

# ProjectsAbroad

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Photo by Will Dalziel

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## **Volunteer story by Madeleine Carney, Medical Elective**

My name is Madeleine Carney and I am a 3<sup>rd</sup> year medical student undertaking a month long medical elective project at Railway Central Hospital, Ulaanbaatar. I was drawn to Mongolia as a destination for volunteering because of a previous visit I had made during the summer months to the Aimag of Khovsgol. I had many friends working and volunteering in UB during December, so I was intrigued as to how the country would transform from lush green rolling hills and steppe to a frozen wonderland.

Coming from Australia, I had no concept of how cold -20C would be so I thought I had definitely over-packed in terms of warm clothing – but I was wrong. I needed to wear most of the layers I brought, everyday, all at once. I'd also invested in some decent walking shoes suitable for walking on ice and snow, which I cannot recommend enough. It's remarkable how snow can change a rather bleak looking cityscape into a lovely snowcapped wilderness. It also increases the temperature – I'm not sure if it actually does this or if it is just such a novelty that you forget how cold you are.

Being a medical student heading into my final two years, I was looking for a volunteer placement where I'd be able to assist the staff but also gain some useful experience for my own learning. So I was placed at Railway Central Hospital situated on Peace Avenue, a few kilometers west of the State Department Store.





It is a state hospital with a small emergency department, general surgery, cardiology, gastroenterology, as well as an outpatients building and a pediatrics and mental health building. My supervising doctor was Dr. Arshabek or Dr. Bek for short. He is a general surgeon who speaks Kazakh, Mongolian, Russian, Korean and good English. I was supervised also by other surgeons in the department and I also moved into other departments from time to time. Whether the doctors, nurses or orderlies spoke in English or not, they were all incredibly friendly, welcoming and helpful to me. If I know something was already within my skill set or I was capable, I could go assist and the nurses or doctors was always oblige.

It was very interesting for me having spent a fair bit of time in major Australian hospitals, to see the relationship between the staff in the Mongolian hospital system. There was a high-degree of respect but also a light-hearted friendly attitude that made for a really fantastic environment. If there wasn't much happening at the ward or they were between surgeries, a nurse would bring me into the nurse's tea room and offer me milk tea and a biscuit. I never got the impression of a strict hierarchy or male-bias towards the doctor role. There was an even number of female and male doctors in this hospital which was really good.

A typical day for me would be to arrive at 8:30, and initially assist the anesthetist and nurses at transferring the patient and prepping the patient for surgery. Then I would usually observe a surgery – such as abdominal hernia repair, gall-bladder removal or an omentectomy. The operations were a range of open and laparoscopic. I then occasionally helped extubate – remove the supportive breathing tube used during surgery – and transferred the patient. All members of the team do all necessary jobs – it's just who is free at the time. Occasionally there were multiple surgeries a day, if not I would assist with injection preparation and administration, changing bandages or assist some of the younger doctors in their English practice. Many other departments such as pediatrics and cardiology would take me after the completion of my surgery duties, to show me interesting cases or have me examine patients to get a firsthand look at common pathologies, such as heart murmurs or crackles in the lungs of a patient with pneumonia.







Dr. Bek and the entire surgery department were so welcoming; they invited me to their New Year's work party, which I discovered was not a stuffy work party in the slightest but a night of dancing, vodka shots, karaoke and laughter. I was so thankful for my time at Railway Central and that is in no small part thanks to Dr. Bek. I also had the opportunity to have a tour of the First Maternity Hospital as well as an afternoon at the Nursing Institute, where we received a tour of the fantastic teaching facilities and had a sit down, meet and greet, with some of the second year nursing students. Through Projects Abroad I was also able to take part in a Care Outreach project at a technical school teaching the children some Christmas carols and playing games.

