

Tsagaan Sar Insight
February 23rd - 28th 2020 - 6 Days

TSAGAAN SAR INSIGHT

(WITH MONGOLIAN LUNAR NEW YEAR
FESTIVAL)



‘The whole of the New Year’s experience we were just participating along with the Mongolians. It wasn’t a ‘tourist’ activity and we didn’t see a single other Westerner the entire time. We were just part of the family.’

Amanda Cook, Tsagaan Sar Insight

This is a small group trip. However, our maximum group size is six - which is refreshingly small. These small group sizes mean that our trips are more respectful for your host families that we work in long-term local community partnerships with. It also means you’ll be one of few rather than one of many and this leads to a more genuine experience as well as a more personal and real insight for you as our guest.

It also means that no two trips are ever the same as we can keep things flexible.

All images used throughout this document were taken either by EL guests or members of the EL team. This is the Mongolia that you will also experience.

Our Tsagaan Sar Insight In Brief



Tsagaan Sar is Mongolia's Lunar New Year Festival known as White Month. It is one of the most important and traditional of celebrations in Mongolia. Experience Tsagaan Sar through the eyes of three of the rural families we work in long-term local community partnership with.

These are our own personal friendships that we have built up over the past 13 years. We form long-term local community partnerships throughout the country and work side by side with each family. Our experiences are put together in a way which benefits each herder and their family, rather than disrupting their lives. This leads to a more respectful and genuine experience as well as a more personal and real insight for you as our guest. Because of the way we work you'll get an original insider experience.

Winter in Mongolia is a remarkable experience for those willing to take themselves outside of their comfort zone. Pack your thermals and come to Mongolia this winter and do something a little out of the ordinary. Come and enjoy being part of a minority who visit Mongolia in the winter and actually interact with the local people and enjoy slowing-down and seeing and experiencing Mongolia like few other people get to do. This is our own personal insight into local life in Mongolia.

Overview

Ulaanbaatar

February 23	Final Arrival Day Discover Ulaanbaatar City Walking Tour	Your own choice of accommodation	Free transfer	Local lunch welcome drink
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Middle Gobi

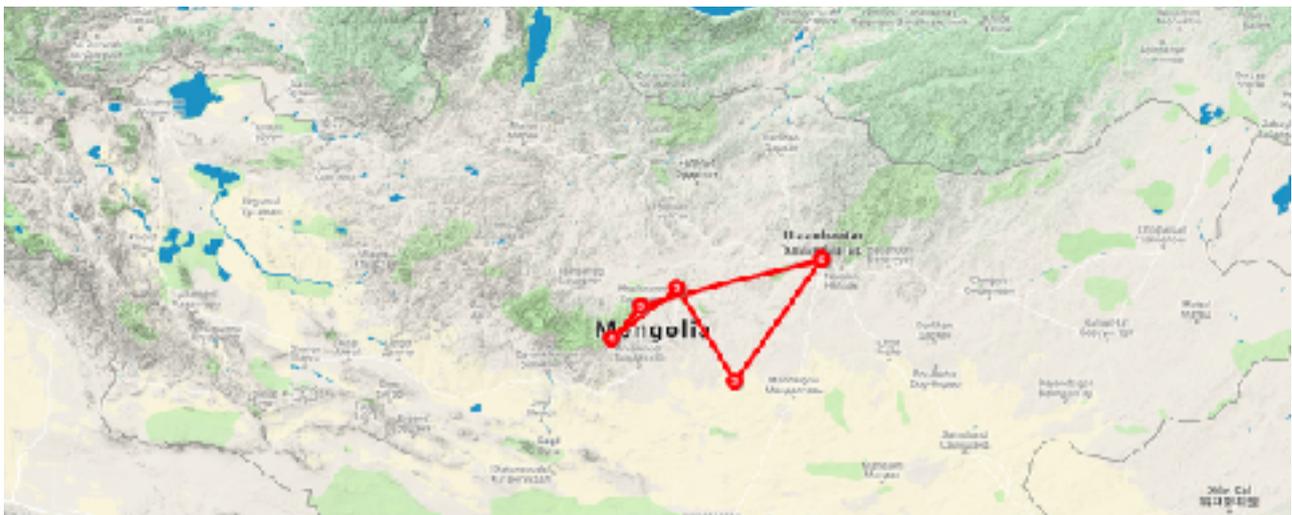
February 24 & 25	Erdenedalai Homestay Bituun - New Year's Eve & Shiniin Negiin - New Year's Day	With Nergui herding family	280km on dirt and asphalt road	L/D
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Central Heartland

