Country Overview

Mongolia: Geopolitics and the Environment
Spring 2015

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General Information
Mongolia rejoined the global scene in 1990 and started the process of dual transition to democracy and a market economy. Mongolia is focusing its efforts on developing balanced policies open to outside involvement, while maintaining strong nationalism rooted in its pastoral culture. Among the temperate zones of the Northern Hemisphere, few nations compare to Mongolia in the size, diversity, and health of its natural ecosystems. Covering 1.564 million square kilometers, Mongolia encompasses an area larger than Britain, France, Germany and Italy combined. It is the seventh largest country in Asia and one of the largest land-locked countries in the world. With only 2.9 million inhabitants, its population density, 1.7 persons per square kilometer, is the lowest in Asia.

Although threatened by commercial exploitation, Mongolia still contains relatively intact examples of Asia’s deserts, steppe forests, mountains, and rare species of wild creatures and plants that inhabit them. The traditional culture of the semi-nomadic herder still thrives, as one-third of the country’s people still live a traditional nomadic lifestyle, tending nearly 50 million livestock. To consider culture within Mongolia, one must consider the natural surrounding environment. The two are interdependent, continually needing to adapt to the needs and demands of each other. The nomads’ life has changed very little since the old days, and Mongolia remains one of the last refuges of pastoral nomadism.

Mongolia used to be the second stronghold of Buddhist religion, after Tibet. However, in seven decades during the 20th Century, Buddhism was almost eradicated. The new democratic changes of 1990 allowed its peaceful revival. Now more than 140 Buddhist monasteries have been set up anew.

Under this newly found freedom of belief, other religions established themselves, including more than 30 churches and cults, mostly Christian. Another popular religion is Islam, which is practiced by a 100,000 strong Kazakh minority in the Bayan Ulgii.

Climate and Geography
Mongolia is a land of extremes. Humidity can be close to zero and the sun is intense, with over 260 sunny days a year. Temperatures often change drastically from day to night. Winters (October to April) are long and cold; sometimes it can get down to minus 40 Fahrenheit. Spring is short but there are major blizzards and dust storms, making the period from snow melting in late March to first grass in late May the least comfortable.
Summer, from mid-May to September, is usually warm with average temperatures of 64º to 78º. There are short rains in June, July and August. On some days, the temperature may go above 86º which can be difficult to handle, especially in the South Gobi region.

Summer accounts for almost 70% of the precipitation for the year, but this does not mean long periods of rainy days. Rains rarely last for more than 2-3 days. Most rain occurs in July and early August. Global warming has its effects on Mongolia: experts say that average annual temperatures have risen by 1-2 degrees Celsius, making winter milder, but with a few days of extreme cold, and summers hotter.

Mongolia resides on a high mountainous plateau some 1,580 meters above sea level. Altai, Hangai, Hentii and Hiangan mountain ranges shield away humid, warm airflows from Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Mountains make up 42.5% of the territory. The distance from the sea, along with the considerable elevation over sea level, makes the climate very dry.

### Diet

Participating in the local food culture is a central aspect of daily life in Mongolia. You should be willing to try the local cuisine and share in your host family’s mealtimes. Special or restricted diets may not be fully understood by your host family although they may have previously hosted a student with similar dietary restrictions. By trying to replicate your diet at home you will miss out on an important part of your host culture.

Mongolia is an essentially meat eating society, and the diet in Mongolia can be restrictive. Boiled mutton or beef, noodles, rice and a lot of milk products are the nutritional staples of nomad life in the country. Fruits and vegetables outside of Ulaanbaatar are almost non-existent. Flexibility in one’s diet is essential for both basic food needs and cultural etiquette.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ulaanbaatar (UB):</th>
<th>Average High/Low Temperatures (°F)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>Mar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16/-12</td>
<td>32/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept</td>
<td>Oct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62/34</td>
<td>46/19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you have not eaten red meat or milk products very often lately, we encourage you to start eating more of these, just to get your system accustomed to a diet heavy in these products. Past students have also recommended bringing dietary supplements, vitamins or other health items to supplement your diet, especially when on rural homestays.

Note: If you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform our office prior to the start of your program. We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context. In some locations, we cannot guarantee zero exposure to certain foods or a given allergen.

### Homestays

As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. You will learn firsthand the joys and responsibilities of being a guest, a family member, and a friend. You will also have the opportunity to share your culture and to learn from
another’s culture. We hope you will come prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question, distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.

