

Travel

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Soaring high
The Altai Mountains; (below) a Kazakh with
his sizeable coat and bird

Travel

The land of the eagle hunters

Adrian Bottomley treks into the wild borderlands of **western Mongolia** in search of golden eagles and brown bears

Big coat, more respect' whispered my trusted guide, Borkoo, who like most Kazakhs was not one for wasting words. Before us, stood a solitary ger poking out of the sea of golden grass like a huge white mushroom. And, opening the tiny orange

door, resplendent in wolf-skin, was Shohan, one of the Altai's fabled eagle hunters. Perched on his arm was the most magnificent bird I had ever seen.

It had been a long day. After a three-hour flight by old-school prop plane from Ulaanbaatar,

I had landed in Ulgii – an end-of-the-world town in the wild west of Mongolia – with the rest of my journey consisting of a seven hour drive across the steppe in an old Russian van (affectionately referred to by locals as a 'bukhaku' or 'loaf', on account of its shape). I quickly learnt that what these relics of Soviet engineering lacked in comfort they made up for by pretty much being able to go anywhere! And that suited me perfectly. My aim was to head into the Altai Mountains to research a new trekking route through the isolated glacial peaks that rise up from the rolling plains to form the spectacular border with China and Russia.

Now comfortably plied with airag, a mildly alcoholic fermented mares milk offered to all visiting guests, I discovered that the temporary partnership between hunter and eagle is nearly always one between the youngest son of a family and a young female bird of prey. Caught in the wild, the eagles are trained to hunt for a period of six to eight years before being released back into the wild to breed. According to my hospitable hosts, it was indeed their ancestors that had originally invented falconry and, whether this was strictly true or not, it was clear that the practice remained

an enormous source of pride and a strong badge of identity for these proud nomads, where even to this day, it still stands that the more extravagant the coat, the more respected the hunter.

Mongolia is a land of big blue skies and stunning landscapes; the endless perspectives impart a sense of freedom that somehow invites



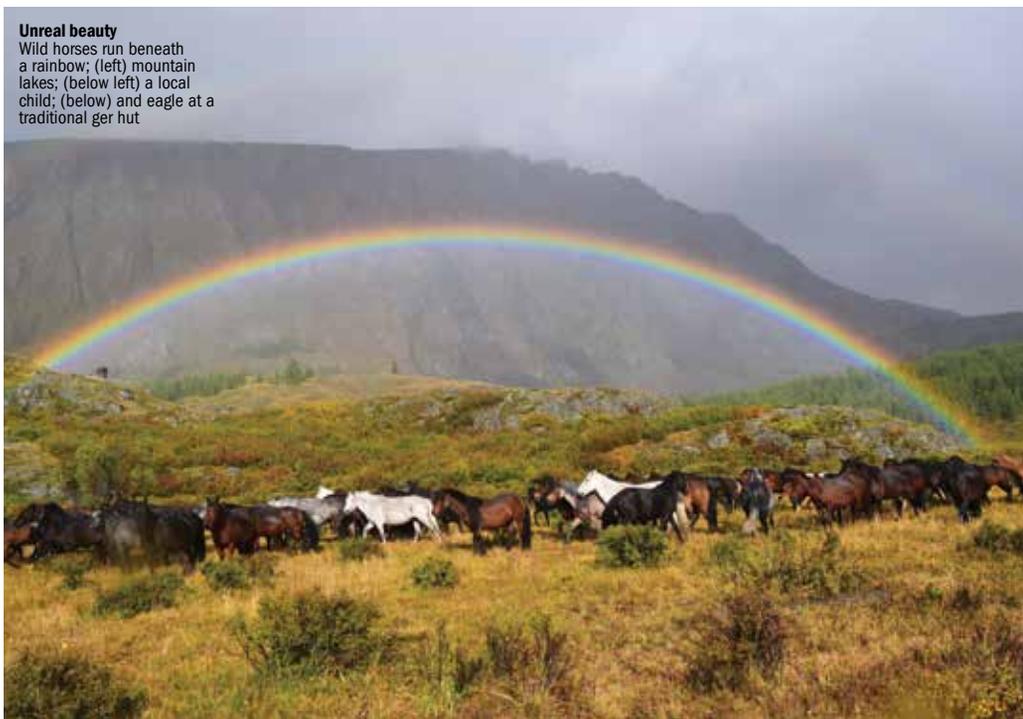
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exploration. Hidden away, in the far western corner of the country is Altai Tavan Bogd – or 'the five saints of the Altai' which refer to the regions five tallest peaks – an untouched gem and epic backdrop to any intrepid adventurer. And so, shaking off a thick head from the night before (the airag is stronger than you think) we set off to trek into the upper reaches of Tsagan Gol, arguably the most beautiful valley in Mongolia. Our expedition consists of me, my guide, a cook and a large Bactrian camel with all our supplies strapped between its woolly humps. We are also armed with a special border permit and a gun.





