

CHINA TRIP REPORT

by Clifford Kam

The NZCA China Winter camp 08 was the most exhilarating, awe-inspiring, eye opening experience I have ever had. There is so much to China that I didn't know before the trip and there is still plenty more to see as we only just scraped the surface.

I had never been to China before, living my entire life in western countries I had never fully experienced Chinese traditions and culture.

My cousins had been on this trip in previous years and only had great things to say about the trip. It was from them that I learnt about the NZCA and from then I was determined to experience China for myself.

THE FOOD

One of the biggest things I wanted to experience in China was the food. Since I was young I have always heard of the exotic foods that China has to offer. For some, just the idea of the types of foods that the Chinese eat would make their stomach turn. But I was game for anything.

On our first night in China, we were thrown straight into the deep end. We were given chickens blood and giblets, as well as periwinkles and pork trotters. The blood wasn't bad, I rather liked it. It was congealed with a texture similar to tofu, in a kind of broth.

Probably the most surprising dish we had during the trip was goldfish. The only problem with them was that they were extremely bony and fragile. Any attempt at picking one up just with chopsticks and they would crumble.

Other fascinating and exciting foods we got to try included crocodile, frog legs, crab fat, pigeon, swan, geese, rabbit and eel. Though dog was sometimes on the menu we never ordered it. These sorts of dishes were mainly during the first two weeks. Once we were out of the Guangdong area, we had food more similar to that in New Zealand.

If you love food, and have a strong stomach then you will love China. Many people got sick of eating Chinese food everyday of the week. Some couldn't handle the food and many nights ended in McDonalds.

THE TRAVEL AND TRANSPORT

The longest time we spent travelling was definitely the flight from Auckland to Hong Kong. At 11.5 hours it can get a bit tiresome. However, as it was the beginning of the trip many of us did not know each other and we busied ourselves by moving about the plane finding a new person to talk with, and getting to know each other over a game of scum (a card game).

Generally the trips between villages during the first two weeks were the longest, one in particular from Foshan to Taishan took 4 hours. They are generally a good opportunity to sleep and rest. On our trip we had one guy who made it his duty to get a picture of everyone sleeping.

The first thing we noticed about the road and traffic system was just how hectic and stressful it was. Many cars would just pull in front of you on a whim, cars never

stayed in their lanes and reversing on the motorway was commonplace. Cars are constantly honking their horns even when stationary. Crossing the roads in Foshan was a thrilling experience. A kind of game is played between pedestrian and motorist as to who will give way. But if you're a pedestrian and give way, you may find yourself stranded in the middle of a road for a while.

The public transport system that we mainly used in China (particularly the major cities) was the metro or subway. The places we stayed in were never very far from a metro terminal. It was amazing just how easy it was to use the self service tills and plan your journey from one place to another. In Hong Kong they've taken it further making tills and tokens a thing of the past. They have what is called an Octopus card. All you have to do is swipe the card at the terminal you board the train, and then swipe it again when you exit your destination and the fare is automatically deducted from your credit on the card. And these cards aren't limited to the subway. You can use them for buses, ferries and even some stores allow you to use them.

Occasionally when the distances we needed to travel were short or we had missed the last train, we would catch a taxi. Overall the taxi service wasn't bad. Many got you where you wanted to go safely and quickly and the fares compared to New Zealand are much, much cheaper (then again, everything is cheaper in China). Of course we were always a bit nervous, we never knew the area and we couldn't converse with the drivers very well. But very rarely did any of us get taken for a ride. However, on one occasion, the driver we had was not the same as the driver on the taxi ID card. When asked he just replied casually 'He is my friend, I am using his taxi today.'

The only time we were suspicious was in Shanghai, with the red taxi's that had an 'X' on their number plates.

THE HOTELS

The hotels we stayed in were very nice. Most of us would have been content just with a western style toilet. Many of the Hotels had four star ratings, only the government hotel in Guangzhou had a two and even that was fine. Though all our accommodation was substantial, I would say that the best hotels we stayed in were the Golden City Hotel in Foshan, the Shanghai Hotel and the Joy City Hotel in Beijing. Joy City Hotel had a nice beer garden which provided a serene area to sit, relax and talk.

All the hotels were located in good places within the cities we were staying in. The Golden City Hotel in Foshan was only five minutes walk to the Ancestral Temple where we learnt kung-fu. The BP International in Hong Kong was a stones throw from Nathan Road.

