



First Steppes in Mongolia: traveling in Mongolia with children

We cherish the memories, but they hardly suggested Mongolia was a child-friendly destination. Eight years ago, my husband Calum and I hired a battered old Lada in Ulan Bator to navigate the pot-holed track to Karakorum, former capital of the all-conquering Mongol empire. Stuck one night in an early winter storm, we feared perishing in our Soviet-made freezer, until the sound of distant barking pierced the snowfall.

Following the dog's siren call, we reached the salvation of a nomad's tent, where a mother nursed two children, spotted with burns from the stove. After midnight, her husband returned, blind drunk. He collapsed on the stove and extinguished the fire, leaving us to shake with cold till dawn when we offered him kill or cure: our last bottle of vodka. Duly refreshed, he rustled up a combine harvester to haul our Lada back into action.

Travel in Mongolia remains a certified adventure, and getting anywhere is most of the fun. Its hardy people are generous and hospitable hosts, survivors in a vast wilderness where animals outnumber people by ten to one. Now those roaming herds are a definite plus, we thought, mulling a return trip with two animal-loving daughters, May, aged three, and Kirsty, aged one.

But geography offered the clinching argument for a family holiday to the land of Genghis Khan. For it is hard to lose sight of toddlers on grassland stretching to the horizon. No more worries about them falling into the hotel swimming pool, drifting off to sea, or wandering into traffic, for precious few roads scar the steppes, let alone cars. A carpet of cowpats is the only major hazard, give or take the odd rabid dog.

So when Calum went to Mongolia to report on national elections, May May, Kirsty and I came too. We hoped our girls would fall in love with the country as we had. Friends in China were shocked at our plan. "How can you take children to such a poor and backward place? What if they get sick?" One told me about the Mongolian doctor who wanted to let out blood from a woman to cure her broken leg! But we trusted in our girls' robustness and set off.

Mongolia is under two hours' flying time from our home in Beijing, yet it quickly resembles another world. Instead of crowded city streets where skyscrapers and industrial pollution block out the sun, Mongolia greets visitors with the freshest of air and wide open vistas under a big blue sky. Until your taxi from Ulan Bator airport reaches the city itself.

Don't be put off by this Soviet blot on the landscape. Nomadic traditions lie just around the corner, if you follow the goats trotting across the Stalinist city square, and back to their owner's ger (don't use the Russian 'yurt'), in the tent-strewn suburbs. Newish hotels like the Genghis Khan are surprisingly soulless, and over-priced, so we found a 'home-stay' with a Mongolian family. These US\$10 B&Bs include use of a kitchen, but we chose a mutton-heavy barbecue at a restaurant called, you guessed it, Genghis Khan, before the former Communist Party held its pre-election concert.

Just over a decade ago, the Communists had no need for elections. In today's young democracy, however, they must buy votes by appealing to every age group. On stage, cool homeboys rapped in Mongolian, shaking their baggy trousers and baseball caps. "We want The Lipsticks!" May chanted with the crowd for the star turn, the Spice Girls of the Steppes, whose pop tunes sent May and Kirsty dancing beyond police lines, soon joined by many local kids.

Our Mongolian landlady proved a godsend after May vomited throughout our second night. It was election day and many hospitals were shut, but we finally found a Russian clinic. The pediatrician cut an imposing stereotype, her bottle blond beehive almost diverting attention from her enormous bust. "I would criticize you if you were Russian," she told me. "It's risky to eat local food. This child is seriously ill and must be hospitalised immediately!"

My heart sank until my new friend whispered from experience, "Don't worry, the Russians always exaggerate things." Luckily, the wards were full, forcing a retreat to another hospital where the Mongolian receptionist claimed she was also a doctor, and dismissed us impatiently with some local medicine. By lunchtime, May recovered to enjoy the dinosaur bones of the Natural History Museum, while Calum interviewed the future prime minister.

Our landlady came up trumps again by finding a jeep and driver to escape the city. As we drove towards rolling grasslands, just turning green, our spirits were lifted as high as the blue sky. The kids never tired of spotting the other traffic "Look, sheep! Goats! Horses! Cows! Yaks! Poo poo!"

Terej, some 80 km north-west of Ulan Bator, is a deservedly popular destination. Hundreds of animals roam its verdant valleys between low hills thick with forest. Our girls went wild, running and falling on the grass, pointing and shouting. I had never seen them so excited. Their favourites were the baby goats. They picked up a grey coloured kid, fighting to stroke its soft fur.

