

Northern Mongolia



Log cabins, pine forests and monstrous fish do not conform to the classic image of Mongolia's desolate steppes. But strung along its northern border are three aimags (provinces) of such lush and serene vegetation that one might confuse them for bits of Switzerland. Selenge, Bulgan and Khövsgöl aimags actually have more in common with Siberia than Mongolia. Winters are long and cold, with snow staying on the ground until May. Summers bring wildflowers and the snowmelt fills up lakes and rivers, many of which flow north to Lake Baikal in Siberia. The area teems with elk, reindeer and bear, and the rivers and lakes brim with fish. Beautiful Khövsgöl Nuur, the major feature of the region, pokes Siberia in the belly.

Although the majority of the people are Khalkh, here are also Buriats and Turkic-speaking peoples, including the Tsaatan, the reindeer herders. Shamanism has long been the faith of choice in the forests and, after decades of persecution, it is being revived and encouraged.

The fragile environment is crucial to the economy and this area is a major battleground between environmentalists and business interests that want to log the forests and explore for minerals. Although ecotourism is making inroads, the concept of sustainable development is still relatively unknown. Old hunters lament that wildlife is now more difficult to spot.

If travelling by train to or from Russia, you'll pass through Selenge. Make a diversion and take in the wondrous Amarbayasgalant Khiid or horse trek by the shores of Khövsgöl Nuur. These are also attractions for domestic tourists; you may come across a vanload of urban Mongolians off to see the sights, stopping en route to taste the local *airag* (fermented mare milk) or pick berries in the forests.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Drop a fishing line into **Khövsgöl Nuur** (p152), and while away an afternoon by Mongolia's most spectacular alpine lake
- Ride a horse into the taiga (coniferous forest) around Tsagaannuur in the Darkhad Depression for a unique encounter with the indigenous **Tsaatan reindeer herders** (p160)
- Wander around the grounds of spectacular **Amarbayasgalant Khiid** (p140), the architectural highlight of the country
- Visit the bow-and-arrow-making workshop in **Dulaankhaan** (p137), one of the last of its kind in Mongolia
- Journey to **Chandman-Öndör** (p159), a little-visited region of fish-filled streams, hot springs, sacred caves and lush forests



POPULATION: 448,600

AREA: 192,800 SQ KM

History

For thousands of years northern Mongolia was the borderland between the Turkic-speaking tribes of Siberia and the great steppe confederations of the Huns, Uighurs and Mongols. Some of the Siberian tribes still survive in Mongolia, notably the Tsaatan people of northern Khövsgöl. Evidence of these steppe nomads is also found in Khövsgöl in the form of numerous burial mounds and deer stones.

Settled history really began in the 18th century under Manchu rule when thousands of monks poured into the area from Tibet and China to assist in the construction of monasteries. As the nomads were converted to Buddhism local shamans were purged and harassed into giving up traditional practices. The largest centre of religion, Amarbayasgalant Khiid, had more than 2000 lamas.

During communism, religious persecution boiled over into a 1932 rebellion that left thousands of monks and Mongolian soldiers dead. The fighting was particularly bloody in the north, where monks were reportedly stringing soldiers up in trees and skinning them alive. Later, the Russians improved their standing with the locals by developing a variety of industries. Darkhan and Selenge became important centres of agriculture, Bulgan became home to the Erdenet copper mine, and Khövsgöl developed a thriving industry of timber mills, fisheries and wool processing.

Climate

In the region around Khövsgöl aimag, the terrain is mainly taiga (subarctic coniferous forest) of Siberian larch and pine trees, where there's plenty of rain (often 600mm a year). Snowfall can exceed 2m in some regions during winter. After winter, the lakes and rivers remain frozen until May; travel can be hazardous at this time as trucks and jeeps can fall through the thin ice. Travelling in winter means faster drive times around the aimag as vehicles won't get bogged in the mud. July is warm and relatively dry, but this is also the time of the tourist crunch, leaving ger (traditional circular felt yurt) camps teeming. September, when the leaves change colour, is visually spectacular.

Getting There & Away

Selenge aimag is accessible by paved road or rail from Ulaanbaatar. A paved road now runs as far as Bulgan City. If your

destination is Khövsgöl Nuur, the quickest way into the area is either on a flight from Ulaanbaatar to Mörön or by jeep via Bulgan. Main jeep tracks also run from Ulaangom and Tosontsengel in the west to Mörön, but tracks heading north from Tsetserleg in central Mongolia are more difficult to find. To travel between Selenge aimag and the east, you'll have to come back through Ulaanbaatar first, or go by horse.

Getting Around

Improvements to the roads to the Russian border, Erdenet and Bulgan make life a lot easier in terms of getting into the region. The fun starts as you travel further west, with the usual dirt roads and rocky terrain. Travellers who enjoy train travel can ride the rails as far as Erdenet and hire a vehicle from there. The horse is a popular form of transport in the mountains. While there is very little organised adventure travel, some tour companies offer mountain-biking trips in the region. A few crazies have even paddled kayaks down the Selenge Gol (Selenge River) to Sükhbaatar City!

SELENGE СЭЛЭНГЭ

pop 181,500 (incl Darkhan-Uul) / area 42,800 sq km
Mongolia's breadbasket, Selenge is a fertile landscape of rolling wheat fields, apple orchards and meandering rivers. Wide-scale agriculture has settled many nomads and nowadays wood cabins and lumbering trucks far outnumber gers and camel caravans.

The relatively well developed infrastructure of paved roads, cities and train lines means that Selenge sees a steady flow of through traffic, particularly from travellers heading to and from Russia. The main reasons to visit are the majestic but remote monastery, Amarbayasgalant Khiid, and some beautiful scenery.

Darkhan is the major population centre, although the city is actually part of its own tiny aimag, Darkhan-Uul. The aimag capital, Sükhbaatar, is comparatively small, but as a border town it remains a viable part of the local economy.

In the southeast, the open-pit coal mine at Sharyngol produces about two million tonnes of coal each year to provide electricity for the Erdenet mine in Bulgan aimag. Selenge's biggest revenue earner is the Canadian-owned

NORTHERN MONGOLIA



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Boroo gold mine, which produces 5 tonnes of gold per year, netting US\$65 million.

The mighty Selenge Gol starts in the mountains of western Mongolia and flows into Lake Baikal in Siberia, draining nearly 300,000 sq km of land in both countries. The other great river, the Orkhon Gol, meets the Selenge Gol near Sükhbaatar.

SÜKHBAATAR СУХБААТАР

☎ 01362 / pop 19,700 / elev 626m

With its hilly backdrop, riverside location and unhurried pace of life, Sükhbaatar makes a pleasant stopover for travellers heading into or out of Russia. The town was founded in the 1940s to facilitate trade between the USSR and Mongolia, and was named after the Mongolian general who helped usher in communism in 1921. Sükhbaatar himself spent time in nearby Altanbulag and Khyakhta where treaties were drawn up formalising Mongolia's independent status. There is little reason to stay, however, unless you want to break up the train journey to/from Russia, you prefer travelling on cheaper local trains or you are smuggling goods.

If you have time drop by the **Khutagt Ekh Datsan** temple near the town square. Unusual for a Mongolian monastery, its head lama is a woman.

Orientation & Information

Just north of the train station is the centre of town, where you'll find the main hotel, market and town square.

Private moneychangers appear at the station whenever a train arrives. If you are leaving Mongolia try to get rid of all your tögrög – they are worthless anywhere in Russia (including on the Trans-Mongolian Railway in Russia). The police station is to the south of town.

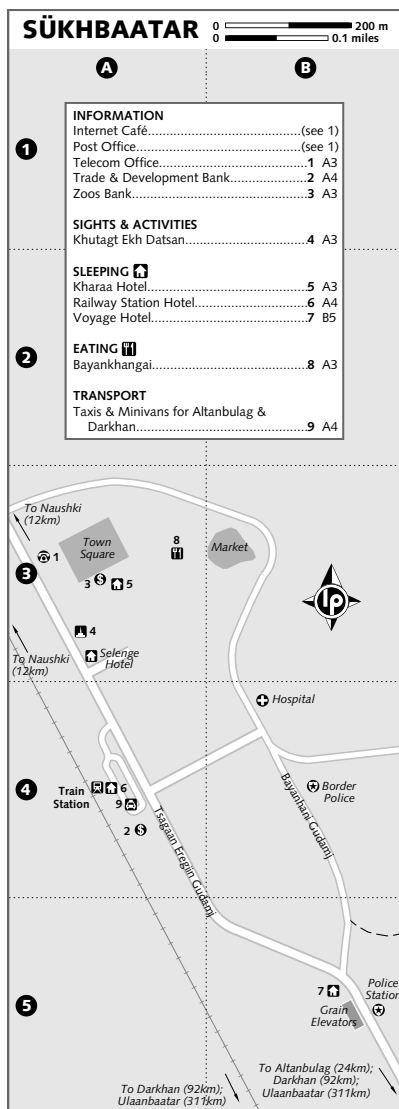
The daily market, behind the Selenge Hotel, is lively and friendly and, as a border town, well stocked.

Internet café (☎ 23901; per hr T400; ☎ 24hr) Adjacent to the Telecom office.

Telecom office (☎ 22385; Tsagaan Erejiin Gudamj; ☎ 24hr) The post office is also located here.

Trade & Development Bank (☎ 22407; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Near the train station. Changes travellers cheques, US dollars and euros, and can give cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

Zoos Bank (☎ 23110; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat) Near the Kharaa Hotel. Also gives cash advance on Visa and MasterCard.



Sleeping & Eating

Selenge aimag is particularly pleasant for camping. At Sükhbaatar, the best place to try is across the train line and among the fields, just west of town. Alternatively, there are great spots among the hills northeast of the market. Sükhbaatar's main hotel, the Selenge, was under renovation at the time of research.

Station Hotel (☎ 40371; per person T5000) Decent rooms are available at this wee hotel adjacent to the train station.

Kharaa Hotel (☎ 23876; tw/half-lux/lux T10,000/16,000/25,000) Close to the town square, this hotel has remodelled but unexciting rooms. Look for the 'Hotel Bar' sign.

Voyage Hotel (☎ 23839, 9949 5357; Tsagaan Erejiin Gudamj; tw/lux T25,000/45,000) Newly built hotel in the south of the city with clean rooms and a reliable restaurant. Sauna available.

Bayankhangai (☎ 22106, 9949 8949; ☎ 9am-11pm) Between the market and Kharaa Hotel, Bayankhangai serves some tasty dishes including *moogtei khuurag* (mushroom and meat) and *sharsan takhia* (fried chicken).

Getting There & Away

HITCHING

Because of the regular transport along the main road between Ulaanbaatar and Sükhbaatar, you'll get a lift pretty easily along this road.

MINIVAN & TAXI

The road to Ulaanbaatar (311km) through Darkhan (92km) is well paved, so jeeps are not necessary. Because of the popularity and regularity of the train, there are relatively few share vehicles to Ulaanbaatar (T8000), but many to Darkhan (T5000, two hours) and Altanbulag (T1500, 20 minutes). These vehicles depart from outside the train station.

TRAIN

International trains going to/from Moscow, Irkutsk or Beijing stop at Sükhbaatar for two or more hours while customs and immigration are completed. This usually takes place late at night or very early in the morning. See p276 and p275 for more information about international trains.

Direct, local trains travel between Ulaanbaatar and Sükhbaatar (T3500/8400 for a hard/soft seat), with a stop at Darkhan. Train 271 departs Ulaanbaatar at 10.30am daily, arriving at 7.56pm. The same train departs for Ulaanbaatar the next morning at 6.10am. Returning to Ulaanbaatar, you could also opt for train 264, departing Sükhbaatar at 9.45pm.

The **train station** (☎ 40124; ☎ 8am-noon, 3-5pm & 8-10pm) sells local tickets and also tickets for Ulan Ude (T17,600), Irkutsk (T34,000)

and Moscow (T124,750), but you'll need a Russian visa.

ALTANBULAG АЛТАНБУУГАЙ

Just 24km northeast of Sükhbaatar is Altanbulag, a small, peaceful border town opposite the Russian city of Khyakhta. Despite its location, the town sees few benefits of cross-border trade and many of the buildings have been abandoned, looted and left with only their skeletons intact. The only inspiring view is of **Khyakhta Cathedral**, right across the border in Russia. Unless you are crossing the border by road, or desperately want to see the aimag museum, there is no reason to visit Altanbulag.

Both Khyakhta in Russia and Altanbulag are of some historical importance to Mongolians. In 1915 representatives from Russia, China and Mongolia met in Khyakhta to sign a treaty granting Mongolia limited autonomy. At a meeting in Khyakhta in March 1921, the Mongolian People's Party was formed by Mongolian revolutionaries in exile, and the revolutionary hero Sükhbaatar was named minister of war.

Selenge's aimag museum is located here in Altanbulag. The **museum** (admission T2000; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) contains lots of antiquated communist propaganda and exhibits dating back to Mongolia's independence movement of 1921; relics include some of Sükhbaatar's personal effects – his boots, gun and even his desk. The curator assured us that Sükhbaatar's office was housed in the small red building outside the museum.

Minivans run between Sükhbaatar and Altanbulag at various times during the day. If there is nothing going you could charter a taxi (T6000).

The border is located right at the edge of Altanbulag. You cannot cross by foot so you'll need to try and hitch a ride with a local or take any public transport available. The border is open between 8am to 5pm and you can expect delays of several hours. From Khyakhta there are daily buses to Novoselenginsk.

DULAANKHAAN ДУЛАНХААН

Forty-seven kilometres south of Sükhbaatar, this tiny village is worth a stop if you have your own vehicle. Dulaankhaan is home to a **bow and arrow workshop** (☎ 9913 1491, 9926 7291; www.hornbow.mn), one of only three in Mongolia. Bows and arrows are made from

ibex and reindeer horn, bamboo and even fish guts. Only 30 to 40 sets are crafted every year because they take about four months to complete. Each set sells for about T180,000. In the village, look for the two-storey wood building, next to the red-and-blue monument. Ask for Boldbaatar.

