



ProjectsAbroad

Projects Abroad Mongolia Official Newsletter

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Why the Hell Mongolia?

"Why do you want to go to Mongolia, of all places?" was everyone's question when I told them that I would spend five weeks there. Well, why did I want to go there? Since I had watched the film "The Cave of The Yellow Dog" by Byambasuren Davaa, I had been fascinated by the vast landscapes and the Nomad culture that differs so much from my own. Whenever there was a documentary about Mongolia on German TV (and there were not few of them), I would watch it. It was just a consequence to go there myself some day; and so I did on 11th of March. Although I had read some books about Mongolia, I had not dared to go there myself: not knowing the language, let alone the alphabet, and being unfamiliar with the culture. Therefore, I was glad that Enkhee, one of the local representatives of Projects Abroad in Mongolia, waited for me at the gate of ChingghisKhaan Airport. I was quite tired after the 15-hour-flight with stopovers in busy Istanbul and sleepy Bishkek. Declaredly, I hadn't spent time thinking about what cities in Mongolia might look like, but the thought that struck me on my drive to the host family was that this was a typical development country: the first things that I saw from the taxi were brownish mountains and bright little houses, as well as gers next to a dusty road. Ulanbaatar itself was very busy, with cars honking and passers-by crossing the streets at all possible and impossible places and this is how I became a journalist, an actress, an explorer and a goat brusher within five weeks.

I was glad that I got a day's rest at my host family's apartment before I went to introduce myself at the office of the UB Post, the newspaper I did an internship at for the next weeks. Having never worked for a newspaper before, I was surprised to hear that office hours were just three days a week, namely the days before the newspaper were published, and even then, the journalists didn't have to be present. They could plan their time freely, just as long as their articles were ready on time. So, I wrote my first two articles from home, but the edition was really helpful.





During this time I got a phone call from Projects Abroad as one of the other volunteers had an internship at a TV station, and they were looking for Europeans who could act as extras in a film scene. Would I like to join them? Yes, of course! So, I met with three other volunteers at Sukhbataar Square (the central place in UB) and was brought to the TV studios. We got professional make-up and waited for the things to come. As I hadn't time to change my clothes, I was still wearing my suit from the office. So, I had to come up to the front and act as the assistant of the auctioneer, while the others were the visitors to the auction. That was really weird... At the end of the week, Abbie from Essex joined us, and we decided to have a break from our placements and go to the Gobi desert. The tour with a public bus took about eight hours, but it was

worth it! There aren't many Europeans that can claim to have ridden on camels through the desert during a sandstorm. We can since last Tuesday. Apart from that, we hired a driver who brought us to the flaming cliffs where we watched the sunset over the desert; we also walked on sand dunes and stayed in a ger overnight. The desert differed from anything you can see in Europe; the landscape seemed so unreal that we had the impression of walking through a picture or being on another planet.

When back in Ulanbaataar, I got ready for my second project, namely, living with a nomad family. This project also gave me some new insight; I had never thought about how these nice, warm, and above all, expensive cashmere pullovers that hang in diverse stores and boutiques in Germany are made. The family I was brought to (a household of three generations) happened to keep over 200 cashmere goats. So, on the first day I was there, the whole family (me included) combed cashmere goats; and, let me tell you, you need to comb quite a lot of goats, who don't like to be brushed at all, to get a sack of cashmere wool. It was strenuous labor, considering the fact that the nomads that deliver the cashmere get the least amount of money. Apart from that, I collected new born baby goats and calves from the steppe; altogether, the family had already about 200 baby sheep, goats and five calves.

