

On safari in Inner Mongolia



Gegentala Grassland promises dazzling landscapes, fresh air and timeless entertainments. Now's the time to visit, **Jules Quartly** reports.

A trip to Gegentala Grassland in July is a bit like going on safari: Endless plains and a blue vault of sky, campfire and counting stars, lively local culture, and animals, lots of them.

It's where the annual Naadam Festival — Asia's equivalent of Greece's Olympic Games — is hosted from July 25-31; while the International Naadam Festival takes place in Ordos from Aug 27 to Sept 3.

It's bound to be a colorful experience, full of history and culture; while the clean air and unspoiled grasslands provide a physical and mental detox for city slickers.

Gegentala Grassland, in Siziwang banner, the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, derives its name from the Mongolian for "summer grazing area" and historically huge flocks of sheep and herds of cows have descended on the plains to be fattened up in preparation for the slim pickings of the winter months ahead.

Inside There's just a three-month window from mid-June to September when the weather is balmy, flowers bloom and the nights don't have a nip in the air, so this is the time to go.

It's a great little road trip of 140 km from Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia autonomous region, north over Mount Daqing. On the roadside are scattered smallholdings and farms dug into the loess soil (rich and sandy, hence its yellow color), while pigs root around outside and straw is stacked up for use as both insulation and fodder.

The occasional settlement along the route has a Wild West feel, though there are traffic jams rather than horses and the number and variety of new stores suggest these are boomtowns. I have never seen such a high density of gas stations, most of them huge and some dotted with dome-like structures. They reflect the fact that the area is a transportation hub for the huge mineral, gas and oil wealth that is pumping up the local economy.

The occasional plantation of young trees to battle soil erosion, and restaurants selling "home made" food along the way are the only other diversions, otherwise it's just huge vistas to enjoy and your favorite tunes playing as a backing track. Perfect.

Just before the Gegentala Grassland tourism center is an easy to miss, odd little town called Chaganbulige that seems stuck in a previous era. The roofs and walls of the houses are covered in baked soil, while red banners and graffiti issue battle cries, such as: "Choose the right leaders and walk on the road to prosperity."

If you want to disappear down a time hole for an hour or so, check it out. Sheep graze in the hospital grounds and what appear to be glorified sheds host locals playing mahjong.

The lamasery here is a little run down but there's a note tacked on the door with a number that will put you in touch with the village monk, who is full of stories (translation required for both Mandarin and English speakers).

A 20-minute drive later, you will find Inner Mongolia Gegentala Prairie Tourism Co Ltd, aka Gegentala Grassland, which hosts the Naadam Festival. You can't miss it. There are loads of horses and camels chewing the cud waiting for riders, and yurts stretching across the plain, bordered by a lake.

After dismounting from your vehicle you are likely to be met by a welcoming party of brightly dressed locals, a plaintive song from one of the women and firewater from the guys. You are supposed to imbibe three small cups of alcohol, one for heaven, one for the land, and one for yourself. This washes away the weariness of the road and inevitably puts you in a more sociable mood.

We were shown to our yurt, the deluxe version costing about 850 yuan (\$134) a night, though we would have done better to have chosen the more basic Mongolian tent for about 240 yuan.

They are perfectly adequate (if you don't mind sharing toilet facilities) and constructed of wool to insulate, canvas to keep the rain out and raised wooden floors, which keep the bugs from biting. They have a musty smell and just a single, naked light bulb, but once you are settled they're really comfortable and the wind buffets the top section panel to create a shifting light effect that is romantic, if that's what you're after.

Our five star version was said to be the kind that Genghis Khan, his family and VIP members of his retinue would have rolled around in the old days, pulled by scores of oxen. It had a range of amenities — including a bathroom, dining room and kitchen — that I'm sure even the Great Khan would have been house proud of.

But its best feature, in the sitting room cum bedroom is a huge plate glass window with an untrammelled view of the grasslands. Turn the lights off at night and you can spot the North Star from your bed.

Our first entertainment of the day was at around 5 pm, when six burly men stripped off in the bitter wind, before rushing at us with a horse riders, receptionists and other hotel staff members doubled up and took the mic to sing one song after another. During peak season the show is held outside around a campfire and without a distorted amplification system, which might help.

