When boys are three and five years old and when girls are two and four years old, a hair-cutting ceremony is held. Each guest cuts a small piece of the child’s hair and gives the child a gift, such as money, toys, pencils, ribbons, or candy.

At its height, the Mongolian empire stretched from what is now Korea to Hungary and included most of Asia. Established by the great ruler Chinggis (or Genghis) Khan, it was the largest land empire in the history of the world!

Children in the countryside can start learning to ride a horse from the age of two.

Mongolian camels have two humps and can live for three months without water.

Airag (fermented mare’s milk) is a favorite drink both in the summer and during winter holidays such as Tsagaan Sar (Lunar New Year).

Mongolians pass items to each other with their right hands, supporting the elbow with the left hand, to show respect.

When people in the countryside greet each other, they say, “How fat are your livestock?” or “How is the spring for you?”

Mongolian names include a variation of the father’s name and a given name. People are called by their given name. So a girl named Hasbatyn Hulan is called Hulan, and her father is Hasbat.

A zud is a winter with enough snow to cover the grass. During a zud, many animals die of starvation. This is a hardship for farm families.

About one in every two hundred people in the world has Mongolian DNA.

Flag

Red represents fire, as well as progress and prosperity. Blue represents the sky and eternal peace. On the left is the traditional national emblem, the Soyombo.

National Image

The Soyombo is a symbol of Mongolian independence. It combines traditional symbols and imagery from Buddhism, Shamanism, and Mongolian culture. The fire, sun, moon, and other figures represent harmony among people and with the earth.
Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 603,909
Area (sq. km.): 1,564,116

Located between its powerful neighbors Russia and China, Mongolia is just smaller than Iran or the state of Alaska. Mongolia’s Gobi Desert is the coldest desert in the world. Mongolian legend says that it was formed by the trampling of the ground by the horses of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan’s army. The Gobi is also one of the world’s driest deserts; it sometimes goes years without rain. However, not all of Mongolia is so harsh. In the east are beautiful green grasslands, called steppes. Steppes are vast and open and home to huge herds of gazelle, flocks of migrating birds, and other wildlife. The tall Altai Mountains make up the western border of the country. Mount Khuiten, or Nairamdliin Orgil (Mount Friendship), the highest peak in Mongolia, is part of this mountain range.

Mongolia has long, cold winters and short summers. Although it is cold for many months, Mongolia is called the Land of Blue Sky because it averages over 250 cloudless days a year. Springtime in Mongolia can be rainy and windy. Summers are warm and sometimes bring droughts. Winters are almost always below freezing, but the country rarely receives much snowfall.

Population

Population: 2,953,190

Mongolia is one of the world’s most sparsely populated countries. That means that few people live there even though the country is large in size. Ulaanbaatar, the capital, is Mongolia’s only big city and is home to one-third of the population. One-fourth of the people live in smaller cities. The remaining people live in the countryside. More and more Mongolians are moving to Ulaanbaatar and regional town centers in search of jobs and better education. Most Mongolians belong to the Mongol ethnic group, although there are small minorities of Kazakhs, Chinese, Russians, and others.

Language

The Mongol language has several variations, called dialects, but most people speak the dialect called Khalkha Mongol. In traditional Mongol writing, letters and words are written from top to bottom (instead of from left to right, as in English). For many years, the Mongol script was replaced by a Cyrillic alphabet, like the one used for Russian. However, Mongolians are now starting to use their traditional script in addition to Cyrillic.
Can You Say It in Mongolian?

