

NZCA China Winter Camp Report 2009

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After I heard of the amazing experiences my brother and sister had on the Winter Camp in 2008, I was determined to go the following year. The 22nd of November finally arrived and it was time to meet and greet the other 22 strangers (with a few exceptions) that I would be travelling with on the trip. Little did I know that the relationships I would forge with the other participants would be more like family than just friends.

Guangdong

The first day in China we went to Splendid China. I went to see the cultural side of the park first which I enjoyed more than the miniature side of the park because of the various shows they had throughout the day and also the fact that we would be going to see the real sights of China in the coming weeks. The horse-back battle was especially thrilling to watch as well as the two evening shows the park held. I was very impressed with the amazing talent of the performers and the stage sets, complete with the water features and conveyor belts.

Visiting ancestral villages was quite fun. I did not go to any of mine (visited them only last year) but it was interesting to visit the other participants' villages to see the housing in different areas and also meeting the local people. Although my knowledge of Cantonese is limited, it was interesting to vaguely understand the conversations some locals were having. Also, the children were always happy and playful. One time, two busloads of school kids arrived to where we were waiting and we had a game of catch with them.

From the 25th till the 30th of November, we stayed at the Overseas Chinese Vocational School. I think all of the Winter Campers would agree that the food here was some of the best on the trip. Three full Chinese meals a day went down quite easily, especially if we had Shaolin Kung Fu that day. It was all very formal right down to no laughing was allowed. Even though the training was challenging, I am glad to have learnt the routine as it was an enjoyable experience. Other activities were did at the school included mandarin and calligraphy lessons. I found both of these difficult because I had no knowledge at all about either of the lesson. However, the classes were fun as most of our group was in the same boat. The show at the school to celebrate their 30th Anniversary was another highlight for me, both as a spectator and a performer. All of the acts performed by the students and staff were well done and it was great to see the culture from these performances. Doing the Haka we practiced for only a few days in front of a crowd probably 1000+ strong was both a rewarding and exhilarating experience. Kudos to the boys.

Hangzhou

Hangzhou was a breath of fresh air to our China travels so far. The main attraction of the area is Westlake. This pristine locale was our first contact with cold weather in China but the scenery was immaculate. During our stay in Hangzhou, we went on a boat cruise on the lake, a bike ride around the lake, visited General Yue Fei's memorial, saw the Song Dynasty Show and went to the Lingyin Temple. Hangzhou marked the beginning of the more touristy part of the trip.

Shanghai

Shanghai was an amazing city for which the city skyline has grown quite rapidly in the past 10 years or so. Our first day in Shanghai saw us in the Shanghai Historical Museum which is situated underneath the TV Tower. We also walked along the riverside to see the Bund which was under construction so we were unable to walk along it. We also walked along the pedestrian street Nanjing Rd but the highlight for the day has got to be the tailors market. Tailor made suits at bargain prices, what more could you want? I found bartering with the tailors a fun experience. If they would not budge on the price, the never fail walk away trick made the price drop like a rock. Other activities we did in Shanghai included the Yu Gardens in the Old Shanghai Bazaar and the Chinese acrobatics show.

On our free day in Shanghai, we had to make friends with the subway system and befriend we did. The subway was the main mode of public transport around the city and was surprisingly easy use. Using the subway, we made our way onto the Maglev train which takes you to Shanghai International Airport. The train is raised off its rails by magnets and reached a top speed of 430 kmph. After having lunch and travelling back into Shanghai, we went to the markets under the Science & Technology Museum and also went back to the tailors market to pick up our suits.

Beijing

This part of the trip was perhaps the coldest. The temperature reached lows of -11°C. Here we went to the Temple of Heaven and the Ming Tombs but the highlights of Beijing have got to be the Great Wall and the Forbidden City.

The Great Wall was a remarkable sight. The climb to the top of the section of the wall was excruciating but now I can say that I have climbed the Great Wall! Another must-see sight we went to was the Forbidden City along with Tiananmen Square.

Having spent a tour day rushed through this incredible building, a few of us decided to go back there on our free day. We first went into Mao's Mausoleum in Tiananmen Square to see the body of Mao lying on the platform. Security was tight and there was no chance to inspect Mao's wax-like figure. After seeing this, we went into the Forbidden City. It was truly a sight to behold. Learning about the history and seeing the buildings up close and personal made the Forbidden City one of my favourite spots to visit on the trip.

Another memorable moment in Beijing is the night we had Peking duck for dinner. Some of the best I have had and will have to return to get some more as nothing will compare.

Hong Kong

Coming into Hong Kong, we were all thrilled with our three free days here but also realised that it was our last part of the trip and it wouldn't be long till we were back in NZ. That said, we packed the days full of activities.

On one day, we took the cable car up Lantau Island to see Tian Tan Bhudda aka the Big Bhudda. This took up the majority of the day as we also had lunch up at the peak as well. Later that night, we went around the various street markets around Hong Kong as well as the Silk Markets.

While in Hong Kong, we also went to Ocean Park. The theme park offered a dolphin show, pandas and various other theme park facilities such as rides.

Hong Kong was an amazing place, I only wish that we had another day or 2 more there so we could go to other sights around the city such as Macau. On the whole, Hong Kong was a wonderful place to mark our last days of our trip.

Conclusion

First off, I would like to thank Janet for her time (and patience) with us on the trip. Without you, we could very much be lost somewhere in China. Also thanks to Virginia and the NZCA. The organisation of this trip has been superb and has made our four weeks in China an incredible experience. Last thanks go to the participants of the Winter Camp. We have shared many moments and experiences together over the four weeks and I am sure that we will stay in touch for the rest of our lives. This trip has shown me a lot about China and what it means to be Chinese. It was awesome to gain a larger understanding of my culture and heritage. I am proud to be Chinese. To those reading this who have not gone on this trip yet, do yourself a favour and apply. You won't regret it.