The village is 6km west of the Sükhbaatar–Darkhan Hwy. Expect to pay about T15,000 for a taxi from Sükhbaatar. There is nowhere to stay in the village so carry on to Sükhbaatar or Darkhan, or camp nearby.

DARKHAN ДАРХАН

☎ 01372 / pop 73,500

With its vast acres of parkland, sporadic bursts of concrete and languorous street life, Darkhan is an unassuming blip on the Trans-Mongolian Railway. The Soviets created it in the 1960s as an industrial base for the north and for a while it worked as a model urban cooperative of factory workers, tractor drivers, coal miners and government officials. When the bottom fell out of the economy in 1990 everyone lost their jobs and the Russian advisors beat a hasty retreat to Moscow. The economy has since made small strides, thanks to grain production and some requisite coal mining at nearby Sharyngol. The city is not actually part of Selenge aimag, but an autonomous municipality, Darkhan-Uul.

Darkhan is not somewhere you would rush to see, but you may need to stay here while you arrange transport to Amarbayasgalant Khiid.

Orientation

Darkhan is spread out. The city is divided into an 'old town' near the train station and a 'new town' to the south. Near the central post office in the new town is Darkhan's pride and joy: a 16-storey building, one of the tallest in the country.

Information

Golomt Bank (☎ 23928; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–5pm) It is 200m west of the taxi stand.

Library Internet (☎ 23205, 9940 9812; per hr T500; ☎ 10am–8pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun) Located inside the Cultural Palace.

Telecom office (☎ 23275; ☎ 24hr) ATM and post office are also located here.

Trade & Development Bank (☎ 33713; ☎ 9am–3pm & 4–5.30pm Mon–Fri) Changes cash, travellers cheques and gives advances on Visa and MasterCard.

Zoos Bank (☎ 24173; ☎ 8am–10pm Mon–Fri) Opposite the Telecom office.

Sights

KHARAAGIIN KHIID ХАРААГИЙН ХИЙД Probably the most interesting sight in Darkhan is this monastery. Housed in a pretty log cabin in the old town, it has a host of protector deities and a tree encased in blue *khatag* (silk scarves). Until 1989 the building served as an elementary school.

MUSEUM OF DARKHAN-UUL

This **museum** (☎ 27910; admission T1000; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–7pm) contains a well-laid-out collection of archaeological findings, traditional clothing, religious artefacts and a few obligatory stuffed animals. Its most valued piece is the original painting of Lenin meeting Sükhbaatar, a classic work of myth-making, painted by B Tsultem in 1953. The museum is upstairs in a building on the northern side of the shopping square, across from the minibus and taxi stand.

MORIN KHUUR STATUE & SEATED BUDDHA

These two new monuments are across the road from each other, near the roundabout between the new and old towns. Both are congregating points for locals who hang out here at sunset.

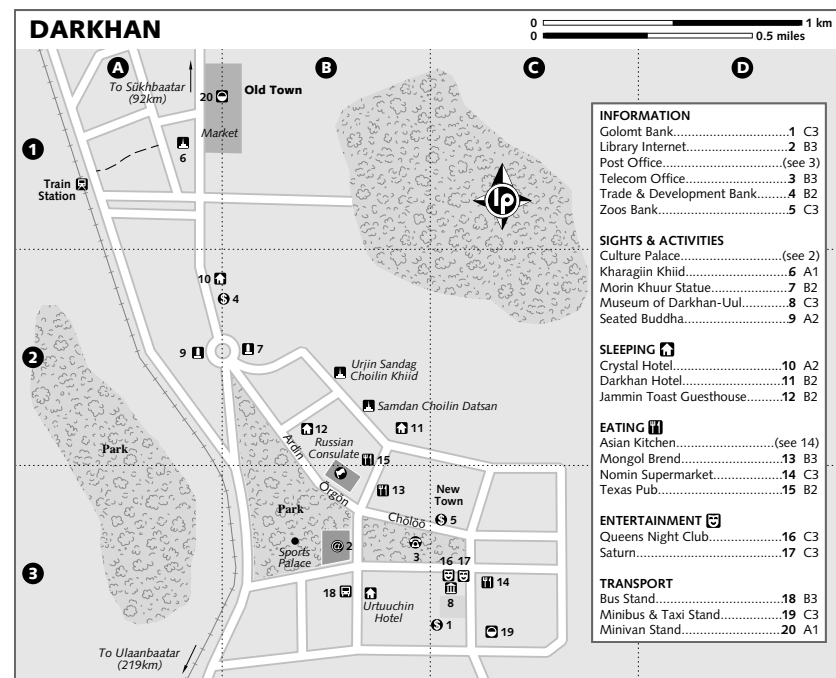
Sleeping CAMPING

Despite the size of Darkhan, it isn't hard to get away from the town and find a nearby secluded spot. Southwest of the train station are some empty fields – but get away from the drunks who hang around the station. The fields to the north of the Darkhan Hotel are also good.

HOTELS & GUESTHOUSES

our pick Jammin Toast Guesthouse (☎ 9996 3154; davruss2000@yahoo.com; dm US\$5; ☎ May–Sep; ☎) Scotsman Dave Russell offers dorm beds in a comfortable setting with a Scottish–Mongolian theme. It's a great place to overnight in Darkhan and Dave can provide logistical tips for getting around the area. It's located next to the Kiwi Hotel; look for the sign on the 4th-floor balcony, or call for directions.

Darkhan Hotel (☎ 20001; s/d T6000/10,000, lux T12,000–16,000) This Soviet-era monster has



scruffy old standard rooms and slightly better lux rooms, all with attached bathroom and hot water. It has a restaurant, a sauna (T1000) and a billiards room (T7000). It's located on the north side of the new town, opposite the Scorpion nightclub.

Crystal Hotel (☎ 36966; s/d T8000/10,000, s/d half-lux T12,000/15,000, lux 25,000) Stuck halfway between the new and old towns, this has modern amenities and nice bathrooms. Note that the standard rooms share a bathroom.

The train station has a **hotel** (☎ 42263; r T5000, lux T6000) on the top floor.

Eating

Asian Kitchen (Nomin Supermarket; ☎ 9am–9pm) Fast-food place reminiscent of Ulaanbaatar's Berlin restaurant. It's run by a Malaysian and serves up good, non-Mongolian curries.

Texas Pub (☎ 27961; ☎ 11am–midnight) Roy Rogers could not have designed a better restaurant. This Texan-themed joint, just south of the Darkhan Hotel in the new town, has an English-language menu with Hungarian goulash, steaks, salads and pasta plus Chinggis beer on tap.

Mongol Bred (☎ 27681, 9939 9181; ☎ 11am–midnight) A life-size photo of Miss Darkhan welcomes you to this brew pub on the main drag. Steaks and pasta are available and by evening the basement turns into a nightclub and karaoke bar.

If you are self-catering, the best place to shop is the Nomin Supermarket, southeast of the central park in the new town.

Entertainment

Locals bust out their moves at the **Queens Night Club** (☎ 6pm–midnight) in the centre of the new town. Saturn, next to Queens, is another club that has seen some refurbishment.

Getting There & Away BUS

Two buses per day depart at 11am and 4pm for Ulaanbaatar (T4500, four hours). They leave from the lot west of the Urtuuchin Hotel.

MINIVAN, TAXI & JEEP

Constant demand ensures that shared taxis (T8000) and minivans (T6000) regularly do the four-hour run to Ulaanbaatar. Vehicles

depart from a bus stand just west of the Urtuuchin Hotel, where you can also get a seat in a van to Erdenet (T7000, three hours). For Sükhbaatar (T5000, two hours), vans leave from outside the market in the new town.

Darkhan enjoys the privilege of having a paved road to Ulaanbaatar (219km), Sükhbaatar (92km) and Erdenet (180km). Many *guanx* (canteens or cheap restaurants) along the way sell *airag* and basic meals.

For Amarbayasgalant Khiid you'll have to hire your own jeep or taxi at the bus stand near the Kharaa Hotel. A round-trip should cost around T50,000 but you'll need to bargain.

TRAIN

Darkhan is the only train junction in Mongolia: all northern trains to/from Ulaanbaatar, and all trains to/from Erdenet, stop here. The **domestic ticket office** (☎ 42301; 🕒 7.30-9.30am, 2.30-6.30pm & 10.30pm-4.30am) at Darkhan train station is at windows 1 and 2. Window 3 is reserved for international tickets. Hard-seat carriages are always crowded so consider taking a soft seat.

Travelling to Ulaanbaatar (hard/soft seat T2600/6400), a daytime train (272) leaves Darkhan at 8.33am, arriving in UB about 4pm. An overnighiter (264) departs Darkhan at 12.05am, arriving at 6am. Other trains leave in the middle of the night.

The daily five-hour trip between Darkhan and Erdenet (hard/soft seat T2100/5300) goes through some lovely countryside, but you'll miss it as the train leaves Darkhan at 2.50am.

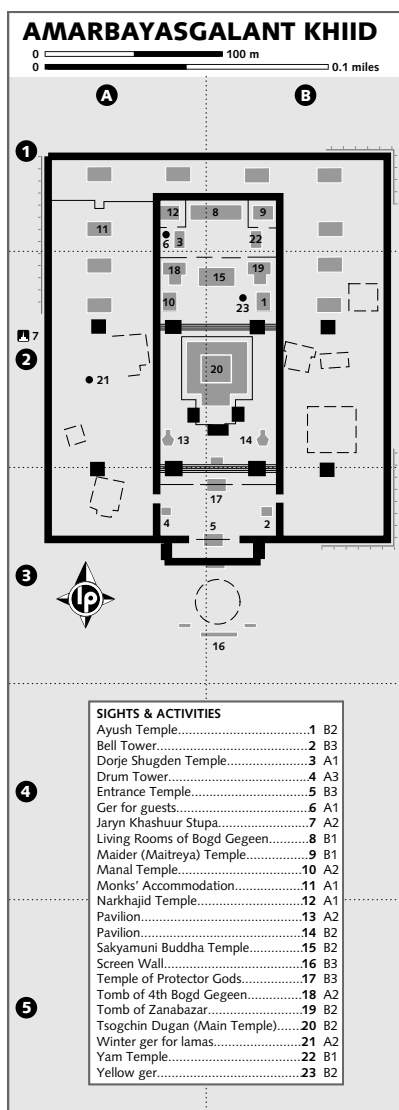
The daily Ulaanbaatar-Sükhbaatar train (271) leaves Darkhan for Sükhbaatar at 5.50pm (hard/soft seat T1200/2400, two hours), or at an ungodly 2am. See p276 and p272 for details about international trains that stop at Darkhan.

Getting Around

Darkhan is spread out, so you will probably have to take a taxi or hop in a minivan (T200) that connects the new and old towns.

AMARBAYASGALANT KHIID АМАРБАЯСГАЛАНТ ХИЙД

The star attraction of Selenge aimag, this monastery is considered to be one of the top three Buddhist institutions in Mongolia (along with Erdene Zuu in Kharkhorin and Gandan in Ulaanbaatar) and the country's most intact architectural complex. It is well



worth visiting on the way to/from Khövsgöl Nuur, or other areas in northern or western Mongolia. Otherwise, you are better off incorporating the monastery into a three- or four-day countryside trip to take in the surrounding scenery.

Amarbayasgalant Khiid (www.amarbayasgalant.org; GPS: N49° 28.648', E105° 05.122') was originally built

between 1727 and 1737 by the Manchu emperor Yongzheng, and dedicated to the great Mongolian Buddhist and sculptor Zanabazar (see boxed text, p142), whose mummified body was moved here in 1779. The monastery is in the Manchu style, down to the inscriptions, symmetrical layout and imperial colour scheme.

The communists moseyed in around 1937, but 'only' destroyed 10 out of the 37 temples and statues, possibly because of sympathetic and procrastinating local military commanders. The monastery was extensively restored between 1975 and 1990 with the help of Unesco. These days about 30 monks live in the monastery, compared with more than 2000 in 1936.

The temples in the monastery are normally closed, so you'll have to ask the monks to find the keys and open them up if you want to see any statues or *thangka* (scroll paintings). There are around nine temples open to tourists.

To the west of the complex you'll find eight new stupas and a meditation centre (you can see it from Amarbayasgalant). It takes about two hours to hike there.

The main hall has a life-size statue of Rinpoche Gurdava, a lama from Inner Mongolia who lived in Tibet and Nepal before returning to Mongolia in 1992 and raising much of the money for the temple's restoration. It's normally possible to climb up to the roof for fine views of the valley.

To help with the restoration work, foreigners are charged an entry fee of T3000. Ceremonies are usually held twice a day at 9am and 4pm.

Travellers have raved about the scenery of the mountain range Bürengiin Nuruu, north of Amarbayasgalant.

Festivals

The most interesting time to make the sojourn to Amarbayasgalant Khiid is 9 to 11 August, when the **Gongoriin Bombani Hural** (prayer ceremony) is held. As part of the rituals the locals hike up to the eight white stupas. Festival-goers usually camp in the fields near the monastery - like a Buddhist version of Woodstock.

Sleeping

There are excellent camping spots all around Amarbayasgalant Khiid.

Amarbayasgalant Meditation Centre (☎ 011-322 529; per person US\$10) Located 300m west of the monastery, this camp has flush toilets,

hot showers, a restaurant and free meditation classes. It is operated by the monks of Amarbayasgalant so any money you spend here goes towards the continued preservation of the temples.

Great Selenge (☎ 011-451 743; www.nomadic-empire.tour.mn; GPS: N49° 26.688', E105° 05.141'; ger with 3 meals US\$26) Located 3.5km south of the monastery, this modern ger camp has clean flush toilets and hot showers. It's run by Baigal Tour.

