

# THROUGH the eyes of children



Workshop in Song Kul

In 2005, a young French couple decided to act on their mutual love of photography and fascination with the nomadic life-style and embark on a 50,000-kilometre expedition from Paris to a remote mountain range called Altai in Central Asia.

Thibaut and Maï-Loan would call their venture Step by Steppe, and the journey to Altai, a mountain range where Russia, China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan come together, would incorporate strategic stops where they would organise photographic workshops with children. The objective was to allow children to take pictures of their daily life and to share them with other children along the journey.

The couple spent months planning their trip, deciding

everything from modes of transport, funding for the expedition, the ideal itinerary, and gathering food and supplies. They also had to learn some Russian and build up contacts in the media to ensure the trip got good press coverage.

In addition, they learned some basic mechanics, necessary because they intended to embark on the trip on Kubilai, a 16-year-old, four-wheel drive camping-car, which had been converted to meet their needs.



Thibaut, Mai-Loan and Kubilai in Kirghizstan

Finally, in June 2005, they were ready and they organised the inaugural photographic workshop in a French school. From this they selected pictures to be shown to all the children they would meet later. The idea was that by seeing these pictures, the Kazakh, Uzbek, Kirgize and Tadjik children would learn at a glance about the lives of French children. Thibaut and Mai-Loan also created a blog – <http://stepbysteppe.blogspot.com/> – on which they would recount their adventures, step by step and display pictures along the way.

On January 2006, Step by Steppe left Paris. One month later the expedition reached the Balkans. In Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Thibaut and Mai-Loan saw communities torn apart by war, the after effects of which look likely to last for years. Then, they arrived in Montenegro and organised their first touring photographic workshop in Nudo.

In Rumania, they organised their second workshop in the town of Roznov. It was here that Kubilai encountered its first serious mechanical problems due to the extreme cold. Nevertheless, the Step by Steppe expedition managed to reach Ukrainia, arriving just as the general elections were about to take place. Thibaut and Mai-Loan witnessed the political campaign, which they felt was more like a business venture than a quest for democracy. During the month they spent in Ukrainia, they met fascinating people such as Dima, a brilliant and charismatic young songwriter who taught them a lot about his country, its history and its people.

They arrived in Georgia in June. Captivated by the landscape, the Georgians and their art de vivre, Thibaut and Mai-Loan felt like they were in paradise. They set up the third workshop in an orphanage in Bediani.

The couple were still having problems with Kubilai, but when they reached Baku in Azerbaidjan, they were able to fix the vehicle, thanks to a machine part brought from France by the French Ambassador's wife.

Next on the journey was Uzbekistan, where they organised two more workshops, and then it was on to Tadjikistan where they organised their sixth workshop in Dushanbé.

During their incredible journey, the Step by Steppe expedition encountered many different kinds of landscape, from vast beautiful deserts to incredible mountain ranges with peaks between 3,000 and 5,000 metres high. Their seventh workshop was held in Murghab, 3,600 metres above sea level.

Finally, in late September Thibaut and Mai-Loan set foot in Altai, the ultimate destination of Step by Steppe. Here, they organised probably the most remote workshop of all. The location was Song Kul, a 3,000m high lake where semi nomadic shepherds live in the middle of nowhere. Afterwards, they travelled through Turkmenistan before turning for home. On the journey back they plan to organise additional workshops in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and Albania.



Kirghizstan



"The one crossing the river is Tavallo. He likes running and jumping. I like this picture because we can see my village Murgab and we see that without water, the ground is very dry. I like my family very much."  
Raouf, 12 years old, Murgab

Once Thibaut and Mai-Loan are back in France, Step by Steppe will be kept alive thanks to the numerous new projects. They plan to set up an exhibition of the children's pictures taken during the workshops and will write a book and documentaries recounting the 50,000-km expedition from Paris to Altai.

The following is an extract from an interview with Thibaut and Mai-Loan while they were in Baku in October.

