



ProjectsAbroad™

welcome to the
Land of Blue Sky

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Projects Abroad Mongolia Newsletter

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ICE CASTLE

As the winter always comes
And I cannot get away
I must get used to it

-Galsansukh Baatar-

As we were about to land, planet earth had transformed into a mass of white, sliced up by a few black wavy ribbons that I presumed were roads. A flight attendant broadcasted the usual final announcements - all I heard were the words 'it is currently minus 25 degrees'.

Once again, I surveyed my immediate surrounds, looking for clues from my co-passengers, clad in ordinary casual clothing. They all seemed so relaxed. How did they do it? I mean, how did they exist in such an extreme climate? When the seat belt signs were turned off, but a few put on their jackets. "There must be more to it," I thought. "Perhaps life was entirely lived underground," I hoped. Comforted by a possibility of such hope, I alighted in the same clothes I had worn when departing Melbourne. Bad move.

I made it from aircraft to airport and from customs to baggage claim. With each next step I was waiting to turn into a human ice block. My pick up was there. Still no clues. I walked cautiously to the exit point. On approach, I realized my worst fears - no full time heated underground fantasy world. In the instant I stepped outside, I had to bend over to claim composure as my body was immediately racked in the grips of my virgin breath of fresh air.

The spectrum of colour had now been reduced to black and white. The only sound was the crackle of crushing ice as the wheels of my taxi slowly approached Ulaanbaatar, or UB as the locals refer to their capital.

I managed to put on a jacket and gloves by the time I climbed four flights of a naked, concrete stairwell and knocked on the door of my temporary home. It was like walking into a Christmas tree - colour had returned.

Mongolia, 'the land of blue sky', is the most sparsely populated country in the world. Formed in the 12th century when founding father, Genghis Khan, united the nomadic tribes. Mongolia is capped by Russia and heeled by China. In subsequent centuries, boundaries, political systems and culture have bounced between neighboring courts. For the better part of the 20th century communism was the nation's anthem. By 1991 Mongolia had become an independent, democratic republic. The ball stopped bouncing.

The salty streets are the stage for aggressive motorists to act out their madness. Pedestrians who squeak with each brave step are without fundamental rights. Even the green flashing little man has no voice.

Block shaped apartments without a shred of architectural charm line the streets like multistory government secret service departments. People cloaked simply in untailored, animal skin robes, wrapped by bright cloth belts walk in and amongst contemporary society who carry liver and potato salad in one hand and rice and noodles in the other. Mongolia today is an intriguing mix of the chapters informing its complex and vast history.

As for the weather...

Seasonal temperature range is staggering. Enjoy a cozy winter's night in at an average minus 30 degrees Celsius. Then hop out, play tennis or go for a swim in summer when the temperature averages 25 degrees.

Snow can fall at the speed of a sewing machine.

It is cold under the ground,

It is cold above the ground.

It is so cold even the stone walls say so.

Some allow their bed and pillow to dominate their thoughts,

Others live like flies between windows. Cabin fever.

Many embrace winter without fear or fury. I learnt how it is done in the lawless frenzy of the overcrowded city market. Every part of the body, bar the slit of the eyes, is embalmed in the three layer rule. And it works, but at a price:

Dare to stand still;

Heaven forbid the mobile rings;

Have the audacity to somehow reach a sweat and Mother Nature will freeze your eyebrows;

Engage in conversation with a friendly stranger and fall prey to the rule of etiquette requiring a bare skinned hand shake;

Have the need to step inside a sauna heated building and begin the ritual of peeling off layers of clothing;

Have the inevitable need to return into the urban white wilderness and undo what has just been done.

And so it goes, on-off, on-off, and on-off again all day long. Only a few have the ability to stroll the streets without face or hand covering. I want to be like them!

I had to take off my gloves, inner-outer gloves and inner-inner gloves when I stepped inside the National Legal Institute of Mongolia. With gloves off, I could more readily dismantle my hood, beanie, balaclava, and then neck warmer. Scarf and jacket were the last to leave. Here I met my supervisor and her research team. I was greeted as if some kind of modern day all-conquering nomadic war hero. Introduced as a 'fellow academic, skilled in drafting legislation,' I was convinced someone read the wrong application.

