China Diary - 2014

5/9/2014

Rather than call, I thought that I would email, since we have a connection at the hotel.

We met our guide and driver at the airport without a hitch. From there we were brought to the hotel to change and make ready for the rest of the day. Our first stop was at the Oriental Pearl Tower, a broadcasting tower with an observation deck. The students loved it until we got to the next deck that had a glass floor. That was wild! It can be rather frightening to look down at your shoes, and see 50 stories of empty space below you.

From there we went to the World Financial Center. Again this is a very tall structure, about 100 stories. Anyone who has seen photos of Shanghai may remember a very tall building with a square hole in the top. We stood above the square hole and had a terrific view of the city as the sun began to set.

Next we hopped a ferry across the river to meet with our tour bus. We were taken to a restaurant for our first Chinese meal. We were at a large round table with a Lazy Susan in the middle, and they kept bringing food until I we were all full: soup, rice, pork, beef, duck, fish, and lots of vegetables.

It was clear from the eyes of all of our travel colleagues that it was time to get to bed. We headed home to our beds and the first night's sleep against a pillow in a real bed in a couple of days.

Today we will be touring more of the City of Shanghai. More on that in my next contact.

All is well here!

Dan

5/10/2014

We had a terrific day! We visited a mosque, a lovely garden, a Taoist Temple, and moved on to a touristy shopping area before lunch. The shopkeepers were happy to see us—or they should have been. Lunch was followed by a tea ceremony, and then to the Bund for a brief walk along the river. We stopped at a local museum to look at how the locals lived before the economic development in recent years.

We took a ride on the maglev train. It took us to the airport at about 200 mph. Wish we could get one of these on the Green Line. After dinner, we attended an acrobatic act. It was sensational! It kept us awake after a very tiring day. Everyone is still a bit stung out, and adjusting to the jet lag and the time change. But all are well and enthusiastically looking forward to tomorrow when we start the day by visiting a water town about an hour and a half outside of Shanghai.

Best wishes from the other side of the world!

Dan
5/11/2014

Another busy, fun, and exhausting day in China. We spent most of it in a "water village" about an hour and a half outside of Shanghai. It is set in the lake region, and the town is crisis crossed with canals, much like Venice. It was a day of touring this very old village, taking in the local color, and of course shopping.

After lunch we visited a Buddhist temple from the Ming dynasty (500 years old), and then explored a park known as the Lingering Garden of Suzhou, the former home of a very wealthy official. We have arrived at the hotel, and plan to get to bed early. We need to be in the lobby at 6 am for our bus trip to the airport. Tomorrow we will be heading to Xi'an.

Everyone is well.

Dan

5/12/2014

Another good day in China. We spent the morning traveling by air to Xi'an. After lunch we climbed to the top of the city wall, and rented bikes. It is a formidable wall that surrounds the old city. It could not have been a better day for biking. Sunny with a light cool breeze. We biked over the nine mile road that sits on top of the 500 year old wall, with a few stops thrown in for photographs.

Our next stop was the Giant Goose Pagoda, a Ming dynasty Buddhist temple complex. We received a first class tour from a local Buddhist guide, and a brief introduction to calligraphy. By then it was dinner time. So we made our way through the dense traffic of Xi'an to a dinner concert. It was a historical representation of the Tang Dynasty period that included music played on ancient instruments, and dancing in beautiful costumes.

Despite the wonderful show, we all were challenged to keep our eyes open. Traveling and biking had taken its toll.

Tomorrow we will experience what our guide calls the eighth wonder of the world. The terracotta warriors, and the tomb of the first emperor of China.

All is well with our intrepid travelers.

Dan
5/13/2014

All is well. We visited the famous terra cotta warriors of Xi'an. This 2,200 year old set of over 8,000 life-size Chinese warriors comprise part of the burial site of the first emperor. They had been buried and long forgotten in the farm fields about an hour outside of modern day Xi'an. Their purpose had been to watch over the remains of the emperor, and to fight for him in the next life. In the late 60s, a small group of farmers had tried to dig a well, and they stumbled upon this hidden treasure. They looked for water and found gold. Today it is one of China's most important historical sites and tourist attractions. The government has fully enclosed the three areas where they were found, and constructed museums that explain the construction and burial of the warriors. Seeing them spread out over acres of land is breathtaking, and all of us were extremely impressed not only with the warriors, but also the manner with which the Chinese government has preserved and displayed them. Some of us even got to meet one of the farmers who originally found them.

After returning to town, and after lunch, we walked to the Muslim district of Xi'an. This comprises a large shopping and food area. The students shopped 'till they dropped. The area is loaded with small shops that carry souvenirs, brand name knock-offs, and street food that often defies description.

This is our last day in Xi’an. Tomorrow morning we will be assembling at 6:30 am for our 5 hour train ride to Beijing. Everyone has had dinner, and is now heading out of the hotel to do more shopping. Can't seem to get enough of it!

