

ProjectsAbroad

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Photo by Celine Castel



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Former volunteer fulfills a lifelong dream of becoming a professional journalist after volunteering in Mongolia

In summer of the 2006, Patricia Sexton (38), from New York, seized the opportunity to follow her dream of becoming a journalist when she embarked on a 3 month volunteer adventure with the Projects Abroad Journalism Project in Mongolia.

Working as a investment banker on Wall Street, Patricia decided that it was now or never; she quit her job and travelled to the land of blue sky in order to pursue her life-long dream of becoming a journalist.

Almost 8 years later, Patricia has fulfilled her dream. As a successful TV host and author of the book *LIVE from Mongolia*; Patricia says that her time in Mongolia was life changing. "Without my experience in Mongolia, I could not have done what I'm doing today. Without that one chance to really follow a dream, I'd still be dreaming. but now it is real."

During the time that she spent with Projects Abroad at the Journalism Project, Patricia was placed at MNB (Mongolian National Broadcaster). Some of her work included anchoring news broadcast, reporting, proofing scripts and recording voiceovers. As a volunteer, Patricia was given as much responsibility as the locals: "One afternoon, my boss Gandima told me to put on a suit. I asked her why, and she sort of laughed a little bit.

"Because tonight you will anchor the Mongolian news," she said. I will never forget what it felt like to run home to my host family's apartment, put my suit on, and race back to the station to report on air! That night, I watched the broadcast from the apartment, and cried. Pursuing a dream, and then achieving it, well, it's an extraordinary feeling."



At her project, Patricia worked with other Projects Abroad volunteers, as well as the local staff. Occasionally, the volunteers got a chance to go out into the field to produce their own stories as well.

“Our stories were first presented on the Mongolian news, and then translated into English for our broadcast. What was most exciting for me though was discovering (and occasionally covering) stories of people following *their* dreams, like Quiza, a local hip-hop star and his brother and manager Bol-doo”

As a journalism volunteer in Mongolia, Patricia and her fellow volunteers had the opportunity to experience Naadam, a major Mongolian festival, through the eyes of a journalist and went on a Ger-to-Ger trip through the rolling Mongolian steppes and stayed with nomadic families, interviewing them and covering what life is like for Mongolian nomads.



Aside from her work, she enjoyed staying in a Mongolian host family and experiencing, first hand, life in a new country, a new language and new people half way across the world. “I learned a lot about Mongolia by living with my host family. My host mother was extremely kind to me, and always eager to teach me new things: new vocabulary, better pronunciation. She took me and my roommate to a picnic in a village where they spent their summers. She patiently taught me about the little things about Mongolian culture.”

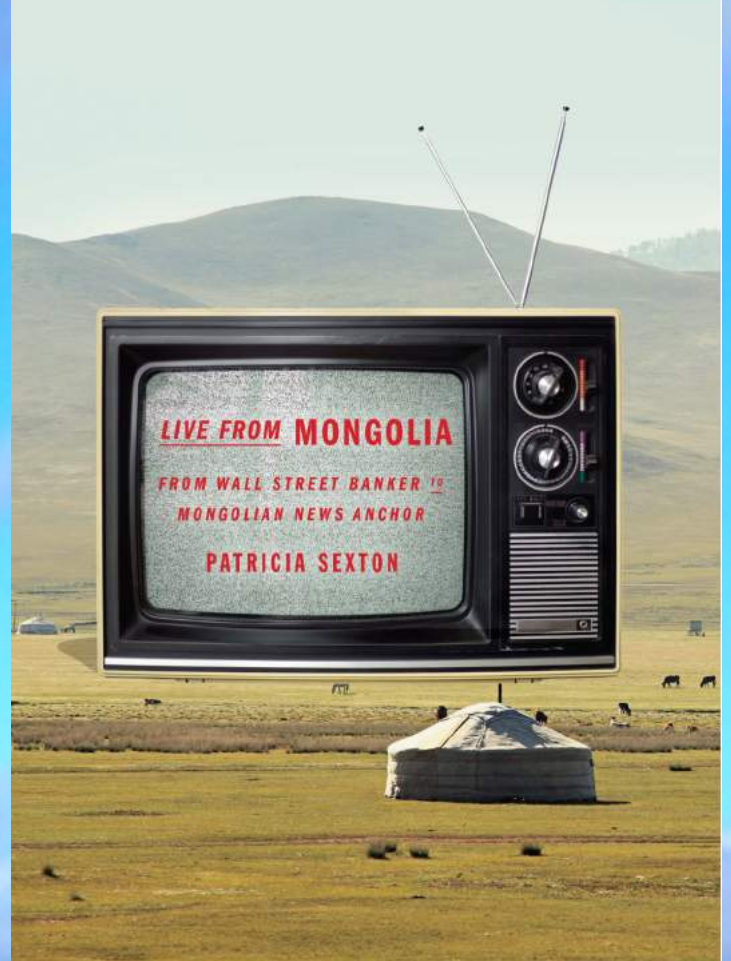
“During the summer of 2006 while I was in Mongolia, I tried to see as much of the country as possible, but once I left, I knew I had to return, but I would need to return in winter. There’s something about the Mongolian winter that helps to explain the culture to a foreigner.”

