

General Information-Package about Bike Touring in Mongolia

The country

Even today, Mongolia seems like the end of the world, and indeed once one has left the major cities one may think to have stepped into another century instead of just another country. Mongolia, which is a large landlocked country has an area of 1 566 000 km², which is only shared by 2.2 million people giving the lowest population density of all countries of only 1.4 persons per km². If one takes into account that 25% of the Mongolians live in the capital city Ulaan Baatar, the actual population density in the remaining country is even lower.

Mongolia is a country with very diverse landscapes. In the northern part, it is influenced by Siberian Taiga with pine and spruce forests, which turn into larch forests more towards the east. The southern third of Mongolia is dominated by the Gobi Desert, which still has enough grass to allow scattered herds of sheep, goats and camels to be held by the nomads. The central part of the country is Siberian steppe. Much of Mongolia is covered by grassland, the home of the famous Mongolian horses. Mongolia is also one of the highest countries in the world, which has the Altai Mountains in the west, the Changai Mountains are in the center of Mongolia, and even in Gobi desert, there is the Gov-Altai Mountain range. Towards the East, the country has a large grassland plain.

The Mongols are also quite a diverse mix of different ethnic groups consisting of Halhs (70%), Kasakh, Dorvod, Bayad, Buriad, Dariganga, Zahchin, Urianhai, Oold, and Torguud. Mongolia is a democratic country since 1990. Before then, it was strongly influenced by Russia, and indeed, Mongolia was the second country in the world to become communist in 1921. This was, when Mongolia became independent from China with the help of Russian invaders. Nowadays, the Mongols glorify the times of Ghengis Khan in the twelfth century. Languages spoken in Mongolia are Mongolian, Russian, and also German (many Mongolians have studied in former East Germany).

General information

Mongolia certainly is not the right country to do the first bicycle tour. Some challenges involved in bicycling Mongolia can only be met if one has experiences from other bicycling tours. Especially the usually bad quality of the roads and tracks requires a good general fitness and condition as well as riding experience. In addition, the sometimes difficult navigation, and the lack of technical and medical help requires to be able to help oneself even in difficult situations.

Traveling season

The ideal traveling season for bicyclists is late summer and fall. This is the time, in which the clay tracks are dry, and riding is very good on the solid clay. In spring time and early summer, the tracks often turn into deep bogs, which make bicycling hardly impossible. Further, September and October are the driest months, and the probability of rain is very low, the air is dry and clean. Temperatures even in the desert are ideal for bicycling, reaching maximal 20°C. However, in October, in the mountains and also in Gobi desert, night temperatures can be below zero (up to -10°C).

Planning of the trip

Cycling entirely offroad is not recommended for various reasons. One reason is, that especially in the southern parts of the country there are plants with very small thorns, which penetrate also strong kevlar tires. Apart from that, one should not destroy the vegetation which recovers only slowly. Actually, the tracks are rough and challenging enough for man and material.

It is very good to obtain a good map of Mongolia. In Ulaan Baatar, one can buy a physical map 1:3.000.000, but using this map for detailed touring is hard work in terms of navigation. For the rough planning this map gives a good overview. We recommend using topographic maps 1:1.000.000 covering the whole country. These maps are from 1981, but the topography and details are still excellent and valid. The maps nowadays are out of print. Copies can be obtained from us at <http://www.mountainbike-expedition-team.de/Mongolia/maps/topomaps.html>. They are not anymore available on the market.

A thorough tour through Mongolia including a few resting days at interesting places requires about eight weeks. The average speed on tracks with fully loaden bikes is about 12 km per hour, sometimes even less, especially when it is sandy. Sand is the worst enemy for bicycles, because sand passages deeper than 5cm cannot be traversed by cycling. Small sand passages require a lot of force and skills. Pushing is often necessary. In the mountain regions, traveling speed is severely reduced by the steep inclines. Obviously, in Mongolia winding roads at hills are not existent. Roads usually lead up and down the hills in a straight line.

