

DESTINATIONS

# 5 must-see off-track locations



Mozambique offers gorgeous white beaches.

**3. MOZAMBIQUE:**

Ok Vancouverites, we know you're reading this and looking out the window at a grey rainy day, so let's get back to the beautiful beaches shall we? Mozambique is one of the most underrated beach destinations we can think of, and if you head to the far north of the country, you'll see countless idyllic islands rimmed by palm trees, turquoise water and sand as white as snow. Seeing such bliss will make you wonder why more people don't know about this holiday utopia. And don't worry, there are cheap, good quality

hotel rooms to be had and you can fly domestically in Mozambique relatively cheaply.

This is not always an easy place to travel, but the people are friendly and they will help you any way they can. Imagine mixing your beach holiday with a trip to a local African village. Meet children who have little, but feel as though they have it all. You'll be touched by their giant smiles and their love for their country. This is Mozambique and it is the real Africa. Get in the mix of it and explore, it can offer you the adventure of a lifetime.

**4. KYRGYZSTAN:**

It's time we leave the beaches behind ... well, the tropical ones anyway. Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked nation in the former-soviet region known as Central Asia. Before you let the "stan" suffix scare you, you should know that Kyrgyzstan is nothing like Afghanistan or Pakistan. It is very safe to travel here, you will be given a free travel-visa on arrival (unlike any of its neighbouring countries) and you'll be treated like an honoured guest for the entire duration of your stay.

You don't have to completely give up on your vacation beach dreams either. Issyk Kul is a heated, endorheic alpine lake at 1,600 metres above sea level and it is absolutely breathtaking. Put on your bathing suit and enjoy a refreshing swim with a view of the snow-capped Tian Shan mountains as a backdrop.

After you're done soaking in the high altitude sun, you can head into the

mountains for some amazing treks. The hike from Karakul to Altyr Arashan is exhilarating, exhausting and brilliantly scenic. You'll pass by the powder-blue Ala-kul lake at 3,560 metres before hiking up another few hundred metres over the Ala-kul pass, where you'll enjoy magnificent views of the jagged mountain ranges and deserted valleys in all directions. You'll finish the trek in a small town called Altyr Arashan where you can soak in a steamy natural hot spring and let your muscles rest after your marvellous accomplishment. You don't get rewards like this from a beach holiday!

If trekking by foot isn't your thing, you can hire a horse and let it do all of the work for you. Horse trekking in Kyrgyzstan is very popular and a must-do during your trip. The journey from the tiny town of Kochkor to Lake Song-Kul is fantastic, with two night's spent in warm, authentic felt yurts along the way!

**5. MONGOLIA:**

Our final stop on this intrepid travel journey takes us to a land of endless sky and the nation of nomadic horse-men. None of the above countries can match Mongolia for its sheer beauty and pristine, empty countryside. Picture brilliantly green hills, rolling on for miles into the horizon and not a soul around. You can hire a guide and a horse to take you into the deserted steppe, or you can simply trek there yourself. Despite the fact that this is one of the least populated regions on our planet, there always seems to be a curious and friendly Mongolian around to help. Lace up your hiking (or your riding) boots and just venture out into the vast open steppe.

The land here is owned by the Crown, meaning you can camp anywhere and everywhere. Go for a trek and pitch your tent wherever you like, and if you love fishing, you're in for a massive treat. Mongolia is home to the hugo taimen which can grow to over 6 feet in length, making them one of the largest river fish in the world. Bring your fly rod and hook into one of these enormous beasts, but make sure you catch and release as they are a highly protected species. Other fish in the rivers, such as lenok and grayling, could keep you sustained on your travels if needed.

If you're not into hiking alone in the countryside and fishing for food, you can simply take buses or mini-vans between major destinations in Mongolia and while they aren't the most comfortable way to travel, they'll give you plenty of stories to tell when you return home. Add these tales to others about meeting local nomads and spending a night in their family ger (yurt), getting drunk on fermented mare's milk, learning about Tibetan Buddhism and sleeping under a sky of countless stars. Mongolia is an adventure waiting to happen.



A view of Ala-Kul Lake from the Ala-Kul Pass at 3,860 metres in Kyrgyzstan.

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The Time To Go Is Now!

Veering off of the well-trodden tourist trail may seem intimidating at first, but once you arrive at these fabulously foreign destinations, you'll soon realize that there's actually quite a bit of tourism infrastructure in place. You'll have no problem finding hotels, booking flights, planning bus rides and eating at restaurants. There are just enough fellow travellers around to make your visit easy and comfortable. You're never alone in the travel world and even if there aren't any other travellers around, the local people of these five off-track countries will welcome you in and treat you just like family. What are you waiting for? Get out there and explore!

*Nick Wharton and Dariece Swift run the Canadian travel blog GoatsOnTheRoad.com*

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I just got back from our top producers cruise with Holland America. I was very impressed on the new vision of the cruise line — elegance with a bit more hip. The shows were lively, the music at BB Kings (which is on some ships) was such a great place to dance and they

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are really making their food venues top notch. Bottom line, they will appeal to a broader range of individual and family cruisers while also enhancing their "premium" touches. I've sailed over 60 times with them, and I noticed some significant improvements making the value for what you get compared to other lines even better. Their new addition, the ms Koningsdam, set to launch in early 2016, may just be the nicest mid sized (around 2600 passengers) ship at sea. It's already booking very well.

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