

Chapter 15 – Mongolian Life

(2007 to 2008)

Contents

VSO Secure Livelihoods Conference in Arvayheer.....	364
Trolley Buses	368
Taiji (Tai Chi) Classes	370
The VSO June Conference	371
Trip to Tsetserleg	374
Trip to Dadal.....	376
Gek’s Project	383
Visitors to Lotus	386
Preparing to Leave Mongolia	387
Mongolia to Singapore via China – a Letter my Mum	388
ADB Project Debriefing Notes.....	392
Memory Litter Bin	393

So much happened over the Mongolian summer of 2007, that I have decided to write this chapter as a series of short cameos, each covering one of Gek and my doings over these months. Once the short Mongolian autumn passed and the cold returned to the country, all travel out of the city's boundary became very difficult, although we did get to see the Eagle Festival held in the Terelji National Park in February 2008.

VSO Secure Livelihoods Conference in Arvaikheer

(29th March 2015 - Singapore)

[Blog Entry for May 2007](#)

In May, ten of us piled into a minibus and set off for Arvaikheer, to the south west of UB. We were part of the VSO Secure Livelihoods (SL) group based in UB, one of three VSO groups represented in Mongolia, the other two being Education, to which Gek initially belonged, and Health. Being assigned to a different group, Gek did not accompany me on this trip out into the countryside. Perhaps as well really as most of the 447 km drive was over very rough terrain, the main track between UB and Arvaikheer being 'up graded' at the time. And boy was it rough. It took over twelve hours of bumping over rut and ridge with the minibus slamming this way and that to make the journey, by the end of which we were



Meeting in Session

all pretty tetchy. On reaching Arvaikheer, we learnt that the town was hosting a horse fair that weekend and most of the hotels were booked out. As a result, the only place Urna could find for us to stay was a zero-star hostel with dormitory accommodation and very, very basic facilities. But being volunteers, young and resilient, we could cope – well some of us could.

The next morning after a rather spartan hotel breakfast, we gathered in the hotel's cramped meeting room and started our deliberations by each of us briefing the rest on the progress, or not, of our individual projects. This was the second get together for the SL group, the first one being in February when we had a weekend away in Terelji, a national park forty km to the east of UB. As a result, we were all already familiar with the work that each of us was involved in. At the first meeting in Terelji I had been nominated as the volunteers'

representative for the SL group, for which I had to thank one Mike Brown who was in the last couple of months of his VSO placement. He likened the job of representing VSO volunteers as akin to herding cats, a very good analogy as I was later to find out. Not that I minded being the SL rep really as it did allow me to get involved more closely with the workings of the VSO office in UB. We had come to Arvayheer not only to have a SL get together but also to visit Erik in his posting. Erik was from the Philippines and was assisting in the setting up of small businesses in the area using micro-finance loans, from whom I cannot recall. We spent an afternoon visiting one or two of his start-up projects.

After the day-long meeting and site visits we decided to spend the evening up the road in a Karaoke bar. Yes, here in the back of beyond there was a Karaoke bar, unbelievable I know but there it was. And some of the song's subtitles were written in English, some more. I am never a willing participant in this sort of activity but after being poked and prodded until I had to admit defeat in the face of overwhelming odds, I sang a song. By way of revenge, I chose Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody, all eight minutes of it, for the group to struggle through, which they didn't, and we ended the track by just listening to the music sans the lyrics. And then, surprise, surprise, the booth door opened and there standing in the doorway was Tserendash, my friend from the construction ministry. He was in town for the horses and hearing the English voices booming from our booth, just had to see who were making such the racket.



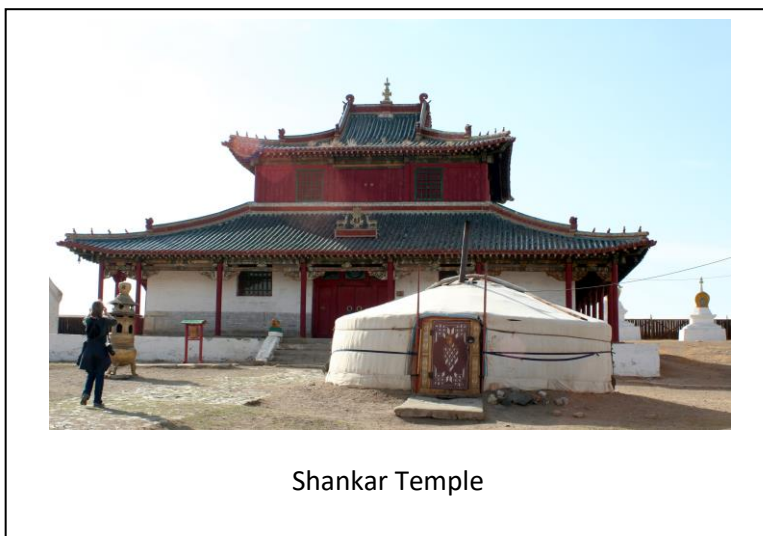
Helpful Nomads

Following a second night in the less than comfortable hotel, the natives were getting a bit restive. It was decided that we would decamp and drive over to Kharhorin where Hazel's posting was and hopefully find a more comfortable berth for the night before making our way back to UB. Our justification for this extra excursion was to

visit Hazel's project based in a Buddhist monastery school in the town, added to which the daunting prospect of driving back the way we had come, trumped it. None of us wanted a repeat that twelve hours of our lives. There was, at least, a metalled between Kharhorin and UB. Maglesh, our driver, had done the UB to Arvaikheer run before and was therefore familiar with the terrain we had crossed getting here but this proposed drive from Arvaikheer to Kharhorin would be new to him. No problem, you might think, get out the

maps. Well, not so easy since there were no roads or even tracks linking the two towns, rubber to bare earth contact only, with the freedom of the rolling Steppes to drive over at your will. It is very difficult for a European to even begin to imagine the 'emptiness' of the Mongolian Steppes. There are no signs of human activity at all. No metalled roads or pathways, no walls or fences, no buildings, no pylons, nothing is 'private property', all is common land, not even vapour trails in the sky above your head. And total silence.

Maglesh set off with us loaded back in the minibus in the general direction of Kharhorin, a journey of around 112 km. Occasionally he would stop and ask the way of herders we happened to meet along the way, and it surprised me each time this happened that they invariably, without any hesitation, pointed to 'the way' we should take. Can you imagine being dropping in the middle of the Brecon Beacons and being asked to point in the direction of Birmingham with accuracy and without a second thought? Amazing spacial awareness these Mongolians have. After much buffeting and one perilous moment when the minibus all but turned turtle down a steep incline, we arrived at the Shankar Temple, one of the few remaining Buddhist structures left standing by the Russian occupiers in the Soviet Union era. When the Russians took over Mongolia in 1922, there were hundreds of Buddhist structures, including several temples and monasteries, spread across the country. By the time they left in 1992, the Russians had destroyed all but a couple of them, the Gandan Monastery in the centre of UB being the biggest, along with the brutal elimination of the Buddhist monks that occupied them. Tens of thousands of monks died as a direct result of the Russian's drive to purge Mongolia of Buddhism and Shamanism.



Tibetan Buddhism was first introduced into Mongolia by Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis, after his conquest of southern China in the 13th century. He had recognised the need for a unifying religion for the disparate tribes of Mongolia and had considered both Christianity and Islam as possibilities for the job. Kublai's wife's mother, after

all, was a Nester Christian, a small Christian sect that followed the teachings of Christ but stop short of claiming he, Jesus, was the son of God. I guess monasticism did not fit well with the Mongol Emperor's view of himself as the rightful leader of the whole of humanity, a God with a different set of rules for the populous to follow would somewhat dilute his, Kublai's, authority. Before Buddhism, the nomadic peoples of the Steppes and Gobi practised a form of Shamanism, much as other peoples around the planet had done from pre-recorded history days. Rituals inspired by the cycles of sun and moon in addition to

special powers over man associated with particular mountains, rivers or other significant geographical features in the landscape all play their part in Shamanism. Some of these practices are still evident in the Mongolian landscape today. For example, the piles of stones placed at heads of valleys or on hill tops, often dressed with blue flags and prayers offered up on pieces of cloth or paper to the resident god. The ritual to follow at such a cairn is to circle the stones three times in a clockwise direction and on each pass throw an additional stone onto the pile. The three turns represent one for the past, one for the present and one for the future with a personal wish being made on the last pass.

The Russian communists and their native Mongolian camp followers failed completely to eradicate either Shamanism or Buddhism with both 'isms now on the ascendancy in Mongolia. But not without competition from the Christians these days, who seemed to be in UB in force, represented by mainly American apostatising churches including the Mormons. This Christian 'invasion' has caused some strife in the capital which was particularly evident when both the Dalai Lama and Billy Graham arrived in the city at the same time. There was a rash of poster trashing, the Buddhist group set against the Christian group. My feeling was, 'Get a life guys, there are hundreds of children living rough on your streets, dying in your city's drains in the bitter winters here. Wise up for god-ness sakes!!!' The Chinese government was not too happy with the Mongolians either and threatened all sorts of nonsense if the Dalai Lamas visit went ahead. All hot air of course, he came, he talked, and he left. China huffed and puffed but they needed Mongolia's iron ore and other raw materials to fuel their expanding industries far too much to let the spiritual override their material interests.

