

The NZCA China Wintercamp 2006

Harley Bristow

The droning rumble of a large internal combustion engine followed by the sharp hiss of expelled air with the creak and squeaking of worn brakes was the obvious focus for the motley looking group of foreign travellers on the pavement.

No attention was paid to the hundreds of other sensations that filled the air.

The constant crying of shop owners and assistants was paid no heed. The distant ebb and flow of traffic that had once caused gasps of wonder, now was largely ignored.

Smells and stench wafted from sewer grates like invisible ghosts. Not a nose was wrinkled. A thinning blanket of cotton wool smog covered some of the sky.

There were multitudes of people going about their business filling the streets, more still leaning from windows or doorways, thousands of bright signs advertising god knows what. So many things to absorb and take in, that at times, it must have seemed that five senses would not suffice to do this place justice

Yet, all this was ignored.

Save for the bus.

Doors were opened, bags were thrown on.

The atmosphere around the travellers was charged with emotion. Sadness, feelings of loss, hints of joy.

Awkward jokes, smiles and slaps on the back abounded. Hugs, kisses and heartfelt goodbyes were exchanged.

Tears were shed.

On the bus, the air was heavy, as if the four people on there had each lost something very dear to their heart.

In a way they had

So ended what was possibly the best four weeks of my life. Ever.

But to fully tell the epic tale of the 2006 NZCA wintercamp, one must start at the beginning.....

My name is Harley Bristow, I am a half caste, my mum is Chinese and my dad is kiwi. I am twenty two years old, I live and work in Palmerston North, home of the mighty Manuwatu Turbos! (Yehoo.) My knowledge of china before I went on the trip? Nada. Nought. Zip. Zilch. I could not speak a word of Mandarin/Cantonese if Chuck Norris himself wanted me to. So yeah, I was one pretty damn ignorant dude, no question, and now I have to write an essay?! Good lord, this is going to go horribly wrong, feel free to stop reading whenever the urge takes hold....

In two thousand and five my cousin went on the china trip, getting back to NZ on Christmas day, he ranted and raved about it, the sights the sounds but most of all, the people he shared the trip with. At the time, my care factor was approximately zero. Six months later, I had let the job of a lifetime and a lifechanging opportunity slip through my fingers. So I put my name forward for the wintercamp, what have I got to lose? Nothing.

Coming onto the trip, I had no idea who anyone was (save for one outstanding lady from Wellington who went out of her way to see me, I was blown away,) I didn't know what to expect, except lots of rice for one month.

Upon landing in Hong Kong we were whisked through customs, onto a bus and drove into China till stupid o'clock at night.

The next morning we began Kung Fu training in Foshan. Scungy, scungy Foshan. This was primo. Four days of utter sweatiness. Mmmmm. In truth, it was (just quietly) outstanding, I enjoyed every minute of it, we were actually doing Kung Fu, in a martial arts academy, in China. Yeah Baby!! How many New Zealanders have done that? Watching some of the instructors do their *job* is like watching a whole lot of Kung Fu movies in real life. Mint as. While we may not have been quite as good as our instructors, I reckon we gave a not too shabby performance at the end of it. Which was followed by a (not to blow my own trumpet) mindblowing haka. All in all, Kung Fu: Big thumbs up.

After the Kung Fu, the next few days were spent visiting ancestral villages, the main guts of the trip really. The standards of living between villages varied greatly, from quite flash to relative poverty. However, something which took me by surprise was the total contrast between urban and rural China, whereas in Foshan everything was go, go, go, jam packed with shops and traffic, out in the country not a sound was to be heard. Not even a bird. Complete and utter serenity. My own village was somewhat of a surprise, I hadn't been expecting to visit it as I had no idea where it was. To the credit of Janet Joe, she knew where it was from the trip the year before.

Personally, I was a tad astounded when I met some one who I didn't even know existed and who may or may not have been my grand uncle. The jury is still out on that one, but although my own ancestral village visit was somewhat awkward, if you asked anyone else what their thoughts were on their respective villages.....well, the word "indescribable" comes to mind.

The ancestral village visits lasted for about a week, with most people getting to their respective villages, good times had by all. After that, the pace of the trip picked up a notch or two, as we got into the touristy stuff for the second two weeks. There is no way I'll be able to cram it all into this essay, so I'll provide you with a few of my personal highlights.

