



Photo: Jan Wigsten



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Photo: Haroldo Castro



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Orkhon Valley & Karakorum

Erdene Zuu & Tövkhön monasteries

This 5 day trip combines ancient history, religion and the diverse and beautiful landscapes of Central Mongolia. We visit Harhorin, or Karakorum, as the ancient capital of the Mongol empire was called during the 13th -14th centuries. Before it was destroyed by the Chinese Ming army during the overthrow of Yuan dynasty, Khubilai Khan's dynasty. The Mongol emperor who shaped today's China borders and the grandson of Genghis Khan. Little remains of the original city, as during the 16th century, the first Buddhist monastery of Mongolia, Erdene Zuu was built on the site from the rubble of Karakorum. The monastery was destroyed during the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s and the remaining temples were reopened as museum in 1965. Since the democratic reforms of the early 1990s it is a fully functioning monastery once again with about 40 resident monks. In stark contrast to the giant monastery of Erdene Zuu, situated in a broad fertile valley, the small and secluded Tövkhön monastery, is hidden deep away on top of a densely forested mountain. It was used by Zanabazar, the first Buddhist leader of the Mongols as his personal retreat. On the way back we visit Högnö Khan Mountain, a unique rock formation, situated on the arid steppe. Hidden among the rocks, another monastery, Erdene Khamba is being restored and nearby a small freshwater lake with ducks and herons can be found. We will stay overnight in gers (Mongolian yurts) in permanent camps, with restaurants and shared sanitary facilities for the duration of the trip.

Day 1: To Karakorum

We depart from Ulaanbaatar in the morning by bus or car for Karakorum. We will travel on one of Mongolia's few tarmac roads. There will be steppe landscape all the way. We'll stop for picnic lunch at place with sand dunes and camels, locally known as "Little Gobi" or "Elsen Tasarkhai". We stay in a ger camp near Karakorum for the night.

Day 2: Erdenezuu & Karakorum

In the morning we visit Erdene Zuu Monastery. Within its 400 by 400 meters long walls, it once housed 62 temples and 1000 monks were performing religious duties. Today only the three oldest temples remain and about 40 monks are in residence. At once a museum and a fully functioning monastery, Erdene Zuu is still one of the most fascinating sites of Mongolia.



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Usually we will be able to see the prayers. We will also visit the best Mongolian countryside museum here, exhibiting artefacts from ancient Karakorum. After lunch we drive up the Orkhon Valley, passing the village of Khujirt, famous for its mineral springs. The Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape was inscribed by UNESCO in the World Heritage List for the role it played in the formation of the first steppe empires, and the host of cultural remains including petroglyphs, stelaes and monuments. It also is a picturesque valley used as summer pasture by many herder families and their livestock. There are a lot of yaks. We stay at Ursa Major Ger Camp for two overnights.

Day 3: Tövkhön Monastery

Full day excursion to Tövkhön Monastery. We drive on along the Orkhon valley into the Hangai Mountains. We hike on a steep uphill for 2½ kilometers to reach the Tövkhön Hermitage retreat. We are rewarded with breathtaking views of the forested mountain range. Tövkhön is a secluded Mongolian pilgrimage site which sits on top of a rocky mountain ridge at 2312 meters above sea level, where Zanabazar the first religious leader of Mongolia composed the Soyombo alphabet. The first letter of this alphabet can be seen on the Mongolian National flag. The retreat features several minor caves where Zanabazar meditated in total seclusion. Today Tövkhön is a lively pilgrimage site for local Buddhists.

Day 4: To Högnö Khan Mountain

Today we will drive back east, and stop at Högnö Khan Mountain, to enjoy the grand scenery and visit the small and recently rebuilt Erdene Khamba Temple. It is possible to hike a short way to the ruins of Övgön Monastery, located in a green oasis hidden in the middle of Högnö Khan Mountains. A small freshwater lake with ducks and herons is situated nearby. We stay at a ger camp in the area for the night.

Day 5: Return to Ulaanbaatar

We drive back to Ulaanbaatar and have a picnic lunch en route. Check into your hotel and explore the city on your own.

Practicalities

Transport: This tour is supported by a jeep or minibus depending on the number of travelers.

Accommodation: We'll stay in Ger (yurt) Camps for the duration of this trip. These permanent camps are equipped with a restaurant and shared bathroom and shower blocks.

Staff: An English-speaking Mongolian guide will accompany you at all times. Other language guides such as Russian, French, German, Italian, Korean etc. available at additional cost, upon request.

Meals: The meals will be provided in the ger camps, or as picnic lunches.

Additional: We can organize hotel accommodation, city tours and transfers in Ulaanbaatar.

PRICES ex Ulaanbaatar:

2 - 12 members: **USD 950 per person**
Single supplement (4n): **USD 160**

Including: Guide, all meals outside Ulaanbaatar. All overnights in ger camps. All local transport and entrance fees.

Excluding: Beverages. Transfers and accommodation in Ulaanbaatar. Air or train tickets in and out Mongolia.

DATES 2018 ex Ulaanbaatar:

Daily mid May to end of September.

