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Inside Mongolia's new wave of luxury stays



Katie Lockhart

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Luxury travel in Mongolia: Where wild adventure meets five-star comfort. Photo / Nomadic Expeditions

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Gobi Desert glamping and grand hotels redefine luxury travel in Mongolia. Photo / Nomadic Expeditions

When I misbehaved as a child, my mother used to threaten to ship me off to Outer Mongolia. Now, I'm one of thousands of travellers who willingly make the journey to the most sparsely populated place on planet Earth.

You'll probably need to do a quick Google search to pinpoint Mongolia on a map. Sandwiched between Russia and China, it feels like an amalgamation of the two. However, its culture is uniquely Mongolian, a poster child for wild, nature-centric experiences.

Sleep in a canvas-covered yurt surrounded by the rolling green mountains as Mongol dogs herd goats and sheep outside. Ride through the sparse, vast deserts, where the only traffic jams are caravans of camels. Journey to ultra-remote areas to spend time with the indigenous Tsaatan reindeer herders. Or plan a trip around the annual Golden Eagle Festival to witness the ancient practice of hunting with majestic eagles.

Mongolia is a make-your-own-adventure kind of destination. And these fascinating outdoor offerings are just a few of the reasons that Mongolia has appeared on countless magazines' "where to go" lists over the past several years.

Since the country opened to tourism in 1990, high-end offerings have been limited, with budget hotel options dominating the Soviet-coded capital, Ulaanbaatar. But this year, the city's most luxurious stay opened on its outskirts.



Mongolia's new Ayan Zalaat hotel brings marble luxury to Ulaanbaatar's edge. Photo / Ayan Zalaat

Ayan Zalaat sits at the edge of the Bogd Khan Uul Unesco Biosphere Reserve, surrounded by the green Bogd Khan mountain. This stately stone compound feels like the European palace of an eccentric tsar. An ideal place to start or end your trip to Mongolia, its quiet location away from the capital's traffic jams makes it a supremely serene stay.

Light from the crystal chandeliers bounces off the imported Italian marble splashed across every surface of its massive lobby. Fresh off a red-eye flight, I arrived bleary-eyed and was quickly greeted with a cold towel and a glass of fresh seabuckthorn juice.



Ayan Zalaat, a new luxury hotel near Ulaanbaatar, features spacious rooms and diverse amenities. Photo / Ayan Zalaat

Its 32 rooms and suites are wildly spacious, decorated with Italian-inspired flair, neutral tones, Mongolian wool carpets and floor-to-ceiling windows with peek-a-boo views of the sprawling capital city.

Considering it's a boutique hotel, Ayan Zalaat's grand design and surprising variety of amenities make it feel much larger. The hotel has 10 different places to wine and dine, including an Italian-style wine cellar, a Japanese sushi restaurant and a Chinese restaurant serving lip-tingling plates of Sichuan chicken.

Don't worry, there's a chance to try traditional Mongolian dishes such as tsuivan, a classic stir-fried noodle dish served with house-smoked beef brisket and soy sauce, at its signature steakhouse restaurant.

There's also a 2500sq m spa with a large pool and fitness centre, a two-lane bowling alley, a pool table, a billiards table, a ping-pong table, three karaoke rooms, a dedicated temple for meditation with monks and a theatre where guests can watch Mongolian dancing and khoomei, traditional throat singing.



Three Camel Lodge offers 40 gers deep in the Gobi Desert's vast wilderness. Photo / Nomadic Expeditions

I started and ended my trip here, settling in after a long flight with a session at its Technogym-equipped fitness centre, followed by a massage where my Bhutanese therapist, Pema, combined stretching and lymphatic drainage.

Views over the city are a main feature of this luxe hotel, so it's only right that guests head down to experience them during a stay. Depending on traffic, a trip into Ulanbaatar can take anywhere from 15 minutes to one hour. Once you get there, head to Gandan Monastery to hear the monks' morning chants, to Soviet-style Sukhbaatar Square, and to the Chinggis Khan National Museum to try to wrap your head around Mongolia's thousands of years of history.

But for many travellers here, a visit to the Gobi Desert is the main draw. Whether you're a birder or a thrill-seeker looking to get away from it all, a trip to one of the world's largest and most famous deserts is a must.

Nomadic Expeditions has spearheaded luxury tourism in Mongolia since it started nearly 25 years ago. Founded by Jalsa Urubshurow, a Kalmyk Mongolian American, this locally-operated travel company creates customised trips through the wilds of Mongolia. But Urubshurow's happy place is Three Camel Lodge, a 40-ger expedition camp in the middle of the Gobi.

After an hour-and-a-half flight south of the capital, I touched down in the desert, where a 4×4 took me on a bumpy, gravel-filled road to this remote camp. My ger, a traditional circular canvas tent used by nomadic herders, was named after the Mongolian Pallas cat.

Despite the chilly desert temperatures, my ger was warm and cosy, decorated with Gobi Desert antiques, leather slingback chairs, Mongolian cowhide and wooden furniture handmade on-site. It also had a large attached bathroom, covered in slate, hand-carried down from a nearby mountain.

My first night was spent stargazing from bed, through the partial skylight in the centre of the ger. And in the early morning as the sun rose over the flatlands, I woke up to views of semi-wild horses running across the desert, hurried along by a herder on a motorbike.

Days at Three Camel Lodge are a buffet of exhilarating activities. Guests can take one of the hotel's bicycles or dune buggies and zoom around the desert solo. They can book a session with a local artist or the artist-in-residence to learn the art of jewellery-making or felt-making.



Guests can dine on tsuivan noodles or ride camels across Moltsog Els dunes. Photo / Nomadic Expeditions

However, a destination like Mongolia begs for far-flung adventures.

Among its most exciting are the Flaming Cliffs, whose hues change as the sun sets below the rolling hills. In the 1920s, scientists discovered the world's first dinosaur egg here, preserved in its sands. During our walk through the dunes, our guide led us to a dinosaur fossil he had found several months earlier. As the sky changed colour, we drove even further off-road to a sundowner overlooking the cliffs, with a private three-course dinner following.

If hiking stark, windswept landscapes is your thing, take a drive to Havtsgait Mountain, home to the Gobi's largest concentration of petroglyphs dating back 3000 to 4000 years. If you make it to the top of this steep hill, you're rewarded with endless views.

A visit to Moltsog Els, the Gobi sand dune region, is arguably one of the area's best experiences, and my personal favourite. Here, we entered the ger of a local camel-herding family, where we were served fermented camel milk and camel milk caramels. We also tried the herder's homemade Arkhi, a surprisingly mild alcohol also made from fermented camel milk.

Meanwhile, dozens of shaggy camels roamed outside, shedding their winter fur into the Mongolian wind. Jumping on the back of these two-humped camels isn't for the faint of heart, but bragging rights for exploring the Gobi Desert on camelback are well worth it.



Mongolia offers a blend of wild adventure and luxurious yurt stays, attracting many travellers.
Photo / Nomadic Expeditions

Back at Three Camel Lodge, we're greeted with cold towels and the owner's favourite iced tea recipe. Lunch and dinner here are three-course meals, with the majority of ingredients sourced from the Gobi, including asparagus soup and an expertly fried khuushuur, a Mongolian meat pastry.

After dinner and a nightcap at the homey Thirsty Camel Bar, I wander along the stone path back to my ger. As the moon rises over the horizon and the sea of stars appears above, it's hard not to think, "I wish my mum had sent me to Mongolia sooner".