

000905 Travels

Hello! I have been preparing this email for a long time. My travels to date have been a once in a life time experience. During the past two months of travel in China I have seen so much and experienced a lot of things. I saw the Great Wall four times, the Terracotta Warriors, the Tibetan plateau and grasslands, the Three Gorges, the Three Gorges Dam, the surreal mountains along the Li River in southern China, and many other marvels. Too many marvels, I am afraid to relate all that I have seen. But, I do want to share as much as I can, so I have decided to include the highlights in this email.

I was very fortunate to be able to share my experience with others as several friends and my parents were able to travel with me. Having several people come meant that I had to backtrack a lot and to go to cities such as Beijing several times, but it was a fair price to pay for the experience of their company. Jennie arrived first in late June and stayed for three weeks. Next, my friend Gerard from Muhlenberg came for two weeks to visit his friend Michael who lives in Beijing. Michael has been in China for over 3 1/2 years between teaching English and working for Interconix. I also stayed at Michael's place and the three of us took in the sights of Beijing and Shanghai. My friend Carol from Wash U who had some time before entering med school at the University of Washington arrived in July and stayed for almost one month. Next my parents arrived in mid-August and stayed for two weeks. It was a whirlwind tour and I hope that they had as good an experience as I did.

During most of our travels, we had to stick to a tight budget so that we could see as much of China as possible. We did not stay in dorms often, but we haggled hard for hotel rooms. The same budget applied to our traveling. The bulk of our traveling was on trains in the hard class sleepers. Hard class sleepers can actually be nice with six stacked beds per open "compartment". and about ten "compartments" per car (no doors for the compartments). Some trains had A/C and the others had fans and windows that could open to cool you off as you sweat it out. All of the trains had sheets and some sort of blanket (often a beach towel).

The train rides could be really fun or sheer misery, depending on who you shared your compartment with. On our first train ride to Xian from Yantai, Jennie and I taught the kids in our car how to play UNO which was a lot of fun. UNO was always a huge hit and people always wanted to try to figure it out, but only the kids wanted to give it a try. However, during our trip from Xian to Lanzhou we shared a compartment with a bunch of 50 year old chain smokers who drank themselves into a stupor until they finally passed out at 3AM. Since the train conductor was partying with them, there was little that anyone could do.

Trains were the preferred mode of transportation, but occasionally sleeper tickets were impossible to get and we were not about to spend 20 hours in hard seat. This was the case from Guilin to Xiamen or from Beijing to Shanghai. In these cases we flew, but I actually hated flying in China. The airports are always far outside the city center and I have yet to be on a flight that I was not clinging to the seat as the plane rocked and rolled or dove at the runway.

A lot of time was spent on the traveling itself. To pass the time we talked, played games, slept, wrote or read. I read War and Peace (amazing book) and started Tess during the trip to give an

indication of how much time we had on our hands. In total, I spent:

- 143 hours on 6 different trains
- 101 hours on 4 boats
- 43 hours on busses
- 6 hours on planes
- 7 hours on bicycles
- countless hours on hundreds of different busses (#120 in Beijing) (or City Boats as they are called in Chengdu (oops)). Taxis were too expensive for the amount of moving around we did, so busses were the best option.

In all, I spent 11 nights on moving vehicals. On the long overnight trains or boat trips, we shied away from the food served on board and instead survived on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. For our Yangzi cruise, we figured that we would need enough fixings for 80 sandwiches and we pulled it off. Ritz (the ones in the pink package are the best) was also a staple and ramen served to add a little variety to our diet.

Our travels were as follows. I have included the city name and (province):

Jennie:

Stayed in Yantai for a few days and was the only one to get to see me teach a class.

Xi'an (Shaanxi): A walled city that is home to the Terracotta Warriors. The city is also home to a very neat Muslim quarter that is full of delicious restaurants and sweet shops as well as a bazaar where you can find all sorts of neat things. Bargain hard!

Longzhou (Gansu): Called the 'most polluted city on earth', but we found it to be actually pleasant during our stay. It was the only city that we could get a bus from to get to Xiahe.

