

# The Gobi



Be prepared to have some illusions shattered. The notion of the Gobi Desert as a wasteland of uninhabited sand dunes seems to have been developed solely in the minds of a few folklorists and Hollywood scriptwriters. While it *is* a fairly bleak part of the world, the Gobi is also enormously diverse, with various sprinklings of ice-filled canyons, John Ford–esque rock formations, and verdant oases. By comparison, sand dunes appear in short supply – they cover just 3% of the Gobi.

As you may expect, a trip to the Gobi is no cakewalk. Between the summer heat, winter cold, sandstorms, poor infrastructure and lack of water, this is one of the harshest landscapes on the planet. One Mildred Cable, an Englishwoman who passed through in the 1920s, noted: 'Only a fool crosses the Gobi without misgivings'.

Somehow, the Mongols have made a home of it, with scattered nomad camps still dotting the plains, ramshackle villages and the occasional ruined monastery to indicate long-disappeared settlements. A close look on the ground reveals a more ancient past as the Gobi supports a wealth of fossils, first made known to the world by American naturalist Roy Chapman Andrews, who visited in the early 20th century.

These days the lure of the Gobi extends mainly to minerals, specifically the Oyu Tolgoi gold and copper deposit, one of the largest of its kind anywhere. The Gobi aimags (provinces) of Bayankhongor, Dornogov, Dundgov, Gov-Altai and Ömnögov also support small-scale goat and camel herding and, increasingly, tourism – foreign travellers come here to spot wildlife, hunt for fossils, hike the canyons or just enjoy the terrific emptiness of it all.

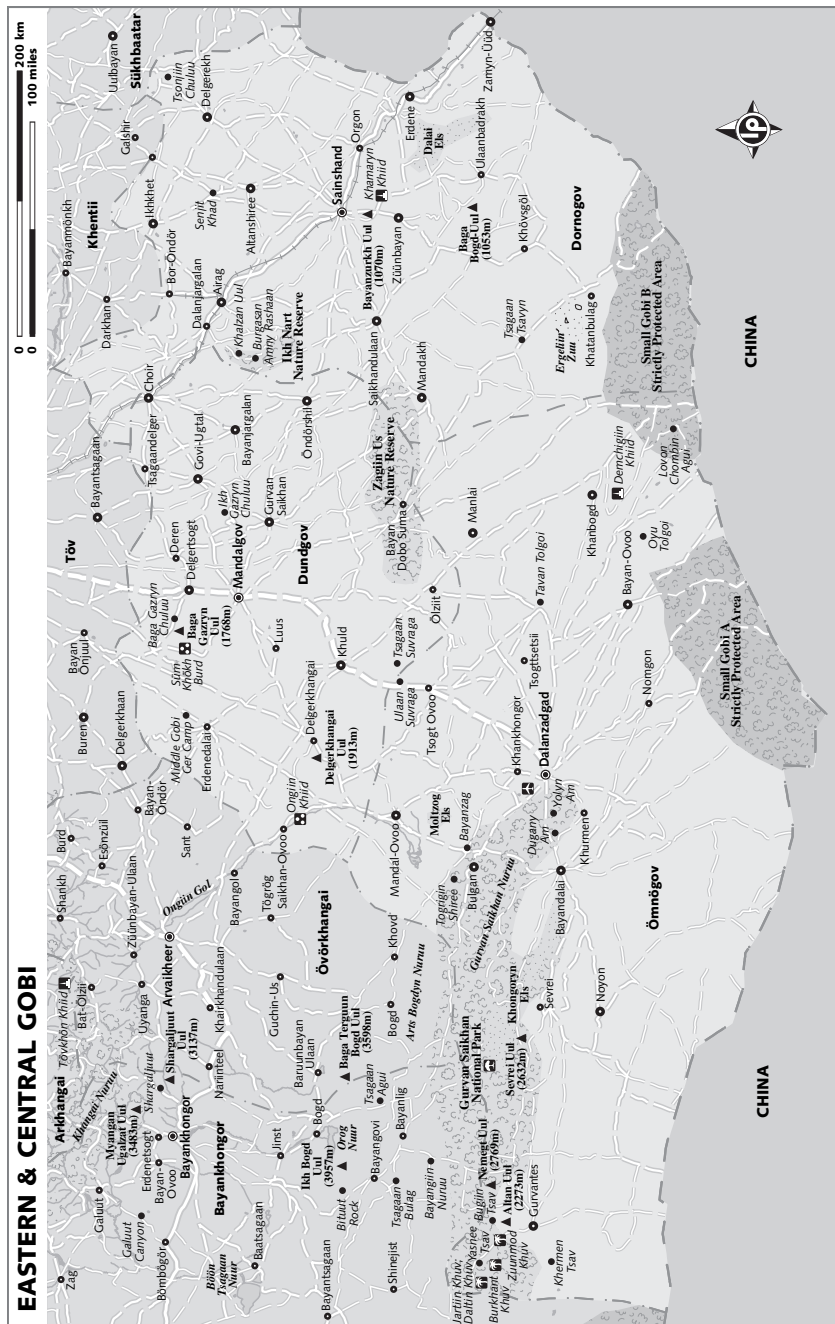
## HIGHLIGHTS

- Make a pilgrimage to **Khamaryn Khiid and Shambhala** (p202), once home to the legendary poet-monk Danzan Ravjaa
- Go fossil hunting at **Bayanzag** (p208), the remarkable 'flaming cliffs' that house rich deposits of dinosaur bones and fossilised eggs
- Scramble up and slide down the dunes at **Khongoryn Els** (p209), perfect for camel riding
- Step into the amazing **Yolyn Am** (p208), a canyon covered in ice for most of the year
- Stretch your legs with a Ger to Ger walk and rock-climbing adventure in the eerie **Ikh Gazryn Chuluu** (p198)



■ POPULATION: 309,021

■ AREA: 612,000 SQ KM



## Climate

While daytime temperatures in summer can range from pleasant to stifling hot, nights are almost always cold, so take a sleeping bag. Dust storms can rock the region at any time but are especially common in April and May. The tourist season lasts longer here than northern areas; even October is not too late to see the sights. By December the desert will be blanketed with snow and daily maximum temperatures will fall to  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

## Getting There & Away

There is plenty of public and private transport heading from Ulaanbaatar to all the Gobi aimag capitals, so it's easy enough to reach Mandalgov, Sainshand, Dalanzadgad Altai and Bayankhongor. You can fly to the latter three. If you are travelling on local trains in China, it's possible to enter Mongolia at Dornogov aimag, although catching a jeep further west is next to impossible; it's best to have a tour operator in Ulaanbaatar send a jeep down to meet you when you get off the train.

## Getting Around

Gobi infrastructure is almost nonexistent, but the lack of roads does not prevent vehicles from getting around. On the contrary, the rock-hard jeep trails are the best in the country and along main routes it's possible for jeeps to reach speeds of 100km/h. But breakdowns in the Gobi can be deadly.

Travel in this region is serious business and you shouldn't think of setting off without a reliable jeep and driver, plenty of water and supplies, and a good sense of direction. A map and a GPS unit would not go astray if your driver is inexperienced. Hitchhiking is not recommended, though we have mentioned instances in this chapter when it might be possible. Otherwise, there are few vehicles passing and hitchhiking (or a breakdown) can leave you stranded for days.

## DUNDGOV ДУНДГОВЬ

pop 49,406 / area 78,000 sq km

Dundgov (Middle Gobi) is something of a misnomer. The aimag would be best described 'North Gobi' as this area is the northernmost extent of the Gobi Desert. Lying just a few

hours drive south of Ulaanbaatar, it's also one of the most convenient Gobi regions to explore and is fast becoming a tourist destination.

Dundgov's allure lies in its mysterious rock formations, which appear mainly at two locations: Baga Gazryn Chuluu and Ikh Gazryn Chuluu. At both you'll find large granite pinnacles and winding canyons that make for great hiking and climbing. The water that manages to collect in these areas can support some wildlife, including argali sheep and ibex.

Dundgov is now home to a couple of trekking routes for the Ger to Ger programme, one of which includes rock climbing. The project is boosting ecotourism in the region and this has spawned better hotels, restaurants and facilities. Besides trekking and the rock pinnacles, it's definitely worth visiting the ruined monastery Ongiin Khiid and the still-intact monastery at Erdenedalai.

## National Parks

**Ikh Gazryn Chuluu Nature Reserve** (60,000 hectares) Extraordinary rock formations, argali sheep and ibex.

**Zagiin Us Nature Reserve** (273,606 hectares) Protected mountain-Gobi area, saxaul trees, salt marshes and black-tailed gazelle.

## MANDALGOV МАНДАЛГОВЬ

☎ 01592 / pop 13,820 / elev 1427m

Mandalgov came into existence in 1942 and originally consisted of just 40 gers. Today, it's a sleepy town that offers the usual amenities for an aimag capital: a hotel, a monastery, a museum and a few shops. It also has a useful Ger to Ger information office. A walk to the top of Mandalin Khar Ovoo, just north of the town centre, affords sweeping views of the bleak terrain. There is more to see in western Dundgov, but Mandalgov is a useful stop-off on the way to Dalanzadgad in Ömnögov.

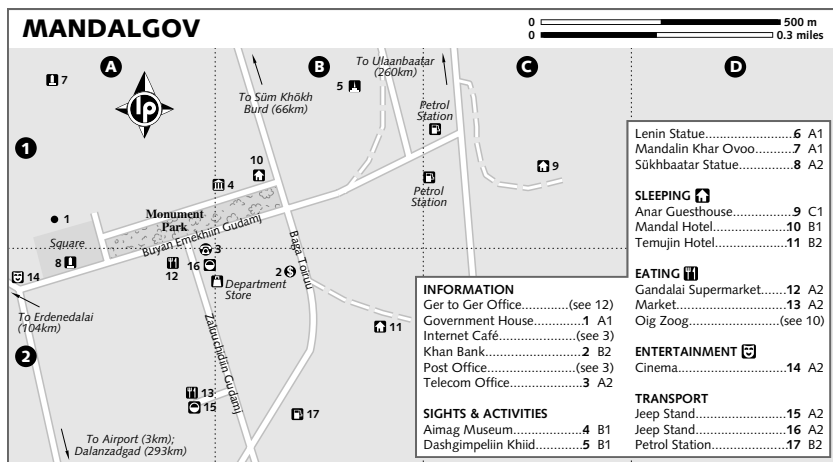
## Information

**Ger to Ger office** (☎ 9969 7456; zaanaa\_999@chingiss.com; 2nd fl, Gandalai Supermarket, Buyan Emekhiin Gudamj; ☎ 9am-6pm) Assists with vehicle hire, bus tickets and general info, and is a contact point for Ger to Ger routes. Ask for Ganbaatar or Nara.

**Internet café** (per hr T460; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Located in the Telecom office.

**Khan Bank** (☎ 23881; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri) Can change US dollars and give a cash advance on Visa or MasterCard.

**Telecom office** (☎ 21212; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also located here.



## Sights

### AIMAG MUSEUM

The renovated **Aimag Museum** (☎ 23690; Buyan Emekhiin Gudamj; admission T1000; ☎ 9am-6pm) is divided into two main sections: a natural history section and a more interesting ethnography and history section. There's also a collection of priceless *thangka* (scroll paintings), old flintlock rifles, bronze arrowheads, silver snuffboxes, pipes, and chess sets carved out of ivory.

### DASHGIMPELIIN KHIID

#### ДАШГИМПЭЛИЙН ХИЙД

In 1936 there were 53 temples in Dundgov; a year later, nearly all were reduced to ashes and rubble by the Mongolian KGB. In 1991 Dashgimpeliin Khiid was opened to serve the people of Mandalgov. The monastery is now served by 30 monks and services are held most mornings from 10am. It's 300m northeast of the Mandal Hotel.

### MONUMENT PARK

Communism has been preserved in this small park, which contains statues of Sükhbaatar, Yuri Gagarin (first man in space), a pair of happy workers, various livestock and a Soviet-Mongolian friendship monument, among others.

## Sleeping

Like other Gobi aimag capitals, Mandalgov has no great camping spots; the city has no river and is flat and dusty. Perhaps walk north

of town and find somewhere past Mandalin Khar Ovoo or the monastery.