Getting There & Away

HITCHING

The monastery is not on the way to anywhere but a couple of cars a day come here in summer so you may be able to bum a lift. The cheapest and best way from Ulaanbaatar is to catch a train to Darkhan, take a shared jeep to Khötöl, hitch (which is easy) from there to the turn-off, then hitch another ride (much more difficult) to the monastery.

JEEP

From Ulaanbaatar, travel north to the T-intersection for Erdenet (just short of Darkhan). Take the Erdenet road for 90km and then turn right onto a dirt track; look for the red sign (GPS: N49° 12.809', E104° 59.128') that says 'Amarbayasgalant 35km'. Altogether, the journey to/from Ulaanbaatar takes around six hours. If you don't have your own car you could charter one from Darkhan for T50,000.

BULGAN БУЛГАН

pop 143,600 (incl Orkhon) / area 49,000 sq km

Bulgan's lack of major tourist sights has kept it off the beaten track. Most visitors to northern Mongolia charge through the aimag en route to more prolific sights such as Khövsgöl Nuur and Amarbayasgalant Khiid, but travellers with a bit of time on their hands can find some interesting, rarely visited sights in Bulgan, as well as some beautiful scenery that makes for nice cycle touring.

The aimag is rich in natural resources; it's home to the Erdenet copper mine, one of the largest of its kind anywhere, as well as agricultural areas and a small-scale timber industry. The ethnic groups comprise Khalkh, Buriat and Russian people.

A small mountain range, the Bürengiin Nuruu, bisects the aimag, and though it only reaches a maximum altitude of 2058m, it

provides plenty of lush habitat for wild animals and livestock. A few adventurous travelers have seen this spectacular landscape while floating down the broad Selenge Gol on a raft, although to do such a trip you'd need to be completely self-sufficient. In the south of the aimag are two unique historical sights, Tsogt Taijiin Tsagaan Balgas and Khar Bukh Balgas, which are both geographically more in line with sights found in central Mongolia.

This section includes the small aimag of Orkhon, which contains the city of Erdenet. This aimag was formed in 1994 after being previously run as a federal municipality under the capital, Ulaanbaatar.

ERDENET ЭРДЭНЭТ

☎ 01352 / pop 73,450

In the autonomous municipality of Orkhon, and not technically part of Bulgan aimag, Erdenet is a little slice of Russia in Mongolia. The reason for Erdenet's existence is the copper mine, which employs about 8000 people and is the lifeblood of the city.

Erdenet, Mongolia's second-largest city, is modern (built in 1974) and comparatively

wealthy, so the facilities are the best outside of Ulaanbaatar. Up to one-third of the population of Erdenet was Russian during communist times, though now only about 1000 Russians still work as technical advisers at the mine. You'll hear plenty of Russian on the streets and will find restaurant menus featuring *peroshki* (meat-filled fried pastry) rather than *buuz* (steamed mutton dumplings). These days, you are just as likely to bump into a pair of clean-cut Mormons, who have set up a large base here.

With good road and rail connections, it's likely that you'll eventually find yourself passing through Erdenet. Such a feat was less likely under communism – back then, the USSR preferred to keep the city a secret and on most old maps Erdenet was deliberately marked incorrectly.

Orientation

Erdenet is a sprawling city, though everything you will need is along the main street, Sükhbaatar Gudamj. The train station is inconveniently located more than 9km east of the centre.

ZANABAZAR: THE MICHELANGELO OF THE STEPPES

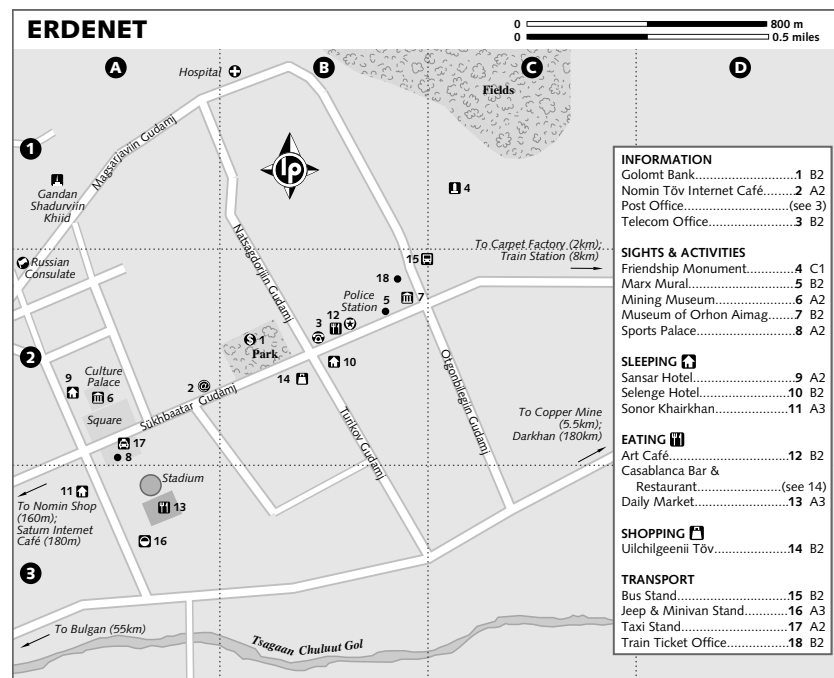
The life of the great Zanabazar, artist, statesman and Living Buddha, was not without controversy. One day, while in his workshop, a group of aristocrats arrived to chastise him for living with an 18-year-old girl, which went against his monastic vows. Zanabazar's female disciple, the so-called Girl Prince, who was deeply offended by the men, appeared from the workshop holding a lump of molten bronze in her bare hands. She proceeded to fashion the hot metal into a beautiful sculpture before their eyes, an act that had them begging for forgiveness.

Although some of Zanabazar's life seems pulled from the pages of a fairy tale, he was in fact a real man, and today is considered one of the greatest Renaissance artists in all of Asia. He was born in 1635 and at the tender age of three was deemed to be a possible *gegeen* (saint), so when he turned 14 he was sent to Tibet to study Buddhism under the Dalai Lama. He was also proclaimed the reincarnation of the Jonangpa line of Tibetan Buddhism and became the first Bogd Gegeen (reincarnated Buddhist leader of Mongolia). He is also known in Mongolia as Öndür Gegeen.

When he returned from his studies in Tibet, the artist-lama kick-started a Mongolian artistic renaissance and become Mongolia's greatest sculptor. In his spare time he reputedly invented the *soyombo*, the national symbol of Mongolia, and reformed the Mongolian script. Zanabazar was also a political figure and his struggle with the Zungar leader Galdan led to Mongolia's submission to the Manchus in 1691.

Zanabazar died in Beijing in 1723. His body was taken to Urga (modern Ulaanbaatar) and later entombed in a stupa in Amarbaysgalant Khiid. You will see many of Zanabazar's creations in monasteries and museums in Mongolia, and there is a fine collection of his art (particularly his Tara and Dhyani Buddha statues) in the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts in Ulaanbaatar. You can recognise images of Zanabazar by his bald, round head, the *dorje* (thunderbolt symbol) he holds in his right hand and the bell in his left hand.

For more on Zanabazar, look for the *Guidebook to Locales Connected with the Life of Zanabazar*, by Don Croner.



Information

Golomt Bank (☎ 25200; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5.30pm Sat & Sun) Changes US dollars and euros and gives cash against Visa and MasterCard.

Nomin Töv Internet Café (☎ 20922; per hr T400; ☎ 10am-10pm) Small internet café on the main road.

Saturn Internet Café (☎ 9911 8277; Sükhbaatar Gudamj; per hr T500; ☎ 9am-midnight) Has 40 computers.

Telecom Office (☎ 27427; cnr Sükhbaatar Gudamj & Natsagorjiin Gudamj; ☎ 24hr) ATM and post office are also located here.

Sights

COPPER MINE

The **open-cut mine** (www.emc.erdnet.mn), easily seen to the north of the city, is one of the 10-largest copper mines in the world. It is also a tremendous burden on the country's infrastructure and consumes nearly 50% of Mongolia's electricity.

Open-cut mining is more damaging to the environment but infinitely safer than digging mine shafts below the surface. Since this particular mountain is almost solid copper and molybdenum ore, this is the only practical way to reach it.

Despite the destruction of the mountain, the long-term environmental effects aren't as bad as the gold mines in nearby Zaamar, where rivers are being polluted.

The mine accounts for around 40% of Mongolia's hard-currency earnings, producing some 25 million tonnes of copper/molybdenum ore per annum. Thanks to skyrocketing copper prices the mine is now profitable and it earns between US\$150 million and US\$200 million in profit annually. Nearly all the copper is sent to China and some bits of it may be inside your mobile phone.

The mine is worth a visit if you've never visited one like this before. You'll need to show your passport to the guard at the gate. No-one seems to mind if you look around on your own, but it would be wise to check in at the administration building, up the hill from the guard station, on the left. A taxi to the mine and back from the town centre costs about T4000, including waiting time.

FRIENDSHIP MONUMENT

This communist monument, about 200m northeast of the Selenge Hotel, is worth a

DOWN ON THE RANCH

Anak Ranch (☎ 011-316 181, 9909 9762; www.anakranch.com) is a working ranch where guests can get their hands dirty doing farm work. You can milk cows, herd the sheep, make cheese and lasso a half-wild horse or two. There is also plenty of time to relax, enjoy a barbecue, hike and fish. Prices are US\$39 all-inclusive and a portion of the proceeds goes to improving conditions at Ulaanbaatar's dungeonlike Gants-Hudag prison. The ranch is close to the town of Orkhon, which you can easily access by train from Ulaanbaatar; there are daily trains in both directions (from Ulaanbaatar, trains depart at 7.35pm). If you contact the ranch ahead of time someone will meet you at the station with horses.

quick look. On the way from the town centre you pass a fine **Marx mural** and a picture of **Lenin** bolted to the wall. A little further to the east, the **ovoo** (a shamanistic collection of stones, wood or other offerings) is impressive if you haven't seen too many before. The hills north of the monument and south of the stadium are great for short hikes.

MINING MUSEUM

This Soviet-built **museum** (☎ 9935 0888; admission T1000; ☎ 8am-6pm Wed-Sun) belongs to the copper-mining company, Erdenet Concern. It's on the 2nd floor of the Culture Palace on the town square, and is worth a look.

MUSEUM OF ORKHON AIMAG

Opened in 1983 and hidden in a concrete complex on the right side of the Marx mural, this small **museum** (admission T1000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm) includes a few oddities including a model of the copper mine (you can see it in 'day' or 'night') and a model of a modern ger with a TV inside. Look out for the two-headed calf, which hopefully is no indication of what the mine is doing to the local water supply.

Activities

If you have some time to kill, check out the **Sports Palace** (☎ 73436; Sükhbaatar Gudamj; ☎ 8am-9pm). You can take a hot shower (T1000) or sauna (T2000 per hour), watch some wrestling or go ice-skating in winter at the stadium at the back. There's an indoor pool (T2000), open weekdays only, but the staff may make life difficult by insisting on a medical examination before they let you swim.

Sleeping CAMPING

Although the city is comparatively large, it is still possible to camp near Erdenet. The

best places to try are north of the Friendship Monument, or south of the stadium, over the other side of Tsaagan Chuluut Gol and among the pretty foothills.

HOTELS

Erdenet has a reasonable selection of hotels but no guesthouse or ger camp.

Selenge Hotel (☎ 27359; r T6000-20,000, half-lux T24,000, lux T30,000) This classic Soviet-style hotel has large, clean rooms with private bathrooms. Renovations in some rooms include fresh wallpaper, carpeting and beds, although a few cheaper, unrenovated rooms have the same old lumpy beds and musty furnishings. It's on the main road.

Sonor Khairkhan (☎ 28120; d T13,000, half-lux T20,000, lux T28,000) Budget travellers after good value should head for this place – it has attractive, clean rooms, an excellent hot-water supply, phone, TV and the price includes breakfast in the room served promptly at 7.30am. It's near the daily market.

Sansar Hotel (☎ 27927; r T15,000, half-lux T36,000, lux T40,000) This new hotel is the best in town, with clean rooms and modern bathrooms. It also sports one of the best restaurants around. It's on the street running northwest of the main square.

Eating

The restaurant in the Sansar Hotel offers a better-than-average selection of dishes, including stir-fried mushrooms with lamb (T3000), fried chicken (T4000) or, for the adventurous, horse meat (T2600).

Art Café (☎ 27316; ☎ 10am-midnight) A progressive café and bar on the main road with very orange interior, couches and modern art on the walls. A big-screen TV is tuned to local news. Food consists of standard Mongolian meat-and-potato dishes and a few Russian soups and salads.

Casablanca Bar & Restaurant (☎ 28546; ☎ 9am-midnight) Various Russian and Mongolian dishes and beers are served to customers sitting in huge leather couches. Try the *azu*, a fried meat and veggie dish inspired by Chinese cooking. It's located in the department store (Ulchilgeenii Töv).

The daily market behind the Sports Palace is surprisingly small and scrappy, though there's a decent selection of (nonrefrigerated) dairy products here. Most locals buy their food from the shops along the main drag.

Shopping

Carpet Factory (☎ 20111; ☎ 8-11am & 1-5pm) If a couple of tonnes of copper is a bit inconvenient to carry around, a carpet would make a fine souvenir. The city's carpet factory produces more than a million square metres every year using machinery from the former East Germany. The factory is open year-round but production is low in summer (June to August) when supplies of wool are scarce. If you ask the guard it may be possible to take a tour of the entire operation. The factory is just off the main road to the train station, about 2km from the Friendship Monument.

Nomin Shop (☎ 21735; ☎ 9am-9pm) You can also buy carpets and rugs here, about 500m west of the Sports Palace. A huge Chinggis Khaan wall carpet costs from T90,000 and smaller, towel-sized carpets are around T5000 to T20,000.

For general goods (electronics, food and clothing) the best place to shop is Ulchilgeenii Töv (Үйлчилгээний Төв), the department store opposite the Telecom office.