Family structures vary in every culture, and SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families. For example, your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. They may be quite familiar with your hometown or with international students, or your homestay family may not know much about where you come from. Additionally, please bear in mind that, in many countries, the idea of what constitutes a “home” (i.e., the physical nature of the house) may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and possibly new priorities and expectations.

Each program’s homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays. These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the greatest extent possible. Please note: SIT will not have information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.

In this program, you will be staying in homestays with two types of Mongolian families: nomad and urban.

Your nomad host family will herd sheep and goats. They typically have horses to ride and cows and/or yaks to milk. They most likely will be living in their small mobile gers (felt covered tents). School age children will be gone to boarding school from September 1st until the end of May, so you will be left with younger and older members of the families. Nomad family homestay sites can be changed depending on the amount of precipitation during the summer season.

Your urban homestay will take place in Ulaanbaatar. The program strives to find families with high school or college-aged children. All families represent middle class families, meaning they are of medium economic means and social levels. Please remember this definition does not necessarily coincide with an American definition of middle class.

Other Accommodations
During your orientation, evaluation, and a short period of the Geopolitics and the Environment Seminar in Ulaanbaatar, you will stay in a small hotel and with urban host families who mostly live in Soviet-type apartments. During excursions, you will often stay in ger camps and small local hotels. For the ISP period, you may choose your own accommodation from a long list of possibilities that may include hotels, guesthouses, apartments, host families, etc.

Transportation
You will take public transport or taxies while in Ulaanbaatar. During your nomad homestay, horses will probably be the main form of transportation for getting to nearby sites. For excursion travel, the program uses all forms of transportation, including airplanes, trains, vans, jeeps and horses. Please be prepared to take long car drives in extreme conditions on poor roads. During ISP, students often use relatively cheap long-distance public buses that could be crowded and may take up to two days to reach some remote destinations.

Money
In addition to tuition, SIT Study Abroad program fees cover room and board throughout the program. When room and/or board are not taken with the group, students will be given a stipend to cover related expenses. SIT will cover daily commuting costs, if any,
and excursions that are part of the normal program itinerary. Daily commuting costs will be determined by the program. During the ISP period, students will receive a stipend for basic room and board only based on the cost of living at the program base. Any domestic travel, interpretation services, or supplies necessary for the ISP are the students’ responsibility. Please plan accordingly.

The national currency of Mongolia is Tögrög (MNT or Tugrug). Bank notes are issued for 20,000, 10,000, 5,000, 1000, 500, 100, 50, 20, 10, and 5 tugrug denominations.

1,000 Tögrög bill

ATMs are available only in Ulaanbaatar. We recommend using American Express or VISA traveler’s checks, as they are the only type of check that can be easily replaced if lost or stolen. It is best to bring travelers’ checks in varied denominations (US$20, US$50, and US$100 notes) as well as sufficient cash in varied denominations (US$1, US$5, US$10 and US$20). We strongly advise you to bring a major credit/debit card in your name if you do not already own one. It is also possible to get cash advances against a MasterCard or VISA card, but only in limited amounts with a commission up to 4%. Although it is possible, it is expensive to transfer or wire funds to Mongolia.

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. This is very important; if you don’t inform these companies that you will be away, when they see charges from another country, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad. If they will expire while you are overseas, please contact your bank and/or credit card companies for early renewal. It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust just in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

Remember to notify your banks and credit card companies before you go abroad!

Following are suggestions for spending money during the program, including estimates for textbooks, ISP-related expenses, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Figures are based on recent student evaluations, though individual spending habits vary widely and these costs are averages.

A suggested total amount of money to budget ranges from US$1700 to $2000. To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program, including travel costs for your planned ISP or a specific personal expense.

Check current exchange rates:
http://www.oanda.com/currency/convert/

Please budget approximately:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Estimated Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration:</td>
<td>US$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books, printing, supplies:</td>
<td>$70 photocopying + $50 refundable library deposit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up-front medical costs:</td>
<td>$400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottled Water:</td>
<td>$50-70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Internet Café usage:</td>
<td>$60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential ISP travel expenses:</td>
<td>$700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential cost for interpretation services:</td>
<td>$450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communication
While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication. We have a few suggestions regarding communication during the term, based upon our experience.

