

EF COLLEGE STUDY TOURS

Education in China Tour 2011

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FINAL DESTINATION

After 3 days of the worst flight experience in delays and screw-ups I'd ever experienced in my life, we finally arrived in Beijing. We didn't get our luggage until nearly midnight, didn't get to our hotel and settled in until well after 1am and had to be up at the crack of dawn the next day. Here, we celebrate FINALLY getting luggage, after 3 days of being without.

Fortunately, I packed light, and I had all my things in carry-on with me. The bag that got lost was only books and things like shampoo which the hotels provided. Travel experience pays off. I felt bad, though, for the rest of the crew, who tried to haul as little as possible around with them from plane to plane. They were without clothes and all their stuff that whole time. Lesson 1: Pack necessities and carry them with you no matter how inconvenient to drag them along from one plane to another. You'll be glad you did. Lesson 2: Don't fly Delta.



First Day in Beijing

Monks in Tennis-shoes at Tiananmen Square paying a visit to Mao Zedong's memorial. I found these monks fascinating for several reasons... not the least of which was that they were paying homage to a man who put in motion the political machine that very nearly destroyed the Buddhist faith and slaughtered holy men all over China. What a lesson in compassion, don't you think?



The entrance to the Forbidden City, with Mao Zedong's portrait still proudly displayed. It is a misconception to think that the Chinese as a people are all hero-worshippers of this man, but, whatever you may say bad about Mao Zedong, he reunited a country that was falling apart and they know they have him to thank for that. His intentions were good, but, as the saying goes, "The path to hell is paved with good intentions."



The Forbidden City

It was every bit as expansive and beautiful as the movies and tour pamphlets make it out to be. This place was magical, despite the crush of people (which we learned quickly was just how China is). The details in every corner of every building were extraordinary!! I wish I could have spent more time here. Nothing can do this place justice.

Gold, gleaming rooftops and white stone pillars carved to look like clouds, bright red and turquoise paints, dragons winding around every surface. Every surface is covered with an homage to the artisans and the Emperors who lived here during Imperial Chinese rule.

I fully intend on going back for an independent tour of this site when I return to China. It deserves a whole day of exploration.



Tea House and Shopping

Tea Ceremony: After our trip to the Forbidden City, we were taken to a Tea House and treated to a Chinese Tea Ceremony. The ladies who hosted were funny and spoke very good English. They let us sample several traditional teas. Most of the crew didn't enjoy it, or the tea, but I had a great time and thoroughly enjoyed having high quality, brewed right, fresh, untampered-with tea. I would do this again in a heartbeat.



The Market: After the Forbidden City, we were given about two hours to roam one of the main-street markets in Beijing. Just as we were walking in I spotted this gentleman dressed up as a 'statue' with dumplings skewered on a giant stick, advertising the wares inside the store. You'll also note the cop standing there. Police and Military presence was impossible to ignore. They were everywhere. I had a great time at the market and picked up a few books while I was there.



Day Two: The Great Wall

After a good night's rest, we all woke up early and piled into the bus for the drive to Ba Da Ling. Simon (our tour guide) got us through the ticket booth and then set us free for about two hours.

You have two choices at Ba Da Ling. You can either turn to the right and go up the less steep portion of the wall with the rest of the masses or you can turn left and head up a less busy portion of the wall. Less busy, because it rises at impossible angles toward the summit of a steep mountain. I chose to go left to avoid the crush of people.

I have never been so scared for so long in my entire life! The stairs were uneven, the angles at which you had to climb were nearly impossible, and that was just the trip up. The trip down was TERRIFYING! On the trip back down, there is a portion of stairs that most people go down BACKWARDS because it is so steep. But, it was well worth the effort, sweat, tears and fear. The view was incredible and I met some REALLY neat people on the way up and down.



Jade and Heaven

The Jade Factory: After our harrowing trip to the Great Wall, we stopped at a jade factory for lunch and for a tour. Of course, the point was to part us from our money, and we all spent at least a LITTLE while we were there. We also learned a little about the actual stone and its properties. I listened carefully and took this picture of the raw rocks for my grandfather, who is a geologist. I wish I'd known we could purchase uncarved pieces. I would have brought one back for him.



