Eagle Hunters of Western Mongolia Tour Report 2024

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Magical Mongolia. I don't know why but for some reason I was never very enthusiastic about visiting the Eagle Hunters of Mongolia. I can't pinpoint that reason. Maybe I'd just seen so many photo tours visiting them and everyone seems to shoot the same type of photos? Maybe just too many people had visited them and I feared they may have become jaded by visits from lots of photographers? I really don't know.

When I landed in Ulanbataar in September to lead the inaugural Wild Images tour to meet Mongolia's Kazakh Eagle Hunters, my fears began to subside. By the time we were on the plane to Khovd in the Altai, the fears had faded more. During the flight over Mongolia's incredible landscapes, including the rugged snow-capped Jargalant mountains, remote lakes and desert dunes, not only had my fears disappeared I became completely mesmerised by the countryside unfolding below the plane. We had been blessed with clear skies during our flight, offering those with a window seat a truly breathtaking introduction to the beauty of Mongolia in all its grandeur.

This trip surprised me in all the most incredible ways. Together with a wonderful group of guests we saw the northern lights, had two days of snow, received blessings from a Shaman, shot some incredible drone footage and, while living alongside two warm Kazakh nomad families, we had no less than TEN private photo shoots with eagle hunters while learning about and photographing the most lovely bucolic Kazakh life.

The final highlight of the tour was spending two days attending the Kazakh Eagle Hunter festival at Tolbo Lake where we watched members from both of our host families competing and enjoyed lunches with them in between events.

It was all such an incredible experience that none of us wanted it to end!

Ulanbataar

Arriving into Ulanbataar, the countryside airport with its modern and organised terminals, belies the nature of the city which these days is choked by traffic and filled with highrises. We hit the ground running after our morning arrival and decided to spend our first day doing some sightseeing around the city with our knowledgeable and fantastic local guide, Mendee.

After our long flights we went to the lovely Modern Nomads restaurant for a traditional Mongolian lunch before spending our first afternoon exploring the city.

Our first stop was Sukhbatar Square, with its scattering of beautiful European and Mongolian buildings. It was here we learned about the importance of horse branding symbols in Mongolian folklore which was fortuitous given that we would eventually see some beautiful horse brands in the Altai on this trip.

We then went to visit Gandanteglichen Monastery with its vaulted wooden ceilings and giant statue of the Buddha. We spent a little time here walking the prayer circuit with the faithful and taking photos of the main hall plus the surrounding satellite buildings before driving up to Zaisan Hill to get a view over the city and learn about its history.

Since we were all a little tired we had an early dinner at the modern Khuree Restaurant before heading back to our hotel to pack our bags in time for our flight to western Mongolia the following day.

Flight to Khovd

Blessed with clear skies, we left Ulanbataar by plane to fly to Khovd and those of us who had window seats were truly blessed with some spectacular views during the flight. We first saw the ancient snow-capped Khangai Mountains and then came the Bor Hyar Sand Dune belt adjacend the to Zavkhan River. We saw isolated "Soums", or administrative centres, like Dörvölin that seemed to be completely in the middle of nowhere and cut off from road connections! We managed to see Chandman, the town that is home to some of Mongolia's most famous throat singers and finally the layered snow covered Jargalant Mountains, home to Mongolia's largest number of wild Snow Leopards. What breathtaking scenery! It was hard to stop taking photos from the plane!

We stopped for a quick lunch at the lovely Steppe Hotel in Khovd before loading our gear into our comfortable 4WD Landcruisers and driving out to stay with our first Eagle Hunter family.

In the shadow of the Tsambagarav Mountains

Whenever you talk to Mongolian people about where the Kazakh Eagle Hunter nomads live, they will probably think of the Tsambagarav first. Our drive into the mountains first took place on bitumen roads but the really interesting section came when we left the civilised roads far behind and started driving deep into the countryside. We started to see our first domesticated Bactrian camels, large Kazakh sheep and yaks during this drive. We also began to see some wonderful wildlife including Whoooper Swans, Ruddy Shelducks and Pikas.

As our road meandered through mountain valleys we stopped to learn about Khirgesuur, the circular graves of the nobles dating back to the Bronze Age and also Ovoo sites of worship revered by Mongolian shamans.

