

Out on the Steppe

If Mongolia sounds far away, then Outer Mongolia must surely be one of the most remote places on earth.

For the Chinese Emperors, the part of Mongolia that lay closer to Beijing was “Inner” (or nearer) Mongolia – the part with resources and pastures that made it worth controlling. The other half of Mongolia was, to the Imperial mind, a valueless void consisting of the Gobi Desert to the south and frozen Siberian wastes to the north.

Populated by Mongolian horsemen who stubbornly refused to learn Chinese or pay taxes, this “Outer” region was a part of the Chinese Empire barely worth the trouble and expense of controlling – it was placed under martial law and written-off as being beyond any value to the Chinese emperors at all. It was truly Outer Mongolia.

The boot had, of course, once been on the other foot – and both feet had been in the stirrups. In the era when China’s capital had been southerly Xi’an, Mongolia had invaded the Chinese North, conquered it and established a second Mongolian capital there – Khanbaliq.

Internal strife between the warring branches of the Mongolian royal family would eventually see Khanbaliq declaring war on Mongolia proper and bringing it under Khanbaliq’s control. But you won’t find “Khanbaliq” on any map today – because it’s now called Beijing.

China’s paranoia about Mongolia goes back hundreds of years. The Great Wall of China was built specifically to keep the Mongolians out. Once they’d placed Outer Mongolia under martial law, they even sought to erase from history the name of Mongolia’s most feared leader – Chinggis Khan, whom we renamed Genghis Khan.

Visitors to today’s Mongolia will see how effectively his name was erased – no palaces, forts or treasures of the “khan of khans” remain. The only artefact that can be certainly linked to his great Royal

Court of Karakorum is a stone statue of a turtle (a sacred animal to Mongolians) on a mountain top near the South Gobi settlement of Harhorin (the modern-day “Karakorum”).

But on the site of Genghis’s camp of war now stands an ornate lamasery dedicated to peace – the Erdine-Zuu Buddhist Monastery, built in the C17th, four centuries after Genghis. Gelugpa Buddhism was brought to Mongolia by Tibetan missionaries and has long been Mongolia’s national religion.

The country’s vastness encompasses a landmass three times the size of Germany – but with a population of just two million people who would fit into a single London borough.

Mongolians enjoy more space per person than almost any other country on earth. Nor do the extremes of climate (winters down to -50C, summers above +40C) dissuade Mongolians from settling apparently hostile environments like the Gobi Desert – which lies entirely within Mongolia’s borders.

There wasn’t a “capital” in Mongolia until the end of the 19th century – at least, not in the European sense.

The Royal Court of Mongolia’s priest-kings made an annual circuit of stays at different monasteries. It was only the arrival of the telegraph and the overthrow of Chinese rule in the 1920s that turned the monastery-city of Urga into a full-time capital.

The building of the Trans-Mongolian Railway in 1927 confirmed this status – but with the majority of the monasteries closed-down under Soviet communism.

Now renamed “Red Hero” (Ulaanbaatar) Urga enjoyed the dubious benefits of being a soviet satellite – the development of infrastructure (roads, electricity, heating) but at the cost of hideously ugly and randomly placed developments.

Mongolia conjures up images of iconic warlords, vast open spaces and a complex history. Neil McGowan discovers it is also one of the most enchanting and captivating places on earth.



Ulaanbaatar has the ostensible appearance of a European-type city (actually more of a Soviet province), but isn't typical of Mongolia – most of the temples were raised. Still remaining, however, is the Gandan lamasery, the centre of Buddhist worship and learning for the whole country and the “number one” must-see for most visitors.

Other attractions include former temples now turned into museums and the Natural History Museum's collection of dinosaur remains excavated in Mongolia.

Ulaanbaatar's latest reinvention of itself includes an eclectic range of nightlife, from Mongolian dumpling stand-up capps through to pulsating nightclubs, with new age coffee-stores and German microbreweries along the way.

Although this is all fun, it is not a “real” picture of Mongolia. For that you need to get out into the countryside, stay in a yurt “ger” tent, and make contact with the herdsmen – whose lifestyle still reflects the traditional eco-sustainable life of the steppes.

There are quite few tour camps within a few hours drive of Ulaanbaatar but are a complete contrast from the modern city and you really need to see both. Best of all, go for Naadam – the once-yearly festival of manly sports that celebrates the riding, archery and wrestling skills of Mongolian warriors of old.

FACT FILE

The Russia Experience
(0845 521 2910;

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has a full programme of trips to Mongolia and can also include the country as part of a Trans-Siberian railway journey. For example, the 18-day Outer and Inner Mongolia costs from £1340 per person based on two people travelling (excluding flights). Departures are from May through to September. This year's Nadaam Festival takes place between July 11 and 13.

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