At every hotel we stayed we were paired up with another China tripper of the same gender. This gave us good opportunity to get to know people better. As we had odd numbers of boys and girls, siblings would have to be room mates at some point in the tour. It was always fun to try guess who you would be rooming with whenever we went to a new hotel. As it was all random, you never knew who you would get.

Generally the whole tour group would be on the same floor. This made it easier for all of us to plan and communicate with each other as well. One of the fondest memories I have of the trip is walking up and down the corridors looking for an open door. This being a sign that the occupants were present and that you could go into the room and instantly start talking and socializing with the people inside. We learnt the most about each other in the hotel rooms than anywhere else on the tour.

One aspect about the hotels that many people may find hard to deal with is the firmness of the beds. Though I myself prefer firm mattresses, the beds in China are slightly on the hard side. Some were a bit short too; I suppose Chinese aren't exactly the tallest race of people. There were of course the occasional blocked toilet, the

broken air-con, the smelly room and the stained carpet. But these issues aside, I am extremely happy with the places we stayed at.

THE SHOPPING

You cannot go to China and not shop. Everything is cheap over there. We were dividing prices by four to convert them into New Zealand dollars so much that I thought we'd have a problem of stopping when we got back to New Zealand.

The first thing I noticed when we were driving through China was that people could set up a stall anywhere. They would also keep going well into the night selling vegetables, fruit, whatever.

Of course the best experience you can have with shopping in China is at the markets.

Blatant and obvious fakes are sold here at bargain prices. In a time where counterfeit is bad you can't help think how these places are allowed to stay in operation. But because they have become such large tourist attractions and such a large part of the economy, closing these places down would have such a negative effect on China that they are practically forced to keep them open.

I have learnt so much shopping in the markets. Bargaining with the store clerks became a game. A routine that you had to go by to get the price lower, lower. "tai gui le," "pian.yi," "mei-you qian," "wo kankan" became phrases we used all the time when bargaining. But they always knew we were tourists whenever we reverted back to English. They would recognize our China trip shirts and hoodie's and inflate their prices majorly. Every time you wanted something cheaper they would call you 'crazy', or ask you again to give them 'your best price', everything in their shop is "good quality." Everything in other stores is "poor quality." Even though your initial price would be considered "impossible", you can always pull out your trump card, the simple walk away. As soon as you do they will start cutting their prices drastically just to get a sale. We went to so many markets that we became pros at bargaining.

When we got to Beijing however, it was a whole new ball game. Up to that point, store owners were happy to just talk to you from their stores. In Beijing, they would actually come up to you, and literally drag you into their stores, they would hit and harass you, shouting from one end of the aisle to the other. Though it was funny at first it did start to put me off shopping.

All in all, you can get very, very nice, good quality imitations at a very cheap price, but only if you know what to look for. If I could go back I would shop more in China than in Hong Kong. Hong Kong markets are harder to bargain in, and shopping is generally more expensive there. Whether its because of the current exchange rate, the lack of baggage space, the change in lifestyle or that we just couldn't be bothered shopping as much by that point, many of us were slightly disappointed in the HK shopping.

THE CULTURE AND HERITAGE

This would obviously be one of, if not the main reason we went on the China trip. Most of us had never been to China before so this was a very big eye opener for us.

Our first taste of Chinese culture was the kung fu training. To be able to train in the style of Wong Fei Hung was a great honor. Though the training and learning of our routine was hard work, we all enjoyed it immensely and it was sad when we had to leave the Foshan Ancestral temple. Our Seefu's were extremely humble and skilled and their performances always left us in awe. The Wong Fei Hung music stayed in our heads for days.

One thing that was the most troubling was some of the habits of the local people. Due to the pollution in China people get a lot of phlegm and mucus in their throats, so they hoick it up, in what is a very disturbing noise, and spit it out into the street. It is not just the men, but the women do it too.

Toilets were a major concern for all of us during the trip, particularly the girls. Most of the toilets in China are squatters. It is interesting to note however that children in China learn to squat even before they can walk. We obviously had no such training so were pretty much forced to 'hold it in' for the whole day till we got back to our hotels. We were careful how much we ate and drank for we knew not when we might see the next "Westy."

