

Stephanie Martin
Globetrotter Grant Trip Report

My summer in Kyrgyzstan was certainly adventure- in fact, when people ask me how it was, that is all I say- “it was an adventure.” I was well aware of the fact that I was going to a lesser developed country and that things were going to be rough, but books and internet articles could not prepare me for what I found. I still remember arriving in Bishkek’s Manas airport at 3 in the morning, 36 hours after I left Dallas. I was hungry, tired, dirty and not overly thrilled when I discovered that NONE of my luggage had made it and most likely would not make it for another three days. After getting mobbed by taxi drivers, I found my guide, plopped down into the 1980 BMW and was greeted with “Welcome to the USSR.” I didn’t know whether to laugh or to be scared because if I was in the USSR I had clearly just time-traveled because I do believe the USSR died in 1991.

This mixed feeling of whether to laugh, cry or be scared dominated my entire trip. Every experience I had was extremely eye-opening and educational but often in ways I would not have imagined. Having my host sister get down on her knees and beg me to get her out of the country before she was bride-kidnapped or sold to a man by her mother absolutely broke my heart. Being trapped inside a mashrutka bus when it flipped over was terrifying. However, these are not the memories I choose to remember. Instead, I like to dream back to the nights that my new “family” sat around the table eating traditional Kyrgyz food and drinking tea, watching the sun set over the mountains and just talking. We talked about everything from politics, to religion, to cultural differences, our hopes and dreams for our lives, and yes, even Michael Jackson (with occasional breaking out into group jam sessions of *Billie Jean*).

The Globetrotter grant helped me in more than one way. In Kyrgyzstan itself, I used the money to finance a yurt trip. I am not an outdoorsy sort of gal but I figured that three days in the mountains at a lake wouldn’t kill me. Well...it certainly tried! I spent over ten hours on a horse and a donkey to get up into the mountains in the pouring rain and snow. Yes, that is snow in July. The yurt was essentially just a small circular tent made out of wool that housed a family of seven. The view was beautiful! I spent three days hiking to see glaciers, lakes, helping herd the sheep and horses, rolling out bread, playing travel checkers with the kids, and trying not to freeze to death. As miserably cold and wind-burned as I was when I returned, I am so glad I was able to go on my yurt trip. The purity of the land and the innocence and pure hospitality of the nomadic people touched me. Their lives were so simply and I admired their lifestyle.

In addition to my yurt trip, I used my Globetrotter grant to go to Beijing. Due to all of the Tibetan protests early in the summer, my parents told me that I could only go to China if I went significantly earlier than the Olympics. I got to spend an entire week touring all of the major tourist attractions in Beijing, seeing the Bird’s Nest Stadium, and even going bungee-jumping! My week in Beijing was exhilarating and relaxing. I really needed a break from the poverty that I was living in, in Bishkek. I don’t think that a TGI Friday’s cheeseburger has ever tasted so good to me. AND... the highlight of my trip... I got to take a real shower! Don’t get me wrong, I had no problem living the true Kyrgyz

lifestyle of the “banya,” bucket of water out in a shack once a week system. However seeing a true shower where I could actually get cleaned almost made me tear up. I’ve always wanted to see China, just so I could say I’ve seen it. I had such a wonderful time, I can’t wait to go back and hopefully take my family because it was amazing.

The final thing that I used my globetrotter grant for is a little less exciting than my trips to the yurt and to China. Saturdays in my host home usually were a bit awkward. My family was Muslim and had family get-togethers on Saturday afternoons. They included me a few times but then it became clear that I was an awkward addition so I looked to find things to do in the city. Internet in Bishkek was almost non-existent, and expensive!!! My typical Saturday afternoon consisted of me going to the Turkish mall, using their internet for two hours to email home and chat with my boyfriend (now fiancé!!!!) and then walking down to the local movie theater. The name of the movie theater when translated is Red October which always made me laugh. I watched American films that were dubbed into Russian or occasionally Kyrgyz to work on my listening skills... and to keep up with American summer blockbusters. With my globetrotter grant, I was able to use the internet each Saturday and watch: *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *What Happens in Vegas*, *Sex and the City*, *Wanted*, *Get Smart*, *Hancock* and *The Hulk*.

My summer was packed full of traveling, adventures, and fun. I could tell stories for hours without stopping about the things that I heard and saw and experienced in Kyrgyzstan. However, if there is one thing that I learned this summer, it’s that sometimes words and pictures aren’t enough. There are some experiences and some places in this world that people just need to go and see for themselves. Kyrgyzstan is one of them. A blend of Russian, Asian and Middle-Eastern with an overwhelming obsession with America, Bishkek is a melting pot of cultures, religions, ideologies and lifestyles. Sadly, Kyrgyzstan is considered the “failed” of the “stans” so if people want to experience the beauty and purity of this country they should hurry before they lose their chance.