

# Eastern Mongolia



Eastern Mongolia is where heaven and earth fuse into one part – a blank slate of blue sky colliding with an equally empty sea of yellow grass. The occasional wooden shack or ger reminds you that humans do inhabit this enormous landscape, but for the most part it's an unspoilt amphitheatre of bounding gazelle, scurrying marmots and jeep tracks that squiggle endlessly into the distance.

Biologists fawn over the region, touting it as one of the world's last great unharmed grassland ecosystems – imagine the scenery from *Dances with Wolves*. Yet, Mongolian politicians have their own vision of Manifest Destiny and threaten the region with ill-planned urban-development schemes. Get there before the grassland disappears.

Besides the grasslands, the major feature of the region is the Khan Khentii mountains. This was the homeland of Temujin, the embattled boy who grew up to become Chinggis Khaan. A number of sites recall his legacy – the highlight being Dadal, a storybook village of log cabins that claims to be the birthplace of the great khaan. In the southeast of the region, Dariganga remains an inspiring getaway. This volcanic area is filled with craters, lava tubes, ancient stone figures and legendary stories about horse bandits that harassed the Chinese.

Most travellers write off the east because it's not on the way to anywhere and lacks the sex appeal of the Gobi. This is a shame as it's one of the most beautiful areas of the country and relatively easy to get around by jeep. Yet it's something of a blessing for those travellers who want to leave the tourist buses behind and experience an almost untouched landscape.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Get on the Chinggis Khaan trail by working your way from his coronation site at **Khökh Nuur** (p171) to his childhood stomping grounds in **Dadal** (p173)
- Hire some sturdy horses and set off on an expedition to holy **Burkhan Khalduun** (p172), the hill sacred to Chinggis Khaan as described in *The Secret History of the Mongols*
- Climb the sacred **Shiliin Bogd Uul** (p183) to restore your soul and then tour the area around **Dariganga** (p182), rich in cultural relics and eerie landscapes
- Travel across the empty steppes to the war memorials at **Khalkhiin Gol** (Khalkhiin River; p179) and then spot wildlife, including moose and huge herds of gazelle, at nearby **Nömrög Strictly Protected Area** (p174)



■ POPULATION: 195,100

■ AREA: 287,500 SQ KM

## History

The Tamtsagbulag Neolithic site in Dornod, active more than 4000 years ago, is proof that agriculture predated nomadic pastoralism on the eastern steppes. But it was the Kitan, a Manchurian tribal confederation, who made the first big impression on the region, building forts and farming communities in the 10th century, including Kherlen Bar Khot in Dornod.

Another Manchu tribe, the Jurchen, deposed the Kitan in the early 12th century, renamed itself the Jin, and returned eastern Mongolia to its warring ways. It wasn't until Chinggis Khaan united the fractured clans in 1206 that peace took over.

It was from Avarga (modern Delgerkhaan) that Chinggis launched expeditions south towards China. When the capital was moved to Karakorum in 1220 the region withdrew into obscurity. It wasn't until 1939 that eastern Mongolia was again in the headlines, this time as a battlefield between Japanese and Soviet forces. Heavy losses forced the Japanese military machine south, but the Khalkh Gol region is still littered with battle scars from the brief campaign.

The discovery of zinc and oil in the region in the 1990s brought the promise of development. Uranium is also found in the north-east. However, resources have so far proven relatively small and whatever profits have been made have so far failed to stimulate the local economy.

## Climate

Eastern Mongolia's climate and landscape has more in common with northeastern China than it does with Central Asia. Temperature extremes are less severe and winds less violent than in the west. While the Khan Khentii mountains get a lot of rain in the summer, per-year precipitation on the steppes is around 250mm. Winter daytime temperatures fall to minus 20°C but skies are usually blue.

## Getting There & Away

A paved road between Ulaanbaatar and Öndörkhaan is nearly complete, allowing for a relatively hassle-free entry into the region. Decent dirt roads connect other areas, although the far north can get boggy after heavy rains.

Vehicles for Öndörkhaan depart from Ulaanbaatar's Naran Tuul jeep station. You can also get a ride with vehicles from

Ulaanbaatar that go through Öndörkhaan on their way to Baruun-Urt and Choibalsan. Another route into the region is through northern Khentii – daily minivans from Naran Tuul travel to Dadal via Ömnödelger and Binder. During the rainy season this trip can take more than 25 hours.

With your own vehicle, it's possible to drive to eastern Mongolia from the Gobi. You could even enter from Russia at the Ereentsav–Solovyevsk border crossing in Dornod aimag. If you are in Selenge aimag, the only direct way into Khentii is on foot or horseback; jeep travellers will need to go via Ulaanbaatar.

## Getting Around

Public transport can get you to some places of interest, including Dadal and Dariganga. But if you want to maximise your time and see what the region really has to offer you'll need your own vehicle, either hired from Ulaanbaatar or from one of the aimag capitals. Make sure your guide and driver have some experience in the region, as this will make navigation easier (a GPS is a handy alternative). The best way to explore northern Khentii, including the Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area, is on horseback – both Batshireet and Dadal are great places to launch an expedition. The train that connects Choibalsan and Chuluunkhoroот is something of an adventure, but not that useful for serious exploration – you're better off with your own vehicle in the region.

# KHENTII ХЭНТИЙ

pop 68,100 / area 82,000 sq km

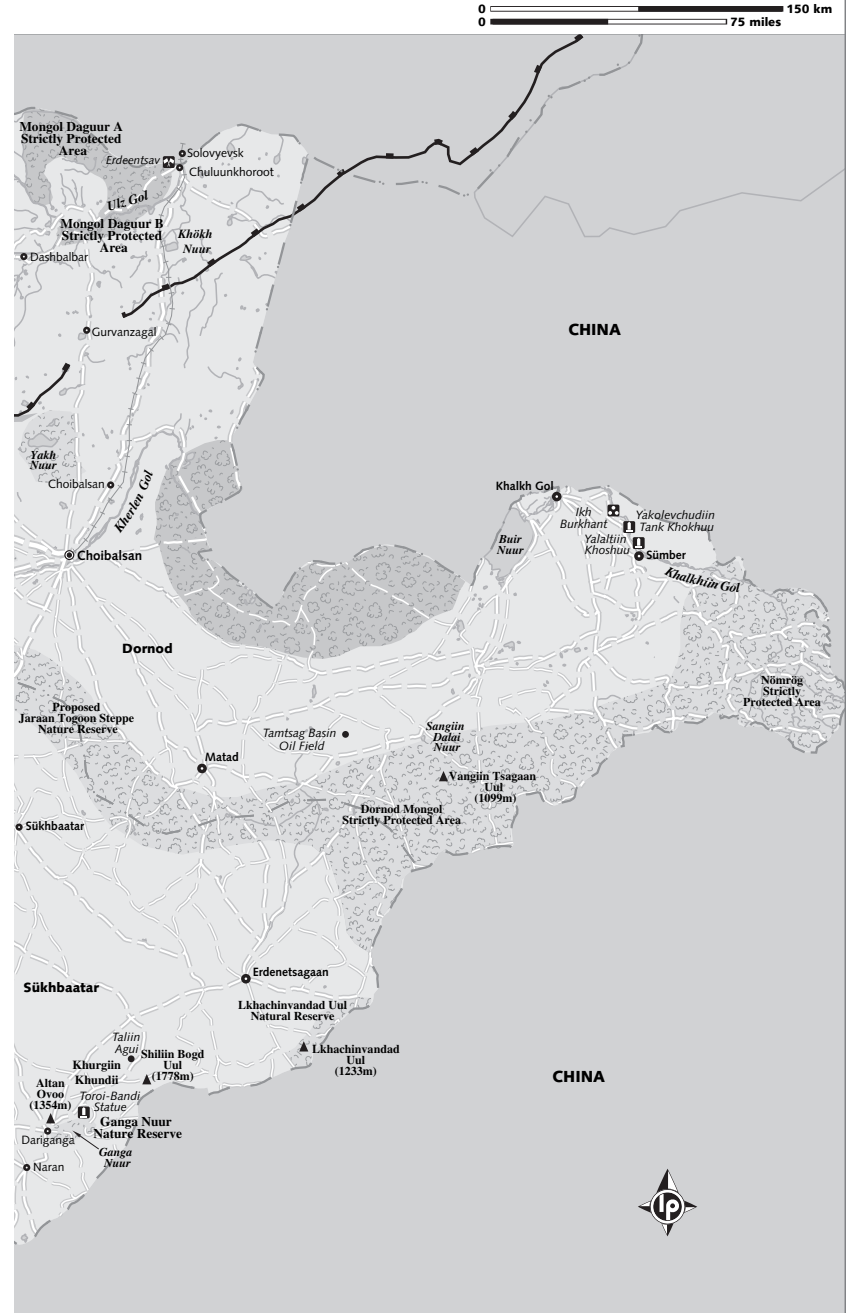
Khentii is Chinggis Khaan territory. The great man grew up here, established his empire on its grasslands and, from Delgerkhaan, launched his military machine to the heart of Asia. As a nomad empire the khans left few physical reminders of their existence, but with a jeep, a copy of *The Secret History of the Mongols* and a GPS unit you could launch your own expedition to scour the land for clues to their past. So far researchers have identified more than 50 historical sites relating to Chinggis Khaan's life.