February 26	Khogno Khan Nature Reserve Elsen Tasarkhai Sand Dunes Option for camel trek	Basic private ger at family operated ger camp - with Davaasuren	260km on asphalt road	B/L/D
February 27	Kharkhorin Orkhon River Valley Homestay Erdene Zuu Monastery Option for horse trek	With Tumees herding family	85km on asphalt and dirt road	B/L/D

Ulaanbaatar

February 28	Ulaanbaatar	Your own choice of accommodation	355km on asphalt road	B/L
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Winter is a quintessential Mongolian season. It is cold, very cold, but the cold is an important part of what makes Mongolia and its landscapes extraordinary at this time of year. For all of our winter trips, we provide traditional felt boots, hand-made goat skin blankets and can provide winter deels as well. You'll spend most nights in a ger - warming yourself by the stove. The night skies more than make up for the challenge of the temperatures. Winter in Mongolia is a remarkable experience - especially as the Mongolians you meet will be very proud to welcome foreign visitors in wintertime.

Day To Day

Feb 23

Final Arrival Day | Discover Ulaanbaatar | City Walking Tour



Logistics

- **Accommodation:** Of your own choice
- **Meals:** Local lunch and welcome drink
- **Travel:** Free transfer

Ulaanbaatar is home to roughly 45% of Mongolia's population and our free city walking tour will give you a more local introduction to this vibrant frontier style city with a strong Mongolian identity of its own.

Yes, the city is chaotic and loud and not as glamorous as other capital cities but it is the beating heart of Mongolia and the hub of contemporary Mongolian urban life. The reality for many Mongolians takes place in this urban context, in a city they are striving to develop and improve. Ulaanbaatar deserves to be appreciated and explored as the urban centre that it is.

Our informal and relaxed city walking tour will give you a contrasting insight into a way of life, compared to that of the rural population. This day is not about museums or shopping – it's about getting out and about and exploring and discovering.

Today you'll spend the day in the company of one of my female Mongolian trip assistants. The day will include Nogoan Nuur (Green Lake) community project - a community space created for the local population of the nearby Bayangol ger districts by Ulzii - a Mongolian philanthropist - as well as other areas of the city including Gandan Monastery. **This day includes visiting the (infamous) Black Market to buy a Mongolian del for the Tsagaan Sar celebrations so that you are warmly received by all that host you.**

Feb 24

Erdenedalai | Bituun (New Year's Eve)

Erdenedalai is our secret. Far from the 'highlights,' the 'must sees,' and large tour groups it is a beautiful region little visited by other international visitors. And that's exactly why we make it one of our bases. It's great for slow travel experiences of a more immersive kind.



Erdenedalai is Mongolian for 'Jewel Ocean' and although far from the ocean this small town located in the middle of the Gobi steppe provides a genuine insight into everyday life in Mongolia. It is also the hometown of a majority of the EL team and a very tight knit and traditional community.

Today is 'Bituun' - New Year's Eve. Bituun means 'to close down.' On arrival, receive a warm welcome from your host Nergui and his family. You'll change into your Mongolian Tsagaan Sar clothing and start the Bituun celebrations.

On this day Mongolian families eat to be full - it is believed that if you stay hungry you will be hungry for the coming year. It could be that you will also visit other families in the region ... including the relatives of the Eternal Landscapes team.



Welcome to our home

This is the first of EL's own ger homestays in partnership with the herding families of Erdenedalai. We focused on a region little visited by other western groups as this meant our support would have more impact. The income raised from this homestay provides an additional income to the herding families that host you during your stay. We work side by side with the family making sure our experiences are put together in a way which benefits the families, rather than disrupting their lives. As our guest you benefit from a more intimate and genuine experience.

Logistics

- **Accommodation:** With Nergui herding family. Hot shower MAY BE available at the local town shower house - your own private cubicle with plenty of hot water. Queue with the locals and enjoy experiencing a little of their daily way of life
- **Meals:** L/D
- **Travel:** Approx 280km total on dirt road (roughly 6-7 hours driving time not including stops). Averages of between 30 and 65 km/hr are usual but depend on road and weather conditions in the winter months



In the run up to Tsagaan Sar families prepare 100s of dumplings - often over 1000. Why? Tsagaan Sar symbolises wealth and prosperity in the family and is a celebration when Mongolians come together to show respect to the family elders and to renew friendship. The number of dumplings shows respect to the eldest member of the family.