Getting There & Away

Travellers often bypass Erdenet and go straight from Ulaanbaatar to Mörön via Bulgan. If you have the time, and want a little luxury, take the sleeper train from Ulaanbaatar to Erdenet and catch a shared vehicle to Mörön; these wait at the taxi stand outside the Sports Palace. Don't make the mistake of first going to Bulgan and then trying to hitch to Mörön. There are comparatively few cars heading to Mörön from Bulgan.

BUS, MINIVAN & JEEP

Two daily buses depart from Erdenet's bus stand to Ulaanbaatar's Dragon bus stand (T8000, seven hours, 371km) at noon and 2pm. Going the other way they depart Dragon at the same times.

For shared vehicles to Mörön (T20,000, 10 hours), Bulgan (T3500, one hour), Tsetserleg (T20,000, seven hours) and Uliastai (T40,000, 20 hours), the best place to look is at the market (*zakh*). The best place to look for a vehicle to Ulaanbaatar is outside the Sports Palace.

The roads from Erdenet to Darkhan (180km) and to Bulgan City (55km) are both paved.

TRAIN

Train 273 departs Ulaanbaatar for Erdenet at 7pm, arriving 11 hours later. It costs T3600/9000 for a hard seat/soft-seat sleeper. The sleeper is definitely worth the extra tögrög: the hard-seat carriages are packed to the roof. The train returns to Ulaanbaatar from Erdenet at the same time (7pm). In summer a weekend train to/from Ulaanbaatar is added, though the schedule is a little unreliable, so check for times at the station.

To Darkhan (5½ hours), the train costs T2100/5300 for a hard/soft seat. For Sükhbaatar in Selenge aimag, change trains in Darkhan.

You can buy tickets at the train station, but it's better to queue on the day of, or before, departure at the **train ticket office** (☎ 22505; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2.30-6.30pm) in the northeast end of town. Look for the small train sign on the side of an apartment block, opposite the local bus stand.

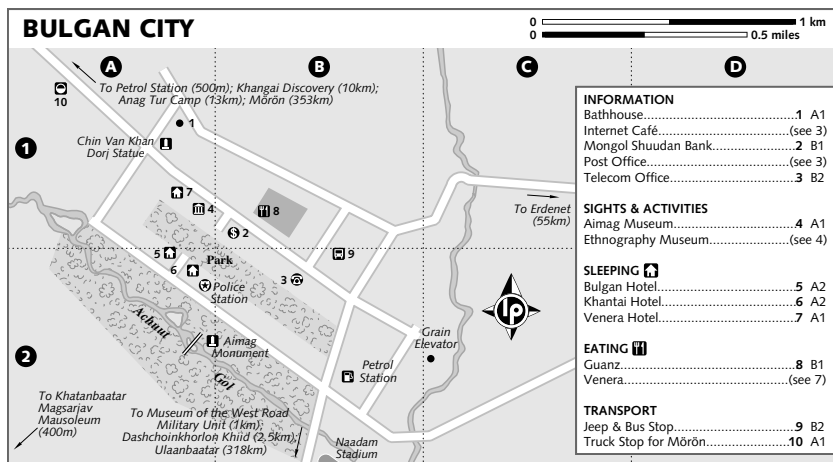
Buses meet arriving trains, but the stampede of passengers quickly fills these to overflowing. It's best to get off the train as soon as you can and find a taxi (about T4000) before the crush starts.

It is more sedate going by bus to the train station. Buses (T300), cars (T500 per person) and taxis (T5000) leave from the local bus stand, opposite the train ticket office.

BULGAN CITY БУЛГАН

☎ 01342 / pop 11,000 / elev 1208m

Bulgan is one of Mongolia's prettiest aimag capitals. There is a grassy pine-clad park in the middle of town and a lazy main street where you are just as likely to see a horseman as you are a passing vehicle. With Erdenet so close by, the town has never had a chance to develop much – there are only a couple of small hotels and restaurants and very few jeeps. As a quiet backwater it's not a bad place to spend a night if you are travelling between Mörön and Ulaanbaatar.



Information

Bathhouse (admission T400; ☎ 9am-6pm Thu-Mon) Behind the pink government building.

Internet café (☎ 24024; per hr T690; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) In the same building as Telecom.

Mongol Shuudan Bank (☎ 22169) Exchanges US dollars and will give a cash advance on Visa.

Telecom office (☎ 24117; ☎ 24hr) In the middle of the main drag, about 150m southeast of the jeep stand. The post office is also located here.

Sights

MUSEUMS

The **Aimag Museum** (☎ 22589; admission T1000; ☎ 9am-6pm), on the main street, has some information on obscure sights in the aimag; a display on J Gurragechaa, Mongolia's first man in space; and some interesting old photos.

Next door, the **Ethnography Museum** (Ugsaatny Muzei; admission T1000; ☎ 9am-6pm) has a few interesting exhibits, such as ancient surgical instruments, *airag* churners and saddles.

DASHCHOINKHORLON KHIID

ДАШЧОЙНХОРЛОН ХИЙД

Like most monasteries in Mongolia, this one (built in 1992) replaced the original monastery, Bangiin Khuree, which was destroyed in 1937. About 1000 monks lived and worshipped at Bangiin Khuree before they were arrested and, presumably, executed. The remains of several stupas from the old monastery complex can be seen nearby.

The modern **monastery** (GPS: N48° 47.821', E103° 30.687') contains statues of Tsongkhapa and

Sakyamuni, and features a painting of the old monastery layout. About 30 monks now reside there. The monastery is about 2.5km southwest of Bulgan City and is hidden behind some hills. The run-down pavilion next to the temple, called Divajin, was built in 1876.

KHATANBAATAR MAGSARJAV

МАУСОЛЕУМ ХАТАНБААТАР

МАГСАРЖАВЫН БУНХАН

Located 1km southwest of the Bulgan Hotel, across the stream and at the top of a hill, this curious blue building looks like a concrete ger but is actually a mausoleum in the shape of a hat. It allegedly contains the remains of Khatanbaatar Magsarjav, a key figure in the 1911 Revolution, who helped to liberate the city of Khovd from Chinese rule. There are some murals of battle scenes inside, but to see them you'll need to get the keys from the caretaker. Ask at the Aimag Museum.

MUSEUM OF THE WEST ROAD MILITARY

УНИТ БАРУУН ЗАМЫН ТУСГАЙ АНГИЙН ШТАФ

The West Road Military Unit was a key force in freeing Mongolia from White Russian rule in 1921. Its history is described in this small **museum** (☎ 99963472; admission T1000; ☎ 9am-6pm), 2.5km south of Bulgan. The building itself dates from 1668 and was used as a shop until being transformed into a military post in 1921. Choibalsan and Khatanbaatar Magsarjav both stayed here during Mongolia's military campaigns of the early 20th century.

Sleeping CAMPING

The best place to pitch your tent is over the southern side of the river, the Achuut Gol; go past the market and find a discreet spot. If you have your own transport, consider camping a few kilometres north of town, along the road to Mörön.

GER CAMPS

Khangai Discovery (☎ 9979 8810, 8876 6894; GPS: N48° 50.608', E103° 25.427'; with/without food US\$30/15) Located 10km north of Bulgan, this pretty ger camp is nestled below some forested hills. The camp includes about 20 gers and some A-frame huts. Horse riding is available (US\$10). About 3km further up the valley is run-down Anag Tur camp.

HOTELS

Bulgan Hotel (☎ 22811; per person T3500-9000) This charmingly run-down Soviet hotel is in a peaceful location overlooking the park. With its decaying moose head on the wall and a

Ping-Pong table upstairs it has more character than most places in the countryside. The standard rooms are depressing but the lux rooms include cable TV and hot-water shower – good value for T9000.

our pick **Khantai Hotel** (☎ 22964; s/d T7000/14,000)

This small B&B offers six spotless double rooms, one with a gorgeous balcony overlooking the park. The bathroom and shower are both downstairs and there is 24-hour hot water. The friendly owner sometimes has breakfast available for an extra cost; she can offer eggs, bread and rice milk. Sometimes, in late summer, she adds blueberries and cream to the menu.

Venera Hotel (☎ 9960 4099, 9908 0944; r T10,000)

Rooms here are clean and new but the size of a walk-in closet. On the main road.

Eating

The restaurant scene in Bulgan is pretty dire. There are a few hole-in-the-wall *guanz* on the main street, and in the daytime the hotels can usually scrape something together.

NOMADS TO NINJAS

Miners indulging in Mongolia's great new gold rush are turning verdant plains and pure rivers inside out in search of buried fortunes. But for once, it's not just the megacorporations from Ulaanbaatar who are to blame, it's the Ninjas.

When severe winters at the beginning of the millennium wiped out entire herds and family fortunes, many impoverished nomads turned to illegal gold mining in Bulgan, Töv and Selenge aimags. The green, shell-like buckets strapped to their backs, coupled with their covert, night-time operations, earned them the moniker 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' or Ninjas for short.

The Ninjas, who often ran what larger mining operations dredge from the flooded plains, attracted interest from businesspeople who sold them food and supplies. Soon 'Ninja ger (yurt) boomtowns' developed, each with ger-butchers, ger-shops, ger-karaoke bars, ger-sega parlours and ger-goldsmiths. Police have tried, often vainly, to break up the settlements, but the Ninjas return in larger numbers.

The Ninjas, who number more than 100,000, pose a serious threat to the environment and themselves. Unlike the licensed mining companies, they don't clean up after themselves; their work sites are often littered with discarded batteries and open pits. Mercury and cyanide, used to separate gold from the rock, add more problems. Health workers report that miners who use these methods have levels of mercury in their urine that are five to six times the safe limit.

Ninjas account for an incredible US\$140 million in gold exports (although official bank figures say US\$40 million). They receive US\$500 per troy ounce, completely illegal and untaxed. Most Ninjas earn US\$16 to US\$24 per day. This kind of money, 10 times that of other rural salaries, has attracted more than out-of-work nomads. They've been joined by pensioners, redundant farm workers and poorly paid civil servants. Students who come in summer are able to finance their entire university education.

But this is dangerous business – a couple dozen Ninjas are buried alive in mine shafts each year. Recognising that the Ninjas won't go away, the government has considered ways to legalise their activities, protect their health and clean up their mess, if for no other reason than to tax their cache, which is mostly smuggled to China.

Venera (☎ 9908 0944; meals T1500-2500; 🕒 10am-midnight) The nicest restaurant in Bulgan is in the hotel of the same name. It serves up decent Mongolian dishes, although promises of Korean meals are empty.

Getting There & Away

At the time of research there were no flights to Bulgan and there is little prospect these will resume in the near future.

HITCHING

As most tourist traffic between Ulaanbaatar and Mörön goes via Erdenet, there is not too much traffic going through Bulgan, but if you ask around the jeep stand or the petrol station, 500m northwest of town, something will turn up.

BUS, MINIVAN & JEEP

A bus departs Bulgan for Ulaanbaatar (T7900, eight hours) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. When there is demand, minivans and jeeps go between Bulgan and Ulaanbaatar (T10,000, eight hours), but most people take a minivan to Erdenet (T3500, one hour, 55km) and then take the overnight train.

Vehicles to Mörön (or anywhere else) are very rare as these tend to leave from Erdenet. Usually on Monday a postal truck goes to Khutag-Öndör (T8000, four hours), but check details as the day is subject to change. Jeeps hang around the Önö Mandal Bar, northeast of the post office. You could charter one for about T400 to T500 per kilometre.

There are two routes between Ulaanbaatar and Bulgan City; the rougher but more direct southern route (318km) via Dashinchilen, or the paved northern route (467km) via Darkhan and Erdenet. If you want to visit Amarbayasgalant Khiid, the northern route is the way to go.

Bulgan City is 248km from Darkhan and 353km from Mörön.

AROUND BULGAN

There are a couple of obscure historical monuments around Bulgan. About 20km south of Bulgan, just north of Orkhon village, are seven standing deer stones, so called because the stones are carved with reindeer and other animals. The stones, known as **Seeriyen Adigyn Bugan Khoshoo** (GPS: N48° 38.537', E103° 32.735'), mark what are thought to be Neolithic grave sites.

About 60km west of Bulgan City is the extinct volcano of **Uran Uul** (GPS: N48° 59.855', E102° 44.003') and nearby Togoo Uul, part of the 1600-hectare Uran-Togoo Tulga Uul Nature Reserve. It's a decent place to camp if you are headed to/from Khövsgöl aimag.

DASHINCHILEN ДАШИНЧИЛЭН

There are a couple of minor monuments in Dashinchilen *sum* (district), in the south of the aimag, which might be of interest if you are travelling between Ulaanbaatar and Tsetserleg, via Ögii Nuur.

On the western side of the Tuul Gol, about 35km northeast of Dashinchilen, are the impressive ruins of **Tsogt Taijijn Tsagaan Balgas** (GPS: N48° 01.422', E104° 21.091'), a 17th-century fort that was the home of the mother of Prince Tsogt, a 17th-century poet who fought against Chinese rule. There is a **stone stele** nearby. The ruins are hard to find without a GPS so ask in Dashinchilen and keep asking at gers en route.

About 12km west of the *sum* capital, the ruined **Khar Bukh Balgas** (Khar Bakhin Fortress; GPS: N47° 53.198', E103° 53.513') is worth exploring and easy to reach as it's just a few kilometres north of the main road. The fortress, inhabited by the Kitan from 917 to 1120, is sometimes known as Kitan Balgas. A small **museum** nearby is unlocked by a caretaker when visitors arrive.

KHÖVSGÖL ХӨВСГӨЛ

pop 123,500 / area 101,000 sq km

Tourist brochures tout it as the Switzerland of Mongolia, and this is no idle boast. Khövsgöl is a land of thick forests, rushing rivers, sparkling lakes and rugged mountains. It's Mongolia's most beautiful aimag and seemingly every river bend or lake cove offers new and wonderful surprises. It does rain a lot during summer, but this only adds to the scenery: rainbows hang over meadows dotted with white gers and grazing horses and yaks.

