

NOMADPHOTO
EXPEDITION

Mongolia Photo Tour and Eagle Training Experience

ULAANBAATAR — BAYAN-ULGII — KHARKHORIN — ULAANBAATAR

12 DAYS

JULY 4 – 15



Introduction

For twelve days, Mongolia opens itself to us in full breadth: fighters bracing before a bout, families welcoming us into their homes, horse races thundering across the steppe, white camels standing patient in the light, dancers whirling until their skirts flare, archers loosing arrows into an open sky, and golden eagles lifting from gloved fists into impossibly wide air.

We begin in Ulaanbaatar, the capital, but move quickly beyond it. Rather than join the mass-market crowds inside Kharkhorin's giant Naadam stadium, we seek out the rural Naadam, smaller and far more intimate, where ties cultivated over years grant us close, personal access most travelers never find.

We meet nomad families and their horses, great herds of them, and witness an actual horse taming staged against the dramatic backdrop of the open steppe. West of the capital, in Bayan-Ulgii, we stay with a champion of the Golden Eagle Festival and learn, in his own words, the story of the man and his birds.

The Kazakh eagle hunters, known as kusbegi, pass their craft from father to son and rarely speak of the training and bonding process with outsiders. Their eagles answer to the handler's hand alone, and every portrait we make carries the weight of that trust.



What Makes Our Difference

For the past ten years, we have returned to Mongolia season after season, and that continuity shows in every detail of this itinerary. It is not a route assembled once and repeated; it is refined year after year, each edition sharpened by what we learned in the one before, so that by now the logistics run quietly in the background and the days themselves can be spent looking through the viewfinder rather than solving problems.

That decade of return visits has built something that cannot be arranged on short notice: real familiarity with the families we work with in the field. The Kazakh eagle hunters we stay with, the nomad households who welcome us into their gers, the camel herders near Elsentasarkhai, all of them know us, and that history of trust is what opens doors that stay closed to a first-time visitor. We are not guests passing through once; we are people who come back.

Comfort matters just as much as access. We travel in modern, air-conditioned Toyota and Lexus 4x4s rather than the older Russian vans still common on the steppe, and we carry a Starlink connection with us so the group stays reachable even in the most remote stretches of the country. At the eagle hunters' encampment, where plumbing is otherwise nonexistent, we bring in portable Western-style toilets for the group's comfort.

And between the two demanding stages of the journey, the wild eagle-training days in the west and the immersive Naadam and nomad-camp days in central Mongolia, we return to a five-star hotel in Ulaanbaatar. It is a deliberate pause: a proper bed, a hot shower, a quiet night, a chance to recover before continuing. Ten years in, we have learned that a well-timed comfort matters as much as the adventure itself.



What Are We Going to Experience

This journey is built around proximity: to eagle hunters who guard their traditions closely, to nomad families who fold us into their daily routines, and to a rural Naadam festival that keeps its spirit intact, far from the stadium crowds of the capital.

We document the full arc of Naadam's "three manly games," wrestling, horse racing, and archery, photographing competitors up close as they parade in ceremonial dress, and the milling crowds afterward, proud in fine traditional clothing beside their medals and horses. In Bayan-Ulgii, we spend consecutive days with a family that has trained golden eagles for generations, learning the bond between kusbegi and bird that outsiders are seldom shown.

Portraiture runs through every stage: set sessions with models in traditional Mongolian dress at the Chojin Lama Temple, spontaneous street photography in Ulaanbaatar's mix of Soviet-era blocks and modern façades, intimate work inside nomad gers, and a private sitting with a Mongolian shaman. Landscape and documentary photography follow the herds themselves, from camel encampments near Elsentsarkhai to the 400-year-old Erdene Zuu Monastery, where monks still chant and burn incense in an active temple hall. The result is a layered record of a culture defined equally by its ceremonies and its everyday, unguarded life.



Itinerary

DAY 1

ULAANBAATAR

JULY 4



We are met on arrival and transferred to our hotel, then set out for a first look at Ulaanbaatar, the Mongolian capital, whose name translates as “Red City.” The city reads as a striking mix of eras: modern, westernized buildings standing beside the drab, uniform row homes left over from the Soviet period. We open with a spontaneous street session, working this contrast of old and new before touring the major sites and quieter back alleys.