In Guangzhou we were pleasantly startled when we witnessed a small boy going to the toilet (i.e taking a dump) in the street. No prior warning or story about these deeds can prepare you for when you see it in person.

As this was a root seeking tour, we all got to visit our family villages. It was quite something to see people come back from their village lost for words, humbled by the experience. I was no different. Even though I had seen pictures of my village from my cousins that still didn't prepare me for when I was standing in the house for myself. The villages are very simple, brick homes which have no insulation or internal decoration. Though they may be run down now, in the old days they were a valuable asset to own. Our own family had a special ornament that symbolized their relative wealth, something which is hard to believe when you compare it to today's standards.

It was strange to see old pictures of your grandparents and great grandparents when they were young. It is even more overwhelming standing in the very room that your great grandfather was born. I try to imagine what it all looked like in his day, but it's just too difficult to do.

THE CITIES AND SITES

China has truly come a long way over the past few decades. The cities were nothing how we thought they would be. There are high rise buildings and skyscrapers all over the place. Some of the buildings are just so spectacular it makes me wonder why I didn't take up architecture.

Shenzhen was the biggest surprise. Being part of the Special Economic Zone it gained benefits of a capitalistic economy in a Communist state. The place is amazing, just over 20 years ago it was a small fishing village. Now it has a population twice that of New Zealand and is a modern metropolis. Because of its close proximity to Hong Kong, many HK people come over to Shenzhen to shop. If HK people shop here then this place must be doing something good.

The pollution, though obvious, was not that hard to get accustomed to. That is not to say that it isn't okay. Many days we were unsure what the weather was going to be like. When we first got to China we weren't sure if we were looking at rain clouds, mist, fog or smog.

In Beijing we were fortunate enough to see some very clear blue skies thanks to the strong wind that had blown through the night before. However it did make the day much, much colder.

Probably the nicest city we went to was Hangzhou. You can see why the Chinese love this city so much; it is clean, clear and pleasant. The West Lake is just beautiful and is a joy to ride a bike around.

The night life in China is somewhat different than in New Zealand. Firstly, the dress code is very lenient there. You can enter a club in just jeans and a t-shirt and it would be okay. They don't ask for I.D either. We sometimes saw little kids running around the clubs.

The best night out that we had was probably when we went to Freedom city in Taishan. This club boasted a bouncing dancefloor. Many of us had never been on one and it was an instant hit. Everyone had a blast and it ranks as probably the best group outing of the whole trip.

There are so many things to see in China it is hard to mention them all. But the most fascinating sites we went to were probably the Olympic Village, the Temple of Heaven, Forbidden City and of course the Great Wall.

We were the first NZCA Wintercamp to visit the completed Olympic Village. Though at first we were only going to be doing a drive by, we managed to find time to take a closer look. All I can say is wow, this place is huge. The Birds Nest Stadium was amazing. The stand for the Torch was still present and you could just picture Usain Bolt sprinting down the home straight to a gold medal.

The Great Wall truly deserves its title. We went to the part that the Mongols were said to have come through. The walk along the wall was quite something. The stairs were so steep that you had to hold on to the railing. It was some real tiresome work, not helped by the unrelenting wind and cold (it had snowed just a couple of days previous so the ground was scattered with snow. It was definitely worth it.

THE CHINA TRIPPERS

Everything I have talked about so far was just brilliant, everything above were things we knew we would see and knew would enjoy, long before the trip. But one thing that was a mystery to us was who we would be spending the next month with. I remember the first time we were all together at the airport. I hardly knew anyone save two or three people. We were all, for a lack of a better word, strangers. And yet, I would have had it no other way. One thing that has amazed me even to this day, was just how fast and how well everyone, and I mean everyone, got on with each other.

The people you go on this trip with are a pleasant bonus to your trip experience. There is such a range of characters and personalities no conversation is dull. There is always someone to talk to.

If I had to make a decision on what made the trip great for me, I would have to say it was my fellow China Trippers. I enjoyed the time I had with them so much that when the trip came to an end and how I wished I applied for an extended stay, I could not see how I could have enjoyed it without the others with me. We have all become truly dear friends.

This China trip will forever be one of the most fun filled, educational, humbling months I will ever have. For those of you who are contemplating going on this trip, I say that you should definitely go on it. Believe me, you will not be disappointed.