

Foxhunt Mongolia

Riding to Eagles in the Land of the Eternal Blue Sky

Story and Photos by Amy Engle



My journey to Mongolia started with an unlikely question asked via Facebook Messenger: "Hey, my friend Mary Williams from Grand Canyon Hounds is looking for someone to go on a foxhunting trip to Mongolia and write a story about it. Are you interested?" There are times in life when you know to jump in with both feet. "Hell yes," I replied. "Where do I sign up?"

Over the next many months, I fielded questions from friends and had plenty myself: "You're going where? Why? To foxhunt? "Where is Mongolia, exactly?" It's okay, I get it. This is a niche trip. You do not need to be a foxhunter to sign up, but you do need to be able to ride hard, fast and for days at a time (100+ miles in a week of riding), and be okay traveling to a remote place with (gasp) little-to-no cellular data or Wi-Fi. It's not for everyone. Months after that initial message and lots of question to Mary later, I was off on a west-bound plane, first to Seattle, then to Korea, and finally on to Ulaanbaatar. It's far. Really, really far.

After a few days exploring UB (as it is known), Mary and I meet up with our travel companions—two New York-area foxhunters, one member from the hunt I belong(ed) to in Santa Fe (whom I had never met), and an ex-hunter from Kansas City. We are about as dissimilar a collection of individuals as you could get, but we all share one commonality: a love for foxhunting and a willingness to travel far afield to experience it in a new light. The next day we pack up and head to Bayan-Ölgii, the westernmost aimag (province) in Mongolia and the home of the Kazakh eagle hunters who will be our hosts and guides for the next leg of this once-in-a-lifetime adventure: seven days of hunting with eagles, followed by two full days at the Golden Eagle Festival to cap off our journey.

To the land of the Eternal Blue Sky

Descending the jet bridge in Ölgii, I feel like I am in a James Bond film. The airport is a tiny, Soviet-era building on the outskirts of a mid-sized town. We meet our guide, Dauit, and load our bags into two burley, Russian Furgon vans, compact cab over engine vans which bear a striking resemblance to a loaf of bread, and look more off-road capable than most modern SUVs. Dauit is compact and handsome—when he's not taking groups of Americans to ride with the Kazakh Eagle Hunters, most of his guiding work involves mountaineering, mountain biking and fishing. His eyes sparkle with genuine interest and kindness. I like him immediately.

We are finally on the extremely bumpy road to our first ger camp, and the excitement is palpable. This is what we've come

for—the expansive valley views, the distant, glaciated peaks of the Altai Mountains, pop music from the radio fading to static as we drive further into a barren landscape dotted with herds of cashmere goats, sheep, cattle, and, of course, horses. About 45 minutes into our drive, we spot a man in traditional Mongolian dress astride a tiny grey, herding a rag-tag group of horses along at a swift pace. "I wonder if those are our horses," said Mary. And indeed they were.

Much is made about the size of Mongolian horses. Yes, they're small. No, they're not ponies. Mongolians find the categorization offensive, and besides, it's inaccurate. Although, height-wise they are technically ponies (most are between 12 and 15 hands), they are one of the oldest breeds of horse in the world, and, as such, hail from a time when equines were not bred to be taller and stouter for battle and then later for show rings and racetracks. And don't let their small stature fool you. These are the most badass equines you could ever have the pleasure of riding.

As our horses run the last ten or so miles to camp, we carry on in our vans across the steppe, crisscrossing feeder creeks of the mighty Khovd river, and marveling at the bright white slopes of Tsast Uul (literally "snow-covered peak" in Mongolian) beginning to take on hues of pink and orange in the fading autumn light. At last we see a handful of gers appear in the distance: our first camp.

It is difficult to describe the utter vastness of the Mongolian steppe. If you've ever been to Montana, you may have an inkling of the experience, but the scale is so much bigger that it seems unfair to even draw a comparison. The landscape is limitless. The mountains in the distance could be hours or days away. I find it hard to calibrate my eye to the openness, even though I live in one of the largest high desert valleys in the world.