The aimag is named for the Khentii Nuruu (Khentii Mountain Range), which covers the northwestern corner of the aimag and is part of the giant 1.2-million-hectare Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area (most of which is in

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the adjoining Töv aimag). Although none of the peaks is over 2000m, these mountains are well watered and heavily forested. The thickets provide a home for wildlife and you stand a good chance at seeing deer and elk. Marmots are ubiquitous. The lush scenery, however, can make jeep travel arduous business – vehicles get bogged and in some areas the best way forward is on the back of a horse.

## National Parks

**Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area** (1.2 million hectares) Mostly in Töv aimag, the strictly protected area includes the northwest corner of Khentii, protecting taiga, steppe and the sacred mountain Burkhan Khalduun.

**Onon-Balj National Park** (415,752 hectares) Protects taiga and steppe along the Mongolia–Russia border. It's divided into two parts; part A is west of Dadal and Part B covers the area to the northeast.

## ÖNDÖRKHAAN ӨНДӨРХААН

☎ 01562 / pop 15,200 / elev 1027m

With tree-lined streets, a growing number of Chinggis Khaan monuments and a small collection of well-preserved 18th-century buildings, Öndörkhaan (High King) is eastern Mongolia's most intriguing aimag capital. The surrounding area is barren steppe, but the Kherlen Gol flows through the southern part of Öndörkhaan, providing a fishing hole for locals and riverside campsites for tourists. Most of the residents live in wooden buildings, so gers are relatively few.

Öndörkhaan is a useful pit stop on the way to the sights in Dornod or Sükhbaatar, but you don't need to come here if you're exploring northern Khentii. The most interesting route to Dadal is not from the aimag capital but along the back roads from Tsenkhermandal.

## Information

**Internet café** (☎ 23695; per hr T680; ☎ 9am–10pm Mon–Fri, 11am–5pm Sat & Sun) In the Telecom office.

**Mongol Shuudan Bank** (☎ 23091) Changes dollars and offers cash advances on Visa. Located one building west of the Telecom office.

**Telecom office** (☎ 22125; ☎ 24hr) On the eastern end of the main road; the post office is also located here.

## Sights

The **Ethnography Museum** (☎ 22187; admission T1000, photos T1000; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–6pm Tue–Sat), next to the City Hall, is housed inside the 18th-century home of the Tsetseg Khaan, a

Mongolian prince who governed most of eastern Mongolia during the Manchu reign. One building holds a portrait of the last Tsetseg Khaan, painted in 1923. Other buildings contain ethnic costumes, Mongolian toys and some religious artefacts, such as statues and *thangka* (scroll paintings). On the museum grounds is a ceremonial ger with delicately carved wood furnishing and ornaments. It's usually locked but you could ask the watchman to let you have a look inside.

The small **Aimag Museum** (☎ 23834; admission T1000; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–6pm Tue–Sat), north of the park, contains a mastodon tusk, a protoceratops skull, some Chinggis Khaan–era armour and the usual array of stuffed animals, including a saluting bear.

**Shadavdarjaliin Khiid**, in the western part of town near the Sports Palace, is a lively place with a dozen or so monks. The original monastery in this area was built in 1660 and housed the first Buddhist philosophy school in Mongolia. At its peak, the monastery was home to more than 1000 monks. In the spring of 1938, the Stalinist purge reached Khentii and the monks were all arrested. The buildings remained standing until the 1950s, when they were torn down.

A well-preserved Turkic-era **balbal** (GPS: N47° 16.722', E110° 36.098') is 7km west of Öndörkhaan, past the airport. The squat-figured statue, covered in blue silk *hadak* (ritual scarves), has a disproportionately large head with pronounced eyebrows and deep-set eyes. His long hair is curled behind his ears, an unusual feature for this type of statue. Locals refer to the statue as 'Gelen', a religious title.

With Öndörkhaan being the capital of Chinggis Khaan's old stomping grounds, local authorities have put much effort in recent years towards elevating the conqueror's cult status. Look out for a **bronze statue of Chinggis** seated on his horse; it's just outside the Ethnography Museum. The statue was commissioned as part of the celebrations to mark 800 years of statehood, in 2006. Nearby, opposite Government House, is a **stone statue of Chinggis**.

The omnipresence of the great khaan is complete with **Chinggis Khaan garden**, at the west end of Central Park. The site features a monument engraved with the image of an approaching Mongol horde. It also contains a list of the Mongol khaans with the dates that they ruled.

## Sleeping CAMPING

If you want to camp, head south past the wrestling stadium, and walk along the Kherlen Gol to the west until you've found a quiet spot.

## HOTELS

**Jargalan Hotel** (☎ 23722, 9666 8694; dm T5000, half-lux T15,000, lux T20,000) Once a government guest-house, this place limps along as a hotel. Rooms are falling apart and hot water comes in a thermos; some have a TV, although it shows just one channel. If the hotel is empty the manager is open to bargaining. The entrance is around the back of Government House.

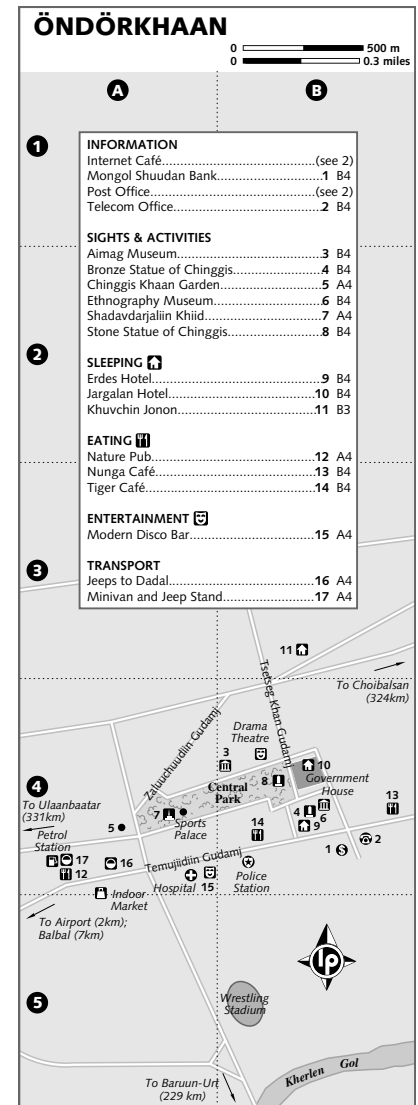
**Khuvchin Jonon** (☎ 23845, 9956 2222; r per person T10,000, half-lux per person T15,000, lux per person T25,000) About 350m north of Government House, this newly constructed hotel offers 17 comfortable rooms, and is the best Öndörkhaan has to offer. It's clean and the staff runs a tight ship. Standard rooms have a shared bathroom but other rooms have private bathroom and shower. Breakfast is included in the price and laundry services are available.

**Erdes Hotel** (☎ 23007; dm US\$10, half-lux per person US\$18, lux US\$25) This overpriced Soviet dinosaur with its grumpy staff might be your only option, as hotel rooms are scarce in Öndörkhaan. The standard rooms are pretty dishevelled and use a shared bathroom so you might want to splash out on a half-lux room. It's on the main road, 150m west of the Telecom office.

## Eating & Drinking

**Nunga Café** (☎ 9905 3505; Temujidiin Gudamj; meals T1000–2000; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Sat) Smart and colourful, this friendly café is a popular business lunch spot. Despite the modern look of the place, the menu is a little bland, offering the usual Mongolian meat-based dishes, soups and salads. But the owner speaks English and might be able to accommodate special requests.

**Tiger Café** (☎ 9956 9191; meals T1500–2000; ☎ 9am–8pm) Owned by the former Khentii governor, this café is one of the better places in town. Meals are served in sizzling iron dishes shaped like a cow, although promises of fried fish on the menu are unfounded. It's on the 2nd floor of a distinctive green building on the main street.



**Nature Pub** (☎ 9909 3701; Temujidiin Gudamj; meals T2500–3800; ☎ noon–midnight) Chinggis Khaan would feel quite at home downing pints in this rustic restaurant and pub. The red exterior leads into a dimly lit hall decorated with stretched goat skins, wolf traps and compound bows. The kitchen is probably the best in town, offering up a variety of dishes from pork steaks to fish.

## Entertainment

**Modern Disco Bar** (Temujijidin Gudamj; ☎ 9am-midnight) By day it's a musty little café and by night a dark drinking den with a scratchy sound system and sticky dance floor.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

There are no flights to Öndörkhaan.

### HITCHING

Öndörkhaan is the gateway for eastern Mongolia, so all vehicles heading to Dornod aimag and Sükhbaatar aimag will come through here. Getting a lift to Ulaanbaatar, Choibalsan and Baruun-Urt is comparatively easy. Rather than waiting on the road for a lift, it's better to ask the drivers at the jeep stands.

### BUS, MINIVAN & JEEP

Daily buses journeying between Ulaanbaatar and Choibalsan or Baruun-Urt make a pit stop in Öndörkhaan. Seats are limited and there is really no way to book in advance, but when the buses roll through you could check to see if space is available.

Daily jeeps and minivans go between Ulaanbaatar and Öndörkhaan (T12,000, five hours, 331km), most of which is paved. The jeep stand, which is about 450m west of the park, also has vehicles to Choibalsan (T12,000, eight hours, 324km) and Baruun-Urt (T8000, five hours, 229km).