Hello  
Sain baina uu  (SAN BAN OH)

Good-bye  
Bayartai  (BAI-YER-TAI)

Thank you  
Bayarlalaa  (BAI-YER-LAH)

Yes  
Tiim  (team)

No  
Ugui  (oo-GWEE)

My name is  
Minii ner  (minyee NYEER)

Religion

- Buddhist Lamaist 52.9%
- None 38.6%
- Shamanist and Christian 5.1%
- Muslim 3%
- Other 0.4%


Around 40 percent of Mongolians belong to no religion. During communist rule, hundreds of monasteries in Mongolia were destroyed, and thousands of monks were sent to work camps during the period of religious persecution. The government promoted atheism (the belief that there is no god). But since the fall of communism, freedom of religion has returned. Many of the monasteries have now reopened. Boys are increasingly applying to become monks, and Buddhism is rapidly regaining its popularity.

About half the population is Buddhist. Buddhism teaches people to work toward enlightenment, or being at peace and free from anger, hatred, and greed. Many Buddhist temples have prayer wheels with blessings written on them. When you spin the wheel, it is like saying the blessing. Kazakh Muslims are free to practice Islam. Christianity is also spreading.

Time Line

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>300 BC</td>
<td>China strengthens the Great Wall to keep the tribes in Mongolia from invading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200s BC</td>
<td>Temujin, later named Chinggis (or Genghis) Khan, is born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1100</td>
<td>Chinggis (Genghis) Khan unites the Mongol tribes into one empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
<td>Mongol armies invade Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1206</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1240-41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1279</td>
<td>Kublai Khan conquers China and establishes the Yuan Dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1368</td>
<td>The Yuan Dynasty is defeated, and the Mongol Empire weakens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400s</td>
<td>The Mongol tribes that retreated from Asia and Russia fight a long civil war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>Dayan Khan, and later his grandsons, rules a mostly united country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1578</td>
<td>Altan Khan (Golden King) converts to Buddhism, encouraging the spread of the religion throughout Mongolia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600s</td>
<td>Unity ends, and Mongol tribes return to fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1639</td>
<td>Zanabazar is recognized as the first spiritual leader of Buddhism in Mongolia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700s</td>
<td>China’s Qing Dynasty dominates Mongolia, which is divided into Inner and Outer Mongolia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1727</td>
<td>The Treaty of Kyakhta creates the border between Russia and Mongolia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Outer Mongolia declares independence when the Qing Dynasty falls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>The Russian Red Army joins with Damdin Sukhbaatar to drive out the Russian White Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>The Russians help set up a communist government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>The Buddhist system of monasteries is destroyed under communism; thousands of monks are murdered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949-55</td>
<td>A railway is built across Mongolia, linking Russia and China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Mongolia becomes a member of the United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Mongolia begins a peaceful transition away from communism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Mongolians <em>ratify</em> (approve) a new constitution and hold their first free elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>The <em>democratic</em> (government by the people) party wins control of the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The communist Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP) regains control of the government after reforms fail to lift Mongolia out of poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>President George W. Bush is the first serving U.S. president to visit Mongolia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Violent protests erupt in the capital following claims that parliamentary elections were rigged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Warrior Ancestors

Different tribes lived in Mongolia for centuries before it became a nation. These early inhabitants left behind stone tools and passed their history and stories down by word of mouth. The Mongols, riding horseback and armed with bows and arrows, attacked Chinese settlements to the south. Warriors of another tribe, the Xiongnu, troubled the Chinese so much that parts of the Great Wall were built to keep them out. The walls did little to stop the invasions; various Mongol tribes controlled parts of northern and western China whenever Chinese dynasties were weak. Ancient Chinese manuscripts talk of countless battles with the fierce, *nomadic* (wandering) Mongolian tribes.

### World Empire

To people outside of Mongolia, Chinggis (or Genghis) Khan was a brutal warrior who conquered large parts of Asia and Europe and destroyed many cities. To Mongolians, he is the nation’s greatest hero. In 1206, after conquering numerous rival clans, he united the Mongol tribes into one nation. He took the title *Chinggis* because it means “supreme” or “great.” Chinggis Khan established his capital city at Kharkhorin (about 200 miles west of what is now Ulaanbaatar). His fierce armies, with their expert archers, went into China, Russia, and beyond, establishing one of the largest empires ever known. Chinggis Khan died in 1226, and the empire passed to his sons Tsagaadai and Ogedei.

