

TRAVEL

Edited by Nick Walton
nicholas.walton@scmp.com

Mongolia's ancient Naadam festival is a riot of wrestling, horsemanship and archery. **Kevin Rushby** joins the crowds

Steppe right up

The first person we meet on the dirt road is Bold. He's at the head of a tidal wave of animals: 500 sheep, 500 goats, 20 yaks and camels carrying a Mongolian *ger* or tent. "We're moving to the city," he tells us. "Life is too hard in the Gobi with all the droughts we've had."

His three sons gallop up on horseback. Talk of the city brings huge grins to their faces. "They've never seen a town before," says Bold. "That's why they're so happy."

"What about the Naadam festival?" I ask. "It starts tomorrow. Won't you celebrate?"

In Mongolia, Naadam, usually held in July, is like the Olympics, the Grand National and Christmas, all rolled into one. It's celebrated in every town, village and nomadic encampment. Missing it would be unthinkable.

We leave him and his sons rounding up the straying herds. Soon we encounter our first festival-goers: four families travelling in battered old trucks with half a dozen horses swaying in the back. Each animal has had its tail plaited and its mane tied up in a plume, signs that they will be racing.

"This Naadam is a special one," an old man tells me, offering a pinch of snuff from an ornate stone vial, a traditional Mongolian greeting. "We heard there are jeeps for prizes."

Everyone is bound for Bulgan, 300km northwest of Ulan Bator. Like all towns in Mongolia, Bulgan is relatively new – it was 70 years old last year.

This annual championship of horse racing, wrestling and archery has changed little from the 12th century and the days of Genghis Khan. The sports are the same, as are the details – horse saddles and riding style, archers' equipment and targets. The strange apparel of the wrestlers – tight shorts and a chestless pair of sleeves joined at the back – is not so ancient, however.

The design was introduced after a muscular woman won the Naadam disguised as a man.

After the frenzy of corporate sponsorship and politicking at the Beijing Olympics, the Naadam is a pure sporting tournament; no bickering, few drug scandals, no money – well, just the occasional 4x4 as an incentive.

At sunrise, looking over the steppe towards Bulgan, we can see the emerald green of the rolling hills is already being dotted with camps, each with a string of horses tied up outside.

Visiting family and friends is the point of Naadam. "Have you painted your door for Naadam?" asks Tulga, my guide and translator, going through the formalities while we drink bowls of *airag*, fermented horse milk. "Have you had lots of visitors?" Outside the jockeys, boys aged between five and 10, exercise the horses while singing to them. "To cheer them up," explains Tulga. "My good horse," sings the boy, Tulga translating. "Be fast and strong. You have run well since you were born on your feet. Keep running and be a good friend of mine."

Then they were galloping off, sitting well forward, almost on the horses' shoulders.

"See how they ride," enthuses Tulga. "And the song – these things have never changed. If Genghis Khan were here, he would understand everything."



Soldiers dressed in traditional wrestling garb wait their turn to compete (top); real horsepower meets its modern equivalent (above left); official state horsemen head to the stadium (above right). Photos: AP, EPA, AFP

At 9am the next day we make our way to the start. There are at least 300 horses in the first race, all ridden by children, most bareback and barefoot. A huge melee of riders fight to get prime position while race officials check the animals' ages by inspecting their teeth.

"It's good luck if a horse stands on your foot," shouts Tulga, casually shoving a stallion aside.

I shelter behind a trainer dressed in a kaftan-style coat, a pillar of immovable calm in the chaos as he keeps an eye on his horses.

"Naadam is still a simple and beautiful festival," he says, apparently unaware of what seems

like the imminent possibility of being trampled to death. "But we need to take care: some of these horses are partly Arab, not pure Mongolian as in the past. They are bigger and faster and they win. Prizes are getting bigger and people are investing in winning."

Suddenly a 4x4 pulls up and several burly policemen beckon to me. "Come on! Come and see the race close!"

As the horses shoot off in a thunder of hooves, I dive head first into the back of the vehicle and cling to the seat as we drive through hollows and over humps, the policemen mad with excitement,



howling at their relatives among the riders, pounding each other on the back with glee.

We career towards the finish line, passing an ambulance that had stopped to pick up a rider. We've almost completed the 32-km course, but are well beaten.

There's a crowd around the victor, everyone trying to get a hand on the sweaty animal – a mark of good luck. Tulga drags me off to the car. "Come on – the wrestling is starting in town."

At the stadium the atmosphere is less

And the song – these things have never changed. If Genghis Khan were here, he would understand everything

Tulga, guide and translator

intense, more of a family fair. Children are dressed in their best clothes, the wrestlers are resplendent in knotted caps and scarlet and blue fighting suits.

