

“Ni Hao!” BUEC 444 - Experiences from Half Way Across the World.

On our second last day in China, Brett Ferguson, a prominent member of Procor Direct, said to us, “Here, in China, you can cut your own path. A degree is just your anti. It’s your ambition that gets you far.”

On May 16th, 20 business students from the U of A set out to explore the ‘Economic Giant’ for the first time. The trip was part of an International Business course – called BUEC 444. Although course credits was an incentive, much of the group, myself included, were there to explore beyond business opportunities in Edmonton, see what the outer world could offer and ultimately, “cut [our own] paths” into a world so unlike our own.

As the course was only 10 days, each minute of the day was packed with lectures and sight -seeing. In fact, it’s genuinely difficult to remember all experiences and reduce them all to so many words. But, I’m going to give it a shot.

Leaving On a Jet Plane.....

The group met at the Edmonton International Airport around 8:30am. Excited and rearing to go, we readied ourselves for the 11 hour flight with mountains of granola bars, Cosmo magazines, and hours of iPod music. Upon landing in Beijing, staff members took the temperature of every passenger on the plane. Thankfully, no one had a trace of the Swine Flu, so nightmares and fantasies of being quarantined in a foreign land were quickly swept away. By the time we reached Beijing, many of us were still adjusting to the time zone. Although most of us slept, the jetlag still took lots of time to wear off. We were bussed to a beautiful five-star hotel – called the Novotel.

Olympic Site & Pearl Market

Seeing the Bird’s Nest as well as the Water Cube in 3D is magnificent. The inside is comparable to Commonwealth Stadium, but on a much grander scale. The sounds and images that emanate from screens surrounding the stadium provide a brief but insightful reminder of the Summer 2008 Olympics. After the tour, we visited the Pearl Market where many of us experienced the wonders of “haggling” for the very first time. All shopkeepers had different strategies for enticing obvious foreigners into their shop. While some provide a kind and sweet invitation, others aren’t so subtle. Many members of our group experienced a sudden strong pull from a shopkeeper who tightly clasped onto their arm and yelled aggressively in Chinese. Some even described being threatened. One shopkeeper grabbed the attention of an unsuspecting member of our group by forcefully whipping a belt in his path. All things considered, for many of us, the haggling seemed much more exciting than the actual purchase.

The Great Wall

Imagine, if you will, climbing - (not walking) – *climbing* up the biggest wall in the world in 40-degree weather, trying to weave among crowds numbering in the thousands. This was our experience on the Great Wall. It was absolutely stunning to see the vastness of China, but coming from snow and rain to 40-degree weather was difficult to endure. However, we all eventually grew accustomed to the heat and

ventured further and further up. Many of us were stopped along the way to get pictures taken with locals - making us feel like celebrities, but the most amazing part of the great wall was trying to imagine the manpower and time taken to build this incredible piece of Chinese history.

After we traveled up the biggest wall in the world, we were taken across the longest corridor in the world: inside The Summer Palace. It is considered by many as the best-kept royal garden in the world and has become famous being a place of limitless beauty and as a concentrated area of China's historical buildings.

Cabs in Beijing...

We returned to the hotel early and many of the girls, and Harry, decided to go shopping. We cabled to a local Beijing Mall and took in the modern shopping areas of Beijing. Probably one of the greatest experiences in this little adventure was getting home. Well, more like our *attempts* to get home. Here we were, a group of 10 – mainly female - clearly foreign tourists, standing on the shoulder of a busy Beijing road waving frantically to passing cabs. It was definitely a sight to see. We ended up splitting into smaller groups and eventually got back to the hotel an hour later.

Lectures

Every lecture we had about China gave us tastes of the highs and lows of conducting business in a foreign country. Dr. Wong stressed cultural knowledge, professor Wan ManChuan cleared up any misconceptions we had about China's communist government, Professor Li Xuefeng elaborated on China's success economically, Zhiguang Li provided a detailed overview of the economic crisis, and Brett Ferguson, a past graduate of our SOB, gave a refreshing look on his experiences as a foreign businessperson in China.

Although we had many interesting lectures about business in China, one that stands out to me was by a professor at Tsinghua University. He discussed the university and its relation to the U of A. We quickly learned that in China, it is always about networking and developing trust or "guanxi". To have a direct connection to a top Chinese university is a key asset to have in Chinese business.

Tiananmen Square & the Forbidden City

As expected, Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City were both incredible sights to see. The extensive length of the square and the intricate beauty of each stone in the city were breathtaking. The vendors, however, not so much. One of the essential experiences for any foreign tourist is warding off vendors. Some sell paper hats, other take to small ornaments. Whatever "very cheap" item we let pass by, there were 5 others that came up afterward. Walking from the Forbidden City to the bus seemed to be the most prime area for vendors. Some followed members of our group for 2 blocks. It was here that we all grew accustomed to using 2 golden Chinese words: "Bu yao" or, "don't want."

The Mixer

After a lecture, we went into a room at the Shanghai Administration Institute for a "mixer" with students that were our age. Our group was seated at one end of a big room, and a group of students

– mostly girls – were seated at the other. One by one, each of us had to walk up to the front of the room, introduce ourselves, and answer the questions the “hosts” provided. The hosts, near the beginning were trying to make things interesting by asking provocative questions. “Who’s your favourite boy?”, “Are you single?”, “What do you think of us?” Are some of the many questions they chose. After answering questions, we were all paired up with a SAI student. They gave us tours of the campus and explained to us what it was like being a post-secondary student in Shanghai.

Company Visits

It’s hard to comprehend that top executives in well-established companies would give a presentation to a group of foreign business students, but they did. The CEO of Giordano – a highly regarded clothing company based out of Hong Kong, as well as the Executive Manager of Shanghai CRED Real Estate Stock Co, both gave us short presentations and answered any questions we had. They stressed the importance of China in conducting business as we enter the 21st century. China is becoming such a key economic consideration that simply ignoring their presence would be a dire mistake. They also emphasized the importance of having a foreign presence in their company. They asked us to seriously consider working in China following graduation.

In One Word

All in all, the trip was a full mix of the cultural experience, the educational experience, and the business experience. We left China exhausted from all the activities, but satisfied from the lessons learned, cultural tastes and foreign connections. There is a lot I missed – including the Water Village, Hangzhou, the McDonald’s adventure, and the Beijing traffic. But, you’ll just have to ask one of us to get the full story.

Upon arrival in Edmonton, someone asked me to describe China in one word. My response was simply, “hen hao.”