My visit is timely from a work perspective. Elections are next year and the ruling Democratic Party is striving for re-election on a law and order platform. To this end, they propose introducing a raft of spanking brand new laws. Hence the welcome and the introduction to the Minister of Justice next week.

Meanwhile, I am trying to learn some Mongolian, at the very least, so I can communicate with my co-tenants, a mother and her son. We share a small space in socialist spirit. Everything that is mine is yours and everything that is yours is mine, including the volume of the television. There are many customs to observe in private dwellings, do's and don'ts that I must bear in mind. For example one can only receive an item, such as a gift or plate of food with two hands. One can't whistle, eat standing up, wear a hat inside or touch another's head. One must take one's shoes off before entry and one can't wash underwear with host family clothes.

The public place however is open season. People bump and elbow, push and shove, jostle and tussle with an air of entitlement. There exists a word for excuse me, *uuchlaarai*, but it is seldom used. I got a corked thigh buying some Russian beef salami and Polish pickled cucumbers.

In the twilight of my first day and upon realizing I would manage to complete my thirty day tenure, I thought it only right to celebrate with a beer. Sitting in the naked, concrete stairwell I proposed a quiet little toast before resting the tip of the bottle on my lower lip. Then with some affection, I tipped the bottle so as to allow its contents to flow into my mouth. No sooner than this very action occurred did I realize to my shock and horror that the beer was warm. It made no sense.



Law Project Volunteer Ashley Halphen

Anomalies pervade this frozen world: located in Central Asia, citizens speak Mongolian with a heavy Russian accent; I see some elegantly draped in Louis Vuitton, as others hunt and breed reindeer by day and sleep in huts by night; black markets operate in open fields; diners can order anything from hamburgers and fries to horse meat and sheep's head; cheese is sweet, tea is salted; and fresh pineapple is available.

Nothing entirely makes sense at the moment. But...in the fullness of time...it might. If I sound a little confident, it is only because I am the most sun tanned bloke in the country!

A Recorder in My Pocket: Radio Journalism Project Volunteer Experience

The Nomad herder had already ridden his horse home to the Ger, a portable felt dwelling, where we were going to sleep for the night. I was wading slowly through the snow taking in the scenery of snowy mountains, bare forests and rocky outcrops under a setting Mongolian sun.

I heard a sheep murmur and then another sheep murmur that was a little higher in pitch. "Baa" went one and then, much higher, another responded "baa." What could that be? I followed the sound.

I climbed across a steep rock face that was so steep all the snow had sunk off. And I came to them.

There was a wet newborn lamb dragging itself across the ground with its mother licking its wet wool. The lamb couldn't walk yet but it kept up the high pitched baaing as its mother coddled.

I knew it was newborn from the bulging dark red bubble of blood the mother still had stuck to her back side.

I spent ages photographing them. I began to plan how these two could fit in the radio program I'm making. It's on a no-

nomad's winter camp and I've already got so much to say. I'm volunteering at the Voice of Mongolia in English radio program, part of the journalism internships offered by Projects Abroad.



Anyway, I must've spent a while there as the nomad herder came riding back to me. He can't speak English of course so I just pointed frantically to where the lamb was and he followed me there. He picked it up and carried it on his horse back to the Ger. He managed, at the same time, to herd the mother there so he could lock them up together, safe from the wolves.

The great thing about journalism is you're always working. Another program I made was on Mongolian food. For a couple of weeks I carried around the little handheld recorder they gave me and made some comments when I ate something new. Then I jumped in the studio, gave a bit of background and played the recordings.

To make it interesting, I ate more than just the classic Mongolian dishes Buuz (steamed dumplings) and Khuushuur (fried dumplings). I also found some Vital Organ Soup, a sheep's head, a horse's intestine, milky tea with meat and a few other things.

The first program I made was on winter tourism in Mongolia. I proposed about ten story ideas to the people at work and they really liked that one.

So I did some research, interviewed a tour company, and one day drove out to the Sky Resort with a colleague and her husband. She organised for me to interview the tourism manager, which I greatly enjoyed. I learnt why they started the resort, how it lets Mongolian winter sport athletes train there for free and how it's probably the cheapest ski resort in the world.



Then he grabbed one of the English-speaking engineers there and he gave us a tour of their snowmaking facilities. There's heaps of snow on the ground but it's not enough for skiing so they make some and then smooth it out with a special truck. The program really benefited from a first-hand interview and tour with an engineer.