Here we are introduced to our camp staff: Medine and Isalau, our cooks, and Nurka, our driver and all-around helper. Shoman, our first eagle hunter of the trip, arrives soon after with our horses. Shoman is 24-years-old, and shy. His father, Bottei, is a renowned and well-decorated hunter and race horse breeder, having won or placed highly numerous times in both the Golden Eagle Festival, as well as smaller festivals in Sagsai and elsewhere around the region. We are set to ride first with Shoman and his young eagle, and then later in the trip with his father and the 7-year-old eagle that he has been competing and hunting with successfully for the past many years.



Although there is little doubt that eagle hunting, especially during festivals and trips like this which take place before the real hunting season (and very cold weather) begins, are designed to entertain tourists, foxhunting in Mongolia still serves a very real purpose. First, of course, is the income hunters can bring in by participating in festivals or tour trips. Second, there are the beautiful fur hats, coats and other garments made from fox and hare pelts that can be worn during the cold winter or sold. And finally, there is the meat from the foxes themselves, which is vital in keeping the eagles well-fed and willing to continue to hold up their end of the partnership.

We are giddy and exhausted, and we spend the evening reveling in the pink wash of sunset and the ambient tones of the freestone creek layered softly behind the meditative notes of horses cropping grass and the distant bleating of goats. After our first homecooked meal of the trip, we waste no time in settling into our cozy gers, pre-warmed and generously appointed with cozy linens and vividly colored decorative panels called tuzkeez ("wall hanging" in Kazakh) lining the walls. Despite being anxious to finally put a foot in the stirrup tomorrow, sleep comes easily. There is a peacefulness here unlike I have ever experienced. I sink deep into my down bag and blankets thinking about rainbow horses galloping through the shallow water of freestone streams. Tomorrow will be a very good day.

We're not in Virginia anymore.

In the morning we meet our horses. They are a mixed group—two somewhat dumpy-looking sorrels, three taller bays and a petite grey. We all have one or two in mind, but Dauit and Shoman have somehow sized us up already and are certain they know which mounts will be best suited to each of us. I get one of the dumpy little sorrels, and Mary gets the tiny grey Shoman used to herd the horses to us the day before.

In Mongolia horses are not named, but rather described by their physical characteristics and any other identifying marks. Considered livestock, they may be an honored and central component of Mongolian culture, but they are still animals that exist to serve—as transportation, as sport, and yes, food. Mares are milked to produce the infamous airag (fermented mare's milk—an alcoholic "wine"), and geldings are used for work until they are no longer able, at which point they usually end up on the dinner table.

But we are a group of Westerners and horse lovers, and it makes us uncomfortable to think of our pets, even our temporary ones, ending up as food. And, let's face it, we like to name everything. So each of our Mongolian mounts receives a name: Gustav, Frankie, Freddy, and Arturo/Rudy. Mary names

her little grey Lamb Chop, and I name my sorrel Bilbo (a.k.a. Bill). I hope he will be reasonably well-behaved and fast. The opportunity to do some flat-out racing was billed as one of the highlights of the trip, and truth be told, I don't like to lose. He doesn't look fast. But as we all know, looks can be deceiving.

We watch as Shoman and Dauit saddle the horses with a curious jumble of Mongolian and English tack, most of which has been imported by trip organizers over the years to save foreigners from having to negotiate Mongolian saddles—a narrow wooden tree with high pommel and cantle, padded minimally with leather and occasionally cloth, and very short stirrups. Never in my life have I been so glad to see an ancient Wintec. Before mounting up, we are given the basic speech that applies to all Mongolian horses—they are broke but not tame. Do not approach from behind. Do not try to pick up their feet. Do not expect them to behave like your horses at home.