Postal trucks run to Dadal (T8820) on Monday and Thursday, to Delgerkhaan (T4410) on Friday, to Binder (T6170) on Tuesday and to Batshireet (T6600) on Wednesday; they usually leave in the early morning. You could hire your own jeep at the stand, but many private cars also seem to hang around on the main street, near the market.

## DELGERKHAAN ДЭЛГЭРХААН

Despite the historical significance of the area, there's little to actually see in Delgerkhaan, the *sum* (region) capital. Veering off the Ulaanbaatar-Öndörkhaan paved road makes it even less attractive these days, but if you have a special interest in Chinggis Khaan then coming makes sense.

Locals, and some historians, claim that Avarga, not Karakorum, was the first capital of the Mongol empire. The ancient tent-city was located on a 20km-wide plain, Khödöö

Aral (Countryside Island), so named because the area is encircled by the Kherlen and Tsenkheriin Gols.

## Sights

The main monument in the area is the **Chinggis Statue** (GPS: N47° 06.157', E109° 09.356'), 13km south of Delgerkhaan village. It was built in 1990 under the sponsorship of Unesco, to commemorate the 750th anniversary of the writing of *The Secret History of the Mongols*. The symbols on the side of the statue are the brands used by about 300 different clans in the area for marking their livestock.

One kilometre east of the statue is the **Avarga Toson Mineral Spring**, from which Ögedei Khan drank and was cured of a serious stomach ailment. The spring is covered by an *ovoo* (a shamanistic collection of stones), but you can fill your water bottles at a pump house near the site.

Japanese researchers claim that foundations of buildings from **Avarga** are located underground, between the statue and the spring. So far little has been uncovered. It's unlikely that there would be much to find anyway, as the capital of Chinggis Khaan was made up mainly of felt gers.

## Sleeping CAMPING

You can camp anywhere near the lake, though it would help to have your own transport.

## GER CAMPS

**Avarga Resort** (per person/half-lux/lux T5800/9000/11,500) This is the place to come if you have a burning desire to join Mongolian families on holiday. The rather run-down resort offers hot-water bathrooms or you could bury yourself in mud on the shores of the lake. The two small lakes behind the resort are said to contain curative properties. The resort is 4km west of Delgerkhaan.

**Khödöö Aral** (☎ 011-57 855, 9915 8698; per person with/without food US\$24/10) Run by Ikh Zasag University, it's not a particularly attractive ger camp, but it does have hot showers. It's 7km west of the Avarga Resort.

## Getting There & Around

Delgerkhaan is close to the regional centres of Öndörkhaan (124km) and Baganuur (95km). If you are hitching, cars from Ulaanbaatar turn off the main road at the bridge over the

Kherlen Gol, 16km south of Baganuur. The only public transport here is the Friday postal truck from Öndörkhaan (T4400). You *might* be able to hire a jeep or motorbike to see the local sights around Delgerkhaan.

## KHÖKH NUUR ХӨХ НУУР

According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, it was at **Khökh Nuur** (Blue Lake; GPS: N48° 01.150', E108° 56.450') that Temujin first proclaimed himself a khaan of the Mongol tribe. It's a great place for a coronation site; a beautiful lake at the foot of what is called Heart-Shaped Mountain.

The lake is about 35km northwest of Tsenkhermandal (which is just north of the Ulaanbaatar-Öndörkhaan road). As you approach the lake a caretaker from the nearby ger camp demands a fee of T1000, claiming it's a protected area (it's not). The only other drawback is the flies that invade the place in midsummer.

You'll need your own transport and a driver who knows where it is. Someone from nearby Tsenkhermandal might take you there by jeep or motorcycle. The area is sometimes labelled Khar Zurkhen (Black Heart) on maps, which refers to a mountain behind the lake.

The **Khökh Nuur Ger Camp** (☎ 9911 2825; per person US\$25) has popped up right by the lake; it's the only place to stay in the area although you can camp pretty much anywhere (campers can use the hot shower for T3500). The camp has added some wood statues of the Mongol khaans, each with a barely legible plaque describing their deeds.

A further 49km away is the larger lake of **Khangil Nuur** (GPS: N48° 08.619', E109° 22.132').

## BALDAN BARAIVAN KHIID БАЛДАН БАРАИВАН ХИЙД

This **monastery** (GPS: N48° 11.910', E109° 25.840'; admission T2000) in Ömnödelger *sum* was first built in 1700. At its peak it was one of the three largest monasteries in Mongolia and home to 5000 lamas. It was destroyed by communist thugs in the 1930s and by fire in the 1970s. Now only ruins remain, but impressive ruins they are. Near the monastery is the Eej (Mother) Cave, which acts a purifying place for anyone who passes through it.

The US-based **Cultural Restoration Tourism Project** (CRTP; www.crtp.net) made attempts to restore the monastery in the early 2000s (the wood posts in the temple are their work). Progress was halted in 2005 when local au-

thorities seized the site in an attempt to establish a private ger camp. CRTP was sadly run out of town but no such camp was ever built and neglect has left the fragile monastery in danger of further rot. A *manach* (watchman) will ask for T2000 to visit the site; paying this fee would debilitate future efforts to re-establish ecotourism in the area. You can take pictures from afar or explore the nearby hills on foot.

The road to the monastery heads north from Khangil Nuur and goes straight over the hills, it is about 9km. A flatter but more circuitous route goes northeast from Khangil Nuur. The area is perfect for camping but the closest place to stay is the **Bayangol Ger Camp** (☎ 011-451 016, 9918 3067; GPS: N46° 09.621', E105° 45.590'; with/without food US\$30/15), 15km to the west.

About 17km past the monastery, on the way to Binder, are two **deer stones** (GPS: N48° 11.916', E109° 35.712').

## ÖGLӨGCHIIН КHEREM ӨГЛӨГЧИЙН ХЭРЭМ

Literally 'Almsgivers Wall', but also known as 'Chinggis Khaan's Castle' or 'Red Rock', this 3.2km-long **stone wall** (GPS: N48° 24.443', E110° 11.812'), believed to date from the 8th century, stretches around a rocky slope in Binder *sum*. It was once thought to be a defensive work or a game preserve, but recent archaeological digs by a Mongolian-American research team have identified at least 60 ancient graves within the walls, indicating that it may have been a royal cemetery. As you walk inside the grounds you may see small red signs, marking the location of graves excavated in 2002. The nearby wooden cabins used by the researchers now lie dormant. The site is 8km west of the road to Binder.

Close to the turn-off to Öglögchiin Kherem is **Rashaan Khad** (GPS: N48° 22.766', E110° 17.950'), a huge rock with 20 different types of (barely discernable) script carved upon it. About 2km past the turn-off towards Binder are more **deer stones** (GPS: N48° 25.098', E110° 17.825').

## BINDER & BATSHIREET БИНДЭР & БАТШИРЭЭТ

At the confluence of the Kherkh and Onon Gols, the village of Binder is a good place to rest on your way to or from Dadal. There are a couple of cafés, a **ger camp** (with food US\$20) 7km from the village and a small **Chinggis Khaan monument** 2km east of the village. If you are

## THE GREAT TABOO

For the Mongols, disposing of a corpse has always been tricky business. According to steppe tradition, a person was left exposed to the elements to be consumed by wild animals. In some cases a person would be buried but the grave left unmarked to thwart grave robbers, who would not only steal possessions but also disturb the remains, thus destroying the soul of the deceased.

Thus when Chinggis Khan died in 1227 his inner circle went to extraordinary lengths to ensure secrecy of his grave. According to lore, a burial guard slew everyone en route to the grave. Then, at the grave site, thousands of horses were raced over the tomb to conceal its location. (Another theory states that a river was temporarily diverted and Chinggis was buried in the riverbed.) The burial guard was then killed by 800 soldiers who themselves were massacred upon their return to the capital. Still today, the Mongols consider disturbing the grave of Chinggis to be 'The Great Taboo', an act that would invite natural calamity.

Flying in the face of local beliefs, various expeditions, often with Japanese and American assistance and technology, have attempted to locate the grave. The attraction is obvious – the tomb may contain millions, if not billions of dollars worth of gold, silver, precious stones and other priceless religious artefacts (as well as many women, men and horses who were buried alive with the khaan). But with so few clues, the teams are left to search for the proverbial needle in the haystack. The chances of digging in the right spot seem infinitely remote.

A Japanese team spent three years probing Khödöö Aral (near modern Delgerkhaan) before giving up, none the wiser. The Americans, working mainly at Öglögchiin Kherem near Binder, were forced to end their search in 2003 after a storm of protest by a retired politician native to the area.

Neither team achieved any earth-shattering results. On the contrary, the search only seemed to fuel local resentment of foreign archaeologists, not to mention waste millions of dollars that could otherwise have been spent on regional development. With these failures, the search has cooled for the moment, giving Chinggis Khan's soul a chance to momentarily rest in peace.

travelling onto Dadal you'll need to cross the Onon Gol, just north of town. When the river is high locals will offer to tow you across for T7000 with a tractor.

Batshireet, 45km northwest, is worth the detour for some excellent camping, fishing and horse-riding opportunities. From this small Buriat community of 3000 souls you can follow the Eg Gol to the Onon and trek back to Binder. More challenging trails lead west towards the Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area and Burkhan Khaldun.

