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ACCOMMODATION

Like most things about Mongolia, the accommodation situation in Ulaanbaatar is vastly different from what you will find anywhere outside of the capital city. In Ulaanbaatar, there is a wide range of accommodation, from dorm-style places for US\$4 a night to suites in the Chinggis Khaan Hotel, which cost almost as much as Mongolia's gross domestic product. Outside the capital, hotel options are limited and generally poor in quality and services.

One unique option, particularly popular with organised tours, is to stay in tourist gers, which are like those used by nomads – except for the hot water, toilets, sheets and karaoke

bars. Also seriously consider bringing your own tent and camping – it's free, and you really experience what Mongolia has to offer.

Payment for accommodation is usually made upon checkout, but some receptionists will ask for money upfront. Remember that most hotels in the countryside will charge you a 'foreigner price' (which is sometimes double the local rate).

If you negotiate a reasonable price with the management, try to pay immediately and get a receipt. Asking for a receipt can sometimes drop the price dramatically; in some cases the staff will charge you the 'foreigner price' but register you as a Mongolian (ie put the 'Mongolian price' down on paper and pocket the difference).

Hotel staff may ask to keep your passport as 'security'. This is not a good idea, for three reasons: staff often do not show up for work (so the person with your passport cannot be found when you want to depart); once staff have your passport, it leaves you open to possibly being asked to pay more for your room while a taxi waits for you outside; or you may simply forget to pick it up and be 300km away before you realise. An expired passport, student card or some other ID with your photo is a great alternative to leaving your real passport.

Security should be a consideration. Always keep your windows and door locked (where possible). Staff may enter your room while you're not around; take any valuables with you or at least keep them locked inside your luggage and don't leave cameras and money lying around your room. Most hotels have a safe where valuables can be kept.

Apartments

Apartment rental is really only an option in Ulaanbaatar; see p82 for details.

Camping

Mongolia is probably the greatest country in the world for camping. With 1.5 million sq km of unfenced and unowned land, spectacular scenery and freshwater lakes and rivers, it is just about perfect. The main problem is a lack of public transport to great camping sites,

PRACTICALITIES

- The weekly English-language newspapers are the *Mongol Messenger* (www.mongolmessenger.mn) and the *UB Post* (<http://ubpost.mongolnews.mn>). Both have good articles, events listings and classified sections.
- Major private dailies in Mongolian include *Ardiin Erkh* (People's Right), *Zunny Medee* (Century News), *Odriin Sonin* (Daily News) and *Önöödör* (Today).
- BBC World Service has a nonstop service at 103.1FM. Local stations worth trying include Jag (107FM), Blue Sky (100.9FM) and Radio Ulaanbaatar (102.5FM). Voice of America news programmes are occasionally broadcast on 106.6FM.
- Local TV stations don't start broadcasting until the afternoon and switch off around 11pm. All the stations have political allies: Channel 25 favours the Democrats, Channel 9 prefers the MPRP and the others go with whoever is in power.
- Electric power is 220V, 50Hz. The sockets are designed to accommodate two round prongs in the Russian/European style.
- Mongolia follows the metric system.
- As in the USA, the ground floor is called the 1st floor, as opposed to the UK system, where the next floor above ground level is the 1st floor.

though there are some accessible sites near Ulaanbaatar, such as in Gachuurt, Khandgait and Terelj. Camping is also well worth considering given the poor choice of hotels and the expense of ger camps.

Local people (and even a few curious cows or horses) may come to investigate your camping spot, but you are very unlikely to encounter any hostility. Your jeep driver will have ideas about good places to stay, otherwise look for somewhere near water or in a pretty valley. If you're hitching, it is not hard to find somewhere to pitch your tent within walking distance of most aimag capitals and towns. You will need to bring your own tent and cooking equipment if you want to camp away from the main towns or avoid the local *guanz* (canteen).

To wash yourself, you'll probably need to use the local town's bathhouse. Many are listed under the Information entries in this book. Be aware, though, that the bathhouses won't be like what you'd expect to find in Turkey; in Mongolia they are simply for getting a hosedown.

Be mindful of your security. If drunks spot your tent, you could have a problem. If the owners (and their dog) give you permission, camping near a ger is a good idea for extra security; otherwise camp at least 300m from other gers. Mongolians have little or no idea of the Western concept of privacy, so be prepared for the locals to open your

tent and look inside at any time – no invitation is needed.

