

ProjectsAbroad

Projects Abroad Mongolia Official Newsletter

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Photo by Neil Porter

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NOMADIC LIFE EXPERIENCE – volunteer story by Helen Allcock from UK

You would have to be here or have been here to fully understand what it is that I am looking at and experiencing. For those who have been here, I hope my words will act as a brief reminder and for those who haven't, please read on and imagine.

Beneath this azure blue sky the air is freezing but there is no breeze and the sun warms the blood and lifts the spirits. I am presently sitting on a rocky outcrop in the middle of the great Mongolian Steppe with paper, a pencil and my constant companion, a Mongolian Mastiff.

All is so quiet, your ears strain to catch even the slightest sound but there is none; no cars, no motorbikes, no aeroplanes, no radios, no voices, only the constant beat of your own heart in your ears and the occasional cough calling out, "Who are you?"

In every direction there are rising peaks, not exactly mountains but not the gentle rolling hills of England. These are sharp undulations of rock that press themselves out of the Steppe itself. Every peak has its own name and the Nomads know them all.

Everywhere it is now covered in freezing snow with feather-like frost growing each night on its surface. Bleached, dead grass poke out, glisten and wink in the sunlight for their stems are glassy with frost and weighted down with ice crystals reflecting rainbows as far as the eye can see.

Dotted all about, roaming free, are herds of cattle and horses, with the odd peppering of brown and white goats and sheep all trying to glean some nutrition from the few blades that have managed to make it through the snow.

One of my jobs is to take the flocks out in the morning. I drive them far from the ger into the hillside about a mile or more away. Here they settle down to graze and to then slowly make their way home during the day, back to the safety of the encampment and the protection of the dogs, for they do need protection from more than the harsh coldness of the Mongolian winter nights, there are also wolves, eagles and vultures out here!

Life is simple and uncomplicated. The Nomads have few trappings and luxury items, as anything beyond the essential becomes an unnecessary burden. The Nomads may after all need to move their herds and homes several times throughout the year in order to find enough grazing for their animals.

They cannot survive alone and between the neighboring gers the Nomads share everything, what one doesn't have one can borrow and what one does have is freely shared, be it a horse, lorry or motorbike.

The door is never locked or barred and there is a welcoming bowl of suuteitsai (salty milk tea) waiting and huge plate of all manner of boiled meat accompanied with a very sharp knife, just cut off what you like from the fresh kill, for the Nomads love their meat.

The traditions and the customs may be different, their diet and style of cooking, their homes and their sanitation most definitely are different but their love for their family, friends and neighbors is the same and so is their pride in the environment and nation. There will always be similarities, as well as differences we can discuss albeit through mime, pictures, dictionaries and a great deal of laughter.

So my three months here slowly draws to an inevitable conclusion but before I leave I will celebrate Christmas with my new family. Sadly, the West has introduced Mongolia to Santa Claus and all that the poor Saint now has become. I hope to balance the scales by introducing this Buddhist family to my Christian festival with a more humble backdrop, which I feel confident they will fully understand. This will be my final cultural exchange.

I arrived here not really knowing what to expect but with sufficient humility to realize that I would probably take from the experience far more than I could give. I hope it is not the case but I fear it possibly is. Without wishing to sound too poetic, I definitely leave here enriched.



St. John's Kilmarnock school graduate spends 3 months volunteering at care and nomad projects in Mongolia.

Eighteen year-old Emily Ho-Tai from Guelph, Canada, was drawn to Mongolia by its rich history, fascinating culture and the uniqueness of the country itself. "It is certainly a bit more off the beaten trail, so I thought it would be really neat to experience a country that is not as commonly visited." Eager to seize the opportunity of experiencing the Mongolian nomadic lifestyle firsthand, Emily signed up with Projects Abroad for a 3 month volunteer adventure at the Nomad Project, as well as the Care Project.

"The setting of the nomad project was in the beautiful Mongolian countryside. It was so wonderfully peaceful and serene - and there was lots of opportunity to explore the surroundings and take in the lovely scenery. It allows you to become integrated in a completely different way of life and it really makes you feel like you are truly experiencing Mongolia." explains Emily.

With the nomad project, Emily lived with a nomadic family in their traditional ger, a portable, bent dwelling structured traditional Mongolian hut, for one month near the village of Altanbulag in the Tuv Province, which is located 200km away from Ulaanbaatar city. Over the course of the month, she enjoyed involving in many different routines such as collecting cow dung, fetching water, cutting up vegetables for dinner, fermenting the mare's milk to make airag, and herding the animals and got to have many unique experiences included visiting friends and family in neighboring gers, exploring the area (including hikes up the surrounding mountains or walks to the nearby river), and taking afternoon naps under the clear blue sky.

"It was very interesting to just follow my host family around and see what their lifestyle is all about. I did everything from collecting cow dung, to eating sheep innards, to exploring the surrounding mountains. There is just so much to take in when you're exposed to a lifestyle so different from your own."