Karaoke. Funny, funny karaoke. I gotta say, I reckon boy bands owe their entire existence to China, never had so much Backstreet Boys/Westlife violate my ears as in China. It sort of kicked off in Foshan, everyone going to a karaoke bar, having a few drinks, trying to "sing" into a microphone, having a few more drinks followed by much yelling into the mike until your throat is hoarse and generally making a complete ass of yourself. I suppose that leads me onto another subject: the night life. I can sum it up quite easily, lots of dudes. Lots of old and seedy looking dudes. Good times. Good music. Rock on!

Ask any of the girls about the trip and I'll bet Chuck Norris's beard that it'll take them about ten seconds for them to start talking about the shopping. Its strange, how different it is to NZ, the whole side of the road will be lined with shops and crammed with people. Outside each shop will be one maybe two girls clapping their hands with absolutely no enthusiasm on their face at all trying to get you to "come in sir!" There are people yelling at you to come to their shop, hundreds of people trying to sell you a "genuine" rolex and of course the bargaining. There was much good times to be had bargaining at the markets in China, less so in Hong Kong.

A recurring theme throughout the whole trip was the massages. \$10 NZ for over an hour! Try and find that in NZ, can't go wrong can you? Or can you...? When you decide to get one too many, and it turns out to be dodgy. Nuff said. (shudder.)

My personal favourite place on the trip was Beijing, really clean and damn cold! I had never seen an entire river frozen solid. We visited so many places in the five short days that we were there, The Temple of Heaven which I had never heard of was pretty buzzy, quote from tour guide: "The path that you are walking on was where the emperor walked to go to pray for the bountiful harvest." Whoa. I was walking in the steps of *emperors*! I wonder if he got lots of chewing gum stuck to his shoes when he walked down there as well?

Tiananmen square and the Forbidden city were *extremely* impressive, there's just so much history surrounding them, it's a bit surreal. The emperor had a pretty flash house back in the day. The Summer palace was serene as could be, complete with frozen lake and boat made of marble. It doesn't go very fast.

Then there was the Great Wall. This was the highlight of the trip for me, it is so impressive, so epic, nothing I write here would go halfway to say how amazing it is. You just cannot believe that people actually built it, people actually had to carry these big kick ass blocks of stone, up what can only be described as mountains. Absolutely unreal. Nice view from the top too

When we got to Hong Kong, it was another step again, it is just so *vibrant* so many things to explore. It's like an assault on the senses! (soooo cheesy, but also true!) Having said that though, you do get over it fairly quick. The whole experience of coming out of the subway into the street and -I jest you not- the entire road is filled with people. Wall to wall, more people than you point a chopstick at. No kidding. Not enough room to swing a mouse. Trust me, it's rather taxing on the nerves, still, it is a wicked experience.

While there some of us went to Ocean Park, sort of like Rainbows End but WAY bigger, I'm talking elephant swinging room here. Lots of people, lots of rides, and a very impressive gondola ride similar to Rotorua but a billion times longer. Shopping in HK was as you can probably guess totally insane, with about three hundred people per square metre all trying to buy and sell various bits of crap. Good times. From HK we came back to NZ, some before others (that was the really cheesy bit at the start with all the flowery language!).

Don't worry I'm almost finished, you've come this far so you might as well finish it, if you manage to read it all without having to go for a toilet stop or a nap then I salute you!

Thought I'd save the best till last.

This experience has changed me. Do you know why? Not because I spent a month in a foreign country, not because of the karaoke or shopping or Hong Kong. Not even because of the majesty of the Great Wall. All these things would be nothing without one crucial factor. The people. I left Auckland Airport with twenty three strangers.

I came back with twenty three brothers and sisters.

I don't care if you think I'm talking rubbish. I'm not. If you're reading this and you've already been on this trip, I know you'll agree with me. Nothing I did during that one month compares with the friends that I made

. Nothing.

There are people from all walks of life and from all around NZ, well, mostly the north

island. There were more students and accountants than fingers on my hand, pharmacists, a teacher, a doctor, a dance instructor, a banker, a microbiologist, retail sales pers, an HR specialist, a systems anylyst, a geographer and more (who I've probably really offended because I didn't remember their jobs!) Normally, I would have absolutely nothing to do with any of them. But now, a few months later.... not being around them is like not being around family. (sniff, a solitary tear drips down my cheek! haha!) So yeah. People are good.

To conclude, I would like to thank everyone who makes this incredible experience available every year. Our teachers on the trip with us, Janet Joe, Kai Luey and the entire NZCA pretty much have the thaks of all the people on the trip, along with their families. There is no doubt in my mind at all that every single chinese or half chinese in NZ should go on the trip and experience what I have.
Would I do it again?
In a heartbeat.

Harley Bristow