### Internal Divisions

The Mongol Empire was too large to manage for long, and in the 1300s, Mongol troops began retreating back to Mongolia. There, the Mongol tribes fought each other for land. Civil war broke out, and the once united tribes became separated and went back to ruling themselves. Eventually, the Chinese became powerful enough to take control of Mongolia. Southern Mongolia became Inner Mongolia (now part of China), and what is now Mongolia was known as Outer Mongolia. Chinese rule lasted until 1911, when China’s last dynasty fell and Mongolia declared independence.
Freedom at a Price

After World War I, three foreign armies fought over Mongolia. The Chinese invaded first and were soon driven out by the White Russian Army. Then the communist Red Russian Army helped Mongolian hero Damdin Sukhbaatar get rid of the White Army. Mongolians were grateful for Russia’s help in gaining independence from China, and in 1924, Mongolia became an independent communist country (part of the huge communist nation called the Soviet Union).

During this period, Mongolia was heavily influenced by Russia and received a lot of technical and financial support, but the Russians worked to do away with Mongolia’s traditional culture and its religion, Buddhism. They got rid of the nobility, seized private property, and destroyed monasteries. Thousands of people died resisting these changes. This made the people angry, and when Russia’s power began to weaken, Mongolians started to talk about becoming a democracy, or government by the people.

A New Era

In 1989, Mongolians finally voiced their desire to break away from communism and Russian control. In 1992, they passed a constitution and, since then, have held elections and set up new laws. The nation slowly began to open to the rest of the world. People today are glad to have more freedoms, but Mongolia has struggled to adjust to a new system in which the government does not control the economy. In recent years, poverty, mining laws, and government corruption have become major political issues.

Games and Sports

Mongolia is known for three traditional sports: horse racing, Mongol wrestling, and archery. These sports are featured at the annual Naadam festival, where thousands of athletes participate. Rural (countryside) boys race horses from an early age, but city kids are more likely to play soccer and basketball.

Kids collect shagai (sheep and goat ankle bones) to play games. Each side of a bone has a different name: horse, sheep, goat, or camel. The shagai serve as playing pieces and as a type of dice. Shagai can be played in several different ways. You can play them like marbles and flick one shagai to strike the others; you can roll them like dice and move forward depending on how many you roll; or you can play a game similar to jacks, throwing one shagai in the air and trying to grab as many others as you can and then catching the falling shagai before it hits the ground.

Holidays

Mongolian children have two favorite holidays: Children’s Day (1 June) and Tsagaan Sar (White Month), held on the Lunar New Year. On Children’s Day, kids dress in their best clothing, visit amusement parks, have parties, and get presents from parents and relatives.

For Tsagaan Sar, children visit their grandparents and have a big dinner with relatives—and they get presents from the adults. At sunrise, people go to the home of the oldest family member to greet him or her by cupping the person’s elbows. The elder responds by placing his or her hands on the younger person’s upper arms. This greeting is called the zolgoi. People also clean their homes and visit lamas (Buddhist
priests) for blessings. In the evenings, families gather for feasts of **buuzes** (meat dumplings) and cookies. A few **buuzes** are made with vegetables instead of meat, and these are considered lucky.

### Food

Most Mongolian families eat the same foods every day. These foods include bread, dairy products, and meat. People enjoy beef and lamb with a lot of fat, and they eat plenty of yogurt and dried cheese. Fruit is not common because of the cold climate, but Mongolians do grow many vegetables, including cabbage, potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, and onions. These vegetables are often cooked with garlic and added to main dishes or noodle soup.

