

On the 23rd of November I arrived at the airport slightly nervous about leaving for China and mostly tired having not slept for 24 hours due to leaving packing to the last minute! I made an attempt to learn some of the other 29 traveller's names but promptly forgot them all 5 minutes later.

A long 12 hour flight later we had arrived in Hong Kong and immediately boarded the next plane to Guangzhou. Another 45 minutes later and we had arrived, only to board a bus for the 90 minute bus ride to Foshan (with a dinner stop), where we met Sunny, Cindy and Jessie (our teachers). Needless to say after all this travelling and the culture shock experienced at our first dinner ("home-style" Chinese food and dirty squat toilets) I was slightly exhausted by the time my head hit the pillow in the hotel in Foshan.

The next few days spent in Foshan were some of the best days of the trip. It was sweltering hot while we learnt our kung fu routine at the Huang Feihong temple. A special highlight was seeing ourselves on the local news. Our final kung fu performance didn't even go that badly after all! By the time we left Foshan we were all very fond of our kung fu masters and it was sad to say goodbye to them.

Leaving Foshan marked the start of our visits to our ancestral villages. We spent a few days in Taishan area, including visiting one of my auntie's villages. It was so amazing to see the contrasts between all the different villages; some were poor and some were better off; some were tidy and some were dirty; some had newer buildings and some were ancient. One thing universal to all villagers was fascination (i.e. staring) with us, 30 unfamiliar foreigners all coming to their village on a big bus.

We spent a day trip away from the villages visiting Cuihen and Zhongshan and learning a bit about Dr Sun Yat Sen. We spent some time in a park in Zhongshan which was the only time in China I saw a large amount of flat land with grass on it (everywhere else they plant crops).

Next on the village itinerary was Xintang and Dongguan area, where many of the villages were involved in jeans production; we were even lucky enough to visit a jeans factory to see the process and working conditions.

Another day trip was spent in Shenzhen where we climbed many stairs to look out over Shenzhen and Hong Kong. We also spent the afternoon and evening at Splendid China and Minority Village Culture Park, and watched a few amazing shows.

After a long day of village visits we arrived in Guangzhou at night-time, awed by all the bright neon lights and people out and about. We had finally arrived in the big city!

From Guangzhou we spent some time in Baiyun area visiting villages, including my grandfather's village. I was privileged to be able to visit the house where he used to live and I, my brother and my cousin all paid our blessings. It was amazing to see the house, in the same state in which he had left it but now covered in at least 50 years worth of dust.

In Guangzhou we did some sightseeing (the five rams statue, Guangzhou City Museum, Mausoleum of the Nanyue King, Shamian Island and Pearl River night cruise) and some shopping. We also spent a day at the Guangzhou Technical College where we learnt calligraphy and painting, played basketball and soccer (and lost both), and watched a show put on by the school's English classes.

After the end of the official “winter camp” portion of the trip we flew to Hangzhou where we met our tour guide Bob, who was highly entertaining and informative. Hangzhou is a beautiful tourist city where we visited the mausoleum of General Yue Fei, Lingyin Temple, Dragonwell Tea Village and the Song Dynasty Park. We also watched a show incorporating some of the legends of Westlake and took a boat cruise on Westlake then a bike ride around Westlake. Not surprisingly we also fitted in more shopping!

Shanghai was our next stop, only a few hours away from Hangzhou. On the way we stopped at Xitang water town to explore there for a few hours. Managed to do a lot of sight-seeing in Shanghai; we visited a silk factory, the Bund, the Shanghai Municipal Historical Museum in the TV tower, Nanjing Road, Huangpo River night cruise, Yu gardens and bazaar, Jade Buddha temple, and the Shanghai Aquarium. Spent a lot of time at the tailor’s market getting things ordered exactly right; luckily everything turned out as expected! We also saw an amazing acrobatic show and of course tried Shanghai dumplings.

Sadly we said goodbye to Bob and took our next flight to Beijing. On arrival there we met our new tour guide, Sammi, who immediately swept us off to visit the Temple of Heaven. Again we did a lot of sight-seeing; Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, hutong tour, the Legend of Kung Fu show, the Summer Palace, more tea tasting, climbing the Great Wall, the Ming tombs, the Sacred Way, Olympic stadiums, Beijing Zoo (giant pandas are so cute!), and the Lama temple. I spent heaps of money at the markets practicing my bartering! The Peking duck dinner was the food highlight of the trip, and Beijing was definitely my favourite place we visited on the trip.

We departed the sub-zero temperatures of Beijing to arrive into the muggy atmosphere of Hong Kong. In three and a half days I managed to shop at the Temple Street markets (and some fortune telling), Stanley market, Ladies market and Mongkok, went to Lantau Island, Tian Tan Buddha, Po Lin monastery, Macau via hydrofoil (where we visited the ruins of St Pauls Church and numerous casinos), rode the Ngong Ping Cable Car, the world’s longest outdoor escalator (800m) and the Peak tram, watched the sunset from the peak, went to Madame Tussaud’s (complete with both Western and Eastern celebrities), went on all the rides Ocean Park, watched the light show on Hong Kong Island from the Avenue of the Stars, and ate yum cha! I think I slept the whole flight home...

I had some great experiences in China not least of which included exploring my cultural roots and learning about my heritage. It is fascinating (and slightly unnerving) to be immersed in a different culture so unlike our own, but at the same time vaguely familiar. Many thanks to everyone who helped me in any way on the trip, especially Janet, whose aid was invaluable, but also to Sunny, Cindy, Jessie, Bob and Sammi.

Joanne Rogers