Our hostess Oyuna, a kind-faced woman in her '50s, greeted us with a bowl of fermented mare's milk, offered in her right hand, with her left cupping her elbow. Tourism had been good for Oyuna. Her ger was spacious, with a wooden floor and painted furniture. Two large fridges stood like sentinels either side of the door. Her grandchildren awed May with their riding prowess, charging upright in their saddles like the dreaded Golden Horde.

May heard enviously how some nomad children learn to ride before they can walk. Such a skill would certainly have kept her sister Kirsty, an unsteady walker, from tripping headfirst into so much manure. Yet a nagging suspicion about Oyuna's place was confirmed when 20 Japanese tourists disturbed our afternoon nap. They thought Calum had 'gone native' by marrying a Mongolian, and he was reluctant to disabuse them of the notion. However, we quickly relocated to Gachuurt, just 25 km from Ulan Bator, but still in the heart of the steppe.

There was nothing touristy about Gachuurt. In a ger pitched on the open grass, Kirsty and I slept on the only bed, an iron door on bricks, while Calum and May slept on a plank of wood on the ground. Having forgotten our sleeping bags, we clutched grimy sheepskins to keep warm, as we stared up through the smokehole at another magically starry night.

The next day brought the highlight of May's trip, when she took her first ever horse ride. I was impressed with her lack of fear even when the horse galloped quickly. The elder son of our hostess rode with her, while I rode alongside. Sitting on the hard wooden saddles (no wonder the boys were standing), May and I rode for an afternoon across the grassland. Many days later, my body was still complaining, but we loved every minute of it.

Kirsty was more impressed with the pair of camels we discovered on one walk. They sat with swaying jaws, chewing the cud and ignoring our presence. And chewing like a camel became the way our girls ate for the next days. Thankfully, I had bought vegetables and noodles in Ulan Bator to relieve the monotonous nomad diet of mutton, entrails and fried dough.

Our week on the grasslands passed all too quickly, but we were glad we had 'risked' it. "Be prepared, your lives will be changed forever!" friends with children had warned when I first became pregnant. Our lives changed in many ways with the arrival of May and Kirsty, but they have never stopped us travelling. We simply take them wherever we go.

Travel has always been a vital part of my life, yet I was already 26 by the time I boarded my first flight, the long-haul from China to London, to marry the Briton I had met in a garden courtyard of Beijing's Forbidden City. In my naiveté and excitement, I rushed out into the Heathrow arrival lounge, leaving my luggage spinning on the carousel.

By comparison, our two little girls are already seasoned travellers. Besides Mongolia, China and several European nations, they have visited Thailand, Laos, Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and South Korea. Southeast Asia tops the list for many good reasons, but principally because people there would never conceive of, let alone hang up, the sign 'Well-behaved dogs and children welcome' that 'greeted' us outside a Devonshire country pub on a recent trip to my in-laws. We took our custom elsewhere.

From Burma to Bali, the welcome accorded young children is genuine and accommodating. Restaurants may lack high chairs and other western fixtures, but you hardly need them, as waitresses compete to whisk your children away, leaving you to enjoy your meal! Thailand's beaches, elephant rides, food and smiles make it a surefire winner for people testing out long-haul family holidays.

Travel with children demands more planning and luggage than carefree backpacking days. But the results more than compensate for the hassle, since your family unit opens up new dimensions in travel and the people you meet. I started taking May on reporting trips around China since she was two months old. Throwing her in a sling, off we went.

She proved an effective icebreaker when interviewees were nervous, and no obstacle to more adventurous travel. Down in Guangxi, in southwest China, I fancied a three-hour trek to a hilltop carved with paddy fields. But at six months and 13 kg in her backpack cum stroller, May was until three Yi minority ladies hawking jewellery came up with a solution. All of us would make the trek, with the trio taking turns to hold May for 10 yuan each (75p). I still smile at the clash of styles in the photo: one fat baby with shaved head, and her beaming entourage, whose custom is to bolster their hairdos with large wigs made from their own hair.

If you are interested in travel with your children, just go for it. Prepare well beforehand, and pack some common sense, but never forget the truism: wherever you go, there are people with children. In my experience, having children along even increases the joy of travel. And yours are probably more adaptable than you think.

I hesitate to predict how our wanderings will affect my two youngsters, or how much they will remember. For now they are literally broadening horizons, and learning that their way of life is not the only 'normal' way. When we reached grey Beijing after green Mongolia, May rushed to her room to set up an Ikea tent which she had hardly touched before. "This is my ger," she later told her friends, "isn't it cool!"