

Liquid-Sunny Days:

A Travel Log Through China

By Jan Fear

Shanghai, China

Jan Fear, a fourth-grade teacher at Washington Elementary School in Muscatine, Iowa, journeyed to China as part of the Stanley Foundation's Catherine Miller Explorer Awards, which give local educators the chance to study and travel internationally. The program aims to create globally-minded teachers who have a greater ability to teach diverse students because of a deeper understanding and appreciation of another culture.

For years, I've heard about other people's trips with a sense of envy. Every time I listened to tales of overseas travel, it whetted my appetite for my own. I wanted to connect with a culture that was completely unlike mine, so when I saw an available tour in China, I was sold. Not only would I experience multiple cities and the typical tourist sites, I would also have home visits, interactions with students, and a cruise on the Yangtze River. It sounded perfect, and the Stanley Foundation provided the way.

DAYS 1-2: Suitcases packed. Check. Passport. Check. Camera. Check. Dramamine for motion sickness. Check. Temporary panic mode. Check. And I was off to China. It was my first overseas trip, ever.

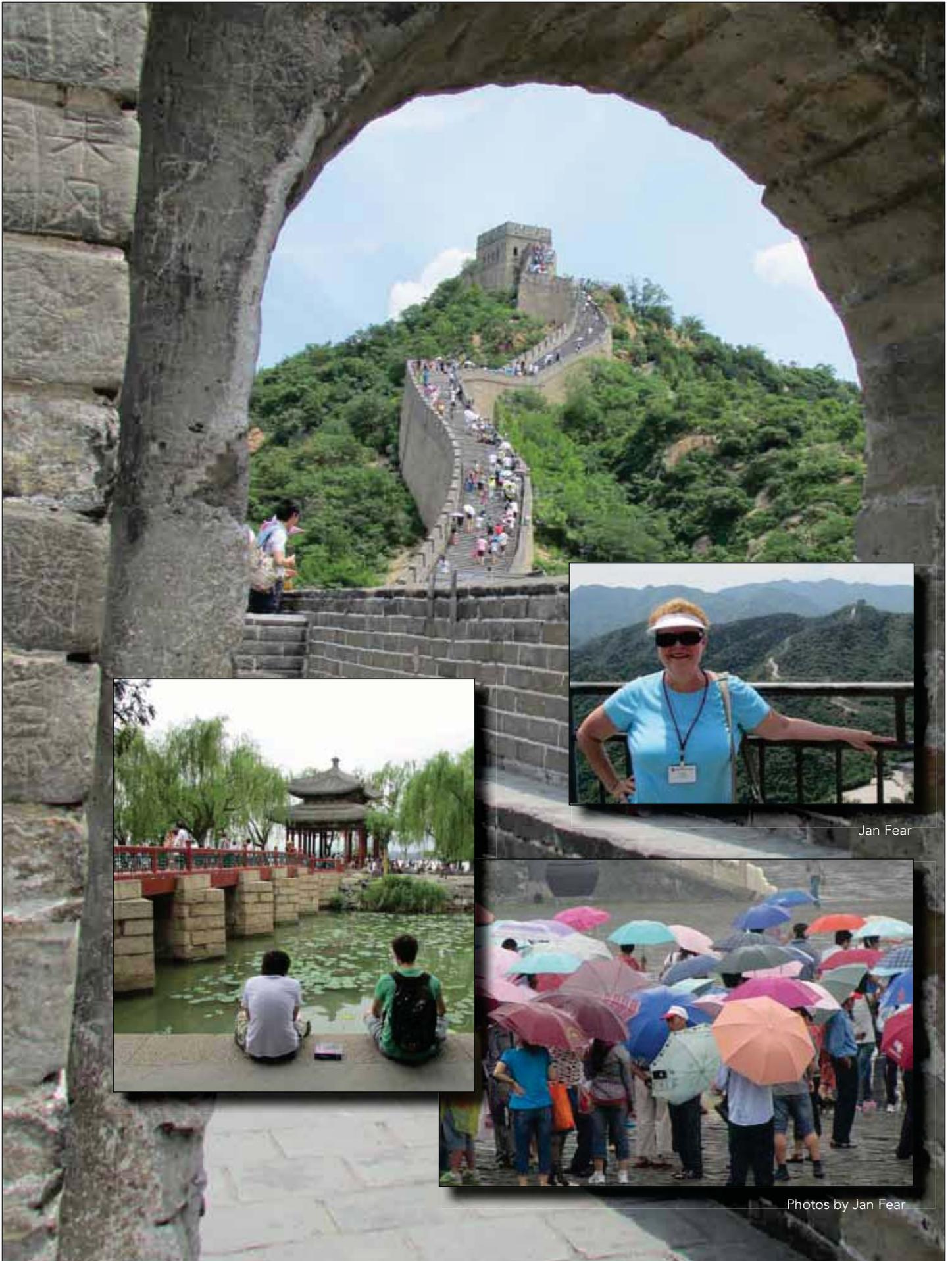
The flights were smooth and easy. What bothered me the most was the 45-minute bus ride to our hotel in Beijing. The traffic was horrific; starting, stopping, and swerving. By the time we arrived, I was deathly sick.

