

# ProjectsAbroad™

*Projects Abroad Mongolia Official Newsletter* *August 2013*

*Mongolian Adventure by Joshua McFalls: page 1-2*

*Professional nurse Inger Sandberg fulfils her purpose of making a difference as a volunteer in Mongolia: page 3-4*

*Joseph Suk's Experience<sup>Squared</sup>: page 4-5*

*On Set in Mongolia by Natasa Bansagi: page 6-9*



## Mongolian Adventure by Joshua McFalls from USA

When I first told my mother that I was going to Mongolia for four weeks, all she told me was, “NO!” Now, three months later, I am at the end of my placement and would not have traded this experience for anything. My first attraction to Mongolia came from a speaker at my college. He was an American doctor who did medical mission trips to Mongolia. It was the stories that he told about the beauty of the land and the character of the people that drew me to Mongolia. My experiences have totally changed the way that I view this area of the world. It is nothing like I ever expected. I feel extremely blessed for being able to come and live life with the Mongolian people.

My host family here in Mongolia has been one of the best parts of my experience. First of all, I am really lucky to have a family that can really cook! There was almost nothing that they cooked that I did not like... almost. One day when I came home from work, I walked into the kitchen where I was surprised to find bowls of various goat organs and a chopping block loaded with fresh mutton. Needless to say, the food is an experience in both taste and preparation. My host family was a huge help with getting acquainted with Mongolian life. They helped me to get groceries, change my traveler checks (which was a huge ordeal), and taught me some of their language. I was so surprised by the depth of their hospitality. It was very refreshing to see how they treated a guest. There was never a time that they thought of their needs above my own.





My medical placement at the Central Railway Hospital in Ulaanbaatar was one of the best experiences in my life. I spent the first three weeks mainly observing and moving patients from the OR to their rooms for recovery. During this time I saw many different surgeries including bunion repairs, hernia repairs, gallbladder removals, and even a few urology surgeries. Seeing how each surgery was done up close was one of the biggest advantages of coming to Mongolia to do a medical placement. I was able to see the intricate anatomy of the inguinal canal and the full contents of the abdominal cavity in great detail. Being fresh out of my first year of medical school, I was able to put my anatomical knowledge to the test just by watching these various surgeries. I was also able to teach some of the English terms to the doctors when they were not too busy. During my last week, I got to scrub in on three different surgeries. I can now say that my first experience of scrubbing in was actually in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia and I will never forget it.

The four weeks that I spent in Mongolia seemed to fly by quickly. The team at Projects Abroad did a wonderful job with handling any issues that I had while I was overseas in a country that I was completely unfamiliar with. I would recommend a medical placement in the Blue Sky Nation to anyone in the medical field looking for a very personal learning environment with a little adventure added in the mix.

## Professional nurse Inger Sandberg fulfils her purpose of making a difference as a volunteer in Mongolia

27-year-old Inger Sandberg from Trondheim, an assistant professor at the Faculty of Nursing at Sør-Trøndelag University College, decided to take time away to make a difference as a volunteer in Mongolia. Inger wanted to volunteer at the Lamp of the Path NGO in Ulaanbaatar, to learn more about their program on fighting poverty and assist the local staff in any way she could. Having already done a report on the Mongolian Health System when she did her Master's degree at the University of Tromsø, Inger decided to make her own contribution to Mongolia's poorer communities and hopefully make a difference. With this in mind, she embarked on a two-week volunteer experience with the Projects Abroad Care Project in Mongolia.

"I was truly impressed by the programme that the Lamp of the Path NGO runs and wanted to offer my help" explains Inger. "The Lamp of the Path NGO was established in Ulaanbaatar in 2003 and aims to help and support vulnerable and poor communities through three main projects: The Soup Kitchen (serving hot meals to homeless), the Health Clinic (providing basic health care and information) and the Children Development Programme (fostering the development of moral values and self-esteem in children)"





Inger went above and beyond her volunteering duties of helping in the soup kitchen, assisting the nurses in the health clinic by checking up the patients and organizing health information training for the homeless, as well as helping out with classes and teaching at the Children Development Programme. “I have learned how important all these services are for the community and that even a small involvement can make a difference. Because I was only able to stay in Mongolia for 2 weeks, the difference I could make was somewhat limited; however, I believe that offering an extra pair of hands was helpful to the both local staff and the community.”