**How did you choose the places for your workshops?**

To be honest, children chose us rather than we chose them! Before leaving Paris, we had no idea where we were going to implement each event, except for the Kareen Mane Centre for street children in Dushanbe, as we contacted Kareen's mother while we were still

in France. [Kareen herself died in 1994 during the civil war in Tadjikistan].

In Murghab, Tadjikistan at 3,600m above sea level, we simply walked the streets of a village lost in the middle of nowhere and asked a young Pamiri girl who spoke English and who worked for the French NGO Acted to assist us. We then collected together children that we met on our way, asking their parents to allow them to work with us and then immediately began the workshop.

**How did you communicate with the children?**

Usually the person who looked after them spoke a bit of English or even French. We also asked for help in the neighbourhood. It was never a problem finding someone.



"My name is Muslima and my surname Davlatova. Religion is very important to me and I pray to thank and protect my family and the beloved ones. This picture is one of my favourite because I can see myself."

Muslima, 9 years old, Murgab



"Here is my little sister Aizada with my mother and my friends Adilet and Tobaker. We are enjoying so much to take pictures of our daily life here. We are very lucky to have had Mai-Loan and Thibaut for one week with us, we had so much fun!"

Adilet, 14 years old, Song Kul



After selecting four or five pictures from each of them, we asked them about their work, saying: what do you want to say to other children in the world with this picture? Obviously, to understand exactly what they were saying, we really needed someone who spoke their native dialect.

However, sometimes this was impossible. Song Kul Lake, for example, is so isolated – people live in nomad tents and are real shepherds – we needed someone who speaks kirghize so we travelled with a young student. His English was not good, but he could easily communicate with children!

### How did they react to the pictures taken by other children?

Before beginning each workshop, we would project a slideshow with the best pictures taken by children in previous workshops. Then we would discuss with them the environment shown in the pictures, the daily life of the child with his or her different habits, traditions and culture. We would tell them what each child had said about his pictures. Many of the pictures made them laugh, others surprised and amazed them.

### What did the children get from the workshop?

One of the most important things we tried to make them learn was one of the key rules to photography, think before you shoot! Seeing pictures by other children helped open their eyes and made them think about what they wanted to express. We discovered huge creativity in the children and a willingness to show how life is great in their own country. Usually children from villages wanted to show their traditions, while those in the cities wanted to show the modernity of their country.

They also learned about life in other parts of the world through the eyes of other children and this created a link between them and the unknown: what is behind the mountain?

It is interesting to see how the workshops were important for their parents too, as they also made them think about what is important in their culture.

### Can you tell us some anecdotes from your workshops?

In Dushanbe, at the Kareen Mane Centre for street children, we distributed lots of cameras as many children wanted to take photos. A week later, one child came in crying, saying a thief had stolen his camera at the bazaar. Three days later, the woman who looked after them called us saying she had the camera. How come? She replied with a smile: "I went to their house and told

"This is probably my favourite picture. I am riding my donkey and we spend all the time together in Song Kul. Later, I wish to have a horse as they are faster and more convenient to protect animals in "jailoo". When I am old, I wish to be a good shepherd as my parents."

Tchengiz, 9 years old, Song Kul



them not to worry and not to be afraid because the camera was an American one, and inside it there was a sheep that could easily recognise and identify the thief. Five minutes later, the camera was back on the table."

In Georgia, children returned to us with batteries that had bite marks in them. We asked them, "but what have you done, why?" It turned out they were trying to get more power out of the batteries! They were so impatient to shoot, so excited that they could not wait for new batteries, so they bit them hoping this would give them extra power.

In Pamirs, Tadjikistan, two children climbed a huge mountain – maybe two hours walk – just to shoot one picture of the landscape and of the whole village. One of them also shot a picture that we could never have taken: a military base camp in a very sensitive area of nearby Afghanistan. If we had shot this picture we would certainly be put in jail for spying. e