

Ulaan Baatar – Töv Aimag

Bogd Khan Uul

One of the Four Sacred Mountains of Ulaan Baatar

Four Sacred Mountains surround the city of Ulaan Baatar: Bayanzurkh Uul to the east; Chingelt Khairkhan Uul to the north; Songino Khairkhan Uul to the west; and Bogd Khan Uul to the south. In pre-communist days each of these four sacred mountains were worshipped by a particular part of town. The easternmost suburb of Ulaan Baatar, now known as Bayanzurkh, was in the old days a mainly Chinese trading quarter known as Maimaicheng. During the third month of summer the residents of Maimaicheng would go to the summit of 5,430-foot Bayanzurkh Uul, place *khadags* (prayer scarves) on the *ovoo* at the summit, and make offerings of dairy products, tea, and alcohol. Chingelt Khairkhan Uul, about six miles north of the current city center, was worshipped by monks who lived around the temples which were later razed to accommodate Sukhebaatar Square. Offerings to the *ovoo* on its 6,677-foot summit were made during the second month of summer. Songino Khairkhan Uul, to the west of here, about five miles past the airport, was the mountain once worshipped by residents of the western suburbs of the city. Planes approaching Ulaan Baatar from China and Korea circle right around Songino Khairkhan on their approach, and passengers can see the mountain off to the right a few minutes before landing.

By far the largest, highest, and most hallowed of Ulaan Baatar's four sacred mountains is Bogd Khan Uul. While the other three holy mountains were worshipped chiefly by the inhabitants of separate quarters of the city Bogd Khan Uul was venerated by all. The entire massif, extending some twenty miles east to west, up to ten miles north to south, and topped by 7,440-foot Tusheegun Peak, dominates the southern skyline of the city. The upper slopes of the massif are heavily mantled with larch and cedar forests which constitute the southern edge of the latitudinal tree line in this part of Mongolia; south of here steppe-covered ridges eventually grade into the Gobi Desert.

Bogd Khan Uul has an interesting history. It may be the world's oldest wildlife refuge and national park; it is certainly one of the first. A number of books, pamphlets, and tourist ephemera about Ulaan Baatar claim, without citation, that the great Mongol khans of the thirteenth-century first declared the whole mountain a sacred preserve where no hunting was allowed. I have never been able to find a direct source for this assertion, however. There is no mention of such a preserve, for example, in the seminal thirteenth-century *Secret History of the Mongols* nor in any of the thirteenth-century Persian histories of Mongolia.

Although the story of a thirteenth-century nature preserve centered around the mountain may be apocryphal, we do know that starting in the 1700s the Bogd Gegeens, who played a role in Mongolia roughly analogous to that of the Dalai Lamas in Tibet, began to make twice-a-year offerings on the mountain. By then prohibitions against hunting and tree-felling were cod-

ified and enforced on a local level.

Apparently the mountain was first known as Khan Uul. This name was supposedly based on a legend that Chingis Khan had been born at its foot. This is certainly apocryphal, since all thirteenth-century sources agree that Chingis was born in the watershed of the Onon River in Khentii Aimag. It's true, however, that in 1225 Chingis, after his triumphant seven-year campaign against the Moslem empire of Khwarazm, returned to Mongolia and set up his headquarters not far away on the Tuul River. Perhaps this legend is an echo of the fact that Chingis once lived near the base of the mountain.

In 1778 Buddhist officials nevertheless submitted to the Manchu Emperor in Beijing (at that time the Manchus enjoyed suzerainty over Mongolia) a petition reiterating this legend and noting that for several generations the Bogd Gegeens had been



The southern slopes of Bogd Khan Uul

making offerings to the mountain. In the petition the officials sought permission to declare a civil holiday in honor of the mountain and asked that the Manchu Court itself make offerings to the mountain on this day. The Manchus quite rightly did not believe this legend but they did not want to offend the Mongolians either. The reply to the petition read, "The veneration of Khaan uula is a worthy thing. Therefore . . . the appropriate ministry is empowered to send incense, candles, and silk stuffs in the ordained amount, in the spring and autumn of each year with instructions to Sanji Dorji [a Mongol representative of the Manchu government in Örgöö] that he make offerings in the presence of the wangs, kungs, and dzasaks [Mongolian officials and dignitaries]." Apparently the name Bogd (Holy) Khan Uul dates from this time. The exact dates of the twice-yearly offerings were to be determined by Mongolian astrologers. These offerings continued in one form or another until the communist era, when *ovoo* worship was outlawed, although they might well

have continued clandestinely.

Other customs applied to Bogd Khan Uul. For instance, criminals could not be executed within view of the mountain. Those condemned to death were taken to some other city to meet their fate. This ban may have originated because the Bogd Gegeen lived in the city, at the base of the mountain, and executions were considered unseemly in his presence. This injunction was in effect as late the 1890s, when two Mongols were convicted of slaughtering an entire family of seven Russians. When the Manchu government ordered that they be executed in the city lamas made strenuous objections. Finally a compromise was reached. The condemned men were taken to a narrow gorge five miles outside of the city where high cliffs blocked off view of either the city itself or Bogd Khan Uul and here they received their punishment.