She continued: "Something I learned from the nomad project is what it means to be hospitable. The Mongolian nomads are some of the most hospitable people I have ever met. My host family was constantly welcoming others into the ger, the same way we were always warmly welcomed into other people's gers. I felt as though I could pop into any ger and, despite being a complete stranger, I would be offered food to eat or a bed to sleep on without any hesitation."

Aside from the Nomad Project, Emily chose to also enroll in the Care Project during the following two months. She worked with disabled children around four- five years old with various disabilities, including cerebral palsy, as an extra pair of hands and an extra set of eyes at a day care center, the 10th kindergarten and nursing complex for disabled children. "Although the staff do their absolute best to give each child the attention he or she needs, sometimes that can be difficult with so many children compared to the number of staff. I hope I was able to make the staff feel left over stretched during the busier times of the day. For example, I acted as an extra pair of hands during feeding time or an extra pair of eyes during play time. I was also able to do many crafts and activities with the kids, which I always enjoyed seeing the kids doing."

A truly rewarding experience for Emily was any time when she was able to make one of the children laugh or smile, she found it extremely rewarding. "Sometimes I forget that even children with disabilities are very much aware of what happens around them and they are more than capable of laughing and smiling. It is hard to pinpoint a specific experience which I found most rewarding - seeing a smile on any of the kids' faces was very rewarding for me."

Moreover, she learned from working at this placement that she had always underestimated the abilities of disabled children. "I haven't worked with disabled children in the past nor have I had many opportunities to interact with them so I don't think I really knew what to expect. However, I soon learned that, with a little help, the kids are very much capable of doing the activities. Not only that, but they can play and laugh with as much enthusiasm as any other child. I realized just how much I had underestimated what disabled children are capable of and how I had always generalized those with disabilities as being unresponsive and unaware of their surroundings."

"I think there are many benefits that come from volunteering. Not only do you help to relieve the busy staff a bit, but you can help the children out as well. Even if your time spent with them is not necessarily life changing for them, it is also the small moments that count. If you can comfort a kid who is crying or make them laugh even for a second, what is important is that you helped someone feel better even for a little moment." She said.

Apart from the project, Emily has had the opportunity to experience more of Mongolia by traveling to the Terelj National Park and the Gobi desert with other volunteers and her host mother. She managed to check out quite a few sites including museums, monasteries and temples, watching a wrestling match at the wrestling palace and seeing a ballet at the ballet/opera house. "I've really enjoyed living with a Mongolian host family. I think it really does add to the whole experience. I feel like I've gotten to experience so many things that I wouldn't have experienced had I not been living with a host family. Also it has been great meeting volunteers from all over the world. I love learning more about them and hearing their stories. It is quite neat to have this common thread which we can all bond over."





After having spent three months in Mongolia, Emily advises future volunteers to be patient and give things time. "Don't panic if at first you feel lost and unsure of how you can help out; over time you will see where you can step in and be useful."

"All in all, I have many memorable experiences from being at my placement, but I think the things I will remember the most are the children themselves. Each of them I really got to know and learn their ways, which feels quite special to me. There are many moments that I will look fondly upon - moments that made me laugh, moments that melted my heart - but when looking back on my experience, I think I will mainly remember each child and his or her own special ways, and the bond I felt I shared with them.

"I will also definitely always remember the incredible one month at the nomad project for a long time. - the evenings my little six year old host sister led me on a horse to herd the sheep and goat; many moments out in the countryside where I felt so at peace and relaxed, looking out from the mountains, staring up at the stars, or watching the sun set and so many beautiful sights that I will certainly remember for a long time."

Mongolia – The Land of Contrasts

By, Andrea Mason (UK)

I truly did not know what to expect when I arrived in Mongolia. Not many seem to be known about this country where I come from, despite its great vastness. I had heard of Chinggis Khaan, but didn't appreciate fully the importance and prominence of this leader in Mongolian history. I was also unaware of the great contrasts and the dichotomy of this country. There seems to be a massive difference between the hustle and bustle of the capital city, Ulaanbaatar and the quiet and stillness of the countryside. During my time here, I have only been able to get a brief glimpse of the countryside on a trip to Turtle Rock in the Terelj National Park and the great silver statue of Chinggis Khaan. Travelling there with volunteers from the Nomad project was very enlightening when they were describing their experiences and comparing the countryside we were seeing to the areas they were living in. Ulaanbaatar, in contrast, can be a very busy and quite an intimidating place, plus every place looks very similar and it can be easy to get lost. I had never experienced or witnessed traffic so bad in a city before! The constant blasts of car horns seem to be almost a soundtrack to the place. Also, in the UK, the 'little green man' who appears on the traffic crossing usually means it is safe to cross – unlike in Ulaanbaatar! I have gradually built up confidence with it over the weeks, and now feel that I can play with the traffic like I have lived here for ages!