(31st March 2015 – Singapore)

Now, back to Karakhorum or present day Kharhorin. It was, for a short time, the capital or rather, administration centre of the Mongolian empire back in the 13th century. We booked into a hotel on the recommendation of Hazel, and a much better place it was too than our previous gaff, proper beds and very nice food. We spent a jolly evening counting our good fortune. The next day we visited Hazel's Buddhist school and met her boss, the head monk. He, or it was perhaps Hazel, appraised us of the two quite different tacks that the revival of Buddhism was taking in Mongolia. One set of monks and their leaders wanted to prioritise the rebuilding of the Buddhist structures destroyed by the Russian, temples and the like, whilst the other faction, to which our host belong, considered that helping the impoverished population in the country should take priority. On our return visit to Kharahorin and what to the remains of the Erdene Zuu Monastery a few months later with John and Lyn, the split between the two Buddhist factions was all too evident. The monastery was completed in around 1585 and covers a huge area surrounded by a high wall with Stupas built into it every twenty meters or so. But inside the walls there is nothing save a couple of small buildings, all that remains after the Russians bulldozed the complex in the 1930s. One of the buildings which had been a temple was under renovation with all the attendant golden

decorated imagery and statues. The other was much less grand and was being used as a training centre for the local youth to perhaps pick up some livelihood skills. Same creed, different interpretations within the monastery walls which was, by all accounts, causing not a little friction between Kharahorin's small community of monks.

Trolley Buses

As soon as I laid eyes on them, I adored them. UB's trolleys buses. So enamoured of them was I, that I set myself the task of capturing every last one of them in a photograph before I left Mongolia. I even set up a Blog for them at www.ubtrolleybus.blogspot.com. Why? Because they looked so worn and weary but were doggedly refusing to give up the ghost. For that they demanded respect. I had travelled on their cousins in Moscow in 1973 and if there was ever an alternative public transport option in UB, the trolley bus got my cash.



The Russian built, ZiU-9 type trolley bus, a 1966 design, was introduced into Mongolia in 1987. Over the next decade or so the fleet grew to around 255 units, plying eight different routes on the city's streets. After the Russian withdrawal in 1992 and the resultant severing of spare parts supplies, the fleet maintenance had to resort to cannibalism to keep the services running. Now the fleet was down to less than fifty trolley

buses, plying only three routes in the city, Route 2 along the length of Peace Avenue, Route 4 up the hill from Peace Avenue to the new shopping complexes and Route 6 which did a loop from Peace Avenue down to the railway station.

(1st April 2015 - Singapore)

Whilst Ariunaa and I were out on one of our many site visits, we happened to be passing Tsakhilgaan Teever, the company running the trolley bus services, and since we had a bit of time in hand before our next meeting, we dropped into to see if we could have a view of the depot. The company had just introduced a Mongolian built trolley bus, based on an omnibus chassis, onto the city's streets and I was intrigued as to how they had managed such a feat, given the country was on its knees without much in the way of spare cash to even contemplate such an ambitious venture. The fact there was a Mongolian built trolley bus riding the streets of UB says it all about the human spirit, never say die until you are dead. As we hadn't made a prior appointment I wasn't very hopeful of gaining access but in

the event we were ushered into the Managing Director's office and although he would not let us venture into the depot's workshops, we had a pleasant hour chatting about the workings of the depot and the new trolley busses the company was manufacturing. Mr. Jargalsaiklan, the MD, told us that they had had interest in buying their new trolley bus design from Uzbekistan with the negotiations already under way for some of the first batch to be built in Mongolia. Amazing.



Mr. Jargalsaiklan.

Tsakhilgaan Teever, Managing Director

In our meeting with the MD was also Jamts Dash, the company's Marketing Director, whose English was excellent, near perfect in fact, spoken and written. He was a very nice chap and when we left Mongolia the following year, I handed over the trolley bus blog to him for updating etc. In the event, Facebook arrived in Mongolia and took over the function of blogs in the social media, resulting in the trolley blog falling out of use. This was also because it was in written in English and not able to be read by most people in the country. Still, a result of sorts. A couple of months after our visit to the

depot, a second new trolley bus arrived on the network, also made in Mongolia and this new one was much bigger and more sophisticated than the first, it could travel off wire. I had already seen this new breed of trolley bus in Beijing which has quite an extensive trolley bus network. Clearly Mongolia had not lost its engineers and technicians when the Russians had left the country to its own devices. A really good sign to me that at least Mongolia had a good chance of raising itself from the ruins of Russia's collapsed Union of Soviets.

I had a favourite trolley bus, 4-068, which wasn't the lowest number I managed to spot but somehow or other its lobb sided suspension and tired look always made me smile. I gave a little inward cheer whenever 4-068 passed me on the street. Good to see you are still around, old friend. The highest number I spotted was 4-179. Not sure if I managed to see all the remaining TBs in UB but I did get to photograph quite a few. The problem was being on the streets of UB with a camera out was asking to be mugged. I hardly saw anyone with a camera visible walking the UB pavements in all the time we lived there. On the few occasions that I did venture out with my Canon, I would carry it in a rucksack worn on my

chest so that I could whip the camera out to take a snap and immediately put it back in the rucksack out of sight. All very surreptitious like.

Taiji (Tai Chi) Classes

[Blog Entry for June 2007](#)

Not long after we had arrived in UB and we were still living in the original flat vacated by the acting VSO director in Mongolia, we paid a visit to an English Language TEFOL training and testing centre located in a block just down the road from the apartment. We dropped in on the off chance that Gek might be taken on by them as a tutor of English. At that time, we were already looking for ways to supplement our income as it was becoming clear that the two of us could not live on the US\$200 VSO allowance for a single person. And so, started our friendship with Oyuuna and her family.

Oyuuna's father had been part of the Mongolian Embassy based in London, where the family had lived for many years, long enough for his two daughters to have received an English education from a very young age. As a consequence, the whole family spoke perfect Queen's English. On their return to live in UB, they set up the Mongolia-British Friendship Society I mentioned earlier and using this skill in English, the family founded this TEFOL centre and became a registered assessment centre for the courses too. Unfortunately, they had no immediate need for a language trainer. I guess because Oyuuna was surprised to find two native English speakers living just up the road from them, we struck up a friendship with her. She and Gek set up Taiji classes to be conducted in one of the nearby vacant premises owned by the family. This was to be a commercial venture with Oyuuna and Gek sharing the fees collected from the Taiji trainees, not a great deal



Concentration

of cash but it did help to cover some of our daily expenses.

Granddad Stories.

Gek began to teach me Taiji whilst we lived together for that short time in Bridgend. She had started taking Taiji seriously in 1997 following the death of her father and by the time we met in 2006, Gek was a licenced trainer of a variety of the art's forms, including sequences using swords and spears. Seeing Gek wielding a sword was quite something, it being at one and the same time beautiful to watch but scary to perceive.

Taiji is seen as a form of exercise these days but it has its origins as an eastern form of martial arts in China. The exercises are in fact a series of movements done in slow motion, the object of which is to accustom the 'fighter' to become super aware of his/her coordinated arm and leg movements whilst still retaining balance. The form of Taiji that Gek practises is of the Yang school originating in 17th century China, there being numerous other schools today.

I have to say it is the only form of exercise that I enjoy, although surprisingly it can make you break out in sweat. From this start Gek held Taiji classes for different groups for the whole time we were in Mongolia which helped to expand our social network outside of the VSO volunteer group. Notable amongst these new friends were Enkhee and Baima in whose apartment we conducted our final classes just before we left UB.

I say we, because by the end of our time in UB, I was Gek's assistant during the training sessions and even on a couple occasions conducted the classes on my own when Gek felt poorly and was unable to teach. I did get carried away with myself on times, grabbing ladies' legs to correct their posture without thinking about what I was doing. Thankfully, no one slapped my face for such effrontery.

(2nd April 2015 – Singapore)

The VSO June Conference

[Blog Entry for June 2007](#)

Every year in June, a conference was held near UB of the VSO volunteers posted to Mongolia, the organisation of which was the responsibility of the volunteers themselves with a little help, well ok, a lot of help from the staff in the VSO Mongolia Office. This was one of two events during the year when volunteers posted on projects out of UB returned to the city for a get together, the other event being organised by the VSO office in September entirely and with its own agenda. By the beginning of May, no volunteer(s) had stepped up to the plate to take responsibility for organising the June event and as time was running out, it was beginning to look as if the VSO Office were going to have to step in and rescue the gathering. This, the VSO Director Alison, was loathed to let happen. I cannot remember now if I was asked directly to take the role of organiser or I volunteered for the job, I suspect it was a bit of both. Whichever way it was, I was landed with the job. I didn't mind taking on this June's conference coordinator role. My Project was going quite smoothly at the time and as a hands-off type of project adviser role I had set up for myself, I

had the time and the office resources to do the job. Not long into the Project, I had decided that I really was there just to advise in the curriculum development process, quality control measures to implement etc., and not to insist any one way as being the only way things should be done. What did I know about the internal structures and politics of the Mongolian vocational training education institutions and how much could I ever know without understanding a single word of Mongolian or Russian? Perhaps I should have stuck with the Russian classes in the 70s. But I digress.