You can often get boiled water, cooked food, uncooked meat and dairy products from nearby gers in exchange for other goods or money, but always leave something and don't rely on nomads, who may have limited supplies of food, water and fuel. It is best to bring a portable petrol stove rather than use open fires, which are potentially dangerous, use precious wood and may not be possible where wood is scarce.

A few extra tips:

- Burn dried dung if you are being eaten alive by mosquitoes (you may then have to decide which is worse: mozzies or burning cow shit) and bring strong repellent with as much DEET as possible. Other anti-mosquito measures include wearing light-coloured clothing, avoiding perfumes or aftershave, impregnating clothes and mosquito nets with permethrin (nontoxic insect repellent), making sure your tent has an insect screen and camping away from still water or marshes (camping in hills or mountains is always better than low-lying areas).
- Make sure your tent is waterproof before you leave home and always pitch it in anticipation of strong winds and rain.
- Ensure your gear is warm enough for sub-zero temperatures, or you'll freeze. Cheap and flimsy Chinese-made tents

and sleeping bags bought in UB won't cut it, especially for camping in the mountains. Bring the best stuff you can get your hands on for an enjoyable trip.

- Store your food carefully to protect it from creatures of the night.
- Don't pitch your tent under trees (because of lightning) or on or near riverbeds (flash floods are not uncommon).

For more advice on camping responsibly in Mongolia, see p60.

Gers

For information of ger etiquette, see p33.

TOURIST GER CAMPS

Tourist ger camps are found all over Mongolia. They may seem touristy and are often surprisingly expensive but if you are going into the countryside, a night in a tourist ger is a great way to experience a Western-oriented, 'traditional Mongolian nomadic lifestyle' without the discomforts or awkwardness of staying in a private ger.

A tourist ger camp is a patch of ground with several (or sometimes dozens of) traditional gers, with separate buildings for toilets, hot showers and a ger-shaped restaurant/bar. Inside each ger, there are usually two to three beds, an ornate table, four tiny chairs and a wood stove that can be used for heating during the night – ask the staff to make it for you. The beds are really just smallish cots – if you are built like an NBA basketball player or a sumo wrestler, you'll need to make special arrangements.

Toilets are usually the sit-down types, though they may be (clean) pit toilets.

Prices for tourist camps often depend on the location. Where there is lots of competition, ie Lake Khövsgöl, Kharkhorin and Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur, you can find basic camps for under T5000 per night. Better camps or camps in remote areas may charge US\$20 to US\$30 (or more) per person per night, including meals. Activities such as horse or camel riding will cost extra. A surprising amount of the charge goes to the food bill, so you may be able to negotiate a discount of 50% to 65% by bringing your own food. This is pretty reasonable for a clean bed and a hot shower.

Meals are taken in a separate restaurant ger. With only a few exceptions, expect the usual Mongolian fare of meat, rice and pota-

toes. Most camps have a bar (and sometimes satellite TV and a blasted karaoke machine). There's often little to differentiate between ger camps; it's normally the location that adds the charm and makes your stay special.

If you plan to stay in a ger camp you may want to bring a torch for nocturnal visits to the toilets, candles to create more ambience than stark electric lights (though not all have electricity), towels (the ones provided are invariably smaller than a handkerchief), and toilet paper (they may run out).

Book ahead if possible. Not all ger camps have a phone so numbers in this book may be for the office in Ulaanbaatar, which will somehow get the message out that you are headed for the camp.

Except for a handful of ger camps in Terelj catering to expat skiers, most ger camps are only open from June to mid-September, although in the Gobi they open a month earlier and close a little later.

In a few touristy places, such as Terelj, Terkhiiin Tsagaan Nuur and Khövsgöl Nuur, private families often have a guest ger and take in paying guests. In this case the advice of offering gifts as payment does not apply – this is a commercial transaction. These families are rarely registered with local authorities so they don't advertise, so you'll have to ask around (any ger that is set up next to a road is a good bet).

TRADITIONAL GERS

If you are particularly fortunate you may be invited to spend a night or two out on the steppes in a genuine ger, rather than a tourist ger camp. This is a wonderful chance to experience the 'real' Mongolia.

If you are invited to stay in a family ger, only in very rare cases will you be expected to pay for this accommodation. Leaving a gift is strongly recommended. While cash payment is usually OK as a gift, it's far better to provide worthwhile gifts for the whole family, including the women (who look after the guests). Cigarettes, vodka and candy are customary gifts, but with some creativity you can offer more useful items. Constructive presents include sewing kits, lighters, toothbrushes, toothpaste, duct tape, Mongolian-language books and newspapers, and hand-powered flashlights and radios. Children will enjoy colouring books, pens, paper and puzzles.