A Caravan trek through…

the Land of the Khans

DETAILED DOSSIER

16 day itinerary

Ulaanbaatar – Karakorum – Tsetserleg (Naadam)
– 6 day exploratory trek through Khangai Mtns to
Suvarga Khairkhan sacred mountain – Orkhon Valley
– Orkhon waterfall – Khogno Khan – Ulaanbaatar

Travel dates

Friday 7 July – Saturday 22 July 2006

INTRODUCTION

Mongolia’s pristine natural environment makes it one of the last places in Asia
that can truly satisfy the traveller’s quest for freedom and the great outdoors.
Vast rolling grasslands, azure blue lakes ringed by ancient Siberian forests,
snow-capped peaks and undulating desert sands create the backdrop to a
nomadic, Buddhist world far removed from the stresses and strains of modern life.

The Oriental Caravan travels ‘off-road’ on a journey through the sparsely inhabited
Arkhangai province, stopping in Tsetserleg for the National Day festival of Naadam
– the nomad Olympics – where archers, wrestlers and horseman of all ages amaze
the crowds with their skill in the ‘three manly sports’. We spend time in the present
capital Ulaanbaatar before travelling westwards to Karakorum, the ancient capital
of the world’s largest-ever empire, 800 years after its founding. We then load our bags
onto pack animals and hike through unspoilt Alpine wilderness to the little known holy
mountain of Suvarga Khairkhan (3,175m) before emerging into the beautiful
surroundings of the Orkhon valley, birthplace of Genghis Khan himself.

Update: The authorities in Mongolia have yet to confirm the Naadam dates for 2006
so it is not currently possible to confirm that we will see the festival in Tsetserleg -
if so we hope to be able to take in the events elsewhere.
**ITINERARY**

**Day 1 Ulaanbaatar** We arrive in Ulaanbaatar to be met by our Mongol hosts and driven the short distance to our hotel. The make-up of the rest of the day depends on the preferences of individual group members, and may be spent relaxing at the hotel, at leisure in and around the city, or alternatively we may visit Gandantegchinlen Khiid, the largest and most important monastery in Mongolia. The monastery contains a huge, twenty metre high, gold and bronze statue of Avalokitesvara (Janraisig/Chenresig), the bodhisattva of compassion. The current statue was erected in 1996 to replace the original which, 60 years earlier, had been taken away by the Russian communists, melted down and turned into bullets. If time permits we may also visit the Russian-built Zaisan memorial from where there are fine views over the city. **Overnight – hotel**

**Day 2 Ulaanbaatar** Today the whole day is given over to exploring Ulaanbaatar – a pleasant, laid-back city with its own intrinsic atmosphere, that more than justifies the four nights that we will be spending here in total. Previously called Niislel Khuree (Capital Camp) the city was given its current name (meaning Red Hero) in 1924, after Mongolia became the world’s second communist state. Today Ulaanbaatar is home to more than a third of the country’s population, many of whom live in *gher* (felt tents) on the outskirts of town. Now that centuries of Chinese and Russian overlordship have come to an end there is a palpable optimism in the city and wherever one looks great change is taking place, making this a fascinating and exciting time to be a visitor to this town. Today, as well as visiting key cultural sites such as the Choijin Lama Temple Museum, with rich collection of Tsam masks, we will spend time at the National History Museum and the Winter Palace of Bogd Khan. **Overnight – hotel**

**Day 3 Karakorum** This morning we set out on a six hour drive to Karakorum, the ancient capital of the Mongol Empire. Founded in 1220 by Genghis Khan, Karakorum was to be the centre of Mongol expansionism for forty years before the capital was moved to Beijing, then known as Khanbalik. There is little physical evidence of the original walled capital but a strong sense of history still lingers in a place from which the world’s largest empire was once administered. Nearby we visit Erdenezuu which became Mongolia’s first Buddhist monastery when it was established in 1586. Although it suffered greatly during the years of Soviet rule a significant amount of religious artefacts and statuary remain intact. In fact on arrival one of the first things visitors notice is that the entire monastery is surrounded by a huge protective ‘fence’ of 108 white stupas. Later in the day we drive to a *gher* encampment — home to the largest *gher* in the world — where we will be spending our first night in a traditional Mongolian felt tent. This makes for a surprisingly comfortable experience in relatively ‘luxurious’ surroundings – our felt lined dining room has in fact an impressive chandelier hanging from the centrepoint of its vaulted ceiling! **Overnight – gher**

**Day 4 Tsetserleg** Arkhangai Aimag (province) has some of Mongolia’s most impressive scenery: huge forests, broad rivers, wide tracts of pastureland and numerous volcanoes and volcanic lakes. It is through such dramatic landscapes that we continue our drive to the province’s charming capital, Tsetserleg, where we will break our journey for a couple of days to join in the annual Naadam festivities. While in town we will also make a visit to the Zayayan Gegeenii Sum museum – arguably Mongolia’s best – which is housed in an intact, 16th century monastery. The museum has a fine collection of cultural and religious artefacts, which provide a valuable insight into Mongolia’s traditional lifestyle. **Overnight – camp**