From there we continue to the Chojin Lama Temple, a sprawling complex that Stalin’s government converted into a museum in the late 1930s, itself a rewarding subject on its own terms. Inside, a set photo session awaits with two models dressed in traditional Mongolian costume, offering controlled portrait light against the temple’s ornate backdrop. We close the day with a further portrait session with models in typical dress, refining composition and detail before dinner.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Street photography contrasting Soviet-era row housing with modern façades; architectural documentation of the Chojin Lama Temple complex; two staged portrait sessions with models in traditional Mongolian dress, using the temple’s carved details and courtyards as backdrop.

 Accommodation: Overnight in hotel Kempinski (5 stars) or similar.

DAY 2

ULAANBAATAR – ULGII

JULY 5



We transfer by car to the airport for our flight to Ulgii, capital of the far-western province of Bayan-Ulgii, home to a large population of ethnic Kazakhs, a nationally recognized minority who preserve their traditions with particular care. The day unfolds across two registers: a loose, off-the-cuff session exploring the town as we arrive, and posed, set sessions with local people who welcome us in.

Among these is one of the trip’s most anticipated opportunities, a first personal introduction to the famed eagle hunters of Ulgii. Along the drive we also stop for short landscape sessions, framing mountains rising sharp against a clear sky above rolling, seemingly endless countryside.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Candid street portraits in Ulgii’s Kazakh community; posed sessions with local families; first contact and introductory portraits with eagle hunters; wide landscape frames of the Altai foothills and open steppe along the drive.

 Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / Accommodation: Overnight in an individual large yurt with a Kazakh family (portable toilets provided).

DAY 3-4

EAGLE TRAINING
EXPERIENCE

JULY 6 & 7



Over these two days we are guests at an eagle training facility run for generations by a single family, learning firsthand how golden eagles are trained and flown for hunting. We spend time with a multiple-time champion of the Golden Eagle Festival, hearing the story behind his partnership with his birds and observing the discipline the kusbegi tradition demands, a craft rarely explained in such depth to outsiders.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Extended access to eagle training sessions; portraits of the champion falconer with his golden eagle; documentary sequences of jesses, hoods, and handling technique; environmental portraits set against the Altai steppe.

 **Meals:** Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Overnight in an individual large yurt with the Kazakh family (portable toilets provided) each night.

DAY 5

ULGII

JULY 8



Our morning stays with the eagle hunters for a final round of sessions before we shift gears in the afternoon, driving back into Ulgii town to close out our time in the west.

We later leave for Ulgii, capital of the far-western Bayan-Ulgii province, which is home to Mongolia's largest population of ethnic Kazakhs, a recognized minority who preserve their language, dress, and customs with particular care. Our street photography day here works in two registers: a loose, spontaneous session exploring the town as we arrive, and, set sessions with local families that we have been visiting for many years.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Closing portrait and detail sessions with the eagle hunting family; final wide shots of the eagle valley terrain before departure; spontaneous street photography around Ulgii town; posed sessions with long-standing local Kazakh families.

 **Meals:** Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / **Accommodation:** Overnight in a nice 4-star local hotel.

DAY 6

ULGII –
ULAANBAATAR

JULY 9



We fly back to Ulaanbaatar and check into our hotel, then visit Gandantegchinlen Monastery, known simply as Gandan, one of the capital's most important active Buddhist sites. In the afternoon we attend a traditional Mongolian cultural performance, among the most interesting and authentic staged in Ulaanbaatar, offering rich material for portraits of musicians and dancers in full traditional dress under controlled stage lighting.

📷 **Photographic Opportunities:** Documentary photography of monks and pilgrims at Gandan Monastery; stage and portrait work at the traditional cultural performance, focused on costume detail, instruments, and dancers' movement.

🏠 Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / Accommodation: Overnight in hotel Kempinski (5 stars) or similar.

DAY 7

ELSENTASARKHAI
– KHARKHORIN

JULY 10



After breakfast we begin the countryside drive to Elsentasarkhai, a striking region of mountain steppe, green meadows, and sand dunes, arriving in time for lunch at a ger camp. There we visit a camel-herding family, photographing and documenting the rhythms of their daily life and work with the herd. We continue on to Kharkhorin, and in the evening take in a further traditional performance.