The bouts take place on the grass, four or five at a time. There is no ring and the fighters tumble dangerously close to the crowd. "It's very good luck if they land on you," Tulga says.

The winner does his eagle dance of victory, prancing in circles with



arms outstretched like wings. The loser, playing his part, ducks under the winner's armpit and trails away. The victor lumbers towards the crowd, still flapping his arms, then stoops to receive his reward: a handful of cheese balls. These he lobs at the crowd who roar with pleasure. One piece, a rather hard crusty bit, hits me on the head. "Very good luck," Tulga says.

Tulga has soon had enough and drags me to the refreshment tents where everyone congregates to eat lamb pasties, a Naadam speciality. Men with weatherbeaten faces, ladies in silk *deels*, kids with balloons and a gang of cowboy dudes from way out west who had just got fourth place in the horse race and were celebrating with salt tea, *airag* and pasties: everyone talking to anyone. We even spotted a familiar face, slurping from a large bowl of *airag*. It's Bold.

"I left the flocks and came over," he says with a smile. "How could anyone miss Naadam?"

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Getting there: Korean Air (koreanair.com) has regular flights from Hong Kong to Seoul and then on to Ulan Bator. The Naadam festival is held at different times across the country; the Ulan Bator event is on July 11-13 and the Bulgan event starts on July 6.

Detours: Koh Phangan, Thailand

Katie Monk

I'm perched on the end of a longtail boat. The silhouettes of thousands of people line the length of the beach in front of me and a throbbing bass reverberates in my chest. Just two minutes ago I was in the middle of that neon-clad throng, dancing full-moon-style. Now I'm making my getaway to quieter shores up the coast.

Unlike its neighbour Koh Samui, the mountainous island of Koh Phangan in southern Thailand has no airport and few roads. Its terrain has saved it from large-scale development and much of the island is accessible only by boat. Aside from Hat Rin, a popular tourist enclave, near-empty beaches and pockets of solitude abound.

The farther up the coast you go, the quieter life becomes. Huge limestone rocks frame the bays and dense forest rises up the hillside behind. From June to September, before the monsoons, the islands on the eastern side of the peninsula remain drier and sunnier.

As we round the headland, the atmosphere changes dramatically and in place of the craziness of Hat Rin is the calm after the party storm.

By the light of the moon I can see wooden huts standing precariously on the rocks. People sit around bonfires on the beach and the pace of life slackens. This is what I love about Koh Phangan: two different worlds exist within a 6km radius.

The Sanctuary resort ([below](http://thesanctuarythailand.com); thesanctuarythailand.com) is tucked into a corner of Hat Thian beach. Health and well-being is a laid-back affair among the thatched roofs, decks and balconies above the Gulf of Thailand.

It's the antithesis of a clinical five-star spa: depending on your inclination and budget you can do as much as you like. You can detox or retox, stay in a dorm for 120 baht (HK\$27) per night or a HK\$1,225-a-night air-conditioned chalet. Some come just for the yoga, which is held three times a day in a large hall in the jungle; others to gorge on seafood or healthy vegetarian dishes.

To one side, in its own enclave, is the wellness centre. Run by a man called Moon, it offers detoxes ranging from one to seven days, with milder juice fasts and specific liver-cleansing regimes.

I opt for the three-day cleanse and Moon tells me my body will thank me when it's all over.

After a three-day fast (one coconut and clay smoothie a day) I'm back on solids, and the days pass in a haze of extended mealtimes, chats about life and swims in the ocean. I make the most of the morning yoga, experience one of the best massages of my life and leave feeling stronger, happier and more relaxed than I have in a long time.

If you have to up the ante, this tiny island has a lot to offer: there's elephant trekking, jet-skiing and cooking classes, along with diving and snorkelling in the Ang Thong marine national park. Many of the Sanctuary's guests drift in and out of the retreat, interspersing its serenity with the buzz of Hat Rin or less commercial local eateries nearby.

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Big deal

Edited by Nick Walton
nicholas.walton@scmp.comWenceslas Square, Prague.
Photo: Vitezslav Valka

India's Jet Airways is offering great airfares in time for the summer festivals. Fly via Mumbai, to London, Brussels, Budapest, Prague, Warsaw or Berlin for as little as HK\$2,500 economy and HK\$18,000 business class and enjoy summer in some of Europe's most historic cities. The booking period ends on July 31, and travel periods and fare prices vary depending on travel dates and destination – for example, London and Brussels via Mumbai costs from HK\$2,500 until June 30 and again from September 1-30, but starts from HK\$3,500 from July 1 to August 31 this year. Business class goes up to HK\$21,500 in July and August. All fares exclude taxes and fuel surcharges and do not permit a stopover in Mumbai. Terms and conditions apply. For more information and bookings, visit jetairways.com.

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