

METROPOLITAN

BEIJING



Today's weather



35°
HIGH

24°
LOW

TREND

By Brian Salter

It will not be an exaggeration to say that China is a massive country. It stretches about 5,500 kilometers from the north to south, and the third-largest region of China – Inner Mongolia – covers over a million

▶ 4
Hailar's

▶ A visit to the steppes in the far north of China offers an enthralling cultural experience



Northern delight

Wedding guests are served *baiju* before feasting on mutton and milk tea. Photo: Courtesy of Brian Salter

VISTA

► Northern from Page 1

square kilometers, or 12 percent of China's total landmass.

I have often thought about going up to Inner Mongolia to see what the area is like. It has always intrigued me in an odd way. Maybe the stories of Genghis Khan and his ilk sweeping across the steppes of Asia in the 13th century have something to do with it. Therefore, I was particularly delighted when, out of the blue, an invitation came from an independent TV production company asking if I would like to pop up to Hailar in Hulun Buir for a long weekend, and get better acquainted with one of the projects they were working on.

There are about half a dozen daily flights between Beijing and Hulun Buir Hailar Airport, and the flight takes a little over two hours. Hailar is the main city in the northern region of Inner Mongolia. It is located some 150 kilometers from the Russian border. We arrived early in the morning on a clear sunny day, and temperatures were already nudging 30 C. Inner Mongolia experiences extreme temperatures throughout the year. In Hailar, it falls to around -48 C in the winter, and rises to over 39 C at the height of summer. During my time there, temperatures peaked at 35 C and plummeted to 15 C at night.

Ewenki ethnic group

In 1734, the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) founded a garrison town near a crossing of the Hailar river, in order to buffer their strength against growing Russian incursions into Manchurian territory. Hailar currently has a

population of around 280,000, with a large contingent of ethnic minorities.

The Ewenki for instance, are a Tungusic people of northern Asia. In China, they form one of the 56 ethnic groups, numbering around 30,000.

The Hailar town planners have done a wonderful job of putting up statues and sculptures all over the place, which add to the town's overall charm. It is clean and fresh everywhere, the air is pure and the sky is blue.

The official languages are Chinese and Mongolian, with the latter written in the traditional Mongolian script as opposed to the Mongolian Cyrillic alphabet, which is used in the state of Mongolia. It's beautiful to look at; each word is written from top to bottom and separate letters are used for consonants and vowels, but they are organized in a line that runs from left to right.

Although a Mongolian font was developed in Unicode in 1999, there was no support for it until the release of Windows Vista in 2007, and the lack of support for inline vertical displays still causes problems for many software programs.

Genghis Khan unified the Mongol tribes in 1206 and founded the Mongol Empire. In 1271, his grandson, Kublai Khan, established the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). His summer capital Shangdu was located near present-day Duolun County.

After the Yuan dynasty was overthrown by the Han-led Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) in 1368, the latter captured parts of Inner Mongolia and rebuilt the Great Wall of China along its northern border.

Music of Altan Urag

If you have ever watched the film *Mongol* (2007) you will undoubtedly have fallen in love with the music of Altan Urag – a Mongolian folk rock band. Formed in 2002, the band's musical style combines traditional Mongolian and contemporary genres. The members of the band have all been trained in classical Mongolian music, and they typically perform with the traditional instruments such as morin khuur (horse head fiddle) and bishguur (traditional horn), as well as incorporating throat singing and long song into the vocals.

The morin khuur consists of a wooden-framed sound box to which two strings are attached. It is held nearly upright with the sound box on the musician's lap or between the musician's legs. The strings run parallel over a wooden bridge on the body, up a long neck and past a second smaller bridge to the two tuning pegs in the scroll, which is usually carved into the form of a horse's head. Traditionally the "male string," the larger of the two strings, has 130 hairs from a stallion's tail, while the "female" string has 105 hairs from a mare's tail. But nowadays, the strings are more often made of nylon.

I was delighted to see not one, but two horse head fiddles on display at the Hulun Buir Hotel.

Pearl of the grasslands

What intrigues me is that so many people here are carrying fly whisks, and it's not long before you discover why. This place may well be the "pearl of the grasslands," but with that grand title comes something else - midges and

insects by the trillion. If you have not gotten a "rah-rah stick," you have come ill-prepared for the constant fight against the little critters.

One more thing that is really noticeable about this town is the streetlights. Somebody in the planning department has an artistic touch and a good sense of humor. And if you are worried that "civilization" might have made a detour around the region, you can rest assured that you can find a McDonald's restaurant with the name displayed in Mongolian script.

There's a lot of water in the town because Hailar lies on the south bank of the Hailar River where it meets the Yimin River, and this is one of the city's undoubted charms. Apart from the aforementioned statues, there are also flowers in abundance, not to mention flower and plant sculptures. Walls decorated with simple motifs that include horses, yurts, sheep and even the occasional camel can be found along the banks of the rivers.

Everywhere you get a feeling of getting back to nature. While fermented horse's milk may not be to everyone's taste, for instance, it is readily available for purchase if you look for the signs. But you should also be prepared to try Mongolian milk tea just for the experience if nothing else. It's easy to make using normal black tea. All you need to do is sauté half a teaspoon of flour with a little butter, add rice or millet and fry it for a little while. Then add it in the tea, plus a little salt, and boil it all together for a short while. Then throw in a load of milk and then boil again for about 10 minutes. You can even add some mutton pieces into the brew! And there you go – a perfect must-have



drink to accompany every meal.

A wedding party

Mongolian milk tea was exactly what everyone at a wedding party was sipping on as we went to film the reception in the bride's village. I told the bride that she looked lovely. She and her minder – who also acts as an instant interpreter – went into a fit of giggles before the latter told me, "She says she loves you too." I fear something might have gotten lost in the translation!

The father of the bride – the village baker – sings traditional verses extolling the duties of the bride while the women-folk presumably try to keep a straight face on being told about their duties.

Meanwhile, as the wedding guests continue to sip their milk tea, they are also tempted by glasses of *baiju* and plate-loads of mutton. When you consider the frigid temperatures



Top left: A bowl of Mongolian milk tea is the centerpiece of the lunch table. Top right: Statues and flowerbeds decorate the drive into the town from the airport. Photos: Courtesy of Brain Salter

A man of the Ewenki ethnic group drives horses to migrate on June 10. Photo: IC

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Hailar's captivating Mongolian heritage