

The 2009 NZCA Wintercamp was a trip I had been anticipating for a long time. Finally the day came where we met everyone going on the trip, said our goodbyes to family and boarded the plane for a month long adventure of a lifetime.

After arriving in Hong Kong we headed straight to Shenzhen. This was the first time I had set foot in China, and I was immediately amazed at the size of the city and how bustling it was so late at night. In Shenzhen we got to visit the Splendid China attraction park which had miniature replicas of many famous landmarks in China which was a great introduction of what to expect to see. We were also lucky to see a cultural and acrobatic show which was incredible. The grand scale of the show was much more impressive than I imagined and very enjoyable. Highlights of the show were the acrobatics on rollerskates and the unexpected fountains on the stage set.

In the southern part of China we to experience some strange foods. The flavours were quite different to what we were used to so our appetite wasn't what it normally was! Initially we had a lot of fried foods at meals, but the meals improved. The food was better after the first week and my appetite definitely increased on this trip. It was amazing to have banquet meals each night and we surprised ourselves by how much we could eat.

All of the hotels we stayed in were excellent and we all enjoyed having different roommates in each city. Our group quickly bonded, we all got along so well which made the trip even more fantastic. Like myself, a few others had never been to China before so it was exciting to share our new experiences with each other. Even just walking around the streets was interesting because there were so many people and sights you would never see in New Zealand. Every time we drove on the roads I was fascinated by how people managed to drive without obeying driving rules and signs. It was quite a funny sight and I couldn't get over how different it was to back home.

The next part of the trip was to visit our ancestral villages. It was what I had expected but the reality of being in China finally set in. It was really interesting to see where our grandparents had grown up and how different their lives would have been. I got to see my maternal grandfather's village Sah Tol. I don't have any relatives remaining in the village and I am the first person in my family to go there so we didn't know which house my gong gong had lived in. However I was amazed that an elder in the village remembered him and could point out where he had lived. I like the fact that in the past everyone in the village knew each other and who was related to whom, but because my grandad had left so long ago it felt as if these things would easily be forgotten.

I also got the chance to visit my maternal grandmother's village Ta Gang and meet my poh poh's cousins who I had only learnt of recently. Although I couldn't speak to them in Cantonese having a translator with me was very helpful in explaining to them who I was and why I had come to visit. They were very warm and friendly and showed me the ancestral village where my

grandmother grew up. It was funny because a new highway had been built running between the new and old village, a sign of the changes happening in China.

Seeing the villages was a very memorable and special experience for me. It also made me feel very privileged that I live in New Zealand where life is dramatically different and in my view, better compared to a lot of areas in China.

We then went to stay at the Guangdong Overseas Chinese Vocational School for 6 nights. At first the stay at the school wasn't what we expected. We stayed at the school hostel where the beds were very hard and the toilet facilities were a bit out of the ordinary! We also had the memorable experience of trying to stop our washing machine flooding our room! However we quickly settled in, treating the many flights of stairs we had to climb as exercise. Our stay at the school was one I'm glad we had the opportunity to experience, instead of only staying at 4- star hotels. I was especially impressed with the food at the school because I did not expect such good food from a school 'cafeteria'. It definitely helped when we were using so much energy during the day.

Learning Shaolin Kung fu was definitely one of the highlights of the Wintercamp. We got a taste of the daily routine of the kung fu students who are incredibly disciplined. Learning some of the rules of the training grounds was interesting and we quickly learnt how to greet the 'Shifu' (master). The kung fu routine we learnt was hard to get used to at first but after lots of practice I could do it. It was very physically demanding and a lot of thought had to go into remembering the sequence and right techniques. Our master was very patient and fun to learn from. After 3 mornings of kung fu training we all got the hang of it and looked pretty good!

We also had Mandarin and Chinese calligraphy lessons. The Chinese teacher went quite fast so it was hard for a lot of us beginners to keep up with her. Luckily I had learnt basics of Mandarin before so I could just follow what she was saying. We only had two Chinese classes and because it is such a hard language to learn I think it would have been better if she had taught us more phrases that could have been useful when travelling. I enjoyed playing sports against the school students and learning how to tie Chinese knots from them.

