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Shanghai, China

CHINA

As the sun beat down on me from its seat above in the deep blue sky, I took another step into the sandy dune, drew in a breath and continued upward. When I reached the top and looked out upon the vast and seemingly endless dunes of the Gobi Desert, I knew immediately that studying abroad in China was the best decision of my life. The night before I had spent four hours to the east in the Mongolian Grasslands, where I had rode a horse across the equally vast plains, wrestled a Mongolian native, and ate lamb off the bone. This all sounds fictional, like some fabricated story, but it is real. Here I was, one day later facing one of the largest deserts on the planet. It took a car, a jeep, and a camel for me to get here, but I made it.

My time in Inner Mongolia has just been a small slice of my year in China, one week among weeks of adventures. My home base was in Shanghai where I studied and spent most of my time. The city is a gigantic metropolis and cultural melting pot, where traditional Chinese culture collides full on with western commercialism. Shanghai offers endless opportunity in entertainment, food, and culture. Using Mandarin to communicate with cab drivers and locals helps me to navigate the busy streets and tall buildings at every turn. Having excellent and patient teachers helps me gain the confidence I need to speak Mandarin when needed and now I find myself looking for excuses to use the language.

My time in China did not stop with just one mega city, in addition to living Shanghai, I also visited Beijing and Hong Kong - all cities were equally dynamic in their own way and full of rich experiences and deeply rooted culture. The Olympic structures and the Great Wall were attractions drawing me to Beijing and as for Hong Kong, I found it to be an exciting city with a busy nightlife and glitzy atmosphere.

Taking in the many cultures of China, both far and wide, I had the opportunity to visit lesser-known areas as well. Qinghai, a western province I visited with a small group of my classmates and staff of CIEE. We stayed in the rural countryside with



Buddhist Monks and visited a small poor village in the mountains bringing school supplies to the children. I found this to be perhaps one of the most moving moments of my life, let alone my study abroad. The joy and appreciation the people in this small community bestowed upon us was both heart warming and humbling. The children looked at us with shy amazement and a sense of happiness. I will never forget the lessons I learned there about life and hardship. The strength of the people I met there is astonishing to me.