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Living in Mongolia

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Introduction

Mongolia evokes images of boundless steppe, roaming herds, and a nomadic culture that has withstood the tides of history and modernity alike. For many expats, the decision to move to Mongolia is driven by a thirst for adventure, a professional opportunity, or a curiosity about one of Asia's last frontiers. Yet living in Mongolia is more than just dramatic landscapes and the lore of Genghis Khan—it's about daily adaptations, cultural immersion, and embracing a society both rapidly changing and deeply rooted in tradition.

Nestled between Russia and China, Mongolia uniquely blends its historical heritage with the waves of globalization. Its capital, Ulaanbaatar, is growing at a pace unmatched in much of the region, offering expats both the comforts of a modern city and the challenges of rapid urbanization. Despite the urban pulse, much of Mongolia remains untouched, with landscapes that stretch farther than the eye can see and a way of life shaped by a close connection to nature. For expats, this means opportunities for unparalleled adventure—from horseback riding across the steppe to joining in the vibrant energy of local festivals.

However, adjusting to life in Mongolia often requires overcoming hurdles unfamiliar to those from the West or even its Asian neighbors. The infamous winters, linguistic barriers, differing etiquette, and practical matters like healthcare and internet access present real challenges. Understanding the local climate—both meteorological and cultural—is essential for making the most of your Mongolian experience. Likewise, grasping the intricacies of visas, registration requirements, and work permits is crucial for legal and successful integration.

This guide is designed to demystify the many facets of living as an expat in Mongolia. Drawing on current information and real-world insights, it systematically addresses the practicalities of daily life: securing housing, handling finances, navigating healthcare, and keeping safe in a sometimes unpredictable environment. At the same time, it delves into the social and cultural nuances that make Mongolia unique, from gers (yurts) and traditional greetings to modern social scenes and emerging tech communities.

Whether you are considering a short assignment in Ulaanbaatar, planning to teach or work in the countryside, or relocating with a family, this book offers a comprehensive roadmap. It prepares you not only for the challenges but also for the remarkable rewards of living in Mongolia. With the right preparation and an open mind, Mongolia can become more than just a temporary home—it can be the adventure of a lifetime.

CHAPTER ONE: Mongolia at a Glance: Geography and History

Mongolia, often referred to as the "Land of the Eternal Blue Sky," is a country that instantly captures the imagination. Situated in Northern Asia, it's a landlocked nation, bordered by two giants: Russia to the north and China to the south. This unique geographical positioning has profoundly shaped its history, culture, and very identity, creating a resilient and self-reliant populace. The sheer scale of its landscape, coupled with its relatively small population, means that vast stretches of the country remain pristine and untouched, offering an unparalleled sense of wilderness and freedom.

The country's official name is the Republic of Mongolia, a parliamentary republic that transitioned from a communist state in the early 1990s. This shift brought about significant changes, opening Mongolia to the world and fostering a rapid pace of development, particularly in its capital city. For expats, understanding this recent history of transformation is key to appreciating the dynamic blend of tradition and modernity that defines contemporary Mongolian society. The echoes of its nomadic past are still strong, even in the bustling streets of Ulaanbaatar.

Mongolia's geography is as diverse as it is grand. The average elevation across the country sits at a remarkable 1300 meters above sea level. This high altitude contributes to its distinctive climate and the breathtaking vistas that greet visitors. From the iconic Gobi Desert in the south, known for its vast sand dunes and ancient fossil beds, to the majestic Altai Mountains in the west, with their snow-capped peaks and glacier-fed lakes, the landscape offers an incredible spectrum of natural wonders. These varied terrains have historically dictated the migratory patterns of nomadic herders and continue to influence life for many Mongolians today.

Beyond the deserts and mountains, Mongolia is characterized by its expansive upland steppes and fertile pasture lands. These grasslands are the heartland of the nomadic culture, supporting millions of livestock—horses, yaks, camels, sheep, and goats—that form the backbone of the traditional Mongolian economy. The symbiotic relationship between the people and their animals, and the land that sustains them, is a fundamental aspect of Mongolian life that expats will quickly observe. Even in urban settings, there's a deep respect for nature and an understanding of its power.

