

My China Experience - Winter 2012

Guangdong

The winter camp was something I had thought about as my brother and 2 sisters all had gone on the camp previously but I didn't really know what to expect on the trip, having looked at the itinerary briefly and not knowing much about the places we were going to.

The school was situated in a good location, near to a market and with a convenience store inside the school which was good if you forgot something or just wanted a snack. I wasn't looking forward to our rooms and wasn't expecting much but it was much

better than I had expected. Although the mattresses are thinner than normal, it was just enough.

The co-ordinator even said we could get another mattress if we wanted but it wasn't really necessary. The next few days were hard spent learning Kung Fu. Our instructor, Xue jiaolian, didn't speak English so it was a little slower because we had to wait for Janet to translate first but we could get a good idea from his expressions. We were all glad to get some exercise after a long flight of just sitting down. We could feel the toll on our bodies after the second day and most of the group went for full body massages after our Kung Fu sessions were complete.



Other days at the school were spent interacting with the students during Handicraft Club and English corner. This really helped understand how people in Guangdong live while having fun playing games at the same time. We also played a game of basketball against the students and narrowly lost. Since the school is designed for local and overseas students we had a mandarin lesson to teach us some basics of Chinese from a laoshi that teaches students who come to learn Chinese. Calligraphy was another class where we were taught how to do the proper brush stroke and draw a flower painting.

The meals at the school were also much better than anticipated. I was warned of flavourless congee every morning by my parents but this was not the case. There were one or two days where we did have flavourless congee but there was also other dishes on the table available. All the meals at the school were shared meals where we had dishes placed in the middle of the table on a lazy Suzanne. Many of the meals are typical Chinese foods I was already eating at home or have already eaten so it was not difficult to adjust. This meant I didn't really crave any food I was missing at home but we had many chances to have McDonald's or other foods we were missing on our free days.



The village visits were an eye-opening experience where I got to see 3 of my village houses; my Gung Gung, Yeh yeh and Ma Ma. I had visited 2 of the former villages previously about 10 years ago when I was 10 so could not remember too much. My Grandfather's village was a bit more difficult to reach because we had to trek through a muddy rice field but I found it just added to the "root-seeking" experience. I remember an ox living in one of the houses and a well – handpumped – which was quite fancy for that time. It was nice to know small things

I remember were still there. For each village area there was a government official and an official of the region you were visiting, these officials really put extra effort to make sure each and every one of us were able to see our villages and their help was highly appreciated. The highlights of the village visits would be experiencing the specialty foods of each region we visited; my favourite was the wong sein fan in Toi san. In most cases we had time to wander around the area at night and experience the town for ourselves. The unexpected happenings were also a highlight such as Mike and Mandy discovering they were relatives by way of Mike seeing a photo he recognised in Mandy's ancestors house. Also, translating or attempting to translate for Natalie and her relatives. This was an unnerving experience as I am not fluent but it was good to see that even though they must live 2 very different lives, there was still the blood is thicker than water connection.

Shanghai

A short plane ride to Shanghai was followed by a trip to one of the many large malls within walking distance to our Hotel. The streets were much cleaner and people much more westernized in Shanghai compared to Hong Kong. On the organised tour days we went to a silk factory which showed how some of the silk products are made and we had the opportunity to buy some high-grade silk products. The Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower would have been the best of the sights to see in Shanghai. The elevator travelling at 25km/h gets you to



the top in no time where the whole of Shanghai is visible and provides an indicator of the spots where we would later visit. There was also an outdoor glass area where you could feel the high-top breeze and see the city alight from all angles even beneath you. The night river cruise on SH's mother river was a good way of showing us the extent of Shanghai and of the Bund which we would later visit.

There were many shopping opportunities in Shanghai; Nanjing road is designed only for pedestrians with shops on either side, more than enough for at least a whole day. There were also markets in Shanghai where we could once again test our bargaining skills and get some cheap deals. The tailors market is also really good (and cheap!) if you want to design your own clothes or need something that's a good fit, like my suit. We had a few free days in Shanghai and I would definitely recommend YuYuan garden where we ate the famous Xiaolongbao. There was a bit of a line but it was definitely worth it!

Beijing

Beijing was the coldest I've ever been before; you really need to cover up all over otherwise you'll end up sick like most of us did. The airport was freezing and pretty much everywhere was cold. On the Brightside this meant snow fights and sliding down the great wall. Most of the time in Beijing was pre-allocated with a visit to all the major sights including Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, Summer Palace, Ming Tombs and drum tower. We had a good tour



guide (Oscar) who spoke English well and told some interesting stories about the places we visited. We of course had the famous Peking Duck which is a must – the chef even slices the duck in front of you.

Hong Kong

This is where we were fully let loose and had the chance to explore freely in a foreign country. Xmas was spent in HK singing carols, counting down and hanging out at a local bar. The trains were really very easy to catch in Hong Kong with places to go at all the stops we went to. It was tempting to spend most of the time shopping but it was a good idea catching a ride on the cable car over water and through the mountains to see the Big Buddha. Maybe a few days extra to catch the New Year's fireworks would make the experience even better. Hong Kong was a really good way to end the trip where you can just relax and do what you want.



So if you're still considering this trip, I would no doubt recommend it. Having a fellow NZ Chinese such as Janet with the knowledge of China and experience of organising many trips is truly invaluable. I've now got a much greater understanding of China, appreciation of where I've come from and a Winter Camp experience to remember. If you do go on the trip, just be open-minded and try as many new and different things as possible. Thanks to Janet and all the organisers/co-ordinators as well as the other 14 Winter Campers for making the trip a good one.