Lixia (Gansu): An overnight stop on the way to Xiahe. We had to first catch a bus here and then another bus in the morning to Xiahe. A small, polluted, backwater town host to our least expensive hotel room: less than \$4.

Xiahe (Gansu): A city that is half Muslim and half Tibetan where the only Han Chinese are the tourists. The city is home to the Labrang Monastery, a Tibetan Monastery. The town was straight out of a movie with monks in red robes rubbing shoulders with Tibetan people in traditional dress. The woman had long, braided hair, wool skirts, and wool shawls. The men wore wool and wool hats. People came here on pilgrimages to walk the circuit around the Monastery that had several thousand prayer wheels that they would spin. It was a small, friendly, wonderful little town that was a joy to visit. We also rented bikes for a day to go to the grasslands that were just so beautiful. However, I got very sunburned despite the sun block.

Longzhou (Gansu): on our return from Xiahe to catch a train to Beijing

Beijing: What to say about a city like Beijing? It is enormous and chock full of all sorts of

temples and palaces and walls to see. Four days is a fair amount of time to spend here if you want to do the power tour and see everything. Jennie and I went to the Great Wall at Simatai which is the 'most dangerous part of the wall' and also the one most in its original state. It was great as there were very few people there and other than the myriad of pesky postcard sales people, we had the wall to ourselves. However, our tour was a little longer than expected as our return bus broke down, leaving us stranded on the side of the road for almost 3 hours while another bus was sent. We also saw the Forbidden City, Tiananmen, the Lama Temple, Temple of Heaven and other sites. Everyone has seen pictures of Tiananmen and the Gate of Heavenly Peace, but it is truly amazing to actually be there. Beijing was 40 C during our visit which was miserable so we had to carry several bottles of water with us everywhere and you just had to accept that you would always be soaked with sweat.

Jennie left on July 12th and I moved in with Michael until Gerard arrived. It was good to take a few days to just relax and catch up in my journal.

Gerard arrived on July 14th. We spent most of our time in Beijing seeing the sights and hanging out. We also went to Simatai on a day that was rainy and misty. The day offered dramatic views of the wall as the clouds passed over and left gaps. As we climbed, it was as if the wall was at the top of the world as all we could see to the sides was the mist below.

Shanghai: we went here to pick up my friend Carol

Beijing

Carol

Shanghai

Beijing: Our trip this time included the Summer Palace which is beautiful but so very long to get to. Carol and I also went to Simatai.

Chengdu (Sichuan): Here we had hoped to buy tickets to make the trip to Lhasa. However, due to being foreigners, the markups on the outgoing ticket made the trip impossible financially. The plane ticket was marked up from Y1200 to Y2500 due to needing to be part of a tour group. However, we did get to see the Giant Panda Breeding Ground which is home to all sorts of pandas.

Chongqing (Chongqing): It was a long bus ride to this city where we hired a boat to take us through the Three Gorges. Finding the boat was easier than we thought, so we only spent one night here.

The Three Gorges: The boat trip that we took would end in Wuhan after three nights on the boat. The boat left at sunset and we had a 3rd class cabin. We never expected the boat to be nice, but we soon found out that 3rd class was not the way to go. Our cabin housed 8 people who were all

very nice, but who had some hatred of the A/C that would have dried out our very humid room. Plus the beds were sheets of wood that provided a nice home to the plethora of cockroaches that roamed our room. For our last night we upgraded to a 2nd class cabin with some friend that we had met which was better.

On the first full day cruised down the Yangzi and stopped at two "beauty spots" that were two old temples. Along the way we saw markers indicating the level to which the water would rise once the Dam is completed. The most dramatic of these were at a city that had the markers set several stories high on some of the buildings. We also saw a brand new city being built on one of the bluffs to replace to old one that would be underwater in 2009. As of late, the China Daily has been full of stories about the million or so people who are being moved as their homes will be flooded. The papers talks about their joy at the sight of their new homes in Shanghai, Sichuan Province, and other places. However, I doubt that all of the people who are being moved are actually ecstatic at loosing their homes where their families have lived for a long time.