Regards to everyone!

Dan

5/14/2014

We arose early today to catch our train to Beijing. The luggage is bulging with the purchases that we have made. At this point, most of us wish that we had packed fewer clothes to make room for all of the goodies.

Our train ride gave us an opportunity to view the countryside, as well as new industrial developments far into the traditional farm regions. The Chinese people seem to till every possible square inch of fertile land to feed their huge population.

Both coal and atomic power plants dotted the route to Beijing, and dense complexes of high-rise apartments were always visible in the distance with construction cranes standing over an unfathomable number of new projects. The "construction crane" seems to be the national bird. It is hard to imagine the level of building that is underway in China. It feels like the whole country is one big construction project.

Hello Beijing! The size of the city is hard to imagine. Chicago often seems very congested with its 2.7 million people. Beijing has 21 million people!
We arrived after noon, and went directly to lunch, and then to a nearby park. It was constructed with soil that had been removed to build the moat surrounding the Forbidden City. We climbed to the top of a central hill that supports a pagoda. It permits a panoramic view of Beijing. The Forbidden City sat before us, as well as the distant hills and modern apartments and office buildings.

We took our tour bus to Ho Hai, an entertainment district built around a large man-made lake. The area is very touristy, but has its own kind of charm with bright neon lights reflecting off the lake surface. It is filled with bars, restaurants, bars, souvenir shops, and the occasional bar. We took an initial rickshaw ride around the area, and then spent time perusing the offerings at the various establishments. Just before sunset we made our way back to the hotel, none the worse for the experience.

Tomorrow's venue includes Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City.

Best regards from China's capital!

Dan

5/15/2014

Another lovely day in Beijing. We began by driving to the Garden of Heaven for a Tai Chi class. This is a traditional Chinese form of physical discipline and exercise that is supposed to enhance one's health. It is practiced by millions of Chinese people in the early morning air each day. We were instructed by a professor at the Beijing University. We all received a passing grade, although some of us need more practice and remedial work.

Our next stop was the National Museum located across the street from Tiananmen Square. It is an enormous and beautiful building that houses artifacts from as far back as the 16th Century B.C. We could have spent days there without seeing it all. On to lunch for the classic Peking Duck entrée. This takes 24 hours to prepare, and produces a wonderful, crispy skin. Yum! We seem to be eating every few hours, but are burning calories at a high rate as we walk a great deal every day.

Next stop - The Forbidden City. The name sounds ominous, and in its day it probably was. It is located in the center of Beijing, and it has housed 24 different emperors. Only the emperor and his family (along with servants and concubines) were permitted to live there. It is a walled complex of over 8,000 rooms. No trip to Beijing is complete without a trip to the Forbidden City.

Our last stop of the day was a calligraphy class with a master calligrapher. We were instructed in the artistic rendition of Chinese writing. How did we do? Let's just say that I will stick to typing. Tomorrow morning starts with a brisk hike up a mountain side to the Great Wall of China. Although, I have heard a few rumblings about taking a lift up the mountain.

Goodbye from Beijing, the ancestral home of paper, gun powder, and reasonably priced take-out dinners.

Dan
5/16/2014

Another great day in China! We started the day by driving almost two hours out of Beijing to the Great Wall of China. This was originally constructed as a 4,100 mile long defense work along the ridge of a mountain chain to protect the Chinese people from Mongolians and other possible invaders. It has been rebuilt many times by various emperors, the last time being in the Ming dynasty. During the Ching dynasty (1644 - 1911) it was seen as obsolete, and was no longer maintained. It fell into serious disrepair. During the 1960s to 1990s, several sections were rebuilt. Only 7 or 8 places are now climbable. It is an extraordinary structure. It stands approximately 25 feet high and is about 20 to 25 feet wide. Tens of thousands of people visit the Great Wall each year producing millions of dollars in tourist revenue. Its job had been to keep out foreigners. Its primary purpose now is to bring them in.

There are two ways to get to the top of the wall. One is to climb a challenging series of very long stairs. This is the traditional way to get to the top. The other is to take a ski lift to the top. That is the easy route. Seven of us climbed to the wall. This group now has bragging rights. Four people took the lift. What choice did your loved one make? Don't forget to ask on Monday.

Coming down was easy. The Chinese government has installed sleds. They call them toboggans (those of us from the Midwest know what real toboggans look like). These are wheeled sleds that wind along a half-pipe of stainless steel. It looks a lot like a water park ride without the water. Great fun! After the Great Wall, we went to lunch at a nearby restaurant. On our way there our guide talked about Chinese cuisine in various parts of the country. He made it sound like the Chinese eat anything with legs except for the kitchen table. Our meals have been excellent, but not exotic.

Next stop, the Olympic Park. The location of the 2008 games. The various venues are still in operation, but seldom used. This includes the famous "Bird's Nest" stadium, and the Aquatic Center. It appears that the Chinese are not enthusiastic enough about these sports to support the cost of operating these venues. At least that is the message we got from the guide. Sorry to see these wonderful facilities underutilized.

