

Western Mongolia



With its raw deserts, glacier-wrapped mountains, shimmering salt lakes and hardy culture of nomads, falconry and cattle rustling, western Mongolia is a timeless place that fulfils many romantic notions of the classic 'Central Asia'.

Squeezed between Russia, Kazakhstan, China and the Mongol heartland, this region has been a historical transition zone of endless cultures, the legacy of which is a patchwork of peoples including ethnic Kazakhs, Dorvods, Khotons, Myangads and Khalkh Mongols.

The Mongol Altai Nuruu forms the backbone of the region, a rugged mountain range that creates a natural border with both Russia and China. It contains many challenging and popular peaks for mountain climbers, some over 4000m, and is the source of fast-flowing rivers, most of which empty into desert lakes and salt pans.

The region's wild landscape and unique mix of cultures is known among adventure travelers and a small tourist infrastructure has been created to support them. Bayan-Ölgii leads the pack with its own clique of tour operators and drivers prepared to shuttle visitors to the mountains. But while aimag capitals are tepidly entering the 21st century, most of the region remains stuck in another age – infrastructure is poor and old-style communist thinking is the norm among local officials.

Despite the hardships, western Mongolia's attractions, both natural and cultural, are well worth the effort. With time and flexibility, the region may well be the highlight of your trip.

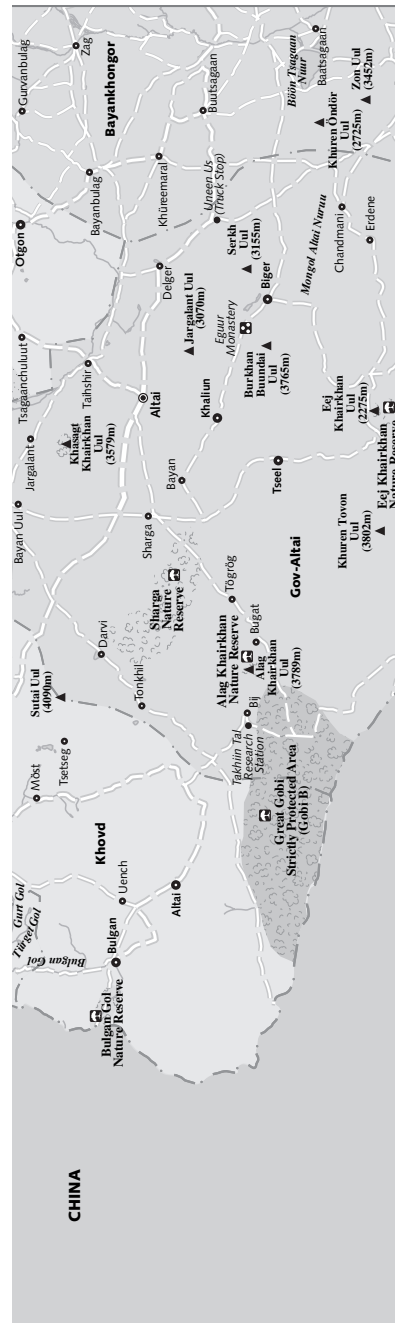
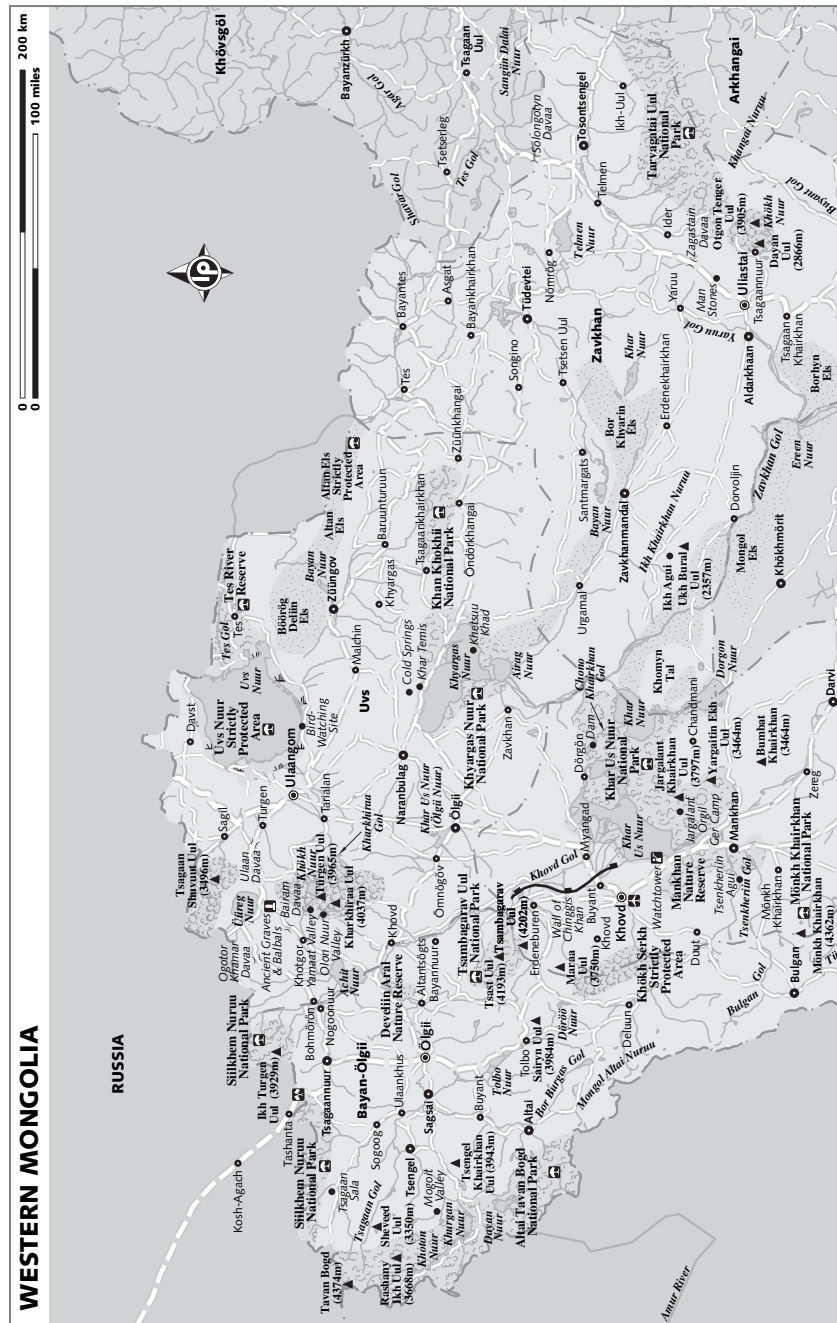
HIGHLIGHTS

- Trek to the twin peaks of **Türgen Uul** and **Kharkhiraa Uul** (p241), a rugged landscape of glaciers, green meadows and boulder fields in the shadow of snow-capped mountains
- Camp by the shores of **Üüreg Nuur** (p240), a lovely, accessible freshwater lake filled with fish
- Climb to the top of **Tavan Bogd** (p231), a mountain cluster that includes Mongolia's highest point at 4374m, soaring above the borders of Mongolia, China and Russia
- Walk around **Khoton Nuur** (p230), a beautiful alpine lake dotted with Kazakh settlements around its shore
- Horse trek around the lakes and valleys beneath **Otgon Tenger Uul** (p245), abode of the gods and Mongolia's holiest peak



■ POPULATION: 347,800

■ AREA: 191,000 SQ KM



History

The Mongol Altai Nuruu (commonly referred to as the 'Altai Mountains') once stood as the easternmost territory inhabited by the Scythians, a vast empire of nomadic pastoralists who dominated Central Asia from around 700 BC to AD 300 – some of their tombs and rock carvings have been located in Mongolia and neighbouring Tuva.

Prior to Mongol domination in the 13th century, western Mongolia was a stronghold of the Oirads, a warrior tribe that initially resisted the expansionary tactics of Chinggis Khan, but later submitted. Following the collapse of the Mongol empire, the Oirads reasserted their domination over the area and expanded to the Volga. These pioneers became known as Kalmyks and still inhabit the Caspian shores of Russia.

Manchu military outposts were created in Khovd city and Uliastai during the Qing dynasty. Both capitulated soon after the fall of the Manchu empire in 1911. The fighting was particularly bloody in Khovd, where a mystic Kalmyk named Dambijantsan (also known as Ja Lama) gathered an army of 5000 Oirads and Mongols, razed the fortress to the ground and skinned the Chinese soldiers inside.

Under Ulaanbaatar rule, western Mongolia was called Chandmandi until it was broken up into three aimags (provinces) in 1931. One of the three, Bayan-Ölgii, was designated as a homeland for ethnic Kazakhs living in the region.

Climate

Weather can be extremely temperamental in the Altai mountains. Brief snowstorms are common even in summer. These don't last long; usually within an hour the sun will be out again, but have a jacket ready. Summer is surprisingly cool in the Altai Mountains and you'll need a reliable, sub-zero rated sleeping bag and tent. The low-lying lakes and rivers of western Mongolia also attract some appalling packs of mosquitoes; arm yourself with serious bug repellent.

Language

In some parts of western Mongolia, especially Bayan-Ölgii, Kazakh is the dominant language. Other dialects are also spoken;

ICE WARRIOR OF THE ALTAI

In 2006, archaeologists in the Mongol Altai made headlines when they uncovered a 2500-year-old mummy believed to have been a Scythian warrior. The scientists noted that the mummy, well-preserved in the permafrost, had blonde hair and sported tattoos. He was believed to be a chieftain of some importance, between 30 and 40 years old. Clothed in a fur coat, he was entombed with two horses, saddles and weapons. Some of these treasures have been displayed in Ulaanbaatar's National History Museum while the mummy was packed off to Berlin for research.

the 1500 Tuvans in Tsengel *sum* (district; the administrative unit below an *aimag*) in Bayan-Ölgii have their own language. With the exception of small Kazakh children, most people will understand some Mongolian and possibly Russian.

Getting There & Away

Transport between western Mongolia and Ulaanbaatar is mainly by plane – so flights are often very full. Transport by land from Ulaanbaatar is a rough and tedious six days. The northern route via Arkhangai has several points of interest, but most share vehicles travel along the mind-numbingly dull southern route via Bayankhongor and Altai cities to Khovd city. The one-hour trip by air is well worth the money.

Though not a main traveller route yet, it is possible to enter or leave Mongolia at the Tsagaannuur border crossing (Bayan-Ölgii). With a bit of planning (you'll need a Russian visa; see p263) it's possible to tour the area and exit to Russia without hightailing it back to the capital. It may also be possible to fly between Khovd city and Urumqi in China; check with Air China for details.

Note that western Mongolia is in a different time zone from the rest of the country – one hour behind.

Getting Around

Hiring a jeep is relatively easy in any of the three western *aimag* capitals, and all three cities are linked by decent roads. You'll waste a lot of time if hitchhiking in the area; trucks will be most likely headed for the nearest

border post and jeeps will be packed full of people. Your best chance of finding a lift is to ask for a share jeep at the markets, or hire your own jeep at a cost of around T450 per kilometre. If sharing a jeep with locals you'll save the anguish of waiting for additional passengers by asking the driver to pick you up at your hotel when he is ready. If you are determined to hitch, bring water, food, a tent and plenty of patience. Travelling by mountain bike or horse is great if you have the time.

BAYAN-ÖLGII БАЯН-ӨЛГИЙ

pop 95,220 / area 46,000 sq km

Travelling to Mongolia's westernmost province gives one the distinct feeling of reaching the end of the road, if not the end of the earth. High, dry, rugged and raw, the isolated, oddly shaped province follows the arc of the Mongol Altai Nuruu as it rolls out of Central Asia towards the barren wastes of the Dzungarian Basin.

Many peaks in the province are more than 4000m and permanently covered with glaciers and snow, while the valleys have a few green pastures that support about two million livestock, as well as bear, fox and wolf. These valleys are dotted with small communities of nomadic families enjoying the short summer from mid-June to late August, as well as some beautiful alpine lakes.

Ethnic groups who call Bayan-Ölgii home include the Kazakh, Khalkh, Dorvod, Uriankhai, Tuva and Khoshuud. Unlike the rest of Mongolia, which is dominated by the Khalkh Mongols, about 90% of Bayan-Ölgii's population are Kazakh, almost all of them Muslim. The remaining 10% are mostly small minority groups.

The Kazakhs who live here hold little allegiance to Ulaanbaatar and increasingly find business, cultural and educational contacts in Russia, China and Kazakhstan. More than 10,000 people left for Kazakhstan in the 1990s, though some have returned.

The *aimag* has a rich collection of archaeological sites, with many *balbals* (Turkic stone figures believed to be grave makers), *bugan chuluu* (deer stones), *kurgans* (burial mounds) and a remarkable collection of 10,000 petroglyphs near the Russian border at Tsagaan Sala (also known as Baga

Oigor). If you are particularly interested in these remote and obscure sites, contact the Mongol Altai Nuruu Special Protected Areas Administration (Manspaa) in Ölgii (see p224).

National Parks

Most parks come under the jurisdiction of Manspaa.

Altai Tavan Bogd National Park (636,161 hectares)

Takes in Tavan Bogd, which includes Mongolia's highest mountain, and the stunning lakes of Khoton, Khurgan and Dayan. Fauna includes argali sheep, ibex, maral (Asiatic red deer), stone marten, deer, elk, Altai snowcock and eagle.

Develiin Aral Nature Reserve (10,300 hectares) A remarkable habitat around Develiin Island in the Usan Khooloi and Khovd rivers. It is home to pheasant, boar and beaver.

Khökh Serkh Strictly Protected Area (65,920 hectares) A mountainous area on the border with Khovd, which protects argali sheep and ibex.