Temple of Heaven: At the end of our long day Simon tried to make up for our group missing the first day of the tour by taking us to the Temple of Heaven public gardens. Unfortunately, it was late and we couldn't get into the Temple itself, but he took us along the Path to Heaven and we got to see the Chinese evening-life. People gathered and played games, danced, and played music together as the sun was setting. It was a great experience.



Day Three: Xi'an

A short flight from Beijing took us to Xi'an, home of the Terra-Cotta Warriors and of, apparently, Dumpling fame. We stopped for a dumpling lunch at this quaint little restaurant. Half of our group decided they were going to hunt down a McDonalds instead. Those of us who chose to eat at the Dumpling House, though, had one of the best meals of the whole trip. It was incredible! The others don't know what they were missing.



Few of my pictures of the dumplings came out, but these little things are walnut filled desert dumplings. I could eat DOZENS of these things. They were so good. American Chinese food is NOTHING like this. Anybody who heads in to Xi'an should make it a point to stop at a dumpling house . They won't regret it.



Chinese Chinese Food

Here is a picture of what our typical meals looked like. In China, you eat 'family style', which is to say that plates of things come out and get set on a giant rotating table. Everyone shares a little bit of everything (though this was a skill we Americans showed little aptitude for in the beginning). Staples of rice and green tea were always there, as well as scrambled eggs with tomato wedges in them.

For those planning to travel to China, be aware that Soda Pop is a luxury there and unlike in America, you only get one glass with each meal. If you want more, you have to pay per glass. Tea, however, is endlessly supplied.

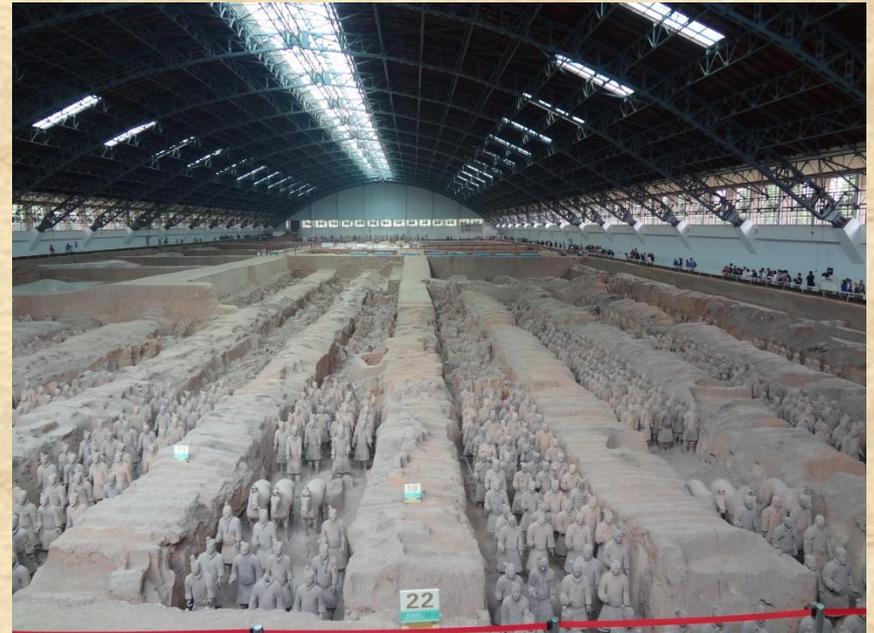
Food for us was always a source of drama and a constant source of embarrassment for me, personally. I have to admit that our group did nothing to dispel the 'Ugly American' stereotype. I often felt compelled to apologize to the wait-staff after each meal for our behavior at the table. That one semester of Chinese 101 definitely paid off, here.



Day Four: Terra Cotta Warriors

Eddie, our resident superstar (the Chinese people LOVED him) posing with a replica of one of the Terra Cotta Warriors in the shop attached to the museum. See the resemblance? I DO!

Pit Number One: It goes on forever! Soldiers and horses all lined up in rows. The sheer number of them is staggering. Each of the statues is about six feet tall. Emperor Qin wanted a strong army to carry with him to the next life, and so each of the statues was made larger than life. This was really neat to visit, but honestly, a little boring. There's not much to do there but look at the statues. These pits are out in the middle of nowhere and there are no restaurants or cafes. Our tour guide warned us to get something to eat and bring it with us and we all had a sort of impromptu picnic. THAT was actually my favorite part.



