

Learning and Development through Adventure and Exploration

Allison Goodwill Fellow 2008

Report on DYEG / YSES Expedition to Mongolia 2008.

The DYEG / YSES group consisted of 16 young expeditioners, (one expeditioner had to drop out of the trip for health reasons only days before departure), and 7 adult leaders; we departed the UK on 30th July and returned on 31st August 2008.

The group travelled to Ulan Bataar via Berlin and Moscow. Upon reaching Ulan Bataar we stayed in the city for two days providing an opportunity for some country familiarisation and the acquisition of supplies. Following our brief stay in UB we embarked on an overland journey northward to Khovsgol Aimag, close to the Russian Border. This journey took three days using three Russian UAZ-452 4x4 minibuses. We spent one night wild camping en-route and one night camping in the grounds of a guest house on the outskirts of Morun; where we visited the Mongolian Border Police in order to obtain our frontier zone permits.

From Morun we continued to Khatgal on the southern lake shore of Khovsgol Nuur, near which we established our basecamp. The weather on the first couple of days was rather inhospitable and that combined with a problem with one of our expeditioners, (requiring her repatriation), delayed the start of our activity phase by a couple of days.

The activity phase involved the group splitting into three sub-groups in order to complete three journeys in the steppe-taiga areas and on the lake near Khatgal. The journeys involved horse riding, hiking and canoeing using inflatable Canadian canoes. Each group completed the journeys in a rotational pattern which involved returning to the basecamp in order to complete a changeover on agreed dates. The weather during this phase of the expedition varied between being very hot and sunny, through short sharp thunderstorms to days which were cloudy and windy. Fortunately there were no major problems despite one leader's close shave when a horse that he was cantering managed to lose its footing and throw him 'over the handlebars'!

The end of this activity phase came with a rest day at basecamp where we took the opportunity to re-group and consolidate our progress thus far. Following on from this we had a further long day driving overland northwards and closer to the Russian border. We overnighted at the Tsaatan Community Visitors' Centre in the village of Tsagaannuur where we received a briefing from TCVC staff for the next phase in the expedition.

On the following day, after a few delays, we met our Tsaatan guides and began a two day ride, (on horseback and using reindeer), onto the tundra plateau of the Ulaan Taiga. This involved a crossing of one +3000mtr mountain pass out of the taiga forest and onto the tundra plateau where the

Tsaatan community have their summer pastures. Whilst there the expeditioners lived in Tsaatan ortz, (tepees), experiencing some elements of the Tsaatan way of live. In addition the expeditioners spend some time teaching English to the Tsaatan children – both groups appeared to greatly enjoy this experience. In the debrief of the experience with our expeditioners it became clear that the few days spent with the Tsataan had a profound effect on many of them and that they were humbled by the Tsataan approach to life and the welcome given to them by the families that we came into contact with.

Whilst based at the Tsaatan ortz the weather took a turn for the worse, with some 15cm of snow falling overnight, (winter was beginning on the tundra). Although our hosts were not unduly concerned, the DYEG / YSES leaders considered that discretion was the better part of valour and decided to return to Tsagaannuur one day early. This two day trip involved re-crossing the mountain pass on horseback in a blizzard and spending a very cold night camping next to the trail at a lower altitude in the forest.

Returning to the TCVC we held a de-brief session with the VSO Volunteer, managed to get everyone showered for the first time in over a week and spent the night in a warm building.

The following day we spent 13 hours driving back to Morun and then spent a further two days driving to Erdenet where we embarked on the overnight train to Ulan Bataar. From UB we then drove to the Terelj National Park, some 80km northeast of the city where we spent a couple of days R&R, (involving canoeing, horse riding and hiking / scrambling), before flying back to the UK on 31st August.

The expeditioners generally coped very well with the demands made of them by all aspects of this expedition. They had to deal with a wide range of climatic and topographic conditions along with a range of demanding activities throughout the trip. The emphasis placed on personal development during the trip saw many expeditioners, (and leaders), being forced out of their comfort zones on several occasions – all participants made a great deal of personal progress as a consequence of this process.

Fortunately there were very few major medical conditions to cope with during the expedition; most, if not all participants had the usual gastro-intestinal problems; mostly short term, but a couple of participants had longer and re-occurring problems. One leader had a longer term health problem, which at the time of writing remains un-diagnosed and will be referred to a GP in due course. Several expeditioners had problems with frequent nosebleeds during the early days of the expedition, (probably due to the dry atmosphere around UB). There were few physical injuries other than blisters on un-hardened feet and at least one very lucky escape, (thrown by the stumbling horse – not least because it happened to me!).

The major health related problem involved the emotional wellbeing of one of the female expeditioners. Her emotional condition deteriorated rapidly over

the first week of the expedition to the extent that it was decided to return her to the care of her parents in the UK in order to place her in a position where she could receive the best possible treatment for her condition. This repatriation involved detaching a female leader, Wendy Grey from the expedition group for almost a week in order to return the expeditioner to Ulan Bataar where her mother collected her. I am grateful to Wendy for this onerous task, to the girl's parents for arranging to travel to UB and to Go Wilderness Mongolia for making the arrangements for this process to take place.

A range of people need to be thanked for their help during this expedition. Firstly the expeditioners who all played their part in making this such a successful expedition, (I hope that many will return as trainee leaders on subsequent expeditions). Chris and Sarol from Go Wilderness Mongolia provided the group with a fantastically comprehensive in-country support package, (to the extent of allowing 22 people to sleep at their house on the last night of the trip!). Many thanks need to go to Neil Drake, the expedition's home agent, who provided an essential link in repatriating the disturbed expeditioner. There were also a large number of Mongolian nationals who supported the expedition; our interpreters Uggii and Chiggi, our support driver Beamba, the various horse guides in the Khovsgol area and our various drivers. All participants would like to extend their thanks to these people and Sheila Marshal, the VSO Volunteer at the TCVC, the Itgal Foundation and the Tsaatan community. My greatest debt of thanks goes to the Winston Churchill memorial Travelling fellowship, without whom I wouldn't have been able to make this trip, and contribute to the lives of these young people.

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Mongolia 2008