But to be honest, those programs were pretty bad. I had no experience in radio so my speaking was poor and my editing atrocious. But that's the great thing about being here, I learnt from it and my third program was a great improvement.

The thing about journalism is you need experience. You can have a PhD in media, a sexy voice, great writing, better research skills and a natural ability with interviews, but none of that matters without experience. You need a resume with newspaper clippings or a disk of radio or TV clips.



In my home country, Australia, "breaking in" and getting the first of these is quite hard. But in a smaller and less affluent country like Mongolia it's not so hard. So with absolutely nothing to my name I came to Mongolia and immediately began producing my own radio programs. And the programs weren't just dumped on a computer; they were transmitted by the government broadcaster all over the world and online.

The other reason to come here is the country itself. Living here with a Mongolian family you learn more about the place than you ever could bashing away at Google back home. And you meet more people and experience things you just couldn't if you were passing through on holiday.

I'd also recommend the non-journalism placements. The volunteers all agree, back home they'd never be doing what they're doing here. One guy here now is an experienced barrister from Australia; he's helping re-write some criminal law. A girl from England just finished her Psychology course and is here for five months. She said she's already met all the experts in her field here and she's doing real work; she would need at least some experience back home.

The humanitarian placements may well be the best. You only need to walk down the street to see how hard life must be for some people here.

Psychology Project Update by Dr. Vanessa Jones

I did not know what to expect when I came to Mongolia. I knew it would be challenging. I knew it would be exciting. What this would be like day-to-day.... I had no idea!

On the first day, I was taken to meet my host family. I was living with a young couple with a three year old boy. I was lucky to be living in a new apartment block. I had a large bedroom and the heating worked a treat. I was worried about living in Mongolia in the middle of winter: -30°C outside. It was always toasty and warm inside. Often I would just be wearing a t-shirt and shorts!

My host family was friendly and welcoming. We would sit together in the evenings and watch TV. This was a great opportunity to learn about Mongolian culture. My family was keen to learn about England too. They spoke “intermediate English”. This meant their vocabulary was good and with short, simple sentences we were able to communicate well.

They also taught me some Mongolian words which was helpful when out shopping and always impressed my colleagues at work.

My work placement has been amazing. I am a newly qualified clinical psychologist and I am doing the psychology project for five months. I have been working at the National Centre for Child and Maternal Health, The National Cancer Centre and at the Etugen Institute (a private medical and economics university).

My job is to provide consultation and training to doctors and nurses at the hospitals. Some of the topics were organised before I arrived, others I was free to choose. Topics include self-care, leadership, working with self-harm, working with difficult customers and communicating with customers and families. At the university, I

teach medical students and nurses about clinical psychology. I design the syllabus and decide how to run the lectures. I am given a lot of freedom and a lot of responsibility.

It is a big job. There are times when this has felt overwhelming, but Projects Abroad has always been there to check the work is okay and will help me to change areas if needed.

As a clinical psychologist, I am the most qualified person in my profession in Mongolia. Although I have a psychology supervisor, it is my responsibility to make sure the work is appropriate and useful. I have really enjoyed this side of the work. Although it is challenging, I have been given many opportunities that I would not have got through working in England.



I have organised additional work with the Mongolia Psychotherapy Association, the National Psychology Centre (research based), the Public Health Institute (government funded public health research), the Ministry of Health, a local orphanage and freelance work with the Ulaanbaatar Post (English language newspaper). These are all areas of personal interest to me and I have been free to follow these up and to balance them with the rest of my workload.



Whilst this may seem daunting to those who are not yet qualified, it shows the level of flexibility that you can have with your project. The most important thing is to let people know what your skills are and what opportunities you would like to pursue.

At the end of the working day, there's the social life. There are always other volunteers in Mongolia, even in the depths of winter! Projects Abroad organises a social event each week and different volunteers will organise day trips, dinners out or anything else you might fancy. The Projects Abroad team are always happy to help with any plans.

Projects Abroad also organises outreach activities once a month. This is usually

something interesting and related to your project. I really enjoyed going to the Traditional Medicine Museum.

I am currently two months through my five month placement. I have really enjoyed it so far and I am excited to be continuing my work. It is really important to me to do work that will make a lasting impact, and Projects Abroad has allowed me to do that. My host family has been wonderful and there is always a lot to do!

Be a Part of something Great...