Arriving at our camp under the blush of sunset we were greeted by our first eagle hunters. Alighting from the car the first thing we heard were the calls of their eagles and then we were warmly greeted by three seasoned hunters plus our hosts for the next three days. As the light was dimming we managed to capture some wonderful silhouettes of our hunter hosts with their eagles until the light finally faded and a large moon rose over the mountains. What an overwhelmingly fascinating and beautiful introduction to the Altai!

After a night in our cosy, wood-heated Gers we were woken at 0530 by the sound of calling eagles. What a fantastic alarm to get us out of bed and photograph our eagle hunter friends preparing to ride out to our sunrise photo shoot location in the blue hour.

We followed our guys out to an incredible viewpoint in our cars and even as we trailed them it was fantastic to watch them galloping out on horseback, hooves kicking up dust and eagles with wings outstretched to meet us. What followed was a scenic shoot with three fur-clad hunters in beautiful light and a backdrop of distant snowy mountains. None of us could stop with the photos! Well, that was until the hunters offered us to wear their furs and hold their eagles to get a feel for what it was like to be them. Each of us took turns donning coats and trying to hold a 7kg Golden Eagle on our arms for photos which was a great source of amusement all round and a fun way to wrap up our morning shoot before we returned to camp.

During the harshest light we opted to do some portraits of our hunters and hosts inside the gers and after a brief break with lunch we started on our drive out to our sunset shoot.

Bucolic Kazakh Life

One of the aspects of this trip that surprised me the most was our experiences of bucolic Kazakh nomad life. For some reason this is never spoken about much by photographers or visitors to the Altai and I really can't understand why. I guess it is due to the fact that Eagle Hunters are so mesmerising in their own right that many visitors tend to overlook the beauty of everyday nomadic life here. To me, anyway, this is a great shame.

Our first real taste of this way of life came on our way out to our sunset shoot that afternoon. We met Khurelbataar, one of Mongolia's most awarded shepherds (and yes, the ability of shepherds in Mongolia is recognised through competitions and awards). He was out herding his livestock when I saw him on his horse coming towards us. He had lived in the area since he was born and, after learning how to shepherd at the age of 15, was still herding animals 50 years later! He kindly allowed us to take his photo before we drove out to a magnificent location with mountains and a lake as our backdrop.

Sunset and Moonrise in the Altai

It was here we saw our first training sessions with our hunters where their eagles were taken to the top of a nearby hill and each hunter was tasked with calling them down and luring their birds with prey. The fastest bird on the prey was deemed the winner.

After this training session we went up the hill and stayed out until dark photographing the hunters in different situations before finally enjoying an open fire with them at dusk and a stunning rising moon over the lake. It was all a bit overwhelming in the end but the cold of the clear night skies drove us back to camp and that evening we enjoyed a meal of Beschbarmak, a local delicacy made from lamb, washed down with Kazakh cognac to warm us up!

The Northern Lights!

Prior to sunrise the following day, a couple of our group wanted to get up and see if they could photograph the freezing and clear night skies. You can understand why. With little light pollution the skies of western Mongolia lent themselves beautifully to celestial photography. Oddly, they were thwarted by some light pollution none of us ever expected. The Northern Lights!!!! We were based so far away from civilisation that none of us had heard they had been visible further south than normal. What a magical surprise!

As the sun started to rise we drove out to another incredibly scenic mountain location for our shoot with our eagle hunters. While this was a truly wild and remote spot, sadly the chill of the winds drove the hunters off the mountains and us back into cars to beat a hasty retreat. We managed to capture some pretty sunrise images but our time was cut short due to the intense cold so we started on our drive back, stopping to photograph some domestic yaks en-route.

Volleyball

When the sun finally heated up the day, we took some more photos inside our gers before our host family and group members got together to play an impromptu match of volleyball in the sun which was a great source of entertainment for everyone.

Menacing skies

After a break with lunch the clouds began to appear which somewhat thwarted our sunset shoot that afternoon. Still we managed to do some mini shoots of our hunters galloping their horses in the dust, doing some more eagle training and finally at our camp. The cold returned and I mentioned that it feels like it will snow, something which was not forecast at all for our trip due to the time of year.

A World of White

The next morning our wishes were granted and we all woke up to a world of white. Overnight the snow had fallen and we spent a magical couple of hours photographing our eagle hunter friends in this beautiful white light. The snow had even excited one of the horses who rose up on his hind legs with mounted eagle hunter and eagle in the ice! Amazing! It was so hard to stop taking photos in this unexpectedly amazing scene but our time with our family was coming to an end we were all getting very cold so we returned to our ger camp for a warm breakfast before packing up our bags to leave.

