

ProjectsAbroad™

Projects Abroad Mongolia Official Newsletter

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Volunteer story by Ruben Mascaro from Australia

Many moons ago I read a book that described Mongolia in such a way that it became a dream for me to one day travel to the country. The opportunity finally arrived many years later for me to not only visit Mongolia but to volunteer with a local nomad family, and my level of excitement could not be contained or hidden! I was totally stoked that I would be living one of my dreams.

Rather than going straight to Mongolia from Australia, I chose to take the train from Beijing, and would continue on train, crossing Siberia, to Moscow once my Mongolian adventure concluded.

On arrival to Ulaabaatar, my awesome supervisor - and yes...she is awesome, Enkhee, picked me up from the train station and took me back to the guest house to get some rest. The next day, Enkhee took me around UB and to the office to finalise some formalities - and then we were off to a Cultural concert (which was amazing). The next day, I was off to the country side to be with my host family!

The drive was about 3 hours long, and was an adventure in itself with Gana the driver. I like to describe Gana as Mongolia's very own MacGyver.....the man just knows so much, how to fix everything with nothing and has an amazing story. The majority of the roads are four wheel drive tracks, as such, making the drive longer, but loads of fun!

I was quite nervous at first, as I had no idea what to do.....I was lucky there was a fellow Australian, Tim, going through his Project Nomad nearby who provided not only great advice, but in the end a great friendship. From then on, it was most likely the greatest experience I've ever had. And as Projects Abroad suggest, throw yourself into it, and you really do the best experience.

I came to Mongolia with a desire to accomplish 2 simple things....I left the country accomplishing 125 new things I've never done before.

My days would start early, where I would wake with the family, and be welcomed by the best view in the world. We would then release the baby sheep, at which point it was a wonderful cacophony of baa's when the baby sheep looked for their mother. About 20 minutes later, off they went to graze, and in we came to pick up all the wool (which would later be burnt or sold - depending on quality) and clean up all the poo. There were even times where our sheep mixed with other families sheep and we had to separate them, which is an experience in itself.

The remainder of the day varied each day. Sometimes I would help cook - fresh *bortk* is amazing - , most times I would herd the sheep and cows to the water well to give them water (make sure you hold the cord well...or...like me....it falls in the well, and you have no option but to dive in, in the freezing cold, get soaked, save the bail, and climb up with your family giggling at you!), some days I helped other families take down their *ger*'s and help them move to a new spot, on many occasions there wasn't much to do and I sat reading my book and in awe of the incredible scenery...sometimes climbing one of the many peaks. At times, my family would drive me to Tim's *ger* where we would play cards, or climb mountains.



Towards the end of the day, it was time to work again, as the cows and sheep came home. At this point we would tie the cows down (it took me forever to figure out the knot, but I finally got there!) and we would milk the cows (I was horrible at this - it is quite funny when you see the locals milk, and then you have me trying to milk with some milk going in the bucket, some on my clothes, and some on my face). We would then put the baby sheep into the sheep pen. Again, this part was a different experience on a daily basis and it is always funny when you see sheep jump around and try to run away.

A couple of hours later, it was time to go to bed...though on a nightly basis we would enjoy some Mongolian TV via satellite. At times, my family would have other family members over to play cards. That also was an experience in itself.

The next day we would repeat the process. But don't get confused. Just because the process repeated, doesn't mean what happened was the same every day. Every day was different. Every day was an awesome adventure and a wonderful experience. Everyday was a laugh and a smile on the dial. And at the end, I was really really sad to say goodbye to my host family. The following is a small list from my list of 125 things that I experienced to give you an idea:

- Milked cows
- Herded sheep and cows
- Rode horse
- Helped butcher & slaughter a sheep
- Hiked mountains
- Helped cook
- Helped take down a ger, move it, and put it back up again (on multiple occasions)
- Saved my water bottle from floating away in the river....by...once again...getting soaked
- And much much much more



During break times, I would returned to the city with Tim, where we had the opportunity to do even more! Projects abroad organise three great social activities on a monthly basis....these are always good fun. The city also offers quite a bit to see. The following are must do's:

- Gandan Monastery
- Parliament & Sukhbaatar square
- Chingghis Khan Statue
- Holding an eagle and vulture
- Zaisan and Buddha park

I've only described a small amount of my time in Mongolia. It was an amazing time, and probably the best experience I have ever had. You meet heaps of new people, and make lifelong friends. As soon as I left the country, I started to miss it terribly. I'm back home in Australia now, and I still miss it! Though I have promised myself and my host family that I will return.