Siikhem Nuruu National Park (140,080 hectares)

This park has two sections, one around Ikh Türgen Uul, the other further west.

Tsambagarav Uul National Park (110,960 hectares) Protects glaciers and the snow-leopard habitat; borders on Khovd.

ÖLGII ӨЛГИЙ

☎ 01422 / pop 27,800 / elev 1710m

Ölgii city is a windblown frontier town that will appeal to anyone who dreams of the Wild West. It's a squat, concrete affair, meandering along the Khovd Gol and surrounded by ger districts and rocky escarpments. Thunderclouds brew in the mountains above town, making for some dramatic climatic changes throughout the day and brilliant light shows in the late afternoon.

The town is predominantly Kazakh, and you'll soon start feeling it has more in common with Muslim-influenced Central

KAZAKHS

Ask anyone in Kazakhstan the best place to find genuine Kazakh culture and they will most likely point to that small plot of land not in their own country but in western Mongolia. Bayan-Ölgii, thanks to its isolation for most of the 20th century, is considered by many to be the last bastion of traditional Kazakh language, sport and culture.

Kazakhs first migrated to this side of the Altai in the 1840s to graze their sheep on the high mountain pastures during summer. They then returned to Kazakhstan or Xinjiang for the winter. After the Mongolian Revolution in 1921, a permanent border was drawn by agreement between China, the USSR and Mongolia.

The word 'Kazakh' is said to mean 'free warrior' or 'steppe roamer'. Kazakhs trace their roots to the 15th century, when rebellious kinsmen of an Uzbek khan (king or chief) broke away, and settled in present-day Kazakhstan.

Traditional costume for Kazakh women is a long dress with stand-up collar, or a brightly decorated velvet waistcoat with heavy jewellery. Older married women often wear a white headscarf. The men still wear baggy shirts and trousers, vests, long black cloaks and a skullcap or a *loovuuz* (fox-fur hat).

In many gers you'll be serenaded by women and men (and often children) who play the *dombra*, a two-stringed lute. Kazakh gers (traditional circular felt yurts) are taller, wider and more richly decorated than the Mongolian version. *Tush* (wall hangings) and *koshma* (felt carpets), decorated with stylised animal motifs, are common. *Chiy* (traditional reed screens) are becoming less common.

Kazakhs adhere rather loosely to Sunni Islam, but religion is not a major force. This is because of their distance from the centre of Islam, their nomadic lifestyle and the suppression of Islam during the communist era. Islam is making a comeback in Bayan-Ölgii, thanks to the lifting of restrictions against religion, aid packages from other Muslim countries, the construction of mosques and the annual hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Islamic law has always sat lightly with the many Kazakhs, however, who enjoy a bottle of vodka as much as the next Mongolian. The main Kazakh holiday is the pre-Islamic spring festival of Navrus, celebrated on 21 March.

Kazakhs speak a Turkic language with 42 Cyrillic letters, similar to Russian and a little different from Mongolian. The Mongolian government is trying to placate the Kazakh minority and stop them returning to Kazakhstan, by encouraging the Kazakh language in schools in Bayan-Ölgii.

Asia than Buddhist Mongolia: there are signs in Arabic and Kazakh Cyrillic, and the market, which is called a bazaar rather than the Mongolian *zakh*, sells the odd shashlik (kebab) and is stocked with goods from Kazakhstan.

A friendly local population makes the place a welcome break on a long road journey and the logical place to launch an expedition into the Altai mountains. It's not the most beautiful city around, but give it a day or two and Ölgii really starts to grow on you. There are reliable tour operators based here, surprisingly good restaurants and some excellent handicraft cooperatives selling high-quality carpets and wall hangings.

Information

Bathhouse (☎ 22442; per person T1000; 🕒 9am-10pm) Hot-water showers, sauna and barbershops. *Monsha* is 'hot water' in the local Kazakh dialect.

Immigration, Naturalization & Foreign Citizens office (INFC; ☎ 22195, 9942 8283; Government House; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Can register your passport if you have just arrived from Russia. In a pinch they can give a visa extension, which basically involves sending your passport to Ulaanbaatar.

Jarag Internet Café (☎ 23732; per hr T600; 🕒 9am-10pm) Good computers and a decent connection. One of the girls that hangs around here speaks Hebrew and likes to chat up the Israeli tourists. The Telecom office also has an internet café, but its connection is slower.

Khadgalamj Bank (☎ 22978; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Changes US dollars and euros. Gives cash advances against Visa. Private moneychangers can also be found in the market.

Mongol Altai Nuruu Protected Areas Administration office (Manspaa; ☎ 22111, 9942 9696; manspaa@mongo.net; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, weekends by calling mobile) The office doubles as an information centre, with informed English-speaking staff plus photos, maps and reading material. The office can help with your border permit, sell national park tickets, provide itineraries for your trip and recommend drivers and guides.

Mongol Shuudan Bank (☎ 22462; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Changes money and offers cash advances against Visa.

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

Sights

The **Aimag Museum** (admission T3000; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) gives an excellent overview of Kazakh culture and the geography of Bayan-Ölgii. The 2nd floor is devoted to

history, and the 3rd floor has some interesting ethnographic displays.

Ölgii's **mosque** and madrasah (Islamic place of learning) is worth a quick look, especially on Friday at lunchtime when weekly prayers are held, though you may not be allowed inside. The mosque holds the offices of the Islamic Centre of Mongolia. Its unusual angle is due to its orientation to Mecca.

Courses

Mr Cheryzdan (☎ 23358, 9942 5202) A music instructor at the Teachers College, gives *dombra* (two-stringed lute) lessons for a negotiated fee. The college is east of downtown, near the Khovd Gol.

Ms Zoya (☎ 9942 3575) A local teacher who can provide Kazakh language lessons. Fees are negotiable.

Tours

When booking a tour with one of the following outfits, try to get the owner to serve as your guide. If the owner is too busy you may get stuck with inexperienced guides and drivers.

Bayan-Auul Tour (☎ 9942 9935; ba-tours@chinggis.com) Offers trips to all areas of Bayan-Ölgii. There is no office; contact Bolatbek by email or phone.

Blue Wolf Travel (☎ 22772, 9665 2637, 9911 0303; www.bluewolftravel.com) Offers a variety of trips including winter eagle-hunting tours. The Ölgii office is about 400m south of the ochre-coloured Kazakh National Theatre.

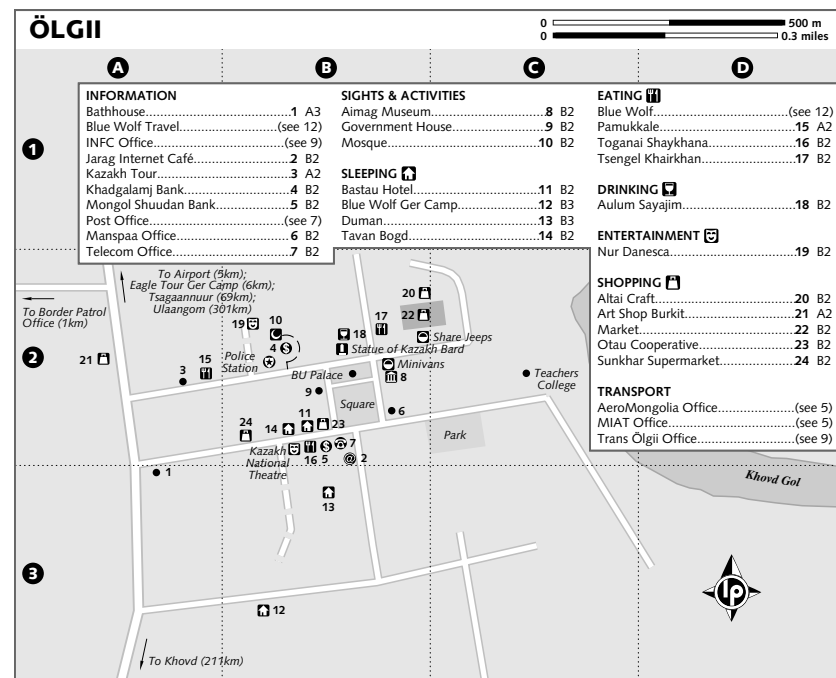
Kazakh Tour (☎ 9942 2006; dosjan@yahoo.com) Friendly guide and owner Dosjan Khabyul has tailor-made trips throughout Bayan-Ölgii and leads trekking tours around Tavan Bogd. He speaks English, Mongolian, Russian and Kazakh, and gets good reviews from travellers. The Ölgii office is next to Pamukkale restaurant.

Sleeping

CAMPING
If you want to camp, walk east of the square to Khovd Gol and then head southeast, away from the market and ger suburbs.

GER CAMPS

ourpick Blue Wolf (☎ 9911 0303, 9665 2637; www.bluewolftravel.com; per person T5000; 🏠) Offers gers, flush toilets and a hot-shower block in a secure walled compound. It's located behind the Blue Wolf café and tour office. It also has a ger camp at Sagsai, charging US\$27 per night including meals.



Eagle Tour (☎ 9942 2100; eagle_tour@mongol.net; with/without meals US\$30/15) Located 6km out of Ölgii in the direction of Sagsai, Eagle Tour has gers, flush toilets and hot showers.

KTS (☎ 9942 2006; dosjan@yahoo.com) This camp was just getting underway at the time of research, contact them for details. It's affiliated with Kazakh Tour.

HOTELS

Hotels in Ölgii want to keep your passport for the duration of your stay. It is much better to give a photocopy of your passport – there is less to worry about if you forget to pick it up when checking out.

Duman (☎ 9942 8174; s/d/half-lux T5000/10,000/12,000, lux T15,000-17,000) This place has good-looking rooms and the reasonably priced lux options have TV, comfy beds and 24-hour hot-water showers. The only problem is the noisy disco downstairs.

Bastau Hotel (☎ 23629; s/d/tr T5000/7000/10,500, half-lux s/d/tr T10,000/12,000/15,000, lux s/d/tr T14,000/18,000) This welcoming hotel has a variety of rooms including a handy three-bed dorm with two

couches and a TV. The lux room includes a cosy living room and attached bathroom. Other rooms use a share bathroom with luke-warm shower.

Tavan Bogd Hotel (☎ 23046, 9942 8877; dm/s/d US\$4/6/12, half-lux s/d US\$10/20, lux s/d US\$12/24) This is the oldest hotel in town, a communist relic that has seen gradual renovations over the years, including a new restaurant. It is a little better than the Bastau Hotel, as the 2nd-floor rooms come with attached bathroom.

Eating

If you give some advance warning, one of the following restaurants should be able to prepare *besbarmak* (literally 'five fingers'), a traditional Kazakh dish of meat-and-pasta squares. Note that the Kazakh phrase for vegetarian is '*Min ate jimmi min*'.

Togantai Shaykhkhana (🕒 11am-7pm) Opposite the Bastau Hotel, this tiny café serves excellent *buuz* (steamed mutton dumplings; T70) and greasy *khuushuur* (fried mutton pancakes; T150) served with a delicious *khaluun nogoo* (chilli sauce).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS IN BAYAN-ÖLGII

Bayan-Ölgii has several festivals that are worth planning your trip around.

The biggest and best is the annual **Eagle Festival** (admission US\$20), held on the first Sunday and Monday in October in Ölgii city. This is a good time to shop for arts and crafts and watch eagle-hunting competitions (though animal lovers may find it somewhat cruel as live foxes and wolves are used as bait). Contact Nomadic Expeditions (p81) for details. A smaller Eagle Festival is held two days earlier in Sagsai *sum*; contact Blue Wolf Travel (p224).

On 28 July a **Horse Festival** (admission US\$30) is held between the two lakes in Tavan Bogd National Park. You'll see horse races, *kokpar* (tug of war with a goat) and *kyz kul* (kiss the girl). Blue Wolf Tours is also the contact point for this one.

The spring festival and family event of **Navrus** is held on 22 March. Family visits and feasting are common. During this festival you may see traditional games and contests, including one that sees men attempting to lift an ox off the ground. In another game, horse riders attempt to pluck a coin from the ground while in full gallop. You can see this in most Kazakh villages.

Tsengel Khairkhan (meals T1000-2000; ☎ 11am-7pm) Mongol-run restaurant with reasonable local fare and salads to accommodate vegetarians.

Blue Wolf (☎ 9911 0303; dishes T1500-2500; ☎ 9am-10pm) Run by the folks at Blue Wolf Tours, this café is in a bright room, its walls decorated with dramatic photos of eagle-hunters and the Altai Mountains. The menu includes delights such as American breakfast (eggs, sausage and bread) and Kazakh breakfast (sausage and apple). Vegetarians will appreciate some of the salads. The taco salad isn't particularly Mexican but does taste good. Kazakh crafts are also sold here.

our pick Pamukkale (☎ 9909 4593; meals T2500-7500; ☎ 10.30am-10.30pm 15 Jun-15 Sep, 9.30am-9.30pm rest of the year) A welcome addition to the local restaurant scene, Pamukkale is a Turkish-run outfit that serves authentic kebabs and Turkish soups. Unfortunately the doner plate is never available (the locals don't like it) but you may be able to score a tasty chicken dish. The Turkish desserts are also excellent but portions are minuscule so you may need to order a few to satisfy your sweet tooth.

Drinking & Entertainment

Nur Danesca (☎ 23720; admission T300; ☎ 6pm-1am) Popular with the local teen set, this modern disco club is behind the mosque. (The over-18 crowd tends to patronise the disco in the Duman Hotel.)