After saying fond farewells to our host family we started on our drive out of the mountains towards Olgiy. Just as we were about to leave the valley we got stuck in a traffic jam of livestock in the snow. We got out of the cars to find our shepherd friend Khurelbataar herding with his family in icy conditions. He kindly let us take some more photos before we embarked on our journey towards town. En-route we stopped to photograph some cinereous vultures in the snow and also a funny little car that was stacked high with livestock fodder and that had broken down next to the Khovd River near Olgiy.

Shortly before the town we stopped briefly to check out some wildfowl on a natural lake including a pair of Whooper Swans and their cygnets, feeding Eurasian Spoonbills, Ruddy Shelducks, Grey Herons and a Great Crested Grebe.

The plummeting temperatures made us realise that some of us were poorly equipped for the next section of our trip so we stopped at the town's Black Market in order to stock up on warm gloves, hats and scarves to keep us warm for our stay with our second nomadic host family in the Altai.

Our camp van had gone ahead of us to find a lovely spot beside the Khovd River for us to enjoy a picnic lunch. Sadly the weather was still cold and grey but the warm food was welcomed and even with the terrible weather we managed to shoot drones up to photograph the snakelike river valley on the edge of town.

Deer Stones

The snow persisted only for our remaining time in this valley. By the time we crossed a section of low-slung hills to visit our next family it disappeared. At the edge of where they lived we stopped to photograph our first deer stones. Unique to Mongolia, the deer stones of this area were simply elongated granite stones that had been stood on one end to mark spiritual sites for ancient Mongols. The ones we visited dated back to 6000BC and while we were walking around them I could smell onions. It seems we were walking around on wild sweet leeks that grow in Mongolia called Khomuul. Mendee kindly point them out to us and we tried them. They were delicious!

7th Generation Eagle Hunter Family

Arriving at our next hosts we were delighted to find out we were staying with one of the most respected eagle hunter families in all of Mongolia. After saying hello to everyone and introductions we were kindly invited inside to enjoy a cup of warm milk tea and curds, a Kazakh tradition. While we were inside, the clouds began to disappear and towards the late afternoon we enjoyed some of our first photographs with our family's eagle hunters, flying drones and also helping out with milking yaks!

We were blessed with the most beautiful red sunset before enjoying a delicious dinner inside the ger of our host, which had been decorated with some of the skins of his prize hunts including that of a Wolverine, a Pallas' Cat, foxes, a Musk Rat and even a Eurasian Eagle Owl!

Sunrise Relections in the Khovd River

Under the blush of dawn the following day we were treated to an amazing photo shoot with our host hunters next to the Khovd River. Pink skies announced our arrival and these gave way to clear blue as the sun rose over the hills. We spent a couple of hours photographing our hunters with their reflections in the river before watching them gallop across it towards us to get some action shots. It was a thrilling low level shoot with all of us lying on our stomachs on the river bank in order to get some fantastic action images of horses, eagles and splashing river water. Even as we were shooting we were all amazing to have a pair of Whooper Swans fly directly over our heads – close enough for us to feel the wind from their wings!!! Afterwards we noticed some hoarfrost still on the ground so we stopped to experiment with settings to capture bokeh in the early morning light.

Heading back to camp for a late breakfast and a break we enjoyed doing some portraits in our camp and also a lunch of Airag (fermented mare's milk) with Marmot (Tarvaga) which were both way more delicious than any of us had imagined.

Later that day we went out for a photo shoot with our hunters and we watched them training their eagles for the festival. This was followed by a proper hunt that was, sadly, unsuccessful. As we tried to follow the hunters in our cars we made stops to photograph a disused autumn/winter house with a quirky selection of gates and windows fashioned out of everyday items. We also found the skeletal remains of a yak which had most likely been picked clean by Cinereous Vultures in the valley.

Finally we returned to the river at sunset just as a local herder was taking one of his sheep across the water, most likely for dinner.

Our eagle hunter friends came to join us and we shot some more incredible photos of them beside a fire on the riverbank with the reflections in the water.

Returning to our camp we feasted on a dinner of freshly caught river trout and dumpling soup which transported all of us into another heavenly culinary universe!