Feb 25

Erdenedalai | Shiniin Negiin (New Year's Day)



This is shine negiin' - New Year's Day.

Wake up before dawn and join the head of the family in the most important of customs - greeting the first sunrise of the new year. You'll visit the family oboo - traditional stone shrine - and be part of this sacred ceremony. They will take food and offerings and voice words of gratitude and praise.

You then gather back in the family home to meet and greet with other extended family members taking part in the traditional zologkh greeting. There is no better way to experience this most traditional and most important of Mongolia's festivals.

Feb 26

Khogno Khan Nature Reserve | Elsen Tasarkhai Sand Dunes



Khogno Khan is a sacred granite mountain within an area of secluded valleys, fresh water springs, open steppe and the Elsen Tasarkhai sand dunes. Khogno Khan Nature Reserve was taken under state protection partly due to the specialised taiga and steppe plants that grow in this area. The small but vital Tarna River provides an essential water source for the herders in the region. At Khogno Khan you'll be hosted by the Davaasuren family.

One option is to explore the hidden interiors of the mountain on a 3-hour hike to the small working temple of Erdene Khambiin Khid and the ruined Ovgon Khiid Monastery. A birch bordered path leads to this location and offers one of the most beautiful panoramas of the region.



There's also an option for a camel trek along the Elsen Tasarkhai sand dunes. Your host Davaasuren is at his happiest on showing off his home landscapes of Khogno Khan. He's a bit of an entertainer as well and his camel treks can include sand sculpting, impromptu wrestling matches and singing.



Logistics

- **Accommodation:** Basic but private ger next to herding family. Asian style outside long drop toilets. No showers.



At Khogno Khan, we work with the Davaasuren family who have lived in the region their whole life. Due to their age, they are no longer nomadic but do keep a small number of livestock - including horses. Over the years, they have become accustomed to western visitors - they are a quiet couple and keep themselves to themselves so don't expect to meet them. However, they are located in an idyllic spot at the foot of the Elsen Tasarkhai sand dunes where they live all year round. This really is location, location, location.

- **Meals:** B/L/D
- **Travel:** 260km on dirt and asphalt road (roughly 6 hours driving time approx not including stops). Averages of between 30 and 65 km/hr are usual but depend on road and weather conditions in the winter months



Don't think that Tsagaan Sar is just a short celebration. Family that cannot visit family during the main two days will visit as soon as possible after - also friends and neighbours come to pay their respects. As well as the more traditional ceremonies, traditional games are played especially shagai - the ankle bones. You have been warned! It gets highly competitive!

Feb 27

Kharkhorin | Orkhon River Valley



Travel to the Orkhon River Valley - home to Tumeer and Jargaa. They are modern-day herders, a strong part of the local community and move up to six times a year.

The Orkhon River Valley is one of Mongolia's four UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It's a cultural WHS and represents the evolution of nomadic pastoral traditions in Mongolia - this region is considered the cradle of Mongolian civilisation and an area rich in nomadic life as the Orkhon River provides as essential lifeline for nomads and their livestock.

For those interested, visit Kharkhorin - the ancient capital of Ogodei Khan and the Mongol Empire in the 13th Century. You can choose to visit Erdene Zuu - Mongolia's oldest monastery - and the excellent Kharkhorin Museum with its clear and updated exhibits based on the history surrounding the Orkhon River Valley and the Turkish and Mongol Empire. Even if history doesn't really 'grab' you, we recommend a visit as it helps to bring the history of the area alive.

Logistics

- **Accommodation:** Basic but private ger next to family ger. Basic long drop outside toilet and no showers. Hot shower available at the local town shower house - your own private cubicle with plenty of hot water. Queue with the locals and enjoy experiencing a little of their daily way of life
 - **Meals:** B/L/D
 - **Travel:** Approx 85km on dirt and asphalt road. Approx 42 hours driving time not including stops. Averages of between 30 and 65 km/hr are usual but depend on road and weather conditions in the winter months
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Feb 28

Ulaanbaatar



Head back through the wild landscapes into the pace of city life. On arrival into Ulaanbaatar you visit the home of one of our Mongolian trip assistants - experiencing the Lunar New Year as it is for urban Mongolians. You'll enjoy a relaxed celebratory meal before returning to your accommodation.



Logistics

- **Accommodation:** Of your own choice
 - **Meals:** Local lunch and welcome drink
 - **Travel:** Free transfer
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Pricing And Group Size

For all of our small group trips we offer a sliding price scale. We appreciate your holiday funds are precious and so the more people that book so the price comes down and everyone benefits.