And I will.



Highlight of the month: “make **Dreams** come true” fundraiser

Disable is able
Impossible is possible...

On 21st of June, Projects Abroad Mongolia organized a “make **Dreams** come true” Fundraiser for members of the Mongolian Community who are disabled. The goal of the Fundraiser was to raise money for disabled young adults with cerebral palsy. It was a special opportunity to see full of culture, music, dance and many volunteers came together, a members of the community uniting to draw attention to very tragic and unfortunate group of society members who are struggling to be productive.

Eager to give them opportunity to take a professional training course which can help to improve their talents, Projects Abroad took so much time and energy to make the Fundraiser successful and gets everyone involved by helping out in different aspects and contributing what they could whether it was artistic work or just being there.



Our fundraiser consisted of bunch of performances done by both professionals as well as Projects Abroad volunteers. We had professional singers, magician, contortionist, violin performance by one of the projects abroad volunteer Anne Haemmelmann, Ballet performance by volunteer Natasa Bansagi and Mongolian dancer Bolor and much more. We were able to raise money money through a care project volunteer Fanny Barruel's (from France) service. She was on the side drawing personal portrait- making portraits of guests who would come and sit down.



During the fundraisers, one of the events that we had an opportunity to raise money with was a auction. Items such as a handcraft watermelon and paintings were donated by professional Mongolian artists. One of the disabled young people, we were raising money for, came to the event and performed us. His talent was when we said a word or somebody on the audience said a word, he was able to make a poem about that word on the spot. We also had bunch of disabled young people who made bakes and cookies to sell. All those goods were sold at the event and we raised considerable amount of money through that.



In the end we were able to raise 1,115,870 tugrug which is about 800\$. We exceeded our goals in raising that amount of money that we tried to get. Projects Abroad appreciates contributions from all the people who helped us to make this event so much more energized and even more successful.

My experience with Projects Abroad: by Journalism volunteer Christine Westgate



One thing I've discovered while in Mongolia, is that at age 55, I'd be retiring. What? For me, that's only 5 years away and small change. I'm just getting started on the "good stuff" of my career - finishing up a second degree in comparative literature with a focus in semantics analysis, and heading towards PhD work with a focus in global health policy.

You might ask, what could comparative literature and global health policy possibly have in common, you might ask, and I wouldn't blame you. My theory (or hypothesis, in academic terms) is that art (including graffiti), literature, advertisements, music lyrics, TV. sit-coms, movie scripts and news articles can precede and possibly outperform traditional quantitative measures (such as demographics, economic and health indicators, etc.) in identifying

public and environmental health issues as well as in assessment of programs designed to address these issues. This past spring, I felt "suddenly" compelled to take the initiative and come to Mongolia to start the ball rolling with my research. I put "suddenly" in quotes because my interest in Mongolia started out of the blue 23 years ago when I was preparing to leave for China. An acquaintance who was also headed for Beijing asked me casually what I was most looked forward to for my time in China. Living in China had been a childhood dream for me, coming quite suddenly when I was ten years old and laying on my back in the snow with my neighbor. We'd been talking about what we would do when we grew up. She said she was going to be a professional roller derby sportswoman. I said I was going to grow up and live in China. This childhood dream came true when I was 25, even though I'd barely done anything to make it happen. So on the verge of now fulfilling that dream; I couldn't believe what came out of my mouth. I heard myself saying that the best thing about China was that it was close to Mongolia, and I wanted to go to Mongolia to ride a horse in the steppes. I thought, where the heck did that come from? I still haven't answered that question. It really doesn't matter, is what I've decided.

Like a bird who decides it's time to migrate, I found myself registering for the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) annual conference in San Diego, and putting together a semantics analysis around environmental themes using the anthropological database of "The Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia" (mongolianoralhistory.org). I presented my research as a poster at the annual meeting of The American Center for Mongolian Studies (mongoliacenter.org) during the AAS conference. Things went well with all of that, including my younger kids - ages 12 and 9 - and I being apart for a week.

So on my return, I decided that the time was right for my "Me & Mongolia" plan. I'd found Projects Abroad through an internet search, and given my interest in policy and text/semantics analysis, as well as my double second undergraduate degree work in comparative literature and creative writing/data journalism, decided that the best way for me to get my feet wet in Mongolia would be as a journalist. Coincidentally, Projects Abroad was hosting an information night in Boston the evening I returned from the AAS conference in San Diego. The info session cinched my decision to go through with my travel. But in truth, I'd already made all the payments, and my kids and I had made arrangements for them to go to overnight camp for two weeks and then to spend a month with their father. It's been great to have their support; if it wasn't okay with them, I would not have made the trip.