It was this that formed one of her best memory from her project: “Providing health information about drinking water for the homeless with the local nurse was the best. Before the training had started, I was a bit worried, because that was my first time teaching with an interpreter. But it went well

and what made me happy was that they really seemed truly interested and were asking questions.” Inger found her time in Mongolia to be beneficial for her career and she has this piece of advice to future volunteers: “Don’t rely on other people telling you what to do, but do as much research as you can before you leave your home country and bring what you have.” She continues: “I will take my experience from volunteering with me and have already planned to do a lecture on Public Health in Mongolia for the nursing students at the college where I work.”

### **Joseph Suk’s Experience<sup>Squared</sup>: Medical and Teaching Projects in Mongolia**

Eighteen-year-old Joseph Suk from East Setauket, New York, has always been interested in the medical profession. Eager to seize the opportunity of observing doctors during surgical procedures and to experience a different culture and country, Joseph traveled to Mongolia to volunteer at Projects Abroad’s 2-week special medicine program for high school students.

This program is very unique in that volunteers are able to both examine doctors’ work during surgeries and ask them questions. In this way, they are able to learn about the medical scene in Mongolia as well as answer questions the doctors have about the medical system in the students’ countries of origin. During the special medicine project, Joseph teamed up with other high school students who came from different countries and visited hospitals at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. He emphasized how incredible this experience was, especially compared to what he would be able to do back home: “It’s really hard to get this kind of opportunity in the United States as a high school student, so I thought it was very neat to be able to see this firsthand in Mongolia.”

This experience allowed him to observe various surgeries including an ophthalmological surgery, prostate surgery, heart surgery as well as a cholecystectomy. It was this that formed his best memory at his medical placement: “I really, really liked seeing the cholecystectomy because that was my first surgery, and I saw it from start to finish. So that was just amazing for me; something that I won’t forget.”

After two weeks volunteering, Joseph was interested in spending more time in Mongolia. Extending his stay to one month, he decided to take on a 2-week teaching project. He taught two English classes, Beginner Level 1 and 2 English, and was surprised that most of his students were in fact older than he had expected – only a few of them under 15 years of age. A truly rewarding experience in this placement was when he was able to communicate smoothly and get his lesson across, despite the language barrier between himself and the students: “There were many times when my supervisor wasn’t there, and I just had to explain something and they had no idea what it was. I would use gestures or pictures or movements, or I would try to explain it in very simple terms. And sometimes they would get it, and that’s the most remarkable feeling – that’s the best feeling: when you explain something to them, and then they finally, they nod their heads and they understand.”

Joseph’s experience has sparked his interest in travelling more in the future, something that was clear in his 2-week placement turned one-month long adventure. On a professional level, though he is not fully certain about pursuing a career in medicine, he has shared that this experience has put a lot more meaning into the medical profession for him. And like Joseph’s two placements, he also has two pieces of advice for future volunteers: be open and be willing!





ON SET IN MONGOLIA  
By Natasa Bansagi

*“I’ve had the time of my life, and I owe it all to you...”* These were some of the last words that I heard in Ulaanbaatar on my taxi ride back to Chinggis Khaan airport, after spending 3 months of my summer in Mongolia. Ask me less than half a year ago about the country, its distinct culture and traditions or its language, and I certainly would not have had even the slightest clue. But coming home after an unparalleled experience, I know a world more than I ever did before. Now, if I were asked about Mongolia, I wouldn’t know where to start – the countryside? The capital city Ulaanbaatar, or ‘UB’? The customs, which at the beginning were so foreign to me?