**Anar Guesthouse** (☎ 9963 9767; nangaa\_j999@yahoo.com; per person US\$4) The best option for independent travellers, Anar is a comfortable ger guesthouse, owned by the people who run the Ger to Ger office. It's just off the road to UB, in a fenced compound. There are no showers.

**Mandal Hotel** (☎ 22100; Buyan Emekhiin Gudamj; s/d T5000/10,000, lux s/d T7000/14,000) A slightly run-down hotel that offers good-value rooms that are regularly clean and fairly comfortable. Hot showers are available.

**Temujin Hotel** (☎ 23973; Baga Toiruu; dm/d/lux T5000/12,000/25,000) Offers the best facilities in town, including rooms with shower and toilet. It's in a white brick building, south of the main drag, a bit off Baga Toiruu.

## Eating

Self-caterers can pick up food items at the local **market** or **Gandalai Supermarket** (Buyan Emekhiin Gudamj) on the main street.

**Oig Zoog** (☎ 9996 1122; Mandal Hotel, Buyan Emekhiin Gudamj; dishes T1100-1500; ☎ 9.30am-10pm Mon-Sat) Disco beats, black lights and a socialist mural provide the backdrop for this funky '80s-style café. Serves Mongolian food and some vegetable dishes. It's in the Mandal Hotel.

## Getting There & Away

### HITCHING

Getting to Ulaanbaatar or Dalanzadgad on a truck or other type of vehicle won't take

too long if you are prepared to ask around at the market and wait awhile.

## JEEP & MINIVAN

Daily share jeeps to Ulaanbaatar (T12,000, six hours, 260km) and Choir (T8000, four hours, 187km) leave when full from the jeep stand outside the Telecom office. You're unlikely to find a share jeep to Dalanzadgad (T12,000, six hours, 293km), but Dalanzadgad-bound jeeps coming from Ulaanbaatar might be able to squeeze you in. Wait for these at the petrol station in the south of town. The jeep stand outside the market is another place to look.

## BAGA GAZRYN CHULUU БАГА ГАЗРЫН ЧУЛУУ

This granite rock formation in the middle of the dusty plains sheltered Zanabazar during conflicts between the Khalkh and Oirat Mongols. Later it was home to two 19th-century monks who left **rock drawings** in the area. The rocks are worshipped by locals who sometimes make pilgrimages here. Naturally, there is a legend that Chinggis Khaan grazed his horses here.

Five kilometres away, the highest peak in the area, **Baga Gazryn Uul** (1768m), will take about an hour to climb. The mountain also contains a **cave** with an underground lake. The **mineral water springs** and trees in the region make it a great spot to camp, and there are plenty of rocky hills topped by *ovoo* (sacred pyramid-shaped collections of stone and wood) to explore.

The **Bayan Bulag ger camp** (☎ 9825 0010; www.bayanbulag.mn; GPS: N 46°13.827', E 106°04.192'; with/without meals US\$30/15) is one of the Gobi's more attractive ger camps and offers good food and hot showers. Guides (free) from the camp can show you sights in the area, including a partially restored monastery and camel-trekking routes. It also has a greenhouse growing delicious tomatoes and cucumbers.

Baga Gazryn Chuluu is about 60km north by northwest of Mandalgov, and about 21km east of Süm Khökh Burd.

## SÜM KHÖKH BURD СҮМ ХӨХ БҮРД

The temple **Süm Khökh Burd** (GPS: N 46°09.621', E 105°45.590'), which sits on an island in the middle of a tiny lake, was built in the 10th century. Remarkably, the temple was built from rocks that can only be found more than 300km

away. It was abandoned and in ruins a few centuries after being built.

Three hundred years ago a **palace** was built here, and 150 years later the writer Danzan Ravjaa (p201) built a stage on top of the ruins. Enough of the temple and palace remain to give you some idea of what a magnificent place it once must have been.

The lake itself, **Sangiin Dalai Nuur**, only encircles the palace after heavy rains; at other times you can slog through the mud to the palace. There is good **bird-watching** here: various species of eagle, goose and swan come to this spring-fed lake in summer and autumn.

The **Süm Khökh Burd Ger Camp** (☎ 9911 4684; per person with meals US\$26) is an old socialist place that has seen some recent renovations. Otherwise, you can pitch your tent anywhere.

The temple is located 72km northeast of Erdenedalai, 65km northwest of Mandalgov and 21km west of Baga Gazryn Chuluu. There is no hope of getting here on public transport or by hitching.

## ERDENEDALAI ЭРДЭНЭДАЛАЙ

This sometime camel-herding community in the middle of nowhere (114km northwest of Mandalgov) is known for the **Gimpil Darjaalan Khiid** (admission T1000), an old monastery that somehow survived Stalin's purges. The monastery was built in the late-18th century to commemorate the first ever visit to Mongolia by a Dalai Lama. It was once used by about 500 monks.

The monastery was reopened in 1990 and the current Dalai Lama visited in 1992. If none is there, wait a few minutes and some boys will materialise with the keys and admission tickets. The spacious temple has a central statue of Tsongkhapa (founder of the 'Yellow Hat' sect of Buddhism), some large parasols and some huge drums. Photos are permitted outside the temple but not inside.

**Middle Gobi Camp** (☎ 9912 8783, 011-367 316; with/without meals US\$35/18) About 25km north of Erdenedalai, it's not a bad place to spend the night if you are headed in this direction.

Although the village is small, it is on a major jeep trail, so a few vehicles come through here every day.

## ONGIIN KHIID ОНГИЙН ХИЙД

This small mountainous area along the Ongiin Gol in the western *sum* of Saikhan-Ovoo makes a pleasant place to break a trip between

southern Gobi and either Ulaanbaatar or Arvaikheer. The bend in the river marks the remains of two ruined monasteries, the **Barlim Khiid** on the north bank, and the **Khutagt Khiid** on the south. Together the complex is known as **Ongiin Khiid** (GPS: N 45°20.367', E 104°00.306'; admission US\$1, photos US\$2, video US\$5). A contingent of 13 monks has set up shop amid the ruins, completing a new temple in 2004. The ger in front of the temple is a 'museum' (admission US\$1) that houses some unimpressive artefacts found at the site. Despite it being illegal, locals may try to sell you some artefacts or dinosaur eggs.

There are plenty of places to camp along the forested riverside and there are five ger camps in the vicinity.

**Great Gobi Ger Camp** (☎ 011-329 350; 9191 6184; www.trip2mongolia.com/gobi\_camp.htm; with/without meals US\$33/12) is a friendly place with English-speaking staff. Amenities include a sauna, basketball court (!) and camel riding (per hour/day US\$3/10). It is located next to the monastery.

In the town of Saikhan-Ovoo, a good option is the new **Zambagijn Tal Guesthouse** (☎ 9929 1892; per person US\$10) which has a café and ger accommodation and is a jumping off point for Ger to Ger trekking. It's in the centre of town – look for the 'Ger to Ger' sign on the roof.

There is no public transport to Ongiin Khiid.

## IKH GAZRYN CHULUU ИХ ГАЗРЫН ЧУЛУУ

Caves, canyons and some excellent rock-climbing routes are a few of the reasons travellers head out to this remote Gobi area, 70km east of Mandalgovi in Gurvan Saikhan *sum*. The area is the site of a Ger to Ger trekking route, which combines travel by camel, horse and on foot. Rock climbers with their own gear will find routes set in the boulders. In late June, the area hosts the **Roaring Hooves Music Festival** (www.roaringhooves.com), with participants coming from around the world.

You can overnight at the comfortable **Töv Borjigan ger camp** (☎ 9825 9985; tuv\_borjigan@yahoo.com; GPS: N 45°45.664', E 107°15.977'; with/without meals US\$20/10). The people who run it can show you caves in the area.

## ULAAN SUVRAGA УЛИААН СУВРАГА

In the southernmost *sum* of Ölziit is Ulaan Suvraga, an area that might be described as

a 'badlands' or a 'painted desert'. The eerie, eroded landscape was at one time beneath the sea, and is rich in marine fossils and clamshells. There are also numerous **ancient rock paintings** in the region. About 20km east of Ulaan Suvraga is the equally stunning **Tsagaan Suvraga**, an area of 30m-high white limestone formations.

The best place to stay in the area is the **Tsagaan Suvraga ger camp** (☎ 9929 8155; ts\_suvarga@yahoo.com; GPS: N 44°34.405', E 105°48.542'; with meals US\$30), 8km east of Tsagaan Suvraga.

## DORNOGOV ДОРНОГОВЬ

pop 54,000 / area 111,000 sq km

Dornogov (East Gobi) is the first place visited by many overlanders, as the trainline from Beijing to Ulaanbaatar runs straight up its gut. The landscape seen from the train window is one of flat, arid emptiness and the occasional station where locals shuffle about on the platform. The railway supports local trade while the rest of the economy lies on the back of copper mining and small-scale oil extraction.

Most travellers stop here with the purpose of visiting Khamaryn Khiid, the monastery established by the poet-monk Danzan Ravjaa. The once-deserted monastery has become an important spiritual centre and pilgrimage point for Mongolians and foreigners interested in Buddhism. Another reason to come down this way is to travel by local train, getting a quick and easy look at the Gobi before heading into China.

### National Parks

Dornogov's national parks are little visited, but make for some good off-the-beaten-path travel destinations. **Ergeliin Zuu** (90,910 hectares), in the south of the province, is a small protected area that has interesting rock formations and palaeontology sites that include 30-million-year-old mammalian fossils. **Ikh Nart Nature Reserve** (67,000 hectares), only a four-hour drive from Ulaanbaatar, is home to hundreds of ibex (mountain goat), black vulture and other wildlife. The natural springs near Khalzan Uul (Bald Mountain) are considered a local health remedy. Burgasan Amny Rashaan is another mineral spring a few kilometres

### ILLEGAL BUUZ Michael Kohn

'Sorry, no more *buuz*' said the woman on the train platform. She was the 10th person we had asked in futility.

'But we're starving,' we whined, 'we've been on the train all day and haven't eaten'.

The *buuz* seller lifted the lid off her red thermos to prove that she had indeed sold out of steamed mutton dumplings. But the look on our faces must have been pitiful. Shifting her eyes back and forth, she grabbed our shirt sleeves and led us to the end of the platform.

'Here,' she whispered, pointing to a sealed container held tightly by a granny in a green scarf, '*buuz*'. The granny slowly lifted the lid to show us a mountain of steaming hot dumplings.

'*Khoyor zuun tögrög.*'

It was twice the normal going rate for *buuz*, but we were desperate. Feeling as though we were buying some type of rare, illegal *buuz*, we peeked over our shoulder to make sure no-one was looking, and slipped the granny a wad of bills. Cloak-and-dagger-style she sealed up the *buuz* in a plastic bag, wrapped the package in newspaper and quickly handed over the goods.

As the train whistle blew into the dry Gobi night we hopped back into the cabin, satisfied with our purchase but still completely baffled at the secrecy of what would become known as 'Operation: Buuz'.

south of Khalzan Uul. Nomadic Journeys (p80) has a ger camp here.

## SAINSHAND САЙНШАНД

☎ 01522 / pop 19,540 / elev 938m

Compared with other Gobi towns, the capital of Dornogov is reasonably well-equipped with facilities and shops, owing mainly to its location on the railway line and proximity to the Chinese border.

Sainshand (Good Pond) is divided into two parts: a cluster around the train station, and the more developed city centre 2km to the east. A leafy park at the centre of town offers cool respite from the Gobi heat; it's surrounded by the standard collection of banks, hotels, restaurants and museums. There are few jeeps for hire for trips to the desert; overland trips generally begin in Dalanzadgad in Ömnögovi aimag. Recently the city has seen growing attention from Buddhist pilgrims, who use it as a jumping off point for nearby Khamaryn Khiid (p202).

### Information

Luggage storage is available for a small fee at the Aimag Museum.

**Internet café** (☎ 22289; per hr T500; ☎ 24hr) In the Telecom office.

**Telecom office** (☎ 22112; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also located here.

**Trade & Development Bank** (☎ 22298; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Changes US-dollar travellers cheques and gives cash advances on MasterCard and Visa. The Mongol Post Bank is in the same building.