This packaging of Mongolian culture into tourist bite-sized chunks is also obvious in the hotel/yurt complex's stores, which alongside vittles such as dried noodles sell huge curved knives without an edge, chess



PHOTOS BY JULES QUARTLY / CHINA DAILY

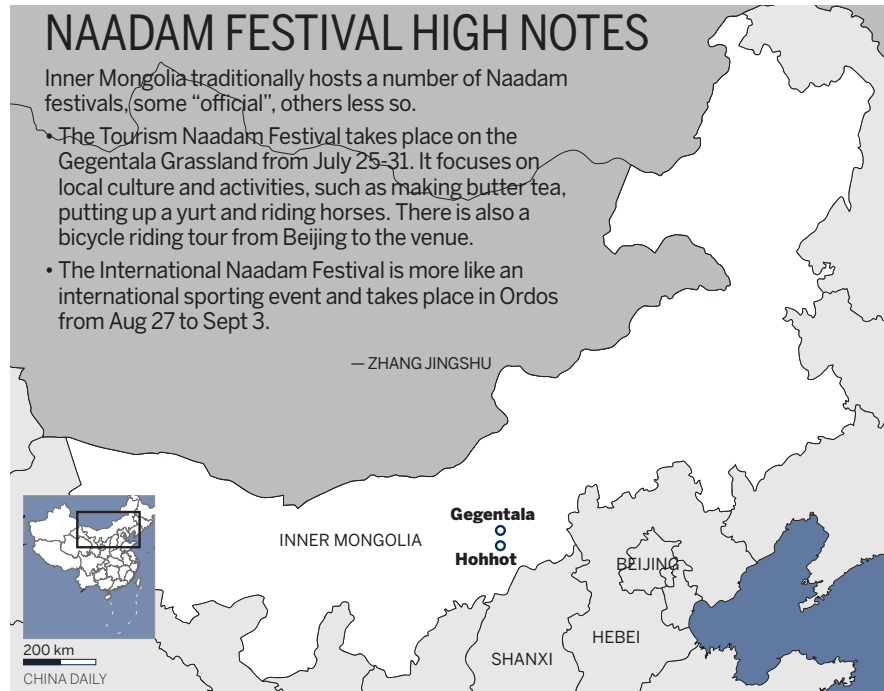
From top: Traditions are maintained on Gegentala Grassland, even it is mainly for tourists these days. Mongolian wrestlers make their charge. Deluxe yurts for five star visitors.

NAADAM FESTIVAL HIGH NOTES

Inner Mongolia traditionally hosts a number of Naadam festivals, some "official", others less so.

The Tourism Naadam Festival takes place on the Gegentala Grassland from July 25-31. It focuses on local culture and activities, such as making butter tea, putting up a yurt and riding horses. There is also a bicycle riding tour from Beijing to the venue.

The International Naadam Festival is more like an international sporting event and takes place in Ordos from Aug 27 to Sept 3.



sets made of pleather and tunics so bright only the colorblind or kids would consider wearing them.

Real Mongolians, we discovered, looked and dressed the same as anyone else. They were straightforward but friendly and full of fun — as the waiter who pushed around a trolley of lamb around like an F1 car, before it fell on the floor, appeared to show.

But the best part of the Gegentala excursion, for us, was the grasslands itself, like a wide-screen movie, the occasional motorbike or horse drifting across the landscape, no TV or Internet, no background noises, just the sound of silence. A rare experience indeed.

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FUN IN THE SUN

By **JULES QUARTLY**

In stark contrast to the grasslands north of Hohhot is the Gobi Desert's Singing Sand Ravine Tourist Scenic Spot, in Dalad banner.

An approximately two-hour drive west of the city, along the Jingzang Expressway toward Baotou, Singing Sands is an otherworldly experience — and a lot of fun.

It's a well-developed tourist destination that made it onto CCNGo.com's list of the top-40 most beautiful places to stay in China, and gets a quadruple A scenic beauty rating from the central government.

There is supposed to be the option of an overnight stay in the Desert Lotus "ecological" hotel, designed by a Japanese architect, and intended to leave the smallest environmental footprint possible. It looks great and certainly blends into the surroundings, but on our visit it was closed.

But most people take the day trip excursion, which starts with a 120 yuan (\$19) entrance fee, followed by a further 220 yuan levy to experience the wonders of an adventure course.

It begins with a cable ride over a ravine and up the 100-meter tall dunes, which have a 45-degree incline. It is the gradient and crescent-shaped topography that make the dunes a natural instrument, hence the name Singing Sands.

While many visitors take the option of wearing little booties, I recommend liberating your feet and walking in the beautifully clean sand.

We were then swept away in a "desert boat" to an area where we could take quad bike and sand buggy rides, while there were plenty of other entertainments, such as rope swings, and play areas.

Next up was a camel ride to the Art Desert Gallery and Sand Sculpture Gardens that loomed toward us like mirages; followed by a train ride to the sand surfing area. A bit like tobogganing, we were launched off the top of the dune and careened down to the bottom.

I liked the Lunar Lander-type toilets but not the constant public service announcements, as I would have preferred to hear the song of the sands instead.

The only thing missing was a pool. And while the price was fairly steep, it was certainly worth it.



Sand Sculpture Gardens at the Gobi Desert's Singing Sand Ravine Tourist Scenic Spot.