

ProjectsAbroad™

Projects Abroad Mongolia Official Newsletter *April 2013*



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Volunteer experience with Projects Abroad in Mongolia

By Venus Kue

My name is Venus Kue. I am twenty three years old and live in Warren, Michigan in the United States of America. I've recently graduated from Michigan State University with my bachelors in Biomedical Laboratory Sciences. I'm a premed student and currently am in a gap year before pursuing more education. During this gap year, I wanted to do some volunteering to build a stronger resume. In order to get into medical school, you have to have so many hours of shadowing physicians and this is why I started looking into Projects Abroad.

Projects Abroad Mongolia was my first choice because I've always been curious about the culture of Mongolians. I'm Asian American, Hmong specifically. Hmong is a small Asian group that not a lot of people have heard about. We don't have our own country, so my people are from China, Thailand, and Laos. It is pronounced "Mong", and many people have asked if I was from Mongolia and I was always like, "I've never even met one Mongolian in my whole life!" I wanted to come here to experience the difference between Mongolian culture and Hmong culture and see what this country and its people were all about.

My placement is in the medical project at Central Railway Hospital in Ulaanbaatar. I have three mentors there who are all surgeons. Doctors in America are really intimidating so I expected them to be the same but they were the funniest and friendliest physicians I've ever met. Their curiosity for the English language is also so inspiring and their talent in what they do amazes me. I was put into the surgery department where I was able to watch them perform operations. I was so excited because my first thirty minutes in the hospital they took me right into the surgery room where a patient was cut open right in front of me! I would have never thought I would have the chance to experience that in real life so I'm very blessed. I've watched them do cholecystectomies and fix patients with varicoceles and so on. On my last day of volunteering, the head surgeon let me scrub into an operation and it was so thrilling! He said I was the first volunteer he's ever let scrubbed in so I was pretty proud of myself.

I was also in the Emergency Department on some days. It's very different from Emergency Departments in the United States. For example, there was usually an average of only three patients a day and they were taken care of as if they were an inpatient. Many of them stayed at the hospital overnight until they were better. I was able to help weigh the patients and take their blood pressure and pulse.

While I was in Ulaanbaatar, I stayed with a host family. On my very first day of arriving in Mongolia, I learned that they gave up their only one bedroom for me to stay in while all six members of the family slept in the living room. I was so humbled by this gesture. They instantly took me in and treated me like I was one of them. My oldest host brother would walk me places and cook for me. My host mother would make my bed and fold my clothes for me. I actually felt like I've been part of this family my whole life. On my last day in Mongolia, my host father gave me the biggest hug and said to me that no matter what, if I ever come to Mongolia or have friends that come, for me to come straight to their house and their door will be open for me. Mongolia has taught me a lot about the love of family. I'm very lucky to have experience all of this.

One of the most valuable things for me on my short trip in Mongolia was the volunteers and people I've met. I've met people from France, England, Switzerland, Netherlands, Korea, and more. These people are outstanding to me because they want more out of life than an average person.



They see that it's a big world with many opportunities and they've come here to experience that and they do it with an open mind. I've never met so many people with such big dreams and big hearts. We talked about our experiences and our thoughts and what we want in life. There was never a dull moment with them. I've found friends for life and it's a bonus that whenever I travel to these places one day, they will be there with open arms.

Overall my experience in Mongolia was more than I could ask for. I've got to do things I've never done and see things I've never seen. It was definitely a part of the world that I'm glad I've got to experience. It's taught me a lot about life and how big the world is, and how many opportunities we have in our short lifetime. My trip to Mongolia has taught me to be fearless and jump into situations with an open mind and it's taught me confidence in whom I am as a person. And most of all, I'm humbled by everything I was able to do while I was here. God definitely has a big purpose for all of us, and if we just open our eyes a little bit, we will be able to see the wonderful things he's made for us to enjoy.



Baptiste Cessieux from Rennes gains worthwhile experience for his future journalism career in Mongolia.

Twenty-five year old Baptiste Cessieux, a recent graduate from The University of Rennes 1, had always had plans to become a successful journalist. He was looking for a challenge which might help to determine if journalism was his real passion. To do this, he chose to volunteer with Projects Abroad and came to Mongolia where he worked at the Journalism Project for three months.

