

Trip to Mongolia

Sept 8 – 23, 2026 Mona and Rick Crandall

Before this trip we knew nothing about Mongolia.

I had seen the film *The Eagle Huntress* (great) and later saw that GeoEx had a trip to that exact Eagle Festival in Mongolia. That's all I needed.

The trip was intense and at times making do in raw country, so maybe not for everyone, but we were well cared for, had a blast – unusual

experience,
and we never
rested.



Mongolia from the air –
Altai Mountains and flat Gobi high desert (4500').



One of the highlights of the trip was learning about Mongolia - its complexity and its changes. It is land-locked and sandwiched between China and Russia. Here is my briefest just-learned history since 1600 when the Manchurians possessed all of China and Mongolia.

In 1910 the local populace in China caused the collapse of the 2000-year imperial rule, energized by the earlier Boxer Rebellion. Mongolians cleverly took advantage of the chaos and declared its independence in 1911, a year before China was officially formed in 1912. However, by 1919, the new China decided it wanted Mongolia. They marched in, jailed the Mongolian king and took over. The Mongolians desperately reached out to other countries for help. It was Russia who got interested and decided Mongolia would be a good buffer from China.

In 1921 the Russian Communists (Red Russia) invaded Mongolia and kicked out the Chinese and the White Russians (the Bolsheviks who were the prior aristocrats) who were hiding in Mongolia.

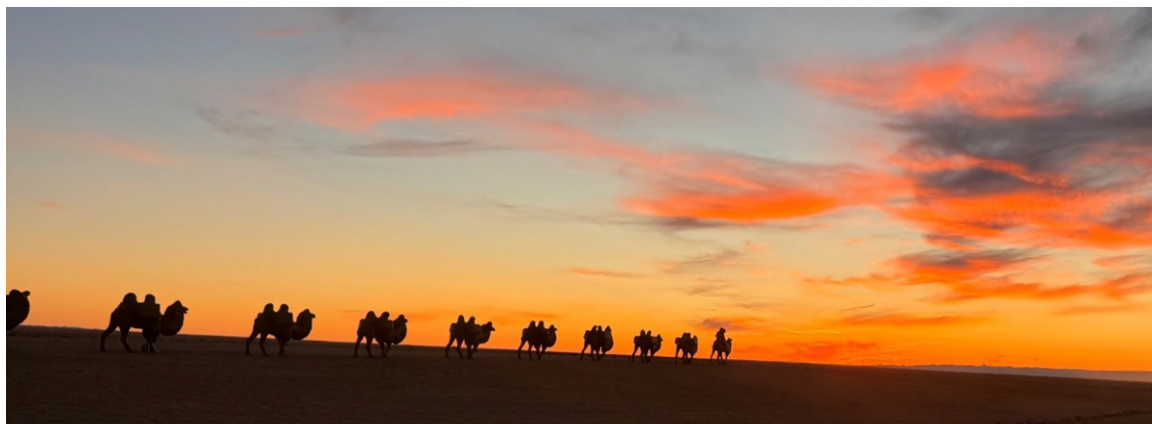
Mongolia became a controlled ally and buffer, but never a USSR state. A fully socialist government was installed officially in 1924. The state took over all private property, all businesses and eliminated all religions. People all became state workers, receiving same modest pay for work and in return, they got a few improvements like better medical treatment and education but lost all independence and personal liberties.

Mongolia had become the second largest Buddhist country gradually since 1700, but Russia proceeded to kill over 35,000 monks who were assumed to be the intelligence of Mongolia. Socialist conditions remained until another major change in 1990 when the Berlin wall came down and the USSR broke up. Once again, during that commotion, Mongolians took advantage and declared independence through peaceful demonstrations. Its youth chose democracy and installed a multi-party, elected Parliament mimicked from what it saw happening in Eastern Europe.

Mongolians had always been largely nomadic living off the land and their livestock – cattle, horses, cashmere goats and yaks. Today there are 3.5 million Mongolians, half of which reside in the capital, plus 60 million animals owned and cared for by the nomads. They are a strongly independent people, free, proud of their democratic status and trying to hold on to their culture in the modern world.

The Silk Road and Tea Road – Ulaanbaatar, the Capital.

A branch of the Silk Road (called the Tea Road) winds its way from China to Europe as a major trade route for silk, tea and many other goods. Ulaanbaatar was a major stop along the way and became the capital of Mongolia with population growing to 1.7 million people.



