft** (☎ 318 591; Tserendorjiin Gudamj; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) Colourful and inventive products made from felt, including slippers and hats.

**State Department Store** (☎ 324 311; Peace Ave 44; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) The 'big shop', as it is commonly called, has a decent collection of souvenirs and cashmere products.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The Mongolian airline **MIAT** (☎ 322 686; www.miat.com) has flights to Beijing, Berlin, Irkutsk, Moscow, Osaka, Seoul and Tokyo. Its office, close to the east side of Sükhbaatar Sq, may move in 2006 but the phone number will remain the same. **Aero Mongolia** (☎ 9191 2903; www.aeromongolia.mn) operates the very infrequent domestic flights.

Other international flights are available: **Aeroflot** (☎ 320 720; Seoul St 15) To Moscow, Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude.

**Air China** (☎ 328 838; 1kh Toiruu, Bldg 47)

**Korean Air** (☎ 326 643; Tokyogjiin Gudamj, Chinggis Khaan Hotel, 2nd fl) to Seoul.

## BUS

Minivans heading for destinations in the north and west (but not east) leave from the Dragon Bus Stand on Peace Ave 7km west of Sükhbaatar Sq. Minivans for all destinations use the Naran Tuul Market. For the Gobi Desert, the Mandalgov-bound minivans use the Dragon Bus Stand while vans for Ömnögovi usually use Naran Tuul.

Both stations are essentially a bunch of vans sitting in a lot with their destinations posted in the dashboard (in Cyrillic). Buses are becoming infrequent with the surge in minivans. Tell the drivers where you want to go and you'll be directed to the correct van. Some vehicles may be ready to go, others may not be leaving for another day. Buy your ticket on the bus.

## TRAIN

For details of the international train services to and from UB, including the Trans-Mongolian, see p324.

International train tickets are available at the **International Railway Ticketing Office** (☎ 944 868; Zamhydn Gudamj) at the foreigners' booking office in Room 212 (☎ 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday); at weekends you use the downstairs booking desk. Tickets for international trains can be booked up to one month in advance but those for the Moscow-Beijing trains don't go on sale until the day before departure.

If you run into problems most guesthouses and hotels should be able to assist.

## Getting Around

From the train station to the city centre is about 20 minutes' walk (about 1km). Alter-

natively, metered taxis charge a standard T250 per kilometre (check the current rate as this increases regularly); most taxi drivers are honest and will use their meters. Expect to pay around T800 from the station to Sükhbaatar Sq, while a taxi from Buyant-Ukhaa International Airport, 18km south-west of the city, should be around T6000. Bus 11 also runs from the airport to the Bayangol Hotel (T200).

## AROUND ULAANBAATAR

Mongolia's real attraction lies in the untouched beauty of the countryside, its exhilarating wide open spaces and rich nomadic culture. Fortunately, these aspects are within reach on day trips or overnights from Ulaanbaatar.

### Manzushir Khiid Манзширийн хийд

Just over 50km south of Ulaanbaatar, Manzushir Khiid was a monastery – established in 1733 – that once contained more than 20 temples and housed 350 monks. Destroyed during the 1930s, the main temple has been restored and now functions as a museum, but the other temples remain in ruins.

The monastery itself is not as impressive as Gandan Khiid in Ulaanbaatar, but the setting is exquisite. Hidden away in the **Bogdkhan Uul Strictly Protected Area** (admission T3000), the monastery overlooks a beautiful valley of pine, birch and cedar trees, dotted with granite boulders. Behind the main temple, climb up the rocks to discover some **Buddhist rock paintings**.

You can catch a taxi straight to Manzushir Khiid from Ulaanbaatar. Alternatively, take one of the hourly minibuses to

## ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO BEIJING

Immediately after Naadam, with thousands of visitors heading out of Ulaanbaatar, it's practically impossible to score last-minute reservations on the direct trains and flights to Beijing. If you haven't booked well in advance, all is not lost as there are alternatives.

Train tickets are often available on the Ulaanbaatar to Hohhot services; buy a ticket as far as the main junction at Jining (T41,670 *kupe*) where you can connect with a nightly train to Beijing (Y130 hard sleeper). To be sure of getting a ticket for this connection there's an agency on the ground floor of UB's International Railway Ticketing Office (see above) who can make the arrangements. It charges the tögrög equivalent of Y250 for the same hard-sleeper ticket from Jining to Beijing; you'll be met at Jining by its local agent, who will have your ticket.

