

Before my great experience in China I knew very little of the country of my ancestors. Now having been to China I know a little more but discovered a whole new scope of what I do know of this five thousand year old civilization with its culture and rich history. I very much enjoyed learning and seeing the history and culture for myself.

I loved the fact that we were able to get a guided tour across Shenzhen, Guan Zhou, Tai Shan, Shanghai and Beijing. It is really quite different having someone who knows about the places we visited and have them be able to explain it to us rather than having to look it up ourselves and read countless masses of texts. It is much more interactive.

Our trip really begins properly in the school we stayed in Guan Zhou. It was interesting living in the school. We were subjected to a range of different aspects of Chinese culture all at once. Mornings started off with an intense session of Kung Fu for two hours, though exhausting left everyone feeling much better afterwards. We then trooped off to the dining hall where we had a traditional Southern Chinese breakfast. In the afternoon we travelled round the villages, had Mandarin lessons, attempted Calligraphy and played sport with the other students there.

For me one of the main highlights was going around the villages. This provided a much more authentic reality of the hardships the majority of the people of China had to endure. It was quite heart wrenching seeing the conditions in which some of the villagers worked, with some villages devoted to the cutting of jeans it didn't seem like the people in the villages had much hope of better prospects. When I was able to go to my great grandfather's village this really hit home. I felt truly humbled standing in his home and looking at the meagre rooms and living conditions. All the rooms were tiny, dirty and cramped. As I explored the house I saw a picture with my great grandfather and his four brothers standing with him. It was chilling seeing a photo of him so far away from the place I knew as home. I was more fully able to comprehend why my great grandfather had set off to New Zealand in search of a better future.

Going from the villages to the bright, crowded, fast paced city life of Shanghai and Beijing and their massive skyscrapers was a completely different experience. It showed the stark contrast between China's rich and poor. It was eye opening seeing this difference.

One thing I learned from the trip was that I do in fact like eggplant and tofu. Before the trip I despised these foods but trying it in China prepared the way they do it quickly changed my mind. One thing we all noticed going from South to North was that the food quality declined. I think in the South it was generally much better as we were staying with the school and so had more authentic Chinese meals. Up north we had Chinese food that was more Westernized. This I didn't enjoy so much. But in general the variety of food was spectacular. We got to sample many foods I've never even heard of before, let alone tasted.

The tours to various historic buildings and architectural feats were beyond amazing. Personal favourites of mine were the Emperor's Summer Palace, the Temple of Heaven, The Forbidden City and of course one can't forget to mention the iconic Great Wall. These ancient buildings still stand from the many years, even centuries ago when they were built. One thing though I found we were very rushed for time

when going to the Great Wall and climbing to the top. It would have been much better if we were allowed a full day so we could fully explore it. Wandering around them was simply awesome. One modern feat we saw which was unbelievable was the Maglev train in Shanghai. It was astounding being in the train as it accelerated up to a remarkable 430km. It was so futuristic and just remarkable to be there.

Other cultural aspects I particularly enjoyed was the tea tasting ceremony in Long Jing. The salesperson there managed to talk nearly all of us into buying some of their tea! The performances we went to were incredible with their dazzling light shows, displays of acrobatics involving swinging high into the air from ropes dropped from above, horses galloping across the stage floors that moved to reveal water underneath and then the fountain jets from the ceiling raining down was astonishing. It was like nothing I've ever seen in New Zealand. It left more than one of us in awe.

The only thing I didn't enjoy as much was that we seemed to have too many days dedicated to shopping. Sure it was fun at first, learning the art of haggling down prices the hard way-by walking away from a shopkeeper thinking we got an incredible deal then talking to our fellow campgoers and realising we'd overpaid greatly-but this novelty wore off eventually. I guess being a guy I tire much more quickly from shopping.

The experience visiting the ancestral villages is a key part to the China trip experience. This I think was integral as most of us were New Zealand born sometimes going back many generations. Going back to our roots, where our ancestors came from was enlightening. I for one learned a lot more about my identity as a Chinese in this one experience than otherwise. It was a rare experience spending a month travelling with a group of mostly strangers, while a little daunting at first we all became close quite fast and I made a lot of lifelong friends. I loved my whole experience in China, I learned a lot about myself and my heritage. This opportunity was definitely worthwhile and I will treasure the memories I gained from it for the years to come.

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