Another sight I had to get used to while being here is seeing people spitting on the street. Where I come from this is not socially acceptable, but here it is. I have been plagued by a cold for weeks since arriving here and I get the distinct impression that the public use of tissues and hankies is seen as disgusting to the Mongolians, even though I see no problem with it coming from the UK. I have felt embarrassment if I needed to blow my nose whilst out and about in the city. Maybe this is why they spit instead?

I would say that the food here is interesting! My lovely hosts have been providing me with different Mongolian dishes, mostly based on the winter diet of meat, rice and flour. I'm afraid I don't think I'll ever get used to the taste of mutton. One highlight was eating horse meat with my host family from a communal bowl, which was also an interesting, and surprisingly good experience. I have taken a dislike to the meat dumplings (buuz), but feel impolite refusing to eat them at home or work. I did arrive home a few weeks ago to find the entire carcass of a cow spread out on a plastic tablecloth on the kitchen floor. I was rather amused to see an axe on the floor next to the meat and also at the thought that my host had to carry the entire thing up to the fourth floor of the flat we live in! I could hear him from my room struggling to chop the thing up, as all the meat was frozen solid! At least that meant that we could now eat beef instead of mutton... I have noticed with interest that their preferred method of cooking is to boil their meat, but meat cooked in the traditional way over hot stones with carrots and potatoes is absolutely delicious. I will miss the milk tea when I leave – the ingredients of milk, salt, water and tea mix doesn't sound too appealing at first, but I have been pleasantly surprised and it is definitely something I would look for if I ever came back to Mongolia.

My work placement has been different from other care projects I have done in the past. I worked at a day care centre for small children with an array of physical and mental disabilities. My main tasks were to assist the teachers and teaching assistants with day-to-day tasks such as feeding the children, preparing their bedding for nap time, dressing and undressing them, tidying up toys, washing the dishes, taking the children to the bathroom...etc.



I enjoyed getting involved with planning craft activities for the children and helping them to make and draw things. The ladies have hung a lot of these items up around the room. It's nice to think that they will still be there after I have gone home. The children absolutely adore nursery rhymes, even if they are in English. They seem to enjoy any rhyme with actions they can copy – especially 'row, row, row your boat'; the children have been fighting over me to be able to do that one! I tried to introduce the children and some of the teachers to the 'hokey cokey' – unfortunately, the Lonely Planet Mongolian phrasebook are rather limited when it comes to trying to translate that one! I also seem to have become the resident technological expert. Whenever there is a computer query, I have always been politely asked for assistance, from virus scans to transferring photos. I also helped to tune their new television. It's nice to

feel useful in this way too. It has been somewhat difficult to get used to a few of the staff at the placement, they come across as quite hostile and rude, but I think this is just their way. At times, it would have been nice if they were a little friendlier and encouraging, but the other staff has been very welcoming and open to new ideas. One of which has been to a therapy I practice back home called The Bowen Technique. The staff at the centre allowed me to treat some of the children while I was there at the placement.

My therapy is very gentle and ideal for small children. It is a soft tissue therapy that works through making soft rolling moves over key structural areas of the body. The therapy works on the principle that the patient's own body can begin to facilitate its own repair. Although these children would be unable to be treated after I have left, I feel it has been worth doing especially if the children are able to feel some sort of short term benefit, such as reduced pain, better sleep, improved breathing or decongestion.



I have been really grateful to Project's Abroad for seeking approval for me to practice my therapy whilst being here.

When I come to leave Mongolia I think I will have mixed feelings. I am looking forward to going home to slightly warmer weather, but at the same time I have made some nice friends here and have experienced some really good times. My hosts have been incredibly hospitable and have made me feel very welcome and part of their family, even taking me to visit their relatives across the city. The Mongolian sense of family is very strong and is probably an extension of how things are in the countryside. The emphasis on tradition is very much a way of life for Mongolians, and it has been very special to be included and made to feel part of this. I have vowed to return one day, maybe during the summer months this time to experience the countryside and much more of what this magical country has to offer.



Projects Abroad world wide has recently organized a first PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION among the volunteers which is introduced by Projects Abroad Nepal.

We have received many great pictures by our both alumni and current volunteers of their volunteering experience in Mongolia AND THE WINNER OF THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION IS...

Congratulations! Neil Porter on winning the inaugural monthly Projects Abroad Mongolia Photography Competition!

Neil Porter, 66, from UK, volunteered between this April till July in the Teaching Project in Mongolia.

This PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION will be announced every month to declare the talented photographers and their unique experiences through their pictures.



Photo by Neil Porter



Photo by Will Dalziel



Photo by Will Dalziel



Photo by Noee Antoni



Photo by Ben Owens



Photo by Ben Owens