Baptiste's placement was at the *UB Post*, Mongolia's first independent English weekly newspaper. "My responsibility at *UB Post* was to prepare the whole international news page and write articles for the community part of the paper. When I met with my supervisor, she gave me the opportunity to take my own initiative on my projects rather than shadowing the senior journalists and asking what I should do. It was such a nice chance to work as a real journalist."

He has already written several articles for *UB Post* so far and one of his articles about "Meat Standardization" was published in other newspapers and different international websites. He was so happy with this opportunity and thought that it was a brilliant experience that taught him a lot about journalism.

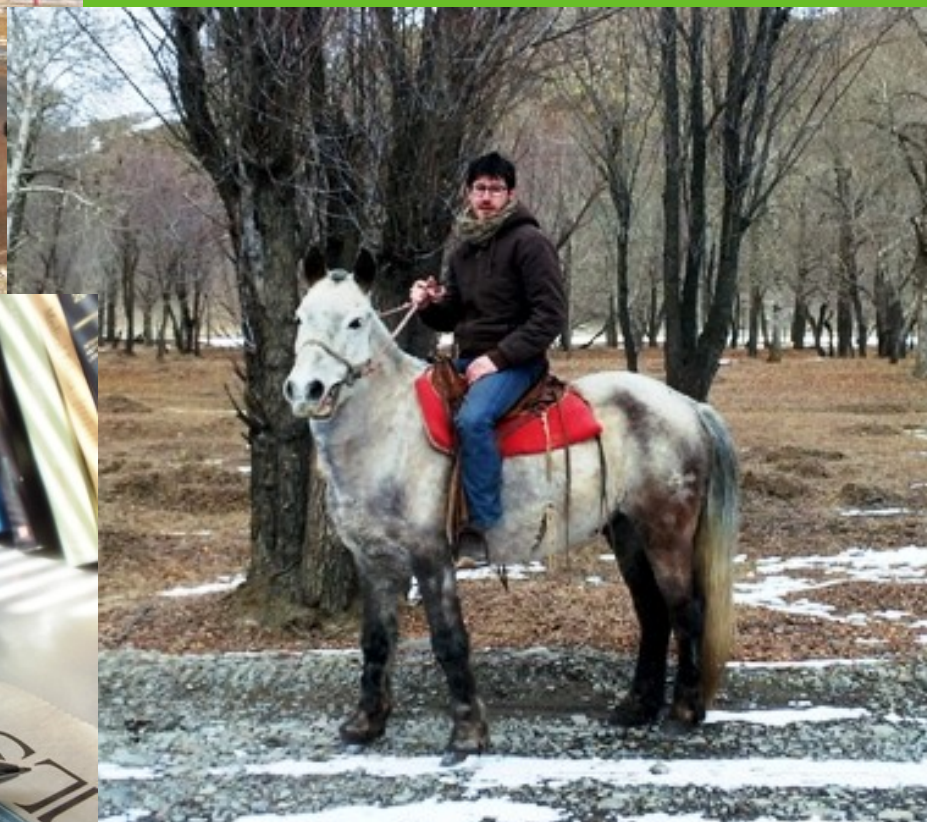
"My first article was rejected by the chief editor. I was not surprised, because I am not a professional journalist. I just kept going and working harder. My second big article was accepted and I received good feedback from the chief editor. It was exciting to hear positive feedback about your article from your supervisor. It was even more exciting to know that readers sent great feedback about your article to your supervisor. I felt proud!"

Baptiste also worked at the *French Cultural Organization* two days a week where he got another chance to write and meet a lot of expats from different countries. While helping *French Alliance* and working with the communication manager, he helped to organized some cultural events. One of the biggest events that he helped with was to show French movies in the *Urguu*, the biggest cinema in UB city.



"Being a volunteer, gives you an opportunity to see different things. If I had come here not as a volunteer, I think I would not have had the opportunity to do the things that I did with Projects Abroad. It's going to be very useful in my future, because here I worked as a real journalist and learnt a lot about journalism. The most rewarding thing was that I had more responsibility here than if I did same job in France."

After his three months of worthwhile journalism experience in Mongolia he says, "This was my first time working as a journalist and I am so happy about it. I was not sure if I really wanted to do this job in the future. But now I am sure".



