

## China is the Classroom

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*China.* Most people would just nod nonchalantly whenever we said we were doing our Junior Term Abroad (JTA) in Beijing, China. “Why?” they would then ask. Surely there were other more attractive destinations like France, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Singapore, Taiwan and the US.

Indeed, why China and why now?

Besides Beijing hosting the 2008 Olympics and the fact that China is touted as the “next world political and economic superpower,” here are the cold, hard facts that might make you think twice:

- Absolutely no English is spoken and all signs are in Chinese characters! You will surely be a headless chicken if you do not know Mandarin
- The stench of the “squatter” type toilets (where you actually squat on top of holes on the floor) is unbearable
- Beijing is considered the most polluted city in the world
- Crossing the street without getting run over becomes an art form
- Cab rides are one of the most dizzying and vomit-inducing experiences you’ll have to deal with (sometimes, you don’t even get to your desired destination due to bad driving skills, odors and miscommunication)
- In the summer, you melt and in the winter, you freeze. Literally.

Turned off?

So were we. But you know what? You shouldn’t be.

There’s more to China than meets the eye. Where else will you be able to experience following the footsteps of Marco Polo on the Silk Road for two and a half weeks, taking camel rides at four in the morning, rolling down head first at breakneck speed down sand dunes of the Gobi desert and sleeping in teepee-like Kazak yurts? Where else will you see the beautiful landscape of Guilin, swim and bathe in pure brown mud, cruise, kayak or raft through the Li River, hike down century old caves and end up in the middle of a mountain trail? Where else can you marvel at the sunrise in both the opposite ends of the historic Great Wall?

Where else but in China.



True, there was a lot of fun and play involved as opposed to the purely rigorous academic work expected in a study abroad program. But whoever said that learning could not come from outside the rigid walls of the classrooms? Don't get us wrong; there was a lot of studying done, especially for the mandatory Chinese language classes. If there is anyone to blame for all the learning, blame it on The Beijing Center (TBC), our host organization at the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) in Beijing. Through TBC's meticulously planned and organized trips and through their academic programs headed by the country's top professors, we were able to maximize learning in all aspects.

Our stay in Beijing was an experience that could not be lived through books alone. It was in a league of its own. What we learned in a span of five months in China was something that we could never have even begun to fathom if we stayed behind.

It goes beyond the small practicalities of learning how to do our own laundry without staining or shrinking our clothes, cooking real food especially Filipino favorites like adobo and sinigang, baking sweet goodies even if that meant merely following the instructions on a ready-to-bake mix box, or doing everything you can to stick to your budget.

Also, being a "headless chicken" that doesn't speak Mandarin will make you a better and more creative communicator. Not only will you be amazed with how far you can go with your limited Mandarin vocabulary, but also you will be amazed at how fast you can pick up the language. After all, the best way to learn Mandarin is to speak it in a place with 1.3 billion native tongues.

But beyond all these, we learned the pragmatism of cultural differences. We gained the wisdom of humility and unity. We learned about real friendships and how fleeting some could be, about distance and relationships, about missing what we neglected the most back home. We learned to appreciate and truly love the Philippines, and most of all, to be proud to be Filipinos, more than we ever did our whole lives combined.

So why China?

Well, it doesn't take a lot of brain activity to figure out why. It's very simple, really. Learning is experiencing. It is experiencing life on your own and through your interaction with people from various cultures. And with TBC, China **is** the classroom.