

Trip to China

by Mikaela Keen

Our trip to China was surely a learning experience, and certainly not only in terms of developing language ability. Being in a new country that is so far from one's own - culturally and geographically - is the ideal environment for true learning to take place.

So to begin our journey: Thirteen South Africans were selected, uprooted and replanted in very different terrain! We were each given a surrogate Chinese family, who were our home-base and guide during that period. I think most of us have discovered that necessity is a really good teacher: Suddenly the importance of being able to ask "Where is the bathroom?" and "Is this bus going to..." takes on new proportions.

I guess it is true what they say about learning a new language: it is hard to judge whether one has improved or not because the path ahead always seems so long. But when you eventually find yourself saying things and dealing with situations that you would have otherwise found too difficult - or simply avoided - then you know it's all been worth it. And that is a great motivation.

Another great plus regarding our daily immersion in Beijing life - in other words experiencing the language in its full cultural context - was that people are frequently very appreciative and touched by foreigners who have sought to learn their language. Even though sometimes one feels that one could have expressed something more articulately there are always more than enough words of encouragement and smiles.

The historical sights were, needless to say, an experience of the senses - perhaps only surpassed by that of the endless variety of food!

Two weeks into the trip and it was time for me to part ways with my family and join the other 78 International Chinese Bridge competitors at the 21st Century Hotel. We were divided into groups and told that our group was first in line to perform. From then on the reality of our moment on stage dawned upon us. I was more than a little nervous, especially because the CCTV crew were due to be there that very day. Anyway all went smoothly. I guess we became good friends - whether or not that was due to the fact that we shared moment of nerves and panic! After our trip to Xi An, it was time to say a sad but final goodbye - to each other and to our time in Beijing. Each of us boarded a plane to our respective countries of origin.

This was a truly unique experience - in all senses of the word!