Group Size - Minimum of two. Maximum of six

- 2 Guests US\$ 1025 pp
- 3-4 Guests US\$ 875 pp
- 5 Guests US\$ 815 pp
- 6 Guests US\$ 750 pp

The above prices include a 15% discount pp as a thank you for choosing to travel with EL outside of the main season. We are keen to extend the season for the benefit of our Mongolian team and the rural families and Mongolian businesses we work with - to make tourism less concentrated around peak season (July) and to help the income of the people we work with be more evenly distributed. Thank you for being part of that :-)

Exclusions

Please be aware that our trip pricing excludes the price of accommodation in UB though. Why? Everyone is different is the standard of accommodation they prefer at the start and end of a trip. As there is now such a variety of hotels in UB it is easier to exclude this cost. I provide a list of ideas covering varying standards and budgets and I can also help with booking. There's everything from a homestay through to Airbnb, US\$10 guesthouses and the Shangri-La!



I provide detailed Pre Departure Guidelines but this is your 'quick (ish) glance' introduction to the EL travel style.

Why this section? I'm not greedy. EL is not a general travel agency and we don't want to be all things to all people. We are an independent micro business driven by the philosophy to support local so that our style of trip is beneficial to all. We use no outside agencies.

We are not perfect. We are just ordinary people trying our best to do something we love. We are not an ever-expanding group of travel professionals. We make mistakes. But we genuinely know and love Mongolia and are willing and eager to learn, develop and strengthen based on feedback from our guests and from all we work with. If it helps, we get repeat custom.

Travelling In Mongolia In Winter

Mongolia is the second largest landlocked country in the world. The infrastructure is basic. Mongolian people are tough and resilient and make their way of life in both the city and countryside look easier than it is.

Mongolia will challenge you and at times irritate you. We're on hand to iron out any niggles and make the experience as smooth as possible but please remember that most of these hiccups are part of life in Mongolia and therefore travelling in Mongolia. Also, winter trips can sometimes be susceptible to unforeseen problems which might result in last minute itinerary changes. Things will not happen on a perfect schedule and conditions will be very rugged - you will be required to step outside your circle of comfort. Please base your expectations on this important point. You will be expected to be flexible and patient and bring with you your willingness to participate and your sense of adventure and humour.

Travel Times

The travel times are listed under the breakdown of the daily itinerary (under the subheading logistics). Please make sure you are aware of these travel times but remember that an integral part of Mongolian culture is not to ask about the length (time) of any road journey. Mongolia can be a challenging destination, road conditions can change dramatically with the weather and some drives may become longer as a result. But, don't be put off by the road journeys. They're part of Mongolian life. Accept them as part of the experience - Mongolia really is about the journey as much as the destination. Also remember that sunrise is not until around 0830 and sunset can be as early as 1630 so this will also impact on the day.

Your Tour Vehicle - The Russian UAZ \ Furgon Van

- Our Furgons are driver owned but we support the drivers with maintenance fees.
- Each Furgon has a high wheel-base, ample luggage space, a sociable layout with forward and backward facing seats, surround side windows and most importantly, impressive off-road capability.
- As is typical with all Furgons, due to the design of the vehicle, seat-belts are not available (2019 although we're working on it for 2020. Get in touch for details if you're concerned) but our Furgons are fitted with grab handles in the passenger area.
- Each EL vehicle has it's own simple mobile kitchen, its own sunshade, a small library as well as a 220v inverter/charger. We only put a maximum of three to four EL guests per vehicle.

Your EL Team

Female Mongolian trip assistant

- As a female, it is important to me to use my skills and influence to improve the prospects for other women.
- We don't source the best guides that work the tourism circuit and that already have guaranteed work with other companies. Instead, we provide training and development opportunities to Mongolian women that want the opportunity to work in tourism (whether that be for a professional reason, for development of personal skills or for economic empowerment) but that other companies won't take as they don't fit the stereotype or have the Our female Mongolian trip assistants are dynamic women who are searching for an opportunity to train and develop and we provide that long-term opportunity.
- You'll travel with someone who sincerely loves their home country, loves their job and genuinely care about you as our guests. They also have a respectful connection with each of the families we work with and this leads to a more genuine insight for you.
- For us, this is a long-term investment and we invite you to part of this bigger travel philosophy. We're proud to be able to provide a starting block to women in Mongolia.

