

November 24th marked the beginning of a true adventure for me. Although our itinerary had been outlined to us in such detail, I can honestly say I had no idea what to expect. It is hard to find the right word for exactly how I was feeling. Nervous, anxious, curious all come to mind, but I guess just plain excited would be the most appropriate.

And it wasn't until I arrived home, five weeks later, that it really occurred to me what an adventure it had been. To immerse yourself in a different culture is always fascinating, but to truly experience it in the way that we did, and to share that experience with such an amazing group of people - it really was something I am sure I will never forget.

Now before I recount this epic root seeking tale, we should get one thing straight - I hate traveling. I cannot stand it. I hate sitting on a plane and I hate sitting around waiting for a plane. It makes me want to punch myself. And cry. And it isn't that I get travel sickness or that I hate plane food, but just because I find it extremely difficult to sit still. I am certain my fellow winter campers can vouch for that. So you can imagine what I was thinking when I got to the airport and checked in for: a 3 hour flight, 2 hour wait in Sydney, 8 hour flight, 5 hour wait in Hong Kong, 1 hour flight into China, and a dandy 1 hour bus ride to top it off. And I forgot my ipod. That comes close to my worst nightmare.

But in spite of all that, I was astounded to be in such high spirits. So eagerly looking forward to what was to come. And that we were all in for something so huge, that these little plane rides suddenly seemed so insignificant. So I hopped on the little Qantas plane, I ordered my tomato juice, sipped it down slowly, and nodded off to sleep. And it didn't seem so bad after all.

We landed in Sydney 3 hours later. I slept the whole way. Everyone mixed and mingled for a good couple of hours and before we knew it Cathay Pacific was ready to rock n roll. Not too shabby.

I'll tell you the best possible feeling on a flight to Hong Kong. First you get on board. Show you're chit to the pretty lady. Find your seat. Sit down, buckle up.

Time to destination: 7:49

Go to sleep. Wake up.

Time to destination: 0:49

Marvelous.

So we managed to make it to Hong Kong with everyone in one piece. I had just slept for around 10 hours and the clock read 3am – the body clock was a little confused I'm sure. We had about 5 hours to kill and all the shops were closed, so that wasn't much fun. One thing I vividly remember was doing that thing when everyone sits in a circle and says a little something about themselves. Man I love that.

We finally arrived in Guangzhou airport – it was broad daylight, but I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to be tired or bouncy. When we got outside and headed toward the bus, I remember two distinct things. Everyone was looking at us, and they were all

smoking cigarettes. It was a nice little welcome. The bus was brand new and very cosy. It would've been quite a pleasant ride to the hotel, had the bus driver not beeped every 3 minutes. At nothing.

Foshan Foshan Foshan. What a neat little place. Out of all the cities we visited, I would have to say Foshan was most like what I had pictured China to be in my head. The roads and sidewalks were a dirty dark grey, tiny little cubbyhole shops sold random things, people squatted and smoked, the odd beggar was here and there, smog replaced oxygen, lots of bikes, even more motorbikes, no one followed road rules, and everyone talked very loud.

And then there was Kung Fu. What an experience. It was a true privilege to be taught by the masters we had – the few days we had there was definitely one of the highlights of the trip for me. After a solid 3 days of practicing our little routine we got to perform it in front of a live audience, which I think we managed to pull off nicely. And it was great to be able to show a little New Zealand to the audience with our haka at the end.

The single most memorable moment for me on the trip was visiting my Grandfather's village. To be on the other side of the world, standing in the house that your Grandfather grew up in really is quite surreal. The whole visit is actually quite a tale in itself - I'll do a little commentary, check it out:

So we're doing our little bus-riding village-hopping root-seeking thing with the group and happen to fall a little behind schedule. We roll up to Cat's village and the sun has long gone, we can barely see a thing. And we still have my village to go to as well. So after a little discussion it's decided that Nick, Cat and I are going to stay back at this little town near Cat's village with Cindy (one of our teachers) for the night, do our thing in the morning and meet the others in Taishan for lunch. Groovy. So we get off the bus at this little street corner and scan the immediate vicinity and the town is very quiet. And all the buildings are like those old wooden buildings from a Western movie. And there's a bit of wind around so dust was sorta blowing across the road like it does in the movies, like when it's a ghost town or something and you know people are going to die. So I'm really buzzing at this stage and I know in the back of my head that we'll be fine, but I can't help but imagine walking past a store and seeing a bunch of ninjas packing bags of opium or seeing some gangsters jump out from the rooftops and kill a bunch of people like in "Kung Fu Hustle". Stupid, I know. But that's what it felt like. Honestly! So we're met by a couple of overseas affairs people, of whom one has a voice with an uncanny resemblance to a Chinese version of "The Godfather". And then he takes us for dinner to one of those classic little Chinese restaurants, you know the ones that make no effort to stay clean at all. But the food still smells good. And it wasn't one of those watered down Dominion Road versions, this was an authentic hardcore China one. Big difference. And the place is full of people smoking cigarettes and wearing tanktops and the usual kung fu movie costume design. So we're walking through the place and the guy we're with seems to know everyone and is saying hi to every second person – very VIP – and I was feeling very VIP by association. And I'm trying to guess which table we're walking to but instead we're led past all the tables, past the kitchen, through the back and up some stairs and into a private room. And it looked exactly like the place where the gangsters eat in the kung fu movies. Really! So right now I'm thinking "Man this is so awesome". And

we all got our own little pot of baked chicken rice which was yummo. So after dinner we went back to our hotel and then hit the local markets and shops, and I'm sad to say from there on out it was pretty standard China streets, didn't resemble anything from a movie. I guess it was just that first street corner. Or my imagination.

So the next morning we headed to my village. I was quite anxious as I had no idea what to expect. Finally, through a little bushy road, we managed to find the entrance. As I walked into the village we saw an old lady washing clothes in the river, and after Cindy and her shouted a few things to each other we discovered she was an old friend of my Grandmother. Crazzzzy. And moments later we met another man who turned out to be an old friend of my Grandfather. So at that point I was just thinking "wow my grandparents actually lived here!" which is obvious I know, but it was pretty amazing to be there. So they took us to the house my grandparents lived in, and it was quite overwhelming in a way as I didn't really know what I was supposed to be thinking or looking out for. And so I shuffled through the house and the whole time I'm just thinking "Oh my gosh this is insane I'm actually here". Apparently no one had lived there for some 50 years so it had some holes here and there, but my Grandfather's friend had been looking after it so it was in reasonably good shape. A lot of photos were taken also, so it was an amazing feeling to take them back to my grandparents and show them that their old friends, and old home, are still alive and well.

So onto Taishan. Not a lot to say about it really. They had a cool club called Freedom City right next door to the hotel, which had some live performances from some singers and dancers which was pretty snazzy. And they had a dance floor that actually bounced. Like it literally went up and down. Very cool.

After all the villages had been visited we headed into Guangzhou and hit the Guangzhou Technical College. We got to chat and mingle in the classrooms with a group of students there who studied English, or at least most of them did. But really everyone was just amping for the basketball game that was to come. So after lunch we got into our groovy 77 Yuan uniforms and headed to the courts.

The game was intense. Like real intense. Like everyone was smiles and handshakes before the game but then once it got going, it was elbows and pushing and shoving all over the place. Mainly because the ref wasn't calling fouls. Or maybe one out of every five. So I'm chilling on the sideline and I'm pretty happy just watching because about half of us knew how to play, and half didn't. And I'm in the latter. But then my time comes around and I get on the court, and the only time I've ever played a proper basketball game in my life is on Playstation. So as the game is going on I'm thinking in my head "triangle, triangle, square square square." You know. Playstation moves. And then the other side of my brain is telling myself "What the heck you weirdo." Seems even I don't know what goes on in this head of mine. Anyway, we lost. But it was pretty close. And our uniforms were hot. So at least we lost in style.

After the game we had dinner before gathering in this big classroom with all the students to chit chat. There were the locals, and the Aussies, but I spent the whole night with the

group from Guatemala. I spoke in English since they were all fluent, and they also taught me Spanish for a good hour or so. Fun times.

Next on the agenda – Hangzhou. Quite pleasant from what I remember. We went on a little cruise on the Westlake, so it was a nice change to ride somewhere on a boat rather than another bus or plane. Our tour guide Rocky kept things interesting - a real character with some good stories. One thing I remember was an old man who came up to me begging for change. He had a sharp hunchback and was limping along very slowly, his body shaking and shivering with sad eyes, looking as if he hadn't eaten for weeks. But as you do, I turned around and walked away. So he made his way around the group but no one gave him anything. And so he walked to the road and crossed, and miraculously his limp disappeared. And he wasn't shaking no more. And he stood upright. And walked like a healthy human being. That was true Oscar material.