### Sights

#### AIMAG MUSEUM

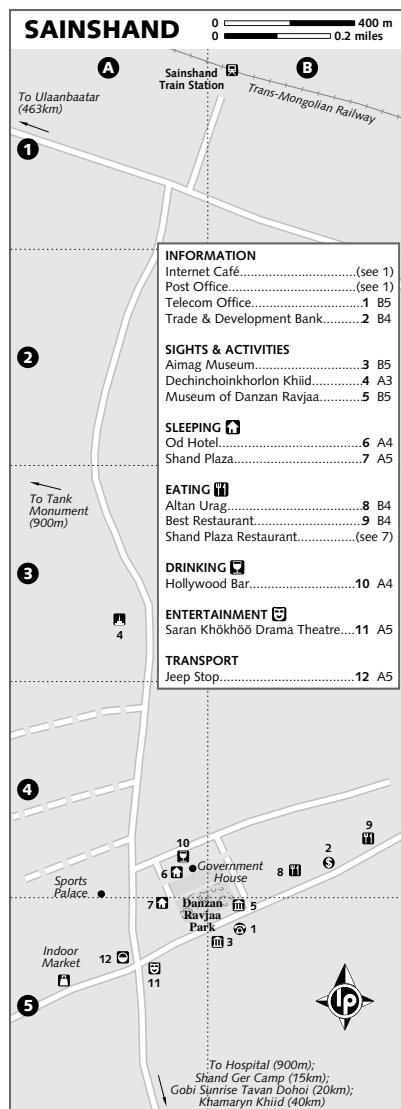
The well-appointed **Aimag Museum** (☎ 22657; admission T1000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm) houses plenty of stuffed Gobi animals, and a collection of sea shells and marine fossils (Dornogov was once beneath the sea). There is also an impressive skeleton of a Protoceratops and a dinosaur egg. Upstairs, look out for the wooden breastplate used by a Mongol soldier of the imperial fighting days. Lighting here is poor so bring a torch (flashlight).

#### MUSEUM OF DANZAN RAVJAA

Noyon Khutagt Danzan Ravjaa (1803–56), a well-known Mongolian writer, composer, painter and medic, was born about 100km southwest of Sainshand. The **museum** (☎ 23221; www.danzanravjaa.org; admission T1000, photos T5000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm) has a collection of gifts presented to Danzan Ravjaa by Chinese and Tibetan leaders, costumes used in his plays, Buddhist statues presented to him by the 10th Dalai Lama, and some of Ravjaa's paintings. He was also very interested in traditional medicine, so the museum also has a collection of herbs.

In the centre of the museum is a statue of Danzan Ravjaa looming in the darkness. Note the small glass jar in front of the statue, which contains Danzan Ravjaa's bones; the poet's mummified body was burned along with his monastery in the 1930s.

Plans are afoot to move the museum to a new facility in the park.



## DECHINCHOINKHORLIN KHIID

### ДЭЧИНЧОЙНХОРЛИН ХИЙД

This **monastery** (☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri), which opened in 1991, is in a large walled compound at the northern end of the central district. There is an active temple and, although visitors are welcome, photographs are not allowed inside. The 25 monks are very friendly. The

best views are from the **tank monument** located behind the monastery.

## Sleeping

### CAMPING

Sainshand, like most aimag capitals in the Gobi, does not offer anywhere decent to pitch a tent. The best place to head for is the cliffs north of the monastery.

## GER CAMPS

**Gobi Sunrise Tavan Dohoi** (☎ 9911 3820, 9909 0151; gobisunrise@yahoo.com; GPS: N 44°45.418', E 110°11.236'; with/without meals US\$25/10) A well-run ger camp, it has a restaurant, flush toilets and clean showers with hot water. To arrange transport to the camp, which is about 20km south of Sainshand on the road to Khamaryn Khiid (p202), ask Altangerel, the curator at the Danzan Ravjaa museum (p199).

**Shand Ger Camp** (☎ 9925 7883; with/without meals US\$30/15) Located 15km south of Sainshand, this camp is more expensive but not as nice as Gobi Sunrise. Arrange transport through the Shand Plaza.

## HOTELS

**Shand Plaza** (☎ 9914 8352, 23509; d/tr/half-lux/lux T20,000/18,000/35,000/65,000) This reasonably comfortable hotel has a variety of rooms with TV and clean bathroom. The triple room has no shower but the basement has a shared shower (T800) and sauna (T5000) that can be used even if you aren't staying here. The hotel also has a restaurant, disco, billiard room and local branch of the Anod Bank where you can receive a money transfer.

**Od Hotel** (Star Hotel; ☎ 23245; dm T4500-5500) In the west wing of the Government House, it has a hot-water shower room and bland dorm rooms. Enter the hotel from the north side.

At the time of research a seven-storey hotel was being built in Sainshand, close to the park.

## Drinking & Eating

**Altan Urag** (dishes T1000-2500; ☎ 9am-11pm) Behind a supermarket and just past the Danzan Ravjaa museum on the left, this place serves authentic, if somewhat oily Chinese meals. One dish is big enough for two people.

**Shand Plaza Restaurant** (☎ 9952 2417; Shand Plaza Hotel; dishes T1500-2500; ☎ 9am-9pm) This restaurant shows a little bit of local pride, with the colourful décor resembling the in-

## DANZAN RAVJAA: POET, PLAYWRIGHT & SOCIAL CRITIC

Danzan Ravjaa was a hot-headed rebellious monk, a writer and popular leader of Mongolia's Red Hat Buddhists. He was recognised as a child prodigy by local people (he began composing and singing his own songs at the age of four) and was proclaimed the Fifth Gobi Lord in 1809. The Manchus had executed the Fourth Gobi Lord and forbade another and it was only by the narrowest of chances that the Manchu court allowed the young Gobi king to live.

Danzan Ravjaa's fame as a writer, artist and social critic spread far and wide. He received foreign students at his monastery and travelled to foreign countries, taking his acting troupe with him to study drama.

Ravjaa was also an expert at martial arts, Tantric studies, yoga and traditional medicine. He spent months in solitude writing, either in caves or in his ger. It is said that he so hated being disturbed that he built himself a ger with no door. He had a lousy temper that was often exacerbated by protracted bouts of drinking.

Many tall tales exist about Danzan Ravjaa and a little prodding will have locals spinning yarns about their beloved Gobi saint. It is said that Ravjaa could fly to Tibet in an instant to gather medicine, disappear into thin air and turn water into whisky (an important feat in Mongolia). Displaying his powers to the local people, he once peed off the roof of his temple and 'magically' made the urine fly into the air before it hit the ground.

Danzan Ravjaa's mysterious death came either at the hands of the rival Yellow Hat Buddhist sect or a jealous queen who failed to gain his love. His legacy remains strong and locals can still sing the songs he wrote and can recite his poetry. There are hopes to one day rebuilding his theatre at Khamaryn Khiid to again perform his famous play, *Life Story of the Moon Cuckoo*.

For more information on Danzan Ravjaa, pick up a copy of his biography *Lama of the Gobi* (Maitri Books, 2006), written by the author of this guidebook.

terior of a ger. The menu has your standard-issue Mongolian dishes and a couple of European meals.

**Best Restaurant** (☎ 9925 5579; dishes T1800-2500; ☎ 10am-11pm; ☎) A local favourite, this place doles out excellent Mongolian dishes, we recommend the *bainshte shöl* (dumpling soup). It's in the 2nd floor of a brown brick building.

## Entertainment

**Saran Khökhöö Drama Theatre** (☎ 22796) Named after the famous play by local hero Danzan Ravjaa, who would be proud that this Sainshand theatre group is considered the best outside of Ulaanbaatar. The theatre's in the centre of town on the west side of the park. Unfortunately, performances are sporadic.

**Hollywood Bar** (☎ 2pm-midnight) For a cold beer try this dim watering hole located behind the Government House.

## Getting There & Away

Because at least one train links Sainshand with Ulaanbaatar every day, there are no flights or scheduled bus services to or from Sainshand.

## HITCHING

For the same reasons that jeeps are scarce, hitching is also hard. You will get a lift to Zamyn-Üüd or to Ulaanbaatar, but the train is quicker, more comfortable and cheap.

## JEEP

Share jeeps park themselves at a stop south of the Sports Palace. These head out to the various villages in Dornogov, but it's nearly impossible to find a ride going to the neighbouring aimags. If you ask around you *might* be able to find someone to drive you to Khanbogd or Manlai *sums* in Ömnögov, from where you could find transport to Dalanzadgad, but the cost for such a trip could be from US\$150 to US\$200 (they would expect you to pay the return fare as the jeep would have to go back empty). Sainshand is 463km southeast of Ulaanbaatar, and 218km northwest of Zamyn-Üüd.

## TRAIN

Local train 285 from Ulaanbaatar via Choir (daily), departs at 10.15am and arrives at 8pm. It returns to Ulaanbaatar from Sainshand at 9.05pm, arriving 8am. A second option is local train 276 to Zamyn-Üüd, which leaves

Ulaanbaatar at 4.30pm, arriving at Sainshand at the inconvenient time of about 2am. The return train departs Sainshand at 11.03pm and arrives in Ulaanbaatar at 9.45am. There may be other departure times (and the aforementioned may change) so check when you book your ticket, or call the station in Sainshand: ☎ 52307. Tickets from Ulaanbaatar cost T6200/9500 for hard/soft sleeper. If you book your ticket more than a day ahead there is a T450 fee. Trains get crowded in both directions so book as far in advance as possible.

The Trans-Mongolian Railway and the trains between Ulaanbaatar and Ereen (just over the Chinese border) and Hohhot (in Inner Mongolia) stop at Sainshand, but you cannot use these services just to get to Sainshand unless you buy a ticket all the way to China. You must take the local daily train.

Getting *on* the Trans-Mongolian at Sainshand for China is fraught with complications unless you have bought your Ulaanbaatar–Beijing/Hohhot ticket beforehand in UB and arranged for someone to tell the train steward at Ulaanbaatar Station not to sell your seat. In Beijing, you can only buy a Beijing–Ulaanbaatar ticket, but you can get off at Sainshand.

## SOUTH OF SAINSHAND

### Khamaryn Khiid Хамарын Хийд

This reconstructed **monastery** (GPS: N 44°36.038', E 110°16.650'), an hour's drive south of Sainshand, has grown up around the cult of Danzan Ravjaa (p201), whom many locals believe to have been a living god. His image is sewn into a carpet that hangs in the main hall. The original monastery and three-storey theatre, built by Danzan Ravjaa in 1821, was destroyed in the 1930s. Water from the spring nearby (surrounded by a concrete building) is said to hold curative properties.

From the monastery, a path leads for 3km to a bell tower which you must strike three times to announce your arrival at the 'energy centre,' known as **Shambhala**. In 1853, Danzan Ravjaa told the local people that he would die in three years but they could forever come to this place and speak to his spirit. Indeed, he died three years later and the site was marked by an *ovoo*. Shambhala is now surrounded by 108 new stupas ('108' being a sacred number in Buddhism). Note that major festivities are held here on 10 September.

## RITUALS AT SHAMBHALA

There are several rituals to adhere to when you enter the Shambhala site. Do them in the following order:

- Write a bad thought on a piece of paper and burn it in the rocks to the left.
- Write down a wish, read it, throw some vodka in the air and drop some rice in the stone circles on the ground (representing the past, present and future).
- Take a white pebble from the ground, place it on the pile of other white pebbles and announce your family name.
- Take off your shoes and lay down on the ground, absorbing the energy of this sacred site.
- Circle the *ovoo* three times.

A watchman may be on hand to show you around.

A series of small **meditation caves** are located a short walk east of Shambhala. Here monks used to seal themselves inside the caves and meditate for 108 days.

Around 23km northwest of the monastery is **Bayanzürkh Uul** (elev 1070m; GPS: N 44°41.644', E 110°02.707'). Legend tells that the mountain is home to the spirit of the third Noyon Khutagt (a predecessor of Danzan Ravjaa). The temple halfway up the mountain is as far as local women are allowed to go (although no-one seems to mind if foreign women go to the top). At the summit they are required to make three wishes and circle the peak along the well-worn path.