For a beer in a quieter atmosphere, try the **Aulum Sayajim beer garden** (☎ 23983, 9942 9094; admission T100; ☎ noon-11pm), near the police station. The walled compound contains several cabanas and a tent. On Fridays, the beer is

covered with towels so as not to offend the local Muslim population, but they will still sneak you a bottle. The gers nearby are actually for rent, but would you really want to sleep in a beer garden?

Shopping

The **market** (☎ 10am-5pm) has a decent selection of food supplies imported from Russia and China. Traditional Kazakh skullcaps and jackets can also be found amid the chaos. How and why the shopkeepers have 'Boots' plastic bags is a mystery to us. There's a small charge to get into the enclosed part of the market where all the food is. A more convenient place to pick up food and supplies is the **Sunkhar Supermarket** (☎ 9am-7pm), just west of the Tavan Bogd Hotel.

CRAFTS & SOUVENIRS

If you are on the hunt for Kazakh wall hangings and felt rugs, check out the gift shop in the Aimag Museum. It has antiques and new items including fox fur hats (US\$70), wall hangings (US\$70) and felt mats (US\$40).

Altai Craft (☎ 9941 8119, 9142 2279; www.altai.craft.com; ☎ 1pm-5pm) This project employs 40 women to create traditional Kazakh handicrafts. You can visit the workshop, watch how the products are made and even take a free one-hour lesson in chain-stitch embroidery. Items available include chalk bags, yoga mats, bike bags, cushion covers and wall hangings. A book exchange is also available. The workshop is behind the market and a little hard to find so you may want to call ahead.

Art Shop Burkit (☎ 9942 9906; narbek2001@yahoo.com; ☎ 10am-7pm) Local craftsman Narbek

Khasim is a silversmith by trade but has recently entered the eagle-hunting accessory market, producing gauntlets, eagle hoods, belts and leather goods. He speaks English and is also a two-time tae kwon do national champion (of Kazakhstan) – one of Ölgii's more interesting characters.

Otau Cooperative (☎ 9942 9787; ☎ 9am-9pm) Sells Kazakh handbags (T6000 to T10,000), felt mats (T10,000 to T15,000) hats (T7000) and other handicrafts made by around 30 local women. It's next to the Bastau Hotel.

Getting There & Away

AIR

AeroMongolia and MIAT (Mongolian Airlines) share the Ulaanbaatar-Ölgii route. Schedules are erratic so you'll need to call and find out who is flying. There are currently two flights a week. AeroMongolia charges US\$200/353 one way/return while MIAT charges US\$161/281 one way/return. The four-hour flight provides breathtaking views of glacier-wrapped peaks as you approach Ölgii.

Both **AeroMongolia** (☎ 9942 5081) and **MIAT** (☎ 9942 8161) share an office in the Mongol Shuudan Bank, next to the post office. A smaller office opens at the airport on the mornings when a flight arrives.

The airport is 6km north of the centre, on the opposite side of the river. There is no bus, but it's usually possible to hitch a ride in a truck or on the back of a motorcycle.

To Kazakhstan

Twice a week, Trans Ölgii flies between Almaty and Ölgii via Üst Kamenogorsk in eastern Kazakhstan. This flight (US\$112 to Üst Kamenogorsk or US\$259 to Almaty, plus T5500 tax) is a little unreliable and you can only buy a ticket in Ölgii, which means there is no guarantee you'll get on the next flight. If you want to buy a ticket in advance, inquire with tour operators in Ölgii. The **ticket agent** (☎ 9942 8161, 318 000) is in the Government House. You may also want to inquire about the latest details with tour operators in Almaty and Üst Kamenogorsk (see Lonely Planet's *Central Asia* for details).

If at all possible, don't try to change the date of your ticket, as this always leads to ticketing problems and your new ticket may be invalid. Flights are always crowded and you may be asked to pay a dubious health tax

(just ignore it). Customs for this flight are done in Almaty.

HITCHING

A few vehicles, most of which are petrol tankers, travel the road between Ölgii and Khovd city. The Ölgii-Ulaangom road is not as busy because most vehicles head east towards Ulaanbaatar and use the southern road via Khovd city. Most vehicles travelling between Ölgii and Ulaangom bypass Tsagaannuur and take the short cut via Achit Nuur.

A lot of Russian trucks hang around the market, waiting for cargo to take to Russia via Tsagaannuur. There is also quite a lot of traffic, with jeeps being driven from Russia and sold locally.

MINIVAN & JEEP

Public share jeeps to Khovd city (T11,000, six to seven hours, 211km), Ulaangom (T10,000, 10 hours, 300km) and Tsengel *sum* (T8000, three hours, 75km) leave from Ölgii market. Drivers may try to charge foreigners double here, so check to see what others are paying.

For Ulaanbaatar (T60,000, 60 hours, 1636km), vans assemble at the road next to the museum.

Many travellers looking to hire a private jeep for trips around the aimag turn to local travel agents. Be careful about who you hire as some local tour operators are quite satisfied with sending out poor-quality vehicles. **Kazakh Tour** (see p224) has a good reputation for hiring out jeeps. Another decent driver in Ölgii is named Bekbolat (beku800@yahoo.com).

Hiring a random driver at the Ölgii market is not a good idea – these drivers are not accountable to anyone and are known to change prices and itineraries midtrip; it's simply not worth trying to save a few tögrögs. The Manspaa office will have a list of recommended drivers who are more familiar with tourists' needs.

To/From Russia

There is no public transport across the Tsagaannuur-Tashanta border; however, trade across the border is brisk so if you ask around the market in Ölgii you should be able to negotiate a ride all the way to the Russian town of Kosh-Agach (68km from the border). There isn't much point in getting a ride just to Tsagaannuur as most cars drive right past

on their way to the border. It also doesn't help to get a ride just to the border as the no-man's land is several kilometres wide.

It's a similar scenario going the other way; you are best off getting a ride all the way to Ölgii from Kosh-Agach as there is nothing at the border itself. Kazakh and Mongol traders at the market in Kosh-Agach are your best hope for a ride.

TSAMBAGARAV UUL NATIONAL PARK ЦАМБАГАРАВ УУЛ

The permanently snow-capped **Tsambagarav Uul** straddles the border between Khovd and Bayan-Ölgii aimgags and is accessible from either side. Despite its altitude of 4208m, the summit is relatively accessible and easy to climb compared with Tavan Bogd, but you'll need crampons and ropes. A neighbouring peak, **Tsast Uul**, is slightly shorter at 4193m and also good for climbing.

The southern side of the mountain (near the main Khovd-Ölgii road) contains the **Namarjin valley**, where there are outstanding views of Tsambagarav. From here you can head west and then south to rejoin the main Khovd-Ölgii road, via several **Kazakh settlements** and a beautiful **turquoise lake**.

An alternative route from the Khovd side leads from the town of **Erdeneburen** (where you can see a deer stone dating back to the pre-Mongol era) and up the mountainside to the Bayangol Valley. The valley itself is nothing special but there are fine views southeast to Khar Us Nuur and you might be able to rent a horse for the hour-long ride to the Kazakh-populated **Marra valley**.

The Bayan-Ölgii (northern) side of the mountain is even more impressive. To reach the massif, a steep pass runs between Tavan Belchiriin Uul and Tsast Uul. Between the mountains is a 7m-high **waterfall** (GPS: N 48°44.741', E 090°42.378') that flows down a narrow gorge. A couple of kilometres to the east of the waterfall is a **glacier** and small glacial lake. Serious mountaineers can hike up the glacier to the peak.

From the glacier, the road dips through some spectacular **rocky gorges** before finally tumbling down to **Bayan Nuur**, a small, slightly salty lake.

The best time to visit the massif is late June to late August, when it's populated by Kazakh nomad camps. You can rent horses from the nomads to explore the area.

Outside of these months it's a cold, empty and forbidding place.

From Bayan Nuur, a desert road travels east through a Martian landscape of red boulders and rocky mountains. Near the town of Bayannuur and close to the Khovd Gol is an interesting white-stone **balbal** (Turkic stone statue; GPS: N 48°50.533', E 091°16.525').

To explore the area, you'll definitely need a driver who knows the region well. Contact one of the tour operators in Ölgii (p224) or Marka's Ger Camp in Khovd (p234) to arrange a trip. The area lies in a national park zone so expect standard park entry fees to apply.

TOLBO NUUR ТОЛБО НУУР

Tolbo Nuur (GPS: N 48°35.320', E 090°04.536') is about 50km south of Ölgii, on the main road between Ölgii and Khovd city, so it's an easy day trip or stopover. The freshwater lake is high (2080m), expansive and eerie but the shoreline is treeless and there are a few mosquitoes (camp away from the marshy shoreline). There are a few gers around the lake, and the water is clean enough for swimming if you don't mind icy temperatures.

A major battle was fought here between the Bolsheviks and White Russians, with the local Mongolian general, Khasbaatar, siding with the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks won and there are a couple of memorial plaques by the lake.

TOLBO TO BULGAN

The southern road through the spine of the Mongol Altai Nuruu, one of the most remote roads in the country, is the back door into Khovd aimgag. From Tolbo *sum* centre, which has an interesting mosque, it's an easy detour to Döröö Nuur and nearby **Sairyn Uul**, an increasingly popular place for horse trekking.

The next *sum* south of Tolbo is **Deluun**, famed for its eagle-hunters and the starting point for a horse trek through the **Khökh Serkh Strictly Protected Area** to Khovd city. Further south, the road winds through the spectacular canyon lands of Bulgan *sum*, on the western flank of 4362m Mönkh Khaikhan Uul. From here it's a very rough six-hour drive through the **Bulgan Gol gorge**, which is navigable by kayak at the end of June if you can stand the mosquitoes and happen to have a kayak. Other navigable

EAGLE-HUNTERS

While travelling around Bayan-Ölgii, you may come across Kazakh eagle-hunters. If you ask gently, the Kazakhs may proudly show you their birds, though actual hunting only takes place in winter.

Eagle-hunting is a Kazakh tradition dating back about 2000 years (Marco Polo mentions it in his *Travels*). Female eagles are almost always used as they are one-third heavier than the males and far more aggressive. Young birds around two years' old are caught in nearby valleys and then 'broken' by being tied to a wooden block so that they fall when they try to fly away. After two days they are exhausted and ready for training, which involves being kept on a pole called a *tugir*, and catching small animal skins or lures called *shirga*. The eagles are trained to hunt marmots, small foxes and wolves (eagles have vision eight times more acute than humans), and release them to the hunter, who clubs the prey to death. Part of the meat is given to the eagles as a reward.

Tools of the trade include the *tomaga* (hood), *bialai* (gloves) and *khundag* (blanket to keep the bird warm). If well trained, a bird can live and hunt for about 30 years. Most hunters train several birds in their lifetime. When a bird dies, it is buried in the ground as if it were part of the family.

The most likely places to find a Kazakh eagle-hunter are in the mountain region of Tsast Uul between Khovd and Bayan-Ölgii, and the Deluun, Tsengel and Bayannuur regions of Bayan-Ölgii. For an up-close-and-personal look at the sport, try the Eagle Festival (p226).

rivers in the area include the Gurt and Türgen rivers.

Confusingly, the road comes out of the gorge at Bulgan *sum* in Khovd aimgag. The mosquito-infested Mongolian-Chinese border post sees many petrol tankers but is closed to foreign travellers.

A locally run **ger camp** (bed with meals US\$25) in Bulgan can organise horse trips in the area; contact **Jagaa** (jagaa3538ube@yahoo.com).

SOGOOG СОГООГ

This miniscule village (pop 1200), a 1½-hour drive northwest from Ölgii (or 20-minute drive past Ulaankhusu), is a good place to stop en route to Tavan Bogd. The village recently opened a **handicraft cooperative** and a **kinder-garten**, both of which are open to visitors. The cooperative welcomes volunteer English teachers, who are given free lodging for a few days or weeks. While in town you can learn to make yak yogurt, comb cashmere from goats or learn Kazakh embroidery.

At the cooperative you can get fresh coffee, espresso and pancakes, and if you give advance notice the locals can bake cookies and apple tart! 'Advance notice' is two or three days and the village has no phone so you'll need to contact **Barb** (☎ 9979 6838; barbmongolia@yahoo.com), the English-speaking contact who can forward information to the village. Once in town, ask for Kakila or Baatarjav.

For transport to Sogoog you can ask around the market in Ölgii or hire your own vehicle at a cost of T450 per kilometre. Another option is to contact a local named **Amaka** (☎ 9942 5205) who has contacts with Sogoog drivers.

ALTAI TAVAN BOGD NATIONAL PARK АЛТАЙ ТАВАН БОГД

This beautiful park stretches south from Tavan Bogd and includes the **stunning lakes** of Khoton Nuur and Khurgan Nuur (and the less interesting Dayan Nuur). It's a remote area divided from China by a high wall of snow-capped peaks and known to local Kazakhs as the Syrgali region.

The three lakes are the source of the Khovd Gol, which eventually flows into Khar Us Nuur in Khovd aimgag. It's possible to make **rafting trips** down river from Khoton Nuur. No agencies offer rafting trips at present, but you could check with the Protected Areas office.

Tsengel, Mongolia's westernmost town, is the jumping-off point for the southern part of the park. It occupies a nice setting amid the mountains and there is good camping away from town, by the river. There are a couple of *guanz* (canteens or cheap restaurants) and a small market, but no hotel. Hiring a jeep could be difficult; you are better off bringing one from Ölgii. The Tavan Bogd area is best reached via Ulaankhusu (see p231).

Permits

Park entry fees are the standard T3000 per person. Fishing permits cost T500 per day, but fishing is not permitted between 15 May and 15 July (there is a US\$50 fine). The main entry to the park is by the bridge over the Khovd Gol, south of Tsengel. You can pay for permits there, or at the Manspaa office in Ölgii (p224) or from rangers around the lake. It's best to get one from the office in Ölgii if you can as rangers in the park can be hard to find. If you go into the park without a permit the border police will give you trouble.