📷 **Photographic Opportunities:** Documentary sessions with the camel-herding family and their white camels; dune and steppe landscapes around Elsentasarkhai; evening performance photography of traditional dance and costume in Kharkhorin.

🏠 Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / Accommodation: Very nice camp, individual yurt.

DAY 8

KHARKHORIN

JULY 11



Today belongs to the Naadam festival of Kharkhorin, staged in a wide valley on the banks of the Orkhon River. We arrive in the morning to photograph the opening ceremony, then move through the day's events: horse racing, wrestling, and traditional archery, each offering close, unobstructed access to competitors. Afterward we photograph the milling crowds, proud Mongolians in fine traditional dress showing off medals and horses. Because the festival unfolds in a small town, we also gain access to local schools and official buildings, and share in true Mongolian hospitality with huushuur, the country's famous fried meat pie.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Opening-ceremony pageantry; close-in action photography of wrestling, horse racing, and archery; portraits of medal-winning competitors and their horses; candid access inside local schools and official buildings; documentary food photography of huushuur preparation.

 Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / Accommodation: Very nice camp, individual yurt.

DAY 9

KHARKHORIN –
ERDENE ZUU

JULY 12



We rise early for the second day of Naadam, and after breakfast head to the ancient monastery of Erdene Zuu, over four hundred years old yet set within the distinctly modern town of Kharkhorin. Its name, meaning Hundred Treasures, reflects its origin, built from the very bricks of the ancient city of Kharkhorum that once stood on this ground. We visit an active temple section where monks still chant and burn incense, a rare unified subject of history and living practice. From there we return to the Naadam grounds for further events and the festival's phenomenal closing ceremony.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Architectural and detail photography of Erdene Zuu Monastery; documentary portraits of monks chanting and burning incense in the active temple hall; closing-ceremony crowd and action photography back at the Naadam grounds.

 Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / Accommodation: Very nice camp, individual yurt.

DAY 10

NOMAD
ENCAMPMENT –
ULAANBAATAR

JULY 13



We say a fond farewell to Kharkhorin and drive north to another ger camp, this one the encampment of a nomad family, deep in the Mongolian wilds. Once settled, we spend the day in close company with our hosts, beginning with an up-close, personal look at horse training and breaking, watching expert tamers weave around and rein in wild geldings, and continuing into portrait work with the nomads themselves as they move through daily life beside their ever-present animals.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Action photography of horse taming and breaking; environmental portraits of the nomad family at work and at rest; documentary detail of ger interiors, tack, and daily herding routines.

 Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / Accommodation: Very nice camp, individual yurt.

DAY 11

ULAANBAATAR

JULY 14



An early morning drive returns us to Ulaanbaatar in time for lunch. The afternoon is reserved for a private photographic session with a Mongolian shaman, a rare and personal encounter that closes our documentary work in the field before the trip's final day.

 **Photographic Opportunities:** Private portrait session with a Mongolian shaman, focused on ceremonial dress, ritual objects, and expression.

 Meals: Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / Accommodation: Overnight in hotel Kempinski (5 stars) or similar.

DAY 12

ULAANBAATAR

JULY 15

Our journey concludes with a transfer to the airport, marking the end of services and the close of twelve days documenting Mongolia's people, festivals, and landscapes.

 Meals: Breakfast

What Are We Going to Experience

Street photography of Ulaanbaatar's Soviet-era and modern architecture

Ulaanbaatar's streets hold two eras in visible tension: Soviet-built row housing, uniform and utilitarian, standing beside glass-and-steel towers built since the 1990s market reforms. Documenting this contrast offers a visual shorthand for Mongolia's rapid transformation from socialist satellite state to open economy. For photographers, it is a chance to work spontaneously, framing everyday city life, commuters, market stalls, and architecture together, before the trip moves into more remote and ceremonial territory further west.

Portrait sessions at the Chojin Lama Temple

Built in 1908 and converted into a museum under Stalin's government in the late 1930s, the Chojin Lama Temple survived a period when active Buddhist worship was suppressed across Mongolia. Its carved eaves, painted beams, and courtyard proportions make an exceptional backdrop for a staged portrait session with models in traditional Mongolian dress, combining documentary architecture with controlled, directed photography, a useful counterpoint to the candid street work earlier in the day.