With so little time in which to get the event organised, I set up a blog for the conference with the intention of perhaps gathering a few willing individuals to help share the tasks. As all the volunteers across the country had access to the internet one way or another, I reckoned that this was the neatest way to get the ball rolling without the need to have face to face meetings. Well, no. Only one other volunteer, apart from Gek of course, 'volunteered' to help and even she in the end could not contribute much as she was about to leave Mongolia. Bit of a surprise that. Where were all these willing, self-motivated, let's get involved young people? I felt like the guy who turns around to find all his friends running for cover when he airs a collective grievance with your boss. I suspect the reticence of my fellow volunteers to get involved with organising this conference had its origins in the last VSO get together the previous September when the final event of the gathering, an open meeting at which the volunteers could air their concerns about absolutely anything, had turned vitriolic. I was a new boy then and it was really quite shocking to see the forty or so people in the room having a go at their leader, Alison. It was so bad with people shouting at one another that I promised myself not to turn up to any future VSO official get



Conference Location

together. At the next September 2007 VSO conference in UB, Alison asked me to chair the open meeting which I agreed to do. This time I had the volunteers submit topics for discussion beforehand on 'post its' which I categorised into 'of interest to the individual only', to be dealt with by Alison in a one to one meeting after the event and 'of interest to the group', to be discussed at the meeting. A much more orderly meeting was the result, although I did have to step in once to stop one cat fight. I did wonder at the time how the heck some of these guys handled themselves in their projects, and this after the two or more weeks of VSO readiness training they had had before coming out here. Well, as someone said, "You cannot teach anyone something they don't already know".

The blog, <http://volconjune2007.blogspot.com>, did have a very practical use in that it kept everybody informed on an almost daily basis as to the progress the conference organisation was making. No one could complain after the event that they did not know this, that or the other was happening. The two crucial things to sort out soonest were an agenda for the conference and to find a place that could host our event. As nobody came forward with suggestions for topics to be discussed, the agenda became Alison's domain and the development issues that she wanted to raise formed the core of the topics that were to be discussed. For this year, it would be issues surrounding the plight of the disabled in Mongolia. With her contacts and with the help of a few willing souls, the agenda and who was to deliver it came together in very quickly. The venue for the event and the logistics for it were to be my main responsibility but I relied heavily on the knowledge and experiences of Urna, the VSO office secretary responsible for the Secure Livelihoods Group. Gek, Urna and I visited some six holiday ger camps in the countryside around UB in the VSO jeep before we found one that ticked all the boxes in terms of location, facilities and cost, the Bayan Khongai Ger Camp.

The actual event went swimmingly until the 'The Problems Facing the Disabled in Mongolia' session. As a prelude to the discussions, a video was shown in which the unintentional discrimination shown by able bodied people to the disabled were acted out. Well, I started to blub. Seeing the young woman sitting in the wheelchair was too much for me and I just lost it. I was supposed to be chairing the meeting but had to rush from the room, apologising to Alison as I pushed the paperwork onto her lap. This completely out of the blue. Jenny had died eighteen months ago, but it felt so raw. I sat on the bed in our ger sobbing away. Gek and Urna came to find me, Urna, of course, not having a clue as to what was upsetting me so much. After a little while I composed myself and Gek and I took off for a walk up the hill behind the camp and sat for the rest of the afternoon watching a herder tending his cattle on the other side of the valley.

The only other drama of the weekend was nearly running out of beer!! But that was easily sorted by our resourceful minibus driver sourcing supplies in UB on an emergency run into the city.

(6th April 2015)

Trip to Tsetserleg

[Blog Entry for Jun 2007](#)

On John's second visit to the Project, he brought along Lyn, his wife. Baigal thought it a good idea that the four of us should take off for a long weekend trip out to Tsetserleg, some 520 km east of UB. We set off in the company of Amaraa as our driver and Bysaa as our interpreter using Amaraa's own Toyota Land Cruiser for the twelve-hour drive almost all of which was again across the Steppes on the now familiar rough tracks. In fact, there were multiple tracks, with a new one being created if the one currently in use becomes too rough or, on the odd occasion, waterlogged. As a result, the landscape can be scarred by numerous old tracks running parallel to one another and in some places this scarring can be hundreds of metres wide.



Amaraa and Bysaa

Along the way, we visited Lake Ogiy where I was surprised to see black headed terns, birds that you normally expect to see on sea cliffs. But here they were in numbers, 4,000 km from the nearest coast. We took a refreshment stop at the equivalent of a motorway service station, a group of gers about halfway between UB and Tsetserleg. Refreshed, we

set off again, this time in search of Amaraa's parents. They had moved into this area from the north near Erdenet to take advantage of the summer pastures here. The nomadic herders on the Steppes move their gers and herds of sheep and goats four times in the year on the change of the seasons. In that sense they are not truly nomadic since they move to the same place in each of the seasons, an arrangement that was agreed between the various herder families generations ago. The reason for the three-monthly move is due to the very sparse and slow growing vegetation covering the Steppes. When you see photographs of the Steppes in the summer months, they almost always appear very green but in reality, the individual blades of grass are a couple of centimetres apart at least, not at all like a British garden lawn. With less than 100 mm of rain falling a year in some areas, the grass recovers very slowly once it has been chomped by the sheep or goats. These two factors, no rain plus sparsely growing grass, compel the herders to move four times in the year to find sufficient grass for their flocks to eat. The herders are currently receiving high returns for the wool from their goats which is used to make Cashmere as opposed to that

from their sheep. This is creating an additional burden on the Steppes. Goats eat anything and everything and their growing numbers are having a devastating effect on the delicately balanced Steppe's ecosystem, evolved as it has over the last couple of thousand years to accommodate the herder's lifestyle. You come to realise just how intensely the Steppes are grazed when you see the amount of sheep and goat droppings on top of the soil, even though there isn't an animal in sight for many, many miles around. This dung doesn't get washing into the soil, of course, because it very rarely rains here but when it does, the grass get its Christmas.

We eventually found Amaraa's mum and dad using the now familiar tactic of stopping and asking the family's whereabouts at gers along the way and as usual when we arrived at their door, we were given the warmest of welcomes. Amaraa had not seen his parents for a couple of years and it was a little sad that we couldn't spend more time with them, even an overnight stop would have been much better for them all. But too soon we had to up and way to find the Tsenher Hot Springs Holiday Camp in the Orkhon National Reserve, still a three-hour drive away. But not before I gave Amaraa's father a tin of the snuff I had brought from Cardiff, which he seemed pleased to receive. We certainly didn't want to have to try locating the camp in the dark of night. As it was, we took quite a while to find the right valley to drive into even in broad daylight. John and Lyn, Gek and I were allocated a ger each whilst the 'lads' took up accommodation in the service block of the camp. Even though it was midsummer the evening and nights were still very cold, requiring us to light the log stove in the centre of the ger each night to keep warm. By the morning the fire was out, and we awoke to a very chilly room indeed.

Tsetserleg is a very remote town about one hour's drive from where we were camped but it is surprisingly lively place. On the drive over from UB we had not met with many other vehicles coming or going to Tsetserleg. I guess most visitors to the town arrive by air at the



Tsenher Hot Springs Holiday Camp

very small airport close to its centre. Evidence of the Russian withdrawal could be seen in the partly dynamited concrete military installations around the town and also in the demolished buildings of the town's monastery, now under partial renovation. The surrounding hills and river valleys, seemingly untouched by human endeavour, looked pristine; no fences, walls, pylons, wind turbines or habitations of any

kind.

John and I were fascinated by the uses that the hot springs had been put to, apart from providing the camps attraction of bathing in the hot mineral waters from them. The water welled out of the earth from a single spring at a place where the valley floor began to raise up to form the hillside. From here the hot water was piped not only to the camp's pools but also into the heating pipes of a series of glasshouses which had long since fallen into disuse. As the water issuing from the bowels of the earth was far too hot to freeze even in the -50° C of a Mongolian winter, the useful window of opportunity to grow vegetables was greatly increased. It was a great pity that there was not the money available to rebuild the greenhouses and recreate a source of green veggie and perhaps even some fruits that UB badly needed. Practically all the fruits and veggies available in the UB markets, if they weren't potatoes or onions, came in from China.

The constant flow of hot water from the spring also created a very localise microenvironment, with plants and animals that would not normally survive the cold of a Mongolian winter. Even snakes, we were told, lived in the surrounding forest although I would need to do some research to verify this claim.