Whatever may have been Bogd Khan Uul's status in the past, it is now officially designated a Strictly Protected Area, one of several classifications of parks and preserves in Mongolia. Within the protected area, which covers over 103,000 acres, hunting, tree-felling, pasturing animals, and permanent residence are forbidden. Given the size of the preserve, and the lim-



The 7,440-foot summit of Bogd Khan Uul

ited number of rangers assigned to it, the enforcement of these regulations remains a problem.

When I first considered climbing to the summit of Bogd Khan Uul back in 1997 I was warned off most forcefully by a knowledgeable local resident who claimed that several small bands of escapees from the men's penitentiary, located at the base of the mountain just south of Zaisan Tolgoi, behind the War Memorial, were hiding out on Bogd Khan Uul and surviving by robbing hikers and others. They had not actually hurt anyone so far but I was assured that I did not want to encounter these people. A year later they had been rounded up, supposedly, and I was told it was once again safe to go on the mountain.

There are several routes to the summit, but from the north side the easiest starts near the Khureltogoot Astronomical Observatory, about seven miles east of downtown. Just across the bridge over the Tuul River the observatory complex of several

buildings can be seen on the hillside to the right, partially hidden in the forest at the edge of the tree line. (Here the tree line indicates how far down the mountain the forest extends, and not how far up; the valley of the Tuul and the lower slopes of the mountain are covered with steppe.) Just to the right of the observatory a deep valley runs several miles directly south, ending at the steep slopes leading directly to by 7,440-foot Tusheegun Peak. From the observatory I followed the crest of the ridge east of the valley. Soon I was into a forest primeval of large, mature larch and cedar. Clearly no illegal timber-felling was taking place on this part of the mountain. A fox skittered across my path, and I saw several beds used by Asiatic elk. Farther on I carefully plied my way across several large boulder fields before emerging on the main ridge line of the massif. Due west could be seen a high point topped by dramatic granite tors. Wending my way upward through house-sized granite blocks I soon emerged into a tennis court-sized flat area surrounded on all sides by thirty-to-forty-foot high tors. Scrambling up the side of one for an unobstructed view, I could clearly see that I was on Tusheegun Peak, the summit of the Bogd Khan Uul massif.

Nature could not have conspired better to create a setting conducive to the worship of a mountain. The flat area at the summit, surrounded on all sides by soaring tors, gave the immediate impression of a large altar, and standing there I could not help but feel I had entered a sacred precinct. Indeed, in the middle of the flat area was an large ovoo draped with khadags and Tibetan prayer flags and surrounded by moldering bricks of tea which had been left as offerings, as well of dozens of empty vodka and beer bottles left by more profane worshippers. On a flat rock near the ovoo I laid out a line of incense made from *artz* (a kind of dwarf juniper) which I had gotten at Gandan Monastery and lit it. There was no wind whatsoever and the aromatic smoke hung in a thin layer about the ovoo.

I had originally planned to spend the night right there on the summit, but I had a vague feeling of unease about this; it would have been like sneaking into a church and sleeping on the pews. Instead I descended to a grassy bench a few hundred yards away and camped there. That night was the summer solstice—I had purposely planned to be on the summit of Bogd Khan Uul on the longest day of the year—and the next morning in the pre-dawn I went back up to the altar area to view the sunrise and contemplate further on Bogd Khan Uul.

Did Chingis Khan himself, I could not help but wonder, ever himself stand here at the summit? Chingis, we know, revered high mountains, whose summits brought him closer to the Eternal Blue Heaven worshipped by Mongolian shamans. Before the start of his campaign against the Chin Dynasty of China he climbed to the top of Burkhan Khaldun Mountain, near where earlier he had escaped with his life from pursuing Merkit tribesmen, and for three days and three nights prayed for guidance and assistance from the ancient gods of Mongolia. In 1219, before starting his campaign against the Moslem empire of Khwarazm, he again "climbed to the top of a hill, bared his head, raised his face . . . and prayed to Heaven for three days." In 1226,

a year after arriving at his camp at the edge of the Black Forest, on the Tuul River near the current-day airport, Chingis left with his armies on the campaign against the Xi Xia of northwestern China. Did he climb here to the summit of Bogd Khan Uul and, as was the custom, hang his belt around his neck and bare his head, make offerings of *airag* (fermented mare's milk), and then fast for three days while supplicating Heaven for success in his upcoming campaign? If he did, there must have been a special poignancy to his entreaties, since by then Chingis was an aging man, in his mid-sixties, and indeed he did not return alive from the Xi Xia campaign, dying in China a year later in 1227.

