

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES FACING MONGOLIA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY

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Some countries are lucky. Their consistently warm and sunny climates draw the masses who want nothing but a sun tan and a sit-by-the-pool retreat. Some countries, like Mongolia, are not so lucky.

Since the dawn of democracy, tourism has blossomed, with 55,000 visitors in 1997 rising to 476,000 in 2012. However, this is largely thanks to Mongolia's stunning summers that provide a perfect climate to compliment the perfect surroundings. But the frostbite-inducing winters remain a hefty barrier for Mongolia's tourism industry. Though Chinggis' homeland wholly satisfies a tourist's thirst for breathtaking scenery, charming people, a vast and extraterrestrial landscape, and more, winter's bitter cold tends to repel foreign visitors from November to April. So, how do the tour guides in this beautiful country survive these challenging months, and what do they think of the barriers affecting Mongolia's ever-changing tourism industry?

I spoke to Magnai and Munkh, two tour guides based in Ulaanbaatar. We all agreed Mongolia is a fascinating, gorgeous, and diverse country to explore, but recognised the underlying problems in the tourism industry. Some that can be solved, and some not, unfortunately.

Magnai is a wonderfully friendly, smiling, and knowledgeable, with a giggly laugh. He founded his business, GBMG, in 2013. He runs tours year round, in packages for a maximum of four people, but predictably suffers a dramatic blip during the harsh winter months. Last year he had 60 to 70 tourists during the year, with only five tourists visiting during winter. These tours were only brief trips to Terelj and Hustai national parks, rather than wallet-busting weeks roaming the Gobi. However, with a part-time job as an accountant, he stresses that he has no intention to embark on long trips when the weather is at its worst. When asked, he says, "Very risky. It's people's lives."



Munkh is well-read, intelligent, and witty. His business, Nomadic Discovery Mongolia, is in a similar position. He runs tours for twelve people at most, and has also been doing so since 2013. During the off-season he holds odd jobs, but still organises tours. In 2015 he ran tours every month, but with very low frequency. He says that during the winter there isn't enough market for conducting tours.

It is obvious why tourism declines when the -40 degree Celsius cold hits the country. Westerners accustomed to comparably warmer winter weather are unlikely to be compelled to visit a land possessing such mind-boggling chill. Though various winter festivals, like the 1,000 Camel Festival and Khuvsgul Ice Festivals in March, and the Golden Eagle Festival in the Altai mountains in October are organised, they have not yet fulfilled their potential. Munkh insists that they are poorly



scheduled, and that tourists can't be at two different festivals at the same time, especially with the camel festival in the Gobi and the ice festival in the north thousands of kilometres apart. If they could be organised so tourists can hop from one to the other with their guides, winter tourism revenue would inevitably soar.

Magnai noted that roads to places of major tourism interest have yet to be constructed. Though major road networks built in 2013 and 2014 provide access to the major cities, many soums and popular areas remain impossibly out of reach over the winter. Even in early March, when I visited the Gobi, the Valley of the Vultures was inaccessible.

Though it can be argued that these places of natural

beauty should be wholly preserved, if winter tourism is a priority, some kind of compromise must be made. At Yolyn Am the ice field is at its highest during winter, and this novelty could attract a range of tourists. However, if it remains unreachable from November to April, will the tourists come? I think not.

Munkh has also encountered setbacks with the operational schedules of accommodations for visitors throughout the year. As owners are unwilling to remain open for visitors year-round, there are no places to stay in Mongolia's more remote areas. He mentioned that when they do open for the winter the "transitional period" causes a deterioration in service, a warming-up period of sorts. If there is nowhere to stay during the winter, then no one can visit. Not exactly ideal for a country that wants to expand its tourism.

Mongolia's winter has further repercussions too. "When it comes to June, you can't find a single room to sleep in," said Munkh, "they only keep it at peak level for four weeks". It was reported in 2013 that the only 3,000 four and five star-level hotel rooms were planned to be available by 2015, and only 5,300 by 2020. The government has declared a target of receiving one million tourists by 2020. Though there are other places for accommodations, 5,300 of these rooms would not satisfy the demand of the target number of visitors. If this is the case, the rapid construction and renovation of hotels needs to occur sooner rather than later.



