

TRAVELS TO CHINA - by Tertia Butcher

One rainy day in Shanghai

President Obama was in town, the day was wet and cold and options were rather limited for my only free day during a recent quick visit to China to attend the Travelscene American Express conference.

Many of the highways were closed, either because of tight security surrounding President Obama's visit or due to slippery conditions.

Much of Shanghai is under construction at present in preparation of the World Expo later this year.

The slogan, 'Better City Better Future' is plastered everywhere and I assume it refers to the construction work which is seen on just about every road and highway in the city.

"We are reconstructing Shanghai," our guide proudly announced as our bus bumped along the potholes from the airport to our hotel. Temperatures were hovering just above zero and the rain was pelting down.

A visit to the Arts Museum seemed a sensible way to spend the morning – but the President thought so too and the place was cordoned off by police.

So I jumped on the Travelscene bus for an hour-long journey into the country to hand over donations of stationery, books and clothes to a primary school in a poor region of Shanghai.

Most of the students are from nearby farms or are the children of construction workers.

Unless you were born in Shanghai it is almost impossible to get permanent residency in this affluent city.

The construction workers are not Shanghaiese; they have been brought in from elsewhere as contractors to get the city rebuilt for the Expo.

Their children therefore do not have access to government-funded education, although they are Chinese citizens.

The school is classified as 'private' and by Chinese standards this means it is not funded by government and has to rely on private donations.

These students also have a lower level of education, which means they will be denied entry into senior high school and will never see the inside of a university unless as a cleaner.

So much for communism, which I always thought stood for equality amongst all.

As always, Hay answered the call to our request (at very late notice) for donations for the school.

A total of 12 boxes, filled with stationery, were collected by Travelscene agencies throughout Australia.

Hay filled one whole box plus another box of clothing! Thank you.

The pupils at Chang Lin Primary

School were typical of the Chinese students I have met over the years – committed to learning, focussed on a brighter horizon and extremely polite; both to one another and to their teachers.

They knew very little English and their principal and teachers knew no English.

Everyone was in awe of the 'blue eye people' as westerners are known in Shanghai.

What these disadvantaged children will never know is what I personally learned from a young boy who showed us how to relieve eye strain.

I am a strong believer of traditional Chinese medicine and practises and the few head and face pressure point massage movement he showed us have now been incorporated into my daily routine.

All students have to stop work every two hours to do some gentle exercise, stretches and eye massage.

Some of the travel agents had never been to a 'cute kids' country like India or Africa before and they found it difficult to say goodbye.

We were back in the city by lunch time and I set out in search of a traditional Chinese meal, bracing the cold and holding onto the umbrella with both hands. I found a nice-looking place, stacked with small gourmet dishes and beautiful cushions featuring little animal footprints.

There was also a section dedicated to baby clothes, really tiny little items.

It took me a while to realise I was in a doggy-deli.

Yip, in my next life I will come back as a dog in Shanghai.

Back in the cold, wet street again and definitely looking like a tourist in my white knee-length cotton pants against the smartly dressed Shanghaiese women in their long black woollen coats, Gucci scarves and calf's leather boots.

My fingers, toes and nose were turning an unflattering shade of navy blue and I sought refuge in Starbucks.

They were playing carols and this was the only bit of Christmas spirit I experienced in China.

When my blood circulation improved enough to hang onto my umbrella with both hands again, I pushed on against the wind and rain – vowing never again to curse the heat and drought on good old Hay Plains.

I found my traditional Chinese lunch in a little noodle bar stuck behind global retail giant, Marks and Spencer.

A bowl of soup and a large plate of stir-fry rice noodles set me back \$2.80 and I could have fed a family of four.

Back at the hotel I met up with Jen



Students at the school I visited to drop off donated items from Hay were keen to improve their English and committed to their studies and their culture.

Payne, our office manager, who used her free morning to explore Zhujajao Water Town, a traditional Chinese village with canals, little wooden houses and beautiful gardens.

If it weren't for the rain, Zhujajao would have resembled a scene from the Blue Willow Pattern.

Jen and I decided against taking the bus to the airport, which was made available to our group.

Instead we took a taxi to the railway station and boarded the Maglev, a super fast train using electromagnetic levitation.

We reached a speed of 301 km/h. Apparently the train may not travel faster than that after 4pm.

Shanghai is a sophisticated city and no Shanghaiese woman will marry a man who does not have his own apartment.

Our guide told us that the divorce rate is high and this is due to the country's one-birth policy.

"We are all raised as an only child," she explained.

"We are told by our parents that we are a very special person and when we get married we suddenly have to

share with someone else. It is very hard and it doesn't always work out."

Shanghai has also retained its traditional Chinese culture and is a typical 'east meets west' city.

Our hotel was 37 storeys high and overlooks a park where people gather every morning to exercise.

Tai Chi and other traditional gentle Chinese exercise movements are carried out in beautiful parkland, surrounded by a concrete jungle under a huge smog-filled sky.

While modern technology is widely used (and produced) in China, it is at odds with the traditional ways of the country. We were told there are internet addiction clinics for young people. The treatment ... sleep deprivation, corporal punishment and mild electronic shock therapy.

Shanghai in particular is moving very fast towards western culture but I do hope China retains its traditional ways.

After all, that is why so many people do travel to the 'Far East'.

A little taste of Kokoda

The Travelscene Hay escorted tour to Kokoda in July is sold out, and all 16 adventurers have started the year in full-on training mode.

Ken Cunningham from Griffith and Bec Woods of Hay are pictured during a group training session at Mt Kosciuszko National Park last weekend. It included challenging hills, many river crossings, heat and overnight camping. Picture by Margie McClelland.



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