The Mongolians – Meat Lovers, Relaxed Hosts and Guests

As I had already experienced in my host family in UB, you have to be an extinct lover of meat if you don't want to starve in Mongolia. In a typical German fridge you'd probably find neatly cut pieces of meat, free from any fat and everything that could remind you that this was once an animal. A typical Mongolian fridge, in contrast, looks like the storeroom of a professional butcher, stuffed with legs, shoulders and tails. These will be vigorously cut into pieces and used for diverse stews, soups and buzz (the Mongolian version of ravioli). Another thing to get used to was the tea that was served. It looked like tea, it smelled like tea, and actually, it was tea, but it was salted. Apart from that, the Mongolians are very relaxed and uncomplicated hosts and guests. One of my personal highlights was when my host family and I got into the pickup (three in the front, five on the back) and went through the dark steppe to the next ger. There, we huddled together – five people playing cards, the host and her daughter making buzz, four people watching an Indian soap opera on TV and one sleeping on the bed – all in one room. It was really cosy, and after lots of buzz and some airag, the fermented horse milk, two more persons fell asleep – one of them being me. At midnight, all the guests climbed onto the pickup again and we drove back home. My experiences were confirmed by the other volunteers I met. "Sometimes, when my host is not there, people would drop in. I don't know any of them, but they would take a shower, watch TV, or just making themselves a cup of tea and leave again" I was told. "Yesterday, when my host had already gone to work, a woman came into my bedroom to serve me some tea; I had never seen her before", another volunteer added. You learn to live with unanswered questions in Mongolia. Anyway, I will leave the country with lots of new impressions and a newly gained relaxedness that hopefully remains for some time.

I have always wanted to volunteer, to learn about volunteering and to learn about ways of helping other people and learn about different cultures.

“Mongolia is very authentic, because it is quite isolated and has very few tourists per year. Mongolia also has beautiful nature. I knew that the best way to travel to Mongolia would be to volunteer so that I could experience the culture in a much more up close way. I did the teaching project when I was volunteering in Nepal, and I loved it. So I decided to do the same project while I’m in Mongolia. I have worked as an English teacher at the state school #13 and taught classes with students from ages around 11 years to 17 years.”

"I think this experience will be very useful for my future. I learned a lot about the Mongolian culture, Mongolia in general and about effective ways of teaching English as well. The most rewarding experience is when you see that the children have learned something new while having so much fun that they don't want to leave the classroom. One of my most memorable experiences was the first day. I was told I was going to just observe a Mongolian teacher, but the teacher suddenly told me "Go ahead, teach English", so I had to improvise an entire class. It was challenging, but a lot of fun. I only have positive feelings towards the project I had been working on."

"Volunteering in Mongolia was very exciting, very different and very memorable."



American university graduate experiences unique way of life with nomads in Mongolia.

Twenty-three year old Sylvan LaChance from Massachusetts, USA, wanted to experience a full cultural immersion somewhere completely different from home and somewhere that would be a rare place to visit for people she knows. This motivated her to travel to Mongolia and signed up for a one month volunteer adventure at the Projects Abroad Nomad Project. "I wanted to be away from the city and have as minimal contact with other volunteers and other people that speak my language. I wanted a full cultural immersion and it really was a cultural immersion because, nobody spoke in my language."



Sylvan stayed in a 'ger', the Mongolian traditional dwelling, with a nomad family consisting of her host parents and their three children for one month near the village of Altanbulag in the Tuv Province, which is located 200km away from the Ulaanbaatar city. There were the host mother's parents who also living next to their 'ger' and they had one farm with about 400 animals including horse, cow, goat and sheep. She really enjoyed being involved in the daily routines of the nomads such as cooking traditional foods, herding animals, riding horses, combing goats and helping with the delivering off young animals. "It was a really busy time as all the animals were giving birth. I think at least 200 animals gave birth in a time I was there. Every day we had to look for babies through binoculars on the cattle run due to animals giving birth while they were in the steppes and we had to go and get the new born animals. Sometimes when babies are born, their bodies are coming out the wrong way. So helping to pull out the babies was pretty incredible and going to find them with horses and sometimes on the motorcycle was my favourite."

Sylvan also got a chance to get involved in combing goat activity. "This time of year, nomads comb their goats for cashmere. It was very difficult at first and took up a lot of time. After having done a lot of brushing I got little bit better with it and they said "you good, you good" and kept saying it over and over. It was just the best feeling as from the beginning I felt like an outsider but the last 2 weeks I really did feel like family. Everything I did they said 'you good' and it was really rewarding just feeling like you're part of something bigger."

At the end of her project, Sylvan said that she found the little things the most rewarding: when she watched and helped out the family with the births. "Because it's like a new life you see the babies and in the couple days they're little bit bigger and for a month you watch them grow. Sometimes the mothers abandoned them so sometimes you feeding them with bottles. I felt that it was very maternal."