It’s important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call, thereby avoiding frustration and making connections more meaningful. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion. While you are encouraged to share with those close to you and use them for support whenever necessary, it is also important to remember that you are on the program for just one term, and that you get out of the program what you put into it.

Phones and Email
All students are required to have a working cell phone while on SIT Study Abroad programs. This policy is part of our commitment to student safety and will facilitate communication in case of an emergency. It is the responsibility of the student to ensure that they are reachable by phone at all times. This means keeping the phone charged and stocked with airtime/minutes as well as notifying staff of, and replacing, lost or stolen phones. Please note that students who do not comply with the cell phone policy may be subject to disciplinary action.

Cell phones have become easily available. You can get a second-hand cell phone starting from US$30. An additional US$10 will be charged for the SIM card; this does not include calling minutes. It is impossible to make direct calls to the U.S. from our nomad homestay and some excursion sites, so don’t expect to be able to make regular telephone calls home during your travel dates.

More options for obtaining a cell phone prior to departure can be found here, under the contact and communications tab. Please bear in mind that a basic cell phone with simple call and text messaging is the best option for all programs. Expensive or flashy phones (including iPhones) are not recommended as these may attract unwanted attention in some economically depressed areas.

Making phone calls from Ulaanbaatar is getting easier. Keep in mind the time difference when calling or receiving an international call; Mongolia is 13 hours ahead of EST, 12 hours ahead during Daylight Savings Time (April - October).

As soon as you arrive in country we will inform the SIT Study Abroad office in Brattleboro, Vermont, to let them know of your safe arrival. If your family and friends want confirmation, please have them call SIT at 1-888-272-7881 – allow enough time for us to get you settled into our lodging and then send a fax to the U.S. before calling.

Mail: In these days of instant communication, this mode allows you to retain your cultural immersion while still sharing your experience with your friends and family. Mail will take about two to three weeks to reach Mongolia. It is possible to receive packages in Mongolia from the United States, but service is slow. You may be required to retrieve packages from the busy Central Post Office and pay a customs tax.

E-mail: There are a great number of Internet cafes in Ulaanbaatar from which you will be able to access your home e-mail account, but connections could be slow and sometimes unreliable. In addition to the internet cafes widely available in the capital, the program office in Ulaanbaatar is equipped with WiFi. It is however unlikely that you will have consistent internet access in many other parts of the country.

Mailings
Throughout the semester, posted letters should be sent to the following address:

Student Name
SIT Study Abroad (Mongolia)
P.O. Box 1178, Central Post Office
Ulaanbaatar – 15160
Mongolia

Sending and receiving packages is another matter, however. Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site could be expensive and problematic. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of
items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient (due to customs delays) that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, unless it is an emergency, sending packages should be done on a needs basis. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged. (This certainly includes laptops! For this reason, make sure you bring your laptop with you on the plane if you think you’ll want it in country). If you will be celebrating a birthday during the program, please inform parents, grandparents, significant others and anyone else who might think of sending you packages, of the above.

For this program, DHL and UPS services are available in country. For this program, reliance on the U.S. Postal Service is not advised; while they may send packages for a cheaper price, timeliness and reliability have been more inconsistent than with the preferred express mailing agencies. When given the option, it’s always a good idea to send packages certified and with a number that allows the sender to track the package.

If it is necessary for someone to send you a package, it should be sent to the following address:

**Student Name**
Eruul Mendiin Yam 16-B-3 toot, Bayanzurkh duureg, 16 horoo, Dandarbaat Street
Ulaanbaatar 13321
Mongolia

Note: Street addresses are rarely used in even in Ulaanbaatar: Always add telephone number 976-11-452138.

The delivery services listed above sometimes require a phone number to mail a package internationally. As the student has a cell phone in country, please use that number.

**Visitors and Free Time**
SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the term, due to the rigorous nature of the programs and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See Attendance Policy.

During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season, or if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist. Please note that you will not have a long break during the program, such as for Thanksgiving Break.

Students typically have four weeks to conduct research, gather and analyze data, write, and prepare for the ISP presentation. There is a lot to cover, and students find the ISP period a very busy time. For this reason, please plan to use your time wisely.

Students are not allowed to leave Mongolia at any point during the semester or travel independently during the thematic and field methods courses and during the homestay immersion. Prior to ISP, each site trip must be coordinated and approved by the AD.

**Alumni Contact**
If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor or ask an alumni contact: http://www.sit.edu/studyabroad/eop_contact_alum.cfm.