



# ProjectsAbroad

*Projects Abroad Mongolia Official Newsletter*

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### **Mad for the Nomads: My Nomad Project Experience by Emily Ho-Tai from Ontario, Canada**

I knew that my month long Nomad Project adventure had truly begun when I looked out the car window and there were no longer any signs of city life. It was a good feeling to be leaving behind the craziness of Ulaanbaatar and trading it in for the peaceful Mongolian countryside - the many modern buildings would be replaced by sparsely located traditional gers and the urban city dwellers by livestock and nomads. I became increasingly nervous the further out we drove, as I realized just how secluded we were, being out in the countryside. My anticipation built with every ger that we drove by, wondering whether it would be the ger of my host family - the ger I'd be calling home for the next month. When the car stopped and the driver motioned for me to get out, I knew that it was time for me to meet my family. I could say that the moment I stepped into the ger and met my family I instantly felt at home, but I would not be telling the truth.

Despite being warmly welcomed by the friendly faces of my host mother and father, the first evening was rather awkward. Well, very awkward. It involved copious amounts of silence and uncomfortable eye contact. I felt somewhat helpless as I desperately tried to figure out how I could break the ice (I never considered just how difficult it would be when there's a language barrier - my staring and creepy smiling certainly wasn't doing the job). I must say that I was mildly relieved when my host father turned on the television (yes, the television!) and the silence was broken at least. I went to bed feeling slightly invasive and wondering what I had gotten myself into. On top of that, I was still wearing my clothing from the day, as I didn't quite know where I should go to change into my pyjamas with some privacy (I eventually discovered a few methods of doing this, including changing in my sleeping bag or in the dark and away from the television, to which my family's eyes were glued most nights). After a bit more time, my family and I slowly established ways to communicate with each other and we began to understand more about each other's ways. I can say with confidence that I managed to settle into life and grow comfortable with my surroundings in the beautiful countryside (and I hope that my host family got used to having me hanging around for the month too!).