Altangerel, the curator of the Museum of Danzan Ravjaa in Sainshand (and the fifth generation in the hereditary line of Danzan Ravjaa's personal protectors, which extends from Danzan Ravjaa's assistant Balchinchoijoo) can help with accommodation. Contact him at the museum in Sainshand if you are thinking of heading to Khamaryn Khiid. The monastery has very basic facilities, but the Gobi Sunrise Tavan Dohoi ger camp (p200) is a 30-minute (20km) drive back towards Sainshand.

## ZAMYN-ÜÜD ЗАМЫН-ҮҮД

The Trans-Mongolia railway line runs into China at this small, otherwise insignificant village in the Gobi Desert. If you are trav-

elling by local train between Mongolia and China you'll need to stop here and organise onward transport.

While Erlen booms with economic activity right across the border, little happens in Zamyn Üüd – there is no market and the roads are slowly being consumed by sand, blown in from the surrounding desert.

There are just enough transit travellers to keep some hotels and restaurants busy around the train station. Plans to build a casino in the town could help, although after several years of talk nothing has happened yet.

## Information

The train station has banks, an ATM and money changers. Luggage storage is available for T250 per item.

**Telecom office** (☎ 21112; 📠 24hr) International calling available, and internet (per hour T470).

## Sleeping

There are enough vehicles heading in and out of town that you probably won't have to spend the night, but in case you do, try the following.

**Jintin** (☎ 53289; dm/s/half-lux US\$6/8/12) A cheap option located next to the train station.

**Khan Shonkhor Hotel** (☎ 21608; half-lux/lux T16,000/20,000) Clean and modern hotel with a restaurant serving better-than-average Mongol fare.

## Getting There & Away

The daily train (276) to Zamyn-Üüd, via Choir and Sainshand, leaves Ulaanbaatar every day at 4.30pm, arriving around 7.10am. Tickets cost T5100/12,800 for hard/soft sleeper. The train returns to Ulaanbaatar at 5.50pm, arriving the next morning at 9.45am. Tickets cost T2400/6500 to Sainshand and T3900/10,200 to Choir.

From UB you can also take the 34 express train, departing Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 8.05pm, arriving in Zamyn-Üüd at 7.55am for T20,000. It returns at 10pm on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Contact the station in Zamyn-Üüd (☎ 53340, 53108) for more details.

To cross the border, most people take the frequent jeeps that run between the train stations of Zamyn-Üüd and Ereen (T12,000, 7km). The jeeps are generally quicker than the train. When the train arrives in Zamyn-Üüd there is a frantic rush for jeeps and

then a jockeying for position at the border. Keeping up with the crowd will get you to Ereen more quickly, so don't dally! See p269 for more information about crossing the border.

By jeep the price is the same if coming from Ereen. Jeeps assemble at the Ereen bus station and the market – ask the Mongolian drivers. There is a Y5 tax that you need to pay going either way (you can pay the driver in tögrög or US dollars and they will pay the tax for you).

The road border is open from 8am to 6pm daily except holidays. If it's closed for a holiday, a train will still run across the border.

If you are on a Trans-Mongolian train, or the service between Ulaanbaatar and Hohhot or Ereen, you will stop at Zamyn-Üüd for an hour or so while Mongolian customs and immigration officials do their stuff – usually in the middle of the night. See p272 for details.

## NORTH OF SAINSHAND

Probably the best sight in Dornogov, **Senjit Khad** is a natural rock formation in the shape of an arch. It is about 95km northeast of Sainshand in Altanshiree *sum*.

The volcanic rock formation of **Tsonjijn Chuluu** looks rather like a set of hexagonal organ pipes. It's in the extreme northeast corner of Dornogov, in Delgerekh *sum*, about 160km along the northeast road from Sainshand.

Both sites can be visited only with your own vehicle en route between Dornogov aimag and eastern Mongolia.

## CHOIR ЧОЙР

Choir, about halfway between Sainshand and Ulaanbaatar, was once home to a large **Russian air-force base** that was abandoned in 1992. The base is still there, although most of the buildings have been stripped to their core, leaving empty shells and wreckage everywhere. The base and landing strip, around 15km north of Choir near the village of Lun, are an eerie ghost town of old buildings and abandoned MiG fighters.

To promote rapid economic growth, Choir formally seceded from Dornogov (it is now an autonomous municipality called Gov-Sumber, with a population of 13,000) and was declared a Free Trade Zone. Nothing much was done to promote the area though, and it continues to languish in neglect.

To get to Choir, train No 276 leaves Ulaanbaatar daily at 4.30pm and arrives at 9.23pm. Train No 284 departs at 5.40pm on Friday and Sunday, arriving at 11.33pm. Tickets cost T3000/6400 for a hard/soft seat. From Choir, the train departs for Ulaanbaatar at the unspeakable time of 3.48am. On Thursday, Saturday and Monday another train departs at 2.16am. On Monday at 8am a bus departs from the Bayanzürkh bus station in Ulaanbaatar for Choir (T5000, five hours). The road is newly paved.

## ÖMÑÖGOV ӨМНӨГОВЬ

pop 46,300 / area 165,000 sq km

Ömnögov (South Gobi) is the largest aimag in Mongolia, with a population density of only 0.3 people per square kilometre. It's not hard to see why humans prefer to live elsewhere: with an average annual precipitation of only 130mm a year, and summer temperatures reaching an average of 38°C, this is the driest, hottest and harshest region in the entire country.

Gurvan Saikhan Nuruu in the centre provides the main topographic relief in this pancake-flat region; the mountains make human habitation marginally possible by capturing snow in winter, which melts and feeds springs on the plains below, providing water for some livestock.

Ömnögov supports thousands of black-tailed gazelle, which you may see darting across the open plains. The aimag is also home to a quarter (around 80,000) of Mongolia's domesticated camels.

Tourism is an important business in the region and there are plenty of ger camps throughout the aimag. Far more important, however, is the mining industry (legend has it that the aimag governor passes out business cards printed with gold dust). The massive Oyu Tolgoi copper and gold deposit, located near the Chinese border in Khanbogd *sum*, is currently being developed by a Canadian mining company. When fully operational in a decade's time the mine could boost Mongolia's GDP by more than 30%.

### National Parks

**Gurvan Saikhan National Park** (2,000,000 hectares) Wealth of sand dunes, canyons, dinosaur fossils and mountainous terrain. Desert wildlife includes argali sheep, ibex and snow leopard.

**Small Gobi A Strictly Protected Area** (1,839,176 hectares) On the border with China, includes dunes and saxaul forest. Last great bastion of the *khulan* (wild ass).

### DALANZADGAD ДАЛАНЗАДГАД

☎ 01532 / pop 13,900 / elev 1465m

The capital of Ömnögov, Dalanzadgad is a speck of civilisation in the desert, sitting in the shadow of Gurvan Saikhan Nuruu. As the capital of a mineral-rich aimag, there are some positive signs of development, including the construction of a massive new Government House. The town is also the main base for explorations into the desert, although travellers facilities are still a little basic.

### Information

**Bathroom** (admission T1000; ☎ 10am-8pm) One street north of the Strictly Protected Areas office.

**Internet café** (per hr T690; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat & Sun) In the Telecom office.

**Khan Bank** (☎ 22216; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes dollars and can give a cash advance against Visa or MasterCard.

**Strictly Protected Areas office** (☎ 23973; gtzgobi@magicnet.mn) In the southwest of town, this office mostly deals in bureaucratic affairs. For information, you are better off at the information ger at the gate to Gurvan Saikhan National Park.

**Telecom office** (☎ 24110; ☎ 24hr) A one-minute call to the US or Europe costs T772.

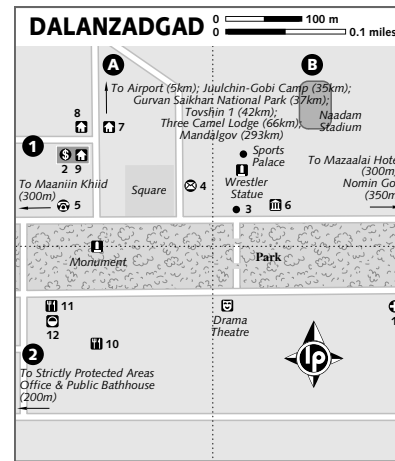
### Sights

#### SOUTH GOBI MUSEUM

Surprisingly, this **museum** (☎ 23871; admission T2000, photos T5000, video T10,000; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) has little on dinosaurs – just a leg, an arm and a few eggs. (All of the best exhibits are in Ulaanbaatar or in other museums around the world.) There are a few nice paintings, a huge stuffed vulture and a display of scroll paintings and other Buddhist items. The museum is on the main street, on the other side of the park from the pink Drama Theatre.

### Sleeping CAMPING

Like other Gobi aimag capitals, there is no river or any decent place to camp in



Dalanzadgad. You will have to walk 1km or 2km in any direction from town, and pitch your tent somewhere secluded.

### GER CAMPS

There are more than 20 ger camps between Dalanzadgad and Khongoryn Els. A GPS unit will make your search easier if you are looking for a particular camp.

**Mazaalai Hotel** (☎ 22076, 23040; per person T5000) This small ger camp is on the eastern end of Dalanzadgad near the Nomin Gov store.

**Tovshin 1** (☎ /fax 322 728, 9911 4811; GPS: N 43°45.841', E 104°02.838'; with/without meals US\$30/15) Located 7km beyond Juulchin, this camp has good hot showers and toilets, and a decent restaurant and bar, but the location is uninteresting and the buildings are ugly.

**Juulchin-Gobi Camp** (☎ 26522; jgobi@magicnet.mn; GPS: N 43°45.236', E 104°07.578'; with/without meals US\$40/22) This huge camp, 35km from town with an airstrip attached, is popular with organised tours. If you rock up with a tent it's possible to camp for US\$5. It is about the same standard as the others, but the location isn't as good.

**our pick** **Three Camel Lodge** (in UB ☎ 011-330 998; www.threecamellodge.com; GPS: N 43°53.603', E 103°44.435'; with/without meals US\$70/35) A veritable oasis in the desert 66km northeast of Dalanzadgad, overlooking a great grassy plain and spectacular mountains, this place raises the bar for the Mongolian ger camp, with first-rate facilities and food. Run by Nomadic Expeditions, the cosy lodge offers nightly performances of folk

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### TRANSPORT

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singing and dancing. Asian/European meals are buffet-style and tasty. Lunch (US\$12) is the main meal of the day (the dessert, a baked apple with raisins and custard cream, is reason enough to splurge). Visitors stay in luxurious gers that have easy access to a good-quality shared bathroom. It is a great way to break up a long journey. Even if you don't stay here, you could stop by for a drink on the terrace.

### HOTEL

At the time of research the Dalanzadgad Hotel was undergoing extensive renovations and is expected to be one of the best hotels in town when it re-opens.

**Tuvshin Hotel** (☎ 22240; per person T5000) Looked after by a friendly granny, the Tuvshin has just two rooms in good condition. It's in the same building as the Khan Bank.

**Gobi Gurvan Saikhan Hotel** (☎ 23830; dm T6000, s/d with bathroom T10,000/20,000) This place is homely and bright. The double rooms have toilet and shower, although the latter just dribbles water.

### Eating

Vegetarians could put together salad from the fresh veggies on sale in the **market** (Gobi vegetables are renowned in Mongolia for their sweet taste). Nearby, you'll also see women selling jars of lovely *tarag* (yogurt; T500) and packets of sugar.

**Nomin Gov** (☎ 24003; ☎ 9am-11pm) If you need to stock up for an expedition, this is the

## DINOSAURS

In the early 1920s, newspapers brought news of the discovery of dinosaur eggs in the southern Gobi Desert by American adventurer Roy Chapman Andrews. Over a period of two years Andrews' team unearthed over 100 dinosaurs, including Protoceratops Andrewsii, which was named after the explorer. The find included several Velociraptors (Swift Robbers), subsequently made famous by *Jurassic Park*, and a parrot-beaked Oviraptor (Egg Robber). Most valuable in Andrews' mind was the discovery of the earliest known mammal skulls, 'possibly the most valuable seven days of work in the whole history of palaeontology to date'.

Subsequent expeditions have added to the picture of life in the Gobi during the late Cretaceous period 70 million years ago, the last phase of dinosaur dominance before mammals inherited the earth.