Most kids like to eat **buuz**, which is a steamed dumpling stuffed with chopped meat, onions, cabbage, and garlic. A fried version of the dumpling is called **huushur**. Other favorite dishes are **shuulte khool** (a soup made of pasta, meat, broth, and sometimes potatoes) and **khuushuur** (fried pancakes made with mutton).

### Schools

**Adult Literacy: 98%**

Mongolian kids have eleven years of free schooling available, beginning as early as age five. Only eight years of school are required. Grades 9 through 11 are meant to prepare children to go to college. City kids go to school five days a week for nine months a year. Wealthier city families send their children to private schools for a better education. Almost every school has uniforms, and most boys wear suits even in elementary school! In the countryside, kids might not go to school for the full eleven years or for the full nine months a year. However, Mongolia has a high literacy rate, meaning that a large number of adults can read and write. Schools in Mongolia have lots of clubs for students interested in activities such as basketball, wrestling, singing, table tennis, and chess. Many students participate in these clubs and spend several hours every week practicing for competitions with other schools.

### Life as a Kid

Kids in the countryside ride horses, help herd livestock, and play with siblings. They usually wear a piece of traditional clothing called a **deel**. This full-length buttoned tunic (like a robe) is tied with a long belt (usually blue, white, red, or yellow) and worn by boys, girls, and adults. A winter **deel** is lined with sheepskin or fur. They also wear long leather boots with curved toes. In the cities, kids wear jeans, T-shirts, and jackets or coats. After school, they get together with friends. They like to play computer games and watch television, and many enjoy skateboarding and basketball.
Government

Capital: Ulaanbaatar
Head of State: Pres. Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj
Head of Government: PM Norovyn Altankhuyag

Mongolia has been working to create a modern democratic (government by the people) system since it broke away from Russia’s influence in 1989. The parliament, or lawmaking body, is called the Great Hural. It has 76 members, all of whom are elected. The prime minister is the head of the government. He is usually the leader of the party with the most members in the Great Hural. A president is also elected and serves four-year terms. The voting age is 18.

Money and Economy

Currency: Tugrik

Russia and China are Mongolia’s main trade partners. Nearly half of all Mongolians raise horses, cattle, camels, sheep, goats, or yaks. These animals provide food, clothing, and transportation for the family. The goats produce cashmere, a type of wool highly valued in Europe and North America. Mongolia sells cashmere and copper to other countries. Money from these products is needed to help the government build roads and buildings. The money also helps create jobs for people moving to the cities. Mongolians hope that tourism, mining, and industry will create more jobs and bring more money to the country.

Getting Around

Most of the roads in Mongolia are not paved. The roads that are paved tend to be in the cities. Cities have buses and trolleys, and people in the countryside use cars or motorcycles. However, for many families, a fast horse is still the most prized possession. The Trans-Mongolian Railway runs across Mongolia and into Russia and China.
Nomads and Gers

Most rural (countryside) families are nomads, meaning they move their homes to find grazing land for their animal herds. The home is called a ger. It is a round domed tent made of wood, wool, and canvas—but without nails or screws. A ger can be taken apart in a few hours so that a family can move on to the next place whenever they need to. Everyone sleeps, eats, and plays in the same room. In cities, families typically live in apartments, but some live in more permanent gers. City gers often have electricity but are without heat or running water.

Learn More

Contact the Embassy of Mongolia, 2833 M Street NW, Washington, DC 20007; phone (202) 333-7117; web site www.mongolianembassy.us.
Mongolia's highest point is Mount Khuiten, at 14,350 feet (4,374 m). It is part of Tavan Bogd (Five Holy Peaks) in the Altai Mountains.

Mongolia shares a 2,000-mile (3,220-km) border with Russia and a 3,000-mile (4,830-km) border with China.

Most of Mongolia sits above an elevation of 3,200 feet (1,000 m).

The Orhon River is Mongolia's longest river, at 698 miles (1,124 km).

Covering 604,247 square miles (1,565,000 sq km), Mongolia is about the same size as Alaska.