I'd sort of envisioned a summer without kids. So when I learned that my host family had a 4-year-old I needed to change my perspective from what I'd imagined my summer to be like. I had to let go of all expectations. Forgetting about any preconceptions turned out to be a good idea. There have been a lot of surprises in Mongolia, and an open mind is the #1 thing that should be on anyone's packing list. My hostess faces a lot of the challenges I've faced as a mother and a working professional. I've seen her juggle family, work, housekeeping, day care, friends and her leisure time, as well as housing issues and of course, dealing with the cold water situation that occurs every summer here in UB when the hot water is shut off without notice for pipe cleaning.

My family and I went on a camping adventure where we started out with a tent but because of rain ended up at a Government-run health camp. That's a story in itself

Fortunately, for the curious, you can read about that experience of mine and others by going ub-post.mongolnews.mn and using their search feature to query my last name, "Westgate." Of course, there's a lot that happened that I didn't write about. But a lot of my Mongolian "adventure" was chronicled publicly. I'm normally quite shy and private about my opinions. Working as a reporter and being asked to "put it on the line" so to speak, has really developed me professionally.

I even had the courage to write an article to promote good research data and methodologies in Mongolia, and that article has put some steam under such an initiative, one that might very well see me through to the end of my career. Of course, I won't be retiring at age 55! I fully expect to be engrossed in my semantics analysis of public health, social welfare and policy issues well into my so-called old age. I'll be finishing my doctorate at age 55, just getting started in my opinion.

Overall, it's hard to believe that in only four weeks I've accomplished in Mongolia, under a Projects Abroad Placement, along with the resources offered by the ACMS (open to all, not just Americans by the way) what I otherwise might have accomplished in one year, if that.

Another Projects Abroad volunteer I met was agonizing over having to start a new career in his mid-30's. "I'm so old," he said. I could only laugh.

Cherlyn Tan gains eye-opening experience while volunteering at a hospital in Mongolia

Twenty-one-year-old Cherlyn Tan, a Singaporean native studying Biomedical Sciences at the University of Manchester, was drawn to Mongolia by its rich culture, long history and traditional medicines. Having already done a project on Chinese traditional medicine, Cherlyn wanted to learn more about traditional medicine in Mongolia and its role in the current medical scene. She was also interested in observing different types of surgeries. With this in mind, she embarked on a two-week volunteer experience with the Projects Abroad Medical Project in Mongolia.



Cherlyn was placed in the General Surgical Department at State Central Hospital in Ulaanbaatar. Some of her work included shadowing and assisting the supervising doctor, observing surgeries, and visiting patients who would soon be undergoing surgery. From the very beginning, Cherlyn loved her work at the hospital: "I got to watch many different surgeries, such as chronic appendicitis, cholecystectomies and replacement surgery. Observing all the surgeries up close, directly behind the surgeons was just an eye-opener and something I never ever got to do back in Singapore or in the UK."

Cherlyn emphasized that the most memorable experience in Mongolia was one night when she was on-call at the hospital. She thought she would not have much to do, but there were three surgeries and many patients that had to be seen. She found that it gave her so much more practical knowledge than she ever expected to gain: "I got to examine a patient and pre-diagnosed her with chronic appendicitis, a diagnosis that the doctor confirmed upon his arrival. It was 3am and the patient arrived with great pain. I was so scared to try pre-diagnosing since I could see how much pain was on her face."

At the end of her project, Cherlyn explained that the experience she gained with Projects Abroad Mongolia would allow her to stand out as she pursues medical school next year: "This experience will definitely help me in my future career."

Cherlyn also got to experience the Mongolian culture firsthand by living with a host family, something she really enjoyed: "My host mother was the nicest person. They treated me just as if I was a member of their family. I don't think I would have done any better or enjoyed my time any more in Mongolia without my host family and all the volunteers!"

Although only spending a short time in Mongolia, Cherlyn completed her placement with much to share with future volunteers interested in the Projects Abroad Medical Project: "Don't be afraid to ask questions. There are a lot of things that doctors can teach you. Make friends and meet locals. They are very friendly." And, when it comes to the country whose culture and history she was so eager to discover during her stay, she says simply: "Mongolia is too awesome to describe in one sentence."

