



MONGOLIA
Tseren Tours
Ulaanbaatar
976/(0) 11-327083
tserentours.com
From \$70 per person
per day, including guide,
driver, food, and lodging.

Yurts So Good

WE DIDN'T KNOW where we'd be spending the night as we drove into the vast Mongolian grasslands. Our guide, a petite 20-year-old woman in a sequined hat and tight jeans, didn't seem worried.

"We Mongolians are very friendly," said Tsama. "We'll find a good *ger*."

The circular white gers, or yurts, as they're more commonly called in English, are the traditional dwelling of nomadic Mongolians. There are plenty of sterile ger camps for tourists. But for our five-day trip, my husband and I had enlisted the help of a tour agency that offers homestays.

Still, there was no plan—just us, Tsama, and a driver. With the radio blasting Mongolian pop hits of the '80s, we drove beneath blue skies past miles of golden fields, the hills occasionally punctuated with a ger and a cluster of grazing goats.

Several hours west of the capital, Ulaanbaatar, our four-by-four climbed off the dirt road, struggled up a rocky hill, and halted with a sputter at a ger. The ropes securing its canvas covering to the wood frame made it look like a gift wrapped tightly with ribbons. A teenage boy in camouflage pants fiddled with a motorcycle while a younger girl in a pink headband and miniskirt stood by. A brown baby goat was tethered to the door as if it were a golden retriever pup. The driver walked over. Apparently, this ger belonged to his cousin's friend's younger brother—or some variant of this.

"They said yes," Tsama said. "Let's go in."

WIDE OPEN SPACES: Mongolia is the least densely populated country in the world, with two inhabitants per square kilometer. Singapore has more than 6,000 inhabitants per square kilometer.

Inside, the circular room was cozy and neat, even though there had been no warning that houseguests would be arriving. Two cots draped with Oriental rugs served as sofas. Family photographs and horse-riding medals covered an orange wooden chest of drawers. A small, solar-powered black-and-white television sat atop a tall dresser. A wood-burning stove was the centerpiece, with a pipe that exhaled smoke through the roof's open skylight.

From a plastic vat, the boy scooped bowls of *airag*, fermented mare's milk. As we struggled to swallow the bitter beverage, families that were camped nearby stopped in to say hello.

We rented horses from our hosts for the rest of our trip. A 22-year-old herdsman accom-

panied Tsama and us as we rode on wooden saddles across the fields, stopping for lunch near shrines consisting of rocks and branches draped with blue silk scarves known as *khadag*.

Each night, we'd wander up to a new ger and ask for room on the floor. None of the families we stayed with would accept any money, so we shared food and small gifts—notebooks, pencils, crayons—we had brought. One grandma insisted on making us traditional mutton dumplings called *buuz*. A young mother prepared fresh milk curds with biscuits for our breakfast as she juggled a squirming 1-year-old.

On the last night, a 40-year-old father named Atardeej, fresh from a marmot hunt, wanted to chat around the fire. As Tsama translated,

Atardeej skipped from topic to topic—from questions about America's skies (Are they as beautiful as ours?) to advice for child rearing: Don't use diapers, keep it natural.

"This is the real Mongolian life," he explained proudly, his eyes spanning his one-room home. "We can be located on any kind of land. Our ger can be in a field, on a hillside, on rocks even."

It's true. Gers can be assembled in less than two hours. A family can move freely. "Our round ger is like a womb," Atardeej concluded, wrapping his hands in a circular motion.

I'm not sure if his simile was meant to be so poetic, but it was apt. Sitting by the fire, with the kids playing on the floor, I felt safe, warm, and nurtured inside that welcoming ger. **A**

Nomadic Lodgings *Around the World*



Ecocamp, Torres del Paine National Park, Chile



Okuti Garden, New Zealand



Nduara Loliondo, Tanzania



The Hoopoe Yurt Hotel, Spain

CHILE

Ecocamp
Torres del Paine National Park,
Patagonia
(800) 901-6987
ecocamp.travel

The traditional dwellings of the region's Kawésqar people inspired Ecocamp's domed structures. Constructed from locally sourced materials, they make use of solar and wind energy. From \$1,200 per person for a five-day stay with trek.

ENGLAND

Full Circle—Luxury Lake District Yurts
Ambleside, Cumbria
44/(0) 7975-671-928
lake-district-yurts.co.uk

Four yurts imported from Mongolia come equipped with wood-burning stoves and ovens so you can cook

like a true nomad. From your door, you can look down the green valley to Lake Windermere. From \$450 per yurt for a three-night weekend stay, spring and fall (midseason).

MEXICO

Baja Airventures—
Las Animas Wilderness Lodge
Baja California
(800) 221-9283
bajaairventures.com

From San Diego, a private plane and then a boat deliver you to a remote camp of eight beachside yurts on the Sea of Cortez. You can snorkel with whale sharks or tickle the famously friendly Baja gray whales (depending on the season) and build up your bird-watching life list. From \$1,595 per person, double occupancy, for a four-day all-inclusive stay.

NEW ZEALAND

Okuti Garden
Little River, near Christchurch
64/(0) 3-3251-913
okuti.co.nz

Okuti Garden, a bed-and-breakfast with yurt accommodations, features a solar shower and an organic garden. Use the shared semi-outdoor kitchen or dine in the main house, where chefs prepare feasts made from homegrown ingredients. From \$40 per night for one person, \$65 for two. Opens for the season October 25.

SPAIN

The Hoopoe Yurt Hotel
Near Málaga, Andalucía
34/696-668-388
yurthotel.com

Each of these solar-powered yurts is set on its own private acre amid

olive groves and cork oak forests in southern Spain. Guests choose among five styles of yurt, ranging from a traditional Mongolian structure to an Afghani yurt framed with willow poles. From \$190 per night, double occupancy, breakfast included.

TANZANIA

Nduara Loliondo
Loliondo
nduara-loliondo.com

This safari camp moves across the Serengeti with the seasons. The six yurts incorporate the design of Mongolian gers—with the center opening to keep them airy—but with Masai-inspired tribal decor. There's a dining yurt and a lounge yurt with a library. Rates start at \$450 per person per night. Book through an Africa safari agent.