

NZCA Winter Camp 2009 by Simon Lee

The trip started with a 10 hour flight from Auckland to Hong Kong. Once on the ground we rode the charter bus through 2 customs checks - one when exiting Hong Kong, and one when entering China. Getting to the hotel in Shenzhen was a great relief, and was a rather impressive sight. I found that all the hotels on the trip were of a high quality. Some had nicer lobbies, or nicer rooms, or more amenities, but none of them drew any complaints from me.

Our first day in China was put aside for Splendid China. Splendid China is renowned for its miniatures of Chinese landmarks: temples, pagodas and the like. The sheer amount of miniatures was amazing in itself. And like all good theme parks, the day was concluded with a show. The scale was incredible, with the number of lights, actors/dancers and special effects. To say it was grand would be an understatement.

The next two days were different altogether. We were out of the hotel in Shenzhen and moving off to Xintang to begin our village visits. Most of the villages are dirtier than the cities. The waterways are polluted and you had to watch your step in some areas lest you stand in something. Most of the buildings were rundown, and some even abandoned. But despite all this, these visits were interesting and worthwhile. Seeing how little the villagers can live on and how hard they have to work was any eye-opener. It wasn't strange to see elderly people working in the fields or the markets or tailoring clothes. And for the few villages that had children around, it was good fun playing games with them

We had been pretty nomadic since arriving in China, so I was keen to get to the school and settle in for the next 6 nights. The school was a bit of a surprise – it was spacious, with basketball courts, a soccer field and a kung fu centre. I was a bit apprehensive about the quality of our rooms, but was relieved to find it clean and spacious and containing a sit-down (toilet), although the beds were rock-hard and the shower had a squatter in it (mind your step). We spent that night at the nearby markets, which gave most of us our first taste of shopping in China. The markets are different to what we think of markets in NZ, and represented more of an outdoor mall. It was brightly lit and busy, even on a Wednesday evening.

It was early morning starts at the school, with breakfast at 7am. We had had some

disappointing eating experiences whilst in China so far, and there would be more to come before the trip was over. Two memorable occasions were the dinner at the restaurant outside Splendid China, where all the dishes were served lukewarm or cold, and the lunch at the restaurant that smelt like...well...something unpleasant. So I did not have high hopes for the school cafeteria food. However, breakfast dispelled all doubts, and the meals at the school were perhaps the best during the whole trip. Food was waiting for us by the time we reached the table, yet still hot, and the variety and quality was great.

Kung fu lessons started at a respectable 9am and scheduled for the first 3 mornings. The beginning of our first lesson was spent teaching us kung fu etiquette and taking us around the training area. Set on a hillside amidst natural foliage, the training area is made up of stations with traditional kung fu training apparatus. Some of us were keen to have a go, but unfortunately this would be the only time we would set foot within this area. The bulk of our training was learning a basic Shaolin kung fu form in the courtyard, which was a great challenge, yet not overbearing.

The first couple of afternoons were spent learning mandarin. It was good learning some of the basics, although at times it got a bit fast and confusing. On the third afternoon was calligraphy, which was less stress on the brain, and thus more enjoyable. When not stuck in the classroom, sports games were organized with some of the local students which were a good break from learning.

As much fun as we had within the school, any opportunity to see the outside world was welcome. Our first dinner was spent at a yumcha buffet near the night markets. Basically a buffet with yumcha dishes, which caused great excitement among the crowd. And the Pearl River cruise was a great way to unwind and get a bit rowdy.

The school was celebrating its 30 year anniversary during our time there, and we were booked to do a performance as part of the festivities. There were two events 5 days apart, and we had been told that we'd be performing at the latter event...until we were notified we'd be performing at the first event just a few hours away. However the boys had decided to perform the haka beforehand, and had already had a practice session. The girls on the other hand, they were not as prepared. The celebrations were amazing, with the whole school turning out in force. Seeing the amount of people we'd be performing in front of, it was a little nerve racking. But afterwards, we could not have asked for a better high. We

had given it our all, and the reaction was breathtaking.

We made our way back to Guangzhou to spend a couple of nights, where we got some free time to explore the city. From here we popped back down to Shenzhen for a night before crossing the border into Hong Kong. It was from there we caught our flight to Hangzhou.

Heading to Hangzhou was a turning point in the trip. It was the end of the warm weather and the time we turned into tourists (with tour guide to boot). We spent our first day around the West Lake, which is what the city is famous for, starting with a cruise on the lake itself in the morning and cycling around it in the afternoon. The only lowlight of our time in Hangzhou was killing 3 hours in the central city. It was a stark contrast to the other areas we had seen, being dirty and plain, with the rain not doing it any favours.

We travelled by bus from Hangzhou to Shanghai with a stopover in Xitang. Xitang is a watertown and is best compared to Venice. Waterways run through the entire town, and we were able to take a boat from one end to the other. After a superb lunch we walked back through the town before hopping back on the bus to Shanghai.

Shanghai is an amazing city. The scale and variety in design of the buildings need to be seen to be believed. We visited the Oriental Pearl Tower, which is an iconic building in the Shanghai skyline. Unfortunately we didn't go up the tower, but walked through the museum on lower level. There was also shopping, and we were taken to a few shopping districts, most notably the tailors' market. Within this building are 3 floors of packed with tailors trying to sell you their wares and services, and almost everyone took advantage of this buying tailor made suits, coats or cheongsams. We were given 1.5 hours here, which ended up being far too brief.

Beijing was our last stop in China, and we had lots to do. We walked through Tiananmen Square before heading across the road into the Forbidden City. We climbed up the Great Wall. We made a quick stop outside the Bird's Nest Olympic stadium and drove past the Water Cube facility. But what everyone was holding out for was shopping, and the markets have something for everyone. And a trip to the capital wouldn't be complete without a meal of Peking duck.

I was a little worried before departing for China – I had impressions of it being a dirty country with little creature comforts. And although there were areas which were dirty, it was a very comfortable trip. All our lodgings were clean and pleasant, and our own charter bus ensured transportation between destinations wouldn't be a problem. The different cities we travelled through and villages we visited showcased the country wonderfully. It was a great month in China and I've been recommending the Winter Camp to everyone.