Camel caravan statues commemorating the Tea Road connecting China with Russia via the Gobi Desert for the tea trade.



The stone caravan in daylight.

As the country progressed it realized it needed more of an

export economy than goat wool. Minerals were discovered and since about 2016, mining grew rapidly with the help of the U.S., Canada, Australia and China. Now copper, coal and gold are 50% of Mongolia's economy. Nomadic life is gradually shrinking but is firmly committed to its unique culture.



The massive enclosed "Black Market" in Ulaanbaatar – this section shows today's "silk road" of goods.

We overnighted in Ulaanbaatar and then flew the next morning into the Gobi desert, leaving the capital for further exploration for a few days at the end of the trip.

Our four days in the Gobi Desert at Three Camel Lodge in one of the white gers.



The Gobi desert is the largest desert in Asia – characterized by high elevation, flat grassy areas and sand dunes.



Our ger at Three Camel Lodge.

These can be assembled in just hours and have been traditional nomad homes for centuries.

Below left: Mona in the main living/bedroom

Right: - unusual luxury – our attached ger with private shower and toilet rooms. Later in the

trip it would get rougher. Thanks to Starlink, we even had occasional internet!



Four days in the desert? Doing what? Well it was packed!

There were 9 of us in the group with an awesome guide, Muuggi, who turned out to be the leader and trainer of the Mongolian Guides group. We had three cars, ours was a Toyota Land Cruiser with awesome suspension – there are NO roads in the desert!





We traveled to the Flaming Cliffs right on the Tea Road route – our first hike.

The rocks really looked flaming at dusk. It was the Gobi version of Alpenglöw.



We saw countless herds of Cashmere goats – yeah, we bought plenty of cashmere stuff.



Free range horses, cows and Yaks which do interbreed with the cows. Cowaks or Yakows?





Yup, we did the camel ride thing – this time on double-humped camels.



We hiked a stunning gorge in the Yol Valley one day and the next day, rocky uphill hike to 2500-year-old petroglyphs. There are lots of discoveries of civilization well over



4000 years ago in Mongolia and dinosaur remains as well. Some locals even tried to prove civilization began in Mongolia – but the Middle East wins that one.

Our best hike of the trip was up the tallest sand dune in the Gobi – 550 feet up, and steep.



The red line shows the route up. Mona flew up first and flabbergasted everyone – they had an earlier impression she was delicate – we know different! This was tough on me – 3 steps up, two backwards. My lungs weren't happy, but I was.

Of course, Mona always tells everyone my age – and they were amazed and Mona was in tears when she caught sight of me cresting the dune. She didn't know if I would make it (neither did I at times). It was very different



than hiking up a mountain.

We did more in that desert, but I need to get to the Eagles part of the story.



We flew way out to Western Mongolia close to Kazakhstan in the thick part of the Altai Mountain range. It is raw land and camping, but Muuggi had arranged another 3 cars, drivers, including Ishee, a great guy and former head of guide training and managed renting gers from locals who set up our camp in one morning. We even had a ger just for a kitchen (and chef from Ulaanbaatar) and a dedicated dining ger. We even had a portable Starlink powered by an old cranky generator. Our group of 9 turned out to be great travelers, not one



was a pain as often happens, and all with interesting backgrounds.

Here our ger was more basic. Heating from a wood stove in middle, toilet was a porta-potti, at least there was one per ger. Grass floor with rugs, but not too shabby compared to actual tents.

Muuggi, was amazing – full of info, always patient - for example, he made sure the wood stove in our ger was stocked and fired up by 5:30am before

we would emerge from our covers – temps were 55 – 60's days but 35 – 40's nights.



Animals always around – along with their poops, so we surely needed our headlamps at night.



The Kazakh Nomad Eagle Hunters and the Competition

This was everything I imagined after seeing The Eagle Huntress film. Every photo was better than the last one, so for the next pages I'll use lots of photos.



We visited a nomad family in their ger. They served us local food preparations, some strange but I ate it all and survived.

The head of family was one of the most famous Eagle Hunters, having won twice in 26 years competing. He was The Real Deal.



Here he is in traditional garb, super warm fox fur coat cinched by a unique belt style (I had to find one – turned out to be not easy). All the foxes were caught by eagles who eat the meat. He put a hood on his eagle to keep it calm and let us have a try at a hold.





