

My Journey to China

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There are some things that you can only imagine yourself doing, and some places you only dream about seeing in real life. In my case, I never thought I would have the privilege of traveling across the world as a seventeen year-old to spend the summer in a foreign country. Since first hearing about the Student Diplomacy Corps and the scholarships offered by the Naples Council on World Affairs, I became intrigued with the idea of being immersed in a completely different culture and society for a month. I have always been interested in China's history, culture, and environmental issues, so naturally it was my first choice when applying for the program. My time in China was undeniably one of the best months of my life, and I know I will remember it forever.

Most of my knowledge of China before I went on the trip was limited to history textbooks, and the news, but while being there I learned more about the country than I thought I ever would. Each day, it seemed as though my group and I were merely sightseeing, trying delicious new foods, and hopelessly failing to communicate clearly with our host families, but I soon began to see the bigger picture of it all. I was in a nation with a rich history over five thousand years old, and a culture that has prevailed through an extraordinary number of governmental shifts in power, and it would all be revealed to me. The orientation visit to Beijing, seminar studies, family stays and travel in Shijiazhuang and Luoyang Pei village,

field exploration in Xi'an and Chengdu, and the culminating visit to Shanghai were all exceptionally well planned, masterfully supervised and enhanced by our Corps Leader David Klarer, and enjoyed tremendously by group members.

The moment I stepped off the plane in Beijing and got my first view of China, I knew I was about to embark on a journey that would change my life. In the matter of a few days, I became aware of the beauty of China's landscape. Our visit to Tsinghua University and attending a lecture about China's environment from Dr. Lihui was most informative. Although pollution was less obvious in the summer, it was still present, and China is taking active steps to bring about ecologically sound policies. Keeping that in mind, I hope that one day, with more research and the implementation of alternative energy sources, China may achieve the cleaner environment being sought. Regardless of the smog and waste, seeing the exquisite architecture of both ancient and modern society partnered with nature was possibly my favorite part of the trip. Visiting Tian'anmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, and the Temple of Heaven made ancient history come to life. The vast army of 2,200 year-old Terra Cotta Warriors in Xi'an, to crowded Muslim Quarter markets, to an ultramodern world-class shopping along the Bund and Nanjing Road, every step and turn of my journey was an adventure.

There is one moment in particular I will never forget. My group and I had just climbed to the top of the Great Wall of China, and as we reached the final fortress at the highest point, I looked around me at the massive mountains, the 8th century BC

wall below my aching feet, and my group members who all had contagious smiles on their faces despite being exhausted. I had a sense of joy, which was almost unexplainable. In that moment I experienced an amazing connection with ancient China. I even began to tear up as I looked around at my group because we all knew that we had just accomplished one of the hardest climbs we had ever done, but we did it encouraging each other the whole way. I still remember that feeling of exhaustion I had whenever I climb steps now, but I wouldn't trade the world for the feeling I got when I reached the top and saw the country unfold before my eyes.

From early on in the trip, I learned that Chinese hospitality is incomparable to any other kind I had experienced before. While in Beijing we visited traditional Hutong neighborhoods where a local family generously made us a homemade lunch. The host families in Shijiazhuang and Luoyang in particular made me feel like not just a part of their family but like royalty. I loved spending time with both families equally, regardless of the modern conditions of the urban family and more traditional and austere dwelling of the rural family. I found that although both families that I stayed with were not wealthy, they still went to great lengths to make sure that I was always comfortable, extremely well fed, and constantly entertained. Before the trip I was actually worried that staying with a host family would make me miss my own, but in fact it did the opposite. I made what I now know to be life-long bonds with my host sisters in both the urban and rural homestays. Also, despite the fact that at moments it was difficult to communicate with my families, I connected with them by alternative means such as the games we played, food we

prepared together, served, and ate, and places they took me. My rural homestay family in particular went above and beyond to not only make me feel welcome, but also my group members. Each night my host family invited what seemed to be half of the village and my group to celebrate us staying there. We laughed, ate some of the best home-cooked meals I've ever had, and drank amazing tea. In both urban and rural China there are values that are placed on family and friends that I will always remember. I gained a new perspective on how life can be lived, the respect family members should have for each other, and how rewarding homestay experiences can be.

Although I had traveled in Europe as a child, my time in China gave me an even deeper craving for international travel and exploring different cultures. It is my hope that programs like the Student Diplomacy Corps will continue to send students on programs to foreign countries. I made incredible friendships within my group, and with people that I met in China. In addition, I learned quickly on my trip that many Chinese had never seen foreigners before, so we were looked at as celebrities. We took a countless number of pictures with strangers and signed autographs, but just because we stood out didn't mean we were outcasts. Foreigner visitors in China are placed on a pedestal, so we received the greatest amount of respect and kindness. My advice for anyone who wants to go on a trip offered by Student Diplomacy Corps, or a different program, is to not hesitate to pursue it because it will be one of the best times of your life. In the near future I have confidence that I

will be able to make a trip back to China to help improve the environment as well as experience other parts of the vast, beautiful country.

I owe the Naples Council on World Affairs my utmost appreciation for helping high school students like myself go on journeys of a lifetime. My time in China not only shed light on the fact that environmental issues in China are more pressing than ever before but also that there is a side to the country that can only be seen by first hand experience. I will be forever grateful for the life lessons I learned, the friendships I gained, and the memories I made this summer in the great country of China.