The town has a couple of basic hotels, including **Altan Endert** (per person T10,000) located near the Telecom office. It can arrange horses for T5000 per day. There is fine camping in Batshireet; the best spots are 7km north of town on the Onon Gol. Camping is also allowed behind the Protected Areas office. The information officer, Tsetsegmaa, can also arrange horses for a pack trip. She has accommodation in her home for T3000 per night.

Because it's near Russia, you'll need a permit for Batshireet from the Border Protection Office in Ulaanbaatar. Expect a visit from the police, who will want to see

your permit, original passport and trekking route. If you've come without a permit you can probably buy one for T2000 at the police office.

## BURKHAN KHALDUUN БҮРХАН ХАЛДУУН

This remote mountain, known as God's Hill, in the Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area is one of the sites mooted as the burial place of Chinggis Khaan. More than 800 burial sites have been found in the region, though the main tomb is yet to be found. Whether or not Chinggis was buried here, *The Secret History of the Mongols* does describe how the khaan hid here as a young man and later returned to give praise to the mountain and give thanks for his successes.

Because of its auspicious connections, Mongolians climb the mountain, which is topped with many **ovoo** (GPS: N48° 45.430', E109° 00.300'), to gain strength and good luck. The hill itself is in a very remote location. To get there you'll need to head to Mōnggōnmorit in Töv, and then travel north along the Kherlen Gol.

Around 22km due north of Burkhan Khaldun (as the falcon flies) is **Khalun Us Rashant** (Hot Water Springs; GPS: N48° 57.206', E109° 00.217'). The site has more than a dozen hot springs, a collection of log bathhouses and a small Buddhist temple (built in honour of Zanabazar who frequented the site). You can also reach the area by horse from Batshireet (it's possible to drive there in winter when the ground freezes).

## DADAL ДАДАЛ

As written in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, it is now generally accepted that the great Chinggis was born at the junction of the Onon and Balj Gols (though his date of birth is still subject to great conjecture). The assumed spot is in Dadal *sum*, near the town of the same name.

Dadal is a gorgeous area of lakes, rivers, forests and log huts (very few people live in gers), reminiscent of Siberia, which is only 25km to the north. Even if you are not a Chinggisophile, there is no shortage of scenery to admire and hike around in. It wouldn't be hard to stay here a few days (which may be necessary anyway unless you have rented a jeep). The downside is that it often rains here in summer.

The 415,752-hectare **Onon-Balj National Park**, extending north from the village towards Russia, offers enticing camping spots, fishing holes and chances for spotting wildlife. Buy your national park ticket (T3000) in the Government House.

## Information

Dadal is in a sensitive border area so it would be wise to register with the police (T2000). If you are heading any further out of town, it would also be a good idea to register with the border guards, on the western side of Dadal. Don't expect anyone to speak English. At the time of writing there were plans to build a tourist information centre in town.

## Sights

About 3.5km north of Dadal village is a collection of hills known as **Deluun Boldog**. On top of one of the hills is a **stone marker** (GPS: N49° 03.158', E111° 38.590'), built in 1990 to commemorate the 750th anniversary of the writing of *The Secret History of the Mongols*. The inscription says that Chinggis Khaan was born here in 1162. Some historians may not be entirely convinced about the exact date or location of

his birth, but it's a great place to come into the world: the scenery and hiking around the valleys and forests are superb.

There's a more impressive **Chinggis Khaan Statue** in the Gurvan Nuur camp, built in 1962 to commemorate the 800th anniversary of Chinggis' birth. The monument was built at the height of the communist era and after it was complete the president purged the folks who built it. Somehow the monument itself was allowed to stand.

About 2.2km west of Deluun Boldog is the **Khajuu Bulag** (GPS: N49° 02.767', E111° 36.865') mineral water springs, where the great man once drank. Take your water bottles and fill them to the brim because this is the freshest (flowing) spring water you will ever taste. You could also hike up into the hills behind town, where there is a large **ovoo**.

For an offbeat adventure, you could drop by the home of **Zundoi Davag**, an old hunter who has built a private museum filled with the animals he has trapped over the years. Zundoi will be happy to show you his trophies and regale you with hunting stories, if you can find him. He will also let you practise shooting his bow and arrow. His camp moves with the seasons but a local should be able to take you there on horseback.

## Activities

There are several **hiking** and **horse-riding** routes out of Dadal. Locals recommend the 30km hike to the junction of the Onon and Balj Gols, or the 45km trek further along the Onon Gol to the gorge at the confluence of the Onon and Agats Gols. You'll need to inform the border patrol of your itinerary and it would be wise to take a guide. Ask at the ger camps or track down Dorjsuren, who runs the guesthouse (p174).

There is good **fishing** in the area but permits are almost impossible to get unless you have gone through a licensed tour operator. Some locals get away with fishing illegally but if you get caught there could be hell to pay.

## Sleeping CAMPING

This is perfect camping country, so if you have your own tent and food supplies there is no need to stay in a hotel or ger camp. Just find a secluded spot away from the village and set up camp.

**GER CAMPS & RESORTS**

**Khongor's Ger Camp** (per person T5000) Next to the Naadam Stadium, this new place has basic accommodation and meals.

**Chinggisiiin Gurvan Nuur** (Three Lakes; GPS: N49° 02.005', E111° 39.267'; per person T10,000, hot shower T1000) This resort has a nice location on the shore of a lake about 2km from Dadal village. Meals are T1500. There are no gers. A good hiking trail starts from the back of the camp.

**Onon** (bed & 3 meals around US\$30) Between Gurvan Nuur and the village, by the monastery, is this ger camp, which opens in summer when there is demand, which isn't often.

**GUESTHOUSES**

**our pick Guesthouse** (GPS: N49° 01.280', E111° 38.562'; per person about T6000) Dorjsuren, a retired maths teacher, runs a hostel next to his home. The classic Buriat-style lodge includes a toilet and hot-water shower block (a shower costs T1000). There's a cast-iron stove for cooking and Dorjsuren can hunt down bread, eggs, milk, cream and vegetables. It is a 10-minute walk southeast of the centre, across the river, but there is no sign, so ask for directions from the Telecom office. Dorjsuren can arrange a variety of activities in the area.

**Eating**

Dadal has a few *guanz* (canteens/restaurants) that serve up hot soup and goulash, the best of which is probably **Buren Khaan Tsainy Gazar** (meals T1000-2000).

**Getting There & Away****JEEP**

One minivan or jeep a day usually goes to Ulaanbaatar (T22,000, 515km). The journey takes anywhere from 12 hours up to 35 hours after heavy rains.

A postal truck travels from Öndörkhaan (T8820) every Monday and Thursday morning at around 8.30am. Most traffic from Öndörkhaan takes the road via Norovlin. There are few vehicles for hire in Dadal, but if you ask around the shops something should be available. Expect to pay T450 per kilometre.

For travel from Dadal to Öndörkhaan or Dornod (but not Binder) you'll need to cross the Onon Gol at a lone bridge crossing (GPS: N48° 50.403', E111° 38.746'). Dadal is 254km north by northeast of Öndörkhaan and 301km northwest of Choibalsan.

**DORNOD ДОРНОД**

pop 74,600 / area 123,500 sq km

One of Mongolia's most stunning landscapes, Dornod is pure steppe, with pancake-flat grasslands in all directions. There are few roads, towns or fences, making this an important ecological zone and habitat for white-tailed gazelle, which can outrun even the best jeep driver.

Dornod, which means 'east', has a number of worthy attractions, geared for both historians and ecotourists. These include Buir Nuur and Khalkhiin Gol, both the scenes of fierce fighting against the Japanese; Khökh Nuur, the lowest point in the country; and some lovely nature reserves. If you've already visited other more popular areas of Mongolia, Dornod offers scope for some challenging, offbeat exploration.

The northern *sums* of Bayan-Uul, Bayandun and Dashbalbar are home to the Buriats, who still practise shamanism. If you ask around you may be able to meet a shaman or, if you are lucky, watch a shamanist ceremony in these areas.

**National Parks**

Thankfully, the authorities have been convinced that the area's fragile environment and the endangered fauna and flora need to be conserved. Dornod aimag is currently the base of a multimillion-dollar environmental-protection project. This massive project involves researching everything from forest fires to field mice in an attempt to protect one of the world's last undisturbed grasslands. The Strictly Protected Areas (SPA) of the aimag include the following:

**Dornod Mongol** (570,374 hectares) Holds one of the last great plain ecosystems on earth, protecting seas of feather-grass steppe and 70% of Mongolia's white-tailed gazelle, which roam in herds of up to 20,000.

**Mongol Daguur** (103,016 hectares) The reserve is divided into a northern 'A' and southern 'B' section. Mongol Daguur A is a hill steppe and wetland bordering on Russia's Tarih Nuur and Dauriski Reserve, protecting endemic species such as the Daurian hedgehog; Mongol Daguur B, along the Ulz Gol, protects the *tsen togoruu* (white-naped crane) and other endangered birds. The area is part of a one-million-hectare international reserve, linking the Siberian taiga with the inner-Asian steppe.

**Nömrög** (311,205 hectares) An unpopulated area, which contains rare species of moose, crane, otter and bear. Ecologically distinct from the rest of Mongolia, the area takes

in the transition zone from the eastern Mongolian steppe to the mountains and forest of Manchuria.