You definitely need a border permit as well. It's best to get one in Ulaanbaatar but, failing that, try the **Border Patrol office** (Khiliin Tserenk Alb; ☎ 22341; 🕒 8-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) in Ölgii, located a couple of kilometres from the centre. The permit will be checked by the border guards at Dayan Nuur, Tavan Bogd base camp, Aral Tolgoi (western end of Khoton Nuur) and Syrgal (the point where Khoton Nuur meets Khurgan Nuur). If you don't have a permit you will be fined about US\$100 and given 72 hours to leave the area. The soldiers have nothing to do with the national park and cannot be negotiated with. Note that your guide and driver will need their Mongolian passports.

At the time of research border permits were free, but this may change. Processing the permit takes between 10 minutes and an hour. You must bring your original passport (no photocopies accepted) and be prepared to describe your itinerary. Also note that you cannot get a border permit on your own; you need to be with a guide or local affiliate.

Sights

There are many archaeological sites in the region. Mogoi Valley (Snake Valley) contains a moustachioed **balbal** (GPS: N 48°44.099', E 88°38.930') and a Kazakh cemetery with an interesting beehive-shaped mausoleum about 2km to the north. Yet another **balbal** (GPS: N 48°39.506', E 88°37.863') can be found south of Mogoi Valley, on the way to Khurgan Nuur. More interesting Kazakh cemeteries and ancient burial mounds are easily spotted from the road. Closer to Tavan Bogd, Sheveed Uul (3350m) contains some fascinating **petroglyphs** (GPS: N 49°06.238', E 88°14.918') depicting wild animals and hunting scenes. Keep your eyes peeled (and binoculars ready) for ibex which inhabit the mountain above.

The best **petroglyphs** in the area, if not all of Central Asia, can be found at Tsagaan Sala (aka Baga Oigor), on the route between Ulaankhus and Tavan Bogd. The drawings, more than 10,000 of them, are scattered over a 15km area; you'll need a guide to find the best ones.

THE LAKE REGION

This is one of the most beautiful regions in the park, with the scenery growing more spectacular the further west you travel. The area is best explored on foot or horseback. Kazakh families living around Khoton Nuur in summer can rent horses.

The shoreline of **Khurgan Nuur** is dry and exposed. Few people travel along its southern shore but if you are going this way there is a stupa-like construction and several burial sites. Nearby is a **balbal** (GPS: N 48°32.006', E 88°28.549').

The northern shore along **Khoton Nuur** has excellent camping spots, especially around **Ulaan Tolgoi** (Red Head), the spit of land that juts majestically into the lake. The northern tip of the lake is marked by **Aral Tolgoi** (Island Head), a unique hill surrounded by verdant pastureland and rocky escarpments. A border station at the northern end of the lake will check to see if your border permit is in order.

Coming around the southern shore of Khoton Nuur, you can camp in secluded coves or explore the valleys that lead towards China. There are some difficult river crossings on your way back to Syrgal.

About 25km northwest of Khoton Nuur you can also visit Rashany Ikh Uul, an area of 35 **hot springs** (GPS: N 48°55.655', E 88°14.288'). The springs (which are really just luke-warm) are facilitated by **Aksu Rashan Suvlal** (☎ 9942 2979; per person with breakfast US\$10), a small ger camp run by a local entrepreneur. The springs are around 33°C to 36°C and cost US\$5 to enter.

Northwest of Khoton Nuur the mountains close in and there's some fine **hiking** possibilities. For experienced backcountry walkers, it is even possible to travel up river for 90km all the way to Tavan Bogd. It is a five-day walk and you'll need to be completely self-sufficient. Be prepared for border-permit checks en route. It's usually not possible to cross until early July because of deep snows on the highest pass (Dakilbay Davaa).

Note that Khar Tsalaagiin Gol is in a restricted border area and should be avoided;

make sure you are walking up the next valley, **Tsagaan Us Gol Valley** (good maps are essential).

TAVAN BOGD TABAH БОГД

Tavan Bogd (Five Saints) is a soaring cluster of mountains that straddles the border between Mongolia, Russia and China. The highest peak in the range, **Khuiten Uul** (Cold Peak; 4374m), is the tallest mountain in Mongolia and is of interest to professional climbers. It's fairly dangerous to climb: you need to be with an experienced group, properly equipped with ice axes, crampons and ropes; don't even consider attempting it solo. The best time to climb is August and September, after the worst of the summer rains.

Besides Khuiten, the range includes Naran (Sun), Ölgii (Land), Bürged (Eagle) and Nairamdal (Friendship) *uuls*. In 2006 the president of Mongolia climbed Khuiten and renamed it Ikh Mongol; however, no-one seems to use this name and it's not included on new maps, so for now we'll stick with Khuiten.

Even if you are not a climber, it's worth trekking up to the Khuiten Uul **base camp** (elev 3092m; GPS: N 49°09.036', E 87°56.528'), where you can get stunning views of all the peaks as well as the 12km-long **Potanii glacier**, which tumbles out of the range. It's possible to walk onto the glacier but be careful of deep snows and crevasses. If you're not too exhausted already, head to the top of **Malchin Peak**. The three-hour walk is rewarded with views of Russia and the surrounding mountains.

Note that there are two trails to the base camp. One starts from the end of the road in Tsagaan Gol Valley. From here it's a 14km trek to the base camp. The trailhead has a ranger station and a place to camp. Across the river are some gers occupied by an extended family of Tuvans. They can rent horses (T5000) and one of the younger family members can guide you up to the base camp (for around T4000). From here, the shortest route is via the Tarmid Pass. It takes about three hours by horse or four to five hours on foot. To return from the base camp, follow the Tsagaan Gol back to the trailhead. The route is a little longer but offers better views.

The other trail to base camp begins in the Sogoog Gol valley (north of Tsagaan Gol); from here it's 17km to the base camp. This trailhead also has a ranger station. You will

need border permits to visit the mountain and will have to pay national park fees.

Sleeping & Eating

There is no official accommodation in the park (the aforementioned Aksu Rashan Suvlal has no permit to operate and may be shut down by the time you arrive), so you'll need to camp and be completely self-sufficient. The best camping spots are around the lakes. Dayan Nuur has some nasty mosquitoes but the other two lakes are largely bug free. The lakes teem with fish. Tavan Bogd also has camping spots but it's always cold here. At **Syrgal** (GPS: N 48°36.004', E 88°26.672'), between the lakes, there are a couple of very basic shops selling sweets, vodka, water and little else.

Getting There & Away

The main road from Tsengel leads 38km south to the bridge over the Khovd Gol (there's a T400 toll) and then continues 33km to the junction of Khoton and Khurgan *nuurs*, where there is a bridge across the wide water channel between the two lakes.

A more scenic route takes you from Sagsai over a pass and up the beautiful Khargantin Gol valley, past Tsengel Khaikhan Uul and Khar Nuur, and then down to Dayan Nuur. A good option would be to enter the park this way and exit via the main road. It's possible to drive from Dayan Nuur to Buyant by jeep, but you'll need an experienced driver who knows the way.

Getting to Tavan Bogd can be tricky. On the map the shortest route looks to be via Tsengel and up the Tsagaan Gol. From Tsengel, head across the river and travel 110km to the end of the road. There is no bridge across the Khovd Gol, however, so after heavy rain it's difficult to cross. The alternative route from Khovd is via Ulaankhus and up the Sogoog Gol. You can continue straight to Tavan Bogd but it's more interesting to go over Hagiin Davaa (Hagiin Pass) which leads to Tsagaan Gol. From Ölgii city to the end of the road is 190km.

KHOVD ХОВД

pop 92,400 / area 76,000 sq km

Khovd aimag has long been a centre for trade, business and administration in western Mongolia, a status that began during the Qing dynasty when the Manchus built a military garrison here. The aimag still does

robust trade with China through the border at Bulgan and its Agricultural University is the largest of its kind outside Ulaanbaatar. The province is set to become a major producer of energy, once the hydro-electric power plant on the Chono-Khairaikh Gol is complete.

Besides its developing economy, Khovd is notable for being one of the most heterogeneous aimags in Mongolia, with a Khalkh majority and minorities of Khoton, Kazakh, Uriankhai, Zakhchin, Myangad, Oold and Torguud peoples. Its terrain is equally varied, with large salt lakes, fast-flowing rivers and the Mongol Altai Nuruu almost bisecting the aimag.

Khovd is a character-filled place; you could spend a day with Kazakh carpet makers in Khovd city, learn throat singing from the old masters in Chandmani or hang out with an emanation of the Green Tara in Dörgön. If you have a little time to spend in the area, there are also good ecotourism opportunities around Khar Us Nuur and fantastic hiking opportunities around Tsambagarav Uul (4202m; see p228), on the border with Bayan-Ölgii.

National Parks

Bulgan Gol Nature Reserve (1840 hectares) On the southwestern border with China, it was established to help preserve *minj* (beavers), sable and stone marten. A border permit is required.

Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area (also known as 'Gobi B') Created to protect *khulan* (wild ass), gazelle, jerboas and *takhi* (wild horses).

Khar Us Nuur National Park (850,272 hectares) Protects the breeding grounds for antelope and rare species of migratory pelican, falcon and bustard.

Khökh Serkh Strictly Protected Area (65,920 hectares) On the northwestern border with Bayan-Ölgii, it helps protect argali sheep, ibex and snow leopard.

Mankhan Nature Reserve (30,000 hectares) Directly southeast of Khovd city, it preserves an endangered species of antelope.

Mönkh Khairkhan National Park Established in 2006, this protects an important habitat for ibex and argali sheep.

KHOVD CITY ХОВД

☎ 01432 / pop 31,000 / elev 1406m

Khovd city is a pleasant tree-lined place developed by the Manchus during their 200-year rule in Outer Mongolia. Somewhat more developed than other cities in western Mongolia, it boasts an Agricultural University and some

food processing and textiles manufacturing. It also has the region's busiest airport, one reason why so many tourists end up here.

The town offers a few sights to keep you busy for a day and some pleasant ger camps outside town. Shops are well stocked and there are plenty of jeeps, making this a good place to launch a trip to the Altai Mountains or the lakes region. Khovd city also boasts a significant population of Kazakhs – some local Kazakh women have set up a felt-making craft cooperative that is worth visiting.

Information

Bathroom (☎ 23690; shower/sauna T900/3500;

☎ 9am–10pm) Just north of the market.

Internet café (☎ 22472; per hr T460; ☎ 8am–10pm Mon–Fri) Inside the Telecom office.

Internet Kafé (per hr T400; ☎ 10am–10pm) Open on weekends as well.

Khar Us Nuur National Park office (☎ /fax 22539; kharus2006@chinggis.com; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri) Opposite the Telecom office, this office gives information on, and permits for, nearby Khar Us Nuur National Park.

Mongol Shuudan Bank (☎ 24004; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) Gives cash advances against MasterCard.

Telecom office (☎ 22471; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also located here.

XAC Bank (☎ 22669; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) Changes money and gives cash advances on travellers cheques.

Zoos Bank (☎ 24004; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) Changes dollars but not travellers cheques. Gives cash advances against MasterCard.

Sights

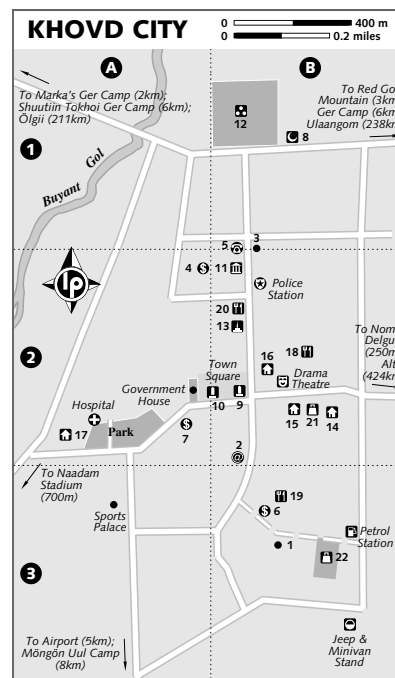
MUSEUM

The **museum** (☎ 9943 4502; admission T2000; ☎ 8am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri) is located on a corner near the police station and has the usual collection of stuffed wildlife, plus some excellent ethnic costumes, Buddhist and Kazakh art and a snow-leopard pelt tacked up on the wall. One of the more interesting exhibits is the re-creation of the cave paintings at Tsenkheriin Agui (p236), which is actually better than the original. There are also several examples of the many deer stones scattered around the aimag, plus a model of the original Manchurian fortress.

SANGIIN KHEREM (MANCHU RUINS)

САНГИЙН ХЭРЭМ

At the northern end of the city are some crumbling walls built around 1762 by the Manchu (Qing dynasty) warlords who once



conquered and brutally governed Mongolia. The 40,000-sq-metre walled compound once contained several temples, a Chinese graveyard and the homes of the Manchu rulers, though there's little left to see. Three enormous gates provided access. At one time there was a moat (2m deep and 3m wide) around the 4m-high walls, but this has been completely filled in. The 1500-man Chinese garrison was destroyed after a 10-day siege and two-day battle in August 1912. The one legacy of Manchurian rule that has remained is the 200-year-old trees that line the streets of Khovd city.

While you are around this part of town, the nearby mosque **Akhmet Ali Mejit**, constructed in 2000, is worth a look. Friday services are held at 2.30pm.