Historically, Mongolia's most enduring legacy is that of the Mongol Empire, founded by Genghis Khan in the 13th century. This formidable empire stretched across Eurasia, becoming one of the largest contiguous land empires in history. This period forged a powerful sense of national pride and identity that continues to resonate deeply within

Mongolian culture. While the empire eventually fragmented, its impact on world history and the collective consciousness of the Mongolian people remains immense. Expats will encounter references to Genghis Khan everywhere, from currency to public monuments, reflecting his status as a revered national hero.

Following the decline of the Mongol Empire, Mongolia experienced various periods of influence, including centuries under the rule of the Manchu Qing Dynasty. In the early 20th century, spurred by the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, Mongolia declared independence. However, it later became a satellite state of the Soviet Union, adopting a socialist political and economic system. This period, lasting for much of the 20th century, profoundly shaped modern Mongolia, introducing elements of Soviet-era infrastructure, education, and social structures. The legacy of this era can still be seen in parts of Ulaanbaatar's architecture and some administrative systems.

The democratic revolution of 1990 marked a pivotal moment in Mongolian history, leading to a peaceful transition to a multi-party system and a market economy. This dramatic shift brought both opportunities and challenges. The country embraced democratic principles, adopted a new constitution, and began the process of integrating into the global economy. For expats arriving today, this recent history of transition explains the country's eagerness for foreign investment, expertise, and cultural exchange. It also accounts for the rapid development seen in Ulaanbaatar, as the nation strives to modernize while preserving its unique heritage.

Ulaanbaatar, the capital and largest city, stands as a testament to this ongoing transformation. What was once a nomadic settlement, occasionally shifting its location, has grown into a sprawling metropolis, home to nearly half of Mongolia's population. It is the country's economic, political, and cultural hub, where modern high-rises stand alongside traditional gers, and luxury cars navigate streets shared with horse-drawn carts. The city is a vibrant, often chaotic, melting pot of ancient traditions and contemporary aspirations, providing expats with a fascinating urban experience unlike any other.

Outside of Ulaanbaatar, life takes on a slower, more traditional pace. The vast countryside is sparsely populated, and many Mongolians continue to practice a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life, moving their gers and herds across the steppe in search of the best pastures. This rural existence, deeply intertwined with the cycles of nature, offers expats a glimpse into a way of life that has largely vanished elsewhere in the world. Traveling through the countryside, one experiences an overwhelming sense of openness and tranquility, a stark contrast to the urban bustle.

The cultural tapestry of Mongolia is rich and complex, woven from threads of nomadic traditions, Buddhist spirituality, and a strong sense of community. Hospitality is a cornerstone of Mongolian culture, and visitors are often welcomed with warmth and generosity, even in the most remote ger camps. This innate kindness and openness

towards strangers can make the initial adjustment period for expats feel more welcoming, despite potential language barriers. Learning a few basic Mongolian phrases and understanding fundamental customs, as will be discussed in later chapters, goes a long way in fostering positive interactions.

Economically, Mongolia is a resource-rich country, with vast reserves of coal, copper, gold, and other minerals. The mining sector is a major driver of the economy, attracting foreign investment and contributing significantly to the nation's growth. This economic activity, while bringing prosperity, also presents challenges related to environmental protection and equitable distribution of wealth. Expats working in Mongolia will often find themselves involved in or influenced by this crucial sector, either directly or indirectly. The country's economy is heavily reliant on mining, which can lead to cyclical growth and inflation fluctuations.

Despite its vastness, Mongolia's population density is one of the lowest in the world, fostering a sense of close-knit communities, particularly in rural areas. This low population density, while contributing to the country's pristine natural environment, can sometimes lead to feelings of isolation for expats accustomed to more densely populated regions. However, for those who embrace the solitude and appreciate the quiet beauty of the landscape, this can be one of Mongolia's most appealing characteristics.

Mongolia is a country of paradoxes: ancient traditions coexist with modern aspirations, vast untouched wilderness lies a short distance from a rapidly developing capital, and a challenging climate is offset by an abundance of sunny days. For the expat, these contrasts create an experience that is constantly engaging and often profound. This initial glance at Mongolia's geography and history merely scratches the surface of what awaits, setting the stage for a deeper dive into the practicalities and pleasures of living in this extraordinary land.

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