Whatever role Bogd Khan Uul played in the ancient animist religion of the Chingisids, it was later among the Buddhists that the mountain took on the aura of sanctity which continues to the present day. Among the many Buddhist temples found in Ulaan Baatar (then known as Örgöö, or Urga) during the pre-communist era there was one known as the Shar Süm. It was quite active in 1892, when it was visited and described by the Russian ethnologist and linguist A. M. Pozdnev. Each autumn monks held ceremonies in the temple honoring Bogd Khan Uul while other lamas presented offerings on the summit of the mountain itself, presumably the same summit where I greeted the dawn. The Shar Süm was subsequently destroyed by the communists, and now no one I had talked to could tell me where it might have been. The Shar Süm was dedicated to Padmasambhava (Sanskrit for "the Lotus-born"), one of the principal founders of Tibetan Buddhism, which eventually spread to Mongolia. Born in the Swat Valley of present-day Pakistan in the eighth century, he studied various Tantric teachings before undertaking a mission to Tibet, then under the sway of shamans and followers of the Bon religion. In Tibet he became famous for his subjugation of demons and indigenous nature spirits who ruled the countryside. Through Padmasambhava's wrathful intervention, these entities were assigned the role of protecting, rather than harming, the incoming Buddhist religion. This same process took place in Mongolia. All four of Sacred Mountains I have mentioned were thought to have been ruled originally by spiritual entities whose influence on human beings was often malignant. One of the duties of Buddhism was to destroy or at least suborn these entities.

After the reintroduction of Tibetan, or Vajrayana, Buddhism into Mongolia in the sixteenth century by the Tüsheet Khan Avtai (it has enjoyed a brief florescence in the court of the great Mongol khans of the thirteenth century, but had largely disappeared after the dissolution of Mongol Empire), a similar campaign was launched against the chthonic spirits of Mongolia, which hitherto had been the sole concern of shamans. The third Dalai Lama of Tibet was directly involved in this endeavor, apparently with the sanction of the Chinese government, which in an attempt to establish a state religion "aimed at easing the differences between Mongolian folk beliefs and those of officially

sanctioned Buddhism," in the words of one study. In order to objectify these spirits they were identified with a specific image from the Buddhist canon which eventually came to serve as a kind of demonifuge. In the case of Bogd Khan Uul, Garuda the Devourer was chosen. Originally Garuda was an entity from the Hindu pantheon, half man and half vulture, which feasted on snakes, the archetypal chthonic creatures. Vajrayana Buddhists later fastened on this image because of its similarity with the mythical Himalayan bird known as the *khyung* which was associated with the air, or the heavens above. "With his heavenly associations and his sworn enmity to the evil forces of the earth, Garuda appealed to Mongolian Buddhists, whose own native shamanism honored the sky above all . . ." notes one commen-

tator. During the performance of *tsam*, the ceremonial dances which once played a key role in the liturgical life of Mongolian (and Tibetan) Buddhists, especially in Örgöö, Garuda appeared as a masked figure, one of the Lords of the Four Mountains, representing Bogd Khan Uul. An elaborate nineteenth century *tsam* mask of Garuda, with a large snake in its mouth, now resides in the Chojjin Lama Museum in Ulaan Baatar, where I had seen it earlier.

I reluctantly left my mountain-top aerie. Rather than retracing my route I decided to descend via the southern side of the mountain. I headed west along the ridgeline and then clambered down some steep rock faces before emerging into thick woods. There is very little water on Bogd Khan Uul—none on the route by which I had ascended the mountain—and I had brought only two liters along, the last of which I

used for tea in the morning. The temperature climbed into the eighties and, parched as I was, I was overjoyed when I stumbled upon a small wash basin-sized spring with water bubbling up out of a rock crevice. I consider myself a connoisseur of drinking water, and this was excellent—soft, with no mineral taste, and biting cold, straight from the inner recesses of Bogd Khan Uul. Of course I was not the only sentient being to frequent this spot. Elk had trampled the banks of the tiny rivulet just below the spring, and on a small patch of mud at the edge of the pool was imprinted a perfect four-inch long track of a wolf.

Eventually I emerged at Mandshir Monastery, a thriving establishment in the pre-communist era but later almost completely destroyed. It has been partly rebuilt and one temple now serves as a museum. The scenic environs, well wooded and watered, are very popular with Mongolian day-trippers and party animals and I had no trouble hitching a ride back to town.

As I mentioned, Bogd Khan Uul once fell under the purview of Shar Süm, which was apparently destroyed back in the 30s. Now the lamas at one of the temples at Gandan Monastery have reinstated rituals honoring the mountain. These usually take place in June, at various easily accessible locations at the base of the massif, and are open to the public. Thus Bogd Khan Uul's traditional role as the main Sacred Mountain of Ulaan Baatar has been restored.



Mongolia Adventure Publisher A. Sarantuya meditating at the summit of Bogd Khan Uul