TÜREEMEL AMARJUULAGAI KHIID

ТҮРЭЭМЭЛ АМАРЖУУЛАГАЙ ХИЙД
The original Shar Süm (Yellow Temple) was built outside of Khovd in the 1770s but was completely destroyed during the Stalinist purge of 1937. The **monastery** (admission T2000; ☎ 9am–5pm) was recently relocated to the centre

INFORMATION

Bathroom.....	1	B3
Internet Café.....	(see 5)	
Internet Kafé.....	2	B2
Khar Us Nuur National Park Office.....	3	B1
Mongol Shuudan Bank.....	4	A2
Post Office.....	(see 5)	
Telecom Office.....	5	B1
XAC Bank.....	6	B3
Zoos Bank.....	7	A2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Akhmet Ali Mejit.....	8	B1
Aldanjavyn Ayush.....	9	B2
Galdan Boshigt.....	10	B2
Museum.....	11	B2
Sangiin Kherem.....	12	B1
Türeemel Amarjuulagai Khiid.....	13	B2

SLEEPING

Agricultural University Dorms.....	14	B2
Agriyat Hotel.....	15	B2
Khovd Hotel.....	16	B2
Myangan Ugalzit Hotel.....	17	A2

EATING

Ikh Mongol.....	18	B2
Naran Restaurant.....	19	B3
Tsomorlig Kafé.....	20	B2

SHOPPING

Khovd Handicraft Cooperative.....	21	B2
Market.....	22	B3

TRANSPORT

AeroMongolia Office.....	(see 4)	
EZ Nis Office.....	(see 6)	

of the city (in the former billiards club) but it's not all that active.

TOWN SQUARE

Two statues in the town square honour local heroes. One of them, **Aldanjavyn Ayush** (1859–1939), was a local revolutionary hero who agitated against the Manchus to lower taxation and was made head of Tsetseg *sum* after the 1921 revolution. The other statue (close to the Government House) is of **Galdan Boshigt** (1644–97), ruler of the Zuungar Mongols. Although only a blip on the pages of history, Galdan Boshigt's military victories in Central Asia gave him brief rule over the Silk Road cities Samarkand and Bukhara.

Sleeping CAMPING

There are fine camping spots along the Buyant Gol; head out of the town towards Ölgii, turn right (downstream) at the river, and pitch your tent anywhere. It can get buggy here in late summer so make sure you have adequate insect repellent.

GER CAMPS

ourpick Shuutiin Tokhoi (☎ 9943 8200; bayar.huub@yahoo.com; GPS: N 48°02.960', E 091°40.253'; per person T10,000) About 6km from town, this basic camp is run by a local school teacher named Bayarkhuu (locals know the place as Bayarkhuu camp). It has a gorgeous location along the Buyant Gol, at the foot of sheer cliffs that make for good rock climbing. You can buy meals for T2000. It's just past a half-abandoned chicken farm.

Marka's Ger Camp (☎ 9943 8849; markas2002@yahoo.com; GPS: N 48°01.360', E 091°37.685'; per person T10,000) Just 2km from town, next to the Buyant Gol, this is a reasonable place to stay if you don't have your own transport. It includes two Kazakh gers and meals are available. Contact Marka at the Khovd Handicraft Cooperative.

Möngön Uul (☎ 9943 7770; mungun_uul@yahoo.com; GPS: N 47°56.425', E 091°34.803'; per person T13,000) Slightly better setup than the other two camps, but the location is dry and exposed. It's 3km southwest of the airport.

HOTELS

Agricultural University Dorms (☎ 22178; dm T5000) Clean and bright basic rooms, run by the local university. Bathrooms are detached.

Khovd Hotel (☎ 23063; s/d T3000/6000, half-lux s/d T6000/12,000, lux s/d T8000/16,000) Scruffy, communist-era hotel near the Drama Theatre.

Beyra Hotel (☎ 23860; dm T5000, half-lux T15,000-18,000, lux T25,000) Though nothing extravagant, this is the best hotel in town. The lux room has a huge living room with fridge and TV plus hot-water shower. The half-lux rooms include toilet and cold-water shower. If you are considering a dorm, bear in mind that the bathroom is two floors below.

Myangan Ugalzit Hotel (☎ 22086; s/d T8000/16,000, half-lux s/d T10,000/20,000, lux T18,000/36,000) A government-run hotel on the edge of town. It's well maintained and has spacious rooms but it can be hard to get in here unless you've booked ahead.

Eating

Naran Restaurant (☎ 9143 5555; meals T1300-1900; ☎ 9am-10pm) Somewhat upscale atmosphere for a basic Mongolian eatery. The fish looks like a progressive menu item although they never seem to have it.

Tsomorlig Kafé (☎ 9943 9765; meals T1500-2000; ☎ 9am-9pm) Sizzling platters of meat are served in this hole-in-the-wall café on the

main street. Ask for the house specialty, *on-dogtei hurag* (fried eggs and meat).

Ikh Mongol (☎ 22388; meals T1500-2500; ☎ 9am-midnight) Mongolian-themed restaurant that goes all out with traditional leather art and wolf pelts on the walls. The menu, however, is mainly Chinese dishes with a few Mongolian stand-bys. In the late evening it's mainly a beer bar.

SELF-CATERING

The daily **market**, south of the town centre, is large, lively and well stocked. Khovd aimag is justifiably famous for its miniature watermelons (normally best in late summer), which are available at the market.

Probably the easiest place to shop is the **Nomin Delguur** (☎ 10am-7pm), a big and modern supermarket on the eastern side of town.

Shopping

The **Khovd Handicraft Cooperative** (☎ 9943 8849), made up of 12 local women, produces and sells handmade felt carpets and wall hangings. You can meet the women in their homes and purchase their work, or you can buy it from a shop next to the Buyant Hotel. A 1.2m x 2m carpet will cost around US\$70. Some customers claim that having products shipped abroad can be unreliable – if you are buying, take the carpet with you.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

At least one plane a day travels the Khovd–Ulaanbaatar route. MIAT flies for US\$161/282 one way/return. AeroMongolia flies for US\$183/324 and EZ Nis flies for US\$201/362.

Khovd to Ulaanbaatar flights (and vice versa) are popular, so it is vital to buy tickets well in advance. If you have a return ticket from Ulaanbaatar, reconfirm it as soon as you arrive. The **EZ Nis office** (☎ 22880) is in the same building as XAC Bank. **AeroMongolia** (☎ 9982 1265) is at the Mongol Shuudan Bank. **MIAT** (☎ 9943 4130, 22414) can be found at the airport. The airport is 5km south of the city.

At the time of research Air China had plans to start a route between Khovd and Urumqi in Xinjiang (China). If the route opens up you'll need to have a valid Chinese visa to make the journey.

THE GREEN TARA OF KHOVD

In Dörgön *sum*, two hours drive from Khovd city, an elderly woman is performing miracles. Megjin, 60, has spent the past several years clearing out a demon-infested charnel ground near the shores of Khar Us Nuur. The once-barren ground has been planted with more than 3500 trees and shrubs; several Buddhist temples have also been erected here.

Megjin, clearly no ordinary granny, is in fact a certifiable Green Tara (Buddha of enlightened activity) recognised as such when she was seven. The threat of persecution by local communists kept her identity under wraps but locals still took her title seriously. It is said that her mother's pregnancy lasted three years and local doctors had wrongly assumed that the woman was carrying an enormous tumour in her belly. In 2006 Megjin was officially recognised as a Tara by the Mongolian government and was given an enthronement ceremony in Ulaanbaatar.

Megjin's Buddhist park overlooks Kar Us Nuur and is surrounded by a landscape of green, red, black and white rocks. As Megjin explains, the place is connected to Khamaryn Khiid (see p202) through an underground geomantic line.

HITCHING

Hitching to anywhere from Khovd is a hassle and not recommended. Your time will be spent more wisely slugging it out on a share Furgon (Russian-made minivan) or jeep. If you do hitch, the easiest destination is probably Ölgii and you might get a lift from other tourists. Although it's the main highway to Ulaanbaatar, hitching to Altai (in Gov-Altai aimag) isn't easy and you may end up stranded halfway in **Darvi** (Дарви). Darvi has a **hotel** (per person T1000), but you'll need to wait by the petrol station should the rare vehicle pass through. Cars do pass this way, but they are usually too full to take an extra passenger.

MINIVAN & JEEP

Furgons wait at the market. You should be able to get a ride somewhere within a day, or maybe two. Approximate fares are T20,000 to Altai (15 hours, 424km), T35,000 to Bayankhongor (28 hours, 795km) and T50,000 to Ulaanbaatar (50 hours, 1425km).

At least one Furgon per day will travel to Ulaanbaatar. As usual, these vans leave around four to eight hours after the suggested departure time; ask the driver to pick you up at your hotel when he is ready. Bear in mind that the ride to Ulaanbaatar is 45 to 50 nonstop hours of driving, during which time you'll be allotted less than half a seat (think 23 people in a 10-seat van) and, unlike the northern road, there is almost nothing to see on the southern route. Flying back to Ulaanbaatar saves both time and sanity.

There's less traffic headed to Ölgii (T11,000, six to seven hours, 238km) and less still to Ulaangom (T12,000, seven to eight

hours, 238km) but, again, something should come up.

Jeeps cost around T450 per kilometre, including petrol. Ask around at the market. The road from Khovd city to Ölgii is pretty good; to Altai it is rough and boring in patches; and to Ulaangom the road is often marred by broken bridges and flooded rivers after heavy rain.

KHAR US NUUR NATIONAL PARK
XAP YC HYYP

About 40km to the east of Khovd city is Khar Us Nuur (Dark Water Lake), the second-largest freshwater lake (15,800 sq km) in Mongolia – but with an average depth of only 4m. Khovd Gol flows into this lake, creating a giant marsh delta. Khar Us Nuur is the perfect habitat for wild ducks, geese, wood grouse, partridges and seagulls, including rare relict gulls and herring gulls – and by late summer a billion or two of everyone's friend, the common mosquito. The best time to see the birdlife is in May and late August.

As at Uvs Nuur (p239), bird-watchers may be a little disappointed: the lake is huge, difficult to reach because of the marshes and locals know very little, if anything, about the birdlife. The best idea would be to go with one of the national park workers and head for the delta where the Khovd Gol enters the lake. You'll need several litres of drinking water and mosquito repellent.

The easiest place to see the lake is from the main Khovd–Altai road at the southern tip of the lake, where a metal **watchtower** (GPS: N 47°50.541', E 092°01.541') has been set up to view the nearby reed islands.

STEPPE ASIDE TUVANS, THERE'S A NEW VOICE IN TOWN

Thanks to good PR in Tuva, everyone has heard of the Tuvan throat singers. Less known is that Mongolia also has its own contingent of throat singers who you'll surely hear at concerts staged in Ulaanbaatar.

Known as *khöömii*, throat singing allows the human voice to produce a whole harmonic range from deep in the larynx, throat, stomach and palate, and has the remarkable effect of producing two notes and melodies simultaneously: one a low growl, the other an ethereal whistling.

Throat singing is traditionally centred on western Mongolia (particularly Chandmani in Khovd) and the neighbouring republic of Tuva (Russia). It's rare to hear a concert out in the countryside, but if you prod some locals someone might strike up a tune.

Several recordings of throat singing are available abroad, though most are from Tuva. Some singers, including the well-known Aldyn Dashka, have blended throat singing with rock'n'roll beats. Mongolian singer Dangaa Khosbayar is backed by a range of instruments including the sitar and didgeridoo. Most *khöömii* singers are male although a few female singers are breaking out the scene; look for recordings by Alimaa or Undarmaa.

To check out some throat singing try the CDs *Choomej: Throat Singing From the Center of Asia* (Tuvian Singers) and *Deep in the Heart of Tuva: Cowboy Music from the Wild East*.

For more information on throat singing, and to learn how to do it, see www.khoomei.com.

The outflow from Khar Us Nuur goes into a short river called Chono Khairkhan, which flows into another freshwater lake, **Khar Nuur** (Black Lake), home to some migratory pelicans. See this area while you can: construction of a hydropower dam on the Chono Khairkhan is nearly complete. When finished, the dam will inundate canyons and huge tracts of grassland, and almost certainly kill off rare aquatic life.

The southern end of Khar Nuur flows into **Dörgön Nuur**, which is a large alkaline lake good for swimming. The eastern side of Dörgön Nuur is an area of bone-dry desert and extensive sand dunes. West of the lake, on the road to Chandmani, you have a better-than-average chance of spotting saiga antelopes.

Just to the south, and between the Khar and Khar Us lakes, are the twin peaks of **Jargalant Khairkhan Uul** (3796m) and **Yargaitin Ekh Uul** (3464m). You can see the massif as you drive to Ölgii from Altai in Gov-Altai aimag. With the help of a guide you'll find numerous springs in these mountains. The canyons also hide a 22m high waterfall.

If you are driving in a loop through the park, the village of **Chandmani** makes a logical place to camp. There are good camp sites, a few shops and, for once, no mosquitoes. Chandmani is also renowned as a centre for *khöömii* singers and Westerners sometimes come here for informal study from the old masters. Well-known local singers include Tserendavaa, Tsenee and Davaajav.

Accommodation in the area includes **Jargalant Orgil** (☎ 9943 8800; tseveenravdand@yahoo.com; per person T15,000), a new ger camp between Khar Us Nuur and Jargalant Khairkhan Uul.

TSENKHERIIN AGUI ЦЭНХЭРИЙН АГУЙ

The **Tsenkheriin Agui** (GPS: N 47°20.828', E 091°57.225') is located in an attractive setting next to a stream in Mankhan *sum*, 100km southeast of Khovd city. Until just a few years ago the walls of these caves were strewn with dozens of 15,000-year-old wall paintings. Vandals have wrecked all but a couple of the drawings and only an experienced local could find the best examples. The museum in Khovd city (see p232) has a re-creation of how the cave paintings looked before their senseless destruction.