While the Khalkh dominate the south, there are also scattered populations of Buriat, Uriankhai, Khotgoid and Darkhad people. The Tsaatan, who live in the taiga in the far north of the aimag, herd reindeer and live in tepees resembling those of Native Americans. The north is a stronghold of sha-

THE REINDEER HERDERS

Not far from Khövsgöl Nuur live the Tsaatan (literally 'Reindeer People'). Their entire existence is based around their herds of reindeer, which provide milk, skins for clothes, antlers for carving and medicine, transport and, occasionally, meat.

The Tsaatan are part of the Tuvan ethnic group, which inhabits the Tuvan Republic of Russia. There are only about 300 Tsaatan in total, spread over 100,000 sq km of northern Mongolian taiga landscape. They are truly nomadic, often moving their small encampments (*ail*) every two or three weeks, looking for special types of grass and lichen loved by the reindeer (of which there are around 700 in total). The Tsaatan do not use gers, but prefer *orts*, similar to Native American tepees, traditionally made from birch bark, but now from store-bought canvas. The Tsaatan are strong practitioners of shamanism.

Visiting the Tsaatan is difficult and exhausting. The climate is exceedingly harsh, the area is prone to insects, the terrain is rough and mountainous, and it's easy to get lost without a good local guide. Plan to be self-sufficient with a quality sleeping bag, food and waterproof tents.

Irresponsible tourism, research and evangelical activities have put the Tsaatan culture and their reindeer at risk. Tourist dollars have already lured Tsaatan members down to Khövsgöl Nuur, an inhospitable elevation for their sensitive reindeer (see boxed text, p155). Others have been subjected to bible-thumping sessions and Tarzan films shown by Korean missionaries. It's estimated that 80% of their food comes as handouts from NGOs and tourists, which has made them considerably reliant on outsiders. If you are intent on making the trip, read up about permits (p160).

manism and you may be fortunate enough to see a shaman ceremony.

The main geographic feature of the province, as well as its major tourist destination, is enormous Khövsgöl Nuur. Most travellers fail to explore areas beyond the lake and this is a shame; the rest of the aimag has much to offer. The Darkhad valley, Chandman-Öndör and the south all make fine destinations, with plenty of opportunities for fishing, hiking and cycle touring. Note that if you want to fish anywhere but Khövsgöl Nuur you will need a permit from the Ministry of Nature in Ulaanbaatar. As these can be hard to get, consider hooking up with a licensed and responsible tour operator, a list of which can be found on p58.

MÖRÖN МӨРӨН

☎ 01382 / pop 36,100 / elev 1283m

For such a beautiful province, Khövsgöl has a rather disappointing capital. Mörön (pronounced 'mu-roon') sprawls over the north bank of the Delgermörön Gol, a treeless landscape that serves its purpose as an administrative centre. The town has few sights and most travellers only use the place to break up a journey to and from regions to the north.

Information

Border Guard office (☎ 24136, 24662; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Might be able to issue permits for border towns

such as Tsagaannuur, although it prefers that this be done in Ulaanbaatar. Located opposite the Ider restaurant.

Exchange Centre (☎ 9938 8858; Peace St; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Located upstairs of the Khadgalamjiin Bank, it will change US dollars and euros.

Internet café (☎ 24706; per hr T700; 🕒 9am-11pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) Attached to the Telecom office.

Mongol Shuudan Bank (☎ 22616) About 200m east of the Telecom office, this bank changes money and gives cash advances on Visa.

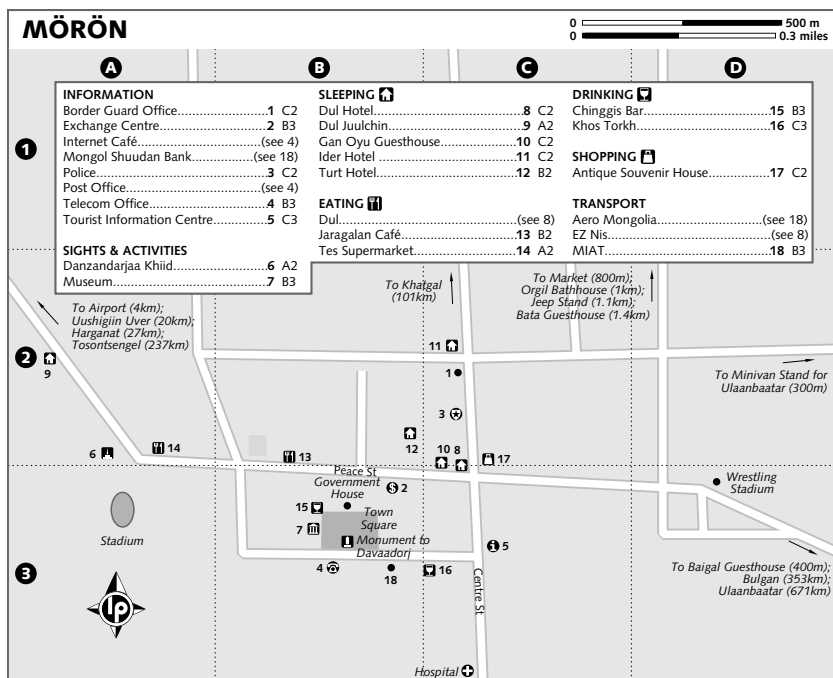
Orgil Bathhouse (☎ 22018; per person T1500; 🕒 8am-midnight) On the east side of the market, this is the newest bathhouse in town.

Telecom office (☎ 21034; 🕒 24hr) Opposite the town square. The post office is also located here.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 9938 7009; hovsgul_info@yahoo.com; Centre St; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Supplies maps and books for the region and can give some basic tips on transport and accommodation. A tourist kiosk (☎ 9938 9564) at the airport opens when a plane arrives.

Sights MUSEUM

Given the variety of wildlife in the aimag, stuffed animals are, not surprisingly, the main feature of the **museum** (☎ 9938 6815; admission T2000; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri). There's a large tusk from a woolly mammoth, but you won't see one of those in the flesh – they haven't inhabited this region for more than 40,000



years. Photographic exhibits of the Tsaatan people are also intriguing. The museum is housed inside the local Drama Theatre on the town square.

DANZANDARJAA KHIID

ДАНЗАНДАРЖАА ХИЙД

The history of this monastery is unclear, but the original (Möröngiin Khuree) was built around 1890 and was home to 2000 monks. It was rebuilt and reopened in June 1990, and now has 40 monks of all ages. It's a charming place, designed in the shape of a concrete ger, and contains a great collection of *thangka*.

The monastery is just back from the main road, on the way to the airport. Visitors are always welcome.

Tours

The guesthouses listed below can help to arrange transport out of Mörön. Local English-speaking guide **Saraa** (☎ 9938 5577; saraa_m3@yahoo.com) can also help with logistics and travel in the area.

Sleeping

CAMPING

The best camping spots are by the river, the Delgermörön Gol. Twenty-seven kilometres east of Mörön, on the road to Bulgan City, a tiny, unmapped and unnamed lake offers good camping. If you are heading west, there are great spots on the river past Burentogtokh.

GER CAMPS

Dul Juulchin (☎ 22206; GPS: N49° 38.483', E100° 08.618'; s/d US\$15/20, ger US\$20) Good value for money, this extension of the Dul empire has clean and simple rooms in the lodge or comfortable gers. The toilets and showers are both clean.

Harganat (☎ 9938 7022; www.besudtour.com; GPS: N49° 38.521', E99° 50.030'; with/without meals US\$30/15) Perched on a ridge over Delger-Mörön valley this attractive camp has hot showers and excellent French and Italian food. Even if you're not staying it's a nice place for lunch after visiting the deer stones at Uushigiin Uver. In summer, swans swim in the river below but the real time to visit is mid-September when more than 100 swans make their home here. It is 7km past Uushigiin Uver.

GUESTHOUSES

Bata Guesthouse (☎ 9138 7080; bata_guesthouse@yahoo.com; GPS: N49° 39.053', E100° 10.018'; per person incl breakfast T4000) This *hashaa* guesthouse (basically a fenced-in yard) is a 20-minute walk from the centre, 400m past the market. Turn right at the water pump house and walk for another 150m; it's on the left. Look out for the 'Bata Guesthouse' sign. Locals know the address as '5-8-4'. The owner, Bata, speaks English and can help arrange transport around the aimag. Laundry service and hot showers are available.

Baigal Guesthouse (☎ 9938 8408; baigal_999@chin.ggis.com; GPS: N49° 38.176', E100° 10.798'; per person T4000, hot shower T1000) A similar option to the Bata, about 800m past the wrestling stadium. The price includes a breakfast of toast, bread, jam and eggs (Baigal raises chickens so you can be sure the eggs are fresh).

Gan Oyu Guesthouse (☎ 22349, 9938 9438; ganoyu_n@yahoo.com; Peace St; dm incl breakfast US\$5; 🚻) This guesthouse is the best value in town, with a spotless dorm room and hot-water shower. It is on the 2nd floor of an apartment block next to the Dul Hotel. For a cheaper option, ask about its off-site ger camp, with beds for T3500. Laundry service available.

HOTELS

Turt Hotel (☎ 9905 8239; per person T6000) The Turt is an older hotel and pretty run-down but the management does keep it reasonably clean. It's far better than the Delger Mörön, the dumpy hotel next door.

Ider Hotel (☎ 29612, 9938 2890; r T20,000, lux T35,000) This place is clean and all rooms have an attached bathroom, but it's a little disorganised and not as good value as the Dul. Located a block north of the Dul.

Dul Hotel (☎ 22206; s/d US\$15/20, s/d half-lux US\$20/25, lux US\$30-45) The name of the place is a little self-defeating but in fact this is the best hotel in town. All rooms have been renovated and come with a modern bathroom, IDD phone and cable TV. The standard rooms have no hot water so a half-lux is a good option. It has an excellent restaurant downstairs. It is located 100m northeast of the square.

Eating & Drinking

Jaragan Café (☎ 24409; meals T1300; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) The streetside patio at this Mongolian restaurant is worth visiting on a warm day. It's just northwest of the square.

our pick Dul (☎ 22206; mains T2500-3500; 🕒 9am-midnight) Located in the hotel of the same name, the Dul is hardly descriptive of what this place has to offer. If the staff can get your order correct (a long shot at best) you can enjoy excellent pizza, roast beef, a taco salad or a Chinese dish. Round off your meal with an outstanding cinnamon roll or apple pie. Vegetarians should find a soup or salad to their liking. All these delights are enjoyed on comfy sofas in a clean, bright atmosphere.

Khos Torkh (☎ 24016; 🕒 10am-7pm) Easily spotted, this local watering hole features two giant beer barrels outside its entrance. The local drink of choice is Kvas, a brew made from fermented rye bread. The alcohol content is so low (1%) that you'd need to drink a few gallons of the stuff to feel any of its effects.

Chinggis Bar (☎ 24016; 🕒 10am-midnight) Depending on your perspective, the outer-space theme here seems totally surreal or completely appropriate for northern Mongolia. Chinese and Mongolian food served by day, beer by night.

Tes Supermarket (🕒 10am-8pm) Located on the main road, this is one of several shopping markets.

Shopping

Antique Souvenir House (☎ 9976 8837; 🕒 9am-9pm) Sells maps, books, antiques and locally produced handicrafts. On the main road.

Getting There & Away

AIR

MIAT (Mongolian Airlines; ☎ 9638 0002) is located in the Mongol Shuudan Bank building. Another office opens at the airport when planes arrive. MIAT runs direct flights between Ulaanbaatar and Mörön for US\$90/157 one way/return. **Aero Mongolia** (☎ 22478, 9997 7705), located in the same building, flies here for US\$109/194 one way/return. **EZ Nis** (☎ 21199, 9904 9930) charges US\$120/216 one way/return; its office is in the Dul Hotel. Between the three of these airlines there should be at least one flight a day.

Mörön occasionally serves as a refuelling stop for flights headed further west, so you could theoretically combine a trip to the west with Khövsgöl Nuur. Check MIAT for details. Buy your ticket as early as possible.

Mörön airport is about 5km from the centre of town. You will have to take a jeep or taxi there (T2500), or you can hop on the crowded bus.

BUS

A direct bus departs Mörön for Ulaanbaatar (T20,000) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 2pm. It leaves from the minivan stand. Going the other way, it departs from Ulaanbaatar's Teeveriin Tovchoo on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

HITCHING

The Ulaanbaatar–Erdenet–Mörön road is fairly busy, so hitching a ride shouldn't be a problem. But be warned: the trip by truck between Ulaanbaatar and Mörön is a tough 27 or more nonstop hours (expect to pay at least T10,000 for a lift). Some travellers do it one way for the 'experience' – and then gratefully fly back. It's best to fly here from Ulaanbaatar as it's easier to get a seat. It's also easier to hitch to UB rather than from it, as all traffic tends to funnel back to the capital.

MINIVAN & JEEP

Minivans run between Ulaanbaatar and Mörön daily (T25,000, 17 hours, 671km). You can cut down on the time spent bumping around in a van by taking the sleeper train between UB and Erdenet.

Minibuses and jeeps leave most afternoons to Khatgal (T7000, two hours). There are occasional jeeps to Erdenet (T20,000, 10 hours) and Darkhan (T24,000, 13 hours, 601km).

Transport to Ulaanbaatar, Erdenet and Darkhan leaves from the southern side of the market. Transport to Khatgal and elsewhere leaves from north of the market.

From the city of Mörön it is 273km to Tosontsengel in Zavkhan aimag and 353km to Bulgan City.