**Toson Khulstai** (469,928 hectares) Protects large herds of white-tailed gazelle; easy detour if travelling between Khentii and Dornod.

The aimag also has several nature reserves, including Ugtam Uul (46,160 hectares) and Yakh Nuur (251,388 hectares).

**CHOIBALSAN ЧОЙБАЛСАН**

☎ 01582 / pop 39,800 / elev 747m

Lying on the banks of the Kherlen Gol, 324km downstream from Öndörkhaan, is Choibalsan, Mongolia's easternmost capital and the regional centre for trade and industry. The city has a better-than-average selection of hotels, plenty of shops and one of Mongolia's busiest markets. It's fractured in two parts, a half-abandoned district to the west and a more functional eastern section, where most of the action takes place.

Centuries ago, the city was a trading centre and part of a caravan route across Central Asia. It grew into a town in the 19th century and was called Bayan Tumen.

In 1941 it was named after the Stalinist stooge Khorloogiin Choibalsan, an honour bequeathed while the dictator was still in power. It's now a major economic centre for eastern Mongolia.

**Orientation**

Although the city is spread out along a narrow 5km corridor north of the Kherlen Gol, most of the facilities needed by visitors are near the Kherlen hotel. The market is 1.5km east of the main square. The train station is about 5.5km past the market.

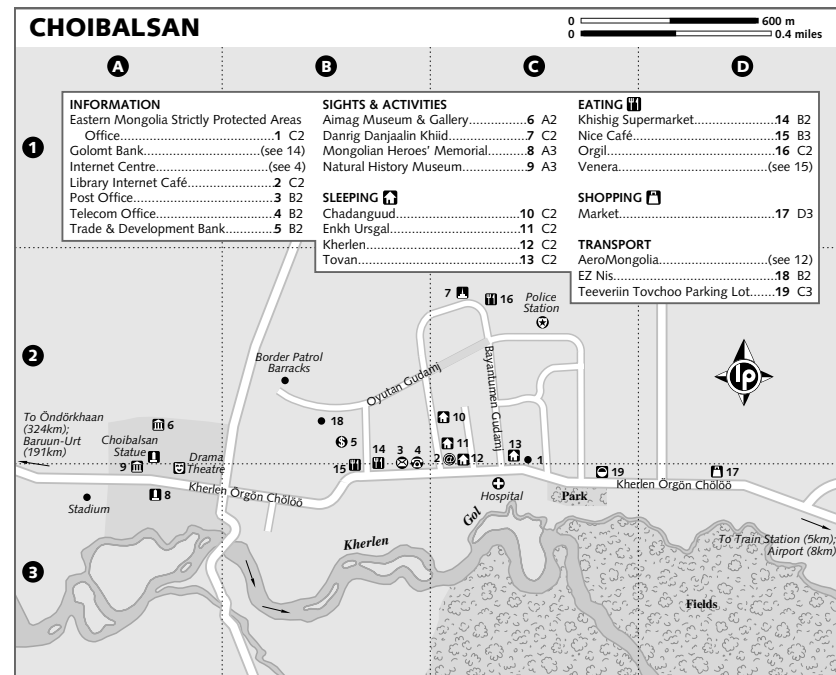
**Information****Eastern Mongolia Strictly Protected Areas Office**

☎ 23373, 9986 3888; fax 22217; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Next to the Tovan hotel, this office can supply information on visiting protected areas in both Dornod and Sükhbaatar aimags. It can also arrange permits and sell tickets to protected areas and nature reserves.

**Golomt Bank** (☎ 22702) Gives cash advances against Visa and MasterCard. Next to Khishig Supermarket.

**Internet Centre** (☎ 21530; per hr T500; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) Next to the Telecom office.

**Library Internet Café** (per hr T500; ☎ 10am-6pm)



One building east of the Telecom office, the public library has good internet connection.

**Post office** (Kherlen Örgön Chölöö) Next door to the Telecom office.

**Telecom office** (☎ 21861; Kherlen Örgön Chölöö; ☎ 24hr)

**Trade & Development Bank** (T&D Bank; ☎ 23009; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Gives cash advances against Visa and MasterCard. About 350m northwest of the Telecom office.

## Sights

### MUSEUMS & MEMORIALS

The **Aimag Museum & Gallery** (☎ 21940; admission T1000; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri), in the former Government House in the old part of town, is one of the best of its kind outside of Ulaanbaatar. It contains some interesting paintings, fascinating old photos, some Choibalsan memorabilia and a giant bowl, made in 1861, which is large enough to boil mutton for 500 people (the mind boggles, the stomach churns). The aimag map marks the location of some ruined monasteries.

The **Natural History Museum** (☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri), on the western side of the square, houses a collection of stuffed wildlife from around the aimag, plus exhibits on geology and flora. It's free if you've already paid for the Aimag Museum.

Choibalsan's **Mongolian Heroes' Memorial**, in the western town square, is one of the more dramatic pieces of Stalinist architecture in Mongolia. It is a large arch with a soldier on horseback charging towards the enemy. A Soviet tank next to the monument adds a quaint reminder of who really was boss.

### DANRIG DANJAALIN KHIID

#### ДАНРИГ ДАНЖААЛИН ХИЙД

According to the chief monk, this monastery was built around 1840 and was once very active. It contained three northern temples and four southern temples, but less than half the 800 monks could be accommodated at one time, so most had to pray outside. It was closed in 1937.

The monastery reopened in 1990 and has two small temples where about 15 monks worship. The monks are particularly friendly; we were warmly welcomed and allowed to watch a ceremony. The monastery is about 400m behind the Kherlen hotel.

## Sleeping

### CAMPING

The best place to camp is anywhere south of the main street; walk for a few hundred metres and you will be sharing some great spots along the Kherlen Gol with a few curious cows.

### HOTELS

**Kherlen** (☎ 29058, 5058 1250; Kherlen Örgön Chölöö; per person r T7500, half-lux T25,000, lux T31,000) This friendly hotel, next to the library, has renovated rooms with toilet and some with shower. A common hot shower (T800) is available for visitors in the standard rooms. A sauna is an additional T2500.

**Enkh Ursгал** (☎ 21666; s/d T8000/12,000, half-lux s/d T12,000/18,000, lux s/d T20,000/28,000) Rooms at this new hotel are small but well maintained. Only the lux rooms have a shower. It's behind the library.

**Tovan** (☎ 21551; Kherlen Örgön Chölöö; half-lux s/d T10,000/15,000, lux s/d T21,000/30,000) Rooms are large, reasonably clean and come with attached toilet. The lux room, with shower, also includes breakfast.

**our pick** **Chadanguud** (☎ 22355; r T17,000, half-lux T24,000, lux T30,000; ☎) Choibalsan's newest hotel, 250m north of the library, is also its best. It has clean rooms with cable TV (including BBC news), reliable internet and 24-hour hot water. It also does laundry for T1000 per kilogram. As a social hub, the place does get busy, with lots of people using the billiards hall downstairs. The complimentary breakfast is fairly lamentable.

## Eating

**Nice Café** (☎ 9958 7677; ☎ 10am-midnight Mon-Sat) Pleasant atmosphere, and pretty good goulash and *khuurag* (fried meat chunks) make a popular stand-by in Choibalsan. A few steps west of the Khishig Supermarket.

**Venera** (☎ 9951 9309; ☎ 10am-midnight) Next to the Nice Café, Venera has similar meals, and some Chinese dishes.

**Orgil** (☎ 21199) Decent Chinese restaurant with a bona fide Chinese chef. It's in the northern part of town, near the monastery.

Self-caterers can shop for groceries at the **Khishig Supermarket** (☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Fri, noon-7pm Sat), next to the post office. Both the Tovan and the Kherlen hotels have decent restaurants.

## Shopping

Choibalsan's proximity to China means that its **market** (☎ 9am-7pm) is better stocked compared with other aimag capitals. It has lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as an interesting shop selling ger furniture, saddles, Mongolian hats and boots. The back of the market plays host to gambling stalls where locals play cards, dominoes and *shagai* (a dice game using anklebones).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**AeroMongolia** (☎ 9958 8735) has an office in the Kherlen hotel building. It flies here from Ulaanbaatar three days a week (US\$119/212 one way/return). **EZ Nis** (☎ 21177, 9904 9934) is in a building near the Trade & Development Bank. It also flies here three days a week (US\$131/236 one way/return). The airport is about 10km east of the centre; buses, jeeps and minivans sometimes go there.

### BUS, MINIVAN & JEEP

A daily bus departs for Ulaanbaatar (T15,800, 13 hours) at 8am from the market. Going the other way it leaves Ulaanbaatar's Bayanzürkh bus station at the same time.

Minivans and jeeps run along the good road between Ulaanbaatar and Choibalsan daily (T20,000, 655km), departing Ulaanbaatar from the Naran Tuul jeep station. Minivans depart Choibalsan in the morning from the Teveriin Tovchoo parking lot at the eastern end of town. Daily vans and the odd jeep to Öndörkhaan (T10,000, 324km), Baruun-Urt (T10,000, 191km) and, less frequently, nearby *sums* such as Bayandun (T8000) leave from the same lot or from the market. You can charter a jeep for T450 per kilometre.

Postal minivans travel to Khalkhiin Gol (T10,500, Wednesday), Dashbalbar (T6500, Monday), Bayandun (T6300, Tuesday) and Bayan Uul (T7200, Wednesday).

