

China Wintercamp 2008

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Before writing this report I decided to flick through the thousands of photos taken during our journey through China. Looking back I still find it hard to believe that I had just recently participated in such an engaging and exciting affair. The whole experience seems like a fantastic blur, a surreal dream in which priceless memories were created with new friends. Those new friends were formally the fresh faces I met at both the Wellington and Auckland airport upon our departure from New Zealand. Little did I know at the time that these 27 other travellers would quickly become more than mere acquaintances, and feel more like family by the end of the trip. Everyone was in the same boat, and was equally open to starting new friendships.

Foshan was the first city we visited, and instantly we were submerged in the Chinese culture. It was fascinating watching our bus dodge other cars and motorbikes as well as weaving in and out of lanes just to get us from the airport to our hotel in Foshan. The heavy traffic and crazy drivers (especially the ones attempting u-turns on busy highways) were always a great source of entertainment during long journeys on the bus. We were told that Foshan is the hometown of Kung Fu legend Bruce Lee, so I felt very privileged to be given the chance to train under such great masters at a temple with such a prestigious reputation. What followed was almost three days of intensive training, a lot of patience and horse-stances. Divided into two even groups we were assigned a master each. We were slowly introduced to a new set of kung fu moves each time we gathered for a training session, and gradually we learnt to perform and perfect an almost convincing looking martial arts routine. The performance we were working towards at the end of the three days signified how much we had learnt and achieved. Although the training was tough at times, the sense of achievement at the end was very rewarding. With that we all received official certificates to celebrate and mark our success. It was especially fun getting to interact and joke around with our masters. They also never ceased to impress me every time we sat down to watch them practice and perform their own routines. All of their hard-work and dedication to this strenuous sport was clearly evident in the confidence in the way they moved and in their execution of flips and jumps.

My older Brother and Sister were also with me on this trip, and together we all got to see where our grandparents came from. This was another incredible experience, which I'm sure none of us will forget. When we visited our Yaiyai's village, his sister's sons and their families greeted us. We had already been to other people's villages, and it was finally our turn to feel that sense of belonging and to actually experience how the real people of China live. It was really special when we saw a faded baby photo of Kelly, my sister, stuck in a large photo frame on their wall together with a collage of other family photos sent over from back home. Instantly I felt like there was already a strong family connection between our newly acquainted relatives and us. This made travelling all that way to meet them really worth our time.

We also visited our Mama's relations, the Kwok family. They were incredibly hospitable and even invited us to join them for the whole day, which meant leaving the tour group. I was a bit reluctant at first as none of us three could speak any Chinese. With Janet's consent we agreed to stay with them anyway and found out later that our relatives had already organised to get a translator named Fay who helped us communicate with them. Our Uncle owns and manages a zip factory, which he and his family live directly above on the fourth storey of their large house. The factory took up the two bottom floors while his spacious office occupied the third. The house/factory was certainly impressive and so was the nice black car they drove us in to take us to a delicious lunch at their favourite local Chinese restaurant. Even before we had a chance to sit down our uncle lead us out the back, past the kitchen, to where we were allowed to choose whatever type of seafood we wanted to eat by simply pointing at the live creatures swimming in the tanks. At first this request seemed a little bit too generous of him considering we had no idea what half the fish were. We eventually asked what the others thought were good choices and also settled on choosing ones we actually recognised, like prawns, crab, scallops and the chickens, which were flapping wildly in the bamboo cages along the wall behind us. Me, my Brother and Sister all agreed afterwards that, that had been one of the best Chinese meals we had had on the trip so far. After lunch, our Uncle and Fay – our translator – showed us around their hometown. We first stopped off at Lychee Square and then casually strolled along the cobblestone paths that snaked through the large picturesque garden adjacent to the square. It was a hot and sunny day, which made the gardens look even more bright and beautiful. Later Fay took us to the Jeans factory which the Kwok family supplies their zips to. It was fascinating seeing the giant rolls of dark denim fabric on the ground floor and then progressing up through the building, viewing each floor filled

with sewing machines and piles of unfinished garments. As we finished our tour and began to walk outside to wait for someone else to pick us up, Fay (who also worked as the foreign trader at this particular factory) was very informative and told us about how this factory was only one of the 2000 other factories that lined that long industrial street.

We were then handed over to our 20 year old cousin Hao, who gave us the option of either a Western or Chinese meal for dinner. We had been eating Chinese consistently for just under 2 weeks by then, so I was extremely grateful that we were about to be given a break as we all quickly voted for Western. After being seated in our own separate room in the restaurant, it took us at least half an hour to order our meal because we had to get Fay to translate half the menu for us.

Another memorable meal was the steamboat dinner we enjoyed on our first night in Guangzhou. It was a fun affair trying to deliberate with the whole table what to cook next in the boiling broth in the middle. It got a little messy at times with everyone fishing around for cooked food, but after stewing all sorts of vegies and meat the soup in the end was very tasty.

We spent a whole day at the GZ Technology College where we had calligraphy and painting lessons in the morning. I found it very interesting seeing the how the teachers would expertly manoeuvre their thick brushes loaded with black ink onto the delicate rice paper. I admired their skill and enjoyed learning and practising the techniques to create authentic looking Chinese characters and imaginative landscapes. After a game of basketball and soccer against the school's best teams, we were invited to attend a special show they had organised in the evening. As soon as we walked into the room we were all swept away and individually partnered with students learning to speak English. My "Buddy" was a shy little girl named Linda who I talked to while we watched the amusing skits and singing on stage. In the middle of the show the presenters were suddenly calling out "J-mae". It took me a while to realise that they were actually saying my name because of their heavy accents. It was the encouragement of the people seated around me that confirmed it was actually me they wanted. I reluctantly left my seat and walked up to the brightly lit stage. Once I was in everybody's view, the lady presenter announced that it was my birthday tomorrow and encouraged everyone to sing to me. I was certainly surprised (and slightly embarrassed) and eventually was allowed to return to my seat. At the end of the show my buddy Linda was extremely grateful that she got the opportunity to talk to me and help her improve her English. I also managed to gain an extra buddy when another girl turned around in her seat in front and started to casually chat to me. After exchanging emails we all said our goodbyes and watched them wave at us as our bus pulled away from the college grounds.