UUSHIGIIN UVER
УУШИГИЙН ӨВӨР

A Bronze Age site, **Uushigiin Uver** (GPS: N49° 39.316', E99° 55.708'; admission T3000) contains 14 upright carved deer stones, plus sacrificial altars (*keregsuur*). This remarkable collection is located 20km west of Mörön, and about 1km north of the Delgermörön Gol. The area is enclosed by a fence and small placards describe the stones. The most unique, stone 14, is topped with the head of a woman; there are only a handful of such deer stones in Mongolia. The carved stones are dated to around 2500 to 4000 years old, and the nearby mountain range contains around 1400 burial tombs. A caretaker living near the area can

show you around and provide commentary. Despite the uniqueness of the site, an ugly ger camp built nearby detracts from its allure.

KHÖVSGÖL NUUR NATIONAL PARK
ХӨВСГӨЛ НУУР

Known as the Blue Pearl of Mongolia, Khövsgöl Nuur is an extraordinary lake that stretches 136km deep into the Siberian taiga. The lake and mountains that surround it form the basis for this popular national park, a major destination for both Mongolian and international tourists.

In surface area, this is the second-largest lake (2760 sq km) in Mongolia, surpassed in size only by Uvs Nuur, a shallow, salty lake in the western part of the country. But Khövsgöl Nuur (sometimes transliterated as Hövsgöl or Hovsgol) is Mongolia's deepest lake (up to 262m deep) as well as the world's 14th-largest source of fresh water – it contains between 1% and 2% of the world's fresh water (that's 380,700 billion litres!). Geologically speaking, Khövsgöl is the younger sibling (by 23 million years) of Siberia's Lake Baikal, 195km to the northeast, and was formed by the same tectonic forces.

The lake is full of fish, such as lenok and sturgeon, and the area is home to argali sheep, ibex, bear, sable, moose and a few near-sighted wolverines. It also has more than 200 species of bird, including the Baikal teal, black-headed goose (*kheeriin galuu* in Mongolian), black stork and Altai snowcock.

The region hosts three separate, unique peoples: Darkhad, Buriat and Tsaatan (aka

DEER STONES

Found across Mongolia, deer stones are ancient burial markers that date from the Bronze Age. The ancient steppe tribes believed that after death a soul departed this world and ascended to the sky on the backs of deer. The deer carved onto the stones are representational of this act. Many deer stones are also carved with a belt, from which hang various tools including axes and spears. These accessories would be required for successfully navigating the afterlife. Of the 700 deer stones known to exist worldwide, 500 are located in Mongolia. The best collection of deer stones is at Uushigiin Uver (see left).

Dukha). Shamanism, rather than Buddhism, is the religion of choice in these parts.

The lake water is still clean but a rise in livestock using the area for winter pasture has led to some pollution of the shore and feeder rivers, so you are better off purifying your water.

Khövsgöl Nuur is a pristine but increasingly heavily visited part of Mongolia. Please read boxed texts p54 and p60 for suggestions on how you can minimise your impact on this beautiful region.

Climate

Spring is a pleasant time to visit as it rains less and the flowers and birdlife are at their best. However, it will still be very cold, with snow on the ground and ice on the lake (some ice usually remains until early June).

The summer is a little more crowded (not so crowded that it would spoil your trip), but it can still be cold, and it often rains. The meadows around the lake are sprinkled with beautiful wildflowers during this time. Autumn is another pleasant time to visit, when the leaves are changing colour.

Winter is amazingly cold, though blue skies are the norm. Khövsgöl Nuur freezes to a depth of 120cm, allowing passenger trucks to cross the length of the lake in winter. Oil trucks once made this journey in vast numbers but this practice was stopped in 1990 when it was determined that they were polluting the water. About 40 trucks have fallen through the ice over the years.

Information

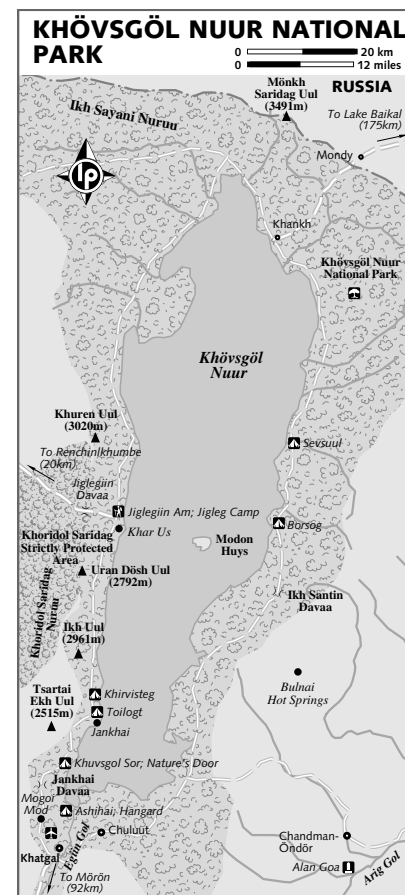
Discovery Initiatives produces a useful booklet on the park entitled *Lake Hovsgol National Park: A Visitors Guide*, which you can get in Ulaanbaatar and, maybe, in the national park office.

Information Centre (Мэдээллийн Төв; ☎ 9am–8pm) Located near the MS Guesthouse in Khatgal. It has some interesting, museum-style displays on the lake but the staff speaks only Mongolian and has little practical information on touring the area. The caretaker (with the keys) can be found in a ger around the back.

Telecom office (☎ 01382-26513/36; ☎ 8am–11pm) The post office is also located here; there're plans for an internet café but the only guaranteed place to check your email is back in Mörön.

Permits

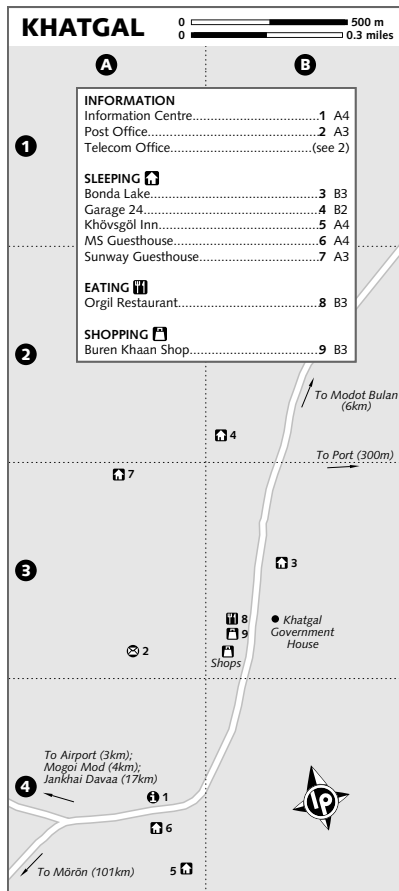
On the main road, 12km before Khatgal, you'll be required to pay an entrance fee at a gate to



the national park. The cost is T3000/300 per person for foreigners/Mongolians. If there's no-one there you can buy permits at the information centre or from the ranger, who patrols the lakeside on horseback. With your permit you should receive a useful visitors' pamphlet explaining the permits and how to limit your impact on the lake. Hang onto the ticket as you may be asked to show it more than once.

Sights**KHATGAL XATTAJI**

As the southern gateway to Khövsgöl Nuur, Khatgal is the largest town on the lake. With some of the best budget accommodation in Mongolia, it is a good launching pad for the



WESTERN SHORE

From Khatgal, a reasonable road first heads southwest before swinging northeast across several dry riverbeds and over the pass, Jankhai Davaa, 17km from Khatgal, where you receive your first magical glimpse of the lake. The road continues past the gorgeous headlands of **Jankhai**, once a Russian scientist station, and **Toilogt** (GPS: N50° 39.266', E100° 14.961'), pronounced 'toy-logt' but routinely mispronounced 'toilet' by most travellers, where there is a rash of ger camps. The road then gradually deteriorates.

About 30km north of Toilogt is **Khar Us** (GPS: N50° 56.132', E100° 14.835'), a series of springs surrounded by meadows of beautiful wildflowers. In June locals flock here to eat the baillus fish for its medicinal properties (these fish are smoked and served with wild green onions, or sometimes boiled). This makes a great destination to reach on horseback – three days from Khatgal.

A jeep can travel about 10km past Toilogt, after which the trail becomes overgrown and is best managed on horseback for the trip up to **Jiglegiin Am** (GPS: N51° 00.406', E100° 16.003'), almost exactly halfway up the western shore. From Jiglegiin Am you could take the western trail to Renchinkhumbé, on the way to Tsagaannuur. For that trip see p156.

EASTERN SHORE

The eastern shore is less mountainous than the west, but offers spectacular views across Khövsgöl Nuur. There is wildlife, golden fields of grass and plenty of fishing holes. It gets far fewer visitors than the western shore, making it a great destination for travellers seeking an off-the-beaten-path experience. The main drawback to this side of the lake is the appalling road that heads up to Khankh, possibly the worst stretch of road we encountered in 15,000km of overland travel! Expect mud, rocks, roots and the odd collapsed bridge.

From Khatgal, head for the bridge over the Egiin Gol, where you may need to ask directions. The trail meanders over some hills and continues past an interesting *ovoo* at the pass **Ikh Santin Davaa** (GPS: N50° 52.622', E100° 41.185') to a gorgeous spot called **Borsog** (GPS: N50° 59.677', E100° 42.983'), six hours by jeep and 103km from Khatgal.

If your spine hasn't suffered permanent damage by now, you could carry on further to a couple of gers known as **Sevsuul**. The road

BIZNESS TSAATAN

Some Tsaatan (Reindeer People) have discovered the fine art of capitalism and have moved to Khövsgöl Nuur to be nearer to their source of income – tourists. Their teepees are easy to spot on the lake shore, where they appear each summer, ready for photo opportunities (US\$5) or the chance to flog antler carvings.

Members of their own community know them as 'Bizness Tsaatan', or sometimes 'Bizness Shaman' as they occasionally put on a shaman dance in broad daylight (another US\$5). While this may sound like an innocent way of extracting money from tourist pockets, the presence of the Tsaatan on the shores of Khövsgöl Nuur has had detrimental effects on their reindeer. The lichen upon which the reindeer feed does not grow at lake elevation, causing illness and sometimes death. Each year the Bizness Tsaatan families return to the taiga to buy more reindeer from other Tsaatan families, knowing that they endanger these creatures when they travel to the lake.

The authorities have tried for years to move them out of the park, but business has been too good to keep them away. Tourists might consider refusing their services to dissuade them from returning. Also worth missing is the 'Reindeer Festival', a contrived midsummer event organised by local tourist companies who don't necessarily have the reindeer's best interests in mind.

If you want to visit a Tsaatan family, you'll need to visit their camps outside Tsagaannuur (see p162).

actually improves a little here, then hugs the lake and is usually passable all the way to Khankh. Surprisingly, a few sand dunes dot the landscape.

From Khatgal, allow at least 12 hours by jeep to travel the 200km or so to **Khankh** (Turt), a former depot for oil tankers headed to and from Siberia. Khankh is more Buriat and Russian than Mongolian, because it is closer to its northern neighbour than to Ulaanbaatar.

Remember that if you reach Khankh, you will have to come *all* the way back along the same bone-crunching, eastern road: there is no way any vehicle can get from Khankh to Jiglegiin Am, halfway up the western shore. At the moment going all the way around the lake is only possible by boat or horse. There have long been plans to open the border crossing into Russia at Khankh – check for updates at the border office in Ulaanbaatar or in Mörön.

Activities

FISHING

If you love fishing, then you'll get excited about Khövsgöl Nuur. If you don't have fishing gear already, you can buy some at the shops in Khatgal (Buren Khaan shop has the best selection).

Around a dozen species of fish inhabit the lake, including salmon, (bony) sturgeon, grayling and lenok. A fishing permit costs T10,000 and is valid for three days or 10 fish, whichever comes first. You can get them from the

park rangers, Khatgal's Government House or MS Guesthouse. Fishing is not allowed between 15 April and 15 June. The fine for fishing illegally is US\$40.

HIKING

This is one of the best ways to see the lake and the mountains surrounding it. You will need to be self-sufficient, although there are a few gers in the area from which to buy some meat or dairy products. The trails around the lake are easy to follow, or just hug the shoreline as much as you can.

Of the mountains in the southwestern region, the most accessible is Tsartai Ekh Uul (2515m), immediately west of Jankhai, where the hiking is excellent. Also try the numerous other mountains in the mountain range of Khoridol Saridag Nuruu, such as Khuren Uul (3020m), not far north of the trail to Renchinkhumbé; Ikh Uul (2961m), a little northwest of Toilogt; and the extinct volcano of Uran Dösh Uul (2792m).

Longer treks are possible around the Ikh Sayani Nuruu range, which has many peaks over 3000m. It is right on the border of Russia, so be careful not to accidentally cross it or you may get shot at by border guards.

Both Garage 24 and MS Guesthouse (p157) in Khatgal have trained some local hiking guides in first aid, route finding and low-impact hiking and have scouted out some good treks in the surrounding mountains. Contact them for route ideas and/or guides.

TREKKING FROM KHÖVSGÖL TO DARKHAD

One of the most adventurous treks in Mongolia, done by either horse or foot, begins in Khatgal, goes up the western shore of the lake and over the Jiglegiin Davaa (Jiglegiin Pass) to Renchinlkhumbe.

From Khatgal to Jiglegiin Am, about halfway up the western shore of Khövsgöl Nuur, will take five days (four hours' riding each day). You start to feel the isolation after Ongolog Gol (the end of the jeep road), from where it's a 10-hour journey to Khar Us. There are endless camping spots along this route.

From Khar Us it's just three hours to Jiglegiin Am where you can find accommodation in a cabin (T2000) and get a cooked meal (T1000) – it's best to have exact change. The jeep trail that heads up to Jiglegiin Davaa (2500m) is very muddy even after a long dry spell – this is where a pair of Russian NBC overboots will come in handy. Expect to get to the pass in around three hours.

From the pass it's a gentle walk down to the Arsayn Gol, which you'll need to cross at least twice. There are also some side streams to cross. These crossings are usually OK but if it's been raining hard you can be stuck for hours or even days. In dry spells the river can disappear completely so you need to fill up with water whenever possible.

