

Having never been to China before, what better way to do it than with 22 strangers in the middle of winter. I guess that's what the winter camp is all about... new experiences.

It all began at 7am in the Auckland International Airport, waiting for our 10 hour flight...

We arrived in Hong Kong relatively tired and jetlagged and jumped on a two hour bus ride to Shenzhen. The journey from Hong Kong to Shenzhen was my first taste of China and a learning experience. It was quickly discovered we were not in New Zealand anymore. This brings me to China Trip Note 1 – Lines. The only rule is you have to respect the security people maintaining the line; otherwise your goal is to get to the front of the line first. Pushing and shoving others in line is fair game, and when in doubt feel free to un-attach the line divider and start your own line. Believe me, during this trip you will encounter quite a few lines, and when in Rome...

Upon arriving in Shenzhen our first group activity was to visit the Magnificent China and Minority Cultural Park. It was amazing seeing all the historical buildings and structures China has to offer, in miniature form. I should also note here China Trip Note 2 – Driving. It's not the same as NZ, it's ok to make u turns on the highways, tooting seems like a common thing and never usually done in anger, and don't worry about sirens on police cars and ambulances... there only there for show.

The second day of village visiting we went to my grandparent's village on my mother's side. Seeing as I did not know anything about where I was from I did not expect to find much. When we arrived at the village we followed Janet as she attempted to find a house or family based on a picture of my grandparent's headstones. We walked through the streets asking locals if they knew of any Ng's living in the village, and they pointed us in the right direction. When we got to the house there was a man there, apparently he was a close relative of mine. Through a translator we discovered how we were related. He remembered coming to New Zealand years ago when I was only four years old and had an old, faint memory of me. He showed us around the old house where my grandparents lived before migrating to New Zealand. It was an amazing feeling finding out you have relatives halfway round the world that you didn't even know about, although awkward at times with regards to the language barrier.

In Guangzhou we stayed at the Guangzhou Overseas Chinese Vocational School campus accommodations. At the school we participated in a number of activities, including language classes, kung fu lessons, Chinese calligraphy lessons, and sports events. It might also be of interest to note that in this part of China the weather is not so wintery. So China trip note 4 – preparedness. It's recommended that before you leave you should get your vaccinations and bring warm clothes such as thermals, but that's only correct to a certain extent. Having not been prepared enough to organise my vaccinations on time I had to go without. It seems this worked out for the best, as I saved a few bucks and didn't catch a thing. Also, the winter in winter camp only applies for the second half of the trip. The first half of the trip is made up of intense hot, muggy weather. It would be recommended that you bring deodorant and summer clothes, such as shorts. I mean you don't want to be the kid who brought four pairs of jeans and no shorts do you. Oh, and drinking tap water is ok too.

Next stop Hangzhou. Hangzhou was defiantly the most tranquil city we visited. There was greenery everywhere and the sights were amazing. This city sort of reminds you of home. However, this city was more a tourist sightseeing destination, so there was not a whole lot to do. The most exciting thing we did was ride bikes around the lake. I was a bit nervous at first, as I hadn't been on a bike for at least 10 years, I wasn't sure I still remembered how to ride a bike – but what do you know, it's just like riding a bike. Another memorable thing we did in Hangzhou was the tea tasting at the Dragonwell Tea village. It was cool finding out how Chinese tea was grown and produced, and sampling all the flavours; however it was way more entertaining watching everyone getting duped into buying potentially overpriced tea.

The next city was Shanghai. This is the part of the trip where it starts to get cold, but not too cold. Shanghai is such a massive city, with skyscrapers galore. I think we were meant to go to the top of the Pearl Tower but because visibility was so poor it would have been a waste of time. We did however visit the Shanghai History Museum, the Bund, Nanjing Pedestrian St, Yu Gardens and even went on a river cruise around Huangpo River. This city had the best public transport system ever. It definitely puts the Metro Link busses in NZ to shame. The subway seems to arrive every five minutes and the stops/stations were in the most convenient places too.

In Beijing it was freeeeezing. Here's where the winter part of winter camp fits in. During the day, temperatures were around -1 – 5 degrees Celsius. I was kind of regretting not bringing thermals at this point. Here we visited all sorts of sites, including the Temple of Heaven, Tiananmen Square, Mao's Mausoleum, the Summer Palace, the Olympic Village, the Ming Tombs and Sacred Way, and the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall was so spectacular. The walk to the top was an absolute nightmare, but it was worth it when we reached the top. Another thing about Beijing is that it's definitely the shopping city of the trip. Here there are all sorts of markets, the silk markets, the pearl markets, and the Ya Show markets. All these markets sell relatively the same things, so the novelty wears off after a while. But this brings me to China Trip Note 5 – Bargaining. This is where you put your confidence to the test. When stall attendants know you speak English they try to take advantage of you, so it's only fair that you try and take advantage of them. Never accept the price the attendant initially offers you, and don't be afraid to insult the attendant by countering with a ridiculously low price. And if all else fails, walk away... they will eventually give in, or walk a few meters and you'll find exactly the same item and you can start again.

The final destination of the trip was Hong Kong. Here we had three days free to do whatever we wanted. I caught up with a mate of mine who was now living and working in HK. He basically showed me around the city and showed me where to get all the good deals. I also met my aunty and a family friend who was coincidentally in town the same time I was. They too took it upon themselves to show me around, buy me clothes and even offer me money. With the group we spent a whole day at Ocean Park. It was good, more a family fun thing, but still good. Definitely a good move going on a weekday to avoid ridiculous queues at rides.

Then it came... the flight home. It would probably be a good time to mention that flights have weight restrictions with regards to passengers' luggage. So China Trip Note 6 – Pack Light. I think this was mentioned repeatedly through bits of documentation we received about the trip. It's expected that you will buy stuff that you want to bring back, so don't go over with 20Kgs of luggage unless you plan on leaving it in China. Don't be the girl who has a 30kg suitcase and desperately tries to unload it onto everyone else on the trip. Anyway, the flight home was long, cramp, and tiresome. It was sad leaving China and HK but it was good to be going home.

It was amazing exploring my cultural roots and learning about my heritage. A big thanks to NZCA and the Guangdong Overseas Office for arranging this trip for us, and a big and special thanks to Janet for personally taking care of us and making sure none of us got arrested. This was a truly amazing experience which NZCA member should have the opportunity to enjoy. If you are contemplating attending the Winter Camp I implore you to go for it, it'll be one of the greatest experiences of your life and you'll never regret it.

Ronzo.