Male Mongolian Driver

- We employ ten drivers. We know each one and their family personally.
- They are not modern city men - they are more traditional men - often now overlooked by other tour companies who prefer younger more international Mongolians who speak English. We wanted to provide equal opportunities and so as our trip assistants are female and typically younger with a more modern outlook, so our drivers are all male, older and from more traditional backgrounds. We find it is a partnership that works well.
- Yes, their English is limited but their role is to handle the Mongolian roads and not to converse fluently in a multitude of languages.
- Our 'boys' have superb driving skills, are expert mechanics and are supremely talented at the skill of 'mongolclokh' - improvising the Mongolian way. It's a joy to watch so if your vehicle does break down, don't get angry. Instead, watch the drivers do what they do best - improvisation.
- They are of the strong and silent type but take the time to know them and you'll see why we employ them and why they are an essential part of our EL family and great, all-round men.

Our Local Long Term Community Partnerships

- We work with a network of local families throughout the country. These are long-term local partnerships we have built up over the 13 years+ we have been based here. These are also our own personal friendships.
- BUT ... We never ask a family to change their daily living for us. We do not try to change Mongolians or their way of life for our/your own benefit or comfort. We don't ask them to change their daily schedule or to put on an 'act' as this would lead to a contrived experience.
- BUT ... Guidebooks portray Mongolians as being warm and welcoming. They are. But they can also be stubborn, taciturn, reserved and very very indifferent. Yes, they can be welcoming but they really do not like displays of impatience, superiority, arrogance or anger and will make it known when they are not happy. They also rarely wear a watch let alone work to an agenda.
- BUT ... As in our everyday lives, sometimes plans change and a family has to go to UB (for a medical reason etc). You will almost certainly comment that you will wish you had more interaction with local families but their livestock and their family life must come first. Reverse the situation for a moment and think about the impact on your life if visitors wanted to document everything about you.
- BUT ... Nothing is planned in any program, because we do not disturb the rhythm of life of the working families visited. We are just trying to share / experience a portion of their life.
- **Yes, there will be tasks in which you can participate. But, you need to be proactive. Offer your time and help.**

Logistics - Meals

- Mongolia one of the most remote countries in the world with a population of 70 million+ livestock. The food Mongolians eat reflect this.
- However, each of our vehicles has a simple portable kitchen as it offers you more freedom and flexibility as we're not reliant on anyone else to provide meals. It also means we can have picnic lunches en-route so as we prepare them you can be exploring the local landscapes or sitting and taking in the view.
- But, it's not the same as a modern well-equipped kitchen. Also, your trip assistants prepare your meals and we're not professional chefs. Also, we take food miles into consideration and prefer to purchase produce local to Mongolia so we do not provide kale smoothies or Thai curries or paella or Chinese stir fry. We just provide honest, heartening grub.
- We buy as much fresh produce as possible but fresh fruit is not available daily. Please remember where you are and that there will be limitations as to what we can provide. If you're the type of person that must have five pieces of fruit a day then you may struggle.
- We often include the families we work with in our meals and so cook to please all including the EL team. However, we do adapt to those with dietary requirements. We frequently cater for vegetarians, those who are following dairy or gluten free diets and even vegans but as mentioned, there will be limitations in place.

Logistics - Weather

Mongolia's weather system has a reputation for a reason. We'll prepare you for what weather to expect during your trip (including links to the long-range weather forecast for the regions you will be visiting) and also provide a detailed packing list on booking. Although the temperatures can scare at first sight, it is a very dry cold and with good clothes, -25°C in Mongolia could be compared with -5°C in Europe. However, the concept of cold is very subjective! We need you to be responsible for yourself. Do not try to put a brave face on it. It is not a competition to see who is the strongest - remember your EL team and the Mongolians you will meet are used to the winter weather conditions. You may not be.