After a seven-hour walk from the pass you should be at Ooliin Gol (25km west of Jiglegiin Am) where there are some camping spots. It's then another seven hours to Renchinlkhumbe. When you reach the broad expanse of the Darkhad, make a beeline south for the town.

The final three hours of the trek are often marred by horrific swarms of flies and mosquitoes – a sanity-saving measure is to wrap your head with a towel or T-shirt. The bugs seem to disappear when you've reached the village.

From Renchinlkhumbe it's another two-day trek to Tsagaannuur, from where you can organise a trip to the Tsaatan camps. Alternatively, you could return to Khatgal via the old Russian logging route that runs through the mountains. If you have no intention of going to Tsagaannuur you could skip Renchinlkhumbe too and take a shortcut back to Khatgal. This involves following the Arsayn Gol around 35km upstream, eventually picking up the logging route.

This route involves moderate trekking in good weather. However, the area is prone to heavy rain and flash flooding that can stop you in your tracks. Hikers and horse riders are frequently made to wait on river banks (sometimes for several days) until water levels drop low enough for them to cross. Bring wet-weather gear, warm clothes and preferably a guide to get you across. If you don't have a guide, at least bring a good map, such as the *Lake Khövsgöl National Park Satellite Map* (Conservation Ink). Contact MS Guesthouse in Khatgal for further details on this trek.

HORSE RIDING

The only place to organise a horse trek around the lake is in Khatgal. The three main guesthouses can arrange everything within 24 hours. Prices are negotiable but reasonable at about T7000 per horse per day, and about T10,000 to T15,000 per day for a guide. Ger camps along the lake can organise horse rentals for day trips.

A guide is recommended for horse-riding trips in the region and, in fact, park regulations stipulate that foreigners should have one local guide for every four tourists. Guides will expect you to provide food while on the trail.

A complete circuit of the lake on horseback will take from 10 to 15 days. A return trip by horse from Khatgal to Tsagaannuur, and a visit to the Tsaatan, will take 15 to 20 days. An interesting two-week trip could take you east

of the lake to Chandman-Öndör and Dayan Derkhiin Agui, a sacred cave. A trip to the Bulnai hot springs would take eight to nine days. You'll definitely need a guide.

Shorter trips include one to Toilgot, through the mountainous Khoridol Saridag Nuruu Strictly Protected Area, or up to Khar Us and back in five or six days.

KAYAKING & BOATING

Travelling by kayak allows you to see the lake without the strain of driving along the appalling roads. The lake is full of glorious little coves, perfect for camping and fishing, and you could even check out **Modon Huys**, an island almost exactly in the middle of the lake. Nomadic Expeditions (p81) runs kayaking trips in the region. Garage 24 (opposite) can rent kayaks for T25,000 per day.

Garage 24 has a Zodiac boat and can run travellers up to its camp and beyond to the island and the northern reaches of the lake. MS Guesthouse also has a motor boat. Ask about the two-day boat trip to Jiglegiin Am (T300,000 for up to six people, including meals).

Several large boats remain moored at the Khatgal docks. They *very* occasionally take passengers up to Khanh but these days they will only move when chartered, which will cost an arm and a leg. If you do charter a boat to Khanh, you'll still have to share it with a boatload of nonpaying passengers who have been waiting for some tourist or trader to fork out the money.

Festivals & Events

If for some strange reason you've come to northern Mongolia in winter, it is worth checking out the **Khatgal Ice Festival**, held on 28 February. The event includes cross-country skiing, ice-skating and horse-sledding competitions. Khatgal's **naadam** (traditional sports festival) is held on 11 July.

In late June or early July, the **Sunrise to Sunset Ultra-marathon** is held further up the lakeshore. Mongolian and international runners compete in 42km or 100km divisions; for more info, check the website: www.ultramongolia.org/.

Sleeping KHATGAL

If you have a tent and are hanging around for a lift to the lake or to Mörön, you can camp in the forests along the shores of the Egiin Gol, either in town or in the beautiful valleys further south.

Bonda Lake (☎ 9996 3994; bond_lake@yahoo.com; camping T2000, r T3000, ger T4000) This new addition to Khatgal is located on the main road heading north, just past the shops. It has four-bed gers and one ger with a double bed. You can also stay in the lodge but these rooms are a bit boxy. The hot showers work well and the English-speaking owner has kayaks for rent. Ask for Bayara.

MS Guesthouse (☎ 9979 6030; lake_hovsgol@yahoo.com; bed per person T5000, camping T3000) This guesthouse (designed like a camp), in the extreme south of town, is the first collection of gers you see when you arrive in town. Perhaps the most congenial of ger camps around Khatgal; the staff makes visitors feel at home, with communal meals and activities. Owner Ganbaa is

very knowledgeable about hiking and horse-trekking routes in the area. The camp has hot showers, clean pit toilets and a lodge where you can order meals (T1200). Prices include breakfast. This place is open all year, and may be your only option in winter.

Garage 24 (☎ 011-323 957, 9911 8652; www.4thworldadventure.com; dm T5000, camping T3000) This environmentally conscious backpacker hangout is built from a reclaimed Soviet-era truck garage. The cosy lodge, warmed by a fireplace, feels like an old English country home. It has bunk beds and a dining area where you can get the best food in northern Mongolia. Mountain bikes, kayaks, horses and camping gear are rented out to suit your needs (note that some kit may be at the Jankhai camp). The staff is friendly but little English is spoken. Garage 24 is in the north of town, at the base of the hill, not far from the storage drums of the petrol station.

Khövsgöl Inn (☎ 9911 5929, 9838 9687; k1m@boojum.com; dm T5000, ger T10,000) A welcome addition to Khatgal, this place offers quality accommodation at competitive rates. Beds are available in gers or dorms and there is a nice lodge with a cosy fireplace. It's affiliated with the Saridag Inn at Renchinlkhumbe and the Jigleg Camp on the lake so you can get info here if you are headed that way. It's between MS Guesthouse and the Egiin Gol.

Sunway (☎ 9975 3824; horsetrek_khovsgul@yahoo.com; per person US\$5) This camp is smaller and less communal than others, although some travellers may prefer it that way. The hot shower is powered by an inventive foot pump. It's on the northwestern part of town below the hills. It serves meals (T1500).

MODOT BULAN

This area extends due north of Khatgal, up the Egiin Gol mouth for about 6km. Most people miss it because the road up the coast bypasses this section. If you are exploring the lake by foot you can walk here and continue up the shore (which is blissfully ger-camp free for another 7km).

Hangard (☎ 011-311 333, www.ashihai.mn; with/without meals US\$30/15) Just past Ashihai, the Hangard camp is a large camp that caters to tour groups. It has a couple of boats and does yak cart trips.

Ashihai (☎ 011-315 459, 9968 5185; www.fly2mongolia.mn; with/without meals US\$40/20) This camp nearly qualifies as a work of art. Beautifully decorated

gers are embroidered with traditional patterns and the interior contains exquisitely carved furniture. Gers are elevated onto wood platforms and offer lake views. The camp has a fine location on spit of land overlooking the lake and the bay.

WESTERN & EASTERN SHORES Camping

Khövsgöl Nuur offers excellent camping opportunities. There is endless fresh water, plenty of fish, and the hiking is outstanding. On the down side, it often rains in summer and you'll need to hike a bit to get past the rash of ger camps.

There are designated camp sites, marked by yellow signs with a triangle. There are camp sites near the Nature's Door camp, just past Jankhai camp, and two in the bay between Jankhai and Toilogt. These seem to be aimed primarily at Mongolian tourists and groups.

Away from these areas you can pretty much pitch your tent anywhere you want, though try to stay 100m from other gers. You should never camp, wash or build fires within 50m of the shore.

The best camping spots on the western shoreline are anywhere between Jankhai and Ongolog Nuur, 10km north of Toilogt. If you have your own jeep, and want to experience one of the worst roads in Mongolia, the best spot to camp on the eastern shoreline is at Borsog.

Ger Camps

There are several ger camps in stunning locations on the western shore (but only one or two on the east). Nearly all have electricity, running water, flush toilets and showers, though many are dangerously near the shoreline and have little environmental regard for the lake. Most places will offer a lower price if you bring and cook your own food. The majority open only in mid-June.

Several families also accept guests in a guest ger. They are not registered with the park and they don't advertise, but if you ask around you can probably find a family who will let you stay for a couple of US dollars. Note that none of these will have the above-mentioned facilities.

The main group of camps start where the road meets the lake, after descending from Jankhai Davaa. The following are listed south to north:

Khuvsol Sor (☎ 011-300 150; with/without meals US\$30/15) This is the first camp after the pass (Jankhai Davaa). Unlike many others on this part of the lake, this one is hidden in the trees and off the main road, providing some sense of isolation. Quality cabins and bathrooms available.

Nature's Door (☎ 9926 0919; ger without meals T15,000) This popular backpacker hangout has plush cabins, a lodge and excellent Western food options. Most people stay in the gers but for around US\$30, the flashy cabins are also an option. Camping (US\$3) allows you access to the hot-water showers. The staff speaks English although many travellers report frosty dealings with the management. If booking transport and trips here, do check the prices carefully, and compare with those offered by other operators where possible. Nature's Door is associated with Garage 24 in Khatgal; it's about 5km past Jankhai Davaa.

our pick Toilogt (☎ 011-460 368; www.hovsgol.travel.com; with/without meals US\$35/18) Run by the Hovsgol Travel Company, this excellent camp is 5km north of Jankhai, and off the main road to the right. It is situated by a peaceful and lovely lake immediately adjacent to Khövsgöl Nuur. Facilities here are of high standard and the camp offers bikes, boats and horses for hire. Concerts are occasionally organised for guests. The camp has a boat that can transfer you here from Khatgal but you'll need to give advance notice to the Ulaanbaatar office.

Khirstevog (☎ 9938 8955; with/without meals T25,000/5000) One of the last camps on the western shore, Khirstevog is 42km north of Khatgal.

Jigleg Camp (dm T2000) Serves as a handy pit stop for trekkers on their way to Renchinkhumbé (it's right at the Jigleg trail head). The camp is 90km north of Khatgal. Book through Khövsgöl Inn in Khatgal.

KHANKH

Northern Gate Ger Guesthouse (NGGH; per person T10,000) Operated by the people from MS Guesthouse in Khatgal (see p157). To find the guesthouse, walk over the bridge at the northern end of Khankh near the northernmost of the two jetties, turn right and follow the track up the steep hill where you will see the compound.

The **Last Frontier** (GPS: N51° 30.566', E100° 39.296'; per person with meals US\$40) ger camp is another option in Khankh.

Eating

There are a few basic shops in Khatgal selling things such as beer, soft drinks, chocolate bars and a limited selection of vegetables. If possible, stock up in Mörön or Ulaanbaatar. The following places are all in Khatgal.

Orgil Restaurant (meals T900; ☎ 9am-9pm) Amid the row of downtown shops and *guanx*. Has an English-language menu that includes cream soup, goulash and vegetable *khuushuur* (fried pancake).

Garage 24 (p157) has a Western-oriented menu that will come as a welcome break after a few days of hard trekking in the wilderness. The English breakfast (T6000) includes bacon, toast, beans and sausage. Lunch and dinner menu items include shepherd's pie (T4800) and pizza (T5500). Give some advance warning as preparations take around an hour.

MS Guesthouse (p157) is another nice place to eat and will occasionally prepare *khorkhog* and authentic Mongolian barbecue for guests and visitors.

Getting There & Away

AIR

In summer MIAT has direct flights from Ulaanbaatar to Khatgal (via Mörön) four days a week; the cost is US\$101/192 one way/return. Flights are cut back in the off season, but extra flights might be added for the July peak season. Schedules are continually in flux so check with MIAT in Ulaanbaatar. There are no longer any flights to Khankh.

HITCHING

For lifts from Mörön, hang around the market or the petrol station – and keep asking. Once in Khatgal, most trucks will stop in front of the post office.

From Khatgal, hitching a ride to Jankhai or Toilogt shouldn't be difficult in the summer, but you'll probably end up paying a fair bit for a lift anyway. Ask the guests at the camps for a lift. You should be self-sufficient with camping gear and food.

Hitching around the eastern shore is much more difficult and you could wait for days for a lift to come along.

JEEP

Minivans and jeeps regularly make the trip between Mörön and Khatgal (three hours) for T7000 per person or T70,000 for the jeep.

Inquire at the stand at the northern end of the market in Mörön.

Transport also meets the Ulaanbaatar flight at Mörön airport to take passengers directly to Khatgal. Some jeep owners will try to charge foreigners up to US\$50 for the run; local drivers with the 'XGA' license plate are likely to be fairer. Contact Bata Guesthouse (p151) in Mörön for transport to Khatgal.

A chartered jeep should not cost more than the normal T450 per kilometre. There are plenty of jeeps in Mörön but few in Khatgal, where it is best to ask at the guesthouses. Khatgal is 101km from Mörön over a raised gravel road.

CHANDMAN-ÖNDӨР ЧАНДМАНЬ-ӨНДӨР

Nestled between pine-clad mountains and consisting almost entirely of log cabins, the village of Chandman-Öndör comes straight out of the pages of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale. The surrounding area is one of wide meadows, alpine forests and wildflowers, making it a good exploratory trip for hardy travellers.

The town **museum** (admission T500) shows off local history. More interesting is the **Alan Goa Museum** (admission T500), housed inside the ger-shaped log cabin. Alan Goa was an ancestor of Chinggis Khaan and revered locally.

Every three years a large **naadam** is held here to honour Alan Goa. The naadam attracts Mongols from Inner Mongolia, Kalmyks, Tuvans and Buriats as well as a host of Khalkh Mongols. The next instalment is in August 2009.

The only place to stay in town is **Alan Goa Töv** (☎ 01382-26535, 9577 6963; per person T5000), a fenced-off grassy area in the centre of town where some gers are set up in summer. Ask for Oyunchimeg or Enkhtuvshin, the local couple that manages the place.