First contact with Kazakh families in Ulgii

Bayan-Ulgii is home to Mongolia's largest population of ethnic Kazakhs, a recognized minority who maintain their language, dress, and customs distinct from the Khalkha Mongolian majority. First encounters here mix unposed street portraits with more considered, seated sessions inside family homes. For photographers, it is an introduction to a community whose visual identity, embroidered clothing, felt textiles, silver jewelry, differs markedly from the rest of the country, setting up the deeper access to come with the eagle hunters.

Golden eagle training with a champion falconer

For generations, Kazakh kusbegi have trained golden eagles to hunt foxes and hares across the Altai steppe, a skill passed strictly from father to son and rarely explained to outsiders. Spending consecutive days with a multiple-time Golden Eagle Festival champion allows for extended, unhurried photography, handling, feeding, and flight, rather than a single staged encounter. The resulting images document one of Central Asia's most distinctive living traditions, at a level of access most visitors never receive.

Gandan Monastery and the traditional cultural performance

Gandantegchinlen Monastery survived Mongolia's socialist-era purges to remain the country's most important active Buddhist site, home to resident monks and a towering statue of Avalokiteshvara. The visit offers documentary photography of religious practice in the modern capital. The traditional cultural performance that follows, staged and lit for an audience, gives photographers controlled access to dancers and musicians in elaborate costume, a useful contrast to the informal devotional scenes at the monastery itself.

Camel-herding family life near Elsentasarkhai

Elsentasarkhai's mix of mountain steppe, meadow, and sand dune supports communities who still herd Bactrian camels as their ancestors did. Visiting a camel-herding family here means photographing animals and people together in working relationship, feeding, leading, and moving the herd across open ground. It is documentary work in its purest form: no staging, simply the rhythm of a pastoral life still practiced much as it has been for centuries, framed against one of Mongolia's most striking landscapes.

Rural Naadam festival: wrestling, horse racing, and archery

Naadam is Mongolia's oldest and most significant festival, built around the "three manly games" of wrestling, horse racing, and archery, traditions with roots in the training of Genghis Khan's armies. Choosing the rural festival at Kharkhorin over the capital's stadium event trades scale for access: photographers stand close to wrestlers before their bouts, riders at the starting line, and archers drawing their bows, rather than viewing the games from distant stadium seating.

Local schools and official buildings during Naadam

Because Kharkhorin's Naadam unfolds through a small town rather than a sealed venue, the festival grants incidental access to local schools and official buildings rarely open to outside visitors. These interiors offer a quieter, more domestic counterpoint to the festival's public spectacle, images of everyday institutional life in rural Mongolia that most travel photography never reaches, filling out the documentary record of the town beyond the games themselves.

Erdene Zuu Monastery and its active temple hall

Founded in 1586, Erdene Zuu was built using stones and bricks salvaged from the ruined ancient capital of Kharkhorum, making the monastery itself a physical record of an empire's disappearance. Its name, Hundred Treasures, points to the scale of what it once held. An active temple section still functions today, monks chanting and burning incense, allowing photographers to document four centuries of continuous, living Buddhist practice inside a single walled compound.

Nomad family horse taming and daily life

Breaking and taming wild geldings remains an essential skill in nomadic Mongolian life, where horses are transport, status, and livelihood combined. Watching expert tamers work a resistant animal in real time gives photographers a rare, kinetic subject, motion, dust, and controlled risk, followed by quieter portrait work with the family themselves as they move through daily chores beside the animals that define their way of life.

Private portrait session with a Mongolian shaman

Shamanism predates Buddhism in Mongolia and persists today alongside it, particularly in rural communities where practitioners are consulted for healing and guidance. A private session with a practicing shaman, arranged specifically for this trip, offers a level of access rarely available to travelers, portraits of ceremonial dress, ritual objects, and expression that document a living spiritual tradition rather than a performance staged for tourists.

Hotels Used

Hotel Kempinski (5 stars) or similar	Ulaanbaatar	3 nights
Individual yurt, Kazakh eagle-hunter family	Bayan-Ulgii	3 nights
4-star local hotel	Ulgii	1 night
Individual yurt (ger camp)	Elsentasarkhai / Kharkhorin	3 nights
Individual yurt (ger camp)	Nomad family encampment	1 night

Final hotels will be shared 30 days before departure.