One of the most famous fossils unearthed so far is the 'Fighting Dinosaurs' fossil, discovered by a joint Polish-Mongolian team in 1971 and listed as a national treasure. The remarkable 80-million-year-old fossil is of a Protoceratops and Velociraptor locked in mortal combat. It is thought that this and other fossilised snapshots were entombed by a violent sand storm or by collapsing sand dunes. One poignant fossil is of an Oviraptor protecting its nest of eggs from the impending sands.

A picture of prehistoric Gobi has emerged of a land of swamps, marshes and lakes, with areas of sand studded with oases. The land was inhabited by a colourful cast of characters: huge duck-billed hadrosaurs; ankylosaurs, which were up to 25-feet tall, armour-plated and had club-like tails that acted like a giant mace; long-necked, lizard-hipped sauropods such as Nemegtosaurus, which may have grown to a weight of 90 tonnes; and the mighty Tarbosaurus (Alarming Reptile), a carbon copy of a Tyrannosaurus Rex, with a 1.2m-long skull packed with razor sharp teeth up to 15cm long.

best place. A smaller version of UB's State Department Store, the Nomin Gov is located at the eastern end of town.

**Michid Restaurant & Bar** (meals T1500) For a hot meal, try this restaurant located in the Gobi Gurvan Saikhan Hotel. It has some reasonable Mongolian food.

**Gobi Restaurant** (meals T1200-1800; ☎ 9am-11pm) A decent second choice if you've already been to the Michid. It's behind the market.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Both MIAT and EZ Nis airlines fly between Dalanzadgad and Ulaanbaatar. MIAT flights are US\$78/134 one way/return and EZ Nis charges US\$120/216 one way/return. During peak tourist season – July to mid-September – MIAT schedules extra daily flights between Ulaanbaatar and Juulchin-Gobi ger camp for the same price. Even if you have a ticket to Dalanzadgad, check that you are going to the city and not just the ger camp. The new airport is a designated 'international airport', but as yet has no international flights.

### BUS

A daily bus travels between Dalanzadgad and Ulaanbaatar (T13,300, 12 hours, 553km). The

bus leaves from the market in Dalanzadgad around 8am (but expect delays).

### HITCHING

Hitching around the Gobi Desert, including to the attractions in Gurvan Saikhan National Park, is impractical and dangerous. Hitching between aimaq capitals and out to a few *sum* centres is possible but not easy. There won't be anything of interest on the way so you'll still need to hire a jeep at some point to visit the attractions. Make sure you carry plenty of water, food and a tent and sleeping bag for the inevitable breakdowns.

### JEEP

Daily vans run from Dalanzadgad to Ulaanbaatar (T14,000); for details call ☎ 23708. The cheapest way to see the attractions in Gurvan Saikhan National Park is to hang around for a few days and ask other independent travellers to share a jeep. Vans and jeeps can be hired in Dalanzadgad for T450 per km.

## KHANBOGD ХАНБОГД

If you are travelling between Sainshand and Dalanzadgad, it's worth taking a slight detour to visit Khanbogd *sum*. Despite its apparent remoteness, the *sum* is set to enrich the whole

Other weird and wonderful beasts that once roamed the southern Gobi include bone-headed pachycephalosaurs, which used their reinforced skulls as battering rams; the Embolotherium, with a periscope-style nose that allowed it to breathe while the rest of it was underwater; and Therizinosaurus (Scythe Lizard), a fierce carnivore with massive claws over 60cm long. Huge rhinos, over four times the size of an adult elephant and thought to be the largest land mammals ever to have lived, shared the land with tiny rodents, the forerunners of modern-day mammalian life.

With a bit of digging you may be able to find some dinosaur fossils in the southern Gobi, but please be aware that these fossils are very precious, and far more useful to palaeontologists. Locals may approach you at Bayanzag, the ger camps and even Dalanzadgad to buy dinosaur bones and eggs. Remember that it is *highly* illegal to export fossils from Mongolia.

Apart from the famous sites of Bayanzag and nearby Togrigin Shiree, the richest sites of Bugiin Tsav, Ulaan Tsav, Nemegt Uul and Khermen Tsav are all in the remote west of Ömnögov aimaq and impossible to reach without a jeep and dedicated driver (or a helicopter).

There are still plenty of fossils – in 2006 a team of palaeontologists from Mongolia and Montana unearthed 67 dinosaur skeletons in a single week! In 2007 a Canadian paleontologist reported finding large numbers of fossilised carnivores near Nemegt Uul. The proportion of carnivores is usually 5% but this site had closer to 50%. Sadly, he also described how poachers remove the skulls, hands and feet, scattering the other bones in their dirty work.

Today, the best places to come face to face with the dinosaurs of the Gobi are the Museum of Natural History in Ulaanbaatar and the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which also has a fine website ([www.amnh.org](http://www.amnh.org)). As for books, check out *Dinosaurs of the Flaming Cliffs* by American palaeontologist Michael Novacek.

of Mongolia, thanks to an enormous copper and gold deposit at Oyu Tolgoi, about 40km southwest of the town centre.

The development of the mine is having profound effects on the town of Khanbogd, which has a new health clinic, shops and a renovated **hotel** (☎ 01535-12223; r T10,000). In order to facilitate all this change, plans are being set to expand the population; come back in 15 years and this dusty village of 1500 people could be home to as many as 30,000 folks working at the mine or in support businesses.

Unless you have a particular interest in copper mining, the main reason to come here it to visit **Demchigiin Khuid** (Дэмчигийн Хийдийн Туйр; GPS: N 43°07.711', E 107°07.668') one of the monasteries built by the famed fifth Noyon Khutagt, Danzan Ravjaa (see p201). The monastery, about 20km from the town, was destroyed in 1937 but is undergoing a major renovation project funded by Ivanhoe Mines, (the mining company exploiting Oyu Tolgoi). Gobi people consider the rocky area around the monastery to be an important energy centre for Buddhism, and as a result the place gets a few pilgrims who come to meditate.

Serious explorers may want to carry on to **Lovon Chombin Agui** (Ловон Чомбын Агуй; GPS: N 42°35.305', E 107°49.529'), a 50m-long cave with

numerous stalactites. The cave and adjacent monastery ruins are near the Chinese border so you'll definitely need a border permit from Ulaanbaatar (p66).

## BULGAN БУЛГАН

There is little to see in this ramshackle village 95km northwest of Dalanzadgad, but you may end up here as it is located along the main tourist route between Bayanzag and places south.

By virtue of its central Gobi location, this small village is home to large-scale **Tsagaan Sar** (Lunar New Year) festivities, which take place in January or February. The two-day festival includes camel racing, camel polo and a camel beauty contest (unfortunately, good breath is not a key category). During the event, temporary ger camps pop up to house tourists.

The **Ankhsan Cooperative Guesthouse** (☎ 811117, 811 134; [treepool-06@yahoo.com](mailto:treepool-06@yahoo.com); per person T3000-5000), run by a friendly local named Poli, is a great place to stay in the town. Food is available.

Nearby is **Ulaan Nuur** (Red Lake), the largest and just about the only lake in Ömnögov. It may not be there when you visit because it often dries out; it won't quench your thirst either – it is very salty.



## BAYANZAG БАЯНЗАГ

**Bayanzag** (Flaming Cliffs; GPS: N 44°08.311', E 103°43.667'), which means 'rich in saxaul shrubs', is more commonly known as the 'Flaming Cliffs', penned by the palaeontologist Roy Chapman Andrews (see the boxed text, opposite). First excavated in 1922, it is renowned worldwide for the number of dinosaur bones and eggs found in the area, which you can see in the Museum of Natural History in Ulaanbaatar or, mostly, in other museums around the world.

Even if you are not a 'dinophile', the eerie beauty of the surrounding landscape is a good reason to visit. It's a classic desert of rock, red sands, scrub, sun and awesome emptiness. There's not much to do once you're here except explore the area or grab a cold drink from the souvenir sellers who hang out on the edge of the cliff.

**Bayanzag Tourist Camp** (☎ 5053 1005; info@mongoliagobi.com; GPS: N 44°10.466', E 103°41.816'; with/without meals US\$30/15), about 4km from the cliffs, is a reasonable choice in the area, notable for its giant tortoise-shaped restaurant. Camel rental here is T3000 per hour. You could camp near the *zag* (scrub) forest.

Bayanzag by road is about 100km northwest of Dalanzadgad and 18km northeast of Bulgan. It can be surprisingly hard to find so you really need to take a driver or guide who's been there before, or ask directions regularly from the few people who live in the area.

A further 22km northeast of Bayanzag is an area of sand dunes called **Moltzog Els**, which might be worth a visit if you're not planning to visit Khongoryn Els.

## GURVAN SAIKHAN NATIONAL PARK ГУРВАН САЙХАН

With its iconic sand dunes, ice canyon, striped badlands and stunning mountain vistas this is understandably one of Mongolia's most popular national parks. Most travellers only see a fraction of it, sticking to the main sites. With more time it's possible to drive to the remote western area – an eerie landscape so lacking in life that you may feel as if you've landed on the moon.

Gurvan Saikhan (Three Beauties) is named after its three ridges (though there are four). Besides its spectacular natural beauty it contains more than 200 bird species, including the Mongolian desert finch, cinereous vulture, desert warbler and hou-

bara bustard. Spring brings further waves of migratory birds.

The park also has maybe 600 or more types of plants, a lot of which only bloom after (very infrequent) heavy rain. The sparse vegetation does manage to support numerous types of animals, such as the black-tailed gazelle, Kozlov's pygmy jerboa, wild ass and endangered species of wild camel, snow leopard, ibex and argali sheep.

### Information

There is a national park entry fee of T3000 per person. You can pay the fee and get a permit at the park office in Dalanzadgad, at the entrance to Yolyn Am or from the ranger at Khongoryn Els. Keep your entry ticket as you may need to show it to rangers later in your trip.

### Sights & Activities

#### YOLYN AM ҮЛЫН АМ

Yolyn Am (Vulture's Mouth) was originally established to conserve the birdlife in the region, but it's now more famous for its dramatic and very unusual scenery – it is a valley in the middle of the Gobi Desert, with metres-thick ice for most of the year.

The small **Nature Museum** (GPS: N 43°32.872', E 104°02.257'; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am–9pm) at the gate on the main road to Yolyn Am has a collection of dinosaur eggs and bones, stuffed birds and a snow leopard. It also sells the excellent booklet *Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park*, by Bern Steinhauer-Burkhardt. More information in English on the park and its facilities can be found in an 'information ger', which also sells park entry tickets. There are several souvenir shops and a couple of places to stay, including **Tavan Erdene guesthouse** (☎ 9953 7058; per person US\$3–5) which offers basic ger accommodation.

From the museum, the road continues for another 10km to a car park. From there, a pleasant 2km walk, following the stream, leads to an **ice-filled gorge** (GPS: N 43°29.332', E 104°04.000') and one or two lonely souvenir salesmen. Locals also rent horses (T6000) and camels (T10,000) for the trip.

In winter, the ice is up to 10m high, and continues down the gorge for another 10km. The ice is not particularly accommodating for tourists, and usually disappears in the summer (June to September). It's possible to walk the length of the gorge – an experi-

### ROY CHAPMAN ANDREWS

American adventurer Roy Chapman Andrews (1884–1960) had a restless spirit. 'I wanted to go everywhere', he wrote, 'I would have started on a day's notice for the North Pole or the South, to the jungle or the desert. It made not the slightest bit of difference to me'.

Born in Wisconsin, Andrews' itchy feet soon brought him to New York where he sought work at the Museum of Natural History; upon learning there were no job openings he offered his services as a janitor (eventually working his way up to Museum Director). Adventures in his youth included filming whales in the Atlantic, trapping snakes in the East Indies and hunting game in Yunnan. But he is best known for his explorations of the Gobi in the 1920s, where he found the first dinosaur eggs, jaws and skulls in Central Asia. Andrews' most famous expeditions were based at Bayanzag, which he famously renamed the 'Flaming Cliffs'.

According to his books and biographies, he was a real-life adventurer, who took the expeditions' ambushes, raids, bandits, rebellions and vipers in his stride (the camp killed 47 vipers in their tents one night). He was never one for understatement: as one expedition member said, 'the water that was up to our ankles was always up to Roy's neck'. In reality, one of the few times an expedition member was seriously injured was when Andrews accidentally shot himself in the leg with his own revolver.