I had a really good birthday the next day. After a day of shopping along Beijing road, we all went on a night cruise along the Pearl River. It was relaxing sitting on the top deck watching the city roll by. Colourful neon lights decorated the sides of buildings, illuminating the shape of each that would otherwise be swallowed in the darkness of the night. The night did not end once the cruise finished though. We all walked back into town to sample the nightlife in Guangzhou.

Hangzhou was our next destination and probably the best thing we did in this city was the bike ride around the West Lake. We started early in the morning and took almost an hour and a half to do a complete circuit. The first stretch was lots of fun as there was wide footpaths to glide along, divided by little bridges. I was worried that I had chosen a faulty bike when my chain had slipped off near the start, causing me to stop and desperately ask for the help of my brother to come fix it. Further around the lake it started to narrow off into regular pedestrian paths, which made it slightly harder to navigate your bike between the people and trees. You would think that travelling around the edge of a lake would be relatively easy, but we actually had to stop every now and then to figure out which way to turn. Quite often we would be redirected by an officer blowing his whistle at us because we were entering a no bike area. Nevertheless we all safely made it around the entire lake in one piece. My chain only slipped three times in total and I was glad to discover that it wasn't just my bike that had troubles. Around 11am we got to rest by taking a relaxing boat cruise across the lake.

Our first night in Shanghai I went and had a massage with Janet and a few others. I decided to get full body one that only cost me 132 Yuan. That's pretty cheap compared to what you would pay here at home. My sister and I were led to a little private room with two massaging tables. Jasmin and Jo were also led to a similar room that joined onto the our one. We all got changed into the clothing they provided and made sure we got photos of us all together looking like jailbirds in our matching baggy grey t-shirts and shorts. The masseuses' in China are very firm when they massage you. Occasionally I would (and sometimes the others too)

burst into a small fit of laughter because of where they were massaging. For example I found the centre of my back quite ticklish and especially when they started to knead their hands up your inner thigh. What I found really strange was when I was lying on my front she started to lift my leg across my back and towards the opposite wall, meanwhile pushing lightly on the centre of my spine. It was actually quite a good stretch but still came as a bit of a surprise.

On the night of our free day in Shanghai a group of us went out in search of somewhere to eat. We wanted something cheap and fast and stumbled upon a small shabby restaurant where there was a giant pot outside boiling god knows what, but the warm steam rising from it looked promising. We were all keen for a noodle and dumpling meal like the one we had seen a guy eating as we entered, but as we scanned the picture menu on the wall we couldn't find what we were after. We attempted to describe it to the waiter, which proved to be quite difficult considering how little Chinese we knew between the seven of us. Just when we were feeling a little helpless a nice local, who spoke English, quickly realised our dilemma and came to our rescue by helping us order. The dumplings were meaty and the broth was tasty and costed us no more than 7Yuan each!

Beijing was our second to last destination. Here I got to do some serious shopping and bartering at the markets. I grew more confident at haggling the shopkeepers down to reasonable prices as I got more practice. I knew that as soon as I started speaking English to them they would hike up the price and try to make a decent profit from an unsuspecting tourist. It became quite fun after a while and some of them were quite amusing to talk to. They will practically say anything to get you to buy something. It was hilarious watching the women assistants try to woo and flatter the boys by stroking their arms and trying to lead them into their shops. I'm pretty sure they were enjoying the attention though as they made feeble attempts at shrugging them off.

Our hotel in Beijing was probably one of the nicest we had stayed in. Although all of our rooms were dispersed a little more than usual, making it harder to wander into other people's rooms for a chat. The facilities, modern rooms and luxurious décor certainly made up for this. The indoor garden was also a pleasant place to hang. When using the hotel's pool you were treated like royalty and were taken care of by the staff very well. There was always someone different to attend to you from before you even enter the changing room, to when you stored your belongings away in the lockers, right through to in the pool. The spa was only warm but it had all sorts of massaging jets which was exactly what we needed after a hard day of walking and sight-seeing.

We visited some of the most famous tourist attractions in Beijing: Tianamen square, the Forbidden city, the Great wall and a couple of the Olympic buildings – even though we weren't even scheduled to visit them.

In Hong Kong we were allowed a lot more freedom and were able to plan our days as we pleased. Finding our own way around was made less difficult with the subway. It was easy to navigate yourself from one area to the next without getting too lost. Travelling on the subway was especially easy when one had an octopus card so you could simply glide through the barriers to catch the next train. It was always quick easy and painless. It was only a cheap ride to Mongkok where the famous ladies market was. This was a good place to find presents but not necessarily to participate in any serious haggling. In HongKong they don't seem to want to lower their prices as much and aren't that enthusiastic as they are probably use to dealing with tourists everyday.

I have only just begun to scratch the surface of what really made this trip unforgettable. I would have to write an entire novel to cover every remarkable event. Without the help of Janet none of this would have been possible, and I truly admire her ability to organise such an extraordinary trip to a country the majority of us had never been to. The teachers and guides who accompanied us through each city were also extremely helpful at familiarising us with our new surroundings. To me China is no longer a picture in a travel magazine, but a set of fresh memories and friendships that I will treasure forever.