For now, I’ll start with why I ended up in this country, which on the way there took around 20 hours by plane. 20 hours away from my hometown of Ottawa in Canada. Itching to become a professional TV reporter or anchor, I was determined to gain more experience in the journalism field as I entered the field years of my Bachelor’s degree. I applied through the organization Projects Abroad to complete a 3-month journalism placement in Mongolia from May to August 2013. Not only had I never been to Asia before, but I also figured that I would be able to learn a lot from working in media somewhere where freedom of the press is a much newer concept. After much back-and-forth communication, I found out that I would be working at NTV Broadcasting LLC, a television station founded in 2006 in the country’s capital. Eager, extremely excited but also quite unaware of the specifics of my duties there, I left Canada and all that I knew behind for the start of my internship in The Land of the Blue Sky.

Understandably so, being in a foreign country required a lot of adjustment on my part. Needless to say, it was not a piece of cake getting used to the new language and to living with my host mom who spoke only Russian and Mongolian. Nor was it easier getting used to the Mongolian culture because it was nothing like anything I’d ever known. For example, unless there is no chair or table around, Mongolians never place their bags on the floor. Another interesting cultural tidbit is that you should always touch somebody’s hand or forearm if you have accidentally stepped on his or her foot. Indeed, a stark difference from back here in Canada where a simple “sorry” would suffice.

One of the first things I noticed in this new country was the traffic. I must admit that I was actually scared to cross the road at times. The sheer amount of cars, especially in the first few weeks after arriving, stunned me, not to mention the lenient use of the car horn and a lesser degree of yield towards pedestrians. Another thing I noticed were prices. While I did not find clothing prices in stores to be cheap at all, I did find many food prices to be reasonable, quite reasonable. Meals that I used to eat at the supermarket's cafeteria right near to my workplace would typically cost me as little as \$1.20 (if I ordered only rice and a carrot salad), to around \$2.50-\$3.00 (for a meatball or fried chicken dish complete with rice, potatoes and a small salad) to \$5 (the one day I decided to splurge on the fried beef dish). The currency, tugrugs, as they are called in Mongolia, are another topic for discussion. There are no coins in this currency, which certainly saves on wallet weight. But with denominations ranging from 1 to 20,000 and one Canadian dollar averaging 1,500 tugrugs, you start to wonder how you could have a bill representing 0.0007 cents, the equivalent to 1 tugrug?



I certainly came to Mongolia with a purpose greater than experiencing the so-called 'thrill' of crossing the street or examining price differences – I was there to work. On my introduction day at NTV, I was presented with my first assigned duty: anchoring a weekly English News program in studio that I was told would air on TV Sunday evenings, on the website *infomongolia.com*, as well as on one of the Mongolian airlines. I was thrilled from the moment I heard about this, and throughout my placement, I worked on such segments as those highlighting the first major American franchise to come to Mongolia (KFC), the opening of the temporary dinosaur museum in the central square housing a dinosaur skeleton repatriated from the United States, as well as events surrounding the national festival, Naadam. I assisted in both the News and Programme departments and after a few weeks of working there, one of my supervisors proposed an idea of making a program about nomadic life in Mongolia in

Thus, it was on: when all was decided, we were to visit and stay with a family of nomads in one of Mongolia's 21 provinces, around 1,100 km west of our home base in the capital. It turned out to be *Destination Nomad*, a 30-minute program with English and Mongolian subtitles, so that speakers of both languages would be able to understand (<http://youtu.be/R6k8LOHR9xM>).