Though the countryside was blanketed in snow and quite a contrast to the last time I visited – I took the opportunity to travel at the end of my project and I would highly recommend this no matter what time of year you visit. I was able to spend some time at Terelj National Park, only 90 minutes away from UB. I was able to go horse-riding, dog-sledding, stay in a real ger and embark on frosty walks in the hills to enjoy the stunning scenery. While not the obvious time of year to visit Mongolia for a volunteer project, I found it incredibly rewarding and enjoyable .....and very difficult to leave!



## Helen Allcock experiences the life of Mongolia's nomads

Somerset, England native Helen Allcock has completed a three-month Nomad Project in Mongolia.

Now retired and having recently moved to Wellington, Somerset; Helen left the UK altogether to pursue an opportunity she has been keen on since the age of 18. With the help of Projects Abroad, an organization offering volunteer and intern placements abroad across the globe, she embarked on a long-awaited journey.

Helen was paired with a nomadic family, living with them in Mongolia's countryside, where her duties consisted of helping around the ger (the traditional home of Mongolia's nomads) and with the family's many animals.

Every two weeks, she returned to the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, where she prepared for the next two weeks in the countryside and met with other Projects Abroad volunteers.

"I learned about not taking resources for granted, about open hospitality to everyone that crosses the threshold of the ger, about both the freedom of living on the steppe and the hardships that go with freedom. I learned to appreciate peace and quiet and how to spend time just 'looking' at my surroundings," she said.

Calling her journey 'invaluable', Helen's personal experience has given her a genuine perspective of nomadic life in Mongolia. She says the most rewarding part of her experience has been the inclusion she felt within the nomadic family.







“Volunteering, certainly for this project means you become part of the family rather than an employee. I was involved in every aspect of their lives. My family never excluded me from anything,” she said.

“The thing I will take away with me held in my heart, will be the beauty of the landscapes, the blue sky and glittery freezing frost, the still air and warming sunshine. As well as the smiles on the faces of the nomad people everywhere I went and the warmth with which I was welcomed.”

In describing her overall experience in the Land of the Blue Sky, Helen has both treasured her placement, and hopes that others will make the most of their opportunities as well.

“I get moved to tears. It has been both practical and spiritual, a time filled with utter beauty from without and within,” she said.

“Take every day as it comes. Let the world unfold as it may. Go with an open mind, listen and learn.”



## GEORGE HALPHEN SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

The George Halphen Scholarship program, which is initiated by Ashley Halphen from Australia, one of the Projects Abroad alumni volunteer, has been carrying out by the Projects Abroad Mongolia team since September 2013.

The aim of the scholarship program 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 trainings. Twenty school children, who are very talented and have eagerness to learn from the poor area, “Ger” districts, had already been selected by the scholarship program team, including some of the Projects Abroad staffs and local university students.

In terms of the aim of the scholarship program, “The Self Development” and “The 16 Guidelines for Happy Lives” trainings has successfully completed from September to November, 2013.

The Self Development Institute professional teachers held the trainings and taught how to set and achieve the goal, time management, team work etc. and practical experiments was organized on each topic.

“The 16 Guidelines for Happy Lives” training was held by Mrs.Baigalmaa who graduated in France as a life coach and this training introduced The 16 Guidelines for Better Life to set practical and straightforward tools for developing happiness and meaning in everyday life. It includes humility, patience, contentment, delight, respect, forgiveness, gratitude, loyalty, kindness, honesty, generosity, right speech, aspiration, principles, service and courage.





As a conclusion of the whole trainings, children played in a press meeting to summarize what they have learnt from the entire process and every student received a self-development book as a gift from the scholarship program team.

### **Comments from children about the trainings:**

*I've learned a lot of things through these trainings. I learnt not to be shy and to be open minded. I understood that teams can achieve their goal when team members are united and set a clear goal.*  
Surenjargal.S

*I learnt how to express myself in a right way. Also I realized that if we combine our strength, teams can be successful. I am so thankful for the people who initiated and implemented this scholarship program.*  
Altantugs.B

*I am so happy that I got involved in this scholarship program. This was the best training I've ever participated in and I would like to keep attending any training through this program.*  
Nomin-Erdene.Ts

