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A different kind of herd

As told to Carmela Ferraro



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I arrived in Mongolia in June 2007 with a plan to work for the summer before returning to university. But pretty soon I decided that it was going to be a good opportunity for me to stay longer and I'm still here.

My job consists of meeting with clients and preparing personalised investment packages for them. I work at Mongolia International Capital Corporation (MICC), the first investment bank in Mongolia, which aims to foster Mongolian capital markets development.

When I arrived, my boss and two of my co-workers picked me up and drove me to my apartment. There were no lights. All the furniture was twice my size and made of hard, polished wood. The electrical wiring system under my kitchen sink was dripped on daily. I almost cried myself to sleep.

Why am I here? Well, the US undergraduate lifestyle is geared towards lots of thinking but, unfortunately, very little producing. By my second year I found myself getting a bit tired of that. I heard about an old classmate who was working at MICC. I was very interested in private-sector development work, intrigued by Mongolia's proximity to the emerging markets of China and central Asia.

My cultural adjustment period was fairly long. I find it a very hard place to live, although beautiful and always interesting, and I think it's the same for most Mongolians. My most obvious issue is the language, which is extremely difficult. It's challenging to have to do business with a translator. Day-to-day activities that should take minutes are often lengthened because of miscommunication.

The Mongolian diet – cow, sheep, goat, horse, camel and yak – has also been a little hard to cope with, given that I've been vegetarian since the age of five. Mongolians place a high value on meat, which is very expensive. So when you tell someone you don't want any meat in your food, it seems very backward. But a few vegetarian restaurants have opened up in the past year, which is really great.

I don't socialise much. There's a very competitive social life among the expat community. If you're seen at the right places with the right people, you can really boost your social and, in some cases, your business reputation. But I haven't been too involved in that, partly because I find it exhausting and partly because the drinking in Mongolia is heavy duty. A remnant of the Russian occupation is a predilection for many, many rounds of vodka. This isn't universal but it's definitely a common practice.

I spend most of my time with my Mongolian colleagues. My job keeps me at the office from before 9am until well after 7pm most of the week, so I've become quite close to many of them. I'm lucky because the majority are young, speak excellent English and share my interests.

The Mongolian winter in the capital – which at -40°C is something else – kept me indoors, but mainly because of the

pollution at that time of the year. Ulaanbaatar is mainly Soviet-style block apartments. However, the four hills that ring the city consist of “ger districts” – traditional Mongolian houses made of a round wooden lattice structure covered in thick layers of felt. In winter people burn brown coal in stoves in these houses and the smoke just pours into the centre of the city.

Some places can be quite dangerous for foreigners . A significant percentage of Mongolia’s gross domestic product comes from foreign-owned mining, whose profits Mongolians see very little of. Some people, as a result, associate white faces, especially if they’re wearing a business suit, with this exploitative extraction culture, which is really unfortunate. But, paradoxically, being a foreigner, especially a western foreigner, is also an asset in the sense that you are likely to have had a better education, be wealthier and have international experience. Sometimes this means you have more influence, although it doesn’t translate to people being more friendly to you. Being foreign has provided me with a great deal of professional authority that, I have to say, I haven’t earned.

Mongolia is a country of great contrast. I have an office with a high-speed internet connection and I work with people in business suits. But the moment you travel an hour away into the countryside you see people wearing traditional dress – in fact you see this in the capital as well – and leading the same nomadic lifestyle based around herding animals that they’ve lived for thousands of years.

But the pace of change in Mongolia is extraordinary, even during my time here. The gross domestic product growth rate was 9.9 per cent in 2007. Wealthy Mongolians have burst on to the scene like never before and high quality housing and new businesses are shooting up all over the place.

There’s also a developing arts and cultural scene. A US-educated Mongolian woman, for instance, runs an art gallery. The twice-monthly openings usually come with a rocking party, which attracts an interesting group of people – young, ambitious and culturally very aware.

But I’ve decided it’s time to go home. I want to finish off my degree in political science and physics at Columbia University. I identify as a New Yorker much more strongly than anything else, although I’ve lived overseas because both my parents are economists and they were involved in negotiating the Kyoto Protocol.

I think that what I’ve learnt from living here will travel with me for the rest of my life. I’m very interested to see how I’m going to adapt to being a student again, especially after having been an investment banker, and, I guess, a sort of mover and shaker.

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