Oyunchimeg can play the *shanz*, a sort of python-skin banjo, and will give lessons for a small fee.

Around 11km from town on the road to Mörön is a painted **statue of Alan Goa** (GPS: N50° 24.994', E100° 58.548'). About 5km west of the statue on the main road to Tsagaan-Uur is a **deer stone**.

Shared jeeps going to Chandman-Öndör (T11,000) occasionally leave from the northern side of the market in Mörön. From Khatgal you need your own jeep. The 85km ride is very rough and takes five to six hours.

It's muddy in places and the chances of getting bogged are pretty good (the worst bit is in a valley around 48km out of Khatgal). Don't attempt it after a heavy rain.

In the rainy season, the best way here is by horse; the trek from Khatgal takes four to five days. The route is spectacular, the lone drawback being swarms of flies in the boggy areas on the second day of the trek.

AROUND CHANDMAN-ÖNDÖR

Chandman-Öndör is the jumping-off point for several sites, including the **Bulnai hot springs** (Булнайн Рашаан; per person T5000), about 60km northwest of town. This Soviet-era resort has wood cabins over the springs, some of which reach 48°C.

Heading east of Chandman-Öndör, the road follows the Arig Gol. After 41km you'll pass a row of 13 **shamanic tepees** (GPS: N50° 30.727', E101° 17.478') made from sticks. These represent the 12 years according to the Asian calendar, plus one central *ovoo*. After another 13km you'll spot a **sacred tree** honoured with blue silk scarves. The town of **Tsagaan-Uur**, reached after another 5km, has shops and *guanx*. The bridge east of town washed away in 2006 and the river crossing now is a bit dicey. About 15km east of Tsagaan-Uur you'll spot another large wood **ovoo**.

Around 38km past Tsagaan-Uur (and 97km past Chandman-Öndör) is the **Dayan Derkh Monastery** (GPS: N50° 26.804', E101° 53.328'), set on a beautiful bend of the Uur Gol. The log cabin temple, rebuilt in 2006 over the remains of an older monastery, is home to seven lamas. Another 15km east of the temple is the **Dayan Derkhiin Agui** (Даян Дэрхийн Агуй), a cave considered holy by local Buddhists and shamanists. According to legend, the monastery was founded after the famed shaman Dayan Derkh turned to stone rather than be captured by Chinggis Khaan, whose wife the shaman had stolen. In winter you could reach the cave by vehicle, in summer the only way is by horse (a six-hour return journey). Herders in the area may be able to rent you a horse for T5000. In theory you need a border permit for Tsagaan-Uur and Dayan Derkhiin Agui, although there is rarely anyone around to check.

The road from Dayan Derkh Monastery to **Erdenebulgan** requires two difficult river crossings. A tractor might be available to haul you across (ask at the monastery), but you'll need

to pay around T50,000 for this service (the crossings are 20km apart so the tractor needs to follow you).

About 26km downstream from the monastery is the confluence of the Eg and Uur Gols. Head west at the Eg and after about 35km you'll reach the town of Erdenebulgan, which offers basic food and lodging.

Alternatively, continue down the Eg-Uur Gol, a rough and remote journey into northern Bulgan aimag.

In the northeast of the aimag, the area around the Khökh, Arig and Kheven Gols is particularly good for **camping** and **hiking** enthusiasts.

DARKHAD DEPRESSION

ДАРХАДЫН ХӨНДИЙ

About 50km west of Khövsgöl Nuur, behind a wall of mountains, sits a harsh but mystical landscape of prairie, forest, and 300-odd lakes scattered over a wide plain called the Darkhad Depression. The depression is roughly the same size as Khövsgöl Nuur and was also originally formed as a glacial lake.

The difficulty in reaching the region ensures the unique Tsaatan people, who are among the inhabitants of the valleys (see p149), are able to continue their traditional lifestyle – but tourism is rapidly making an impact. Darkhad is one of Mongolia's strongest centres of shamanism.

This is one of the best-watered regions in Mongolia and the lakes are full of white carp and trout. Salmon and huge taimen can also be found in the region.

One definite drawback to visiting the region is the insects that invade the area in summer. Be warned: these little critters have insatiable appetites for foreign skin and will ruin your trip if you are not fully prepared with mosquito nets and repellent.

Permits

To visit Tsagaannuur (and probably Renchinlkhumbe) you will need a border permit, available in Ulaanbaatar. If you didn't get one in Ulaanbaatar you could try to get one in Mörön, although many travellers have been turned away so you're taking your chances. In either case, it's strongly advised that you register in Mörön. Border permits are free and are processed in one to three working days. Delays are common so apply as early as possible. You'll need a map of where you

THE NINTH JEBTZUN DAMBA

It's somewhat ironic that while Mongolia enjoys freedom of religion, its spiritual leader is not allowed to visit the country. The 76-year-old ninth Jebtzun Damba ('Bogd Khan' in Mongolian), who in 1999 was officially recognised as the chief Buddhist monk, currently makes his home in Dharamsala, India.

The debate regarding the status of the Jebtzun Damba has its roots back in 1924. When the eighth Jebtzun Damba died, the newly formed communist government refused to recognise any future 'reincarnations', ensuring their control over Mongolian Buddhism. Even after restrictions were lifted in 1990 the Mongolian government kept its distance from the ninth Jebtzun Damba, who was formally identified by the Dalai Lama in 1991.

The ninth Jebtzun Damba was born in Tibet in 1932 and was accepted as the ninth reincarnation at the age of four. To protect him from Stalin's thugs his identity was kept a secret and he later escaped anonymously to India.

In 1999, at the age of 67, he turned up in Ulaanbaatar, unannounced, having received a tourist visa in Moscow. (One can only imagine the customs form: 'Occupation: Reincarnation of Tibetan deity Vajrapani!')

It seems all too coincidental that his visit coincided with that of then Chinese president Jiang Zemin, but whether or not the visit was orchestrated from Dharamsala remains pure speculation.

The Jebtzun Damba stayed in Mongolia for 60 days, visiting monasteries in both Ulaanbaatar and the countryside. Although mobbed by adoring fans wherever he went, he was pressured to leave after overstaying his visa.

The Jebtzun Damba still teaches Buddhism in Dharamsala and has among his students several Mongolian monks and nuns. He still hopes to return to Mongolia one day although current restrictions prevent him from doing so. For more information on Mongolia's exiled spiritual leader, see www.jetsundhampa.com.

intend to travel, passport copies and ideally a letter of support from a Mongolian organisation of some sort. In a pinch, guesthouses can arrange the permit in Khatgal through their Mörön contacts.

Additional permits are not needed to visit the Tsaatan camps, but an informal control system is in place to monitor visitors heading in and out of the area. One measure asks visitors to submit their name and travel dates to Tsaatan representatives in Ulaanbaatar. You can do this by emailing reindeer@hovsgol.org. The representative will inform you of the best travel dates and provide travel tips. Please respect the Tsaatan by dropping an email; you'll get a better welcome for it.

Once you reach Tsagaannuur, you are also encouraged to visit the Tsaatan Community & Visitors Center (p162).

Ренчинлхумбе РЭНЧИНЛХҮМБЭ

Renchinlkhumbe is 42km west of the Jiglegiin Am trailhead on Khövsgöl Nuur, an adventurous two-day journey on foot or horseback. Most travellers heading further into the taiga will rest here for at least one night.

A nice time to visit the town is in mid-June when it hosts the **Blue Valley Awards Festival**, a great time to see traditional horse games and singing competitions.

Renchinlkhumbe hosts an excellent local **naadam** (July 11) complete with 'barrel racing' (horse racing around barrels) and mounted archery events, along with the usual wrestling, horse racing and standing archery.

The local ger camp, **Saridag Inn** (GPS: N51° 06.852', E099° 40.135'; camping/tr/ger/T3000/4000/T5000) is run by Khövsgöl Lodge Company. Its hot-water showers and sit-down toilets are legendary. Prices are per person.

Тсagaannuur Цагааннуур

About 40km beyond Renchinlkhumbe is Tsagaannuur, the last stop before the Tsaatan encampments in the taiga.

Tsagaannuur's mid-June **Reindeer Festival** is now becoming an annual event. It includes reindeer polo, reindeer racing, arts and crafts, and a big bonfire. However, bringing the reindeer down to this elevation is definitely not good for their health, and the festival has become somewhat controversial within the community.

INFORMATION

The village is home to the **Tsaatan Community & Visitors Center** (TCVC; http://itgel.org/visitors_center.htm), which provides background info on the Tsaatan and important tips on travel in the area. The TCVC can organise guides, horses and other logistics for trips to the taiga; it's operated by the Tsaatan community with support from the **Itgel Foundation** (www.itgel.org).

It's a good idea to contact the TCVC well ahead of your visit (at least one week) as it can take a few days to organise guides and horses. Call or email the **Itgel office** (☎ 9972 2667; info@itgel.org) in Ulaanbaatar if you plan on using TCVC services. Otherwise, send an email to reindeer@hovsgol.org; you'll receive an auto-reply filled with useful tips on travel in the region.

A **bathhouse** (T1000) is located south of the taiga hotel and post office, next to the lake.

SLEEPING & EATING

The TCVC offers guesthouse accommodation at its new facility in Tsagaannuur. You can also stay with Ganbaa, a local who runs a **guesthouse** (incl breakfast T5000) and restaurant; it's located just north of the post office. A tent and your own food will also suffice.

Around Tsagaannuur

The Tsaatan live in two groups, known as the east (*zuun*) and west (*baruun*) taiga (this is a little confusing as the west taiga is actually south of the east taiga). From Tsagaannuur, it can take four to 12 hours to reach the west taiga by horse (the camps move but are usually closer in the early summer). The UN Development Programme has dropped several **teepee hotels** (per person T5000) in both taigas; these are operated by the Tsaatan themselves. The east taiga is 10km north of the Shishged Gol, which is crossed by ferry. The west taiga has more rugged beauty while the east taiga is easier to visit for travellers without much time.

Once you are in the taiga, you'll need your own tent, camping supplies and 100% DEET to keep the bugs at bay. The TCVC offers meal kits that you can bring to the taiga to be cooked by the Tsaatan families. Once you've left Tsagaannuur, figure on spending around US\$30 a day for horses, guides, accommodation and meals.

Plenty of tour operators offer trips to the taiga. A specialist in the area is Dino de Toffol, whose Italian company **Lupo World Trekking**

(www.world-trekking.com) brings small groups into the area and contributes some of the profits back into the community.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

There are no flights to Tsagaannuur, save the odd charter flight. Staff from foreign embassies and development agencies in Ulaanbaatar sometimes take a helicopter directly to the Tsaatan encampments and land like some flying saucer from outer space.

HITCHING

Traffic between Mörön and Tsagaannuur is extremely sparse, but if you have your own tent and food, and don't mind waiting for a day or two, something may come along during summer – or it may not.

HORSE

There is really only one way to get to the taiga: by horse. Horses can be hired in Tsagaannuur, otherwise you can take them from Khatgal. A return trip from Khatgal to Tsagaannuur, with a visit to the Tsaatan, will take from 15 to 20 days. You could go from Khatgal to Tsagaannuur on an easy trail in about five days (bypassing Jiglegiin Am), but you would miss Khövsgöl Nuur.

JEEP

By chartered jeep, you can get to Tsagaannuur from Mörön (but rarely from Khatgal) in a bone-crunching 12 to 20 hours, depending on the state of the road. A seat should cost around T20,000, but you'll have to negotiate hard and long for a reasonable price. There are no scheduled public shared jeeps to Tsagaannuur; hiring one would cost around T50,000.

MÖRÖN TO TERKHIIN TSAGAAN NUUR

A popular route out of Khövsgöl is south to Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur in Arkhangai aimag. This is also an excellent road for cyclists. About 97km southwest of the aimag capital is **Zuun Nuur** (GPS: N49° 03.727', E99° 31.096'), a large lake and the scenic highlight of the region. There is good camping in the region and in summer many nomadic families live here. An interesting headland jutting into the lake ends with a dramatic stick *ovoo*. The lake is 13km north of Shine-Ider village.

Around 30km south of Shine-Ider, right on the main road, is an area of **standing stones**

and graves (GPS: N48° 45.808', E99° 23.084'). A further 8km brings you to a scenic pass and the historic **Gelenkhuugiin Suvraga** (GPS: N48° 41.182', E99° 22.650'), an old stupa built in 1890 by local hero Khainzan Gelenkhuu (1870–1937), who leapt off a 200m cliff with a set of sheepskin wings and flew as if he were some kind of Icarus-incarnate. From the pass it's an easy 19km to Jargalant.

Jargalant is a pretty town near the confluence of the Ider and Khonjil Gols. The *sum* is perhaps most famous as being homeland of a herder named Öndöör Gongor (Tall Gongor) who was 2.63m in height (you can see pictures of him in the local museum).

The **museum** (admission T500; ☎ 8am–7pm) in Jargalant contains old photos, stuffed animals and religious objects. Two of the rooms are not lit so bring a torch (flashlight). It's run by a local elder named Shagdarsuren who will proudly show off some of his wood craft and

demonstrate the use of hand-powered drills and other tools. The other attraction in town is **Jargalantiin Dugan** (also called Dashbijeliin Süm), an old monastery that dates back to 1890. It's run-down and boarded up but you could still have a look around.

Jargalant has three basic but clean hotels, each offering rooms for around T5000. The most established is the Deed Khonkh Hotel, which also contains the local bar (open 9am to midnight). More upscale is the **Jargal Jiguur** (☎ 011-450 093; admin@ajnewtour.mn; GPS: N48° 33.615', E99° 22.061'; with/without meals US\$42/16, shower US\$2), a ger camp 3km east of town (meals are US\$6 to US\$8). The highlight of the camp is a mineral spring pool (you can see the natural pool across the river, just follow the pipes).

About 6km east of town are several burial mounds, including one with a tree growing from it. It's another 70km to the shores of Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur.

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