Andrews worked for US intelligence during WWI and also explored Alaska, Borneo, Burma, Korea and China. He wrote such Boys' Own classics as *Whale Hunting with Gun and Camera* (1916), *Across Mongolian Plains* (1921), *On the Trail of Ancient Man* (1926) and *The New Conquest of Central Asia* (1932). Always kitted out in a felt hat, khakis and a gun by his side, Andrews is widely regarded as the model on which the Hollywood screen character Indiana Jones was based.

On his return to the US Andrews took the directorship of the American Museum of Natural History but was asked to resign in 1941 after a difficult tenure during the depression years. His death in California in 1960, at the age of 76, went almost unnoticed. For more information on RC Andrews, read *Dragon Hunter*, a biography by Charles Galenkamp.

enced driver could pick you up on the other side, about 8km east of the car park.

The surrounding hills offer plenty of opportunities for some fine, if somewhat strenuous, day **hikes**. If you are lucky you might spot ibex or argali sheep along the steep valley ridges. Yolyn Am is in the Zuun Saikhan Nuruu, 46km west of Dalanzadgad.

About 1km before the museum is a second ice valley called **Mukhar Shiveert**; visitors may be required to pay T3000 to visit the site (on top of the T3000 you already paid to enter the park).

If you are headed from Yolyn Am to Khongoryn Els, an adventurous and rough alternative route takes you through the **Dugany Am** (GPS: N 43°29.521', E 103°51.586'), a spectacular and narrow gorge. The gorge is blocked with ice until July and can be impassable even after the ice has melted, so check road conditions with the park ranger's office at the park entrance.

### KHONGORYN ELS ХОНГОРЫН ЭЛС

Khongoryn Els are some of the largest and most spectacular sand dunes in Mongolia. Also known as the Duut Mankhan (Singing

Dunes), they are up to 300m high, 12km wide and about 100km long. The largest dunes are at the northwestern corner of the range. The views of the desert from the top are wonderful.

The sand dunes are also a popular place for organising camel rides; locals seem to appear from the woodland when a jeep full of tourists arrives. To properly explore the area, you will need to stay the night in the desert before returning to Dalanzadgad. There are plenty of camping spots near the dunes (you'll need your own water) and a handful of ger camps.

**Gobi Discovery** (011-312 769; www.gobidiscovery.mn; GPS: N 43°46.495', E 102°20.307'; with/without meals US\$35/17) is a welcoming ger camp, about 2km north of the dunes. **Juulchin Gobi 2** (☎ 26522, 9914 8115; jgobi@magicnet.mn; with/without meals US\$40/22) is about 6km past Gobi Discovery.

The dunes are about 180km from Dalanzadgad. There is no way to get there unless you charter a jeep or are part of a tour.

From Khongoryn Els it is possible to follow desert tracks 130km north to Bogd

in Övörkhangai, or 215km northwest to Bayanlig in Bayankhongor. This is a remote and unforgiving area and you shouldn't undertake either trip without an experienced driver and full stocks of food, water and fuel.

## BAYANKHONGOR БАЯНХОНГОР

pop 82,200 / area 116,000 sq km

One of the most diverse aimags in the Gobi, this one has mountains in the north, deserts in the south, a handful of lakes and rivers, hot springs and a real oasis in the far south of the province.

Bayankhongor, which means 'rich chestnut' (named after the colour of the horses – or your skin after a couple of hours in the Gobi sun), is home to wild camels and asses and the extremely rare Gobi bear.

Most travellers bypass the aimag while travelling along the major southern Ulaanbaatar-Khovd road, but Bayankhongor does have some interesting, albeit remote, attractions. Some adventurous expeditionists have ridden horses from Bayankhongor over the Khangai Nuruu to Tsetserleg in Arkhangai. Other travellers have gone camel trekking between some of the remote towns in the south of the aimag.

Getting to these remote places is as much expedition as common travel, but if you are

well prepared the area offers some magical trips off the beaten track.

### BAYANKHONGOR CITY БАЯНХОНГОР

☎ 01442 / pop 23,800 / elev 1859m

The broad avenues, cantonment-style apartment blocks and parade ground in front of a monolithic Government House are straight out a Soviet planner's briefcase. There are also large patches of waste ground as if the builders gave up halfway through the project. Although the town itself is nothing special, the Khangai Nuruu, with several peaks of 3000m or more, is not too far away. You'll probably have to stay here if on a long haul to or from the west, to start explorations to more remote regions in the south, or to go on a day trip to the nearby springs at Shargaljuut (p212).

#### Information

**Bathroom** (☎ 22652; per person T800, sauna T2000; ☹ 10am–10pm) Located 650m north of the Telecom office. The sauna needs to be booked ahead at least two hours.

**Internet café** (☎ 117; per hr T500; ☹ 9am–10pm) Next to the Telecom office.

**Khan Bank** (☎ 22981; ☹ 9am–1pm & 2–5pm Mon–Fri) Changes US dollars and gives cash advances on MasterCard.

**Telecom office** (☎ 24105; ☹ 24hr) The post office is also located here.

#### Sights

The skyline of the city is dominated by a **stupa** on a hill to the west of the square. If you are staying for a while, take a walk up there for views of the town and nearby countryside. A Peace Corps volunteer laid out a **frisbee golf course** in the town park, so if you have a disc ask some of the local kids to show you the first hole.

### LAMYN GEGEENI GON GANDAN DEDLIN ДЭДЛИН ХИЙД

The original monastery by this name was located 20km east of Bayankhongor city and was home to 10,000 monks, making it one of the biggest in the country. It was levelled by the communist government in 1937. The current monastery, built in 1991, is home to only 40 monks. The main temple is built in the shape of a ger, although it's actually made of brick. The main hall features a statue of Sakyamuni flanked by a green and white Tara. The monastery is on the main street, 700m north of the square.

#### MUSEUMS

Both museums are closed on weekends but can be opened upon special request.

The **Aimag Museum** (☎ 22339; admission T1500, photos T5000; ☹ 9am–1pm & 2–6pm Mon–Fri), inside the sports stadium in the park, is well laid out and worth a visit. There is a good display on Buddhist art, featuring two lovely statues of Tara, some fine old scroll paintings and *tsam* (lama dance) masks and costumes.

The **Natural History Museum** (T1500; ☹ 9am–1pm & 2–6pm Mon–Fri) across the street is filled with badly stuffed animals, a replica Tarbosaurus skeleton and some fossils, including a 130-million-year-old fossilised turtle.

#### Sleeping

The best place to camp is probably by the Tüin Gol, a few hundred metres east of the city.

**Negdelchin Hotel** (☎ 22278; d/tr/q/half-lux/lux T16,000/21,000/24,000/24,000/30,000) Located at the southern end of the main street, the 'Workers Hotel' is Bayankhongor's old Soviet-era stand-by. Some rooms have seen renovation, all have a toilet but only the lux rooms have a shower.

**Khongor Hotel** (☎ 22300, 9944 7337; tw/q/lux T14,000/20,000/30,000) Above a restaurant on the main road, this small hotel has clean, modern rooms with TV, fridge and toilet. There is a separate shower (T1000) and sauna (T5000). The staff are courteous and helpful.

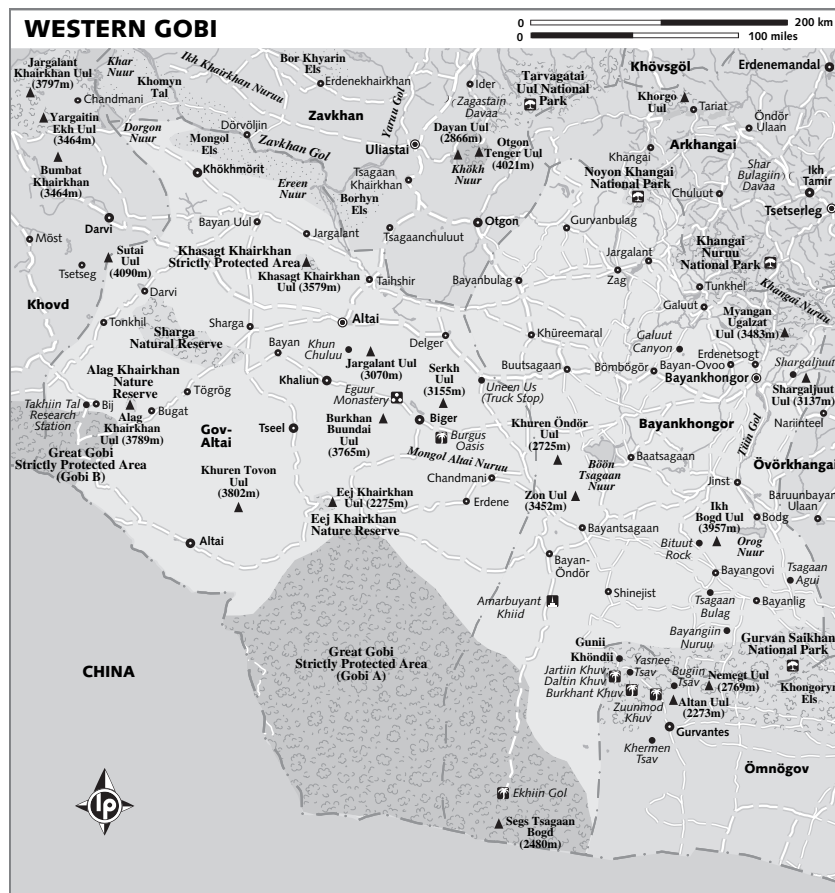
**Seoul Hotel** (☎ 22754, 9944 0884; r T18,000, lux s/d T25,000/50,000) Newly built brick-fronted hotel in the centre of town near the Telecom office. The best rooms come with TV, fridge and hot shower while the more basic rooms have shared facilities. Locals say the restaurant is the best in town.

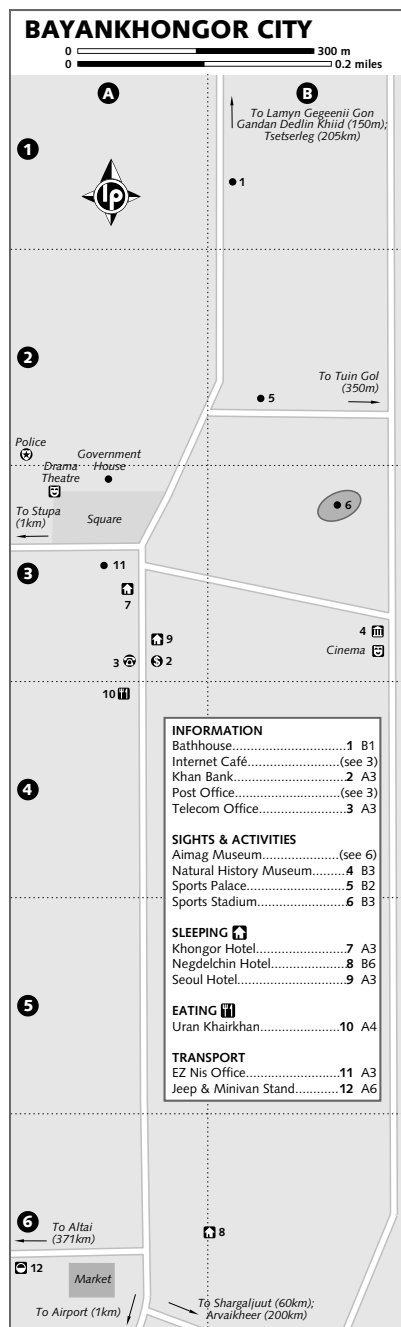
#### Eating

The hotels mentioned all have decent restaurants, with the Seoul Hotel offering the best quality meals, including some Western-style dishes. The Khongor also has some decent meals.

**Uran Khairkhan** (☎ 22062, 9944 8999; meals T1500–2000; ☹ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri) If the restaurants in the Seoul or Khongor hotels are closed this place *may* be able to rustle something up for you.

There are a few *guanx* nearby, including one just south of the Telecom office. Look for the sign: Зоогийн Газар.