Accommodation - Family Operated Ger Accommodation & Homestays

- As much as possible we use rural family operated ger accommodation. We prefer to support this local form of accommodation as it helps provide a supplementary income and extra financial security for them meaning they are one step further away from having to consider urban migration.
- These are all families we work in long-term local community partnership with - we NEVER turn up unannounced and we never just turn up to a herding family demanding accommodation.
- The circumstances and type of ger accommodation provided will change from family to family. Consider them as small rural businesses NOT rustic luxury homestays. Some accommodation is offered by herders (maybe one separate ger), some is offered by 'retired' herders who no longer migrate (two to four separate gers), some by families that live in small town communities and some by families that own small ger camp businesses (mini ger camps of between 7 to 10 gers). On a couple of itineraries it may also involve sleeping on the floor of the family ger on a mat (such as in western Mongolia).
- Be prepared for a variety of standards. Please remember that this is someone's way of life and home and that they provide what they can in relation to their circumstances.
- Beds will vary in comfort - most rural family members still traditionally sleep on the floor so don't really understand the concept of double memory foam mattresses! See below for more details on toilets and showers.
- You should have your own private ger either to share as an EL group (small group trip) or on your own (tailor made trip) but we don't offer exclusivity as this limits the income of the families so do expect other westerners during peak times. We try to get the right balance but during peak season please accept that you might see other westerners

Accommodation - Toilets & Showers (Family & Homestay)

- **A majority of Mongolia's population do not have access to running water.**
- Toilets - Some will be better than expected. Some will be worse than expected. Most will outside long (or short) drop Asian style and if it is at a family home then the toilet will be shared by you and the family. The toilets are not there to disgust you - this is the reality of life on the ground.
- Showers - Most Mongolians visit the local town shower house. So this is what you do as well. It gives you an introduction to real daily life for a majority of Mongolians in both urban and rural areas as well as a hot shower. You get your own private cubicle with plenty of hot water. Queue with the locals and enjoy experiencing a little of their daily way of life

Accommodation - Local Hotels

- We don't use hotels in all itineraries.
- Where we do use a hotel, it is locally owned - built for the passing Mongolian trade rather than for western visitors so they have been built with the local population in mind so they are not corporate chains. However, one or two will pleasantly surprise you.
- Why do we do this? It brings money and support into the local communities. As well as staying at the hotel we eat in local restaurants and buy our tour produce from the local market so you get a more real insight into the way of life for the locality.

Accommodation Winter

- Facilities will be more limited than you have maybe experienced on previous winter trips elsewhere.
- In towns, accommodation is heated through a central piping system which gets turned on in late September and turned off in May. You may find the rooms overly warm and stuffy but there is typically no thermostat so the only option is to open a window.
- Apart from in the towns, your accommodation will be in family provided accommodation where there won't be hot showers and the toilets will be OUTSIDE Asian style long drops. All family accommodation will be prepared for winter and heated by a stove but you're probably used to an insulated house with central heating. There is a substantial difference.

21st Century Mongolia



Mongolia is frequently depicted as a pristine untouched wilderness little changed since the time of Chinggis Khan. But this is not 21st Century Mongolia - this is stereotype or clichéd Mongolia. The traditional culture still remains but there is a drive for modernity and progress.

Our trips focus on 21st Century Mongolia - we try to provide a 'realistic' overview rather than that portrayed by guidebooks and other tour companies. To just want to experience the life of the traditional nomadic way of life is to ignore a majority of the population. We're proud of the long-term local community partnerships we have formed with all spectrums of Mongolian society - from a philanthropist in Ulaanbaatar, to female Kazakh eagle huntresses and also the Tsaatan community. However, Mongolians live in the cities of Darkhan and Erdenet. They also live in the other provincial centres as well as the smaller town and rural communities. There are teachers and Christians and those with disabilities and policemen and musicians and military personnel and accountants and miners and geologists and drivers and shop owners and construction workers and street cleaners - they are all Mongolians.

Don't come in search of what you term the authentic Mongolia. Discard the perceptions that perpetuate the stereotypes of Mongolia and aim for a more true encounter of real life. We ask you to ditch your preconceptions based on what you've read and watched. Instead come with an open mind and be challenged, surprised and often delighted.



There's a hunger for knowledge, understanding, and excellence that drives Mongolian society, and things are changing quickly, but remember that a lot of major changes have happened within just a couple generations. Be patient with Mongolia. While it works through the changes that are going to make it a better place, savour the gifts it offers and try to spend less time worrying about small issues that aren't being met - such as hot showers or lack of western toilets. Remember, Mongolians are living this life everyday through all seasons not just for a few weeks.

Mongolians are tough people and make living in their country look easy. But, Mongolia is not an easy option - tourism is still in its infancy so there is only a rudimentary tourist infrastructure in place. It's actually quite refreshing but will be challenging for you.

As Jack Weatherford writes in *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* - 'Compared to the difficulty of daily life for the herders, living permanently in those areas, ours were only the smallest of irritations.'

Any questions, queries or concerns? Just send them across to me at jess@eternal-landscapes.co.uk. I am always happy to be of help!

Jess