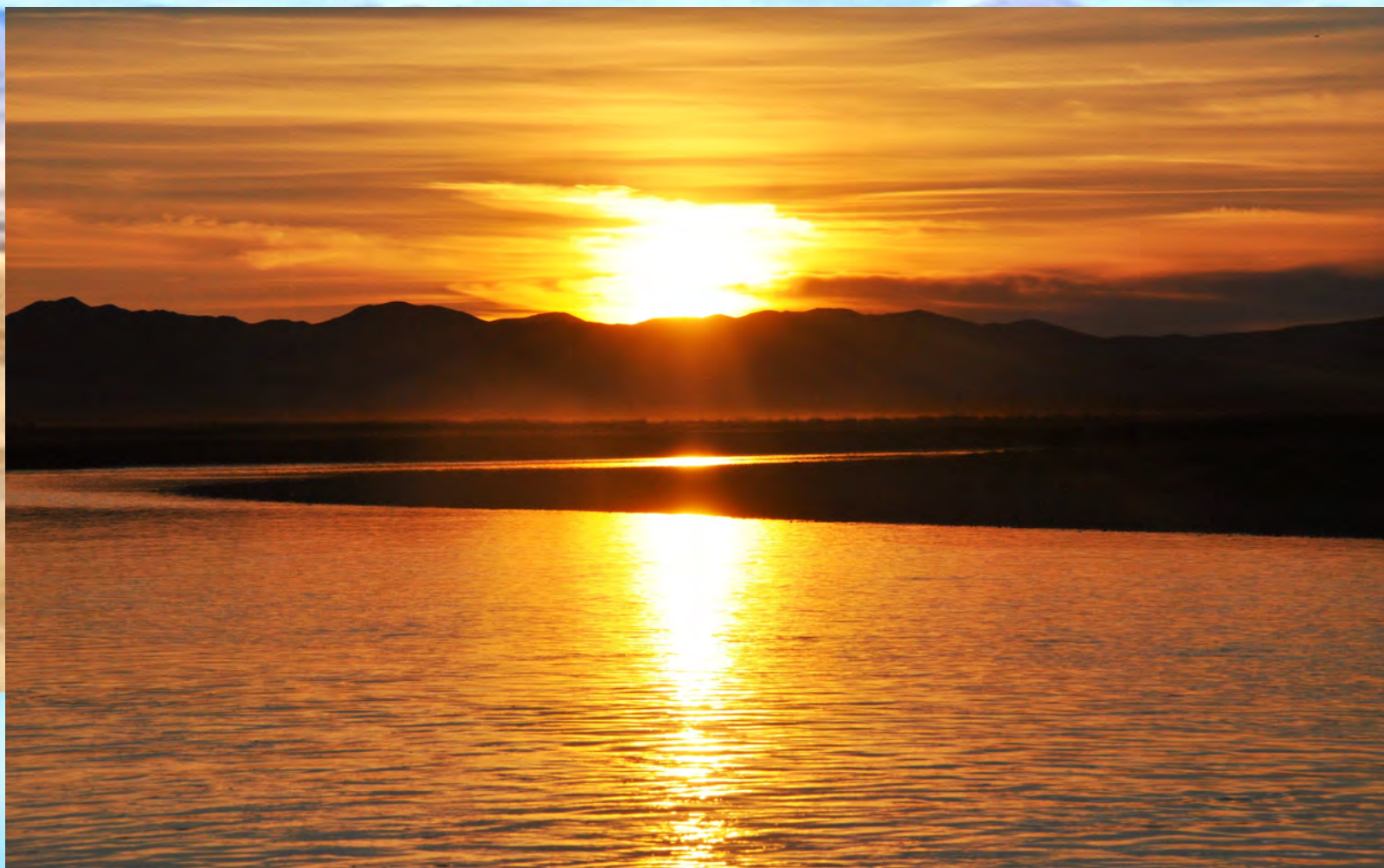
The day we left Ulaanbaatar, my first day in Mongolia, was grey and cloudy. Not being a terribly optimistic person, I took this as an indication of what the weather would be like for the rest of the month: cold and gloomy. Much to my delight, I woke up the next morning and saw a bright blue sky peeking through the hole in the ceiling of the ger. Excitedly I headed outside and was surrounded by a cloudless sky with the most intense shade of blue that stretched far out across the horizon.



Each morning when I woke up, I would peek out of my sleeping bag with anticipation to check the kind of weather we would be having that day. I am pleased to report that most days, I saw a beautiful blue sky peeking at me (one exception was the day that we welcomed some light snow fall; however, I was back to wearing a T-shirt and enjoying the sunshine the very next day!).

The sky was equally as impressive in the evening as it was during the day. As the sun began to disappear for the night, the blue sky was traded for a wonderful multicoloured sunset, which made for a lovely backdrop to the surrounding mountains. Of course, the sky never failed to impress when night fell. The stars that appeared were bright and plentiful. I could see stars all around me, as if I was in a planetarium. I don't think I've ever enjoyed flossing my teeth so much as when I was outside while looking up at the stars. Something I took great pleasure in was looking up at the stars and then looking down for a few minutes - when I looked back up again, I could see so many more stars which had appeared. The last night, I decided to take my sleeping bag outside to enjoy them one last time. It was so peaceful that I ended up falling asleep, only to be awoken by some light drizzle and my host father motioning for me to come back inside. I'm sure I looked slightly crazy lying out there in my sleeping bag, next to all the goats and sheep; but I just wanted to savour the moment.