Equipment

The bike should be very robust. Especially the rims and tires will have to withstand strong forces. It is especially recommended to use tires with a broad profile. There are only 300 to 400 km of paved road in Mongolia, and even these are sometimes very rough. Spare inner-tubes as well as one spare (foldable) tire are highly recommended.

There is no possibility to buy an inner-tube repair kit in Mongolia!! It simply does not exist, and the stuff they use for tubes in car tires or truck tires simply doesn't work for bicycle tires – believe us, we have tested the lot, since we ran out of patches. A suspension fork is recommended, but only in combination with a front rack that is compatible (e.g. von Faiv, <http://www.faiv.de>). A suspended seat post will make riding on rough tracks more comfortable. Ergonomic grips are useful to prevent numbness of the fingers.

Heat and drought

During fall (September and October) temperatures in Gobi Desert are ideal for riding (15°C and 20°C). In the mountains, temperatures may be lower, and sometimes there can be cold wind from the north, requiring to ride with gloves (at least in the morning). During summer, temperatures can be much higher in Gobi Desert, up to 30°C or 40°C. Mongolia is a high altitude country (the lowest point is 980m), requiring strong protection against UV-radiation. Open blisters resulting from UV-burns can become very painful when getting in touch with salt from sweating. In this respect it is very important to replenish the minerals and vitamins to the body, which is lost during sweating.

September and October, which are the best months for cycling, are the driest months of the year. The drought is a logistic challenge for bicyclists. Due to the rather high altitude, water consumption can reach up to six liters per day. This may even increase if temperatures rise above 20°C. This water needs to be stored and transported together with the rest of the equipment, and considering that one may have to store water for more than one day, the volume and weight can increase rather fast. Therefore, the BOB-Yak trailer (<http://www.bobtrailers.com>) is an ideal possibility to store large volumes and weights without losing balance on the tracks. With the trailer, the center of gravity is rather low, adding to a high stability of bike and rider, even when fully loaded.

Camping

Wind, and tracks conditions in Mongolia limit the distance one can cover per day. Sometimes, it is not possible to plan in detail where one will end up for the night. Mongolian nomads are extremely friendly, and a traveler is always welcome to stay for a night. However, in some parts of the country there density of gers (the tents of the nomads) is rather low, and especially in fall many nomads move into lower altitudes and closer to the cities. It will definitively be necessary to camp wild, which is not a problem. When nomads see a tent in their "territory" they will come for a visit. They usually are very friendly and are curious to look at the "different" way of traveling and the equipment (tent, etc.). One or more visitors every evening sometimes can also be very exhausting. Then one should try to somewhat hide away from gers or roads. There is no actual danger of wild animals.

Getting there and away

The most convenient way to reach Mongolia is by plane or train. In the recent years, it became possible to cross the Mongolian border from Russia or China by bicycle.

Reaching Mongolia by train is possible via the Transsiberian Railway. The biggest problem for cyclists using the Transsiberian Railway is, that it is officially not allowed to transport the bicycles in the passengers compartment. The baggage wagon is somewhat at the end of the train, and one should clearly disagree transporting the expensive bike anywhere else than in the compartment with oneself. Speaking Russian certainly helps in the discussion. In some cases it may also help to spontaneously by another seat – for the bikes. In any case bringing a stable lock may turn out to be helpful on the train ride as well as in bigger cities like Moskow and Ulaan Baatar. However, out in the Mongolian back-country a lock is useless weight.

The airline MIAT offers direct flights from Berlin to Ulaan Baatar. Bikes are readily transported, but they are strict on extra weight exceeding the allowed 20kg.

More information

More specific information about bicycling or trekking in Mongolia can be obtained against a small fee from Andy Heßberg, Nobelstr. 21, 95444 Bayreuth, Germany. We have experience on our own mountainbike tour on 3500 km through the country, and collect experiences of other bicyclists who may have visited the country during another season or in a different region. In addition we offer excellent copies of the topographic maps (1:1.000.000) of whole Mongolia. Details at <http://www.mountainbike-expedition-team.de/Mongolia/mongo.html>

In any case, Mongolia is a rewarding country for ambitious bicyclists who love wild nature, friendly nomads, and only little western civilization.