Eagle Hunters in the Mist

On our final morning with our host family we woke up to a heavy hoarfrost on the ground and mist in our valley which turned into an incredible blessing for photography. We went out into the mist capturing silhouettes and our hunters with foregrounds of beautiful frost in the most glorious golden light.

After breakfast we spent a little time doing some souvenir shopping, buying goods made by the women in our family, before we left the valley on a blue sky.

On our way back to Olgiy we stopped to photograph our support vehicle driving through the river, a beautiful Muslim shrine, some more deer stones with a snowy mountain backdrop and also some quite tame domestic Bactrian camels.

We arrived in Olgiy by mid-afternoon and we enjoyed small excursions to visit the local museum for culture and buy cashmere before heading to our hotel where we all enjoyed our first shower in six days!

The Eagle Hunter Festival at Tolbo Lake

After a late breakfast the following day we went out to enjoy our first day at the spectacular Eagle Hunter festival at Tolbo Lake. Our drive took us past Yellow Lake where we were shown the winter homestead of our last host family and then we arrived to find both of the families we stayed with competing at different events so suddenly we became their impromptu 'rent-a-crowd' fans cheering both families on! It was lovely to attend this festival with them and a gathering of so many other hunters.

The opening ceremony had all of the competitors lined up while traditionally dressed Kazakh girls performed dances to herald the start of events. Over two days we watched many events including eagle hunts, an archery competition and eagle calling. The three horseback events included Tengii, where riders collected silk bags filled with coins off the ground and tossed them into the air; Kuzkuar where mounted women riders whipped their male partners galloping horses alongside them and finally Kukbar, a game involving a tug-of-war with a decapitated sheep carcass, similar to Buzkashi that is played elsewhere in central Asia.

Tourists were invited to participate in both a sheep weightlifting competition and also a match of tug-of-war which was highly amusing for both foreigners and Mongolian guests alike!

In between events we enjoyed some souvenir shopping and a lunch inside our designated tent, complete with bottles of red wine! Amazing!

At the end of the last day of the festival we hung around and watched the awards ceremony before saying a final farewell to our eagle hunter hosts. It felt a little sad to leave them after being blessed with so many experiences through their generous sharing of their culture.

Throat Singing and Traditional Mongolian Dinner

That evening Mendee surprised us with dinner at a local restaurant of delicious Mongolian food with live entertainment of a prominent local throat singer. While dining on a variety of superb dishes we were all enthralled to listen to the vast repertoire of throat tones and music, which was accompanied by the singer playing a Morin Khuur, a traditional two-stringed Mongolian fiddle.

A Shaman's Blessing

Visiting a shaman during your trip to Mongolia is nothing that can be planned in advance. Mongolia's fascinating culture combines elements of Tibetan Buddhism with a heavy shamanic influence and over dinner on our last night in Olgiy we heard about a local shaman who said we could meet him that night after dinner if we wished to. Fearing that a night visit with our first shaman would be bad for photos, I kindly asked if we could visit at sunrise the following day instead.. He agreed. We went and this incredible impromptu visit saw us all witnessing a healing ceremony and being blessed by Ochirbataar, our host shaman for the morning. What a fantastic ending to our stay in western Mongolia!

After our shaman visit we drove up to a wonderful viewpoint over Olgiy city, enjoyed an early lunch and then we flew back to Ulanbataar, where we were picked up and drive to Hustai National Park, home to the Takhi, the only truly wild horse species in Mongolia.

We drove into the sunset and stopped at our first true Ovoo, or site of shamanic worship, to take photographs of this at the last light of day.

Hustai National Park

Over the final two days of the tour we explored Hustai National Park enjoying encounters with Takhi, or wild horses, Marmots, Red Deer and a myriad of birds. It was also a wonderful way to learn about true Mongolian nomads and see our first carved ancient deer stones.

Return to UB

Hustai, by nature of its geography, lies quite close to Ulanbataar (or "UB" as it is affectionately known) so on a clear sky day we drove back to the city, stopping to photograph the Ovoo site in better light. We arrived in time to enjoy a sensational lunch at the Choisin Palace, across the road from one of Mongolia's premier wedding venues.

That afternoon we enjoyed some last minute cashmere and souvenir shopping, a visit the Mongolian Museum of Modern Art where we spontaneously commissioned some calligraphy works from an artist in residence and an incredible dinner of Mongolian Hotpot with our guide/driver team.

We all arrived as guests and departed as friends, connected by memories of one of the most fantastic photographic journeys of our lives!