

Guangzhou Wintercamp 2008

November 23 2008:

I left the comforts of home in clean, green New Zealand to rediscover my roots on the 2008 Guangdong Wintercamp – boy what a culture shock. The tour took us through China's major cities each scheduled with a wide range of activities including visiting our ancestral villages, kung-fu and plenty of sightseeing. Through our travels our eyes were opened to the dichotomy that is China, the humble rural outskirts in the south and the fast-paced, developing, industrial superpower in the north. The Wintercamp itself is unique in that it brings thirty Chinese New Zealanders, so that they can rediscover their Chinese heritage together.

A trip which I initially thought would just be one big shopping spree, turned out to be an experience of a lifetime, where I made many friends with whom I shared fun, exciting, and even emotional cultural experiences.

Below is my account of the places I've been and the things I've seen

The South of China

For the first two weeks of our trip we were based in Southern China being trained in kung-fu, visiting ancestral villages, sampling a multitude of dishes and learning all things important; "How to..." 1) Cross the road, 2) Use a squat toilet 3) Say our names in Mandarin and 4) Haggle.

Our trip began in Foshan with an intense three day crash course in kung-fu, at the Huang Feihung School of martial arts. With the guidance of our masters, we slowly learnt the routine which we would be performing to the public. At times it was demanding, requiring much concentration and determination from us all. Yet it always helped us to remember the moves, when the master showed us their practical application. This experience made me come to appreciate the level of skill involved in martial arts and the kung-fu performances held each day at the temple, never ceased to amaze me. Overall this was a fun, excellent, cultural encounter to begin the trip with, as we were all able to bond and share our experiences as beginner kung-fu students.

The next week and a half was spent visiting participants' ancestral villages, which were scattered in and around Guangzhou and for most this was a deeply moving and personal experience. I was even fortunate to have family – my granddad's younger brother, guide me through the village. At first I had been apprehensive due to the language barrier, however as soon as I arrived my family, whom I had never met before were so warm and welcoming, all apprehensions melted away. On seeing the small, run-down and basic house that was my ancestral home, I felt a great sense of appreciation for what my grandparents had sacrificed to provide me with my comfortable life in New Zealand. The room which I was told had been my granddad's, had only pure necessities, a bed and a cupboard, with a few empty draws. I was also mildly amused by the fact that the house had a Western toilet. My granddad had left behind his home, and his family – including a brother who was seventeen years younger, to start our lives in New Zealand and for that I will always be grateful. Visiting my village was the most important part of the trip; I felt a sense of belonging and closer to my Chinese heritage.

The food we received was most unexpected. Unlike the typical dishes of Chinese restaurants in New Zealand, there was no duck, sweet and sour pork or roast pork. Instead it was goose, sweet and sour pork fat and roast pork...fat. It's a wonder that

everyone is so skinny in China. On our first night we were introduced to two dishes I didn't even know existed; Chicken giblets and chicken blood. The giblets were somewhat chewy but very tasty, the blood on the other hand was a specialty dish of the area, yet I could only bring myself to taste a mouthful. Not all food was so obscure but by the end of the trip nothing surprised me. I enjoyed a Peking duck dinner in Beijing, sampled pig ears (rather crunchy) and goldfish and even managed to put on 3kgs.

Crossing the road in China is an experience in itself. If you walk too fast or run, cars speed up. If you walk too slow or stop, cars will continue forward and manoeuvre around you. The best thing to do is confidently walk, at a leisurely pace, or better yet, follow a local.

Squat toilets – oh to be a boy.

Beijing Road was where I was first educated on the art of haggling, after which I was hooked. Markets provided us with many entertaining times and I often got carried away. We also learnt that the best technique is to walk away. It was surprising how fast gossip spread from stall to stall; sometimes we were even refused service on the basis that we were too cheap. Yet by the end of our month long trip I had still managed to buy enough to fill five bags and was grateful for only packing 6kgs to begin with.

