

Winter Camp 2009 Report

It didn't really hit me how surreal this whole experience would actually be until a couple of days into the trip. I had heard heaps of stories from past China trippers before we had left about what to expect over there, the things to do and places to go, but I quickly learnt that you really have to experience it and take it all in for yourself to fully appreciate how much of an amazing experience it would in fact be. I started out actually knowing most of the people on the trip before we left, but most of them were just family friends so the trip helped me get to know them much better to the point that they are all now great personal friends.

The 2009 Winter Camp was my first time visiting China, so armed with little knowledge of its history, culture and language, there was quite a cultural shock waiting for me at the other end of the plane ride into this unfamiliar territory.

Shenzhen and Xintang

As soon as our plane touched down in Hong Kong, we were thrown straight into the hustle of huge, pushy crowds and crazy Asian drivers that played their vehicle horns like an orchestra. Everyone on the bus was sitting up in their seats for the whole ride to our hotel, fully alert and holding their breath at the numerous near misses, random U-turns in the middle of the busy roads and lunatic drivers darting in and around us.

Our first stop was Shenzhen, where we stayed for a couple of nights to settle into our new surroundings and prepare ourselves for the great adventure we were about to embark on. We started off our tour visiting Magnificent China, a cultural park filled with all sorts of scaled down models of the major attractions around China and I found this heaps of fun to explore as it was a great photo opportunity and knew that we weren't going to see all of these places on our tour. At night we watched a couple of cultural performances and from the beginning to the end of each of the shows, we were entertained by amazing costumes, laser lights, water and fire coming out of the middle of the stage and skillful acrobatics, introducing us to the brilliance of China's performing arts industry and leaving us all in awe.

One of the things I was definitely looking forward to in this trip was to visit the ancestral villages, and they didn't disappoint. Our village visits began in Xintang, an area known for producing the majority of China's jeans. As we walked around the village, on every street there were women sitting on the sides of the road cutting the threads off mountains of piles of jeans. It was fascinating to watch them work as none of us had seen a sight quite like this before, but the locals didn't seem to think much of it as it was just their normal way of life, and our group of camera clicking, English speaking students became the day's entertainment for them.

Guangzhou

We then headed to Guangzhou where we used the GD Overseas Chinese Vocational School as a base for the next 5 nights to visit more of the villages. While we were there, we learned Shaolin kung fu, calligraphy, mandarin and during a night of interaction with some of the students, some knot tying.

Although we were given the teachers' quarters in the hostel, the rock hard beds, showers standing over the squat toilets and 5 flights of stairs to our rooms were a change that took a couple of nights to get used to.

The kung fu was one of the highlights of the trip for me. The training grounds at the school looked like something out of a kung fu movie so it felt like a real privilege to be able to watch some of the students in training and learn a pattern of Shaolin kung fu from one of the great masters. There was a lot to learn, and the heat we trained in was a killer, but it was worth it in the end because after 3 days we had mastered the routine and got the opportunity to perform it in front of the rest of the class. After our final lesson, everyone was still pumped and keen for more as it had worked a lot of muscles we hadn't worked before and it provided us with the exercise we all needed from eating so much food on the trip.

I got to visit both of my granddads' villages in the second half of the village visits and it was such an eye-opener going into the houses they had actually lived in when they were kids and looking at the conditions they were brought up in. It gave me a better insight into the traditional Chinese upbringing and the hardships they had to go through to get to today, making me appreciate the sacrifices they made to ensure that us future generations had a more prosperous upbringing. Although my paternal granddad was reasonably well off back in the day, it was still a big contrast to see the difference between his 4 bedroom house and someone else's ancestral house which may have only had 3 rooms in the whole house. The translators were helpful in telling us about the history behind the places, and this soon became one of my favourite parts of the trip as we found that each village was quite unique in its own way.

One thing I regret not doing is taking some photos back to the villages of my family to show the locals because even though my grandparents left at very young ages, some of the older villagers still remembered them and were more than happy to act as our tour guide. At one of the villages we met two bus loads of young kids getting dropped off from school and they were immediately fascinated by the rugby ball we were passing around as they had never seen one before. Such small things such as bringing a spare rugby ball the kids could have kept would have made their day so it was sad to see their faces drop when it was time to head off on the bus to our next destination.

This year we were given the privilege of participating in the Guangzhou school's 30th Anniversary celebrations. Just like every year, our group had to perform a couple of items, but this time, our audience was pretty much the whole school and a group of extra officials. The pressure was on, and to make matters worse, we weren't told until 3 hours beforehand that our performance had been brought forward a couple of days and we were performing that very night. With only the 2 hour bus ride to the school to practice our Waiata, we definitely were not quite prepared enough and our stage fright got the better of us. The boys did an awesome job with the haka however and the crowd just went wild.