Another site we visited was the Memorial Hall of Yue Fei, the famous Chinese General. I really enjoyed touring thorough it. His life story was blockbuster material – had sort of a “Gladiator” flavour, but not so dramatic. And he didn't get to kill the bad guy in the end. But very interesting nonetheless. Could've also been because Rocky's really quite good at telling stories. At the site there were a couple of cages, with statues of the authorities that betrayed Yue Fei imprisoned inside, and above them there was a sign that said “Don't Spit.” I didn't quite know what to think of that, but it was interesting. You definitely don't see that kind of thing in New Zealand.

Bring on Shanghai! We left Hangzhou and made a quick visit to the Wuzhen water village before arriving in the big city. Highlight for me was probably the acrobatic show. Simply amazing. Some of it was so wacky that Jason and I actually started wondering “Is she really balancing them or is she using magnets?” That was definitely one show that stopped me from slouching in my chair. Another thing I remember was on our free day I woke up and looked down the hall and everyone had left to do their thing. It was only 12pm! This group doesn't know how to sleep in I tell ya. To make matters worse I had no money on my cellphone. So I made room to room calls to everyone just in case anyone was in, but no luck. So here I am sitting in my hotel room, in a gigantic city and I can't contact anyone. So I go out and I try and hunt down a China Mobile store for a good 20 minutes, but I can't find one. And all the dairies and co are telling me they don't use China Mobile in Shanghai they use some other Shanghai network. And they don't know of any China Mobile store. And even the hotel reception tells me that. So I decide I'll just use the hotel phone and pay for the dang call. So I ring Jason's cell and he picks up and answers in his half asleep voice. So I walk over to his room, which is right opposite mine, and knock on the door and there he is, still sleeping. At least someone knows how to sleep in! So we head out to the station and on the way there guess what we see? A China Mobile store. A huge one. The biggest one I've seen yet. I mean c'mon, seriously?

After Shanghai was Beijing. Probably the city I enjoyed the most. I reckon the shopping is best here, but I'm sure some of my fellow campers would beg to differ. Can't beat the markets though. There's just so much rubbish to buy. But it's cheap, awesome rubbish. Lots and lots of cheap awesome rubbish.

Compared to Shanghai, Beijing is very Chinese, if that makes sense. It's got that China feel to it. It's the culture city. We mainly did the big tourist spots – Tiananmen Square, Mao's Mausoleum, Great Wall and Forbidden City. It's very interesting because you always hear about these places but you never really think much of it until you've been there. I particularly enjoyed the Great Wall. Was quite funny because everyone was wrapped up in big jackets and beanies, but as soon as we started climbing stairs it all came off and we had to carry all our crap along the wall - didn't make it any easier to climb the wonky stairs to the top. But once you finally get there – what a breathtaking view.

So we left China, all a little sad, but ready for the fabulous city that is Hong Kong. Or country. Still not really sure about that. It was an international flight actually, so I guess it's a country? It was actually very different from China, which I didn't expect. People were a little more polite, less spitting, a little cleaner, most people spoke English, and just a little more western in general. They sell Char Siu Bau at every bakery, so I had my fair share of those. And I had Pizza Hut twice – who would've thought Hong Kong pizza would put NZ's to shame

I spent most of my time in Mongkok, the big electronics street. It was just too cool. So many little gadgets you wouldn't even think of. Among other useless things, I managed to find myself a USB vacuum cleaner. How cool is that.

All in all what can I say, winter camp was an adventure in the truest sense of the word. And what I've brought home with me? Well there's a kung fu routine, a fancy tailored suit, 10 ties, a little Mandarin, a little Cantonese, a little Spanish, a very Asian cellphone, some bargaining skills, 500 Hong Kong Dollars, 10 Yuan, 9 belts, 6 pairs of shoes, a new wallet (finally!), 12 pairs of socks, Versace, Armani, Boss, Mont Blanc, Rolex, Ferragamo, Lacoste, Nike, Adidas and Ralph Lauren merchandise (all fake), a fondness for China, the utmost respect for my grandparents, bundles and bundles of gratitude for everything they've done, thousands of photos, even more memories, and 25 new friends to share all the fun with.

China, you definitely ain't seen the last of me.

Brendan Lee