"As a volunteer at the nomad you definitely take more away than you give. Just because it's such an amazing experience and they can probably do all the work without you. They are so generous and it's kind of them to let you help. You might be slowing them down sometimes while experiencing a different kind of world and different life style. It is so calm, so happy and so simple all at the same time and unlike nothing I've ever seen before."



After completing her 1 month staying with Mongolian nomadic family, Sylvan advises to be enthusiastic and ready to learn. "Just jump and help. If you don't push yourself on them, they don't ask you to help. So you will be watching them the whole time, if you don't say anything. You don't even have to ask them to do anything just go and do it. They respect you more because you took the initiative to do it yourself."

"One thing I really liked about the nomadic families is how they all related and sense of community and the family is so strong. I think that is something we really loose today especially being in a city. Everybody is doing their own thing and own job. It's not about selfishness but you doing your own path and you don't really care too much of everyone around you. They really communicate all the time with each other, really and care so much of each other like a big family. Really it was. So it was nice to see and it was nice to feel a part of it too."

She continued: "They're really hospitable and kind to let me in. I realized how difficult it is to let a outsider come in and how difficult it is to teach someone things that you have been doing for your whole life. Everything is so natural to them- feeding goats or herding animals because they learn it when they're 3 years old. So I was grateful that they allowed me to learn."

"It was a different experience. I liked being in open spaces and I liked the landscape and really liked being with the animals. That's not an experience I could've had in the city. It was so different and incredible that I didn't want to leave."



Teina Nakashima blends language and culture in a unique placement in Mongolia



22-year-old Teina Nakashima from Sendai, Japan, was drawn to Mongolia by its rich history, unique identity and nomad lifestyle. Having already travelled to Mongolia, Teina wanted to visit again and learn more about its language and culture. To do this, she signed up with Projects Abroad and has completed a 2-week language placement to learn the Mongolian language.

Teina's placement consisted of 3 hours of language study each day at Nom- Ekhe, the language school for foreigners in Mongolia's capital city, Ulaanbaatar. Her interest in the Land of the Blue Sky had already taken her to Mongolia once before, where she travelled by herself. "I had a strong curiosity for Mongolia from my interest in history and nature. In September 2012, I went to Mongolia by myself and stayed with a family of nomads in their 'ger', travelled to the Terelj National Park and visited museums in Ulaanbaatar. That was a fantastic experience and I came to love Mongolia more."

Majoring in Geology at Tohoku University, Teina also wanted to learn about the country's mining sectors as Mongolia is well-known for its many natural resources. Her eagerness to explore the Mongolian landscapes, unique culture and nomadic lifestyle; and to broaden her perspective on her studies, all brought her into her new journey of learning Mongolian.

Aside from her language course, Teina took lessons of Morin Khuur, the horsehead fiddle instrument, a Mongolian traditional music instrument. "I liked morinkhuur since I listened to a concert for first time when I was in junior high school. Having my own Morin Khuur and learning it was one of my dreams. Luckily, I could do it this time and I took the lessons. Although I have played a stringed instrument (viola), there were still many differences. Playing Morin Khuur was very interesting. I will keep practicing it in Japan."



Although only spending a short time in Mongolia, Teina completed her placement with much to share: "There were many things I learned from this project. I was often impressed by the kindness of the Mongolian people. My host family was very nice and taught me a lot about the Mongolian culture. Also, when I got lost and asked random people for directions, they always kindly showed me the way.

Secondly, before coming here, I was anxious to start learning Mongolian because when I came here last time, I was confused when Mongolians spoke and I couldn't understand. However, when I said I could speak a little Mongolian, most people talked with me slowly with gestures so that I could understand. Talking with many Mongolian people was such a great experience. Thirdly, I learnt that music is like a worldwide language. I did some activities related to music, such as going to a Morin Khuur concert and learning the Morin Khuur was very interesting. Talking with my host family about Mongolian music was also fun. Music is also an important way of knowing the culture."

Teina's experience has motivated her to be like a bridge of friendship between Japan and Mongolia. "I will keep on studying after this wonderful experience. It is my dream to practice more and play some Mongolian music and make many people happy when I come here next time. In a word, it was a wonderful experience and I love Mongolia more and more."