Taishan

Taishan was our last pit stop for the village visits and one place that you definitely have to go to in Taishan is Freedom City. Clubbing in China was mean! There is no dress code and no ID checks, so as our first major group bonding night out, we all donned our bright blue turquoise Winter camp shirts and

headed out for a jump and boogie on the club's bouncing dance floors. The locals must have thought we were crazy but we were having too much fun to care.

Hangzhou

Once all the village visits had finished, we headed up north to begin our tour of the rest of China's main cities. Beyond all the smog and insane traffic, we found Hangzhou. Hangzhou, most famous for its Westlake attraction was home to one of the most beautiful cities I have seen and the setting for a fairytale-like love story involving both tragedy and romance. We took a boat cruise through the lake and hired bikes for the 15km ride around its circumference, admiring the landscape along the way and using the beautiful scenery as a back drop for more photos.

Shanghai

On our drive to Shanghai, we stopped at the Xitang water town and I was immediately amazed at how peaceful the picturesque town was. The buildings were just like what you see in the old Chinese movies and had beautifully detailed carvings engraved into the windows and walls, red lanterns hanging everywhere and sculptures of dragons and lions all around the place. One of the things it showed me was how quickly the different cities in China changed from each other, as once we reached Shanghai we were quickly reintroduced to the thick black smog suffocating the landscape and massive skyscrapers it contained.

Shanghai was a city buzzing with motorbikes zooming throughout the streets, and food carts on the sides of the roads serving what looked like hot nuts and kumara. Here we also visited the local Silk factory and watched the workers spinning the silk off the cocoons and stretching it to make a silk duvet, showing the high quality of the silk and the reason why it is so expensive! We also went to see the Yu Gardens, Nanjing Pedestrian St and the Shanghai History Museum before going on another night cruise through the Huangpo River. The night cruises were amazing as the whole city was lit up with spotlights and the skyscraper buildings were decorated with brightly coloured flashing lights. It was definitely a sight I missed once I got back to New Zealand as the buildings here come nowhere near as amazing as the ones in Shanghai.

Beijing

The Great Wall of China was of course another highlight of the trip. It was definitely an amazing opportunity to be able to climb one of the world's largest man-made structures, and every aching muscle in our legs climbing the uneven steps was worth it once we reached the top. The scenic views I found personally were more fascinating than the museums we visited, however every place we went to seemed to have something special about it. I liked how our tour guide Oscar entertained us with many stories about the land's history and how everything we saw had a particular story behind it.

During our week in Beijing, we tried authentic tea tasting and took rickshaw rides through a small town, visited the Temple of Heaven, Summer Palace, Olympic village and the Forbidden City. There was just so much to do and places to see that we ignored our fatigue from the lack of sleep and amount of walking

we were still getting used to and pushed on.

Throughout the whole trip, I can't even begin to describe the food that we ate. It was amazing! Every meal – breakfast, lunch and dinner – felt like a feast to us as none of us were used to eating so much food back at home. We got the chance to try a whole variety of food including the specialty dishes from the various areas we visited such as pigs trotters, goose, pigeon, carp, some sort of purple kumara and the peking duck dinner at the very end of the trip, which was definitely the icing on the cake.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong was our final destination and before long, our 4 weeks together had gone by in a flash. Our time in HK was free for us to do whatever we liked so on the first day we all went took the cable car up to the big Buddha statue on Lantau Island and visited the Avenue of Stars in Causeway Bay. Me and a couple of the other China trippers decided to stay an extra 6 days after the main group was scheduled to leave and I'm glad that we did this as the two days that we spent in HK was definitely not enough time to shop and see everything we wanted. We did most of our shopping after everyone had gone and found some really good bargains and knick-knacks at the Ladies market, Temple Street markets, Causeway bay and TST, leaving us praying that we wouldn't be charged for overweight luggage on our way back home.

After living a whole month with 22 other people, I immediately missed having everyone there to hang out with and the knowledge that whenever you get bored, you can always just go to the hotel room next door and find someone to chat to.

Now home sweet home and back to reality, we have had a number of China Trip catch ups and are still sharing stories of the great times we had on our trip. I have collected over 60GBs of videos and photos from everyone and have still not gotten sick of looking at them because each one puts a smile on my face, remembering the good times we had and that they will be remembered for a life time.

This Winter Camp I found was a great place to bond with such an amazing group of people and meet other Kiwi Chinese in the same boat as myself. I would definitely recommend it to anyone thinking of going on the trip because you make so many new friends and get the opportunity to do and see so much more with a group than if you went on your own. The trip was really well organized and flexible enough so that everyone got to do and see everything they wanted to do. Janet was a human book of knowledge and it was great having her with us, giving us tips on how to haggle, the best places to shop and eat, and just in general how to survive in China, so a huge thanks to her for keeping us all in line and making sure we had the best trip ever.

Kirsten Young