Mongolia has been a focus of IU scholars for almost three-quarters of a century. Last summer, a group of IU alumni, along with IU Mongolia expert Christopher Atwood, visited historic and contemporary sites in and around the South Gobi.
IU’s first link with Central and Inner Asia was forged in 1943 when the Army Specialized Training Program called upon IU to teach military personnel several Eurasian languages, including Turkish and Hungarian. The early efforts brought faculty experts who were organized into the Program in Uralic and Altaic Studies in 1956. Denis Sinor came to Bloomington in 1961 to head that program. Sinor, in pursuit of the linguistic and cultural connections of his homeland, Hungary, with areas of Asia reaching as far as Mongolia and even Korea, hired IU’s first instructor of Mongolian, John Gombojab Hangin, in 1963.

From that seed has grown enduring academic programs and institutional ties:

- Department of Central Eurasian Studies
- Ph.D. in Mongolian Studies
- Location of the Mongolia Society in Bloomington
- Honorary degree for Natsagiin Bagabandi, president of Mongolia for eight years
- Partnership agreement with the National University of Mongolia
- National Resource Center for Inner Asian and Uralic studies
- Denis Sinor Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies
- Important language centers, including a summer language workshop that draws students from all over the U.S.

More recently, IU’s Kelley School of Business has partnered with the American University of Mongolia to offer an M.B.A. for global executives, beginning in 2014.

Among the most active promoters of expanding ties between Mongolia and IU is Associate Professor Christopher Atwood, who has established an international reputation with his *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, declared a valuable resource even for those in Mongolia, because it includes the full reach of Mongolian history and culture in Asia, well beyond Mongolia’s current frontiers. Because of its wealth of natural resources and its steady move toward Western democracy, Mongolia has come under increased interest from industries worldwide.
Last summer, the IU Alumni Association offered a tour of Mongolia, put together by Nomadic Expeditions and its program coordinator, Delgerjargal Uvsh. “Deegii Uvsh emailed me to see if we were interested in setting up a trip to Mongolia,” explained IUAA travel officer Karen Conrad. “Deegii’s mother works as a Mongolian language instructor at IU; her father was a visiting scholar here, and two of her brothers were attending IU.” Atwood agreed to be a guide for the trip. He provided participants with a reading list ahead of time, led the group through four presentations based on what they were seeing and visiting, and, Conrad said, responded to every question of interest: “wildflowers, animals, history, culture, Buddhism, and so on.” He had the assistance of Gereltuv, described by Atwood as “not just a guide but a real student of Mongolian history, nature, and politics, and passionately concerned about his own country’s history.”

The tour began and ended in the urban center, UlaanBaatar, and included chances to see natural landmarks and cultural artifacts. It included visits with local nomadic families and much more. Asked what she found most surprising, participant Joan Richards responded with memories of the nomadic families:

I think the one surprise for me was seeing how beautiful the nomadic lifestyle is. It was apparent that the families we visited were in harmony with the environment and with each other, every member understanding what role they played in the family and the family’s business. Small children helped to butcher a goat, made fried bread, displayed the family’s handicrafts. Affection between family members was palpable, from the great-grandparents to the toddlers. I couldn’t capture that on film but the pictures are in my heart.

Atwood, despite his expertise, was as surprised as the other members of the tour. “How much real, vivid, in front of your eyes history we could see in Mongolia—from Bronze Age tombs, to unique Xiongnu (“Hun”)-era rock drawings, to the Mongol imperial capital and Buddhist temples, destroyed in the 1830s and 1940s and now being rebuilt. We could see all the different historical layers in Mongolia in an absolutely breathtaking and pristine environment.” He adds, “I really underestimated how much I would enjoy talking about the latest changes to the IU campus, the sports teams, and Bloomington over dinner in the Gobi.”
Life on the Gobi
By Nancy Dean

The Gobi is not a desert as we know them. It’s a “high” desert—approximately 5,000 feet above sea level—so it’s not covered in sand, but gravel. There is vegetation, but it is sparse. That’s why the herds have to be kept moving all the time.

We saw many, many herds of horses, camels, and sheep and goats (these last two travel together). Somewhere reasonably close by is the herder. Sometimes we would see him, but usually not. Because all the animals range freely, each family brands their animals. The nomads support themselves by selling the wool and camel and goat hair.

Dotting the landscape are individual families occupying anywhere from one to three gers. Often, one ger is where the grandparents live. Another may be just the kitchen. But many times it’s just one ger, all alone, in the middle of nowhere. A third of the population lives as nomads in the Gobi. Yet it is possible to stand in front of a ger, survey the horizon in every direction and see nothing, nothing, nothing that is man made—no fences, no telephone poles, no other gers—not even roads. How the drivers of the four SUVs we traveled in knew where we were going, none of us Americans will ever know. Either the cars moved along a rutted path or, very often, just moved along. We always reached our destination but how it happened will forever be a mystery.

The dimensions of gers are universal, with the door always facing south—a big help for anyone lost in that vast expanse of desert. All gers are wrapped in man made heavy wool felt, plus there’s a stove in the middle of the single room. Nights get very cold in the high desert.

The people are amazingly hospitable. The majority of our multi-ger visits were not prearranged. In fact, our first drop-in occurred when Gerel, our Mongolian guide, stopped a man whizzing across the turf on his motorcycle. We learned later that the conversation between the two of them went more or less like this: “I am the guide to the 11 Americans in these SUVs, and I would like to take them to see the inside of a ger, showing them how Mongolian nomads live.” The response: “Just follow me. You can visit my ger. My family will be happy to have you visit.” Women enter a ger on the left, men on the right. What follows next is a hospitality ritual—the passing around of the bowl of airag (fermented mare’s milk) so everyone can take a sip.

The group dropped in on this family of herders in South Khangai province.

We met children of all ages, but that was only because of the time of year (August). Usually, even the very young are in boarding schools in the county seats. This policy has paid off. Mongolia has a very high literacy rate.

Many of the gers have some modern conveniences. They are solar powered—the panel is right next to the ger and also keeps the family’s cell phones up and running. There may be a pickup truck parked beside the ger. That makes it much easier when it’s time to move again—which happens at least twice a year. And a motorcycle. One ger we visited even had a TV—with young children in front of it watching cartoons. Often, to the side of the ger is what looks like a clothesline attached to two posts, but there are no clothes there. Instead a horse is tied to the line. That’s the “taxi service” in case someone needs to check on the herd(s).

It takes a little over an hour to dismantle a ger and the same amount of time to put it back together again. Though we never actually saw either process, we did come across one family that had planted itself in a new location the day before. The kitchen ger was up and functioning, but the family ger was scattered about. All the wooden pieces—the posts and the trellising on the inside of the ger that give it its round shape—had just been brightly painted again and were drying, propped against everything in sight. The ger would be reconstructed the following day.

“The group dropped in on this family of herders in South Khangai province.