We moved on to an artistic experience by participating in an opera mask-making workshop. Traditional Chinese operas are often staged with the principle characters wearing masks to portray status and emotion. We got to paint our own masks with our owned designs. Our experience revealed the artists and the struggling, but no struggling artists. When we get back ask to see the masks, and you will quickly discern the difference.

One last event for the day was to experience a live traditional Chinese opera. In every culture opera is an acquired taste. It was a very interesting and challenging cultural experience. Let's just say that it did not include the sublime melodies of a Puccini or a Verdi. Tomorrow includes a trip to the local language university to converse within Chinese students studying English.

All is well!

Dan
This was one of our best days in China. It began with a trip to the Confucius Temple. Despite the fact that this is a temple, Confucianism is not a religion. It is a philosophy. Confucius was one of China's great educators. It is said that he had over 3,000 students in his lifetime, of which only 72 demonstrated significant talent. This philosophy served as the basis for imperial rule through all of the subsequent dynasties.

Part of the Temple complex is the National Education Academy. This school of education prepared government officials for their work for the emperor in various ministries. The system was in place from the Tang Dynasty until it was ended in 1906.

China was the first country with standardized civil service examinations. These consisted of three days of exams for each of three levels. The exams all dealt with Confusion Philosophy. There was no math. This would have been good news for our Dominican students! Students caught cheating on the exam were subjected to the humiliation of having their hands and head cuffed to a board, and were made to walk like this in public as a warning to future cheaters. A significant deterrent.

In the school museum we saw a full-size model of a faculty member's office with a student who had come in for advice. Students were required to kneel on the floor before the teacher who sat at his desk. We can learn a great deal from the history of other cultures. As soon as I get back home, I will be removing the student chairs from my office.

Crossing the street in China is a very dicey situation. In China cars have the right of way. One would think that cross walks would afford some degree of safety. They don't. We give all cars and buses plenty of room. They are bigger than we are.

We took a water taxi down the Imperial Waterway to the Summer Palace. This was originally dug by hand in 1750. There is a lake that sits before the Palace. I would estimate the lake to be about 200 acres. This lake also was dug by hand. All of the soil from these projects were placed at the end of the lake creating a hill upon which the palace was built. It is a very impressive structure.

After lunch, we had the most significant experience of the trip. We made our way to the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). This is the premier language institute in all of China. Students must pass a very difficult set of tests to be admitted. These students are in many ways the cream of the China crop. BFSU offers 56 different languages, and degrees up to the Ph.D. in many of them. Ning's good friend is a professor there. We met with her students who were studying Vietnamese. All of whom spoke some degree of English. It was a wonderful experience. They each introduced themselves (about 15 students), and we did the same. Then we began a question and answer session about student life in our two countries. All of the students began to realize that they had so much in common with one another. It was a friendly free for all that included laughs and sighs. This was followed by a tour of the new library (very impressive), and a trip to the gym. We broke up into three groups and played basketball, badminton, and table tennis. The atmosphere was extremely friendly and warm. The students traded email addresses and Facebook pages, and were sorry to have to leave their new found kindred spirits. We had done our part to participate in our version of ping-pong diplomacy.
Our next stop was a visit to a traditional Chinese pharmacy. Earlier in the semester I had had the students view a video on Chinese medicine. This includes the use of herbs, acupuncture, and massage to treat disease. The pharmacy contains an enormous number of natural substances used for the alleviation of symptoms. It had plant matter, animal parts, and various unknown substances for sale. I looked, but didn't buy.

Today is Rachel Hunter’s birthday. She is 22 already. Hard to believe. We celebrated by going back to the Ho Hai area. Bars, restaurants, bars, etc. You remember. We toasted Rachel (several times), and made our way back to the hotel safely.

Tomorrow is our last full day in China. What is on the agenda? Shopping, of course!

Dan

5/18/2014

Today was a quiet day in China for our students. The fatigue of the trip finally caught up to them, and they were grateful to have a day without scheduled events. After a late breakfast, we headed to an indoor mall to try to spend the last of our Chinese money, or so it seemed. It contained shops with a wide variety of products at great prices. Of course, this required serious negotiations. This amounted to the shop keeper typing an asking price into a calculator, and a customer typing in her first bid. This went back and forth until the two parties could agree on a price. Who knew that a calculator could be used as a universal translator?

After lunch we headed back to our hotel where most of us began to pack for our return trip, while others walked to the National Art Museum for one last cultural experience. The special evening demanded another farewell trip to the Ho Hai district. Bars, restaurants, bars, etc. You remember. After a few toasts to Ning, the Chinese people, and to anyone else we could think of, we returned to our hotel for one last night in China.

We will be assembling in our hotel lobby at 11 am for our bus ride to the airport.

Lots of good memories, and lots of good feelings.

See you all soon!

Dan