Going out to watch the sunset and the stars each evening and night became part of my daily "routine." I put the word 'routine' in quotation marks because there was never really any routine, for me or for my host family (or if they had one, I certainly didn't pick up on it - the only routine was my host mother milking the cows each morning and the family watching an episode of a Mongolian-dubbed Korean soap opera most nights). Between our language barrier and having no routine, I would never wake up in the morning knowing what to expect for the day - what we'd be doing, where we'd be going, who we'd be seeing. As one who doesn't always do well with simply going with the flow, this is definitely something that took some getting used to. I'm proud to say that I learned to embrace the excitement that comes with not knowing what to expect! One day I found myself at a pre-wedding party for my host father's niece (well, I think that's who it was for). The morning before we left I could sense we were off to a special occasion, as everyone was getting all dolled up and putting on their best clothes. I decided to change out of my very filthy track pants into my less filthy jeans for the occasion - whatever the occasion might be. Although I felt quite bad for crashing the wedding festivities, I am so grateful that my family took me along. I mean, when else would I ever have the opportunity to experience something like that? I'm also grateful that I was fully welcomed to the event, despite sticking out like a sore thumb. Something else that I wasn't exactly excited about was when six or seven visitors popped into our ger - at two in the morning.





I'm not sure if my host family was expecting company or whether early morning visitors are a common occurrence, but they certainly did not seem phased by the whole thing, and even made a meal to feed everyone. At this point, I had been living in the countryside for two weeks and, although I definitely was not expecting visitors at 2 am, it really didn't surprise me that it was happening.

I sort of just chuckled and fell back asleep, drowning out the sound of people chattering and eating. I was surprised, however, to see a few of them sleeping on the floor when I woke up the next morning (I must say that the ger was nice and toasty from all the bodies in such close quarters!). With all the families I encountered during my time in the countryside, their hospitality and ability to accommodate whoever (and whenever) always amazed me. I am confident that I could wander into any ger at any time of the day or night and be welcomed with open arms. I know that if I were hungry I would be fed and if I were tired I'd be offered a bed, without any questions asked!

It was great to feel like I was truly getting a firsthand experience of their way of life (something definitely quite different to my own). I grew very comfortable out in the countryside and felt quite settled into life there. I was exposed to such a unique and fascinating way of life - I tried to absorb everything in the best way I could. Often times I would be peering on with a curious face as my family did tasks that they likely weren't quite as enamoured with as I was (such as skinning a freshly killed goat or making buuz, the delicious meat dumplings). Don't get me wrong, I certainly tried to help out the best I could and make myself useful, but I would slow down the process with tasks like milking the cows, something that my host mother was much more experienced with. That being said, my less experienced hands could carry out much simpler tasks, including collecting cow dung, cutting vegetables for dinner and fetching water - and quite successfully, might I add, with herding the goats and sheep. I loved the feeling of being only one person and having the ability to move a hundred or so animals from one area to another. I also loved carrying the long stick used for herding and feeling a bit like Little Bo Peep. However, I did find the whole process to be slightly frustrating. It was difficult to keep all the animals together and moving in the same direction (there were always the ones that loved to just take their sweet time and move at their own pace). I found that moving all of them just a short distance took a fair amount of time. I don't think that my method of running after the animals with the stick and shouting "come on, let's go!" was the most efficient herding method. I'm not sure what the proper way of doing it is, but my host father always made it look very easy, so when he asked me to herd them one day (and by "ask" I mean, point to the animals, point off into the distance and then hand me a stick), I didn't think I'd find it too difficult. I must say that I felt satisfied with myself when I finally got them all from point A to Point B. It doesn't matter that it took an embarrassingly long time to do so; the point is that they all made it there eventually and in one piece!

As much as I loved following my family around and observing how they function in their everyday lives, I also enjoyed a fair amount of time to myself. Whether it was heading down to the river or exploring the surrounding mountains, I loved relaxing and enjoying lots of self reflection (as cheesy as that may be). Whenever I was alone, I would find myself talking aloud or singing my heart out. I know it sounds a little odd, and it definitely felt odd at first, but it was just nice to talk and talk and talk (even if it was just nonsense). Why did I take so much pleasure in talking to myself, you might ask. I was unable to participate in many of the conversations around me (for obvious reasons) and found myself doing a lot of listening and observing. Thus, when I had a chance to just keep talking, I was happy to let it all out (even if there was no one there to listen!). As a self-proclaimed introvert, I actually enjoyed being able to sit back and observe what was happening around me. I tried to guess what the conversation was about. Most of the time, I hadn't even the slightest idea of what was being discussed. However, I always knew they were talking about me when one of my host parents would say something and everyone would turn to look at me and started nodding (but I never knew what they were saying about me). It was enough to just hear the animation in their voices and to see the lively expressions on their faces! I couldn't help but smile when they would all erupt in laughter, even without knowing what was so darn funny.