Guilin

We flew right after we saw the warriors and landed in Guilin. We checked into our hotel, and settled down for an early night.

This little hotel was one of my favorites. Situated right across the street from the Li river, and our hotel room had a few of the twin pagodas. We never got to see them up close, but seeing them lit up at night was definitely a treat.

In the morning, we had one of the best breakfasts I had on the whole trip and had a nice, relaxing start to the day. I actually took a few of the breakfast foods with me for the cruise down the river, later.

Before we all piled onto the bus, a group of us took our lives in our hands and crossed the little street to a small open area that had stairs down to the river. As we were gawking at the sun rise over the karse-formations and the river water, a group of older Chinese people gathered behind us and began their morning exercises. Some of the guys joined in and it was hilarious. We all felt relaxed for the first time since we'd started the trip, I think. Everyone was in an unusually good mood.



Day Five:Li River Boat Cruise

I could have done this cruise a hundred times! This portion of the tour was definitely my favorite. Everyone was relaxed, the air was clean, the pace was slow and the scenery was incredible. I stood up on the top deck most of the four hour cruise, watching for all these little treasures buried in the trees climbing up the side of the mountains. Little Pagodas and temples were scattered in the hills and river-people villages with their boats lined up on the shores were everywhere.



The scenery was truly magnificent. Everyone should take this little cruise if they can. Take lots of film or charge your digital camera batteries to the maximum, because you will very likely find yourself taking a LOT of pictures. My battery ran out, so I took the opportunity to break out my sketchbook.



Day Six: Rice paddies and Ice Cream

We arrived in Yangshuo the previous night and settled into our hotel room. Sarah and I poked through the West Street Market as the Tour Guides brought us from the boat and set us loose for a few hours, but neither one of us bought anything. We were all too glad to take the extra time to get a little extra sleep and just relax.

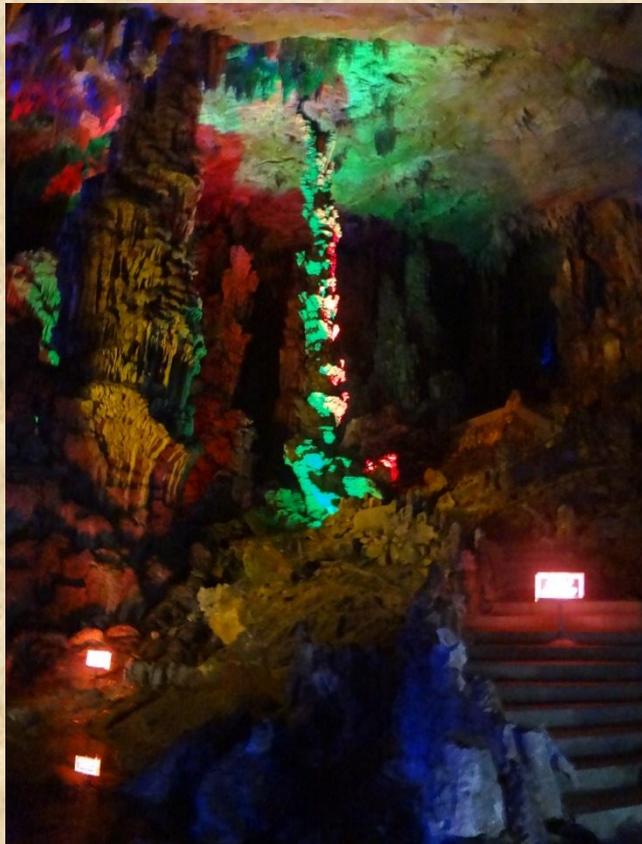
The next morning, we had a leisurely breakfast and then forked over a little extra money for a tour of the rice paddies that weren't far from where we were staying. It was an adventure, that's for sure! It was an enlightening experience to see how the people here live and work. At the end of the tour, we all had the chance to sit on a water buffalo.

Rather than take a second tour that day, I opted to just take my time and enjoy the day. So, I headed to the West Street Market with Sarah and we relaxed, did some window shopping and took some deep breaths. Given the stress of the fast-paced tour and the drama that always came with it, we were glad to get away from the group for a little while and just ENJOY. At the end of the evening, while waiting for our group to gather in front of the KFC (They're everywhere in China), we stopped inside for an ice cream. Five young Chinese ladies came in with their English Language Teacher, and we struck up a conversation. We spoke for about Thirty minutes and that was, quite honestly, one of my favorite experiences of the whole trip. I could have stayed in Yangshuo for the WHOLE trip.