Before leaving, much thought was put into the types of questions that I would be asking the family, the more casual style of reporting that would be required, even potential action shots such as milking the herds and exploring the surrounding area near to where the family currently lives. And once there, it was without a doubt the most mind-blowing experience of my life! To paint the picture a little better, we travelled two hours by plane to Zavkhan province, then under an hour from the airport to the capital city (where we stocked up on food, water, toilet paper, and gifts for the family) and then another approximately 4 hours to reach the family home, or 'ger', where nomads live in the countryside. In fact, on this last leg of the trip, what I expected to take about one hour actually took four because of the very bumpy road conditions, forcing me to constantly hang onto whatever I could in the car to maintain my balance. And when we finally arrived, it was so late that the sky was pitch black, highlighting the beady eyes of the goats and other herds because they were the only parts of the animals that could be seen at that time of night. It was a black sky without any shop signs or streetlights to shine light on anything: some difference from the bright lights of Times Square in New York City that I had visited only two years prior! Being extremely cold outside despite it being the end of June, seeing the family get their water supply from a nearby stream and noting how they care for herds amounting to around 200 animals, was only a small part of what I got to experience over the 5-day trip. In such a technology-heavy society like back home, it was a breath of fresh air giving my contact details to the 15-year old daughter of the family who told us that she would try to be in touch when she opens an e-mail or Facebook account. Wow – thinking about how many times a day I refresh my e-mail account that I've had for about 10 years makes me wonder how someone could just simply not have an e-mail address...I learned a lot and was so fortunate to have met such a welcoming family, but the learning experience was only half over when we left Zavkhan. It was all in all a very full experience as the post-production process of editing brought with it a lot of thought, planning, and selection – even one 'sleepover' at the office to meet our deadline. This editing experience continued over to English News segments as well as the second program I helped with – *Watered Out*. This program, indeed about water, was designed a two-part program totaling 40 minutes and focused on causes and effects of water scarcity in Mongolia, as well as solutions to this problem including examining Israeli innovations in water technology.





Aside from this, I also attended other events with NTV staff such as a fashion show and the opening ceremony of the Mongolian Darts Federation's competition. What I didn't expect I would do was dance, another passion of mine, but as with virtually all my other expectations, this one was also knocked right out of the water when I performed a piece from the ballet Swan Lake with a Mongolian girl at Projects Abroad's fundraiser for disabled children.

There are many, many lessons I learned from this trip, both personally and professionally. To start on a bit of a lighter note, I learned just what variety of toilets exists and this, among other ways, the nomadic lifestyle differs from that in the city. Aside from the usual toilets in homes or offices, in the countryside, where no piping exists, I saw two alternatives. One was a 'stall' with a simple hole in the ground, a wooden plank on either side of it, and the other, well, no hole at all. Let's just say that for this second option, nature serves more than one purpose... On our last evening in the countryside in Zavkhan province, my lack of experience camping was reason for excitement as I nonetheless was able to figure out an innovative solution for something we did not have enough of. This is to say that I ended up creating 'spoons' from plastic water bottles, which, to my surprise, worked quite well for the dinner we prepared outside over a fire.

Professionally, I learned tips for putting together a news piece, advice such as the ideal numbers and length of sound bites, editing skills, not to mention interviewing techniques. Something else I learned, both in theory and in practice, is how important it is not to be sensitive but instead to accept criticism and try to avoid repeating such mistakes in the future. Finally, on a more personal note, I learned to step out of my comfort zone in a difficult situation that I've never before had to face: going to a new country only to realize you're starting to live with someone you don't know and cannot easily communicate with because of the language barrier. Though this got better with time, still, the main methods of communication were four-fold: a combination of a Mongolian/English dictionary, Google Translate (from Russian to English and vice versa), animated hand gestures and of course, a bit of English and a combination of Mongolian and Russian words - 'Mong-ussian', perhaps??

Though there are many experiences in my life that I truly value, this one surpasses all because I was able to really get the feel of the life of a journalist all while living in a culture that, despite all its differences when compared to my life here in Canada, really began to grow on me. And when I am asked whether I would ever go back, I have but one word to answer: **YES!**, or **ТИЙМ** in Mongolian. Why? As for those words to the song on the radio in the taxi to the airport, they sum it up perfectly: "I've had the time of my life..."