Volunteer Story by Laurent Sauge

Mon voyage en Mongolie

En cherchant sur internet une activité bénévole que je pourrais effectuer en Asie, je suis tombé sur le site de Projects Abroad qui proposait plusieurs projets en Mongolie... J'ai eu l'occasion à plusieurs reprises de visiter ce pays par le passé et l'idée de m'arrêter à nouveau quelque temps ici était plutôt motivante : c'était une bonne occasion pour moi de reprendre contact avec un pays que j'aime beaucoup. Plusieurs projets proposés me semblaient intéressants mais je me suis finalement décidé pour des cours de langue française qui me permettraient de rencontrer des Mongols... avec qui je pourrais parler, puisqu'ils parleraient une langue que je comprendrais.

Avant de me décider, j'ai quand même pris le temps de réfléchir un peu : ce n'est pas toujours évident de supporter pendant plusieurs semaines des températures largement négatives et je me suis dit que le "printemps" mongol serait peut-être plus agréable que l'hiver. Je me suis donc finalement lancé dans "l'aventure" mais j'ai vite compris que le mois d'avril est un mois qui a encore, ici, un bon pied dans l'hiver ; les températures descendent encore régulièrement au-dessous des -10 degrés la nuit et il y a un vent froid qui souffle par intermittence qui ne rend pas évidente l'idée qu'un jour on pourra prendre son café sur les terrasses d'Ulaan Baator... Cependant, malgré la neige qui fait parfois encore son apparition, on peut sentir que l'arrivée des beaux jours n'est plus très éloignée, et lorsque que le soleil est là, les températures deviennent vites plus agréables.



De premier abord, Ulaan Baator n'est pas une ville extraordinairement attirante avec ses immeubles qui datent de l'ère soviétique et son flot continu de voitures ; ces dernières années, la ville a eu une augmentation presque exponentielle de la circulation automobile avec, malheureusement, son lot de pollution qui l'accompagne. Il y a une époque qui n'est pas si lointaine, où les chevaux pouvaient encore traverser la ville tranquillement... et les piétons traverser les rues sans être formés au préalable à la survie en milieu hostile. Malgré tout, Ulaan Baator mérite qu'on y prête un peu d'attention et peut aussi être une ville agréable. Le centre, autour du parlement, peut être assez animé. Les anciennes constructions laissent de plus en plus la place à de nouveaux immeubles et les rénovations des anciens bâtiments ou encore des sites historiques sont aussi entrepris avec beaucoup d'entrain. En fait, on trouve aujourd'hui à Ulaan Baator tout ce que l'on souhaite, des boutiques de grandes marques aux restaurants qui proposent une cuisine internationale. En fait, Ulaan Baator ressemble de plus en plus aux autres villes de la planète et il faudra peut-être aller chercher "l'exotisme" un peu plus loin dans les steppes environnantes. Par contre, chose assez remarquable, il n'y a toujours pas de MacDonald ici. Enfin, il ne faut surtout pas hésiter à monter en haut de la nouvelle tour "blue sky" ; la vue sur la ville en vaut vraiment la peine, et c'est peut-être en regardant vers les collines et le quartier des yourtes qu'on comprend finalement qu'on est vraiment en Mongolie.

Ma famille d'accueil

Ma famille d'accueil habite au nord d'Ulaan Baator, à une vingtaine de minutes à pied du centre, dans un appartement qui se trouve au 3ème étage d'un grand ensemble d'immeubles. J'ai été très bien accueilli avec, comme il se doit, un plat de buuz (ces gros raviolis farcis à la viande de mouton) comme premier repas. Trois personnes habitent dans l'appartement : la mère et deux jeunes, des cousins qui étudient à Ulaan Baator. La plus jeune, Hongoroo, étudie la physique à l'université et parle un peu l'anglais ; on arrive à se comprendre un peu et c'est toujours agréable de discuter un moment avec elle. La mère, une ancienne enseignante, ne parle malheureusement pas mieux l'anglais que moi je ne maîtrise le mongol et la conversation se résume donc au stricte minimum. Sa fille qui travaille comme médecin dans un hôpital de la ville parle par contre très bien l'anglais. Elle passe régulièrement voir sa mère et c'est l'occasion pour moi de parler un peu avec elle de la vie en Mongolie.

Je pense que quelques cours de langue seraient bien utiles pour pouvoir communiquer un peu avec les Mongols... J'ai bien essayé de l'apprendre un peu, mais mon cerveau a une très grande faculté pour effacer de façon très efficace le peu que j'arrive à apprendre de cette langue ; à sa décharge, le mongol n'est vraiment pas une langue facile à aborder... et là, je ne vous parle même pas de sa prononciation.