**Day 5 Tsetserleg** Today we attend the first day of the great Naadam festival in Tsetserleg. This festival, with its origins in the trials of strength of Genghis Khan’s armies, and the Ovoo-worship Festival of old, is in fact a Soviet-inspired event that coincides with the anniversary of the 1921 communist revolution in Mongolia. Naadam is held throughout Mongolia, and is without doubt the highlight of the cultural calendar. Although the largest gathering takes place in Ulaanbaatar we consider the events in Tsetserleg to be more authentic and less ‘touristy’ compared with the national ‘showcase’ in the capital. Joining the crowds at this regional fair should allow us to gain a better understanding as well as a better view of the day’s events which will include horseracing, archery and wrestling, with plenty of prestige and prize-money for the winners. This year the
Day 6-12 Holy Mountain trek From Tsetserleg we continue to ‘Red Rock’ where we leave our vehicles behind and begin our exploratory trek (easy to moderate in its level of difficulty) through the Khangai mountains. At first our luggage will be transported by yak cart, then as the terrain changes, it will be transferred to the backs of packhorses. For the next six days we will trek through larch forests and an Alpine landscape of springs and small rivers, passing ovoo (typically piles of stones and animal bones atop hills and passes) which in forested areas are sometimes made of branches into the shape of a domed hut. Ovoo-building is an ancient custom common among all people of central Asia, which existed long before the arrival of Buddhism, and even pre-dates the coming of Shamanism – the worshipping of ancestral spirits. Cairns designed as tombstones later became shamanistic altars, and the focus of archaic funerary cults and cremation rituals. Offerings of food and money are left in the hollow space provided or indeed any space that can be found between the stones. Having walked clockwise around the ovoo three times pilgrims might throw milk or vodka onto the stones to ensure good luck while travelling. On the fifth day we reach the highlight of our trek the holy mountain of Suvarga Khairkhan (3,175m) – an important place of worship for local people. (Please note that as this is a ‘virile mountain’ tribal elders sometimes request that women not climb the last 400 metres to the summit. If this is the case female members of the group can instead walk up to a small lake at around 2,800m). The initial part of our descent is on fairly rocky ground, but after a few hours we find ourselves walking across vast steppe, alongside a river on the southern slope of Khangai mountain which will eventually lead us to the beautiful Orkhon Valley, where we will rendezvous with our drivers, vehicles and any members of the group who have not accompanied the trek.  

Day 13 Orkhon Valley We spend this day in and around the Orkhon valley, a particularly beautiful area rich in Bronze Age remains. At some stage we will also travel to Ulaan Tsutgalan and to the impressive 24 metre high waterfall in an area of the valley covered by ancient lava flows.  

Day 14 Khogno Khan Onwards to Khogno Khan mountain (1967m), where we have time to relax or hike amidst huge wind-eroded rock formations and forests of silver beech. We will be staying at the heart of a nature reserve rich in wildlife including ibex and wolves. As well as exploring the ruins of the 17th century Uvgeg Khiiid monastery settlement, which was destroyed as a result of internecine warfare, but whose foundations remain well-preserved on its granite bedrock. We will also have time to visit the newly restored temples at the foot of the mountain.  

Day 15 Ulaanbaatar We return to our base in Ulaanbaatar. In the evening, our hosts will have organised a performance of traditional song and dance, followed by a mighty Mongolian feast to bid us farewell.  

Day 16 Journey's end... The Oriental Caravan heads home
PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Tour price (excluding international flights) – £1485 per person on a twin share basis

Group size & Leader  The group will comprise between 4 and 12 members, and will be escorted throughout by an experienced Western tour leader from The Oriental Caravan. In Mongolia we will be joined by a local, English-speaking guide, who will be assisted by drivers/cooks and other support staff where applicable, included local horsemen and nomad guides.

Transport  Our main means of transport in Mongolia will be Russian jeep. While on the trek yak-carts and packhorses will be used to transport the luggage.

Accommodation  In Ulaanbaatar (3 nights) the group stays in comfortable, centrally-located (3-4 star equivalent) hotel. Once 'on the road' we will be sleeping for a total of three nights in traditional gers (2-4 people sharing) and will spend ten nights ‘wilderness camping’ (2-person tents) with the benefit of full ‘cook and camp support’.

Food  In Mongolia all meals are provided, including the Mongolian banquet on the evening of day 15 and all other lunches and dinners while in Ulaanbaatar.

Health Formalities  There are no statutory requirements for visiting Mongolia. You may however want to consult your doctor/travel clinic for advice regarding elective immunisation, and perhaps undergo a routine check-up if undertaking the trek for which a good overall level of fitness is required.

Insurance  It is a condition of travelling with The Oriental Caravan that each group member has adequate baggage cover, and be insured against medical and personal accident risks (including the cost of repatriation). All group members will need to provide The Oriental Caravan with copies of their insurance policies prior to departure from their home country, as confirmation of their insurer’s willingness to cover their participation in all activities detailed in the published itinerary, e.g. trekking. In addition, it is strongly recommended that all travellers take out cancellation insurance at the time of booking to cover their costs should they, for any reason, need to cancel prior to the commencement of the trip. (The Oriental Caravan is able to provide details of a suitable single or multi-trip insurance policy – please enquire for details).

Passport & Visa  All nationalities require a passport valid for at least 6 months beyond the date of final departure from Mongolia. A visa is required for Mongolia (30 day tourist). This is best obtained directly from the respective consulates, or through a visa service such as Travcour (+44 020 7223 5295) in the UK.

Special Equipment  Group members will need a four-season sleeping bag or three-season bag with liner, a sleeping mat, a three/four-season thermal jacket, and UV sunglasses and skin protection. Those undertaking the trek will need strong waterproof boots that have been ‘worn in’. More detailed information regarding suitable clothing, what to pack and other practicalities is included in the ‘Pre-departure Information’ that will be sent to group members closer to the date of departure.

This dossier, and the itinerary it describes, have been carefully compiled and are provided in good faith. As with any such journey to a remote destination unusual and unexpected conditions can occur at any time and this kind of holiday can be subject to unforeseen changes; to fully enjoy this kind of travel it is, on occasion, necessary for participants to be prepared to adopt a certain amount of flexibility.

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