This is all a bit hard to take in, especially as turnout-obsessed foxhunters. I can tell by looking around that we all desperately want to groom these feral-looking creatures. But we do as we are told, accept our preselected mounts, and climb aboard with ample help from our guides, who seem suspicious that any of us know the first thing about riding, despite signing up for a trip billed as a "gallop flat out with the eagle hunters" adventure.

This first day in the saddle is designed as a "get to know your horse" day, a trail ride into Tsambagarev National Park where we will adjust our tack, acclimate to the terrain, and learn the cues our horses are used to and how to get them to respond to our foreign riding styles. We spend the day making a big loop around the base of the mountains, stopping for lunch near a herding camp and climbing high into the foothills to check out a Golden Eagle nesting site where a friend of Shoman's captured a fledgling (or *eyas* in falconry terminology) just last year.

There are three methods for acquiring eagles for hunting: one, purchase a started bird the same way you might buy a green broke horse; two, rob the nest; and three, capture a young, but mature bird after it has already learned to hunt in the wild. For Shoman and Botei, this third method is preferred, as they believe that an eagle learns to hunt best from its parents, not from its human captors. I am curious about the actual method for taming such a strong, wild bird after it has been caught, but as it turns out, the fundamental principles are much the same as for any type of animal training: building trust and positive reinforcement (in the form of meat).

In addition to serving as an eagle education prerequisite, this first day of riding teaches me everything I need to know about my horse. He is one of the most surefooted, catty, and overall impressive equines I have ever ridden, and that is coming from a lifelong horsewoman who has ridden everything from

Grand Prix dressage horses to BLM mustangs. I do not say this lightly: Mongolian horses are spectacular. They will gallop up and down the most intense terrain without ever putting a foot wrong or questioning whether you really want to go that quickly. I would gladly take a dozen home to use on our ranch.

And as it turns out, my tiny red horse is also fast. Surprisingly so. But not nearly as fast as Mary's even tinier grey, who came from behind to beat all the other horses in our first race of the trip. Bill came in second. As I said, looks can be deceiving.

The hunt is on.

After our evening meal, we hear the drone of a four-cycle engine and emerge from the kitchen ger just in time to witness two Kazakh men and an eagle arriving on motorcycle. One of the two men is Botei, father of Shoman, our host and eagle hunter for the second leg of this trip. But for this evening he has simply come to welcome the American guests, drink a little vodka, and deliver his son's eagle for our hunt the next day.

Shoman's eagle, named Tirnek, is young—just two years old—and chatters constantly. She spends most of our ride the next day flying in circles on her short tether, flapping her massive wings in Shoman's face and generally making a commotion. She's still learning the ropes and seems intent upon proving that while she may be Shoman's eagle, she still calls the shots, much like the quintessential "red mare," a term that seemed to fit her best, despite her rich brown and gold plumage. And oh boy, is she ever in charge.

During breakfast on the third morning at camp, we notice that Tirnek, who had not stopped squawking since her arrival, is uncharacteristically quiet. We ask Dauit who informs us, in a somewhat embarrassed, hushed tone, that she got into the bag of meat Shoman had for her meals and rewards and





helped herself to everything. She is fat, happy, and—finally—quiet. For our second day of hunting, our huntsman strike out with a much calmer eagle perched on his arm.

Each day the intensity of the riding has increased significantly, and today is no exception. The hunt I belonged to when I lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico (Caza Ladron) is known for its challenging fixtures—volcanic high desert plateaus full of crumbling clay arroyos and cholla cactus forests. And the terrain around my home, a ranch in southern Colorado, is equally imposing. I am no stranger to steep slopes covered in deadfall, or chasing rogue cattle straight up, or down, rocky mountainsides. But the riding in Mongolia puts all of this to shame. In true hunt fashion, there is no stopping when the hounds, or in this case the eagle, strike. You follow the huntsman, and you try not to think too hard about where you're asking your horse to go. It is equal parts challenging and thrilling, just the way I like it.