## Getting There & Away

### AIR

On Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, EZ Nis flies between Ulaanbaatar and Bayankhongor for US\$120/216 one way/return. The airport is about 1km south of the city. The local **EZ Nis office** (☎ 24444, 9904 9933) is located on the south side of the square.

### HITCHING

Bayankhongor city is on the main southern road between Ulaanbaatar and Khovd (city). A lot of vehicles going in either direction stop here, so getting a ride to Altai or Arvaikheer shouldn't be too difficult. South of Bayankhongor, or to Shargaljuut, you will have far less success. Ask around at the market, which doubles as a bus and truck station.

### JEEP & MINIVAN

As a central point in southern Mongolia, Bayankhongor is well connected by bus, or better still by minivan to Ulaanbaatar (T20,000, 14 hours, 630km). Minivans leave daily and go via Arvaikheer. They stop at the market in Bayankhongor, about 300m south of the market square.

If you ask around at the market you should be able to find a minivan or jeep headed to west Altai (T20,000, 10 hours, 400km) or even Khovd (T30,000, 24 hours).

## GALUUT CANYON ГАЛУУТ

This 25m-deep **canyon** is worth a visit if, for some bizarre reason, you are in the region. The canyon is only about 1m wide in places. It is 20km southwest of Galuut *sum* centre, which is about 85km northwest of Bayankhongor town.

## SHARGALJUUT ШАРГАЛЖУУТ

The major attraction in Bayankhongor aimag is the 300 or so hot- and cold-water springs at **Shargaljuut** (GPS: N 46°19.940', E 101°13.624'). About 70km northeast of Bayankhongor city, the springs are one of the few natural attractions in the Gobi region that are easily accessible from an aimag capital.

The springs and bathhouses cover the banks of the river between the peaks of Myangan Ugalzat Uul (3483m) and Shargaljuut Uul (3137m). The hot water, which can reach 50°C, is supposed to cure a wide range of complaints and many Mongolians come

## SPRINGS & BATHHOUSES

After driving around the hot and dusty Gobi for a few days, there is nothing better than washing away the accumulated dirt at either a city bathhouse or one of the springs in the area. Doing so almost feels like losing a layer of skin as the Gobi dust can stick like a layer of film to your body.

The public bathhouses are far from luxurious but they do the trick. Upon entering you pay for your visit at a little kiosk where you can also buy soap, shampoo and other beauty products. You'll be directed to the shower which has a small changing room. Flickering light bulbs, mildew, rusty pipes and generally poor maintenance make for a prison-like experience, but your body will thank you for it. There is no time limit but bear in mind the Gobi's limited water resources! Many bathhouses also have a small lobby and barbershop.

Springs like the ones at Shargaljuut (or elsewhere in Mongolia) are also basic. Usually, the spring water is piped into a small wood hut that contains an old bathtub. Use the wooden stopper to block the hole in the bottom and let the tub fill with water. The wood huts are small but there is enough room to change. When you're finished, just unplug the tub. Some springs are modernising and now have hot pools, the best of which are at Tsenkher (p129) in Arkhangai aimag.

for treatment at the **sanatorium** (☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Dec).

Foreign guests can stay at the **ger camp & hotel** (☎ 26503; ger/half-lux/lux US\$30/30/50) at the sanatorium, but should try to reserve in advance by calling the manager, Mr Tumendemberel.

A number of small **guesthouses** also offer beds for T3500 to T8000. The best is a small ger camp on the west side of the river before the main complex; ask for Dr Burnee who is a mine of information on the area.

Alternatively, you can camp further upstream next to the river on the little-used road to Tsetserleg.

Occasional share jeeps or minivans leave Bayankhongor's market for Shargaljuut (T3000, two hours, 70km). Chartering a minivan costs around T30,000 return. Alternatively, try Bayankhongor's airport on Tuesday and Saturday, when a minivan bound for the springs meets incoming passengers from Ulaanbaatar. In summer a local named Batbayar (☎ 9975 1276) also makes runs up to the springs for T20,000 one way.

From the springs it's possible to take a short cut through the mountains to Tsetserleg in Arkhangai if you have your own vehicle. It's a lovely route but gets muddy so ask about conditions before setting off.

## BAYANGОВИ БАЯНГОВЬ

The small town of Bayangovi is about 250km south of Bayankhongor (by road) in a beautiful valley dominated by Ikh Bogd Uul (3957m). While there is nothing of special interest in Bayangovi itself, the surrounding countryside

offers some intriguing desert sites, which can be visited on a one- or two-day excursion with the aid of a jeep and a local guide.

**Gobi Camels** (☎ 011-310 455; bed per person US\$25) is an overpriced ger camp 6km northwest of town. It has hot showers and satellite TV but usually no food so bring your own if you want to stay. The other alternative is the unmarked and very basic **hotel** (per person T5000) within a compound on the southern edge of the town 'square'. It is usually deserted so you'll have to ask around the shops for the keyholder, Ms Dolumsuren.

The best way to get to Bayangovi and its surrounding attractions is in your own rented transport, either from Bayankhongor or as part of a longer trip. Failing this, shared minivans or jeeps occasionally run to Bayangovi from outside the central market at Bayankhongor. To get back to Bayankhongor ask at the post office or petrol station, and wait.

Once you get to Bayangovi your only option to see the surrounding sites is to hire a jeep from Gobi Camels camp.

## AROUND BAYANGОВИ

With a jeep and local guide it is possible to drive to the top of Ikh Bogd, to the north of Bayangovi, for stupendous views (nomads are sometimes camped up here in summer). Orog Nuur, featured on some maps and just north of Ikh Bogd, occasionally dries up thanks to over-use of its source river, the Tüin Gol.

About 90km east of Bayangovi lies **Tsagaan Agui** (GPS: N 44°42.604', E 101°10.187'). Situated in a narrow gorge, the cave once housed Stone

Age people 700,000 years ago. It features a crystal-lined inner chamber. Entrance to the cave costs T1000 (including a local guide), which is paid at the nearby ger.

Also near Bayangovi are several intriguing rock inscription sites. At **Tsagaan Bulag** (GPS: N 44°35.156', E 100°20.733'), 18km south, a white rock outcrop has the faint imprint of a strange helmeted figure, which locals believe was created by aliens. The area is also home to many herds of camel, attracted to the springs at the base of the outcrop.

Other noteworthy sites which you could add on to make a full day trip from Bayangovi include the vertical walls of the 4km-long **Gunii Khöndii** gorge, about 70km southwest of Bayangovi, and the beautiful **Bituut rock**, northwest of Bayangovi on the southern flank of Ikh Bogd, formed after an earthquake in 1957.

Further afield at **Bayangiin Nuruu** (GPS: N 44°17.218', E 100°31.329'), 90km south of Bayangovi, is a canyon with well-preserved rock engravings and petroglyphs dating from 3000 BC. The engravings depict hunting and agricultural scenes in a surprisingly futuristic style.

Travelling further south the landscape slowly descends into the Gobi Desert proper, along the border with Ömnögov aimag. Just over the border are numerous oases, among them **Jartiin Khuv**, **Daltin Khuv**, **Burkhant Khuv** and **Zuunmod Khuv**. Look out for wild ass, wild camel, black-tailed gazelle, antelope and *zam* lizard, which inhabit the area.

This region is rich in fossil sites. **Bugiiin Tsav** (GPS: N 43°52.869', E 100°01.639') is a large series of rift valleys running parallel to the Altan Uul mountain range. A number of dinosaur fossils found here are now housed in the Museum of Natural History in Ulaanbaatar (p69). The other fossil site is at **Yasnee Tsav**, an eroded hilly region with some impressive buttes. Local guides claim they can point out authentic fossils at this site.

Continuing south will lead to the other famous fossil site of **Khermen Tsav** (GPS: N 43°28.006', E 99°49.976'), arguably the most spectacular canyons in the Gobi. The trip here from Bayangovi is a good seven to eight hours. From here one could continue east into the Gobi towards Gurvantes, Noyon and Bayandalai, but be warned that this section of road is notoriously treacherous. Don't go without plenty of water and well-equipped 4WD vehicles.

All of the sites mentioned above are very difficult to find without a good local guide. Bodio, the manager of the Gobi Camels ger camp (see p213), can organise local guides for US\$15 per day (though few speak English so you really need your own translator). He also hires out jeeps for T450 per kilometre, which includes driver, petrol and local guide, and can arrange horse and camel tours for US\$5 per person per day, plus US\$5 per day for a guide.

## БӨӨН ЦАГААН НУУР BÖÖN TSGAAN NUUR БӨӨН ЦАГААН НУУР

This large **saltwater lake** (GPS: N 45°37.114', E 99°15.350') at the end of Baidrag Gol is popular with birdlife, especially relic gull, whooper swan and goose. It is possible to sleep in the abandoned cabins by the lake. A caretaker at the nearby ger will unlock one for T1000. The lake is about 130km southwest of Bayankhongor city, and 18km west of Baatsagaan.

## АМАРБУЯНТ ХНИД АМАРБУЯНТ ХИЙД

Located 47km west of Shinejist, this ruined **monastery** (GPS: N 44°37.745', E 98°42.214') once housed around 1000 monks until its destruction in 1937 by Stalin's thugs. Its claim to fame is that the 13th Dalai Lama, while travelling from Lhasa to Urga in 1904, stayed here for 10 days. The extensive ruins today include temples, buildings and walls and the main temple has been partially restored. Locals can also show you a small *ovoo* built by the Dalai Lama; out of respect no rocks were ever added to the *ovoo*.

## ЭКХИИН ГОЛ ЭХИЙН ГОЛ

This fertile **oasis** (GPS: N 43°14.898', E 90°00.295') located deep in the southern Gobi produces a tremendous amount of fruit and vegetables. This is probably the only place in Mongolia where, upon entering a ger, travellers are served tomato juice rather than tea. Until the 1920s, Chinese farmers tilled this soil and grew opium, an era that ended when a psychopathic lama-turned-bandit named Dambijantsan came by here and slaughtered them all, down to the last man. Ekhiin Gol is a good place to start or end a camel trek from Shinejist.

## CAMELS

They are known as the ships of the desert. The Mongolian Bactrian camel, a two-humped ornery beast with a shaggy wool coat, can still be seen hauling goods and people across the Gobi, as they have done for centuries.

Your first encounter with a camel may be a daunting experience: they bark and spit and smell like a thousand sweaty armpits. Sitting atop one you may be reminded of the unruly tontons from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. But, excusing its lack of graces, the camel is a versatile and low-maintenance creature: it can last a week without water and a month without food; it can carry a lot of gear (up to 250kg – equal to 10 full backpacks); and it provides wool (on average 5kg per year), milk (up to 600L a year) and is a good source of (somewhat gamey) meat. The camel also produces 250kg of dung a year, and you can never have too much camel crap.

Monitoring the hump is an important part of camel maintenance. A firm and tall hump is a sign of good health, while a droopy hump means the camel is in need of food and water. If a thirsty camel hasn't drunk for some time it can suck up 200L of water in a single day. Most camels are tame, but male camels go crazy during the mating season in January and February – definitely a time to avoid approaching one.

Of the 260,000 camels in Mongolia, two-thirds can be found in the five aimags that stretch across the Gobi – 80,000 in Ömnögov alone. They are related to the rare wild camel known as the *khavtgai*. The current number of *khavtgai* is considerably lower than it was just 40 years ago, largely because they have been poached for their meat. In an attempt to stop the decline in numbers, several national parks in the Gobi have been established to protect the 300 or so remaining wild *khavtgai*.

# GOV-ALTAI ГОВЬ-АЛТАЙ

pop 64,000 / area 142,000 sq km

Mongolia's second-largest aimag is named after the Gobi Desert and Mongol Altai Nuruu, a mountain range that virtually bisects the aimag to create a stark, rocky landscape. There is a certain beauty in this combination, but there is considerable heartbreak too. Gov-Altai is one of the least suitable areas for raising livestock, and therefore one of the most hostile to human habitation.

Somehow a few Gobi bears, wild camels, ibex and even snow leopards survive, protected in several remote national parks. Most of the population live in the north-eastern corner, where melting snow from Khangai Nuruu feeds small rivers, creating vital water supplies.