On the second day, we passed through the first gorge starting at 5:30 AM. Every day on the boat started at 5 AM. We stopped during the morning to switch to a smaller boat to view the Lesser Gorges. These were along a tributary and were steep and dramatic and beautiful. The next two Gorges were passed through later in the day once we had returned to the big boat. Rumors that the Gorges will disappear forever once the dam is built have been exaggerated. The water markers indicate that the water will be higher, but the Gorges will remain. However, they will probably be less dramatic. I am curious to go back one day to see what the terrain will look like.

At dusk on the second day we passed the Three Gorges Dam Project. We could see the skeleton of the dam that would soon flood the Gorges. It was not nearly as big as I had imagined it to be, but a lot still needs to be built. However, I am sure that now I will be the envy of all of my CE friends.

The last day was pretty much just a journey day as the landscape flattened out and the river widened. We read a lot and journaled as we went. We arrived in Wuhan at 3AM, late of course and caught a train to Guilin the next day.

Guilin (Guangxi): Transit point on the way to Yangshou. We actually only stayed here for a few minutes to catch the bus and to avoid the high tourist prices.

Yangshou (Guangxi): Called a "backpacker haven", the main street boasted as many foreigners as Chinese. We were not thrilled at this, but what we were thrilled by were the plethora of little cafes that offered great food. The best was what we called the Big Breakfast. After days of just PB&J it was an amazing treat. The BB included toast with butter (the first I have had in months) and jam, coffee, a fruit plate of mango, watermelon, bananas and other fruit, and a banana pancake. It was amazing and filled you till dinner. We would plan our day around Big Breakfast and when our Malaria pills gave us insomnia we would count down the number of hours till Big Breakfast as we lay awake through the night.

From Yangshou, you could take a river cruise up the Li River to view the surreal mountains. The tour up river took longer than those from Guilin, but cost Y400 less (\$50). We also hired a local

guide to take us on a bike tour of the country side followed by lunch at her house.

Yangshou was a nice place to stop for a few days to recuperate, but it was hardly a window into the Chinese people. In fact our guide confessed that most locals did not like the foreigners, but saw them as a way to make money. Carol and I were never under any delusion otherwise.

Xiamen (Fujian): We had to fly here from Guilin as train tickets from Guilin are impossible to get. We stayed on Gulangyu Island off the coast by about 200 meters. The island boasted views of the rebels in Taiwan as well as a ban on bikes and cars. It was great to walk along the quiet, quaint alleys and to only hear piano music (the island is home to a myriad of music schools). The architecture was colonial and it was a great place to spend a few days. Xiamen city is famous for its peanuts and so the sweets and the soup that we ate were all peanut based. They were actually pretty good!

Ningbo (Zhejiang): Transit point to get to Putoshan, Ningbo is a city undergoing a lot of changes. Old buildings were being torn down everywhere to make way for new ones.

Putoshan (Zhejiang): We took a boat from Ningbo to Putoshan which is a quaint little island. We found it to be a little overrated and very expensive as everything cost a lot more than the guide books said. It is quiet and nice and has some beautiful beaches that you need to pay for. We went out one evening and sat under the full, brilliant moon.

From Putoshan, we took an overnight ferry to Shanghai. We had learned our lesson on the Yangzi and so we had a 2nd class cabin to ourselves with a porthole to look out of. It was great. I awoke early in the morning as we left the ocean to go up the Yangzi. I could see the furious activity along the banks as container ships were being unloaded. We arrived in Shanghai at 6AM as the city was waking up. It would also be the evening that my parents would arrive.

Parents:

Shanghai

Xian: It actually was good to go back to see the warriors again. We had bought a book in Shanghai regarding the warriors that answered all sorts of questions that I had so I better understood what I was looking at. Plus the Muslim quarter of Xian is always a great place to visit and to eat at!

Yantai: Yes, we spent a few days here so that Mom and Dad could check the place out. It was great to be able to show them around and to introduce them to my friends here.