This year was the 30th anniversary of the Guangzhou school so we had the opportunity to do a performance for the students as part of their celebrations. We sang a Maori waiata and the boys performed the haka. It was quite nerve-wracking performing our last minute organised song to all of the students. I don't know how well it was received as it was a very different type of performance to them. However after the haka they seemed quite impressed...or maybe just shocked!

We went on two river cruises in China which I really enjoyed because the city landscapes are so different and exciting with all of the coloured neon lights. Sights like these really stood out and highlighted how China is now such a metropolitan country.

We spent several days visiting everyone's ancestral villages because there were a lot of different ones in different areas. I felt it occupied days which could have been spent seeing more of the

city but it was still very interesting to see all of the different villages. It was interesting to note how the villages were all different as we went from Xintang to Taishan.

We had one or two free days in each large city to do what we wanted. This was a good length of time where we split up into small groups and saw the sights of the city. I enjoyed the freedom of using the subways to travel and we were able to see what took our interest. Because Beijing is such a large city I think that I would have been able to spend a few more days there exploring.

Hangzhou was one of my favourite cities to visit. I was surprised how westernised it was and also the clean, fresh air – a change from Guangzhou! I really enjoyed the Westlake tours. The lake is beautiful and is exactly how I had imagined the scenery of China to be like. Our bike tour around the lake was great because it allowed us to see the different sights of the large lake, and at the same time get some much needed exercise! In Hangzhou we also visited a Buddhist temple and the Dragon Well green tea factory. I enjoyed learning about the Buddhism religion, seeing the large Buddha statues and learning how to drink Chinese tea properly.

Our trip then proceeded to Shanghai via the water town of Xitang. It was freezing but braving the cold was worth it to go on a boat tour to see the old houses along the canals. I didn't expect to see a town like this in China so it was a pleasant surprise.

Once we got to Shanghai I was able to see how urbanised China has become. I was astounded at the sky scrapers and many high rises and the construction that was underway for the World Expo this year. Shanghai shopping was excellent, especially the tailors market where we were all lucky to get clothes tailored in a matter of days! We all quickly got the hang of bargaining and all made some great purchases at very low prices. On our free day we were able to explore the fake markets which I loved, there was so much choice of things to buy. I could definitely get used to shopping like this in New Zealand!

The Shanghai circus was probably the best circus I have seen. I was impressed by all of the acrobatic acts in the show, including contortionists, hoop jumping, plate spinning, chair balancing and foot juggling. The finale of the circus that had me very amazed was a steel cage that had 6 motorbikes speeding around inside.

Our trip then became a lot colder. We moved up north to Beijing and met our friendly tour guide Oscar who had many stories to tell us. The sight seeing in Beijing was fantastic - from the Temple of Heaven, Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, Chairman Mao's memorial hall, the Great Wall of China, Ming Tombs, Summer Palace, jade factory, more tea tasting, the Olympic village, the rickshaw ride in old Beijing hutongs and even the original Peking Duck restaurant could probably be considered as a tourist attraction. The highlights would have to be Forbidden City and of course the Great Wall. Experiencing these sights in zero temperatures was often difficult but the frozen lakes and rivers were fun to see. I loved learning about the history of these landmarks as I had no previous knowledge about China's history especially during the dynasties.

The kungfu show at the Red Theatre was amazing. The martial arts and dance was very well choreographed into a story. It was even more impressive after knowing how difficult it is to do kungfu.

We then travelled to Hong Kong where I really enjoyed having free time to explore it at my own pace. I was fortunate to stay longer in Hong Kong so I got to see everything I wanted to, as opposed to most of the group who had to do a rushed visit of Hong Kong. It was a good way to end the trip.

My Wintercamp experience was one I will remember forever. In my opinion it is the best way I could have seen China for the first time. It was a very organised trip and every day was exciting. My expectations of the trip were met, I tasted so many different dishes, saw amazing sights, did lots of shopping and the most priceless thing, was the memories with an incredible bunch of people. Thank you to the Guangdong Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the New Zealand Chinese Association for making this trip possible and giving me this opportunity of a lifetime.