After a few days in the Tsenher Camp, we packed our stuff into the trusty Land Cruiser and headed over the hills to Kharahorin, a place I had already been to on with the VSO Secure Livelihoods group earlier in the year, and the Erdene Zuu Monastery. I cannot remember how or why it came about, but after our visit to the Monastery we made our way over to the town's prison. Once we were checked in by security through a double gate, we made our way across the prison yard to see a project being sponsored by the British Ambassador to Mongolia, Chris Osbourne. The project was to construct a toilet and shower block for the inmates which they were building themselves with materials supplied by the Ambassador. The prison also had a rehabilitation section where the inmates worked machines making concrete bricks that were sold to local contractors, providing a source of income for the prison and at the same time giving the inmates some work-related skills, however basic those may be. I did wonder what the heck these felons made of us Europeans, suddenly arriving unannounced out of the blue. All very surreal. The next day we headed back to UB.

(9th April 2015 – Singapore)

Trip to Dadal

[Blog Entry for July 2007](#)

The annual Naadam summer festival is the big event of the year all over Mongolia. The three or four day festivities centre on the three manly sports: wrestling, horse riding and archery. Baigal had been invited by the lady Mayor of Dadal Soum (a Soum is a district within an aimag or province in this case Khenti Aimag), 600 km drive to the north east of UB, to stay in Dadal town over the Naadam weekend. The Mayor, on a visit to the capital, had

heard about our Project and was hopeful that perhaps we could extend our work into her Soum. Not one to pass up the opportunity to take to the countryside, Baigal set about organising the excursion.

For some reason we set off late in the day for Dadal, much too late to have any hope of reaching the town before dark. We were seven in our party accommodated in Amaraa's trusty Land Cruiser plus the Project's Hyundai, mostly the Project team minus Selenge and Ariunaa plus Gek. Selenge and Ariunaa were unable to accompany us due to family commitments and seventh seat was taken by a friend of Baigal. The first 200 km drive west to Jargait was on a metalled road but after a brief stop in the 'town' for a bite to eat, we set off north across the bare Steppes. All in our party were excited about the trip, principally because this was going to be a once in a lifetime pilgrimage to the area, if not the exact place, where Genghis Khan was born.

The tracks leading to Dadal were pretty well defined on the ground and we made good time but just as night was falling, the Land Cruiser suffered a puncture. By the time Amraa had changed the wheel it was pitch black. Whereas in daylight we could follow the clearly visible, well-worn tracks, in the dark it was a different matter altogether. We kept 'losing' the track ahead from the headlights' beams, as the vehicles pitched and rolled over the ruts and ridges. At one stage when we had completely lost the track altogether, each vehicle set off in opposite direction across the valley floor to try and find the missing 'road'. The idea was that the finder of the track would use flashing headlights to signal the others to join him. Neither of us found the track but one of us did find power lines which was good enough for us. They must lead to habitation of some kind and so they did, a town with no name, not on Google Map anyway. By the time we reached the small settlement it was approaching 11 pm and we hoped that perhaps we could find a hostel there for the night. But no go. No hostel in town and no one had the room to take us in. So, back out into the night for us.

Unfortunately, the power lines only went as far as the settlement after which we were back to track spotting again. Not far from the settlement with no name, we came to a bridge over a river which fortunately Nymaa, the lead driver, didn't venture onto before checking it out, as it had no centre section!! No choice, we had to ford the river. But there was no obvious crossing place that we could see in the headlights that had been used by previous vehicles and to add our difficulties in was impossible in the dark to see where the shallowest part of the river was. It was decided that the Hyundai should attempt the crossing first, the Land Cruiser making a far better rescue vehicle if the Hyundai got stuck mid-stream. Thankfully it wasn't needed and once safely across we pressed on, still hoping to reach Dadal by perhaps one in the morning, but not really knowing how much further we had to travel, that was more in hope than anything else.

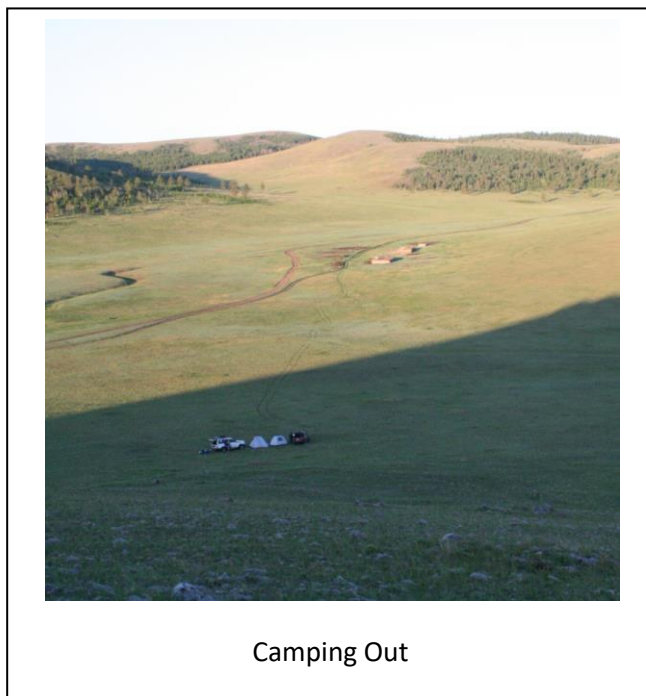
Then we lost the track for the second time and this time we couldn't find it. Now our drivers decided to navigate by the stars. The night sky was crystal clear with the Milky Way a broad

streak of white light sweeping across the ink black sky. Finding the North Star using the Plough as a guide, we chased after it and hoped for the best. It soon became evident by the changing terrain we were travelling through, now with trees either side of us, that we were leaving the plain and heading into the hills. Navigation by the stars now became next to impossible since we were forced to drive along the floor of the valley in which we found ourselves. So, what to do? Well, camp for the night of course.

(10th April 2015)

Our Mongolian friends' preparations for this trip now paid off handsomely, with plenty of water, some snacks and emergence camping gear stowed in the vehicles for just the sort of situation in which we now found ourselves; stuck in the middle of nowhere, not knowing where this nowhere was even and on a moonless night to boot. Nymaa chose a place to set up our tents close to a temporary animal shelter that we had just passed. He had been brought up on the Steppes only moving to the city in his late teens and he knew that this sort of shed was always built in a sheltered place in the landscape.

The two 2-man tents were soon up and after a light supper we seven crammed to sleep into a space meant for four. I had noticed just before we were about to turn in, the headlamps of a vehicle lighting up the trees in the valley opposite to where we were camped and there was a brief window of opportunity for one of us to chase after it and find out how far we



were from Dadal but it was a none starter really. The light soon disappeared. The thing was that Dadal could have been around the next bend in the valley as we really didn't have a clue as to where the heck we were. We could be camping just a kilometre away from the town for all we knew. A little later a passing motorist told us that we were only 30 km from Dadal, but since we still had to cross the River Onon on a ferry, not a good idea in the dark of night, we decided to rough the night in our tents.

After a quick toilet visit out in the dark, the three girls, Bysaa and I crept into

one of the tents fully clothed and lay down on the hard ground with Bysaa and me next to the tent walls and the girls in the middle, like sardines in a can we were. The other two lads slept in the second tent although they might as well have slept out in the open as their tent had an opening in the roof, the cover for which was missing. The nighttime temperatures out here were well below 10° C. We had hoped that our combined body heat in the tent

would keep us comfortable in the early hours of the morning when the temperature was likely to drop to near zero. But this was a vain hope. Not sure if any of us sleep much that night, we were that cold and this was in the middle of summer.

Next morning we were all up bright and early, anxious to arrive in Dadal before the start of the Naadam as this was to be the first day of the festival when all the special guests, including us, were to watch the opening ceremony from the VIP stand. But not before we had crossed the Onon River which was achieved using a do-it-yourself ferry of an intriguing uniquely design. It could accommodate a single vehicle and was guided across the river by a steel horsier with its ends anchored on each bank. The ferry itself was a steel platform mounted on the top of two boat-shaped tanks. The clever bit was that the ferry's design used the energy in the flowing water to propel it from one bank to the other without much help being needed from us, the temporary crew pulling on the cable. We did indeed make it in time and were ushered into the reserved seats to sit with the Mayor and the Soum council members who seemed to be all women. Dadal Soum was the only Mongolian province at that time with a lady Mayor, a reflection of the dominance in politics of men, in spite of the leading role that women played in every other sphere of the Mongolian economy, be it in the private sector or the state's organisations.



A Sweet Offered.

Gek and I were two of the three non-Mongolian's in the whole Soum that summer, and as the third visitor was a Japanese tourist, I was the stand out foreigner, the most obviously looking alien, a fact not lost on the children who would stare at me quite disconcertingly until I gotten used to their unflinching gaze. Sat next to us in the festival stand was a little girl

who held me in full eye-to-eye contact for what seemed an eternity. She must have decided that I was OK really, as eventually she offered me one of her sweets. I cannot imagine a British kid offering a complete stranger, never mind such an alien looking stranger as I must have looked to her, one of their treasured sweets. Bless her.