“Not only did I want to experience winter in Mongolia, I also wanted to find an ending to my book. At that time, I had finished writing it, but it didn’t have an ending. So, I returned to Mongolia for TsagaanSar, the biggest Mongolian traditional festival, to discover an ending. And I did! But it became something of a surprise- it was no longer the ending to the book I thought it would be.”

When Patricia returned to Mongolia in 2009, she spent time in Ulaanbaatar for Tsagaan Sar and travelled up north to Khovsgol province for the Ice Festival at the Khovsgol lake. “The most rewarding experience with Project Abroad in ’06 and when I returned on my own in ’09 was discovering that it truly *is* possible to achieve a dream. Can you just imagine: I went from working in a bank to working in Mongolian journalism! It’s incredible to me that Projects Abroad made my dream possible.”

Now, some 8 years down the line, Patricia is working as a professional journalist. Her journey has taken her all over the world to cover stories of other people following their dreams from North Korea, Venezuela, Mexico, small American towns to New Zealand, Patricia says: "Every story I get a chance to tell, is a story of someone's dream being pursued and achieved. I'm incredibly lucky to be able to tell these stories; they are inspiring for me."

Patricia arrived Mongolia with Projects Abroad as a volunteer but left as professional woman who has achieved her dreams: "I learned about journalism, but I also learned about friendship and loyalty. It was the biggest and best adventure of my life."



Volunteering in Mongolia: Nils Siemonsen from Germany



When you are a volunteer or want to become a volunteer in Mongolia you should prepare a good answer to the question why you choose Mongolia...especially in winter time.

My trip to Mongolia took me more time than I thought it will take. The pilot had; due to heavy smoke in the city; problems landing at the Chinggis Khaan airport, so we visited Irkutsk and Bishkek for some additional hours and I only arrived in Ulaanbaatar 16 hours later than planned. After taking a short bath in the -32 degrees cold air around the airport, I was brought to my host family. I ate my first Buuz (more or less steamed dumpling), that I really liked at that time and tried the first milky tea (in the end it is more like warm milk than tea with milk – my opinion).

My English is not the best, but I quickly noticed that the English of my host mother is even worse than mine. The only person in the family who could speak English fluently is the eldest son of my host mother. I decided to learn some basic Mongolian to communicate with them; especially with the six year old son of my host mother as well as her four year old grandson. The fact that I am not really a television watcher rapidly changed in the first few weeks, because everything in Mongolia is done in front of the television and there was not once during the day that I saw the television being switched off. Later, I got used to doing everything with the host family in front of the television.

On my first workday I was taken to a law firm to work on Human Rights or some related fields but in the end I realised that the law firm is more focusing on business and company law than on human rights in Mongolia, so I changed my placement one week later.

Now I am working three days a week in a NGO for human rights and two days in the law firm. It is really interesting to get both perspectives on a case; where for example a mining company tries to get a license to mine in an area where herders are living from natural products and to see both parties' ways of working.

At the NGO I am mainly working on reports; for example about the amendments of the agricultural law since 2006 and how this changes effect (or not effect) the conditions of being a farmer or herdsman in Mongolia and how that influences the accessibility of food in whole of Mongolia.