The roads in the northern part of Dornod are often buried under mud in late summer, but roads to the other eastern aimag capitals are OK. The border crossing into Russia from Chuluunkhoroot was opened to foreigners in 2004, although so far it sees little traffic; see p178 for more information.

### HITCHING

Choibalsan is a large city by Mongolian standards, so hitching a ride on a truck or

any other vehicle in or out of the city should not be difficult. Hang around the market and keep asking.

### TRAIN

A direct rail line from Choibalsan to Russia was built in 1939 to facilitate the joint Soviet-Mongolian war effort against Japan. It still functions, albeit only twice weekly. As a foreigner, you can go as far as Chuluunkhoroot on the Mongolian side of the border (no permit is apparently required), but the train no longer carries passengers across the border and only travels to Russia to pick up fuel.

The train leaves Choibalsan at 4pm every Monday and Thursday and takes seven hours. The return trip leaves Chuluunkhoroot at 8.30pm on Tuesday and Friday. These times will almost certainly change and you may be told that the train takes only cargo. Call for more info at the **station** (☎ 21502). Tickets cost T2000 for hard seat (the only class).

The train moves very slowly but this remains one of the most unique experiences you can have in Mongolia. Take food and plenty of water as the carriage can get stiflingly hot during the day.

The train station is about 7km northeast of the centre. You can reach the station by bus, but go early, because close to departure time the buses make a sardine tin look spacious.

## KHERLEN BAR KHOT

### ХЭРЛЭН БАР ХОТ

These small-scale **ruins** (GPS: N48° 03.287', E113° 21.865') and 10m-high tower from a 12th-century city were once part of the ancient state of Kitan. You can see a picture of the tower in the Aimag Museum & Gallery in Choibalsan (opposite).

Kherlen Bar Khot is about 90km west of Choibalsan, on the main road between Choibalsan and Öndörkhaan. It is worth a look if you have your own vehicle.

## WALL OF CHINGGIS KHAAN

### ЧИНГИСЫН ХЭРЭМ

Stretching over 600km from Khentii aimag to China, and through all of Dornod, are the ruins of the Wall of Chinggis Khaan. This is not promoted by Mongolian tourist authorities because it was not built, or used, by Chinggis Khaan, but almost certainly created by the Manchu to limit frequent raids from rampaging Mongolian hordes.

## GAZELLE

A highlight of eastern Mongolia, as you bounce along in your jeep, is the sight of thousands of Mongolian gazelle darting across the steppes. When pre-eminent biologist George Schaller first visited in 1989 he proclaimed the immense herds to be one of the world's greatest wildlife spectacles.

Sadly, indiscriminate poaching for subsistence and bush-meat sale has reduced their numbers by as much as 50% in the past 10 years and it's harder to find such large herds these days, but they do exist. It's believed that up to 200,000 of these creatures are illegally shot every year, about 20% of their entire population. Gazelle are especially prized by Chinese and Mongolians for their meat, skins and horns: in China each one fetches from ¥70 to ¥100 (US\$8.50 to US\$12). There is a growing foreign souvenir market for gazelle-leg horse-whips (US\$15) – please do not purchase these.

Habitat loss to overgrazing, road construction and the erection of barriers further puts their numbers at risk. Mining is another threat: oil exploration in southern Dornod has brought large-scale infrastructure and thousands of workers into a once-uninhabited region.

The New York-based **Wildlife Conservation Society** ([www.wcs.org](http://www.wcs.org)) has been researching the migration habits and ecological needs of these animals for nearly a decade and these findings have been provided to the Mongolian government. Specialists remain hopeful that the government will endorse conservation plans and efforts to reverse the decline can begin.

You will need a guide and jeep to find what little remains from the ravages of vandals and time, though it's doubtful whether it's worth the effort. Locals know it as the Chingissiin Zam, or Chinggis' Rd, which gives some indication of just how worn down the wall has become. The best place to start looking is about two-thirds of the way along the northern road from Choibalsan to the Russian border, near the village of Gurvanzagal.

## UGTAM UUL УГТАМ УУЛ

Ugtam mountain (1236m) is part of the Ugtam Uul Nature Reserve (46,160 hectares), which also includes the nearby Tsagaan Ovoot Uul (1236m) and the ruins of some monasteries, one of which has recently reopened. The park is situated along the Ulz Gol in the northwest of the aimag, about 35km from the village of Bayandun.

## KHÖKH NUUR ХӨХ НУУР

The lowest point in Mongolia is Khökh Nuur, a medium-sized freshwater lake at an altitude of 560m. Other than the thrill of standing in the lowest part of the country, there isn't much to keep you here, though the lake has a subtle beauty and you could combine it with an exploration of the Wall of Chinggis Khaan. The lake is also an important migration point for birds and you can spot many waders and shore birds here.

Khökh Nuur is visible from the railway line; you can get off the train at a stop near the lake, and then reboard the train the next day in the afternoon.

## CHULUUNKHOROOT ЧУЛУУНХОРООТ

The small village of Chuluunkhoroot (Stone Corral) is right at the border crossing with Russia. There is no accommodation but it does have a few shops. Locals with motor-bikes can ride you out to **Mongol Daguur B**, a protected area along the Ulz Gol and important habitat for wader birds. The protected area has a couple of **eco-gers** (per night 15000), guest gers run by local families. The train ride here from Choibalsan is definitely one of the most unique transport experiences in Mongolia.

The actual border, just 3km away, is called Ereentsav. The Russian side of the border is called Solovyevsk. Locals ship cargo across the border on the train, but it's also possible to drive or walk across. If you have a Russian visa, this makes for an interesting crossing; you can hitch a ride to Borzaya, a small Russian city on the Trans-Manchurian rail route, and then continue by road or rail to Chita and Ulaan Ude. Expect a serious passport check at the border as it's rarely used and you'll draw lots of attention.

## BUIR NUUR БҮЙР НУУР

This vast lake in eastern Mongolia is well known for the large stocks of fish. Amur Carp is the main species of fish in the lake, although it also contains taimen, grayling and lenok, among others. Most of the fish end up on the plates of Chinese restaurants as the northern shore is actually in China. The 40km lake has a maximum depth of 50m and is especially popular with mosquitoes so bring lots of repellent or you'll need a blood transfusion!

The lake is also great for bird-watching. Head for the northeast area around the Khalkhiin Gol delta.

Halfway between the lake and Choibalsan, a local family has erected an **Eco-ger** (per person 15000) for passing tourists. The family that runs the place can provide meals. The turn-off to the ger is marked with a sign.

The only way to Buir Nuur is by chartered jeep from Choibalsan, 285km away over a flat dirt road, which occasionally gets flooded.

## SANGIIN DALAI NUUR САНГИЙН ДАЛАЙ НУУР

This saltwater **lake** (GPS: N46° 56.430', E116° 52.535'), in the southern part of the aimag, has a productive freshwater spring at one end. The 10 or so families that live in the area harvest salt from the lake using traditional methods.

From the lake you can travel another 29km southwest to **Vangiiin Tsagaan Uul** (GPS: N46° 41.490', E117° 00.436'). From the top of the hill you are 400m above one of the flattest and most remote places on the planet, which makes for great views in the early morning or evening. East of the hill you'll encounter vegetated sand dunes that provide a home for wolves, gazelle, roe deer and the occasional herd of wild boar.

About 50km due east of Sangiin Dalai Nuur is the Tamtsag Basin oil field. From here you could hook up with the oil transport road that heads toward Erdenetsagaan in Sükhbaatar aimag.

## Khalkhiin Gol ХАЛХЫН ГОЛ

The banks of the Khalkhiin Gol, in the far eastern part of Dornod, are of particular interest to war historians because of the battles against the Japanese in 1939. The region is about a nine-hour drive east of Choibalsan.

Numerous **war memorials** are found in the area. The memorials are real socialist masterpieces, built to honour the Russian and

Mongolian soldiers who died here. The monuments are easy to find as they are all along the road from Khalkhiin Gol to Sümber. The **Yakolevchudiin Tank Khoshuu** (Monument for Yakolev Tank Brigade; GPS: N47° 48.810', E113° 32.850') is located 23km northwest of Sümber. The largest memorial is the 10m-high **Yalaitiin Khoshuu**, located just outside Sümber town.

A **museum** (admission T1000) in Sümber (marked on some maps as Khalkhgol) offers some explanations (in Mongolian) about the history of the battles. The friendly caretaker will show you around the museum and probably issue you a commemorative pin to mark your visit. There is no electricity so bring a torch to see the exhibits. A small **hotel** (per person 15000) in Sümber, about 200m from the museum, has a pit toilet and electricity powered by a generator.

Another interesting site in the region is **Ikh Burkant** (GPS: N48° 03.287', E113° 21.865'), where there is a huge image of **Janraisav** ('Avalokitesvara' in Sanskrit) carved into the hillside. The carving was commissioned in 1864 by local regent Bat Ochiriin Togtokhtooriin, or Tovon (*van* means 'lord') and was reconstructed between 1995 and 1997. The carving is right on the roadside, about 32km northwest of Sümber.

