

## Case Study: Marketing Adventure in Mongolia's five Western Aimags

### Situation

Western Mongolia represents the ultimate adventure travel destination. "Remote," "authentic," and "undiscovered:" the words that best describe Western Mongolia are the very attributes that adventure tourists seek today in the places they visit.

Traveling through the five Western Mongolia Aimags of Gobi-Altai, Khovd, Bayan-Ulgii, Uvs, and Zavkhan is to move from desert moonscape to snow-capped peaks, cross rushing rivers, and camp amid verdant pasturelands where raptors soar overhead. Stop by a cluster of nomadic gers to experience instant hospitality and centuries-old cultural traditions that are closely intertwined with the natural world. With 2.5 million people spread across a vast territory of 1.5 million sq km - much of which is governmentally protected or remains in pastoral use - Western Mongolia is a place where the human footprint remains virtually negligible.

For the past decade, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has helped to strengthen Mongolia's tourism policies and laws, and to broaden market awareness of tourist opportunities in the country. Now focus has turned to Mongolia's five, rural Western Aimags with the intent of developing adventure tourism products that will contribute to the livelihoods and economies of the local people and protect the area's precious natural and cultural resources.

The Mongolian National Tourism Organization (MNTTO) is serving as a conduit to the international tourism market for the Mongolia tourism industry through its partnership with the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) and Xola Consulting, as well as directly with international vendors, marketers, media, and policy makers.

### Challenge

Except for a few areas, tourist circuits have yet to develop in the Western Aimags because of their relatively remote location and poor infrastructure. One must drive over 1500 km from Ulaan Baatar (Mongolia's capital and largest city), to reach the area's attractions, and there are significant distances between the various Aimag cultural centers as well. Paved roads, functional bridges, and navigational maps are virtually non-existent. These challenges, while daunting, can also be a magnet for more adventurous souls. However, even this set of travelers needs to be educated about the area's environmental riches and cultural abundance before they are incited to visit.

The Mongolia tourism industry's challenge involved questions of development and marketing - what adventure travel opportunities could be packaged and clearly promoted while being sensitive to issues of cultural and environmental preservation and local community involvement? And, what strategies should be employed to encourage higher visitation rates among United States and European adventure travelers to this under-explored region?

### Solution

Between July and August 2008, representatives of MNTTO and Xola Consulting worked together to develop adventure tourism products that combine the sites and attractions of the five Western Aimags in a marketable manner. The work involved literature and field research, interviews with key stakeholders, and an 18-day inventory analysis field trip throughout the Aimags.

Xola evaluated and benchmarked destination assets for their adventure tourism market competitiveness. It identified existing and potential tourist attractions and developed new itineraries for promotion.

Xola then recommended a series of marketing tactics for various levels of investment over a 10-year time span to attract North American and European adventure tourists to the area to experience these itineraries. Xola also introduced the elements of a branding and positioning campaign to differentiate Western Mongolia from other countries by highlighting its distinctive nomadic culture, vibrant traditions, and diverse eco-systems and landscape.

Beyond product identification and marketing, Xola made suggestions in operational areas where further planning, training, and management will be necessary to maximize tourism potential. Xola addressed concerns and offered solutions to roadblocks to tourism development in the Western Aimags that were brought to light by key stakeholders. The proposed plan and its recommendations will be incorporated into a larger tourism strategy that the USAID-funded EPRC project is developing for the Mongolian tourism industry.

## **Results**

Xola identified five unique Tourism Products that will appeal to a wide range of adventure travelers, and give Mongolian and international tour operators a selection of product concepts with which to work. The Products are presented as a collection of potential sites and activities that fit together with a theme. Within the Product descriptions, there is sufficient flexibility so that no tour itinerary looks the same - an element that should appeal to tour operators who may wish to develop their own individualized products.

Pursuant to Mongolia's tourism development strategy - and responding to growing market demand for environmentally and culturally appropriate tourism that contributes to the betterment of local communities and rural economies - the Products also integrate values and practices of sustainable tourism.

The adventure tourism plan proposed by Xola and MNTTO leverages the natural, cultural, and historical assets of Western Mongolia and offers specific details for the development and marketing of a variety of adventure, educational and specialized tourism products. With this plan, Western Mongolia is well-positioned to become a strong competitor in the international adventure travel market.

**For More Information about this other projects where Xola is contributing to the advancement of sustainable adventure tourism, contact Christina Heyniger at [info@xolaconsulting.com](mailto:info@xolaconsulting.com)**