By the second day of actual hunting (and our third day in the saddle), we are starting to get the hang of hunting to eagles instead of hounds. With hounds, the work of locating the game falls to the noses of the pack. But with eagles, the burden is shared more equally. The overall method involves climbing to the top of the rockiest outcroppings and ridgelines while the

eagle rests, hooded and waiting, on the arm of its hunter. Another rider, who we dub the whipper-in, takes his horse on a path around the midline of the mountain and attempts to scare up game by any means necessary: shouting, slapping a rope or whip on the side of the saddle, etc. The hunter will also shout and make noise, but his job is mainly to keep an eagle eye out for anything that moves.

I am surprised to learn that it is the hunter, not the eagle, who does most of the scouting. Occasionally, Shoman and later Bottei would remove the hood from the eagle and let her scan for movement, but for the most part, it is the human, not the eagle, whose job it is to catch a flash of fur, identify the quarry—generally fox or Pallas's cat (a small wild cat native to the Asian steppes), though some hunters do chase hare as well—and then remove the hood, release the eagle and give chase.

On this day we discover the flip side to the old adage "a hungry wolf hunts hardest." Shoman's extremely well-fed eagle, full and feeling lazy after her evening of indulgence, has absolutely zero interest in hunting. Despite being out all day, covering 14 miles of tough, rocky terrain and viewing four beautiful foxes in full winter fur, Shoman's young eagle simply will not hunt. And why would she? Eagles don't hunt for sport. It's only humans who seem to enjoy the thrill of the chase.

Winter is coming.

After the meat bag fiasco, Shoman must have placed a call for backup, because when we arrive at our second base camp of the trip, we have a new eagle waiting for us—Ana, Botei's six-year-old veteran hunter, an experienced animal with a solid understanding of her job, and a long list of festival titles to prove it. And yes, it is also a she—all eagles used to hunt in Mongolia are female because they are bigger and hunt harder than their male counterparts. The women hunters on the trip all agreed that this is as it should be.

From our second camp we explore the craggy mountains to the east side of the valley and encounter the most challenging terrain of our trip, along with some excellent hunting. Botei's eagle got on one fox, but it escapes down a narrow canyon. She tries to give chase as best she can, but the canyon is too narrow and too steep, and she eventually loses elevation and has to land. To witness this close call, I had to ask Bill to push himself to the limit: galloping flat-out up and down steep slopes covered in loose rock. In situations like this you learn to stay balanced and trust your horse. By this point in the trip, I trust Bill explicitly, and I am willing to put my life in his hooves to keep up with Shoman and witness what we came here to see.

En route to our third camp at Botei's autumn place on the banks of the mighty Khovd river, we finally have success: two foxes and two kills. By now the weather has shifted. The sky is overcast, winds howl constantly, and there is moisture in the air. Perhaps the impending arrival of winter added a notch of urgency to the Ana's prey drive, or perhaps we just got lucky, but on this perfect fall day at the tail end of September, we are treated to the ultimate thrill of watching an eagle soar confidently from the arm of her hunter, swooping down to account for her quarry instantly in the grip of her massive talons.

The timing of our most successful day is perfect; the next day the weather turns even colder and the wind, which had been constant but tolerable, picks up and became near gale-force, making the hunting nearly impossible and the riding unpleasant. While hounds struggle to find scent in strong winds, eagles struggle to fly. Despite spotting a few more fox over the next few days, Ana is unable to give chase—each time she launches from Botei's arm, the wind would catch her massive wingspan and send her in the opposite direction of her quarry.

The home place.

With little hope of successful hunting, we spend our final day of riding following the Khovd upstream to Botei's winter place, where we ride amongst his herd of 60 horses, fat from a

summer of grazing and enjoying the last sweet grasses of fall. By now there is a light dusting of snow on the ground, and the poplar trees along the banks of the river are alight with gold, red and orange. Sea buckthorn, a deciduous shrub with bright orange berries, grows thick along the riverbanks, and we stop now and then to harvest handfuls of the tangy, slightly sweet berries.

