

The 2009 China trip began on the 22nd November with an early 6.45am check in at Auckland Airport for our flight to Hong Kong. I had met about half the group before at LDC but was still quite nervous about spending five weeks away in another country. After arriving at Hong Kong Airport we were straight onto the bus, driving through to Shenzhen, where we stayed for two nights.

On our first day we visited the Magnificent China and Minority Culture Park, which was quite interesting. Around the park were miniature versions of all the famous sights and buildings in China – some of which we visited later in the tour. In the evening we also watched a show.

The next morning we drove to Xintang to visit some ancestral villages. This was the beginning of the many villages we went to visit, spanning over around five days. We stayed in Xintang for one night before heading to the Guangdong Overseas Chinese Vocational School in Guangzhou for five nights.

On our first day at the school we were welcomed with a special ceremony on the field. In the mornings we got up early for breakfast and then had kung fu lessons. We spent most of our time learning a short kung fu routine. The lessons began with a long and tiring warm up which consisted of marching and running in time with everyone else. The temperature was quite hot and a bit muggy so by the end of the lesson most of us were very sweaty and sticky. The food at the school was pretty enjoyable and better than I expected it to be. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner most days our group ate together on the third floor of the school's dining hall. We stayed at the school, each unit had two bedrooms, with two people in each room. I found the beds there to be very hard with not much padding and it took a while to get used to. One thing I didn't have with me which would be useful was insect repellent and itchybite cream. I got quite a few bites on my arms and legs.

Other activities at the school included Chinese classes, calligraphy, and a knot tying class, as well as a game of basketball and soccer against one of the school's teams.

For the next few days after leaving the school we visited the remaining ancestral villages. I got to visit my mum's mum's village (Sew Hoy) and also my dad's dad's village (Ngan), which were both in the Bai Yun area. This was a really interesting experience especially since I would probably never have another opportunity to visit the villages as they are so hard to find and it was quite difficult communicating with the locals. I had never been to any villages before, only the main towns and cities, so it was really interesting to see the differences.

We then spent two nights in Taishan, a smaller city that also seemed smoggier and older. On the way back to Guangzhou we stopped off at Zhongshan to visit a few more villages and also went to an opening ceremony of a special exhibition where Simon was invited to speak (since that was his ancestral village).

On our free day in Guangzhou we went to visit the five rams statue, Beijing pedestrian road for some shopping, met up for dinner, followed by more shopping. The next morning we went back to the school for their special 30th anniversary celebration performance with speeches and some cultural performances. Then we also attended the celebration lunch at a restaurant before driving back to Shenzhen for one night. The next day we got up early to get through all the border checks through to Hong Kong and then flew to Hangzhou.

Hangzhou seemed a little cooler and this was the point when we had to bring out the jackets and scarves and probably also when people began to get colds and runny noses. The city is famous for its beautiful scenery and the West Lake. Our hotel was very near the lake where all the streets were narrower and there were lots of good photos to be taken. It was definitely a lot different to all of the other cities because of its scenery, and it seemed like a holiday town. In Hangzhou we also went on a cruise of the West Lake, rode bikes around the West Lake, visited the General Yue Fei Memorial Hall, Lingyin Temple, went to a tea tasting village, and saw the Song Dynasty Show.

On the way to Shanghai we stopped off at Xitang, a water town, which we all found to be even colder than Hangzhou. Shanghai is a very modern city with lots of new buildings and high rises, and there was also a lot of construction going on in preparation for the 2010 Shanghai Expo. We visited the famous TV tower and the museum inside, which showed the history of the city. The weather was misty and drizzly for most of our stay so there wouldn't have been much of a view from the top of the tower. One of my shopping highlights of the

trip was our visit to the tailors market, where most of the group got at least one item made. I got a big duffle coat made and a bought a few scarves. The prices that we bargained down to were also pretty decent compared to NZ. We only spent about an hour in there so it was a bit of a rush getting around all the stalls. I would have definitely liked to spend more time at the market to get more tailor made items. Some of the others bought work suits, leather jackets, chinese dresses, etc.

The next day we went to the Yu Yuan Gardens, which was very pretty and picturesque, we also had a bit of time for souvenir shopping in the shops around the area. On our free afternoon we went to the Peoples Square and then visited the Shanghai Museum. There were also underground shops in the square and we spent a bit of time there. Shanghai has a lot of department stores, which sell good quality stuff but is a bit more expensive than the market shops.

From Shanghai we flew to Beijing, and on arrival we felt the huge drop in temperature. In the afternoon we went to the Temple of Heaven and had an early dinner. We stayed in the business district of Beijing at a hotel, which was probably the nicest of the whole trip. It was about a five minute walk away from the silk markets, which was where the girls ended up at most nights. I did the bulk of my shopping at the markets in Beijing. Lots of scarves, handbags, shoes, clothes and jewellery. Other places we visited included Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, Summer Palace, the outside of the Olympic stadiums, the Great Wall, the Ming Tombs and Sacred Way.

After Beijing we spent three free days in Hong Kong. On the first and second days we all went to Lantau Island to see the Big Buddha, and to Ocean Park. The third day was spent last minute shopping for most. A small group of us stayed in Hong Kong for a few days after the main group left for NZ on the 22nd December. During this time I was able to achieve a lot more shopping, go to Disneyland, and also visit Stanley Bay. At the end of my trip it was a huge mission to pack everything into my suitcase and within the weight limit, but luckily we all got onto the plane ok.

I had been to China once before this trip about eight years ago and visited many of the same places, although it was still very interesting visiting them second time around. Overall I am really glad that I had the opportunity to go on this trip with the other twenty-two group

members. It was definitely a great experience and a lot of fun travelling with a group of people around the same age. My five weeks away from home flew by very quickly. Thanks to the NZCA for this great opportunity. Also thank you to Janet Joe, our tour guide, who was extremely helpful and knowledgeable, and did a great job of organising and leading us throughout the trip.