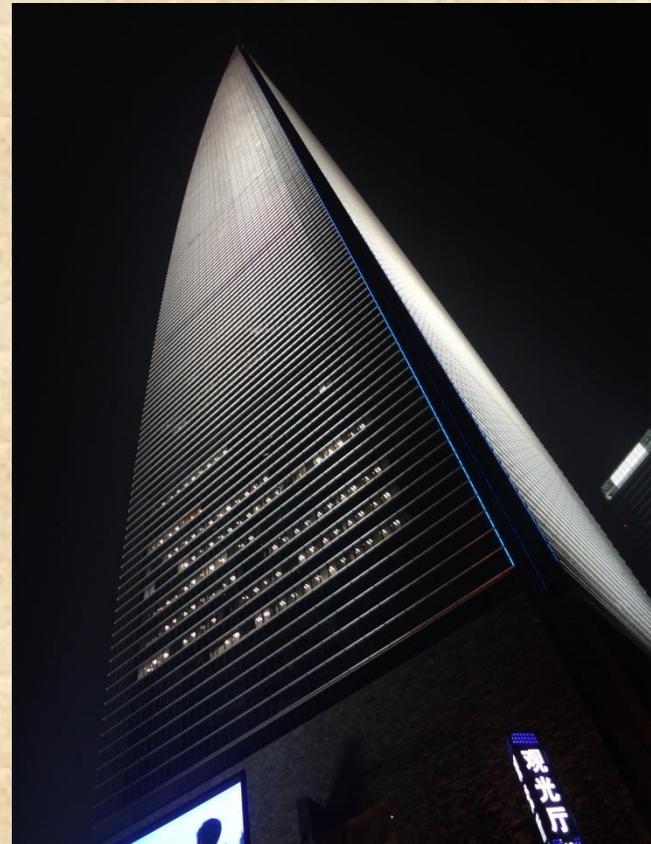


Day Seven: Over and Under

We started our day with a trip to the Reed Flute Caves. Not a very pleasant experience for me, I admit. Caves and I don't get along and this one was lit like a Christmas tree, but ONLY after the tour guide pressed a light. It was, as caves tend to be, dank, slippery and dark. I didn't enjoy this part at all.



Then, we caught a flight to Shanghai and visited one of the tallest buildings in the world. Really, this whole day was a bust for me. Nearly all of the group went up the elevator to the top, but Britany and I chose to stay on the ground floor, thank you very much. Simon walked with us to the shopping portion and we spent about an hour and a half just exploring and shopping. We got some smoothies, sat down and waited for everyone else to come and then all shuffled off to our hotel and to bed.



Day Eight, Nine and Ten: Shanghai

Shanghai was a blur of activity that I can barely remember. We visited several schools, starting with a primary school and then a College. We observed and spoke with students. It was fun and really solidified my desire to travel to China and teach English, someday. The visit to the EF School was my favorite of the schools we saw while we were there. Hopefully soon, I will be studying abroad!

One of the highlights of the visit to Shanghai was the trip to the temples there. I thoroughly enjoyed myself, and during the whole trip, every temple I went to I bought joss sticks and prayed – for good grades on this study tour and for a fast and hassle-free flight home! Someone must have been listening. The flights back were flawless.



Making Friends

The entire trip was something I will never forget. I met great people along the way and shared the adventures overseas with two pretty awesome people. I don't think I could have asked for better roommates. We parted ways at the end of our stay in Hong Kong, with Brittany going back home to Idaho. Sarah and I went on with the rest of our group and spent the next three days exploring the ex-British trading center, but I didn't enjoy it nearly as much as the first ten days of our trip.

I hope someday I'll get to go back and spend more time seeing places we didn't get to see the first time and meeting more great people! I would recommend this trip to anyone! The tour guides were skilled at keeping a large group of independent-minded Americans organized and MOSTLY on time, and they did a good job accommodating for our needs.

If I had another opportunity to go, I'd jump on it in a heartbeat! I learned so much about China, about the people and the place – and it encouraged me to seek out my goal of one day becoming a teacher there.