Going the other direction, it's another 70km or so to the spectacular but remote **Nömrög Strictly Protected Area**. The protected area only receives a handful of visitors each year, but those that go are rewarded with virgin fields and pine forests untouched by livestock or humans. The **border post** (GPS: N46° 59.019', E119° 21.522') at Nömrög is as far as you can go by vehicle. The border guards can rent you horses at inflated prices (around T15,000 per day) for further explorations of the SPA. A border guard must accompany you in the SPA.

Khalkhiin Gol is about 325km from Choibalsan. If you ask around the market in Choibalsan a shared van (T14,000) may eventually turn up bound for Sümber, but from here you'd still need to hire a vehicle to visit the sights. While this may be a cheap way to go if you are alone, it's better to hire your own vehicle and split the cost between travellers.

## Permits

Khalkhiin Gol is near the Chinese border and a military base and there are three military checks en route from Choibalsan. You'll need a border permit issued from Ulaanbaatar to get through them.



It is possible that you'll need two permits: your border permit and a second one issued at the checkpoints on the way to Khalkhiin Gol (which shouldn't cost more than T1000).

The permit given at Sümber (for Nömрrög) may be fake (ie some guards there sell fake permits and keep the money for themselves). If you have a border permit from the border office in Ulaanbaatar (which should be free) you could probably get past the border guards at Sümber, without risking having to buy a phoney permit.

## SÜKHBAATAR СҮХБААТАР

pop 52,400 / area 82,000 sq km

Sükhbaatar is a flat aimag wedged between the Gobi Desert and the pure steppes of Dornod. It contains elements of both – shifting sand dunes and barren rock feature prominently in the southwest while the east offers knee-high grass that provides important habitat for huge herds of gazelle.

The area is of some geologic importance as the southern *sum* of Dariganga contains some 200 extinct volcanoes; this is the most interesting part of the aimag, a legendary region of horse thieves, holy mountains and ancient stone statues. A highlight is watching a glorious sunrise from sacred Shiliin Bogd Uul.

Sükhbaatar is well off the tourist track but can be incorporated into a greater tour of eastern Mongolia. Because it receives so few visitors you feel like you have the aimag to yourself.

### National Parks

**Ganga Nuur Nature Reserve** (28,000 hectares)

Protects dunes and the Ganga Nuur, an important habitat for migrating swans.

**Lkhachinvadad Uul Nature Reserve** (58,500

hectares) On the border with China, this steppe area has plenty of gazelle and elk. It's reached via Erdenetsagaan.

### BARUUN-URT БАРУУН-УРТ

☎ 01512 / pop 11,500 / elev 981m

Sükhbaatar's desolation is nowhere more evident than in its capital, Baruun-Urt, a scruffy, one-horse town in the middle of absolutely nowhere. The city is poor but some

locals have found employment at a nearby Chinese-invested zinc mine, or at the coal mine 7km to the northwest.

One surreal image you can get in Baruun-Urt occurs in the cold season when it's possible to walk out into the empty, barren, frozen steppe and feel as if you've landed on the moon. The ground underneath your feet, however, contains high levels of sulphur, which has seeped into the local water supply – you are better off buying bottled water or filtering the tap water.

### Information

**Government House** (Square) Ask for the latest information about permits to border areas here.

**Internet café** (☎ 21029; per hr T440; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Inside the Telecom office.

**Khan Bank** (☎ 22268; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Changes US dollars and gives cash against Visa and MasterCard. Located between the main square and the Sharga Hotel.

**Mongol Shuudan Bank** (☎ 21034; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Opposite the Sharga Hotel, this bank also changes US dollars.

**Telecom office** (☎ 21030; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also located here. It's on the south side of the main square.

### Sights MUSEUM

Baruun-Urt's surprisingly good **museum** (☎ 21486; admission T500; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) has a fine collection of costumes representing the three ethnic groups that inhabit the region: the Khalkh (the majority), the Dariganga (30,000 live in the south of Sükhbaatar aimag) and the Uzemchin (about 2000 live in Dornod aimag and Sükhbaatar aimag). Look out for the brass-studded Uzemchin wrestling jacket.

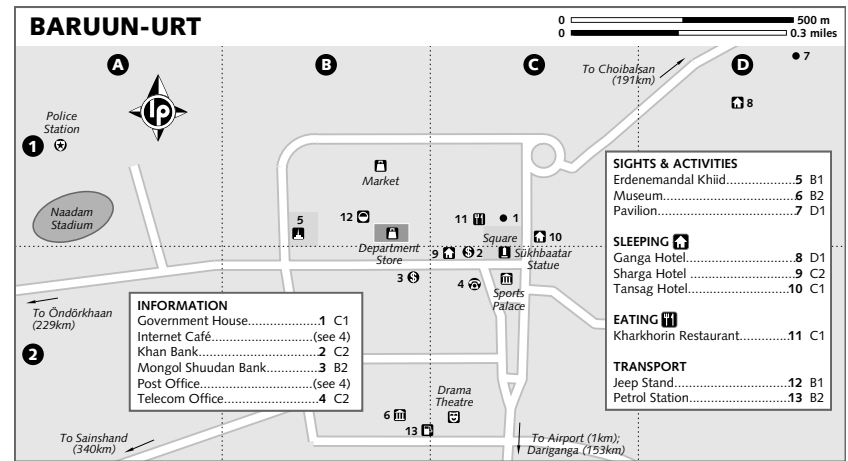
There are also beautiful examples of products from Dariganga's renowned silversmiths and blacksmiths (often these are on loan to museums elsewhere in the world), some stuffed gazelle, a map showing the locations of the 'man' and 'woman' *balbals* (stone figures believed to be Turkic grave markers) in the aimag, and some Sükhbaatar memorabilia.

From the square, walk 400m south and turn right. The museum is located just past the drama theatre.

### ERDENEMANDAL KHIID

ЭРДЭНЭМАНДАЛ ХИЙД

According to the monks, this monastery was originally built in 1830, about 20km from the



present site. At the height of its splendour, there were seven temples and 1000 monks in residence, but the Stalinist purges of 1938 had the same result as elsewhere. The new monastery, surrounded by 108 distinctive stupas, is about 400m west of the square.

### PAVILION

In the evenings, locals walk up to this lookout to survey the town and socialise. It features a statue of Hoeloun and young Temujin (the future Chinggis Khan and his mother).

### Sleeping CAMPING

Baruun-Urt is the only aimag capital where camping is not a good idea. The town is in the middle of dusty plains and there is no river nearby. The only passable option is by a creek in the northeast of town.

### HOTELS

Baruun-Urt is short on hotels and they tend to fill up if a mining crew rolls through town; you may want to call one of the following to reserve a room.

**Ganga Hotel** (☎ 21212, 9979 4213; r/lux T8000/16,000) A ramshackle building with scruffy rooms that have a shared bathroom. The lux room has a private bathroom but no shower. The manager is hardly ever around, but the *jijuur* (watchman) will let you into the rooms and collect payment. It's in a blue building about a 10-minute walk northeast of the centre.

**Sharga Hotel** (☎ 21101; r/lux T10,000/30,000) Next to the town square, this old hotel of communist yore has passable standard rooms and better deluxe rooms with sitting room, TV and private bathroom. Hot water comes and goes as it pleases.

**Tansag Hotel** (☎ 22444; half-lux s/d T20,000/25,000, lux s/d T30,000/35,000) Easily the best in town, the Tansag has six rooms in a new building on the east side of the main square. It has fairly reliable hot water and the price includes breakfast.

### Eating

There will be no surprises with the mutton-heavy menu at the Tansag Hotel, but it's still the best in town. Otherwise, the *güanz* in the Government House does up regulation goulash with aplomb.

**Kharkhorin Restaurant** (dishes T600-800; ☎ 9am-11pm) If you've already eaten at the Tansag, and for some reason you're still in Baruun-Urt, try this restaurant near the main square. The pictures of Mongolian pop stars, presumably those who stopped by and played here, add a little bit of character to the place.

### Getting There & Away AIR

EZ Nis has flights to and from Ulaanbaatar every Thursday for US\$120/216 one way/return. The local **office** (☎ 21421) is at the airport, 1km south of town.

## HITCHING

This is difficult because few vehicles come here. Still, with some patience you'll get a lift to Choibalsan, Öndörkhaan, Dariganga and even Zhamyn-Üüd. In Baruun-Urt, ask around at the jeep stand behind the department store or the petrol station.

## JEEP & MINIVAN

Shared jeeps and minivans leave Ulaanbaatar daily (T18,000, 560km) from the Naran Tuul jeep station. From Baruun-Urt, vehicles wait at a small jeep stand behind the department store. The jeep stand also has occasional vehicles to Dariganga (T7000), Choibalsan (T9000, 191km) and Öndörkhaan (T7000, 229km). It's possible to hire a vehicle (T400 per kilometre) though the options are limited.

## SÜKHBAATAR TOWN СҮХБААТАР

This small *sum* centre is 48km east of Baruun-Urt. It's not worth a trip in its own right but if you are passing through on your way to Dornod, there is an excellent **museum** dedicated to Damdin Sükhbaatar. Exhibits include printing-press implements used by Sükhbaatar during his days as a typesetter in an Ulaanbaatar printing house. To get inside, you'll need to ask Mr Batjargal, a music teacher at the nearby elementary school, for the keys.