DAY 3: After a good night's sleep and no longer queasy, this tired traveler was ready to go. After breakfast, Mark, our program director, met with the entire tour group for the first time. I could tell by his welcoming speech that he was going to be great. Handsome Mark, as he calls himself, is very witty, good with one-liners, and could almost be a stand-up comic. Bathrooms are "happy rooms," we

are Mark's "family," and street vendors are his "cousins." Stay away from his cousins, he says. We are "travelers" not "tourists." Travelers go to a different country or place to learn, be educated, and to discover. I never thought about that before, but he's right. I know I'm definitely a traveler.

The tours for the day were to the Temple of Heaven and the Summer Palace—such ancient places. Even the trees were about 600 to 800 years old. Both are common locations for locals to congregate in order to exercise, socialize, or relax. Many men played games of mah-jongg—similar to the Western card game rummy—or poker while women worked on knitting and other crafts. Others played unusual instruments that sounded melodic and primordial. I wanted to stay and hear more, but time was not on our side. Of course, some of Mark's "cousins" were there to sell their wares.

DAY 4: I can now say I have walked on the Great Wall of China, and I have pictures to prove it. What a wonderful day, knowing that I accomplished something many people have on their "bucket list." My ultimate goal was to get to a stone tower that had a viewing platform. Little did I know it would take me an entire hour to get there. The steps were very steep and narrow, as well as crowded. I was also stopped numerous times by Chinese to get my picture taken with them. Who knew I had been elevated to celebrity status? When I returned to the bottom, I had a moment



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Photos by Jan Fear

when I became disoriented and lost my bearings. I was teetering. I can't say my sense of direction took over, but my instincts did, and I decided to turn around and go the other way. Good thing, because I ran into Mark. He wasn't really looking for me, but what a relief. He asked if I had been trying to get to Mongolia. Very funny, Mark. After a buffet lunch, we went to Ming's Tomb and the Sacred Way, a blessedly straight and flat path lined with larger-than-life statues.

DAY 5: The weatherman—that is, Mark—said it would be a “liquid-sunny” day. The morning was definitely liquid. We walked around Tiananmen Square in a downpour, and I found out my raincoat is only water resistant, not waterproof. Oops. Good thing I had an umbrella, but even that didn't help much.

One place I really wanted to see was the Forbidden City. As I viewed a constant stream of umbrellas flowing up to the doors of the Hall of Supreme Harmony, I decided to join the throngs of pushing and shoving tourists. It was very claustrophobic and almost terrifying. I survived, barely, but never did see the inside of the building.

By afternoon, the rain had stopped just in time for a bicycle-powered rickshaw ride through small alleyways built

around the Forbidden City. We had our first home visit for tea with a local resident. Later in the evening, we saw the Peking Opera.

DAY 6: Mark has been telling us about Chinese culture. We're learning about the one-child policy, the ethnic groups, schools, language, religion, income, taxes, and the government. It's all so interesting. A friend and I saw a police car that had the words “to punish and enslave” written across its side in English. Hopefully this was meant to say something more positive but was just lost in translation.

Our last two stops in Beijing were to a kung fu school and a jade factory. Over 700 students from ages 3 to 25 years old attended this martial arts boarding school. I can't imagine letting your toddler be away from home, but many do. The older students entertained us with a performance. These guys are not just good, they are outstanding. This is the school that performed during the 2008 Olympics.