MÖNKH KHAIRKHAN NATIONAL PARK МӨНХ ХАЙРХАН УУЛ

At 4362m, Mönkh Khairkhan Uul is the second-highest mountain in Mongolia. You can walk up the peak if you approach from the northern side. There is plenty of snow and ice on top, so you'll need crampons, an ice axe and rope, but the climb is not technically difficult. A jeep trail runs to the base from Mankhan. The peak is known locally as Tavan Khumit. This is also Khovd's newest national park and visitors are charged the standard T3000.

UVS УВС

pop 81,200 / area 69,000 sq km

After travelling around this aimag for a while you may start to wonder why they named it Uvs (Grass) as most of the region is classified as high desert. Really the main feature of this diverse aimag is its lakes, which come in all shapes, sizes and levels of salinity. The biggest, Uvs Nuur, is more like an inland sea, while smaller lakes such as Khökh Nuur make excellent hiking destinations. Together the lakes and the surrounding deserts make up the Ikh Nuuruudin Khotgor: a 39,000-sq-km Great Lakes Depression that includes bits of neighbouring Khovd and Zavkhan aimags.

However, the main attraction of Uvs has to be the twin peaks of Kharkhiraa (4037m) and Türgen (3965m) *uuls*. From these mountains spill permanent glaciers, fast-flowing rivers and verdant plateaus. This is also one of Mongolia's most seismically active regions. In 1905 an earthquake measuring greater than eight on the Richter scale ripped through the province and left a distinct fault line in the eastern part of the aimag.

Uvs aimag was originally named Dorvod after the main ethnic group that inhabited the area. The Dorvod people, who still represent just under half of the population of Uvs, speak their own dialect. Other minority ethnic groups include the Bayad, Khoton and Khalkh.

National Parks

The Great Lakes Depression is a globally important wetland area for migratory birds and is a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve. Many other parks have been established in the aimag and, together with parks in Russia, Tuva, China and Kazakhstan, form a Central Asian arc of protected areas.

Khan Khökhii National Park (220,550 hectares) An important ecological indicator and home to musk deer, elk, red deer and wolf.

Khyrgas Nuur National Park (332,800 hectares) An area of springs and rocky outcrops that harbours abundant waterfowl.

Tes River Reserve (712,545 hectares) The newest conservation area in Uvs protects waterfowl, beaver and fish.

Uvs Nuur Strictly Protected Area (712,545 hectares) Consists of four separate areas: Uvs Nuur, Türgen Uul, Tsagaan Shuvuut Uul and Altan Els. Contains everything from desert sand dunes to snowfields, marsh to mountain forest. Snow leopard, wolf, fox, deer and ibex are among

the animals protected. Part of the Man and the Biosphere Unesco programme, and the Ramsar Wetland Convention.

ULAANGOM УЛГААНГОМ

☎ 01452 / pop 22,900 / elev 939m

Ulaangom (Red Sand) is a charmless city stuck in the middle of the desert. Still, it's not a bad place to hang around while planning a trip around western Mongolia: it has a bustling market, well-stocked shops and a worthwhile museum.

Information

Border Patrol office (Khiliin Tserenk Alban) Opposite the market, ask about a border permit here.

Eco Ger (Airport) This small tourist-information ger has details on good horse trekking and hiking areas. It opens when an aeroplane arrives from Ulaanbaatar.

Gurvan Gan Internet Café (☎ 9945 6810; per hr T400; ☎ 9am-11pm) Near the main square.

Internet café (☎ 23370; per hr T500; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) At the Telecom office.

Mongol Shuudan Bank (☎ 24022; Marshal Tsedenbal Gudamj; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) Does cash advances on Visa.

Strictly Protected Areas office (☎ 22271; delhi novuvsnuur_mn@yahoo.com; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Located at the western end of the main road, this office provides information on, and permits to, the protected areas in the aimag.

Telecom office (☎ 107; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also here.

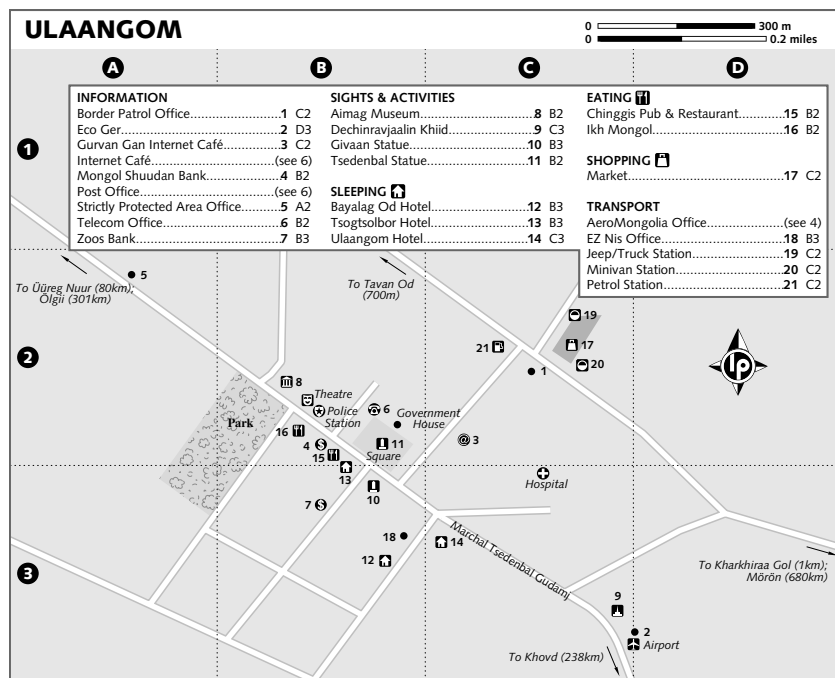
XAC Bank (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat-Sun) Changes money and gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

Zoos Bank (☎ 23899; ☎ 8am-5pm) Next door to XAC Bank. Changes money and gives cash advances on MasterCard.

Sights

The comprehensive **Aimag Museum** (☎ 24720; admission T2000; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) has the usual stuff plus a section on the 16th-century Oirad leader Amarsanaa (the chain-mail jacket is supposedly his). There's a newly built wing dedicated solely to the reign of one-time dictator Yu Tsedenbal (who was born in Uvs), featuring photos of the man with other commie leaders like Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh.

Dechinravjaalin Khid, on the eastern end of town near the airport, was originally founded on this spot in 1738. It contained seven temples and 2000 monks; an artist's rendition hangs inside the office of the head monk. The place was pulverised in 1937 thanks to Stalin,



and its current incarnation consists of a concrete ger and about 20 welcoming monks.

The **bronze statue** in front of Government House is of Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal, who ruled Mongolia for about 40 years until 1983, and was born near Ulaangom. Opposite the town square, another **statue** honours Givaan, a local hero who was killed in 1948 during clashes with Chinese troops.

Sleeping

CAMPING

The only place to camp nearby is along Gumbukh Gol, which you cross as you come from Ölgii. Walk about 300m northwest of the town square to find a spot. If you have your own vehicle, camping is far better along the Kharkhiraa Gol or anywhere south of the city on the road to Khovd.

HOTELS

Ulaangom Hotel (☎ 9969 5251; per person T10,000) This centrally located hotel has a few rooms that share a bathroom, but there is no shower.

Tsogtsolbor Hotel (☎ 24614; Marshal Tsedenbal Gudamj 15; s/d T9000/17,000, half-lux s/d T11,000/20,000,

lux s/d T16,000/22,000) The lux rooms here come with TV and twin beds while the ordinary rooms have king-size beds but no TV. As usual, plumbing is haphazard at best. The hotel does have a swanky little bar and nightclub that draws some late night crowds.

Tavan Od (☎ 23409, 9945 9418; d/q/lux T15,000/20,000/25,000) This 10-room hotel on the north edge of town offers basic but clean rooms at reasonable rates. It has a shop, hot water and sauna. It also has a restaurant but the meat they served us tasted like the cow had died of old age.

Bayalag Od Hotel (☎ 22445, 9984 3261; s/d US\$10/20, lux US\$25-35) Located in an unexciting brick heap, lux rooms have their own bathroom with TV. The management informs us that hot water is available on Monday, Tuesday and Saturday – but even those days are a bit of a gamble.

Eating

For some really cheap *khuushuur* (mutton pancakes) or *buuz* (steamed dumplings), if you're not fussy about hygiene, try the train-car **quanz** outside the **market**.

Ikh Mongol (☎ 9983 9292; Marshal Tsedenbal Gudamj 29; meals 1500-2500; ☎ 8am-10pm) Reputedly the best place in town, Ikh Mongol has a diverse menu with Mongolian and Chinese dishes. Seating is in big red booths and the walls are designed like the interior of a ger. It's owned by a local kingpin who runs a similar restaurant in Khovd city.

Qinggis Pub & Restaurant (☎ 9945 2688; Marshal Tsedenbal Gudamj 27; meals T2000-3000) A couple of doors down from Ikh Mongol is the Qinggis Pub, another restaurant that goes beyond goulash (try one of their soups or a steak). Guns and daggers mounted on the wall add a touch of the Wild West.

Getting There & Away

AIR

EZ Nis and AeroMongolia share the Ulaanbaatar–Ulaangom route; check the schedules to find out when each flies. **EZ Nis** (☎ 25252, 9904 9939) charges US\$199/359 one way/return. Its office is near the Bayalag Od Hotel. **AeroMongolia** (☎ 9945 9551) charges US\$144/252 one way/return and its office is in the Mongol Shuudan Bank building. The airport is a dirt field just 1km from the town centre.

HITCHING

Getting to and from Ulaangom is fairly difficult and you'll need time and patience on your side. For points east most vehicles head to and from Tosontsengel (Zavkhan), the halfway point to Ulaanbaatar. Very few vehicles go to or from Mörön (Khövsgöl).

An occasional vehicle travels to or from Ölgii (Bayan-Ölgii). From Ulaangom to Khovd city, hitching is even harder. In Ulaangom, ask around the modern and busy petrol station near the market, and at the market itself.

JEEP & MINIVAN

A few public share jeeps leave for Ölgii (T10,000, 10 hours, 300km) and Khovd (T12,000, seven to eight hours, 238km) when full. Ask around the jeep/truck station by the market.

Share minivans to Ulaanbaatar (via Tosontsengel and Tsetserleg; T50,000, about 48 hours, 1336km) wait by the road near the market (a different place from the jeep/truck stand).

It's very difficult to find a van going to Mörön (T30,000, about 25 hours, 680km); ask around the market and, if there is nothing

available, consider riding a UB-bound minivan as far as Tariat (T25,000, 26 hours, 700km) and then attempt to bum a lift to Mörön from other backpackers at Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur.

You'll need to bargain hard for any vehicle as local drivers tend to overcharge foreigners. A recommended local driver with fair prices is Erdenejav (☎ 9945 5799), who speaks no English.

The Khovd city–Ulaangom road sometimes suffers from flooded rivers and collapsed bridges after heavy rain.

UVS NUUR YBC HYYP

Uvs Nuur is a gigantic inland sea in the middle of the desert. The lake's surface occupies 3423 sq km, making it Mongolia's largest lake, though it's very shallow at an average depth of 12m. (Still, legend has it that the lake is bottomless.)

Uvs Nuur is five times saltier than the ocean and devoid of edible fish. It has no outlet, so a lot of the shoreline is quasi-wetland. This environment, plus the clouds of mosquitoes, make Uvs Nuur tourist unfriendly. With the exception of serious **ornithologists**, most visitors will better appreciate the prettier, smaller and more accessible freshwater Üreg Nuur.

Ornithologists have documented more than 200 bird species around Uvs Nuur, including crane, spoonbill, goose and eagle, as well as gulls that fly thousands of kilometres from the southern coast of China to spend a brief summer in Mongolia.

Only the most determined birdwatchers spend much time around the lake. Uvs Nuur is huge and public transport around it nonexistent; trails often turn into marsh and sand; only park officials know anything about the birdlife; and you may not be there at the right time anyway. Real enthusiasts should venture to the northeastern delta around **Tes**. Note that Tes is a border area and you'll need a border permit from the border office in Ulaangom (see p237). Contact the Uvs Nuur Strictly Protected Areas office in Ulaangom (see p237) for a list of visiting species and ideas on how to spot them.

Forget about hitching to the lake, you'd almost certainly be dumped in a marshy wasteland. The only way to come to grips with this beast of a lake is in your own hired vehicle. Because of the marshes, you'll need to park 1km or so from the shore and walk to the lake.

If you are travelling between Ulaangom and Mörön you can get decent views from the road (about 1km from the shore) and maybe persuade your driver to veer off for a closer look.

БАЯН НУУР БАЯН НУУР

Close to Uvs Nuur and certainly more welcoming, Bayan Nuur is a pretty lake amid sand dunes. From Züüngov *sum* you can reach its shore in about 20 minutes by car. These are allegedly the world's northernmost sand dunes.

УЛААНГОМ ТО ӨЛГИИ

This route between the two aimag capitals can be done in two days by jeep or a pleasant four days by bicycle. The journey begins with a 40km tarmac road heading northwest out of Ulaangom. Just past Türgen village the road becomes a jeep trail and heads up to **Ulaan Davaa** (Red Pass; elev 1972m), notable for its enormous *ovoo*.

From the pass there are two routes. One heads due south and then southeast to Khökh Nuur (opposite). The other leads west to lovely Üüreg Nuur (right), which is a good area for camping.