## DARIGANGA ДАРЬГАНГА

The vast grasslands of Dariganga are speckled with volcanic craters, small lakes and sand dunes, the sum of which makes the area one of the most scenic in eastern Mongolia. Before communism this area was a haven of aristocracy and its grasslands were the royal grazing grounds of horses belonging to the emperor in Beijing. Silversmiths and blacksmiths made their homes here, providing local women with stunning jewellery that now features prominently in the national museum in Ulaanbaatar. Dariganga's best days are now behind it, but it's still worth the effort of getting down here. With a jeep and a good driver you can set off from town to explore the lakes, volcanoes, caves, sand dunes and ancient stones nearby. The sacred mountain of Shiliin Bogd Uul is also not too far away.

## Information

Although they are not usually checked, permits are required for Dariganga and Shiliin

Bogd. Permits are available from the border office in Ulaanbaatar. The fine for travelling without a permit is T40,000 per head.

If you are coming from Dornod you shouldn't have any trouble getting to Shiliin Bogd and on to Dariganga; this allows you to travel directly from the Khalkh Gol area and Dornod Mongol SPA, bypassing Choibalsan and Baruun-Urt.

## Sights

The skyline of Dariganga is dominated by **Altan Owoo** (Golden Owoo), a wide former crater topped by a **stupa**, which only men are allowed to visit. The stupa was built in 1990 on top of the ruins of the original Bat Tsagaan stupa, which was built in 1820 and destroyed in 1937.

In the area around Dariganga, there are dozens of broken *balbals* – mostly dating back to the 13th- or 14th-century Mongol period, although some are earlier. According to tradition, you should place an offering of food in the cup held in the statue's left hand. There are also three *balbals*, known as the **king, the queen and the prince** (GPS: N45° 18.540', E113° 51.224'), on the northern edge of town, near some hay sheds. In the village itself, you can visit the welcoming **Ovoon Khiid** (Овоон Хийд), which was built in 1990 and is served by a handful of monks.

There are six lakes in the vicinity of Dariganga; all are part of the Ganga Nuur Nature Reserve. The three main lakes, Kholboo Nuur, Tsagaan Nuur and Ganga Nuur, are good for swimming, though a bit muddy.

The magnificent **Ganga Nuur** (Ганга Нуур; GPS: N45° 15.994', E113° 59.874') is about 13km southeast of Dariganga. From the end of September until mid-October, the lake is home to thousands of migrating swans. Along the shore, in a fenced compound, is delicious and safe spring water. Entry to the lake is T1000 per person and T500 per car (but you can park your car by the gate and walk).

The sand dunes in the region are known as **Moltsoq Els** (Молцог Элс) and stretch for 20km, coming to within walking distance of Dariganga.

## Sleeping & Eating

Dariganga has three ger camps, about 1.5km south of the village. There is little to differentiate the Dagshin Amaralt, the Zigistei Nuur and the Ovor Khurem ger camps, which all have

## MILLENNIUM ROAD

Mongolia's road network, little more than a series of dirt tracks that squiggle haphazardly across the plains, is taking a great leap forward. The Millennium Road project, launched by the Mongolian government in 2000, envisions a paved road running the length of the country, from Dornod to Bayan-Ölgii, plus several north-south roads, including one alongside the Trans-Mongolia Railway.

Defenders of the controversial project compare it to America's interstate system of the 1950s or Germany's autobahn, and claim boosts in trade and tourism. Builders point out that one road will reduce land degradation as drivers will end the practice of creating multiple tracks across the steppe. But a cash deficit has slowed progress and political opponents say it's called the Millennium Road because it will take 1000 years to build.

Around 25% of the 2640km road has already been constructed, mostly with loans from international lenders and far-flung countries such as Kuwait, whose royal family imports Mongolian falcons en masse.

Some economists discredit the road as a waste of time and money, saying it goes from nowhere to nowhere. (The current proposal seeks to end the road on a remote plain near Khalkh Gol, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest urban area.) They argue that the money would be better spent on building roads and infrastructure in sprawling Ulaanbaatar.

There is some credibility in the dissent, particularly in Dornod aimag, where plans show the road east of Choibalsan cutting into important gazelle migration routes and heading towards an oil field at Tamsagbulag.

Mining companies, oil men, cashmere traders, marmot-skin smugglers and gazelle poachers (both Chinese and Mongolian) may enjoy the benefits of the proposed route, but biologists would prefer to keep this pristine wilderness, and the gazelle migration route, untouched. An alternative route direct to Choibalsan, favoured by conservationists, is generally ignored by developers seeking cash benefits from the oil trade.

The situation remains murky; in 2007 the governor of Dornod agreed to extend the road towards the oil fields and Khalkh Gol. Public protest has spurred few results. Conservationists are hoping a deal can be arranged to shift the road towards Choibalsan but no-one is holding their breath.

Special-interest groups, conservationists, politicians and economists (not to mention local herders, traders and border-guard generals) remain locked in battle over the Millennium Road's eastern terminus. If the project proceeds in its current ill-planned manner, it could be a knockout punch for the majestic gazelle, a species already threatened by hunting and poaching.

cabins (no gers, actually) and basic facilities for about T4000 per person. If prodded, the caretakers of these camps can provide meals. None of the camps has a shower or phone, but you can get both of these in the village.

There is nothing stopping you camping anywhere you want as long as you stay away from the ger camps. If you have a vehicle, camp on the shores of Ganga Nuur.

Dariganga has a few basic shops on the main road, alongside two or three *tsainii gazar* (tea houses/café's).

## Getting There & Away

Occasional shared jeeps (T7000; four hours) connect Dariganga with Baruun-Urt. A postal truck runs every Thursday from Baruun-Urt; ask the post office for timings.

One or two jeeps and even motorbikes are available for charter in Dariganga. Travellers report being able to hire horses through one of the ger camps.

## SHILIIIN BOGD UUL ШИЛИЙН БОГД УУЛ

At 1778m, **Shiliin Bogd Uul** (GPS: N45° 28.350', E114° 35.349'), about 70km east of Dariganga, is the highest peak in Sükhbaatar aimag. The extinct volcano is sacred to many Mongolians: the spirit of any man (and man only!) who climbs it, especially at sunrise, will be revived. The region is stunning, isolated and close to the Chinese border – so be careful.

A jeep can drive about halfway up the mountain, and then it's a short, but blustery, walk to the top. There are plenty of *ovoos* and awesome

views of craters all around. About 3km to the south, the fire break that squiggles into the distance is the border with China. If you are camping, Shiliin Bogd offers one of the greatest sunrises in a country full of great sunrises.

On the road between Dariganga and Shiliin Bogd, 8km past Ganga Nuur, look out for the new statue of **Toroi-Bandi** (GPS: N45° 17.308', E114° 04.466'), the Robin Hood of Mongolia, who had a habit of stealing the horses of the local Manchurian rulers, then eluding them by hiding near Shiliin Bogd Uul. The statue, dedicated in 1999, pointedly faces China.

The only two roads to Shiliin Bogd start from Erdenetsagaan (70km) and Dariganga (70km). It's better to go to Dariganga first, where you are more likely to find a jeep for rent or a lift.

## AROUND SHILIIIN BOGD UUL

Assuming that you have a jeep to get to Shiliin Bogd Uul in the first place, you can make a good loop from Dariganga, to take in Ganga Nuur on the way to Shiliin Bogd Uul, and Taliin Agui and Khurgiin Khundii on the way back to Dariganga.

**Taliin Agui** (Талын Агуй; GPS: N45° 35.405', E114° 30.051'), 15km northwest of the mountain, is one of the largest caves in Mongolia. If the ice covering the entrance has melted (it's normally covered until August) you can squeeze through the narrow entrance. The large, icy cavern has three chambers to explore (the back wall looks like a dead end but you can squeeze under the overhang). You'll need a torch (flashlight) to see anything, and be careful on the slippery floor.

In summer, a basic **ger camp** (beds T2000, meals T1500) pops up near the cave.

**Khurgiin Khundii** (Хургийн Хөндий; GPS: N45° 33.165', E114° 13.970'), a pretty valley 40km west of Shiliin Bogd Uul, once contained seven stone statues that date back to the 13th or 14th century (only three statues can be found today). Although there are various legends to describe the origins of the stones, the most prominent recalls a certain khaan who, on a hunting trip, drove a herd of gazelle over a cliff, killing hundreds of them. Angered by this senseless slaughter, the sky god (Tenger) struck down the king's family members with disease and natural calamity. The statues in Khurgiin Khundii were erected in memory of the king and his family, and as a reminder for people to respect nature. Because the valley is considered to be haunted by the ghosts of the royal family, herders do not put their gers here. You will have to rely on your driver to find the statues and to locate **Bichigtiin Khavtsal** (Бичигтийн хавцал), a pretty canyon about 2km away.

## LKHACHINVANDAD UUL NATURE RESERVE ЛХАЧИНВАНДАД УУЛ

If you are visiting Shiliin Bogd by jeep, you may wish to carry on east for another 120km to the 58,500-hectare Lkhachinvandad Uul Nature Reserve, on the border with China. This reserve contains Lkhachinvandad Uul (1233m) and is full of gazelle and elk. You'll need a border permit to visit the area and it's wise to register with the police in the nearest town, Erdenetsagaan. While in the town, you could have a look at the old temple, Eguzer Khutagtiin Khuree (Егүзэр Хутагтын Хүрээ), a two-storey building that managed to survive the communist purge.