I guess this festival is becoming more popular. 75 competitors showed, up 50% from assumed 50-60. There were lots of spectators and a big bazaar.



The competition field



The main event platform

Portrait Photo Collection:







A Demo Nomad Migration Complete with Animals and Disassembled Ger Components



Here is an example of Kazakh nomads in a migration. All the pieces of their ger are on two camels. Below shows their animals being shepherded by family horsemen.



The Start of the Eagle Competition – the Entry of the 75 Competitors



Ready for the games.

The first game has each participant taking his eagle up the nearby ridge and handing it off. He returns on horseback to the grounds. When the eagle is released, it must find its owner in the shortest time. There are three stone circles in the field at increasing distances from the release ridge. The participant chooses how far away he risks being vs the time elapsed to reconnect with his eagle. The seconds are counted and modified by the distance

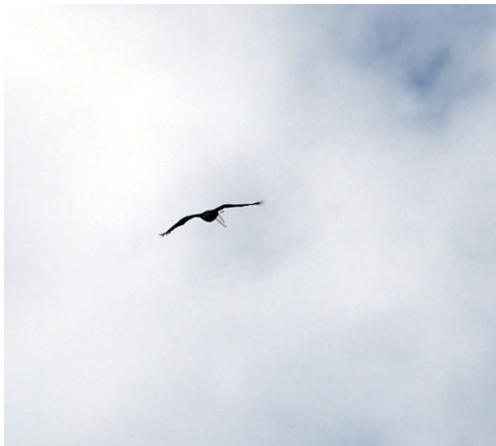
resulting in his numerical standing. We saw some eagles actually fly away, which does happen. Winning time was 9 seconds but typical times are 25 – 50 seconds.



Bringing eagles up the ridge



Eagle is released, timer starts.



In flight



Found its owner.

The Hunt

Next, the participant rides with a cord dragging a dead fox. Again, his eagle is released from the ridge and time to the eagle spotting and catching the fox determines the winner.





Here you can see one of the circular stone rings indicating distance of flight.

Next Game is the Coin Grab

The rider is timed from a standing start to full gallop and reaching over to grab a red bag of coins and tossing it at least one meter in the air. Only 20 of 75 even got the bag. Difficult.



A miss



Another miss



Nearly got it



Got it!



Clock determines speed of the gallop. Judges on the right determine if bag goes in the air.

Then the Really Grueling Game – Tug of War with a Beheaded Goat!



Goat body provides two legs to each tugger

They raise the goat and yank it down hard



Like – really hard until one lets go; and they can (and did) careen right into the crowd.

The Dating Game

Next was kind of a weird funny game. Kazakh nomads are Muslims (Mongolians are Buddhists). They claim to be shy about asking a girl for a date. There is a ritual at these games where single guys and girls are on horseback. The girl has a long crop. The boy touches a girl and gallops off. If the girl likes him, she gallops after him attempting to catch up and lash him with the whip. If she's not so fond of him, she just doesn't gallop as fast.



Looks like she likes him



She never hits – they don't look so happy

Macho Men with Their Eagles – Whooping it Up





This was an amazing festival and competition. The birds are Golden Eagles. They are captured either as chicks or in the wild, trained to hunt and compete for about 4 – 6 years then let free. They live till 30 or so.

We weren't done hiking. On the last day in the West, we visited the local provincial town that wasn't much but then we had a beautiful 3- hour hike back to our camp along a river rimmed with golden brush. Oh, I almost forgot to mention – no roads out there also, but there were some earth-moving signs there might be in future.





At the end of our stay in the West, we had a surprise excellent local performance by a duo with their two-stringed fiddle-like instruments and voice. They played both Kazakh and Mongolian tunes – was beautiful, right in our dinner ger.

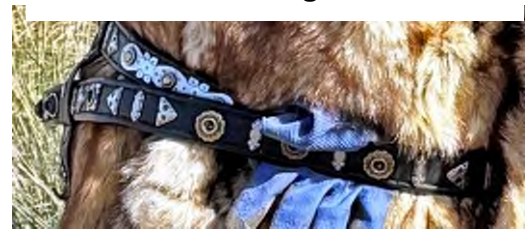
Ulaanbaatar – the Capital City

The next day we packed up and flew back to Ulaanbaatar. There we shopped, ate, stayed a few nights at the beautiful Shangri La hotel, wandered the endless Narantuul Market, also called the “Black Market.” They had everything

there, traditional Mongolian clothing and leather goods, household items, livestock, and secondhand goods.

