

Mongolia 2010

Charlotte Hibbs writes about her trip to Mongolia and how the team helped with the refurbishment of one of the local schools



In July 2010, sixteen very pink girls set off for Beijing and then Ulaanbaatar (UB), the capital of Mongolia. We were accompanied by Mrs Lancaster and our two World Challenge leaders, Kevin and Simon.

Half of the 3.4 million people living in Mongolia actually reside in UB which is highly westernised. The rest of the population mainly live in the very spartan conditions of the open plains.

We spent part of our world challenge visit helping to redecorate and refurbish one of the local Mongolian schools. The school was the largest building in the area educating children between the ages of six and fifteen. When we arrived a large number of them were there to greet us even though it was actually their summer vacation. They treated us to a lovely welcoming ceremony where we got to eat traditional Mongolian snacks such as dried milk products and drink known as 'Ayrag', fermented mare's milk! They were apparently expecting a much older party of visitors, in fact they were expecting a team of builders equipped with power tools and building skills...

We began our work by cleaning the school rooms, however this proved to be more difficult than expected as their mop was a mere stick with a rag attached to the end of it. After overcoming this difficulty a few of us began to take measurements for the floor linoleum, which would be placed in their dining room. This took us a whole day. Unfortunately the measurements were not accurate so we soon realised as we started to fit the lino that we would not have enough to cover the whole dining area. Our problems escalated when we realised that we had misplaced our paint rollers, paint brushes and most importantly the paint! However we used all of our skills of commonsense and initiative by purchasing more paint from some locals. Problems overcome - we were able to begin painting the walls of a dormitory. This room was just the right size for the lino, so we found a use for our mis-measured lino and fitted it here. The dormitory looked lovely when it was all finished.

At the end of each day's manual tasks we also taught the children English. There were two classes, one for the older children and the other for the younger ones. The older children already had a basic knowledge of English vocabulary so we concentrated on teaching them geography. We took a blow-up globe with us and from this we were able to show the children exactly where Europe was and how small our country was compared to theirs. With the younger children we concentrated more on teaching them basic vocabulary such as clothes, weather and body parts! (as an aid to this we sang 'heads, shoulders, knees and toes').

On our last day we joined them in their main school hall for a sad farewell; the children put on a concert for us of their traditional dances and songs. They ended with a song which we all sang together. Then we gave them the presents we had brought with us including a teddy bear for each of the children, pens, pencils, toothbrushes, lego and inflatable globes. Before we left they showed a few of us how to play their traditional musical instruments. A week later, during our horse trek, we came back through Murun Brigade while the village's annual 'summer festival' was in full swing. Some of the villagers we had met earlier were wrestling and showing off their horses. When they realised we had returned they called us into the ringed area they were using as a stage and explained to everyone on the loudspeaker who we were and how we had helped them redecorate their school. As a final goodbye the villagers presented us with a live lamb to say thank you! I'll leave it to your imagination what happened next!!!!!!

This trip was a wonderful experience - we certainly learnt a lot about ourselves and the Mongolian way of life. For many of us, we will never forget the way we were able to change some of the children's lives for the better. Many of us are still fundraising and sending money to the Mongolian villagers who made us feel so welcome and touched our hearts in so many different ways.



