

Journey to Ulaanbaatar

You know you're getting closer to Mongolia's capital city when in the final hour of the train ride the previously desolate brown hills start to show some minor signs of life. You can't expect more than minor signs of life in a country where anyone outside the capital is either a nomad or a miner.



Gers on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar. Photo M. F. Rendeiro

36 Hours from Novosibirsk to Irkutsk aboard a loud and crowded Russian Trans-Siberian train. Followed by 24 hours from Irkutsk to UlaanBaatar on a clean, quiet, and smooth Trans-Manchurian train bound for Beijing. You know you're getting closer to Mongolia's capital city when in the final hour the previously desolate brown hills start to show some minor signs of life. You can't expect more than minor signs of life in a country where anyone outside the capital is either a nomad or a miner. Less than 30 minutes to Ulaanbaatar and I see what might pass as a road as well as several Yurt dwellings (known in Mongolia as Gers) dotting the landscape. Our classic green Chinese train takes a long right curve, so long that from the window of my train car I can see ahead to the blue diesel Mongolian rail locomotive that was attached when we crossed in from Russia. It won't be long now.

In hindsight, it is a good thing that the Trans-Manchurian train arrives in Ulaanbaatar very early in the morning. Most of the city is still asleep, which increases the chances that thieves, con-artists and assorted scumbags aren't quite awake enough to be on top of their game. Having heard enough stories from other travellers and been warned enough times by local friends, I make it a priority to call ahead to a taxi driver that had been personally vouched for by old University of Amsterdam friends who, amazingly, live in town. The voice on the other end of the call is not surprised to hear my American accent so early on this day: "I meet you at the train station, 15 minute, no problem!"

View from the Ger district looking down to the centre of Ulaanbaatar Photo M F Rendeiro



It is dawn at Ulaanbaatar's main train station and passengers coming off the train are outnumbered by Mongolians holding signs promoting their hostels, hotels, guest houses, and taxi services. Some friendly and respectful, some aggressive to the point where you think – what happens if I say no to this person? As the sharks approached, I walked swiftly right through them looking past

their faces towards a guy who looked at me as if he knew me: "Mark?" he asked as he picked up my walking stride along side me. I extended my hand – "Pujee...it is a pleasure to meet you." Pujee himself takes over as my spokesperson, telling the random people trying to get my attention that I am not interested. All at once I feel important and relieved.

When you arrive in Ulaanbaatar at the crack of dawn, half asleep yet very alert to this totally different environment you've just been thrown into, you get a very strange impression of a seemingly empty city featuring a relatively ugly array of 20th century architecture. In between the ugly ones there are some interesting and even oddly beautiful spots that catch your eye. For me it was the plainly titled Soviet-era throwback known as "State Department Store" and the unfinished and unusable skyscraper known as "Mother's Belly" that I could not take my eyes off as the car drove on.

The Unfinished "Mother's Belly" at Sukhbaatar Square Photo M F Rendeiro

A few hours and a long nap later, I'm having brunch with a new friend, an American married to a Mongolian who has been here for over a decade. A restless entrepreneur, his stories and frequent incoming phone calls tell me that I'm sharing scrambled eggs with a man who knows a lot of notable individuals in this town. "Is there any specific place you want to visit in Ulaanbaatar?" he asks me. I fumble through the pages of the guidebook he had handed me: "The Museum of Victims of Political Persecution", I respond – struggling to get the right order of this excessively long-titled museum. He immediately seems pleased with my choice: "[Memorial Museum of Victims of Political Persecution](#)". Yes, you should go there and I can introduce you to the director, very interesting guy."



One phone call, two missed appointments and 24 hours later I find myself sitting in the Grand Khan Irish pub, surrounded by a cross-section of loud accents and languages from around the world, discussing projects, business deals, and recent trips to remote areas of this enormous country, where the mining industry is booming. I'm sitting across from a well-dressed and polite gentleman by the name of Bekhbat, director of the Memorial Museum of Victims of Political Persecution, respected member of the Rotary Club, and grandson of P. Genden, legendary former Prime Minister of Mongolia (1932-36). Over lunch we discuss his family history, from the great story of why his grandfather once slapped Stalin in a heated disagreement, later to be executed by the KGB, to the reality of Mongolia today, with its infrastructure needs and the looming mining wealth and the benefits and dangers associated with that money. In between we find time to talk about my childhood in

New Jersey, life in the Netherlands, and his surprising love for Duke University, his alma mater in the US.



Water station in the Ger district – people living there have no running water or plumbing
Photo M F Rendeiro

A quick goodbye photo and I'm walking quickly towards my next appointment – a guided tour of the Ger district. Home to over 700,000 people, the Ger district is comprised of traditional Mongolian tents, a few makeshift houses, and many outhouses – all dotting the landscape over a series of hills that provide a great view of the apartment blocks and semi-modern buildings in

the center of this capital city. My tour guide is Susan, also American born and raised, but married to a Mongolian and living in Ulaanbaatar for more than 10 years. Susan is not only a founder of Flourishing Futures, an [organization addressing social needs](#) in the Ger District, she lives right in the middle of this impoverished community.

Together we eventually meet up with Troy, who walks us around the district, while teaching us what is what for the people who live here. How does he know? He lives here, he explains, as we walk past the makeshift fence and aluminum gate to his property. Yes, a Ger district resident for many years now, it is easy to forget that Troy is originally from Illinois.



Preschool in the Ger district Photo M F Ren-deiro

In between the tour and the interviews, I sneak out to the center of Ulaanbaatar late at night to walk the streets. I've been warned plenty of times not to do so, but walking the dark streets struggling to take in the coal-heavy winter air, gives me a chance to re-

fect on the clash of civilizations that this city represents. During my walk I pass my two favorites again, many days after first having seen them, with a new appreciation: The "State Department Store", a structure and a name straight out of Soviet days, now repainted and reconfigured inside as a standard western shopping mall where one can buy almost any retail item. And of course, the Mother's Belly, the tallest structure in the Mongolian capital that looks like it belongs in futuristic Dubai, only when you look closer you realize many of the windows are missing and the structure itself lies unfinished – the builders went bankrupt, not such a different fate from those who built the State Department Store in Soviet times.

The famous Soviet-era State Department Store facade Photo credit Flickr member fe-librilu

As I take my last breaths of coal-dust laden air before heading inside to call it a night, a luxury SUV rolls by, followed by a few nondescript Korean compact cars. Across the street an inebriated gentleman collapses into a sitting position. A block behind me I spot an impressive wall of young men silently heading in my direction with a rather unpleasant look on their faces. *Probably just a standard night in Ulaanbataar* I think to



myself.

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