Dadal Soum has a border with Russia. The town houses the Mongolian border guards who put on a flag raising display to mark the start of the Naadam Games dressed in their distinctively Soviet style uniforms. This was followed by some traditional Buryat dancing. The Buryat group moved into this area from over the Russian border to the north around four hundred years ago and they are not considered to be true Mongols and are not the tribe into which Genghis Khan was born. They have a unique traditional costume and form of dancing which is quite different to the majority of Mongolia population.



Following the dancing came the wrestling and our main-man Nymaa's chance to shine. Nymaa was an exponent of traditional Mongolian wrestling and although he hadn't brought his own special kit with him, he had gone over to the organiser's tent to ask if they would let him participate in the contest as a guest. They seemed a little reluctant so to do at first, as this contest was meant just for local participants with the winner becoming the Soum's champion

wrestler for the following twelve months. Not knowing Nymaa's ability as a wrestler, they feared that he might upset their apple cart if he was to win the top prize. In Mongolian wrestling, the participants all wear a similar outfit which includes a top, seemingly worn back to front, tight fitted slip type briefs and traditional Mongolian boots. Nymaa managed to persuade a fellow contestant to loan him some of his spare kit. We now had our champion to cheer, which we did with gusto. He succeeded in getting through to the second round and received a prize of 1,000 Tugrik for his efforts. Result.

After the arena events were over, we made our way to the horse race finishing line, picking our way through the many groups of horses and their riders. The horses were being used as mobile camping chairs which were gathered together so that their riders could have a chat. Nadaam horse races are a feat of endurance for both horse and rider alike, the later of whom are typically boys less than twelve years old. The serious intention is to sort out the weak horses from the strong and thereby identify good breeding stock for the next equine generation. The race is a gruelling 20 to 30 km dash across the Steppes, with the lads riding bear-back, i.e. without a saddle, whilst clinging to the horse's mane to stay on aboard. The first horse home takes around an hour to make it to the finish line. Some don't make it at all, collapsing and even dying in sight of the finish. That didn't happen this day, but some of the horses barely made, coming at a slow amble to take the finishing flag. Back in the arena for the award giving ceremony, I was struck by how shattered the young riders looked with

a far away, haunted look in their eyes. The horses that had won the race looked by comparison quite the opposite, as if this was just a normal day at the office, next event please.

That night we spent in the Dadal town at a three ger guest house adjacent to the Naadam festival grounds. In the evening we were invited to the local festival dance which Gek and I declined but the rest of our travelling companions accepted with glee. Even the town's electrical generator being turned off early to save the cost of running the diesel engines, did not dampen the party spirit with our friends coming home in the late evening. This gave us some idea of just how remote Dadal was with not only no road connecting the town to the capital city, it wasn't even connected to the national grid. The construction of a power line to connect at least the town to the grid was under way but there was no indication as to when the link up would be completed. Early bed for Gek and I was the order of the day that night, not that we minded as we had had next to no sleep camping out on the Steppes the night before.

(15th April – Singapore)

After a brief meeting in the Mayor's office the following day which I am afraid led to nothing in terms of our Project working with the soum, we set off to go visit the places around Dadal associated with Genghis Khan including a cairn site that was dedicated to his memory. I was struck by how emotional a moment this was for my Mongolian colleagues. The usual banter between us stopped as we approached the cairn, photographs were taken, and we progressed thoughtfully three times clockwise around the stones as is the custom. Nymaa in particular was affected by the experience. Nearby a was spring issuing from the ground from which Genghis is reputed to have drank and, of course, we had to take a sample and fill our water bottles with its very sweet water.

We stayed one more night in Dadal before setting off into the hills in search of place to camp. We made a picnic lunch stop by the Balj River, a tributary of the Onon, where the more adventurous of us went for a swim in the fast-flowing waters. People who had been



Ger Camp

at the Naadam were now crossing the river here on their way back home, including a group of young lads on their horses. The Balj here is as wide as a six-lane highway but that didn't deter the lads setting off across the river atop their horses which took the opportunity to have a drink as they slowly made their way over to the far bank. One of the horses was clearly not at all keen to make the crossing. To

encourage it to ford the river, two mounted lads accompanied this reluctant horse, one either side of her, to provide support and comfort. These young lads, who have a totally natural looking horsemanship and self-assurance, is something beautiful to watch. And it is to be seen not only in the boys but also young girls. I am reminded of seeing a young girl not more than ten years galloping across the Steppes at full chat, bareback, with the confidence of a seasoned jockey.

After our lunch and a laze by the river, in the late afternoon we set off in search of our beds for the night. But not before I watched in disbelief as a motorcyclist wheeled his machine into the water and pushed it fully submerged across to the other bank. How he managed to restart the engine after its dunking in the river, I have never been able to figure out. But restart it he did, after a quick wipe down with a towel. Fortune favours the bold, I guess.

With no clue as to where we might find our berths for the night, we set off up into the hills above Dadal. To our delight we found them. Three gers pitched on a ridge overlooking the town with a panoramic view over the Steppes beyond, picture postcard perfect. Not long after we had drawn up our vehicles alongside the gers, we spied a horseman charging down the hill towards us to see what was afoot at his properties. It transpired that he had recently set up the gers in the hope of accommodating visitors to the Naadam, but nobody had availed themselves of his initiative. We were the first guests to use them. Everything was new, the gers and their contents. We even had to unpack the new bedding. What an absolutely brilliant find.

(16th April 2015)

That evening, the 12th July, we officially celebrated the Naadam after dark with a picnic party. A rug was laid on the ground, the Hyundai's doors were opened, the car's sound system turned up to fully volume and the vodka was spliced. Like all the Mongolians Gek and I had met, our friends love to party. After everyone was warmed up with a couple of shots of vodka, the drinking game began. Each person in the circle was asked in turn to address a candid observation of a member of the group. After their response, we were all supposed to down a shot of vodka in one gulp, the idea being that as person's inhibitions decrease as more vodka was consumed, the observations and return comments would become more illuminating. When it came to my turn, I choose to address Amraa, saying how much I admired his steadfastness in any situation, he being the sort of chap you would want by your side in a crisis. Such as when the Land Cruiser suffered a puncture a couple of days before, out in the middle of nowhere and with the night closing in. He responded by saying that the night before the trip, he had had a sleepless night worrying about all the things that could go wrong and if he had made good enough preparations for the journey. A very honest response, I thought. To avoid witnessing any awkward confrontations that are bound to happen in this sort of drinking game as the participants got higher and higher on the vodka, Gek and I excused ourselves and took to our beds, leaving our friends to drink on into the early hours of the morning.

The next day, everyone was up bright and early and, much to my surprise given the amount of alcohol drunk the night before, raring to go. It was decided that for the last night in Dadal Soum we would stay at a camp by the Onon river, not in ger this time but in a wooden chalet typical of the Byriat's traditional homes over the border in Russian Siberia. Another cracking location. After settling ourselves in the accommodation, Gek and I set off up the hillside behind the camp to take in the view of the river valley and perhaps take some memorable photographs. To our surprise the ground we were walking over was alive with insects, crickets, grasshopper and the like, some of which were quite big. A rather large one jumped its way up Gek's trouser leg much to her consternation, reaching as high as her bottom!!! To get the little beastly out, she had to drop her pants, all the while jumping around from one leg to other, which I am sorry to say was very amusing to watch. After this trouser leg invasion, we tucked our trouser bottoms into our socks. After a night plagued by mosquitos, we packed our stuff and headed south back to Ulaanbaatar.

The five-day trip to Dada Soum was the standout Mongolian experience for Gek and me. We had been privileged to visit a part of Mongolia which, at that time, did not get many tourists, neither local nor foreign. The overall impression I gained was one of a well organised community living in tune with their environment and although the area lacked the infrastructure associated with a good quality of life, such as hospitals and a reliable power supply, it nevertheless seemed prosperous. Compared to the conditions that nearly one million people in the slums around Ulaanbaatar were forced to endure, Dadal Soum was a utopia.

Gek's Project

[Blog Entry for August 2007](#)



The Lotus Craft Centre, post refurbishment and equipping.

Whilst the refurbishing work was being done on the craft centre building and the children were away on their camp in Terelji over the summer months, Gek returned to the Hartford Institute. She took a contract to teach one term and gave all her salary to the Lotus Children's Centre, contributing US\$ 1,200 more towards US\$ 9,000 cost of the project.

The Arts and Crafts Training Centre opened for business in September. Gek did amazingly well to have the building refurbished in such a short time. The difficulty in working across a language



barrier cannot be underestimated. It is the biggest challenge in any project or work done in this kind of environment. It feels like you are riding a charging horse through a fog. Things were happening around you, but you didn't know how or why. Situations arrive suddenly, without prior warning. You have to have absolute faith in your horse.....he must know where he was going to charging ahead the way he is. The relief and joy

when the job is successfully done is over whelming. I think you will have to agree that the transformation was amazing. To mark the completion of the refurbishment, Lotus hosted a multi denominational group on International Peace Day; Buddhists, Christians, Jews and Muslims all sat down to lunch together in the centre.