I was worried that I'd feel very isolated for the month and go a little crazy. Although we were out in what I could only describe as the middle of nowhere, there was never a feeling of being isolated. The closest set of gers was a short walk away and getting in the car to go 'ger-hopping' was a common occurrence (and we were always warmly welcomed with tea and snacks). We constantly visited and were visited by others from the neighbouring gers. My first day there I was convinced life would get rather lonely being out in the country, but I soon learned that it just brings about a strong sense of community amongst the different families in the area. I can't imagine feeling lonely surrounded with friends and family.





There is so much to love about life with the nomads that I didn't fully appreciate until coming back to the city. Of course there's the wonderful people I met and their lifestyle in general, but there were also other little things. For example, I didn't realize how much I loved being able to "go" out in the open until I was back in the city and running around, desperate to find a bathroom. It's so convenient to be able to just go wherever, whenever. Not once during my time in the countryside did I find myself with the discomfort of needing to go and not being able to find a place to do it. I also appreciated getting about 11 hours of sleep every night (plus a nap time during the day). Being back in the city and getting seven hours of sleep (still a pretty substantial amount!), I have been feeling deprived and find myself feeling envious of the children at my care project during their nap time. As well, I liked not having to wake up and having to decide what clothes to wear, as I alternated between the same two pairs of pants the entire time and really only changed my shirt every now and then. There are many more things that I love about living with the nomads; I'll find them as time goes by and I have had a chance to further reflect on my experience. I will admit that it is nice to be back in the city, enjoying hot showers and contact with friends and family back at home. I must say, though, that I am missing the nomad life, which is something I find rather surprising. I had always pegged myself as more of a city girl (or a small town girl, at least), but after my month long stay in the countryside, I realized that the stars, serenity, and strong sense of community are things I could get quite accustomed to!





## Hailey Emmins gains valuable experience in teaching while volunteering in Mongolia.

23-year-old Hailey Emmins from Melbourne, Australia, had always been interested in teaching. While working for the government and visiting a lot of schools, Hailey more or less realized that teaching is what she wanted to do in the future. Deciding to get hands-on experience in teaching, Hailey signed up for a 2 month volunteering experience with the Projects Abroad Teaching Project in Mongolia.

"I wanted to be a teacher. But, I was not 100% sure. So, I thought that it would be a good opportunity for me to have personal experience while giving something back to another community and teaching in a different country itself would be a very useful and so much more worthwhile."

Hailey's placement was at School #13, a state school which provides education to children in the western part of the city including the 'ger' district of this area. As a volunteer, Hailey had full responsibility for planning and teaching the lessons and for monitoring the progress of the students. Her duties consisted of preparing and planning lessons on a wide variety of topics, including pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary and teaching classes from Grades 6 to 11.

"Teaching on my own was very daunting and little bit overwhelming at first. I felt a little pressure to do a good job. But I've managed it and I am so happy that I did it. I was little apprehensive at the beginning, but I'm glad that I decided to do this project. Because, I know now that I want to become a teacher for sure." She also continued: "Six weeks is a long time for me, but, probably a short time for them. But I really hope that I made it easier and my students having exposure to a native English speaker would help them to gain a better understanding."







During her two months' stay, Hailey was also able to teach Gunjka, a young girl with disabilities, at her house about three times a week. She found her experience with Gunjka to be mutually beneficial and found it really rewarding. "I loved teaching Gunjka. She is so smart and willing to learn which made it so much more fun to teach."

