

Grassland Culture



This vast and beautiful land is where the great dynasties and kingdoms rose and fell - including the mightiest of them all, the pan-Asian empire conquered by the mighty Mongolian warrior Genghis Khan.

The formidable horseback soldiers of Genghis Khan, raised and trained on the grasslands of the Mongolian region, were no match for opposing armies or city-fortresses of the day: the Mongol cavalry swept through Asia and on towards Europe, crushing all opposition.

The Mongols' tactical planning and fighting prowess were awesome; the marauding troops took on the banner of Islam which, at the furthest extremities of their empire, in what is modern-day Hungary, found them pitted against the Christian forces of Europe.

When Genghis Khan and his troops went into battle nobody had the ability, strength or spirit to mount an effective challenge. It was only when the Mongols relaxed into the more leisurely town and city life of their conquered opponents that their fighting spirit gradually sapped and their newly-claimed lands lost.

The spirit of Genghis Khan lives on today in the Grasslands of Mongolia: the warrior-king's name reverberates through ten centuries of history as a symbol of strength and power. The Great Khan was, like most Mongolians now and then, a master rider and expert hunter, who learned to handle a horse from early childhood. Fighting, whether it was to settle local tribal disputes, or take foreign territory, was a way of life.

As the Mongols galloped across continents, the explorer Marco Polo was heading the other way, ultimately ending up as an honoured guest in the court of the legendary Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan.

Today, the Grasslands are peaceful places, but the noble traditions live on. People in this part of the world have few visitors, so those adventurous travellers who do make the effort to visit are rewarded with fabulous hospitality.

Touring the Grasslands is for travellers who want an alternative holiday, a place where the vistas are of stunning blue skies and wide empty spaces, not city skyscrapers and traffic jams. Visitors inevitably ponder on how the rugged land bred the warriors who created the largest empire of all time.

Our itinerary takes a close look at the lifestyle, culture and history of the Grasslands people. To be able to travel easily, and live in relative comfort when they stop, modern-day Mongolians have devised and fine-tuned a special Grasslands-style home. The yurt, a circular tent-like structure made of thick felt, can be erected and taken down in minutes; whole families live inside, huddled around the central stove during the colder months.

The long spells of isolation mean the Grasslands people take their socialising seriously. The annual Naadam festival is a mini-Olympics of horse racing, wrestling contests and archery competitions, a chance to demonstrate that Genghis blood is still in the local genes.

Traditions are strong in this vast land, undiluted or polluted by the modern world. Although the odd yurt may well sport a satellite dish, Mongolians are just as likely to spend their evenings singing songs, or telling folk stories that have been passed down through the generations. Music is so much a part of Mongolian life that the Grasslands folk have been known to hum lullabies to young animals and children alike.

Mongolia is a huge land, with Grasslands that adjoin China and Russia. In fact the Kazakh people of the Grasslands in neighbouring Xinjiang province in China have a similar lifestyle; they, too, live in yurts and make a living by tending animals. Mongols are also scattered throughout the northeast of China.

It is a harsh life, but rich and rewarding. These are people at one with nature, imbued with a survivalist instinct and a placid, easy-going nature; visiting them literally opens up new horizons, in a vast and splendid country. It's a total cultural experience.