To begin with, Gek's craft classes were for the children with special needs in their own classroom. The skills and abilities of the five children, two girls and three boys aged from 13 to 19, varied widely. One girl, Urgalmaa was good at handicraft work and was particularly helpful and active in cleaning and tidying up after class. The other girl, Bymbasuren, was also quite good in needlework and was keen to learn. The youngest boy, more intellectually inclined and somewhat speech-impaired was eventually transferred to the primary school. The oldest boy, Galaa, about 19 years old was good at physical work such as carrying buckets of water and is always cheerful. Ariunbold was extremely quiet and dreamy boy and was rather passive. Sadly, we heard a couple of years later that he had died, reason unknown. This class of 'special needs' teenagers had a Mongolian teacher who had been with them for about 4 years. This teacher, who was not trained to deal with children with mental disability, was also interested in handicraft work and had already taught them some paper craft and needlework.

Aside from teaching arts and crafts, Gek also got involved in other activities with the Centre.

- She started administrating the Centre's emails.
- She gave a talk to Class 10 students in Ulaanbaatar International School, one outcome of which was some students visiting the Centre on Children's Day with donations in kind. These Class 10 children are required to do some community

service work when they were in Standard 11, and some were interested to do volunteer work at Lotus.

- She created a collection of photographs of the children's activities and artworks for a PowerPoint presentation to be shown to visitors on the laptop recently donated to the Centre.
- Together we designed and had printed a flexible diary with a set of 10 postcards for sale to visitors to the Centre showing the children's artwork.
- An art camp was organized with the help of the Arts Council of Mongolia whereby two Mongolian artists came to the school to run art workshops with the children for three days.

Like me, Gek also held weekly English classes for the teachers in the Lotus Primary school. Russian was still the second language in Mongolia with very few citizens being allowed to study English during their seventy years running the country.

The Centre's founder and Director provided the following reference for Gek at the end of her twelve months with Lotus,

Ms Lim Gek Kheng worked as a volunteer at Lotus Children's Centre for a year starting April 2007. Although her job was a vocational education advisor for the special needs' teenagers at the primary school at the Centre, she has taken on a number of other responsibilities.

Her first major task was to refurbish an old building which was to be used for craft work for the children, fitting it with water and heater supplies. Within three months, she completed the interior design and furnished the 4-room building.

Her primary role was to develop the skills of the special needs teenagers in doing crafts. Through experimentation and observations of the teenager girls, she focused on their needlework skills, and got them making bags, seat mats, coasters using felt, beads and fabrics. She also conducted weekly craft lessons for about sixty 'normal' children in the primary school at the Centre. The school children are largely in the age group of six to eleven years old. She organized an exhibition of the children's craft work after working with the children for six months.

She also helped in the Centre in its public relations by administering its emails responding to queries from the public, donors and potential volunteers. She designed an information brochure to help publicize the Centre. She helped to orientate new foreign volunteers from the various countries such as UK, Canada, Australia, Taiwan, Japan and Singapore and co-ordinate their work at Lotus Centre. On many occasions, she was the 'official photographer' taking snapshots of the activities of the Centre. The photographs were used to produce CDs,

Granddad Stories.

newsletters for its donors and supporters and for display on the walls of the Lotus Primary School.

She took the initiative to raise funds for the refurbishment of the building, and design greeting cards, a notebook and a diary for sale to the Centre's visitors to generate some income for the Centre.

Gek's service to Lotus Children's Centre has been invaluable. She has proved to be a dedicated and flexible worker, willing to take on tasks beyond her terms of reference.

Didi Kalika

Director, Lotus Children's Centre

A job well done by any measure.

Visitors to Lotus



Back Row – Gek, Choon Hong, Kean Eng, MaryAnn, Victoria, Lai Hock.
Front Row – Kelly, Alice
Late arrivals – Josephine, Jolyn
Singaporean Lotus Visitors – Summer 2007

Every year a number of visitors come to the Lotus Children's Centre to help care for the children over the summer months at their camp in the Terelji National Park. They would perhaps teach the children some new skills in activities they might organise for them. The camp was a great opportunity for the kids to spend time away from the Yarmag, their ger district, and get some good clean country air. One group of visitors in 2007 were from Singapore, all but the leader being young women. We met up with them soon after they had arrived in UB and invited them round to

our apartment for tea and cakes. In their number were Alice, Mary-Ann, Josephine, Jolyn, Kean Eng and Choon Hong all of whom became good friends of ours on our return to Singapore. *(Mary-Ann and Alice are coming with Gek and me on a three-week driving holiday around Hokkaido in July this year, 2015).* After a couple of nights in UB the group headed out to Terelji to join the children already camping there.

One young lady in the group, who was much younger than the others, found she couldn't cope with the very primitive conditions in the camp, what with no washing facilities save the river Onon and just a hole dug in the ground as a toilet. Within a day she was on her way back to UB. It is not a good idea for an attractive, young, foreign woman to be on her own

in UB. Since the leader of the group needed to be out in Terelji with his other charges some 80 km away from UB, Gek and I volunteered to take this young lady in hand and make sure she was put safely on a plane to Beijing and on to Singapore. I booked her into an hotel not too far from our apartment for the night and told her under no circumstances was she to venture out in the evening or even open her hotel room door to anyone who knocked other than me or Gek. My fears for her safety were confirmed the next morning when the guy sat next to me in the hotel lobby as I was waiting for her to finish her breakfast, asked me if I knew this attractive young women, explaining that he was in UB sourcing Mongolian brides for his Korean male clients.

This was not the first time we had direct experience of people being trafficked from Mongolia. The owner and chef of an Asian restaurant Gek and I patronised was arrested, charged, found guilty and locked up for people trafficking. On another occasion a number of schoolgirls did not make it home after school one day, they had been picked up off the streets in broad daylight to be shipped off to China for brothels there. Fortunately, in a rare case of the police doing what they are supposed to do, some of these girls were rescued and returned to their families.

But back to our young lady. After the lobby encounter, we went to the Air China offices to secure my young friend her ticket out of there. As we were waiting our turn to be served, she confided in me that she was looking forward to the sympathy she would be receiving from her friends when she recounted to them her terrible experiences in Mongolia. I didn't bat an eyelid but how could someone be so blinded by their own over inflated value of themselves. Astonishing. The next day she flew off, never to be heard of again, not by us any way.

Preparing to Leave Mongolia

Gek and I had tentatively decided to leave Mongolia in April 2008, at the end of her one-year placement with the Lotus Children's Centre, a decision that was confirmed when Gek developed a bad case of bronchitis over our second winter in Mongolia. We suspected that her bronchitis was triggered by the cold and damp of her Lotus office. In retrospect, we should really have sought professional advice on how to better insulate the new craft centre building before the renovation was started. As consequence, Gek's office space in the building was extremely cold and damp, with the outside walls being so cold that ice formed on the inside of these walls from her breath.

This would mean me leaving four months before my contracted two-year VSO stint as the Project's curriculum advisor was due to end. From my point of view, I felt that there wasn't much more I could add to the Project's stated outcomes, except to be there with a watching brief over the implementation of mine and also John's outstanding recommendations. Khiskee, who had taken over the project coordinators job after Baigal had left for America to further her studies, agreed to let me initially suspend my involvement with the project for

six months, with the option for me to return in the Autumn to finish the last four months. Unfortunately, VSO terms did not allow for this long a sabbatical which meant that I would have to end my status as a volunteer with them and be reinstated as if on a separate arrangement if I returned to Mongolia. And so that is what had to happen, and since it took a couple of months for Gek to recover from her chest infection when we returned to Singapore, it really was a no brainer of a decision, we could not go back to Mongolia for a third winter and risk Gek's health there.

March 2008 saw us packing to leave Ulaanbaatar, saying goodbye to all our friends and colleagues in VSO office, the VSO volunteers, our respective project teams and the friends in the taiji classes that Gek conducted right up to our departure date. In mid-April we left Mongolia for Beijing by train, crossing the Gobi for a second time intending to take a fourteen-day tour of China on our way to Singapore and into retirement proper.

Mongolia to Singapore via China – a Letter to my Mum

[Blog Entry for May 2008](#)

Dear Mum,

We left Mongolia by train. I love the train journey across the Gobi. It takes thirty hours, but four hours of that are spent at the Chinese border while they change all the wheels on the whole train. The width between the rails on the Mongolian side and the Chinese side is different. Only by an inch or so. The whole carriage is lifted into the air and the bogies exchanged. Lots of clacking and shunting, no point in trying to sleep. We had a two-berth cabin with its own washroom complete with a shower. Very posh. The journey cost £70 each. Not bad for a 1500-mile trip!!! The first startling contrast was on our pulling into Beijing railway station. We stepped down from a romantic Dr. Zhivargo express type carriage opposite China's new 200 km/hr low profile bullet train, complete with pretty hostesses to welcome you aboard.

