

Veterinary Care in the Wild East – A trip to Mongolia

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Mongolia. Outer Mongolia. For years the words have conjured up a certain magic in my mind. Images of wide open steppe, vast expanses of desert, camels, yaks, snow leopards, wild horses, nomads and Genghis Khan began to float into my dreams as I planned my trip. Months later, as I looked out of the grimy window of the Aeroflot plane, I caught my first glimpse of the steppe, and it was as wild and empty as I could have hoped.

What a contrast, then, to arrive in Ulaanbaatur, the capital. Only a horde of white tents surrounding a central Buddhist temple until less than a century ago, Ulaanbaatur in 2005 swarms with people, cars, concrete, dust and litter. I was there to 'see practice' with a difference. Based from a basement clinic in 'UB', I was to travel with the vets out to rural visits, to help treat dogs in the city, to stay with nomads and experience the life of a herding community first hand, and to visit the famous Przewalski's horses.



But first, I had to master communication. Day one was challenging, when I wasn't yet able to introduce myself, read a menu or write down my address. On day two however, things started to improve as I began my intensive Mongolian tuition, and the vets brought in their English dictionaries. Soon even the local kids had joined in the mass effort to teach me what seemed like the entire Mongolian language in the shortest time possible.

Food items were high on my list of priorities for vocabulary to learn – not surprising considering the choices might include fermented mares' milk, marmot, yak, and salty tea with lamb dumplings floating in it. The prominence of meat and dairy products in the Mongolian diet reflects the enormous importance of their livestock industry. There are many more sheep in Mongolia than there are people, and 40% of the people that do live there are fully nomadic. However, the tough herding lifestyle prevents most herders from having access to veterinary services, either financially or geographically. So for the economically minded vets, there is an even more important resource to be tapped – the racehorse.

Horses are integral to the Mongolian lifestyle: vital to get around the forbidding landscape and to herd the other animals, they are also kept for their milk (drunk all summer in fermented form, or distilled into vodka), as status symbols, and for racing. This is not horse racing UK style however; the Mongolians like to do things properly. Races are held over distances ranging from 10 miles to 28 miles, and can involve thousands of horses in one start. The winners of these races are rightly honoured, and will wear the prized blue silk scarves around their necks for the next year.



Luckily for the vets, even these prize horses suffer from the same tendon injuries of sports horses around the world, and Mongolia has its share of enterprising businessmen carefully importing expensive Arab stallions from Russia to improve their stock, so reproductive work is on the increase. The only hitch was the almost complete lack of diagnostic imaging techniques available. The practice had an x-ray machine, but techniques were crude, and the pictures produced were non-diagnostic. No ultrasound scanner was available, due to a lack of capital to invest, even though the vets and owners both commented on how much help it would be. So treatment tended to be a mixture of witchcraft, guesswork and crossed fingers.

Mongolia left me with more questions than answers, but also with an incredible array of memories and ideas. I was lucky enough to experience life for a short time in a country of extremes and contrasts, where the only constant was the unquestioning hospitality of the people I met. Now I look forward to returning one day, this time for a longer stay so that I can discover more of the secrets of this huge forgotten country.