

NZCA China Winter Camp report

Our winter camp tour travelled to different parts of China starting from Hong Kong, Foshan, Taishan, Guangzhou, Xintang, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing and ending in Hong Kong again. Along this extensive 34 day tour we visited many treasures of the Orient, such as the Huang Feihong Academy (where we were privileged enough to be taught by expert martial artists), old Shanghai town and the Forbidden City.

My expectations of the tour were somewhat limited, mainly due to the fact that I had not researched prior to the tour. The only pieces of information available were in the form of second hand opinions and anecdotes. However, I was pleasantly surprised to have been spoken to and approached as a local. This was a great compliment.

Our tour group had a composition of different people from different places (such as Wellingtonians and Aucklanders) and personalities with even numbers of male and female. We started out on this tour mainly as fellow passengers but have ended the tour as close and personal friends.

The constant advice we were being constantly fed from Janet Joe was extremely helpful. On many occasions I have requested her assistance such as shopping for cheung sams, shopping and bargaining. Her wealth of knowledge of the cities we have visited, the Chinese practices (like having 8 or 9 dishes), her constant assistance to help lower the price of merchandise from tea villages have been of great assistance. I am very grateful for the time, effort and care that she has given to us. Without her, we would have been truly lost.

The mandarin teachers and tour guides that we had along this trip have also been of great assistance. Like Janet, they have given us useful bits of information, commented about the scenery or tourist spots that we have visited and translated for us when communications with storeowners broke down. They have all been very friendly and hospitable to us and I am thankful for their time, effort and assistance.

The abundance of food that we had was also an interesting experience. Having 8 to 9 dishes for breakfast, lunch and dinner has been an eating experience itself. The selection of food was both fascinating and tasty, such as roast pigeons. Having eaten plenty of Chinese food at home has prepared me well for the huge daily courses of meals. Thanks to Janet Joe for taking us also to some Western restaurants along the way. This has helped us to satisfy our Western palates and stomachs on many occasions.

The unfortunate aspect of this trip has been the few days that we had in each city or town. Each place has so many attractions to visit but there is so little time to see them. My recommendation to all the future winter campers is to research thoroughly about each place that you will visit. The places we visited were wonderful, interesting and fascinating in their own unique ways. Further research will help to enhance the priceless experiences that you can gain from your visits.

The accommodation we had in China ranged from 3 to 4 star hotels. Some had their own gyms, pools and spas and of those some charged a price for usage. Water bottles were supplied daily and toilet amenities like toothbrushes and combs were replaced daily. All the hotels were centrally located, with shops and restaurants being within walking distance.

This trip has been a very interesting experience. Only by being immersed in the Chinese world can one appreciate all the benefits and opportunities we New Zealanders have. For example, China is polluted, causing me to develop dry coughs that were difficult to cure. Many families in China are poor but they were all very hospitable and friendly when we went over to visit their homes and villages.

My recommendations to future campers are:

- Research about the towns and cities that are on the itinerary. There is so little time to see all the attractions.
- Always bargain low and learn to walk away. Shopping is all a game in China and you can learn to enjoy the shopping experience. Beware that once a price has been set, the arrangement is binding and you must pay the agreed price.
- Talk to Janet and the tour guides. Their advice is priceless and has been useful on more than one occasion.
- Pack light. Clothes can be bought cheaply from the markets and are good durability and quality.
- Technology such as computers, cameras and cell phones can be purchased in most places. Personally I have found Shanghai and Hong Kong to be the better places to shop. Always research the NZ prices of items you want to buy for comparisons with the RMB or the HKD.
- Last, but not least, have fun. My relationship with the other winter campers has been enriched from all the fun times we had together, such as singing at karaoke.

Finally, I would like to thank Janet Joe, Kai Luey, the New Zealand Chinese Association, the tour guides and Mandarin teachers and my fellow winter campers for enabling me to take this tour, visit fantastic places and meet wonderful people. I have been truly blessed by this event that has left me with wonderful memories and I hope that the future winter campers can enjoy this trip as much, or even more, than I did.