

Late in 2006, a friend told me she was heading to China during summer break. She described the tour briefly; I didn't think much of it. She returned with incredible stories and pictures of the places she went, things she saw and people she met. I had an idea by then that I ought to go. The next two years were spent saving up and talking to other 'China trip alumni'. Rumours spread that Janet was no longer operating the youth trip so it was a relief when my application for the 2008 tour was accepted. Thank you NZCA and Janet for making these root-seeking tours possible.

Meeting with Janet and the 29 other members at the airport on Nov 23rd was exciting and a little daunting, I can be quite hopeless with names at the best of times (luckily, there were some I already knew). It was interesting to learn of all the siblings/cousins in the group.



The flight to HK was an indication of things to come; it's as if transport creates mass chronic fatigue in the group. Planes and buses were the greatest sleep inducers. Shortly after boarding, heads lolled and snores could be heard, regardless of whether the ride was 10 minutes or 10 hours. Solid hotel beds were only inviting after long days spent travelling followed by late nights out on the town. Early wake-up calls also left us slightly sleep deprived.

Touching down in Guangzhou, we picked up Jessie, Cindy and Sunny, our translators and Chinese teachers from GZ Technical College. The three young ladies were so helpful for the two weeks they were with us. We also picked up all the differences that demonstrated we were a long way from home. Air was dusty, roads had a lack of rules and a lot of toll gates, food was chewy, bony and/or oily, toilets were simply holes in the ground with a flushing mechanism and many of the homeless were severely disabled. I was surprised by the abundance of trees, bright city lights, luxury of our hotels, billboards in rural areas, different flavours/ingredients used in cooking and the beautiful orange sunsets.

Foshan's ancestral temple introduced us to Wang Fei Hong's style of Kung Fu. Taught by provincial champions, with incredible amounts of patience, we slowly memorised a short routine of defensive manoeuvres. Shi-fu (master) ensured our stances and movements were absolutely correct so the performance would be a success. Over the 3 days of informal training, we learned a lot about our masters and their lifestyles. They were selected at a young age to move from their village and work in the city without an opportunity to study at a normal school. The lives of most Chinese children are set out for them from birth, we're so lucky to have so much free-will in New Zealand.

A stop off in Zhongshan allowed us to see Dr Sun Yat Sen's home and memorial park. We all came away with a greater appreciation of his contribution to modern China. Walking into a Kung Fu and Lion Dance competition at the local University was a nice surprise. Stunning displays of co-ordination and balance like nothing I've ever seen!

Taishan was memorable for its people and nightlife. The proximity of the hotel to the city centre allowed us to check out the streets, shops and nightclub around the corner without worrying about catching dodgy taxis. I enjoyed visiting the ancestral villages of fellow campers as it gave me an idea of what to expect from my own villages (also how to perform the bai-san ritual of respect for the ancestors). Jessie, Cindy and Sunny were crucial in helping to break down language barriers and tracing our roots. The living conditions are so basic and most of the young people have shifted to the cities but those left in the village are free to keep pets and play social sports just as we do back home.

Xintang was darkest town we visited. Janet advised us to restrict our evening outings, travel in groups and watch our money. The place is notorious for crime, though we managed to keep ourselves safe. My father's long lost relatives from nearby Dongguan visited me at the hotel then returned two days later to show me the cemetery where my great-great grandparents and my father's half brother are buried, their own homes and the house my grandfather lived in. I was also fortunate enough to be taken on tour around the largest jeans factory in the area in which my 'niece' and her husband work as managers in the design department. The complex was massive and most employees live and work on site. It was difficult to communicate without the translators and other campers for help but the experience was overwhelming with positive outcomes. The people I met were complete strangers when on arrival but I left with a true sense of belonging and what it means to be family.



A day trip to Shenzhen was a helpful reminder of the progress the Chinese have made in recent years. In the 1980's the area was declared a Special Economic Zone and has been developed accordingly. The Splendid China and Cultural Park had a lot to offer in terms of entertainment and education. Miniature models of famous landmarks were true to the real-life counterparts we witnessed later on the trip. The evening cultural show had spectacular stage effects and performances.

Guangzhou had too much to see and do. The time we did have allowed for brief visits to my mother's parents' villages in Baiyun District, pictures at the five rams statue and Guangzhou Museum, a spot of shopping and a trip to Guangzhou Technical College for painting & calligraphy lessons, sports (basketball & soccer) and a show put on by the 'Business English' students who were keen to learn more about us and New Zealand. Cruising down the Pearl River gave a different perspective of the city lights and bridges. Free time on the final day was liberating, no uniforms, no wake up call, no time limits! Learning to use the subway was a novelty that never wore off, wish we had one here in Auckland.

After a short flight we arrived in Hangzhou. Our new tour guide told us of the romantic folk tales of that characterise the city. A bike ride around the lake and boat cruise across the surface were perfect ways to take in the beautiful scenery of the West Lake and surrounding mountains. Lingyan Buddhist Temple had a sense of calm about it and much to explore. The Longjing (Dragonwell) Teahouse was our first encounter with highly organised sales seminars. Many of us purchased a carton or two of tea, convinced that we needed a daily brew of the "Emperor Quality" leaves to cleanse our insides.

Xitang water village had certain quaintness about it, the people were incredibly friendly and the shop owners were fun to bargain with (not too pushy). Posters and plaques of Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible III show their pride in hosting a scene of the film. Cats and dogs sat in doorways; a rumour was started that we'd be having their meat for lunch... didn't feel hungry after that.

We did typical tourist activities in Shanghai and Beijing, led by yet another guide. Pleased we went to the factory shops but proud of myself for refusing to cave into sales pitches at Shanghai's Silk factory and Jade factory.

Highlights - shopping at the Yu Garden Bazaar, getting measured up for a coat at the Tailor's market and getting a 'fresh' new hair colour. The Temple of Heaven, Forbidden City, Summer Palace (with frozen man-made lake), Ming Tombs, Sacred Way and Olympic Village in Beijing provided post-card picture opportunities. The achievement that is the Great Wall is just breathtaking, not due to lack of fitness and cold, thin air but thinking about how many lifetimes and lives it took to build such a massive structure on such inhospitable terrain left me in awe. Swimming in the hotel pool and shopping at the Silk Markets were reasons to go back some day.

Free time in HK felt so limited, I hated thinking about the trip drawing to an end but at the same time I was ready to go home. Spent a lot of shopping time with friends not involved in the Winter Camp and missed a lot of sites because of it. Managed to catch the campers at Ocean Park, a place I'd definitely like to return to once renovations are complete. Our final day of the trip was bittersweet, especially since we left Janet at the airport without a proper farewell and gesture of thanks. We've got much to be thankful for, we've gained new experiences, a greater appreciation for our Chinese heritage and genuine friends.

Since returning, I've been asked countless times 'So, how was China?' and I can honestly say it was truly amazing. We experienced so many new sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings. Each city was memorable for its own reasons; even travel in between destinations was an adventure. For future Winter-campers, I recommend taking a decent camera, at least 10GB photo storage and keeping a travel diary. It seems like a chore to write it during the trip but you'll be thankful when memories get hazy. Also, take some extra red packets for unexpected relatives! As for contact and photo-sharing with your new found friends... Facebook shall be your new addiction ☺



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