In Beijing we stayed in a modern four-star hotel, just to pamper ourselves!!! But it rained almost the whole of the two days we were there. And real rain too. We hadn't seen rain in Mongolia for over nine months, so it was a bit of a novelty!!! But not for long. Horrid stuff, rain. But we did get to have high tea at the Raffles Beijing hotel!!! Rather special that was. We felt like lord and lady muck. Just arrived off the up train from the back of beyond and now mixing it with the rich and famous!!! Well not quite but you get what I mean. What a contrast to the broken streets of Ulaanbaatar. I don't think it could have been greater!!! Amazing what different life experiences people have. Unwashed Mongolian street kids, living in holes in the ground and new money rich people nibbling smoked salmon and caviar at Raffles. I suppose the

encouraging thing is that at least today people like us can have access the two environments without too much hassle. We also took a bus trip out to see the new Olympic Games' complex to the north of the city. You still cannot get near the Birds Nest Stadium; it is still being worked on. And by the look of the whole complex there is still a ways to go before the games open in three months. The new underground rail link doesn't look anywhere near finished. The other striking thing is that the complex is totally surrounded by dense housing estates and shopping malls. I think the idea is that once the games are over the facilities are close enough to the city centre to guarantee they will be used by Beijing's citizens. The high-rise flats all around the Birds Nest does dwarf it, though.

So, whilst lazing around in the hotel room, catching our breath and watching the rain come down, we booked the next stage of the journey.... to Xian. Another train trip, but this time an overnight, eleven-hour job. All the soft sleeper compartments were taken, so we had two bottom bunks in a six-berth hard sleeper cabin. Well, the 'hard' doesn't really mean hard. What a crush at the West Beijing Railway station. The train carries well over 800 people and we were all standing at the gate until just 20 mins before the train was due to depart. Bit of a crush. Looking around I could see that I was the only whitey in the crowded. Where were all the western tourists? Well, it turns out that they are herded together into a special area. Poor things cannot stand the strain of train travel in China. I have to say here that travelling with Gek, who speaks three Chinese languages, is just sensational. We go places, do and see things off the well-grooved tourist tracks. Hardly saw a westerner the whole two weeks. Magic. The train left the station right on the dot, 9.30 pm. We both slept really well, no snores in our cabin. Lights off promptly at 10 pm and wake up music at 7 am. All very crisp and organised.

I like Xian city. Of the cities we have visited on this trip, Xian is my favourite. There is hardly a whiff of the old China in any of China's modern cities. You need to go to the countryside to catch up with anything culturally Chinese. Not on this trip. But Xian has a real nice feel to it, from the massive 13 km wall around the old part of the city to the quirky larger than life statues in one of the city's parks. And travelling around the city on the buses is really easy. Even I could workout which bus to get. It is busy though.... but 20% of the world's population live in China, so I guess it is bound to be. The warriors are a different matter. Not impressed with what the needs of tourist have done to the site. Like the world needs another theme park. We hired a car with driver for the day of the warriors visit. On the way to the warrior site we visited a Taoist Temple, all newly refurbished with Taiwanese Chinese money. Having been guided round by a very able young woman, we were persuaded to have

our immediate futures appraised. (Pay here please.... sorry, must keep my cynicisms in the box). Anyway, turned out to be fun. What you do is pick out what looks like a large lollipop stick from a tub. Our pretty guide insisted that this had to be done with a blank mind. No problem. On the stick is some writing which the monk then reads after asking basic things like your age. Well, it turns out from our ages that I am an earth dog and Gek is a water snake which, according to our stick reader, makes us compatible. What a relief. My stick was the number one dragon stick and signified that my life was about to flip over to a new phase. Gek stick was a phoenix rising from a forest, signifying change. I thought that consulting the oracle was supposed to tell you things you didn't already know. Back, back, get back in your box.

From the temple we went on to the terracotta warrior site. Much changed since you were there thirty years ago. Much like a theme park and crowds of tourist. Terrible. Couldn't get out of there quick enough. But I did like the city of Xian. Even if there are 8 million people living there, it seemed on a quite human scale.

The next port of call was Kunming. We had intended to go to Guilin, but a couple of weeks before we left Ulaanbaatar we heard from a mutual friend, Mui Hua, who had just moved to Kunming. So, in good traveller style we decided to pay her a visit instead. I don't know if you went to Kunming. It is in the south west of China and is quite high up in the mountains, over 6000 ft. In fact, it is higher than Ulaanbaatar. But a lot wetter. The rain followed us from Beijing. For this leg of the journey we took a plane from Xian. The train would have taken thirty hours and we felt that was time wasted since we only had 14 days on our visas. Very strange, but for the Olympics the Chinese have cut the tourist visa from the normal thirty days to fourteen days. Odd. Anyway, it was really great to see Mui Hua. We knew each other from our time in Singapore. We stayed four nights in her new apartment. The weather was damp and cold. Made us appreciate the dry and cold of Mongolia. Unfortunately, Gek got sick whilst we were there. We think she had an allergic reaction to some local spices in the dishes we tried. Overnight her face ballooned, her upper body became bright red and she became very hot. She is still not right now, over a week later. But we did get out a bit to see the city. Kunming doesn't seem as prosperous as the other cities we visited. It is a bit remote from the main China plain. The tourist attraction is the minority ethnic tribes that live in the Yunnan Province. We visited the theme park showing their homes etc. Very pretty but sterile. I have been to the real minority villages in the north of Thailand and they are not like this. A lot, lot more organic and with poverty endemic. Some of the Thai minority groups originate from China, having escaped there to avoid persecution. Whilst in Kunming we went to a 'Culture Show'. Such shows in

Mongolia are as near authentic as you can get with a tourist audience. But this was something else. Bizarrely it was blatantly sexual, totally modern and with high tech stage effects. The audience of mainly tour groups were herded like sheep in and out of their seats. Terrible. How can people be so hood winked? Beats me.

So that was Kunming ticked off. Mui Hua was taking a trip to Hong Kong to visit a trade show for her work. As we were going in the same direction, we took the twenty-four-hour train together to Guangzhou. The journey was again over night. This of course meant that we missed seeing most of the scenery, but what we did see was spectacular. The train windows could not be opened, the carriage being air conditioned and they were in need of a clean too, so I did not manage to get any decent photographs. Return trip needed, I think. The carriage attendant recognised from my rugged good looks that I was a senior citizen and I was marked out as ancient with a red Chinese string knot pinned to my cot. She also took down my personal details for the train logbook. I became a special customer. Neat.

The Guangzhou annual trade fair was still on during our stay and the hotel prices had tripled. So, we had booked a 2-star inn and we were a bit apprehensive as to where we were going to spend the next couple of nights. But it turned out to be the best hotel we stayed in. Result. Very clean, great little café and topping location. Gek still wasn't feeling too good, so we took short trips out into the city by taxi then dive back to the inn room to recuperate. Guangzhou is about an hour train journey from Hong Kong, so there is evidence of the British having been here. Things like a monument to the triumph of the Guangzhou citizens over the British after kicking the Brits out of their city. In a park we visited there are still 18th century cannon with the British imperial crown on them. Gave me a strange feeling to know that England had traded here and held sway over this part of the world. Weird. Our first foray into the city was to track down the monument to the reason Guangzhou, now home to 10 million people, was here at all..... five goats. I kid you not. Five fairies arrived in the Gunagzhou basin on five goats bringing a gift of five corn plants for the local populous. Why not five rice plants, I don't know. And why is the statue that marks the event of the five goats and not the five fairies, I also don't know. But there you have it. From this beginning Guangzhou's future was assured. Very modern, very organised, very, very hyper, very global. We only had two nights in the city. It deserves more and with Tiger Air budget airline flying there from Singapore, we will be back.

Our two-week trek down the length of China over, we flew from Guangzhou to Singapore into another world and a new life..... again!

I hope you get this letter close to Mother's Day. Thinking of you often. Gek and I will be back in the UK during August this year. See you then, Love David

ADB Project Debriefing Notes

Debriefing Notes

Mr. David Whitworth, VSO specialist on curriculum development, started his service on the project on 25 September 2006. At his request, the 24-month contracted period has been divided into two parts of 18 months starting from 25/09/06 until 17/04/08 and the remaining six months starting from 15/10/08 (*Which I did not complete.*)

Debriefing session was conducted on 11/04/08 and both parts agreed on the following issues to ensure the permanence and linkages of project activities.

- A. Major achievements and work completed from the original Component B terms of reference by David over the last 18 months are,
 - 1. Include on-the-job, in company training elements in each module.
 - 2. Non-formal training modules content to be demand driven.
 - 3. Include a common core of modules with additional specialist modules for each specific skill.
 - 4. Incorporate current occupational standards.
 - 5. Competency based assessment to include an evidential portfolio of the work undertaken, in-course assignments and formal tests.
 - 6. Flexible delivery of the programme modules.
 - 7. Moderating panels for nine trades created.

- B. Major achievements and work not completed from the original terms of reference by David over the last 18 months are,
 - 1. Link developed non-formal skills training modules with the existing formal vocational education provision.
 - 2. New technologies to be continuously reviewed and introduced into modules at periodic programme reviews.
 - 3. Address, environmental, gender and physical disability issues through the programme.