Aside from her work, Hailey enjoyed staying with a Mongolian host family, spending time with other volunteers, sight-seeing, traveling to the countryside and participating in events organised by Projects Abroad including visiting orphanages, trips to the monastery with school children and a Flash Mob against the littering.

At the end of her project, Hailey had much to share with future volunteers interested in the Projects Abroad Teaching Project: "Say 'Yes' to every opportunity that people give you. That's what I've done and it was the best decision I made. It's important to be prepared to challenge the students."

"All in all, I was really happy to be able to have this experience and I will never forget this for the rest of my life. I am 100% sure that I want to teach in the future and this is the most important thing that I've gained from my stay here. My experience with Projects Abroad Mongolia have been just completely life changing and magnificent. I loved pretty much every minute of it. It's been fantastic!"





## George Halphen scholarship program

Ashley Halphen, one of our alumni volunteers, initiated the George Halphen scholarship programme which is implemented by Projects Abroad Mongolia team since September 2013.

The aim of the scholarship programme is to support secondary school children from families who live in poor circumstances by discovering their interest and talent and help to improve through involving them in different types of training centers. Twenty school children, who are very talented and have eagerness to learn from the poor area, "Ger" districts, had already selected by the scholarship programme team.

According to the programme team, self development training and defining children's interests has started successfully by professional team. It is for not only improving children's talents but also helping them to gain good personal behaviour.

This scholarship program will continue until the children who are involved graduate from their high school. But we are happy to hear from Ashley Halphen that he wants to keep continuing the scholarship further.









## Benjamin Owens gains worthwhile experience in sports and teaching while volunteering in Mongolia

22-year-old Benjamin Owens from Liverpool was eager to travel to Mongolia as a volunteer. With a diploma in Outdoor Education from Wirral Metropolitan College, Benjamin was motivated to sign up for a one month volunteering experience with the Projects Abroad Care and Sports Project in Mongolia.

"I thought that Projects Abroad was the best opportunity to visit the country while doing something useful and helpful at the same time. That's why I decided to volunteer and maybe offer something to the community there."

For his Care Project, Benjamin was placed at the Amela Nursery School where his duties consisted of playing with kids, teaching English and assisting the local teachers. "For the first few days, it was bit of a shock as I had never worked with such young children before. But when I started teaching English lessons to the children, I got used to it and felt that I was doing something useful. Also, the children were really interested in having an English speaking person and they really enjoyed me being there. It was very nice!"

Aside from his Care Project, Benjamin chose to also enrol in the Sports Project. He taught physical training lessons for children at School #13, a state school which provides education to children in the western part of the city including the 'ger' district of this area. "I really enjoyed my time at School #13. The kids were very responsive and always said 'hello' when I saw them. It was a novelty for them having an English speaker at their school and I'm glad that they were happy to have me there."







At the end of his project, Benjamin says the most rewarding experience was seeing the teachers demonstrating things that he introduced. "I've introduced stretches and warm up techniques that I've done in the UK. They were easy to copy and very useful. I saw the teachers demonstrating my techniques to the kids; and at that moment, I was so happy and felt that I made a difference."

Apart from his work, he enjoyed staying with a Mongolian host family and experiencing, first hand, life in a new country, a new language and new people. "I have learnt so much through having to adapt to a different situation, a different language, food and culture." Benjamin also had the opportunity to spend time with other volunteers and build good friendships, sightseeing around the city and participating in events organised by Projects Abroad. It was this that formed his best memory from his stay: "It was really nice being involved in the Flash Mob event with the kids from School #13 which was organised by Projects Abroad. The kids were very passion about it during the entire rehearsal and dancing. It was great to be a part of it."

Benjamin reflects on his one month's stay in Mongolia: "Overall, Projects abroad allowed me to visit somewhere as a volunteer and

experience the culture, while at the same time doing something worthwhile. It's been a different, but enjoyable and completely rewarding experience. I'm glad that I've come here. I will probably come back in the future."