Unreal beauty
Wild horses run beneath a rainbow; (left) mountain lakes; (below left) a local child; (below) and eagle at a traditional ger hut



Fording small streams as clear as bottled water, we follow the meandering 'white river' for two days before discovering a pristine sanctuary buttressed by snowy peaks and home to ibex, red deer, argali sheep and more. The following morning, while scrambling up through the burnt-red hillside, we chance upon a small lake with patches of overturned earth clearly visible by the milky meltwater. Imprinted in the mud, is the unmistakable clawed paw of the endangered Altai brown bear. Retreating to a small outcrop, we lay motionless for two hours, with only the buzzing grasshoppers disturbing the silence. And then, in the far distance, we catch a fleeting glimpse of a mother and her two cubs heading away over a spectacular ridge into the next valley.

I spend the following days trekking through stunning, untouched scenery illuminated

by the most mesmerising light, immersing myself in the experience and bonding with new friends. I learn that marmot, a golden-haired rodent the size of a loaf of bread, tastes like fatty lamb and was responsible for carrying bubonic plague into Europe in the 13th century while scurrying alongside Ghengis Khans' conquering armies. According to Borkoo, the ubiquitous Khan was also the reason why he had piercing blue eyes. 'Genghis travelled far and had many women' he said with a smile.

The climax to the wonderful trip was almost upon us as yet another sunny day dawned. The previous afternoon we had trekked up to the nose of Potanin Glacier, the longest in Mongolia, and made camp near the only other people we had seen for a week; a team of scientists who were monitoring the effects of climate change on the huge ice sheet (alarming they claimed it was retreating at a rate

of five metres per year). Before us, beckoning us, was Malchin Peak and a hard three hour climb to the top. From the 4,000m summit, the panorama is truly awe-inspiring. In one direction, the Siberian steppe stretches out as far as the eye can see and, in the other, endless corrugated snowy peaks – utterly clear, utterly still.

Remarkably though, the Altai had one final surprise in store for us. Trekking back down the valley to rendezvous with our 'loaf', the first dark clouds we had seen all trip burst with icy rain before parting and unleashing a bright ray of sunshine that formed a full rainbow, so close that it felt as if we could reach out and touch it. And then, while rummaging through my dry bag and grabbing my camera, a herd of wild horses trotted by under the beaming, multi-coloured arc. Transfixed, it felt like we had discovered a pot of gold. 'Very lucky' said Borkoo.



Altai adventure

Adrian Bottomley is the founder of Whistling Arrow, a Hong Kong based travel consultancy specialising in adventurous trips to off the beaten path destinations in Asia. The 14-day Altai adventure trip is due to run from August 17 to 30 this year and small trekking groups will be taken along the route each time.

The price for the full trip is \$30,241 per person and includes the domestic flight to Ulgii, all accommodation, equipment, guides, transport and meals. Accommodation includes hotels in Ulaanbaatar, a ger-stay with the eagle hunter family and eight nights camping in the wilderness.

This trek is physically challenging but well within the capability of most reasonably fit walkers. The expedition is supported by horses and camels to carry all the heavier loads. Trekkers only need to carry their small rucksacks during the day. On average, the route will require six to seven hours hiking per day and, in some parts, involves exploring uncharted territory, with only ill-defined or non-existent paths. So be prepared for some scrambling through tough terrain.

For more information visit whistlingarrow.com, email adrian@whistlingarrow.com or call 2811 8892 for more details.

Getting there

Mongolian Airlines (miat.com) fly five direct flights a week to Ulan Bator, Mongolia's capital city, from \$5,840 (inc taxes) return.