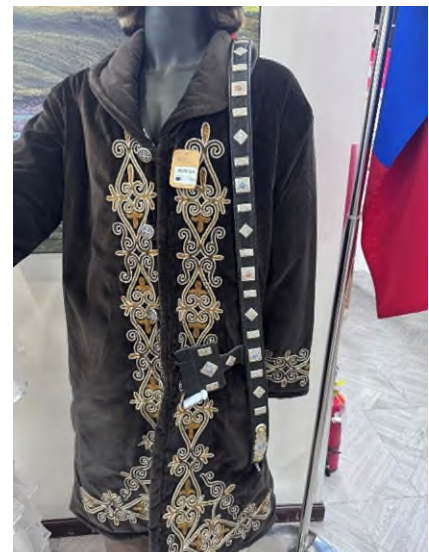
We had to be careful we didn’t wind up with stuff we’d never use.

But I was determined to find that Eagle Hunter belt



I researched the local Facebook market, explored the depths of AI, asked locals and our guide – nothing. And then in the unlikely State Department Store under a hanging preserved eagle was a mannikin with eagle hunter coat and A BELT!

It’s now back in Aspen and needs to be resized.





In the evening we went to a performance of the Tumen Ekh Ensemble, Mongolia's premier traditional folk song and dance performing arts group. Their mission is to preserve and celebrate Mongolia's centuries-old nomadic heritage and cultural traditions.

That was captivating in parts, unusual in others - and quite varied.

Example Dance here: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/u1hi26ujp4ulse8b5gj5u/Tumen-Ekh-Dance.mov?rlkey=ufo1tehd5jr2w382xm9tyl1&dl=0>

Their tribute to American music:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/0dte8ajem7f6d22m5xice/Tumen-Ekh-Ensemble-American-music.MOV?rlkey=bdugz60daespv28rv3uukklm6&dl=0>



I had heard of traditional throat signing but had never heard it in person before.

Called **Khoomei**, it is an ancient, mesmerizing art of overtone singing where a single vocalist produces two or more distinct pitches simultaneously. In 2009, it was inscribed onto the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Listen to a throat signing example here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/6q65rxoxy26y71dc8uadk/Mongolian-Throat-Singing.mov?rlkey=rbhgkxfma5tbnfqc82ia2ml5&dl=0>

It requires precise control over the vocal tract, respiratory muscles, and diaphragm.

The Drone: The singer anchors the performance with a low, continuous bass drone produced by tightening the vocal cords. **The Overtone:** Simultaneously, by manipulating the mouth cavity, changing the shape of the lips, and shifting the tongue, the singer filters and amplifies specific high-pitched, flute-like harmonics. This creates a clear, floating melody independent of the bass line

Of course we had to visit at least one Buddhist monastery, so we went to the biggest one, called the Gandan Monastery established around 1809 and mostly survived the Russian occupation and religious purges. Its Tibetan name translates to “Great Place of Complete Joy” and serves as the spiritual center of Buddhism in Mongolia.



It features the Migjid Janraisig Statue, the biggest buddha in Mongolia. It is the bodhisattva of compassion – a massive 87 feet high-gold gilded and adorned with precious stones. It was worth a photo in the story.

We had a magnificent private farewell dinner and our thoughts turned to the long journey home. We had heard of ground stops in Tokyo Narita due to weather, U.S. east coast airports shutting down due to an Amtrak cable cut in New Jersey – but we had an amazing problem-free trip back to Aspen.

Ulaanbaatar to Tokyo (5 hours) to Houston (12 hours) to Denver (2 hours) to Aspen (1/2 hour) with only

1 ½ hour layovers at each leg, and it all worked like clockwork – go figure!

We both felt this was an amazing and unusual trip, maybe not for everyone because lots of hiking and roughing it more than luxury hotels in cities, such as no running water, warm water from a carafe poured into a bowl, no electricity, using a porta-potti and enduring very bumpy roads.

The highlights? Learning the culture and issues facing a part of the world we knew nothing about; the sand dune climb; the Eagle Festival; a good group of people and an awesome guide. And thank you GeoEx!

Photos by: Mona and Rick Crandall