From Üüreg Nuur, cargo trucks take a less-rugged (but longer) route (301km) via **Bohmörön village** (where you can check out the 8th-century Turkic *balbal*). If you end up in Bohmörön with no onward transport, it's possible to walk 9km to Nagoonuur *sum* in Bayan-Ölgii province, from where you can get a ride to Ölgii city. The difficulty here is crossing the wide river, the Boh Mörön; you'll definitely need a guide and pack horse to get you across.

Light vehicles (jeeps and vans) bypass Bohmörön and take the short cut (254km) over the steep **Bairam Davaa** (Bairam Pass), past the desolate coal-mining village of Khotgor. Long-distance cyclists take note: this is the only place to pick up supplies between Ulaangom and Ölgii. Most maps show no road via Bairam Davaa but, rest assured, you can make it with a halfway decent vehicle or bike.

From Khotgor you could opt for a detour into the **Yamaat Valley**, which leads to Türgen Uul (opposite). Otherwise, continue south for 60km to the **Achit Nuur** bridge. From here it's another 75km to Ölgii. The road passes the surprisingly lush riverside forests of the

Develiin Aral Nature Reserve, a 16km stretch along the fast-flowing Khovd Gol.

ÜÜREG НУУР ҮҮРЭГ НУУР

Large and beautiful **Üüreg Nuur** (GPS: N 50°05.236', E 091°04.587'), at an elevation of 1425m, is surrounded by stunning 3000m-plus peaks, including Tsagaan Shuvuut Uul (3496m), which are part of the Uvs Nuur Strictly Protected Area. The freshwater Üüreg Nuur has some unidentified minerals and is designated as 'saltwater' on some maps, so it's best to boil or purify all water from the lake. There is a freshwater well on the southeastern edge of the lake near some deserted buildings.

The lake is great for swimming (albeit a little chilly) and locals say there are plenty of fish. One added attraction is that it's one of the few bug-free lakes in the region. Camping is the only sleeping option.

One definite attraction of the lake is its accessibility: it's just a little off the main road between Ulaangom and Ölgii. You could hitch a ride there fairly easily.

Tourist facilities in the area are limited to **OT Tour Camp** (☎ 9913 7772, 9919 1761; www.ottour.com), located 25km southeast of the lake. The camp has a restaurant, modern toilet, hot water and horse-riding tours.

SOUTH OF ÜÜREG NUUR

If you are travelling from the lake over Bairam Davaa (in the direction of Achit Nuur) look out for several **ancient graves and balbals** (GPS: N 50°00.484', E 091°02.932') by the road, a few kilometres south of Üüreg Nuur. The *balbals* (anthropomorphic statues) represent either local heroes or, possibly, enemies killed in battle. They date from around the 8th century. Another set of **graves and balbals** (GPS: N 50°00.220', E 091°02.713') is a further 550m south. The circular piles of stones in the area are *kurgans* (burial mounds).

On the south side of Bairam Davaa, the road passes more *kurgans* and standing stones (thin, stone pillars used as grave markers). The most impressive, 7km north of Khotgor, include two **mounds** (GPS: N 49°54.910', E 090°54.527') surrounded by concentric circles and radiating spokes. Around the eastern mound you can see tiny stone circles forming a great arc around the mound. There are two carved **deer stones** nearby.

Khotgor is a rough-and-ready coal-mining town inhabited by Kazakhs and Mongols.

WHICH KHARKHIRAA?

Near Ulaangom there are several areas known as Kharkhiraa. The main places of interest for travellers are Kharkhiraa Gol (river) and Kharkhiraa Uul (mountain), both described below. A third Kharkhiraa is a run-down Soviet-era holiday resort, located in a valley called, you guessed it, Kharkhiraa. The valley is gorgeous but very steep, which makes for difficult hiking. The holiday resort does a lot to ruin the charm of the area and the local caretaker will attempt to charge you T5000 per person for camping. If you are heading into the mountains for a multi-day adventure, the best access remains the Kharkhiraa Gol. There is plenty of scope for confusion so make sure you, your guide and driver know where you are going!

There are a few shops and a barely functioning *ganz* near the petrol pump.

KHARKHIRAA UUL & TÜRGEN UUL ХАРХИРАА УУЛ & ТҮРГЭН УУЛ

The twin peaks of Kharkhiraa Uul (4037m) and Türgen Uul (3965m), which dominate the western part of the aimag, are curiously almost equidistant between Achit, Üüreg and Uvs *nuurs*. As vital sources of the Uvs Nuur, the mountains are part of the Uvs Nuur Strictly Protected Area. In summer, the area has some excellent hiking opportunities and the chance to meet Khoton nomads who graze their flocks in the area. Khoton people are famed throughout Mongolia as shamans.

Getting There & Away

The mountains can be approached from different directions. Most hikers walk from east to west, from Tarialan to Khotgor. In Tarialan you can organise pack camels and a guide.

Tarialan is 31km south of Ulaangom. From here follow the Kharkhiraa Gol into the mountains; you'll need to cross the river up to nine times as you go up the valley. Three days and 50km later you'll cross over the Kharkhiraa Davaa (2974m), which is accessible on foot but difficult going for pack camels.

From the pass you descend into the pretty Olon Nuur Valley, a marshy area of lakes and meadows. Turn north to walk over Yamaat Davaa (2947m) into Yamaat Valley, an area inhabited by snow leopards. In summer a ger camp is sometimes open in this valley. At the end of the valley you can easily reach the town of Khotgor.

It's 50km from Kharkhiraa Davaa to Khotgor, so you should plan six days for the entire route. Mongolia Expeditions (p81) and Off the Map Tours (p270) both run walking trips through this area.

If you start in Khotgor, it's possible to drive into Olon Nuur valley, but it's pretty boggy here so stick to existing jeep tracks.

A third route leads from Khökh Nuur (see below).

KHÖKH NUUR ХӨХ НУУР

This pretty alpine **lake** (elev 6322; GPS: N 49°50.413', E 91°41.141') is surrounded by mountains and makes a great destination on foot or horse. The area is inhabited by many ethnic Dorvod nomads.

On foot or horse you could get there from Tarialan; the trip is about 15km up Davaan Uliastai (one valley north of the Kharkhiraa Gol).

It's possible for a car to reach the lake in a very roundabout manner and only an experienced driver could do it. The road route involves driving up Ulaan Davaa (from Ulaangom), sweeping around the mountains close to Üüreg Nuur, and then heading southeast. The trip is around 120km; travelling this distance really only makes sense if you are doing the trip as part of a tour to Üüreg Nuur and Türgen Uul.

Trekkers can continue from the lake for 25km to the glacier-wrapped Türgen Uul. The walk takes about two days through a harsh landscape of prairie, mountains, glaciers and rivers, but the topography is wide open so it's fairly easy to navigate. There are good **camping spots** (GPS: N 49°42.485', E 91°29.525') along the Türgen Gol, near the northern base of Türgen Uul.

KHAR US NUUR ХАР УС НУУР

To confuse things a little, another freshwater lake in the region is called Khar Us Nuur, but it is sometimes referred to as Ölgii Nuur. You can swim and fish in Ölgii Nuur, and it makes a logical camping spot if travelling between Ulaangom and Khovd city. The lake is 102km south of Ulaangom.

ACHIT NUUR АЧИТ НУУР

The largest freshwater lake in Uvs, Achit Nuur is on the border of Uvs and Bayan-Ölgii aimags, and is an easy detour between Ulaangom and Ölgii. It offers stunning sunsets and sunrises and good fishing.

The lake is home to flocks of geese, eagles and other **birdlife**. One drawback is the absolute plethora of mosquitoes during the summer. Some camping spots are better than others for mozzies, so look around. Locals claim they are almost bearable by October.

The small Kazakh encampment on the southeastern edge has a *guanx*.

A **bridge** (GPS: N 49°25.446', E 90°39.677') just south of the lake allows for relatively steady traffic between Ulaangom and Ölgii. You can hitch a ride or charter a jeep to the lake from either city without too much trouble.

KHYARGAS NUUR NATIONAL PARK ХЯРГАС НУУР

Khyargas Nuur, a salt lake amid desert and scrub grass, provides an attractive summer home for birds but sees little tourist traffic. Some travellers visit the lake when travelling between Uvs and Zavkhan aimags.

On the northwestern side of Khyargas Nuur, there is a **cold spring** (GPS: N 49°20.153', E 093°09.355') that dribbles out of the mountain – locals say drinking some has health benefits. Near the spring is **Khar Temis** (☎ 9945 6796; rT5000, half-lux T10,000), an old Soviet holiday camp that has seen some renovations. It has lake views and a sandy beach.

The main attraction of the lake, and possibly the weirdest sight in western Mongolia, is **Khetsuu Khad**, an enormous rock sticking out of the water that attracts migratory cormorant birds. The birds arrive in April and hatch their young in large nests built on the rock. When the chicks hatch, their squawking is constant and deafening. The aura created by the white cliffs and shrill birds makes you feel as if you've arrived at the ocean. By October the cormorants are off again, migrating back to their breeding grounds in southern China.

The water around the rock is a bit slimy and the beach is rocky, so the swimming isn't so great here. This habitat, however, ideal for fish and you'll spot plenty swimming idly in the shallow waters. There are no laws against fishing although given the sensitivity of this unique ecosystem, it's probably best to leave them alone, tempting though they may be.

Adding to the surreal nature of the place is the **Khetsuu Khad Ger Camp** (☎ 11-310 158; 9919 6966; GPS: N 49°01.968', E 093°28.783'; with/without meals US\$33/15) set down here in the middle of absolutely nowhere. It has hot showers, flush toilets, a restaurant (meals T5000 to T6000) and lonely staff.

The last 15km of the road to Khetsuu Khad are very sandy and it's easy to get stuck – don't attempt it without a reliable 4WD vehicle and confident driver. The drive is easier in July and August when rains harden the sand. (The rain also stirs up waves on the lake, which can make for spectacular viewing.)

A national park fee of T3000 applies around the lake, though you'd be lucky (or unlucky) to find a ranger to pay it to.

South of Khyargas Nuur but still in the national park is the freshwater lake **Airag Nuur** (GPS: N 48°57.126', E 093°22.011'), at the end of the mighty Zavkhan Gol. Despite the name, the lake is not full of fermented mare milk, but it does have about 10 breeding pairs of migratory **Dalmatian pelican**. There were about 400 pelican in the 1960s, but the numbers are tragically decreasing because poachers kill them for their beaks, which are used to make a traditional implement for cleaning horses, called a *khusuur* (currycomb), which you may see in use at the Naadam Festival.

ZAVKHAN ЗАВХАН

pop 79,000 / area 82,000 sq km

Zavkhan aimag occupies a transitional zone between the well-watered Khangai mountain range of central Mongolia and the harsh Great Lakes Depression of western Mongolia. In between the two regions, Zavkhan has its own micro-climates and varied terrain that ranges from snowy peaks to steppe to lakes surrounded by sand dunes.

The aimag is in an awkward location and very few travellers are likely to pass through much or any of Zavkhan. This is a pity because the scenery is some of the most dramatic and varied in the country; one minute you are travelling through lush valleys and hills, and then a few kilometres further you are in a desert reminiscent of *Lawrence of Arabia*.

The highlight of the aimag is Otgon Tenger Uul, a 4021m hulk at the western edge of the Khangai. The mountain is considered holy and a new law prohibits anyone from climbing it, although you could

do some fine horse treks around the mountain. If you are looking for an interesting route to western Mongolia, try driving from Uliastai across the desert to Khar Nuur or Khyargas Nuur.

ULIASTAI УЛИАСТАЙ

☎ 01462 / pop 19,100 / elev 1760m

Along with Khovd, Uliastai is one of Mongolia's oldest cities, founded by the Manchus during their reign in Mongolia. The old garrison is long gone but the town has retained a pleasant, antiquated feel, with a tree-lined main street and rows of one-storey shops and restaurants. Rivers flowing nearby and a lush valley surrounded by mountains complete the picture, making this an enjoyable place to stay while you consider the direction of your next plunge.

History

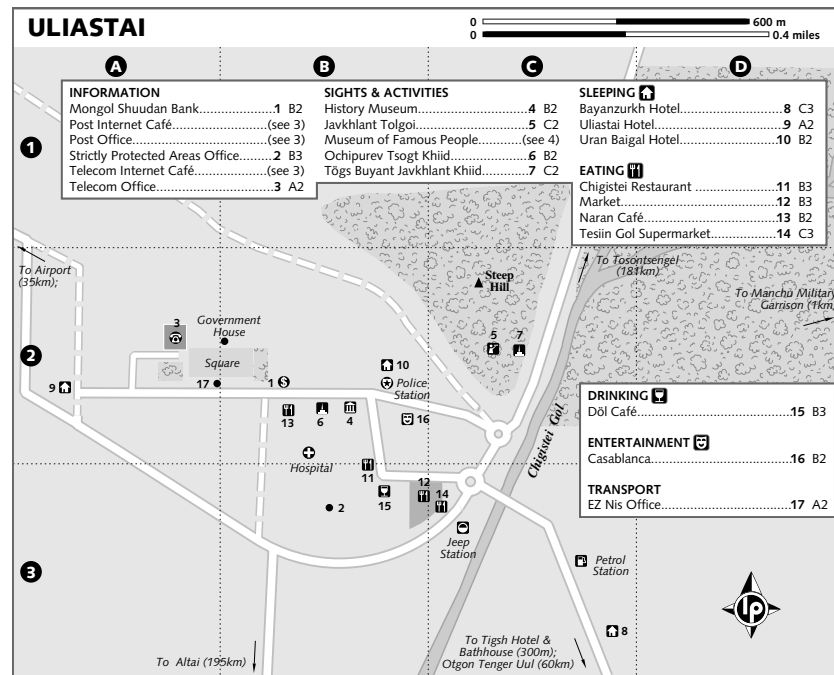
Manchurian generals established a military garrison here in 1733 to keep one eye on the Khalkh Mongols to the east and the other on the unruly Oirad Mongols who lived west of the Khangai mountains. The fortress (the re-

mains of which are visible 3km northeast of town) contained up to 3500 soldiers and was surrounded by an inevitable Chinese trading quarter called Maimaicheng. Chinese farmers tilled the lands along the Bogdiin Gol and, as Russian ethnologist Alexei Pozdnev noted during his 1890 visit, a large contingent of local women were on hand to 'serve' the soldiers.