- C. Other work completed from other Components of the project during David's placement.
 - 1. Promote demand driven non-formal skills training for the construction sector workers.
 - 2. Target the young from low-income families and unemployed adults for construction worker training.
 - 3. Use existing voucher scheme established by the MLSW and new financial mechanisms to support non-formal training for the construction sector workers.
 - 4. Strengthen the link between the training providers and the construction companies to increase the effectiveness of on the job in-company training.
 - 5. Increase the public awareness of employment opportunities in the construction sector.

6. Framework on public and private partnership and cooperation was designed and piloted.
7. Empowered PIU staff and partner agencies by assisting and encouraging their involvement in the development work.

D. Required follow-up actions to ensure the continuity of work in the upcoming six months

1. Print the remaining 8 Trainee Handbooks
2. Build error checks into the tracking data base. Get voucher issue numbers from MACE to cross check Training Providers data
3. Set up The Web Site and allow TP's space to advertise on it
4. Link Trainee register to website
5. Find a home for the project on completion of the project term. (MCC or new state TVET organization)
6. Create and link new learning materials with modules and training methodologies.

E. Other comments and suggestions for further improvement of project activities

1. None

On the basis of above achievements and contributions to the Project, the Project Coordinator confirms that Mr. David Whitworth provided outstanding professional services to the Project.

Agreed by

David Whitworth

VSO specialist on curriculum development

Date

Agreed by

Batkishig Adilbish

Project Coordinator

JFPR-MON 9085

Date

Memory Litter Bin

1. **Trip to Darkhan** – After UB, Darkhan, Mongolia's second city some 230 Km to the north of UB on the way to the Russian border, had the most VSO volunteers' postings. Gek and I took a bus to the city from UB to spend a long weekend there with our friends, including Linda and Christiane. As no one could accommodate us in their billets, we lodged in a dormitory guest house run by an ex - VSO who had stayed on after his posting was completed. Gek and I were the only guests at the time and so the stay was very congenial with only the two of us in the bunk bedded room.
2. **Audrey's visit** – In August 2007, t Gek's niece Audrey came to UB to stay with for a week. She was between jobs in Singapore and was taking the opportunity to do a bit of travelling. Gek and Audrey took an organised camping trip into the Terelji National Park, a trip I had to regrettably forgo as I was feeling a little under the weather at the time.

- 3. Peking to Paris Run** – This event was a rerun of the Peking to Paris car rally first organised in 1907. Amazingly, one of the cars on this event had also partaken in the first run. The real surprise for me was to see a Series I Morgan amongst their number driven by father and son team, David and Jon Spurling, both members of the Morgan Sports Car Club. Needless to say, we fell into conversation about their experience so far and the road ahead, well the no road ahead. The rally was taking the original 1907 route across the Mongolian Steppes, a route with no metalled roads. A Morgan is a bumpy ride on a modern express way, how it would feel driving across the bare earth I hated to think.

All the surviving cars from the Peking UB were corralled in the Bayangol Hotel car park for their stay in the city and a lot of feverish maintenance work was being done on the cars by their crews. I could not do much to help David and Jon with repairs to the Morgan, but I did get them a few supplies for the onward leg of rally. Amazingly they made it all the way to Paris and in a good time too.

- 4. Trip to Erdenet** - This short trip to the mining town of Erdenet, 340 km from UB, was taken with Didi, Gek's boss at the Lotus Children's Centre, to visit with her the Children's Centre she had recently set up in the town. She intended to transfer there some of the boys from the UB Lotus home. The town is linked to UB by a metalled road and the drive in the Lotus Centre minibus was, as a result, very comfortable. Whilst we were at the new centre, Gek got the children involved in some craft activity.

Whilst we were in the town, we when for dinner at a Malaysian restaurant. Yes, you read that a right, a Malaysian restaurant in the back of, the back of beyond. We had contact with the Malaysian owner of Indian decent, through Ben Ho, the country boss of the Singaporean MacCoffee three-in-one coffee suppliers, the guy who had help with the sponsorship of Gek's exhibition. You can image our surprise to be greeted at the restaurant by Alagappan, the Malaysian cook. We had a real jolly chat with Alagappan and after a small snack, we left saying we would return the next day for dinner for which Alagappan promised to make a nasi lemak, a favourite Malaysian dish of both mine and Gek. During our chat with Alagappan he told us that he had arrived in Erdenet straight from Kuala Lumpur in February, the coldest month of the Mongolian winter. And he survived.



- 5. Eagle Festival** - I cannot do justice to this event we went to here. Please visit the Blog entries.

[Blog Entry February 2008](#)

6. **Letter to Polly -**

Thanks for your mail. And thanks for such a long letter. Sorry I haven't responded earlier. Gek has been quite ill with bronchitis and hasn't been to the children's centre for 3 weeks now. She is just about recovering now but is still coughing a lot. She is not used to being inactive!!!! But she has coped well considering.

It must have been really upsetting to visit the patient you mentioned. Brought a lot of memories to the fore. It did for me just reading your mail. The view from here is that human beings are incredibly similar in all aspects of what it means to be human, no matter what the prevailing culture tries to dictate. All that seems to vary is the proportion of a given group who experience any given condition. Beyond the family and often within a family, intervention is needed to change behaviours to 'make things better'. I guess this is an obvious reality if you think about it, but people in different cultures do not really have vastly different reactions to given conditions if left to themselves. Being in Mongolia, a very different culture based on a nomadic existence dictated by the climate and physical environment just underlines the fact. Anyway, sorry, going on a bit. Being here is in many ways energising. Confronts you with some of basic realities about people that you must face in your work too. I am proud that you can handle it.

The project seems to be going well. Difficult to tell sometimes through the fog of another language. We have 8 different training providers with up to 4 staff in each managing and delivering the month-long courses. Over 350 young people have been through their doors so far since last summer. About half have been tracked into jobs. Some of the individual's stories are funny. One young lad never washed. Anything, cloths or body!! Shoovdor, one really classy lady, decided enough was enough and took him for a wash. But even when we visited him at the building site a couple weeks later in the training, he was black again. But six months on with a fulltime job, at a company get together he turned up in a suit with a cell phone!!!! Total transformation.

I have enjoyed doing the 'train the trainer' workshops. We have run 10 so far. We had 30 trainers from our own and other training providers at a session last week. Two and a half hours of interactive working. I just love conducting. Gives me a real buzz when you carry 30 individuals along with you. They all probably think I am completely nuts!!!!

Enjoying Taiji. Gek and me do two teaching sessions a week in the mediation centre. Made friends through the sessions. Amazingly I am teaching Ariunaa, Selenge and Khishgee at lunch time in the office as well!!!!. The building we are in also houses the Min of Construction training section and has teaching rooms. We move the tables

and chairs to one side and away we go. Selenge is amazing at picking up the new moves. We don't manage it every day because we are out and about some days. I am learning the 42 steps now from Gek. Love having my own trainer. Never thought I would enjoy physical exercise. Keeping me fit. Tummy flat, muscles not as flabby!!!

We go out a lot, socialising with friends. So many different people have passed through our lives. Countless. Mongolians are very tactile. Complete strangers will link arms with you to cross the road together. Selenge and Ariunaa simultaneous link arms with me crossing the road to the canteen, makes me laugh out loud. Makes me feel very good too!!!!!! An attractive young Mongolian woman on each arm..... what did I do to deserve this!!!!!!.....When I reflect on what life would be like if I was still in Penylanwell..... There is such a variety of eating places. At weekend we treat ourselves to an English breakfast at the UB Delie or the relax Coffee House. Well, I do. Gek has something different every time!!!! At this time of year, we have the places to ourselves. All the comfort without the tourists!!! Magic. Tonight, we are going to the ballet. Swan Lake. I have always loved ballet. The theatre is a little gem. It is still a surreal experience for me when I stop and think what we are doing. We are watching a Russian ballet in a theatre build to a European design and performed by Mongolian dancers and musicians who are equal to their European counterparts. And yet within a couple of miles from where we are sitting, families are living in poverty. No running water, a hole in the ground to shit in and only a tent to keep the cold at bay. There are over 200,00 people living this way, camped to the north of UB. I half expect to awake one morning to find that there has been a revolution and the masses are marching down Peace Avenue demanding a piece of the action!!!!

The travel plans are not progressed beyond Singapore. We have had an eye on mum's condition, thinking we might have to come back to the UK before Summer but the word from Anna and Mark is that she is stabilised. Anna's baby is to be delivered on the 19th Feb and I guess you already know that Emma is pregnant. With Dylan's baby that will make 10 little ones under the age of 6. Amazing. No chance of remembering birthdays now. Hopeless. So, travel plans all depend on these things as well as on the wedding date. We are looking forward to being somewhere else now. After nearly 18 months the weird and sometimes not so wonderful is appearing normal!!!!!! Help.

OK. Enough already. Hope you are both ok

Love you very much'

Dad