Mountaineers and adventurous hikers with a lot of time on their hands might want to bag an Altai peak. Opportunities include Khuren Tovon Uul (3802m) in Altai *sum*, Burkhan Buuddai Uul (3765m) in Biger *sum*, or the permanently snowcapped peak of Sutai Uul (4090m), the highest peak in Gov-Altai located right on the border with

Khovd aimag. Most climbers approach Sutai Uul from the Khovd side.

## National Parks

The beauty of Gov-Altai's diverse and sparsely populated mountain and desert environment has led to the designation of a large portion of the aimag as national park:

**Alag Khairkhan Nature Reserve** (36,400 hectares) Protected Altai habitat with rare plants, snow leopard, argali and ibex.

**Eej Khairkhan Nature Reserve** (22,475 hectares) About 150km directly south of Altai, the reserve was created to protect the general environment.

**Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area** Divided into 'Gobi A' (Southern Altai Gobi) and 'Gobi B' (Dzungarian Gobi). Gobi A is over 4.4 million hectares in the southern part of the aimag; Gobi B is 881,000 hectares in the southwest of Gov-Altai and neighbouring Khovd. Together, the area is the fourth-largest biosphere reserve in the world and protects wild ass, Gobi bear, wild Bactrian camel and jerboa, among other endangered animals.

**Khasagt Khairkhan Strictly Protected Area** (27,448 hectares) The area protects endangered argali sheep and the Mongol Altai mountain environment.

**Sharga Nature Reserve** Like the Mankhan Nature Reserve in Khovd aimag, it helps to preserve highly endangered species of antelope.

**Takhiin Tal** (150,000 hectares) On the border of the northern section of Gobi B (Dzungarian Gobi). *Takhi* (the

Mongolian wild horse) have been reintroduced into the wild here since 1996 through the Research Station. Experts hope they will survive and flourish in this remote area of the Gobi.

## ALTAI АЛТАЙ

☎ 01482 / pop 19,100 / elev 2181m

Nestled between the mountains of Khasagt Khairkhan Uul (3579m) and Jargalant Uul (3070m), the aimag capital is a pleasant tree-lined place, with friendly locals. It's a poor city but as it's a long way to anywhere else you'll definitely need to stop for a short while to refuel and plot your course to the next aimag or the national parks to the south.

### Information

**Internet café** (per hr T700; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Sat)

Inside the Telecom office. If you ask the Telecom operator you could get internet access after regular working hours.

**Khan Bank** (☎ 23773; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Changes cash, does cash advances against MasterCard and, if you are persistent, travellers cheques.

**Mobinet Internet Café** (per hr T600; ☎ 11am-9pm)

**Telecom office** (☎ 24117; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also here.

### Sights

The **Aimag Museum** (☎ 24213; admission T1500; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) includes some excellent bronze statues, scroll paintings, some genuine Mongol army chain mail, and an interesting shaman costume and drum. Look out for the 200kg statue of Buddha, which was

hidden in a cave during the purges and recovered in 1965. There may be no electricity so bring a torch (flashlight) to see the exhibits.

If you are headed south on the road to Biger, check out this **khun chuluu** (GPS: N46°15.830', E96°16.484'), or *balbal*, said to date back to the 13th century (possibly earlier).

### Sleeping

The road from Altai towards Khovd city goes through a surprisingly lush plain for about 10km. If you have a tent and your own vehicle, head out here. Another great patch of ground, which you will have to share with a few cows, is only a 20-minute walk northwest of town.

### GER CAMPS

**Zaiver ger camp** (☎ 9948 4333; per person T10,000, meals T3000) This ger camp is 16km from Altai. The staff will pick you up from town if you call ahead. It's pretty basic – no shower and Mongolian-style toilets.

**Juulchin Altai ger camp** (☎ 9119 4946; juulchin-altai@yahoo.com; GPS: N 46°21.764', E 96°12.978'; with/without meals US\$30/20) Located 4km west of town, this ger camp offers hot showers, clean gers and western-style toilets. Ask for Chinzorig or Baazar.

### HOTELS

**Tulga Altai** (☎ 23747; dm/d/lux T10,000/16,800/25,000) This newish hotel is located in a two-storey white building near the market. Hot showers

are available and some rooms have attached bath. It also has a decent restaurant.

**Altai Hotel** (☎ 24134; tw/tr T10,000/20,000, half-lux/lux T12,000/28,000) This unexciting relic from the Soviet past, smack in the centre of town and close to the drama theatre, has long been a stand-by for Altai visitors. Staff are friendly enough, and all rooms come with toilets, but only the half-lux and lux rooms have a shower (cold water only).

### Eating

The **market** is reasonably well stocked with foodstuffs (and warm clothing).

Both the Altai and Tulga Altai hotels have restaurants serving Mongolian favourites such as *buuz* (steamed meat dumplings) and goulash for around T1500. The Tulga Altai is the better option.

**Sutai** (☎ 23567; meals T900-3000; ☎ 8am-10pm) If you've been jonesing for a goulash or bowl 'o mutton come down to the Sutai to get your fill of luke-warm Mongolian food. The restaurant includes an attached billiards hall and karaoke bar and also offers basic accommodation for around T7000.

**Gaav** (☎ 23004; meals T1000-1500; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Fri, 11am-10pm Sun) Clean, good-value restaurant located just north of the square serving soups, salads, goulash and *tsuivan* (steamed flour slices with meat). One of the waitresses can speak some English.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

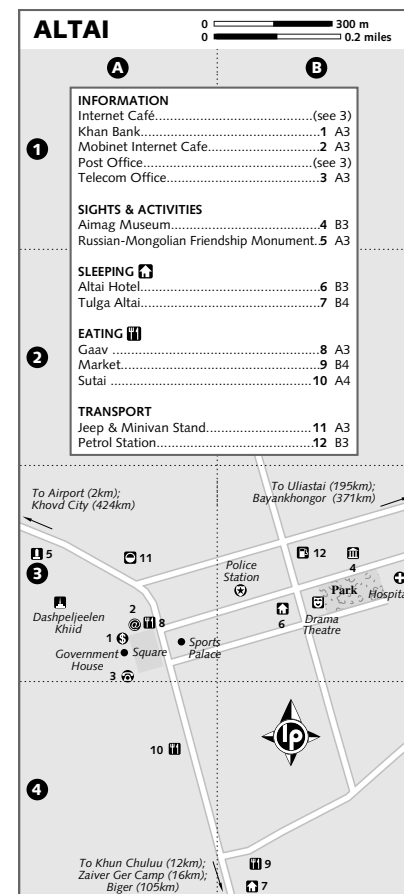
MIAT flies from Ulaanbaatar to Altai and back once a week for US\$132/232 one way/return. The airport and **reservation office** (☎ 23544, 9948 9665) are 2km northwest of the centre.

#### HITCHING

There is some traffic along the main road towards Khovd and Bayankhongor, but you may have to wait a few hours for something suitable. Very few vehicles travel between Altai and Uliastai; you will probably have to wait for something to arrive from Uliastai first. Almost no vehicles venture into the south of Gov-Altai.

#### MINIVAN & JEEP

Altai is a stop on the road to Khovd from UB and you'll find minivans departing every morning from Ulaanbaatar's Dragon



### SAVING THE SNOW LEOPARD

The mountains of Gov-Altai are home to the beautiful and elusive *irbis* (snow leopard). Up to 50kg in weight, and about 1m long (the tail is an extra 70cm), snow leopards can easily kill an ibex three times its size. They remain solitary except during the brief mating season.

An estimated 7500 snow leopards live in an area of 1.5 million sq km across China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Mongolia (where 1000 to 1500 live). The principal threats are poaching, habitat loss and wild-prey loss. Declining numbers of argali sheep and ibex have forced snow leopards to kill livestock, which has brought them into conflict with local herders.

It is hoped that the establishment of several national parks, education programmes and local income-generation projects can help save the snow leopard. Otherwise, the few pelts on display in local museums and the odd ger camp will be all that is left of this beautiful creature.

**Irbis** (www.irbis-enterprises.com) is a local organisation that protects snow leopards in Mongolia by providing alternative sources of income to herders in snow-leopard habitat. The company sells and markets locally made handicrafts, such as felt mats and camel and cashmere goods, with proceeds going jointly to producers and a conservation fund.

If you would like more information about the protection of the snow leopard, contact the **International Snow Leopard Trust** (in the USA ☎ 206-632-2421; www.snowleopard.org). In Ulaanbaatar contact **Mr Munkh-Tsog** (☎ 011-329 632; islmon@magicnet.mn).

and Naran Tuul stations (T35,000, 25 hours, 1000km).

Altai is not somewhere you should expect to find any reliable jeeps for hire. You are more likely to have success in Uliastai and Khovd city. Shared minivans for Ulaanbaatar and Khovd leave from the roadside near the monastery.

The best place to ask around for a share jeep is at the southern entrance to the market. Expect to pay around T15,000 to T20,000 for a ride to Khovd or Bayankhongor.

### BIGER

If you're travelling between Bayankhongor and Gov-Altai you'll likely pass through this small village, which has a few sights in the environs.

Around 13km northeast of Biger is the run-down **Shimt-els Sanatorium** (GPS: N 45°43.782', E 97°19.979'), where locals bury themselves in sand and drink camel milk in hopes of curing kidney ailments and high blood pressure. You can stay here in **cabins** (per person T4500) that resemble WWII POW bunkhouses but expect no privacy.

**Burgus** (GPS: N 45°38.362', E 97°24.480'), an attractive desert oasis, is located around 20km southwest of Biger. The oasis is famed for its production of wines and champagnes, as well as fruit and vegetables. You may be able to buy some of the wine in the *sum* centre.

Another worthwhile sight is the ruins of **Eguur Monastery** located 17km northwest of Biger, on the road to/from Altai. About a dozen destroyed buildings and foundations are scattered around this once active monastery.

## EEJ KHAIRKHAN UUL ЭЭЖ ХАЙРХАН УУЛ

Near the base of the Eej Khairkhan Uul (2275m), just north of 'Gobi A' National Park, you could camp at some delightful **rock pools** and explore the nearby **caves**. You will need a guide to show you around. Almost no suitable drinking water is available in the area, so take your own.

An A-frame hut is sometimes available for rent near the rock pools, but you should always bring your own camping equipment.

About 30 minutes' walk west of the hut are some spectacular ancient **rock paintings** of ibex, horsemen and archers.

The mountain is about 150km south of Altai, and is part of the Eej Khairkhan Nature Reserve.

## SUTAI UUL СУТАЙ УУЛ

A locally revered mountain, Sutai Uul (4090m) is a relatively easy climb that offers good views of the surrounding Gobi. You can drive to the base of the mountain from Tonkhil in Gov-Altai or Tsetseg village in Khovd. From

the base it's a two hour walk to the top, where you'll find permanent snow cover.

## GREAT GOBI STRICTLY PROTECTED AREA ГОВИЙН ИХ ДАРХАН ГАЗАР

For both parts of the park you will need a very reliable vehicle and an experienced driver, and you must be completely self-sufficient with supplies of food, water and camping gear. A ranger will probably track you down and collect park entry fees (T3000 per person).

### Gobi A (Southern Altai Gobi) ГОВЬ 'А'

The majority of this 4.4-million-hectare national park lies in the southern Gov-Altai. Established more than 25 years ago, the area has been nominated as an International Biosphere Reserve by the UN.

The park is remote and very difficult to reach, which is bad news for visitors but excellent news for the fragile flora and fauna.

There are a few mountains more than 1200m and several springs and oases, which only an experienced guide will find. To explore the park, start at Biger, turn southwest on the trail to Tsogt, and head south on any jeep trail you can find.

### Gobi B (Dzungarian Gobi) ГОВЬ 'Б'

Although the majority of this 881,000-hectare park lies in neighbouring Khovd aimag, most travellers enter from the Gov-Altai side, where a **research station** (GPS: N 45°32.197', E 93°39.055') has been set up to protect the reintroduced *takhi* (Przewalski's horse). Most of the *takhi* now run free, although a few still live in enclosures near the research station, which is about 15km southwest of Bij village. For more on *takhi*, see the boxed text, p116.

The scientists based here can provide information on tour options and the best places to camp. Besides *takhi*, you stand a good chance of seeing argali sheep, ibex and wild ass. The park also protects wild Bactrian camel and the elusive Gobi bear.

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