

I am writing to inform you of the details of my year abroad that you so graciously helped fund.

This year has been so much more than I ever could have imagined. I have done so many things, and the experiences I have had over the year have helped change and mould me and my future for the better.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August last year I left London Heathrow with 17 other Project Trust volunteers and headed off into the great unknown. Once we arrived unlike the other volunteers who were a little bit out of sorts, and the reality of the situation hitting them, I was taking everything in my stride. Even the trip to the hospital day 2 due to a mosquito bite that made my hand look like a balloon animal.

Before we could head to our projects, we had to attend a summer camp. The 17 of us were split into pairs, given a class, a syllabus and taught the same class everyday for two weeks. 8am to 5pm. Then after dinner we had to attend a review meeting and then lesson plan

for the next day until 10pm. Having only been in the country two days and never really had taught before we were thrown far into the deep end. But after a few days, we finally started getting into the swing of things. (except for the heat, the fan in our room never once went off) We really

started to enjoy ourselves and started getting creative with our classes, from ceilidh dances to a mini Olympics, our classrooms were covered in posters and mini inventions.

The camp even took us to see the Great Wall!



As our time together in Summer camp ended, each class prepared a play and us teachers made a Greece dance medley, to show at our goodbye ceremony.



And just like that we had to say goodbye to our classes, our friends and get a train for 24 hours to our new homes. For me and my partner Shangyou No.2 and No.1 one middle school.

My partner and I were told we were teaching at separate schools, but we didn't imagine that Lauren's school would be 30 minutes across town on a bike. This meant the time we spent with each other became quite limited.

I was teaching at the Middle school where we lived. The headmaster had told me, by the end of the year, I would have to teach every single class. A very daunting task, at a school of over 5,000 students. As well as the classes at my school, every Thursday I went to the High School where Lauren taught, (also 5,000 students) and helped her at her English corner. I started by teaching



the grade 9s, (around 14-15) they were nice, a little shy and I was enjoying teaching them. However, by the time I'd taught them all it was time to say goodbye and move onto the Grade 8s (around 13-15).

In October we had a week's holiday for China's national day. We had the opportunity to meet some of the other volunteer's in Shanghai. It was great being able to meet everyone again and talk about our projects and share ideas on different lessons and new words we had

Shanyou is famous for its breakfast food. Never thought I would start my mornings with a bowl of beef noodles.

learnt. My year took a bit of a turn however, as on our return Lauren broke the news to me that she had made the decision to leave China.



Luckily, she decided to give it some time, and made December as her decider date.

We started getting busier with Chinese lessons, and the English corner that started at my school. Twice a week I saw the same group of Grade 8's to help give them more confidence in speaking. Even

made some friends with a group of girls from one of my classes. I spent time with them on their birthdays and we went on a picnic together at one of Shangyou's local attractions.



As the holiday season came around, me and Lauren became a bit like parade animals. Being taken from school to school to give special classes and for a week over Christmas taught at the primary school. As they wanted us to teach every student by the end of the week, each class contained 147 students. A bit of an increase compared to our standard classes of 56.



Every year the school has an annual show to showcase the student's

talents, also a good excuse to give the kids a break from their usual 6am-10pm of nonstop lessons. Both me and Lauren were asked to put on a show for the students. Being musical I was 'asked' to play piano, in front of the whole school. All 5,000 students and all 300 teachers. Then we tried to get them to dance the 'Cha Cha Slide' with us. As someone who's always had quite bad stage fright, after this year I can say big crowds are no longer an issue.



It was strange spending Christmas and New Years away from my family, neither are a very big deal in China and it was overall quite a dull beginning to the new year. Everything was winding down for the biggest celebration in China; “Spring Festival”, or as we know it Chinese New Year. It is nothing like we would imagine it to be. No fireworks or bright parades. It’s just the only time of the year Chinese people actually get time off. Everyone clears out of the big cities and heads home for the month. Meaning we had a month of travel time! Sadly, at the

beginning of Spring Festival, Lauren left China and headed back to the UK. The consequences of this wouldn’t hit me until later.

Spring Festival was an amazing time. With the other volunteers we went traveling to so many places and saw amazing things. I first got to visit another groups project, see the countries old capital Nanjing and learn a bit about the city’s history. Then I went to Hong Kong and for the first time in 6 months got to see my parents. Saw the Terracotta Army in Xi’an, and the Panda breeding centre in Chengdu. I honestly didn’t want it to end, I could have gone on travelling like that for the rest of the year.

When I got back, I didn’t realise how lonely it was going to be now that Lauren had left. The first two weeks back were the hardest two weeks of my life. But it got better. I started teaching the Grade 7’s, the youngest year (11-12) and they were a joy to teach. All my teaching nerves had left, and every class was amazing. They had so much enthusiasm and their laughs were truly contagious. I started spending a lot of time with my Waiban (one of the teachers who was there to help me if I needed anything) Mindy and her four year old



daughter Thea. I got to keep the English corner going at No.1 as well, which was great as those kids had a certain place in my heart. Being so close in age to them, it felt like getting to talk to my friends every week. I made so many friends in the remaining months I was there and even got the opportunity to learn a traditional Chinese instrument called the Guzheng.

By the time my year came to an end in Shangyou, I was really sad to



leave. I loved teaching the Grade 7's and both of my English corners in mine and Lauren's school. My English corner kids were so lovely and took their learning so seriously. As exam time came closer a few times some of the Grade 7 boys asked if they could be excused from English corner so they could run laps

round the field because they were worried about their P.E test that wasn't for another 3 weeks. I wasn't worried about any test when I was 12, let alone P.E.

I couldn't imagine not coming into to teach them and eating in the canteen every day. Even now I'm home I still dream of that canteen food.

But sadly, the time came and after a few teary goodbyes, I'd left Shangyou for good.

Then it was time for our Summer Travels. As it was our last chance to travel China we tried to fit in as much as possible.

Considering that most of our trains were anywhere between 12 and

30 hours we never spent longer than 2 full days in any place, except Sanya where we spent 6. We went to Guiyang: to see the largest waterfall in China, Guilin: to see the Reed Flute cave and the Li river (featured on the back of the 20yuan note), Haikuo: to see a volcano, Sanya: to relax on a beach



for a few days, and see the 12<sup>th</sup> biggest statue in the world, Guangzhou: to climb up the Guangzhou tower and see a safari park, Hong Kong: to see the big Buddha and go to Disney Land, Shenzhen: where we were so burnt out from travelling we just went ice skating, Yiyang: to pick up our bags and at last Beijing.

It was amazing to go back to where we first arrived and see how much we had changed since then. We went back to the silk market to get some last minute gifts. I remember being terrified of it at the beginning of the year



with all these people trying to sell you things. But this time round we all had so much fun, began able to speak in Chinese to the shop keepers and having a completely new outlook on Chinese people, I learnt that everyone there is super lovely. (and speaking Chinese they give you a much bigger discount)

Having spent a night sleeping at the airport on the way over and having been awake for 48 hours I was very tired, but glad to be home. I do miss China greatly and

want to go back. I've even changed Universities, so I'll be able to take Chinese. I also know that I love teaching and consider it as something I'd like to pursue

It has been an amazing year and I want to thank you again for your generous donation, as without it I never would have had such an amazing experience. Every day was worth it.

Thank you so much,

谢谢你

Kirsty Lawson 吴丝



If you'd like to see more photos from my year you can go to my Facebook page 'Kirsty's Year in China' @kirstysyear