Beijing: We saw many of the same sights, but this time we went to the Badaling Great Wall via a hired car (a unique adventure in itself).

One of the great parts of my parent's visit was that they brought their video camera with them.

The four hours or so of footage will be something that I suspect that I will always treasure.

Now just a few random thoughts:

Favorite Place: Xiahe

Most difficult place to get to: Xiahe

Wierdest service offered: ear wax pickers who wandered the tea houses in Chengdu with metal instruments for extraction.

A few of my favorite experiences:

sitting on a hill overlooking Xiahe with several monks who shared with Jennie and me their fruit from a picnic they were having. They did not speak English, but we got by with Chinese. There was also a Muslim girl there who was just full of smiles and laughter as she looked on with watermelon streaming down her cheeks.

Riding bicycles into the grasslands around Xiahe.

Playing UNO on the train

Discovering this great restaurant in Beijing with a really friendly waitress who spoke some English. I went there five times and they always remembered me and were very nice.

Winning arguments in Chinese with cab drivers.

Big Breakfast.

Sitting and watching the big, full moon from Putoshan and from the deck of our boat to Shanghai.

Arriving with my parents in Yantai from Xian. Our flight from Xian had been delayed for a good number of hours so by the time that we arrived it was close to 11:30 at night. I knew that getting a cab to their hotel would be an expensive venture, so when I saw two busses sitting in front of the terminal, I asked a young man who was standing there where they were going. Every other city has busses that run from the airport to the city center, so why not Yantai? He told me that the bus was going to the hotel that my parents were going to stay at, so I asked him how much the bus costs. He conferred with a woman ahead of him, so I went up to ask the bus driver. He referred me to the same woman. Eventually, we just decided to throw our bags on because it would undoubtedly be less expensive than a taxi. The young man was in the back and he waved us back. We sat down and the bus took off. Eventually, the woman who we had seen got up and began talking with the passengers who were a group of farmers with similar stray hats and shaved heads (even the women). At this point as the passengers began to complain to the woman, I realized that we had just gotten onto a private tour group's bus. The farmers were not

complaining about us, but probably about the change in the hotel as the young man leaned back to tell us. It turns out that he was a tour guide as well. I was terribly embarrassed that we had just joined the farmer's tour group as I had really thought it was a public bus. I had expected to pull stunts like this with Jennie or Carol, but not with my parents. In any case, we went to a different hotel and were able to easily get a cab to the hotel that we wanted.

My mother on the drivers in China: "Oh I see, they aren't really aggressive, they just have little regard for human life."

Gerard on the heat in Beijing: "I have been hot before, but not like this. I mean, even my shins are sweating!"

After too many 30 hour train trips: "It is only a 15 hour train ride to Guilin. We will be there in no time!"

Hanging out with friends and family who I have not seen in a long time.

Standing on top of a guard tower on the wall, talking with Gerard with the mist all around us. Every now and then the clouds would part to reveal parts of the wall we had not seen before or glimpses of the valleys below.

Having to shut the bathroom door of our hotel in Putoshan out of fear that the shower curtain would wander out into the room on its own (it was pretty nasty). The room was once very nice with marble fixtures in the bathroom, but had been neglected for a while. But, the room was inexpensive...

The banquet the school threw for Jennie that turned into a disco with the principals.

The friends, both Chinese and foreigners that we made along the way.

Carol on Chinese TV viewing habits: "It is rude to have a TV and to not have it at full volume so that your neighbors can listen to it as well."

Finally getting to take shower in Wuhan after not having done so for four days while on the boat.

Meeting up with the Shen's in Shanghai. The Shen's daughter was one of my Mother's students and they were a big help in getting my parents their plane tickets to China.

The banquet that my parents threw for my parents upon their arrival. Before I knew it my Dad was karaokeing with the Party Secretary.

And many more than I can list in this email, lest I make it even longer.

In summary, it was an amazing experience, but I am worn out and glad to be able to rest now for a few days before classes start on September 6th.

Take care,

Jeff

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