An even cheaper option is to get the train as far as Erlian (T25,000) just across the Mongolian border. From here comfortable sleeper buses to Beijing (Y120, 14 hours) wait outside the station to meet each train.



the nearby town of Zuunmod (T700, one hour) and then walk the 5km to the monastery through the Bogdkhan Uul Strictly Protected Area. Laid-back Zuunmod (population 17,000) is also a conveniently close place to UB to catch a local Naadam festival (see p262).

### Tsetseegun Uul Цэцээ Гүн Уул

Of the Four Holy Peaks that surround Ulaanbaatar, the most magnificent is Tsetseegun Uul (2256m). The Siberian larch forest and abundance of bird and animal life make this a great place to escape the city.

The easiest way to explore Tsetseegun Uul is to hike from Manzushir Khiid (p267). Even if you do not enter the monastery/museum, you will have to pay the T3000 admission fee for Bogdkhan Uul Strictly Protected Area. The trail is reasonably marked, but you should also use a compass. A hike from Manzushir Khiid to the Zaisan Memorial (p261) in Ulaanbaatar takes about 10 hours, so be prepared to camp and bring all the food and water you will need for at least two days.

From the monastery, follow the stream east until it nearly disappears, then turn north. About three hours' walking should bring you out over a ridge into a broad boggy meadow, which you will have to cross. If you walked due north, the twin rocky outcrops of the summit should be right in front of you. When you start to see Ulaanbaatar in the distance, you are on the highest ridge and close to the two large *ovoo* (sacred pyramid-shaped collection of stones) on the summit.

From the *ovoo* you can return to Manzushir Khiid or descend to Ulaanbaatar. Finding the most direct route to Ulaanbaatar is difficult, since you must estimate your location by your visual reference to the city. The quickest way is to head due north of UB's Observatory, and down to the valley where you'll cross the train tracks. The road is close by and you can catch a taxi to UB for around T3000. The longer route takes you to the Zaisan Memorial. Be careful not to drop down too soon otherwise you'll end up beside the

Presidential Palace in the Ikh Tenger Valley. The guards here can be uptight about perceived 'trespassers'.

### Terelj Тэрэлж

Although it's fast becoming developed, Terelj, about 80km northeast of UB and part of the **Gorkhi-Terelj National Park** (admission T3000), is still a beautiful and relaxing place to head to. At 1600m, this area is cool and the alpine scenery spectacular. There are many opportunities for hiking, rock-climbing, swimming (in icy water), rafting and horse-riding (around T12,000 per day).

One potential destination for hiking or horse-riding is the appropriately named **Turtle Rock**, easily spotted along the main road through the park. From here it's less than an hour's hike up to the picturesque Buddhist meditation retreat of Aryapala from where you can look back on a stunning landscape straight out of *Lord of the Rings*.

Another place worth heading to is **Gunjiin Sün**, a Manchurian-influenced temple surrounded by forests. From the main *ger* camp area, Gunjiin Sün is about 30km as the crow flies, but it is easier to find if you take the longer route along the Baruun Bayan Gol. Other picturesque routes are along the Terelj and Tuul Rivers towards Khentii Nuruu. Horses can be hired at any *ger* camp for about US\$5 per hour or US\$15 to US\$20 per day.

Terelj is a great place to go camping, or guesthouses can arrange accommodation in the park – sometimes staying in real *gers* with local families. Most of the tourist *ger* camps in Terelj offer similar facilities and prices – about US\$30 per person, including three hearty meals, or US\$15 without food. Among the better ones are **Buuveit** (☎ 322 870; www.tsolmontravel.com), which has a beautifully secluded location, and the friendly **Miraj** (☎ 325 188), 14km along the main road from the park entrance.

A bus for Turtle Rock in Terelj leaves at 4.30pm from the corner of Peace Ave and Öndör Geegen Zanabazaryn Gudamj. The same bus returns directly to Ulaanbaatar. If this doesn't pan out hire a taxi for about T30,000 one way.

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