The overcharging of tourists is yet another barrier, according to Munkh. He suggested that mid-range companies in need of instant expansion tend to rip tourists off, charging excessive amounts for poor service and discomfort to clamber up the market ladder. Even the National Museum of Mongolia, though brilliant, is quick to discriminate against foreigners. From personal experience, my Western face prompted an 8,000 MNT entrance fee, but a Mongolian face is greeted by a paltry

4,000 MNT ticket. I am happy to pay the extra money, and it is understandable why these practices occur. Attractions such as these require a constant stream of money, and so when a tourist strolls by, overcharging must occur to make up for lost time and money. However, some tourists who are little more frugal may begin to lose their faith in the industry. Ultimately, no one wants to be ripped off, and ripping off a demographic that can carry Mongolia's future economy is somewhat unsustainable.

There is no denying that Mongolia faces some issues if it wants to expand its tourism industry. The issues are both controllable and uncontrollable. The cold climate needs to be embraced with issues of bias, accommodation, and infrastructure ironed out. That's the hard bit. So how exactly can that be done?

Munkh mentioned a government-enforced tourism scheme in Bhutan, a small country just north of India. There, they aim for "high value, low impact" tourism, and so a daily fee of 250 USD is charged for every day a tourist remains in the country. Munkh suggested a similar scheme for Mongolia, with bills picked up by the government during the low-season with the money raised by a daily fee charged during peak season. It would mean ger camps, albeit state-owned, would remain open year-round with consistent service and ample space. The fee could also contribute to clearing up trash in national parks and building new roads to Mongolia's most beautiful but inaccessible locations, like Khermen Tsav.



When I asked Magnai how can Mongolia leap over these barriers, he brought up the new airport under construction 52 kilometres from UB. Chinggis Khaan International Airport only receives direct flights from nine locations around the globe. He said increasing the number of direct flights was an essential step in boosting tourism. Though MIAT Mongolian Airlines conducts flights from Germany and Russia, more direct flights from European and North American destinations are required. Surely, a newer,

shinier, and all-improved airport would boost the likelihood of this happening. It will be the biggest airport in Central Asia when completed next summer, and having had the pleasure of seeing it in mid-construction, it will be a real feat of civil engineering. Perhaps, and let's hope, it is a sign of further international travel opportunities for Mongolia.

Mongolia would benefit from further advertising and publicity. Though an increase in festivals spanning all seasons has begun, the event calendar can always get bigger. Mongolia is a land of huge cultural and physical diversity. How about a festival devoted to throat singing held at Chinggis Square, or an international contortion exhibition? There's a wealth of areas Mongolia excels in and should show off to the world. Exposing them can only lead to more people saying, "oh, that makes me want to go to Mongolia!" The 1,000 Camel Festival in the Gobi at the start of March is leading

the way. It set a world record for the biggest camel race of all time, and had an article featured on the Guinness World Record website. Boom, that's publicity. Green tourism initiatives like Munkh's, who says he plants a tree for every person who goes on a tour with him, also help build appeal. He now has three fast-growing tree farms just outside UB, with over 8,000 trees growing, and hopes to keep expanding it to make up for the damage his tours have caused the environment. Again, efforts like this, if publicised, will attract a wide variety of different people to the country. Munkh can show more people Mongolia, and plant many more trees in the process.

So, really, the main question is, just how big can tourism get here? Magnai said he was thrilled that many more people now know where Mongolia is and believes with certainty that tourism can rise above the nine percent of GDP it generates now. Munkh thinks Mongolia can attract four million visitors by 2020, providing the government "gets it right". This is the kind of optimism Mongolia needs if it wants to take advantage of its vast opportunity. There are obviously barriers that need to be overcome, but with the help, guidance, and initiative of the government, Mongolia's people, and the world's winter adventurers, Mongolia can become a globally renowned magnet for tourism throughout every season. It makes you think, if all goes to plan, is four million tourists a year too easy for Mongolia?

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