I am travelling around the provinces and present to so called Community Saving Groups (self-organised money saving groups for improving the living conditions) or local governments how the German politics or organisations are trying to decrease poverty and fight against human rights violations. Sometimes it is very hard to present for example the main functions of the German health insurance to people who do not understand a word of English and the translator looks confused by what I am saying.

But I am on the way to get use to this.



My Journalism experience in Mongolia

by Jessie Rouane from France



“Mongolia? It is a part of China, isn't it?” This was my thoughts before going to this mysterious country, mostly unknown by Westerners like me. Currently being a student in journalism, I was looking for a three-month training programme and of course, I chose Projects Abroad for the second time in my life. The reason for this being, that I had already had a two month journalism internship in India thanks to Projects Abroad, between April and June 2013, and the least I can say is that it was extraordinary. For a young girl without any experience of travel or even work, it was a great chance to see a foreign country without the stress of being alone in case of developing problems and to do this incredible training.

For the last year of my bachelor, I wanted to do an internship in China, the second giant of Asia, but unfortunately, because of visa problems, I ended up going to Mongolia. The only image that I had of this country, before coming here, was what we can call the “traditional part” of it: a ger as a house, a deel as a coat, go to work by horses and live in the middle of nowhere, dying by the incredible high cold and surrounded by cows and mutton. So far from the modern lightning metropolis of China and therefore I did not hide my disappointment when I saw the Mongolian main city, Ulaanbaatar.

As in the towns of India and, I must recognized, in Paris as well; except for the warmth and the permanent crowd; everything in these two city are dirty and noisy. It had completely destroyed the few beautiful ideas that I had of Mongolia. Nevertheless, I had the chance to be quickly introduced to my host mother, an adorable old lady, and to my new colleagues at my journalism placement; the local TV station, NTV. Thanks to their warm welcome and their precious help during my daily life here, I succeeded, step by step, to overcome my terrible first impression and discovered what I call the “true face of Mongolia”.

In mid-January, after my first three weeks of work, one of my colleagues came to see me and asked me if I wanted to participate in the Lunar New Year Program. I immediately accepted even without knowing what it was. The aim of this program is to show foreigners visiting a traditional Mongolian family of the countryside for the Lunar New Year and help them with the preparation of this important celebration. Thus, with five other foreigners; being one other French, two Germans and two South-Koreans, accompanied by the shooting team of NTV; we started what is still the best adventure I had experienced in Mongolia. Wednesday, after lunch, we all went to the famous Black Market of Ulaanbaatar to buy a traditional Mongolian coat, the deel. Soft and comfortable, this coat exists in all sizes and colours, with motifs or not, and there is no clothes as warm as it. The perfect thing to fight against the mortal cold of this country, which is a thousand times worst in the countryside, far of the city pollution!

In the company of welcoming joyful people, we quickly forget the terrible weather. All the family was in the ger to welcome us with horse-milk, salt, tea and many sweets as biscuits, candies and chocolates. After mutual presentations in front of cameras, I had the chance, with the German girl, to help the men of the camp to take back the mutton and horses from the mountain and be awarded with a delicious dinner, full of traditional food such as the famous buuz, mutton meat, long pastas, little oranges, cheese and again some sweets. This all with vodka and mare milk, of course! The next morning, we woke up very early to see the dawn on the mountain. Just that is a reason alone to come to Mongolia at least once in your life. It will be too long to describe with details all the activities that I did during this unique trip in the Mongolian countryside. Horse riding, cow milking, cooking, and so many other moments shared with the family, will stay eternal memories in my heart.

This not only being a cliché for me, but will truly stay the real true face of Mongolia, the country of free horses and infinites steppes, for me. My only regret is not being able to come during the summer, the most active season with all its festivals and celebrations and of course, it's warm weather!



Projects Abroad Mongolia's Monthly Photo Competition has reached it's end. The winner of the competition for this month is Celine Castel has been volunteering at the Royal HDTV as a journalist. It is really great to see that all our volunteers being able to experience different places and things such as the Mongolian rolling steppes and the beautiful sightseeing and the unique culture of Mongolia aside from their projects in the busy city life. And we are grateful to witness your volunteer adventure in Mongolia and hope the pictures and stories like these could give you a chance to share your journey with people all over the world.

Photo by Celine Castel



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Photo by Louise Vermeiren



Photo by Valerie Simonetti