Riding through the forest, breathing in the musky sweetness of leaf litter and familiar layout of shelters and corrals designed for tending animals, I cannot help but feel at home. In the past few weeks, I have developed a deep appreciation for the Kazakh people, their rich culture, and the way they balance a traditional lifestyle with the realities of the modern world.

For our last evening at Botei's, we celebrate with a traditional Kazakh meal and plenty of vodka. Botei serves us a beautiful tray of meat and boiled vegetables alongside the usual accompaniments—dairy in a dozen different formats, traditional breads, candies, cookies, jams and spreads. It is truly a feast. Botei raises a glass to thank us for coming and staying with him, for experiencing his way of life and joining him at his table. And we, in turn, give thanks to him, to Shoman, to Dauit and to the entire crew, for the incredible hospitality, the warmth they have shown us all over the last ten days, and for an experience none of us will soon forget. Tomorrow we would move one last time, to our final camp, and trade our horses for vans as we journey to our last stop: The Golden Eagle Festival.





Golden Eagle Festival

Imagine a county fair or rodeo where spectators and competitors dress head to toe in furs and ride horses everywhere. Add vendors selling their wares on brightly colored tuzkeez, dozens of gers with streams of coal smoke pouring out their chimneys, adventure vans, SUVs and motorbikes of every shape and size, and you will have a picture of the Golden Eagle Festival. A brilliant tapestry of colorful chaos in the form of horses, humans, handicrafts and eagles, something almost too alive, too frenetic, too perfect to be real.

The Golden Eagle Festival is a neo-traditional event, meaning that it was created for outsiders like us, and is a major tourism draw for Bayan-Ölgii as well as for Mongolia as a whole. The events and awards are designed more for tourists and spectacle, rather than to showcase the very best hunter/eagle teams. Eagles that hunt best are usually taken from the wild as mature birds, like Shoman and Botei's eagles, and are not likely to perform well in new situations or in front of noisy crowds. Birds taken from the nest as eyasses, however, imprint on people. These birds might not be the best hunters, but they excel in festivals where they are less likely than their wilder counterparts to be put off by the noise and the throngs of people.

But the crowds are no match for Botei's training abilities and the bond he shares with his eagle. He scores well in both the Eagle Calling and Fox Catching games (a lure-based event where the hunter drags the pelt of a rabbit or fox, and the eagle must fly down from the mountain top to "catch" it, comparable perhaps to drag hunting). Eagle/hunter teams are scored based on time and distance—the playing field is marked by three circles, each one slightly farther away and smaller than the one before. A handler rides to the top of the nearby mountain with the eagle, and then as each hunter takes the field, releases their eagle as the hunter either calls or drags an animal for the eagle to catch. This sounds much simpler than it is; many eagles simply fly off, to be tracked down later by their hunters, and many more circle forever, never actually committing to landing anywhere at all, before the judges call time. But Botei's eagle wastes no time. She knows her job, and nothing can distract her from doing what is asked of her.

At the close of the Festival, we bid farewell to our hosts, staff and guides, and return to Ölgii, for a final night of feasting, a local performance of Kazakh music and culture, and a well-deserved hot shower and sauna. Although we leave before the awards ceremony, we learn that Botei had taken second overall, a fine performance for our new friend. We raise one last toast in his honor. ❖

A Good Cause

This foxhunting adventure is not just a great time, it also supports a very worthy cause: the Flagstaff International Relief Effort (FIRE), a non-profit, non-government organization (NGO), based in Flagstaff, Arizona that works to improve health and education outcomes in Mongolia and Nepal. In addition to being a fundraiser for the organization, FIRE's foxhunting trips also provide a dozen or more Mongolians with well-paying jobs. Because of this, a portion of the trip cost is tax-deductible.

Fast Facts:

Dates: September 17 – October 2, 2024

Trip Duration: 15 days

Group Size: 6-8 guests per group

Riding Time: 7 days riding, 6 hours per day

Skill Level: Advanced Riders

Learn More & Apply: www.foxhuntingmongolia.org

