

China Winter Camp 2008

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I was very excited to be on the Guangdong Winter Camp, as this is my first time visiting China. After two flights and one bus ride we finally arrived in Foshan on Sunday night. The bus navigated through the cities sea of traffic and bright lights, eventually finding our hotel for the next 4 nights.

The check in went smoothly and we were paired with our room buddies. A small group of us who were feeling adventurous decided to check out the streets around the hotel and head out for a night walk. The dim street lighting lead us round the corner where we passed a dark alley lined with bicycle shops selling hot food which smelt delicious. However, none of us were brave enough to try the food.

Further along I could already hear the pumping beats even before we reached a row of brightly lit clothing shops, drawing us in with their club-like music. It was getting late and some of the shops were closing so we decided to head back to get some sleep, but not before trying the local McDonald's

I roll out of bed after the 7.30am wakeup call, and headed down stairs for breakfast in the hotel. The group slowly gathered in the lobby preparing to walk to the Wang Feihong Temple, where Bruce lee trained. Crossing the roads was a scary experience at first but we got use to it after learning that the cars and motorbikes will just weave around you if you keep moving at a steady pace.

Walking through the temple grounds we passed lots of locals playing mah-jong and practising tai-chi. They looked like scenes extracted from the movies, I had never seen this sort of thing in real life. The whole place seemed so serene, peaceful yet full of activity. We were welcomed into the temple with an impressive live performance of kung fu and lion dancing. For the next 3 days we learned kung fu at this temple which was fun but hard on the body. The kung fu teachers were really patient and nice, which gave me confidence for the performance at the end of the last day.

While we stayed in Xintang I got to visit three of my accenstral villages. Janet did a great job at organising these excursions and made all the right connections to ensure that everybody was able to see their own relatives and villages. It was interesting peeking into the local houses, interacting with the locals and watching stray dogs meander up and down the dusty roads. I got to visit my Uncle's zip factory and the jean factory they supplied to. He was really generous and took me out for lunch and dinner, and to some of the popular tourist attractions around his hometown.

It was a hot sunny day when we visited the Magnificent China Park. We each payed 10Yuan to go on the flying fox which started at the top of a waterfall and stretched across a lake. I took a bit of a run up and jumped off the platform, then glided smoothly down to the base where they would reel you in to take your harness off. It was a fun day at the Park, especially the train ride that took us round the entire place to see all the miniature models of China's most famous tourist attractions.

Meeting the local students and playing sports at the GZ Technical College was definitely the highlight of the trip for me. The students were really friendly and were eager to practice speaking English to me. In the morning we had calligraphy and painting lessons and in the afternoon I had a great time competeing against the students in a game of soccer and basketball.

In Hangzhou we visited the Dragon Well tea village. We were led to a private room and sat around a U-shaped table to watch a lady promoting the health benefits of

green tea. She made it very appealing and many of us bought a couple of containers to give as gifts for people back home. They even showed us how well they could pack the tea leaves to reassure us that we weren't getting ripped off. The lady also introduced to us these flower buds, once placed into hot water, they would slowly bloom into a delicate flower.

That night we also went to go see an acrobat show. The performers did some pretty amazing tricks and their exotic costumes and stage effects made the show even more exciting to watch.

The next day we had a Mongolian style lunch. I grabbed two empty bowls, one to fill raw meat with and the other was for vegetables. It was like a buffet, choosing from the wide selection of fresh food. When I was satisfied with what I had gathered, I handed it over to one of the cooks who simply threw it onto a giant hot plate and started smashing it around with a pair of elongated chopsticks. I trusted him that he would know when to take it off, judging by his nonchalant look he had definitely done this a thousand times over. Assuming that my pile of food was half cooked, he swept it over to the other half of the round hot plate and a second cook took care of it. Once ready he pushed it into a long narrow heap and literally swept it into another bowl in his other hand. I'm pretty sure for a split second my entire meal was suspended in the air when travelling between the hot stove to the bowl. It was fascinating to watch.

We stayed at the Joy City hotel in Beijing. It was a rather extravagant place and the rooms were spacious. There was even a huge mall attached to the hotel, which we frequently visited to either shop or eat when we couldn't be bothered venturing outside where it was too cold. While in Beijing we visited Tiananmen square, walked through the Forbidden city and trekked up and down the rugged uneven stairs of the Great Wall. The Rickshaw ride around the Hutong area was lots of fun. Each pair got their own rickshaw and driver who I tipped at the end of the tour. The markets we were taken to in Beijing were really good for finding cheap clothes and souvenirs. Bargaining with the sellers was quite entertaining as they would almost always offer you a ridiculously high price. Once you pretended to walk away it was funny watching them try desperately to draw you back by offering something lower. I bought quite a few things like bags, belts, sunglasses and other gifts for family back home.

Hong Kong was another great place to shop. The Mongkok area in particular had an entire shoe street selling brands like Nike and Rebook. The ladies markets were in a street just parallel to this one and was filled with temporary stalls selling clothes, bags, jewellery and other souvenir type stuff. On our second to last day in HK, we went to Ocean Park. I went on most of the rides including the Abyss (the big drop) and the Dragon roller coaster. I managed to also see a dolphin show and the Panda enclosure. The theme park visit was a great day out and left us all feeling quite exhausted on the bus ride back.

The Winter Camp has been a great adventure. It was really special getting to finally see where my ancestors grew up and I have learnt a lot about the Chinese culture. I have even picked up on a few Chinese phrases and words. This trip was certainly a good way to meet new people who have similar interests and backgrounds as yourself. I myself have made some really good friends along the way and I would strongly recommend this wintercamp to anyone who is considering it.