Mon projet

Mon projet a donc lieu à Ulaan Baator même ; je dois en fait organiser des cours de conversation à "l'université des sciences humaines" pour des jeunes qui se sont lancés (courageusement) dans l'étude du français. Les étudiants choisissent la langue de Molière pour une multitude de raisons différentes, mais l'activité touristique avec la possibilité d'accueillir des voyageurs francophones est l'une des raisons principales qui les pousse à choisir cette voie. Le rêve de partir un jour en France... ou au Québec, fait aussi partie des raisons de ce choix. Enfin, certains d'entre eux ont tout simplement de la famille en France, ont un parent français ou encore travaillent dans une entreprise française... et souhaitent donc pouvoir communiquer plus facilement avec leur entourage.

J'ai une grande liberté dans le choix des sujets que je peux aborder avec les étudiants et j'en profite donc parfois pour essayer de dépasser les frontières françaises en étendant la discussion sur les autres pays francophones. Je travaille avec des enseignantes qui sont pour la plus part Mongoles, mais qui ont toutes une très bonne maîtrise de la langue et qui connaissent souvent très bien la France pour y avoir séjourné, parfois plusieurs années.

Il y a ici, à mon grand étonnement, une petite communauté francophone assez dynamique... qui a aussi droit à sa propre librairie ; n'hésitez donc pas à aller y faire un petit tour si le cœur vous en dit.

J'ai eu beaucoup de chances durant mon séjour puisque je suis tombé sur la semaine de la francophonie. J'ai pu profiter des différentes manifestations liées à cette fête, avec notamment la journée de clôture qui a vu s'affronter une partie des étudiants lors d'un concours de chansons francophones et de récitations de poésies... Le résultat était bluffant.

Enfin, j'essaie (avec beaucoup de difficultés) d'enseigner les bases de la langue à l'équipe mongole de Projects Abroad. Je peux vous assurer que cette langue est un vrai défi à enseigner pour une personne qui n'a pas de formation d'enseignant de français comme moi... Je laisserai donc le soin aux prochains francophones de prendre le relais en leur souhaitant bonne chance ! :)



Stefani Thomsen gains important skills for her future career while volunteering in Mongolia



22-year-old Stefani Thomsen, an International Communication and Multimedia major from Aarhus University in Denmark, wanted to complete her internship in a media and communication company somewhere far from Denmark. Eager to fulfill her plan, she signed up with Projects Abroad, and was placed at Arigu Media and Marketing Company in Mongolia's capital city, Ulaanbaatar.

She never would have envisioned herself travelling and working in Mongolia. "Many people asked me that why I chose Mongolia, because Mongolia is not a typical place to travel for Europeans.



A developing country like Mongolia is a great place to really take what you have learnt in school and use it. The rewarding thing is that they really appreciate your help. If I was an intern in Europe they would probably not allow half of what I was doing here, so that is amazing!"

She started her internship at Arigu media with writing articles for newspapers and websites. One of her main tasks was to design the logo and brochure for a major mining company. By bringing her initiative to her project, she helped with an event at the mining company by making posters and brochures to be displayed and handed out at the event. "I was given a lot of responsibility, because they allowed me to both write and design brochures. Basically they gave me a lot of freedom to be creative and come up with designs."

"Volunteers are needed in this field; because communication is a relatively new thing and a relatively new profession here especially strategic and effective communication which is also a major part of my education back home. Helping them to improve their communication, both locally and internationally, was really worthwhile; because communicating to the outside world through brochures and online articles will be really important for my future development."

Stefani believes that the volunteering experience has been enriching, she has had a great cultural experience and it was a great chance to use the knowledge that she learned at university and get practical experience. "In school I was taught how to affect people through the use of colors, to make interesting design and written communication. Basically I used all of that when I was doing the internship here."

According to Stefani, living with a Mongolian host family and socializing with other volunteers from all over the world were the best ways to experience both Mongolian and different cultures at same time. "My host family was very friendly and approachable and meeting people from all over the world was fascinating. I have made some good friendships. I think it will last for a long time. This has been an amazing and valuable experience for me" explained Stefani.

After returning home to Denmark, Stefani plans to start her Master's degree and advises future volunteers to have an open mind and positive attitude when you are volunteering in Mongolia. "Mongolians may seem distant and closed when you first meet them, but they are really nice people. Don't be afraid to offer your help, you need to take your own initiative and prove your worth."

We hope that great stories like these inspire others to help Projects Abroad to continue to make a difference and, in doing so, to learn something themselves along the way.