

## Töv Aimag

## 9,186-foot Asralt Khairkhan Uul

*The highest peak in the Khentii Range*

A horse trip to Asralt Khairkhan Uul is a good introduction to the vast Khentii Mountain Range north of Ulaan Baatar. There are several ways to reach the mountain. The route we took starts at the sum center of M $\ddot{o}$ ng $\ddot{o}$ nmort, 54 miles (86.7 km) ascf south-southeast of the mountain. From near M $\ddot{o}$ ng $\ddot{o}$ nmort we rode horses on a good jeep trail that extends most of the way up the valley of the B $\ddot{u}$ rkhiiin Gol and camped for the night near the head of the valley. It would be possible to drive to the head of the valley and meet your horses there if you wished to save time. From the head of the B $\ddot{u}$ rkhiiin Gol a horse trail climbs to a pass called by locals Biren Buren Davaa. Maps of the area show several passes at the head of B $\ddot{u}$ rkhiiin Gol, but this one, at N48 $^{\circ}$ 24.170 / E108 $^{\circ}$ 13.537, is the most convenient on the route to Asralt Khairkhan. This 6,768-foot (2063 meters) pass marks the Continental Divide of Asia. The B $\ddot{u}$ rkhiiin Gol flows east into the Kherlen River, part of the Pacific Ocean Drainage. The small creek on the other side of the pass flows west into the Tuul River, part of the Arctic Ocean Drainage.

The horse trail continues down this small creek to the Tuul River. From the Tuul it cuts over some hilly spurs to Khiidiin Gol, another tributary of the Tuul, then follows the Khiidiin Gol upstream toward 8,746 (2666 meter) Khiidiin Sardag Uul. Near the base of the mountain the trail veers off toward 6,656-foot (2029 meter) Khiidiin Davaa at N48 $^{\circ}$ 27.328' | E107 $^{\circ}$ 58.812'. Before crossing the pass, in the thick larch forest to the right are the ruins of Saridgiin Khiid, a monastery founded by Zanabazar, the first Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia. The ruins are very difficult to find until you know exactly where they are. Cut off the main trail at N48 $^{\circ}$ 27.416' | E107 $^{\circ}$ 59.544' and proceed about fifteen minutes by horse to the ruins at N48 $^{\circ}$ 27.710' | E107 $^{\circ}$ 59.593'.

*Ruins of Saridgiin Khiid*

Zanabazar began construction of Saridgiin Khiid in 1654, not long after his return from his second trip to Tibet, during which he had been converted to the Gelug sect of Buddhism. He apparently intended this new Gelug monastery to the new headquarters of Buddhism in Mongolia. At least seven temples were built here, including a large 108-pillar Tsogchin Temple. The entire complex was not completed until 1680. In 1688 It was almost completely destroyed by the Zungarian chieftain Galdan Bolshigt during the civil war between the Eastern and Western Mongols. Now only a few sections of the walls of the Tsogchin Temple remain. (See more details see Don Croner's *Guidebook to Locales Connected with the Life of Zanabazaar*, available in Ulaan Baatar bookstores.)

Continuing on over Khiidiin Davaa the trail soon passes near picturesque Khagiin Khar Nuur (N48 $^{\circ}$ 25.132' | E107 $^{\circ}$ 53.924').

*The distinctively flat-topped peak of Asralt Khairkhan*

There are excellent camping spots along the shore of the lake, and this is a great place to spend the night or several nights if you are so inclined.

From the lake get back on the trail and proceed across the Khagiin Gol, then follow the Khongoriin Gol upstream and cross  $\ddot{O}$ vg $\ddot{o}$ nkhu $\ddot{u}$ giyn Davaa (N48 $^{\circ}$ 23.489' | E107 $^{\circ}$ 33.374') to the Zaan Gol. Follow the Zaan Gol upstream to the base of Asralt Khairkhan Uul. From near the base it is a two-hour scramble by foot to the top of the mountain. The summit is actually a flat area some 600 feet long and a hundred feet wide. The original name of the mountain was reportedly Asart Khairkhan: the

*Happy campers at Khagiin Khar Nuur*

word *asart*, which means a flat place, is a description of the distinctive flat top of the mountain.

According to Mongolian scholars N. Bazarg $\ddot{u}$ r and N. Enkhbayar, Asralt Khairkhan is one the three peaks in the Khentii Mountains which were known by the name Burkhan Khaldun. This Burkhan Khaldun—Asralt Khairkhan—was considered sacred by the Kerait people who were centered in the valley of the Tuul River during the twelfth century. The other two Burkhan Khalduns were Erdene Uul and Khentii Khan Uul (see "Burkhan Khaldun Khora," this issue).