



What I Did on My Summer Vacation

Rachel Mans, a participant in the 2006 SLE program, wrote the following essay shortly after her return from China in August 2006.

I've been home for a couple of weeks now. The pictures have been developed, the souvenirs handed out, and my suitcase finally unpacked (only to be repacked the following week when I head off to college). A common orientation question has been, "So how was your summer?" and each time I'm asked it I find myself pausing for an uncomfortable amount of time, considering how to answer. Do they want to hear about my adventure to China and back, my mastery of chopsticks (finally), and how it felt to run hand-in-hand with my host sister down the Great Wall, soaked with rain and enjoying every second? I usually answer with a summarized, "Awesome."

When I first received the SLE acceptance letter from the National Committee, I read through the information eagerly. The trip was planned around three Chinese cities. Later, Sameer Gupta, one of the other SLE participants would put it like this: "There was a great variety: Beijing, the current capital; Xi'an, an ancient capital; and Qufu, a spiritual capital." I remember reading the names on paper for the first time, trying to work out how to pronounce them. Was it Koofu or Kwoofu? And Xi'an I didn't even attempt, and explained I was going to somewhere starting with an X.

The days leading up to the trip were surreal. I kept saying to people, "I'm leaving for China," but I didn't believe it myself. I didn't believe it until I got off the plane in Beijing. It was such a Dorothy in Oz moment, a "I'm not in Kansas anymore" kind of realization. I couldn't read the signs or understand the babble of voices around me. On the streets of Beijing, people would stop to stare at us and we would stare right back. I was amazed that we actually stuck out in the crowd (which is hard to do in a city of more than 12 million people).

I made it a priority to keep a journal of the trip, and I started two weeks before we left by listing the things I was anxious about. At the top of my list was how I would get along with my host families. What if I offended them, or just couldn't communicate at all? The first night, I met my host sister Cammy. The Chinese teacher pointed her out to me in the crowd. "Look, a perfect match. She's very tall, too." She looked over at me and smiled, and immediately I knew we were going to be friends. On the ride to her south Beijing apartment, we talked and laughed like old friends. She spoke amazing English, and had just finished her first year at the University of Toronto.

Over the next few days, with Cammy at my side, I would meet her entire family, have my first Beijing duck, and get my hair cut and colored. I'd say the latter was one of the most memorable experiences of the trip. I was extremely nervous, having no ability to speak Chinese and having never colored my hair before. Cammy sat in the chair next to me, making small talk with the barber while I flipped through Chinese Cosmo magazines.

The whole family adopted me as one of their own. They welcomed me warmly, offered to help with anything, and even laid out a pink toothbrush for me by the sink.

One night we sat around looking through family photo albums for hours. The day I left my host mother gave me the charm of a tiger with their family name woven onto the top of its head. "It will keep you safe when you are far away." Cammy gave me my Chinese name: Wang Ruixue. "Ruixue" means "the beauty in the first snowfall," but my favorite part is "Wang," meaning I'm a part of their family.

I had another host family in Xi'an. One of my best memories of the trip is walking near the Xi'an city wall at night with my host family. There were groups of people spinning lighted tops, singing Chinese songs, and dancing. We stopped to watch the long line of people snake around, kicking, turning, and laughing. "Looks like fun," I said and, before I knew what was happening, my host sister was dragging me into the line. I was suddenly submerged in a



dancing mob of middle-aged women, young children, and old men. I was trying to make something up and failing horribly. People around me were laughing and pulling on my arm, trying to show me the proper steps. After a few minutes, I was dancing down the line, losing myself in the swarm of laughing voices.

It's funny that none of my experiences on this trip seem really tied to specific places, but more to the people. I never start off telling a story, "I was on the top of Mount Tai..." I always start, "I was talking with my host family, and..." Of course, the beauty of the sites was not lost on me. In fact, I was awed by the history attached to each location. Every location has a story to it far older than the history of our country.

Yes, I enjoyed all of the scenic views and ancient temples, but looking back on this trip, I'll always remember the feeling of love and friendship that developed there. My host sister in Xi'an, Cran, told me the story of the liu shu, the weeping willow. She said that in Xi'an it used to be a custom to exchange willow branches with friends going far away to remind them of their homes. Our last day in Xi'an, we picked branches off of a tree on the campus when no one was looking and traded them. I remember how long we hugged goodbye at the airport, how she cried. "I had a sister for three days," she said. I hugged her and reassured her, "No, you have a sister forever."

If I'd been told three months ago that I'd be spending fifteen days in China forming lasting friendships, I wouldn't have believed it. But when the opportunity presented itself, I felt an immediate pull. Reading through those initial articles and explanations about the trip, I knew this program would change me, but I could've never imagined how much. Before this trip, I never would've sung karaoke songs at the top of my lungs. Before this trip, I never would've tried pickled fried chicken feet. Before this trip, I never really questioned the way the world was being run, or our role in world affairs.

Now I'm back in the United States and adapting to the whole new world of college but I haven't and won't ever forget the experiences of this past summer. I'm planning on taking Chinese next semester. As chance would have it, my roommate here at college lived in Taiwan for ten years and speaks beautiful Chinese. I hear her talking to her mother on the phone in what she's dubbed "Chinglish." I'm already thinking about my next trip to China, for study abroad or for the 2008 Olympics. Maybe even after college to teach English. I promised my Beijing host family that next time I visited, I'd be able to speak Chinese and I plan to keep that promise.