Hangzhou & Shanghai

Hangzhou was a beautiful city, renowned for its romance and created around a great lake. It was around this lake where we took a bike ride and where I had a very fun but heart-thumping and scary experience upon a bridge. It was nearing the end of the bike ride and because there were no bike lanes or footpaths we were forced to bike on the road. Happily following one of the other group members over the bridge I somehow ended up head on, playing chicken with a taxi. As I went to swerve around the taxi a van came up behind me on the opposite side of the road, blocking my way. I did the only thing I could do, screamed and hoped for the best. Amazingly I ended up safely on the other side of the bridge.

Shanghai was the first city so far, where we had felt anything close to winter weather. Up until Shanghai our group had been wandering around China in shorts and t-shirt in their supposed winter weather of around 18 to 23 degrees. One of the first things the tour leader Bob had told us about this city was not to take the red taxis with an X as the first letter on the number plate; apparently they are well known to rip off tourists. Much of Shanghai was spent visiting Buddhist temples and sights such as the Bund, the Shanghai Municipal History Museum and the Tailor's Market.

In particular I enjoyed visiting the tomb of the Great General Yu Fei. I enjoyed the stories of his humble beginnings, to great campaigns and his eventual death sentence due to being framed by Government officials. Not only was I intrigued by China's history but even more so by the reactions these stories instigated from the Chinese people. Constructed by the tomb there were four kneeling statues of the Government officials who had framed the General and above them was a sign which said "No Spitting". The Chinese people were still angered by the unjust death sentence their national hero had received that they couldn't look at these statues without ill feeling.

Beijing

Beijing was host to the best tourist attractions yet. I had high expectations leading up to our daytrip to the Great Wall and I was not disappointed. This massive feat of human labour was a sight to behold and was even more remarkable once you reached the top. A small group of us had decided to take the expert trail and somehow I had not anticipated the steepness of the climb. Nevertheless I made it to the top after

stripping off three of the five layers I had begun with. To my surprise my phone still had reception up there, so I sent a text message from the top of the wall.

The Olympic village was another highlight, boasting the architectural skills of China. The Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City were beautiful, picturesque and intricately designed attractions. At these places I learnt more about Chinese history, beliefs and suspicions. Nine is believed to be the heavenly number, no one but the emperor could use the dragon design or the colour yellow/gold and bats are lucky because when spoken in Chinese they sound like the word lucky. Our group even fought other tourists to stand on the Round Altar at the site of the Temple of Heaven, which was supposedly the centre of the earth, for good luck. An even more fascinating feature at this site was the Echo wall, where a fellow Wintercamp member and I were able to freely have a conversation via the wall, without shouting and while standing more than fifty metres apart.

Despite the sub-zero temperatures, this was by far my favourite city with its rich culture and history, I learnt more about China and its people than I had on the whole trip and I was glad to have spent five nights here.

Hong Kong

Aside from the various temples and Buddha statues scattered about, arriving in Hong Kong was like re-entering the Western world. With so much to do and see, three and a half days was not nearly enough time.

Our first day was spent catching the gondola up to the big Buddha, then tearing back down the hill in a minibus to catch a ferry over to Hong Kong Island. From here we had lunch courtesy of our octopus cards, stood on the longest escalator in Asia and took the steepest tram imaginable up to the Peak for some amazing views. We crossed back to the Kowloon side via the Star Ferry to watch the lights show and went late night shopping in Mongkok. Hong Kong shopping was amazing with so much variety and a more Western influence on clothing styles than in China. The Mongkok area alone has the Ladies markets, an Electronics lane and an entire street dedicated to the latest shoes of every sporting brand.

The following days were spent at Ocean Park visiting the pandas, heading over to Macau to try our luck on the slot machines at the grand Venetian hotel and of course...more shopping.

December 24th 2008:

With literally no money left to feed myself, I arrived back in New Zealand, five bags in hand. With so much going on in the past month, I had barely noticed my lack of sleep or how much I missed home. I was glad to have returned yet I will definitely be planning a trip back some day.

During the trip I learnt so much about Chinese history, culture and the language. I made many friends with whom I shared experiences and who I hope to stay in touch with. Most importantly I gained an understanding of myself and my background and I can now confidently say I am proud to be a Chinese New Zealander.

Sam Wong
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