ON TO SHANGHAI

DAYS 7-10: Anywhere you go in China, you see remnants and reminders of its ancient culture. However, where Beijing seemed to be deluged by history, Shanghai appears to be



Shanghai, China

only soaking in it. Beijing is considered the political capital, whereas Shanghai is the economic capital. The buildings seem more modern and the streets cleaner, and the elevated highways create a smoother flow of traffic. Our guide says that “Beijing is the Bill Clinton, and Shanghai is the Bill Gates.” It’s hard to fathom the size and population of the city. It’s as large as Delaware and has 24 million people.

Each place is a new cultural awakening for me. I’ve learned about Buddhist beliefs by seeing the practices firsthand. After a bullet-train ride to Suzhou, we viewed how people live along the Grand Canal who travel, fish, and even do laundry in the gray water. At a silk factory, I was able to have an up-close and personal experience with a silk worm. A home-hosted lunch of 17 different dishes was delicious, then a trip to an activity center for seniors was entertaining. We walked through a local market, which was sometimes slightly sordid when looking at some of the foods available. The people rely on every type of food, even chicken feet, fish heads, and so-called 1,000-year eggs. Nothing is wasted. The beauty of the city cannot be outdone: the museums, small parks, the lovely landscaping, the river walkway, and the amazing lights along the Huangpu River at night.

The most invaluable lesson I received while in Shanghai was from a lecture given by Qi-Yuan Liu, a Chinese history professor at a local college. He shared his first-hand experiences of what it was like to live during the Cultural Revolution. Words cannot describe the atrocities and hardships these people lived through, or how they have risen above—because of, or despite—these adversities.

Our last experience in the city was taking the “magnetic levitation” train to the airport, which travels up to 268 miles per hour. It only took us seven minutes to go 20 miles. After our plane landed in Wuhan, we took a five-hour bus ride to get to our cruise ship on the Yangtze River. There were views of rice paddies, lotus, fish, and eel ponds, and other layered fields. Farmhouses looked rather large, and many farmers still wear the traditional pointed straw hats.

ON THE YANGTZE RIVER

DAYS 11-14: We embarked on a voyage up the Yangtze River, the third largest in the world. First stop was the huge Three Gorges Dam. A series of escalators took us to the top of a mountain. A massive hydroelectric project in the area had uprooted 1.25 million people. That is mind-boggling.

The Yangtze is very wide, with much more traffic than the Mississippi back home in Iowa. Fishermen use large nets

along the banks, and small fishing boats stay close to shore, while large barges and tugs travel the main channel.

The hazy gorges are beautiful in a surreal way, with the massive narrow cliffs standing guard over the river like sentinels. I do long for a little more blue sky and sunshine. It’s the beginning of the rainy season, and I have discovered that China, like Iowa, is very hot and humid. Rain or no rain. Sun or no sun. It’s like home.

After breakfast on the last day of the cruise, we arrived in Chongqing. We disembarked in a downpour. Porters hauled numerous bags that were attached to poles placed over their shoulders. I honestly don’t know how they did it.

Before our flight to Xian, we took a tour of the Stilwell Museum, home of Joseph “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell, commander of American forces in China, Burma, and India during World War II. He and the “Flying Tigers”—the American volunteer air group that were based here—are highly respected for their fight to protect China from the Japanese invasion.

MADE IT TO XIAN

DAYS 14-16: The highlight of Xian was the terra-cotta soldiers, made more than 2,000 years ago. There are so many that it’s almost overwhelming. I don’t think any two are alike, as they each have their own facial features. What was really exciting was actually seeing one of the five original farmers who discovered the ruins in 1974 and watching him autograph a book that I bought.

DAYS 16-18: Guilin at last! This is one major reason I came to China. Guilin and the surrounding area are home to some of the most picturesque mountains and scenery in the world. Only when we were flying out of Guilin did I see just how vast the mountain range really was.

DAYS 19-21: Hong Kong. Shopping and sightseeing. Flower and bird markets. Parks and fishing villages. I loved it all, but at last, I think I am ready to be home.

IOWA: I am happy, I am home, and I am a better person. On a surface level, I picked up how to use chopsticks and play mah-jongg. On a deeper level, I learned how another culture lives, works, and plays; how the Chinese got to where they are today and where they are going. More importantly, I learned about what I am capable of doing to challenge and better myself, and to enrich my own life as well as the lives of others. This was, after all, a life-changing adventure.