The fort was emptied in 1911 with the disintegration of the Manchu dynasty, but Chinese troops made an attempt to retake the fort four years later, only to be booted out once and for all in March 1921, following the taking of Urga (Ulaanbaatar) by White Russian forces. One of the few traces left visible of the Manchu era is the shackles and torture devices used by the Manchus, now on display in the History Museum.

Orientation

The town is divided into two main districts: west of the Chigistei Gol is the central area with hotels, restaurants and other life-support systems; across the bridge on the eastern bank is the industrial area, which you are



unlikely to visit. The airport is 35km west of Uliastai, close to the town of Aldarkhaan.

Information

Mongol Shuudan Bank (☎ 23686) Gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

Post Internet Café (☎ 9908 7824; per hr T600; ☎ 10am-9pm) In the entry to the post office.

Strictly Protected Areas office (☎ 22361, 9946 9477; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm) This office contains a small information room with brochures and pictures, though no English is spoken. The staff can also sell you entry tickets to Otgon Tenger Strictly Protected Area.

Telecom Internet Café (☎ 21120; per hr T600; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Fri, 11-5pm Sat-Sun) In the Telecom office.

Telecom office (☎ 24117; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also located here (but has a separate entrance).

Tigsh Bathhouse (☎ 9972 3976; shower T800) Located behind the Tigsh Hotel. Opening times are sporadic so call ahead.

Xac Bank (☎ 21315; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-4pm Sat) Changes dollars and gives cash advances on MasterCard.

Sights

MUSEUMS

The **History Museum** (☎ 23097; admission T2000; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri), on the main street, contains a mammoth bone, some fine religious art and a *tsam* mask, worn during lama dances, made from coral. There is also a fine collection of photographs taken of Uliastai in the early 20th century. Next door, the **Museum of Famous People** (☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) features well-known Zavkhanites, including Mongolia's first two democratically elected presidents, P Ochirbat and N Bagabandi. Admission is free if you already bought a ticket to the History Museum.

TÖGS BUYANT JAVKHLANT KHIID

ТӨГС БУЯНТ ЖАВХЛАНТ ХИЙД
This small, well-appointed monastery has around 20 monks. You are allowed to watch their ceremonies, which start at about 10am every day. The monastery is on the eastern side of Javkhlant Tolgoi. A second temple, **Ochirpurev Tsogt Khiid**, a Nyingmapa monastery with five lamas, is near the museums and signposted in English.

JAVKHLANT TOLGOI ЖАВХЛАНТ ТОЛГОЙ

This hilltop near the river and just to the north of the main street features a pavilion, nine stupas and the concrete likenesses of an elk, ibex

and argali sheep. The views from the top are good. To the northeast, about 3km away, you can barely make out the remains of the old **Manchu military garrison** (GPS: N47°44.922', E96°52.198'). It is possible to walk to the garrison in about 30 minutes, though there's not much to see and it is generally regarded by locals as a waste dump.

Courses

Mr. Enkhjargal is a professional music teacher at the local music college and can give lessons in *khöömii* (throat singing). He can be reached through the Chigistei restaurant.

Sleeping

CAMPING

Along the lush valley that hugs the Chigistei Gol for 15km from town, and parallel to the northern road to Tosontsengel, there are some gorgeous (though a little busy) camping spots. Just get off the bus, truck or jeep at somewhere you like.

APARTMENT

Tuya, the owner of the Chigistei Restaurant, rents out a four-bed apartment for T5000 per person per night.

HOTELS

Tigsh Hotel (☎ 9546 9208; ger/dm T5000/6000, half-lux s/d T14,000/28,000) A clean hotel with a handful of bright rooms. There is a large yard behind the hotel with trees, a bathhouse and an elaborate three-bed ger. The disinterested management *might* allow you to do your laundry in the bathhouse. It's a 15-minute walk from the centre of town in a white building labelled Зочид Вудал (Hotel).

Bayanzurkh Hotel (☎ 9946 9198, 9920 3988; per person T11,000) Overpriced apartment-hotel with three rooms and a kitchen but no hot shower. It's a 10-minute walk southeast of the town centre.

Uran Baigal Hotel (☎ 9914 0603; dm T8000, half-lux s/d 10,000/20,000) This hotel has reasonable rooms but none with an attached toilet. It is located north of the police station and has a decent restaurant on the 1st floor.

Uliastai Hotel (☎ 9191 9198) Large hotel under renovation at the time of research.

Eating & Drinking

Naran Café (☎ 9967 5485, 9984 2721; meals T1500-2000; ☎ 10am-midnight) The Naran serves up some decent plates of meat with either *ondogtei*

(egg), *chinjuurtei* (peppers) or *moogtei* (mushrooms). Vegetarians can order a plate of salads and rice (but the potato salad will invariably come with bits of ham). After 9pm it turns into a very dark disco.

Döl Café (☎ 9946 9174; meals T1500-2000; ☎ noon-11.30pm Mon-Sat) One of the more progressive places in town, the Döl serves meals during the day and is a popular evening haunt for dancing and drinking.

Chigistei Restaurant (☎ 9946 0506; meals T2000; ☎ 9am-midnight) Large restaurant with a retro-Soviet décor and Mongolian meals. The owner, Tuya, plans to expand the menu to include cheeseburgers(!) and Korean dishes, so it's worth checking out. Tuya speaks English and can help travellers find guides and horses for countryside trips.

Self-caterers can explore the busy **market** or try the **Tesin Gol Supermarket** (☎ 10am-6pm) near the roundabout.

Entertainment

Casablanca (☎ 9946 7039; ☎ 10am-11.30pm) Everyone from kids to teens to grannies turns up here in the evenings to stretch their vocal cords along with the karaoke machine.

Getting There & Away

AIR

AeroMongolia (☎ 9983 4347) flies between Ulaanbaatar and Uliastai twice a week for US\$158/280 one way/return. The airport is about 35km west of Uliastai; a taxi will cost about T9000.

HITCHING

The road between Uliastai and Tosontsengel is fairly busy, so hitching shouldn't be difficult, but because it rains a fair bit in summer, hanging around for a lift may not be pleasant. Hitching to anywhere else from Uliastai is really hard – Zavkhan's isolated location ensures that few vehicles come this way.

MINIVAN & JEEP

Several minivans and jeeps leave each day for Ulaanbaatar (T30,000, 26 hours, 984km) via Tosontsengel (T10,000, five to six hours, 181km) Tariat (for Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur; T14,000, 10 to 11 hours, 399km) and Tsetsereg (T18,000, 15 hours, 531km). You may need to bargain for these prices.

If you are lucky you might find a minivan or jeep headed north to Mörön (T15,000, 10

to 11 hours, 389km), but very little traffic heads south to Altai. Almost all traffic leaves from the **jeep station** between the river and the market. In the last week of August it is easy to get a ride to Khovd city (T30,000, 18 hours, 480km) when vans fill up with students headed back to university.

The road between Uliastai and Tosontsengel is unpaved, but pretty reasonable and easy to follow. The turn-off to Tosontsengel is 148km north of Uliastai and 33km west of Tosontsengel.

ZAGASTAIN DAVAA

ЗАГАСТАЙН ДАВАА

Forty-eight kilometres northeast of Uliastai on the Uliastai–Tosontsengel road is a spectacular mountain pass with the unusual name of **Zagastain Davaa** (Fish Pass; GPS: N48°04.157', E097°09.900'). At the top, there are fine views and a large *ovoo*. The weather is infamously changeable up here, with the possibility of snow, rain or wind at anytime. There is decent camping and hiking on the stretch of road between the pass and Uliastai. Look out for the two **balbals** and **burial mounds** (GPS: N47°56.396', E097°00.824') 20km south of the pass.

OTGON TENGER UUL STRICTLY PROTECTED AREA

ОТГОН ТЭНГЭР УУЛ

One of Mongolia's most sacred mountains, Otgon Tenger Uul (3905m) is the spiritual abode of the gods and an important place of pilgrimage for many Mongolians. The mountain, located about 60km east of Uliastai, is the highest peak in the Khangai Nuruu and is now part of the 95,510-hectare Otgon Tenger Strictly Protected Area. Normal park fees of T3000 per person apply; pay just past the children's camp, about 45km from Uliastai.

The mountain's sanctity means that climbing is prohibited – attempting to do so will incur the wrath of park rangers and the authorities in Uliastai. You'll need to be content with viewing Otgon Tenger from **Dayan Uul**, a 30-minute drive past the children's camp (passing pretty Tsagaannuur en route), where you'll also get views of lovely **Khökh Nuur** (GPS: N47°37.447', E97°20.546'). Taxi drivers will take you to Dayan Uul for petrol money plus T20,000.

A second route into the area is via the town of **Otgon**, 138km southeast of Uliastai, where a decent road heads up the Buyant Gol towards the southeastern flank of the mountain. The

route from Uliastai to Otgon is littered with impressive pre-Mongol-era burial mounds.

Otgon Tenger is a great area for **horse trekking** and it's possible to encircle the mountain in a few days. Tuya at the Chigistei Restaurant (see p245) in Uliastai can put you in touch with horse wranglers.

TOSONTSENDEL ТОСОЦЭНГЭЛ

☎ 014546 / elev 1716m

Occupying a pretty valley along the Ider Gol, with forested mountains on all sides, Tosontsengel is Zavkhan's second-biggest city and a transit hub for west-bound traffic. Tosontsengel once supported a booming timber trade and its many wood-fronted buildings, coupled with unpaved lanes and wandering horsemen, give it a Wild West atmosphere. Most people only stop long enough to see the truck-stop area of shops and restaurants; if you have some time to kill, walk 400m southwest to see the deserted town square.

The **Computeriin Sugalt Medeliin Töv** (☎ 1800; per hour T1200; ☎ 10am-9pm) offers internet access. It is 250m north of the main square, and 50m south of the main road.

Rashaant Hotel (☎ 9946 5000; per person T4000), on the eastern side of the square, has musty, crumbling rooms and basic facilities. The main road is piled up with truck-stop style cafés and canteens, none better than the other.

Cross-country cyclists will want to stock up on fruit and veggies in Tosontsengel. It has a great selection of food items, though you may need to ask around.

As a transit hub between eastern and western Mongolia there is plenty of traffic, and hitchhikers should find a ride to Uliastai (five hours, 181km), Tariat (five hours, 190km), Mörön (seven hours, 273km), or Ulaangom (15 hours, 533km). If you are coming from Uliastai or Ulaangom to Mörön you don't need to come to Tosontsengel at all; the turn off to Mörön is 33km to the west of the city.

TELMEŃ AREA ТЭЛМЭН

Around 65km west of Tosontsengel is the town of Telmen, which has a well-preserved **deer stone** in the centre of town. A collection of **burial mounds and deer stones** (GPS: N48°30.674', E97°27.169') can be seen a further 21km south of Telmen, on the main road to Uliastai.

Around 20km northwest of Telmen town is **Telmen Nuur**, a large salt lake home to migrating waterfowl (and swarming flies). It is on the main road from Tosontsengel to Ulaangom. You could **camp** (GPS: N48°48.889', E97°31.068') at the eastern end of the lake, but bring your own water.

WESTERN ZAVKHAN

If you are travelling overland from Uliastai to western Mongolia (or vice versa) there are a few places of interest to stop on the way.

Khar Nuur (Хар Нуур), located in the sum of Erdenekhairkhan, is a pretty freshwater lake bordering on alpine and desert zones. Most of the lake is ringed by sand dunes making vehicle access difficult. West of Khar Nuur, **Bayan Nuur** (Баян Нуур) is another difficult-to-reach salt lake amid extraordinary scenery. Locals say the fishing is good here. The lake is easiest to reach after rain, when it becomes easier to drive over the sand dunes. If it hasn't rained it's easy to get stuck and stranded.

A more southerly route from Uliastai travels due west towards the **Ikh Khairkhan Nuruu** (Их Хайрхан), an area of cliffs that provides shelter for ibex and wolf. There are caves in the area, including **Ikh Agui** (Big Cave; GPS: N 47°57.080', E 94°59.854'). Ikh Agui has a 150m deep tunnel but no stalactites. Make sure to have a torch (flashlight).

From Ikh Agui you could travel northwest to the village of **Urgamal** (which has a man stone 1km west of town) and then Airag Nuur in Uvs Aimag or head due west to **Khomyn Tal** (Хомын Тал), the newest rehabilitation area for *takhi* horses. Twelve *takhi* were sent here from France in 2004 to start a breeding program. Khomyn Tal is in the buffer zone of Khar Us Nuur National Park in Dorvöljin sum.

EREEŃ NUUR ЭРЭЭН НУУР

The beautiful Ereen Nuur is surrounded by rolling sand dunes, some of them high enough to resemble small mountains. It's technically in Gov-Altai Aimag but most travellers reach the lake via Uliastai, from where it's a six- to seven-hour drive. You need to cross the Zavkhan Gol near the lake if coming from Uliastai, but this is usually not a problem. From Altai it's an eight- to 10-hour drive but no river crossing is required. The lake can be visited as part of a trip to Ikh Agui (see above).

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