

AZAD member Larry Martin and his wife, Hilde from the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore went on the AZAD-sponsored trip to China in October of 2008.

Several things made this a very unique trip for us. First of all, we are brand new to AZAD. We recently joined and except for receiving several issues of Symbiosis, we had no experience at all with AZAD. Second, while we have traveled extensively all over the world, we have always traveled on our own and have never been part of an organized tour. Third, we are tent campers and seldom stay in hotels when we travel. We generally pitch our tent, cook at our campsite, and explore from there. So with that as a background, this trip to China was an adventure for us in many ways.

On October 9, 2008, we flew from BWI airport in Baltimore to O'Hare in Chicago. We transferred to our direct flight from Chicago to Beijing. It was during the 13 and half-hour flight that we first met some of the members of our AZAD group. We were seated near each other in coach and could identify each other from our Pacific Delights buttons that were mailed to us prior to leaving. During our flight, we flew over the North Pole and had a magnificent view. Since we crossed the International Date Line, we arrived in Beijing, China on October 10, 2008. We were met by our national guide who was holding a green AZAD sign. From that point on we were pampered and very well taken care of. Once our group of 20 was all there, we boarded the waiting bus and headed for the city.

We stayed in the Capital Hotel. We went to Tienanmen Square 3 times. It was about 4 blocks from our hotel. We went once at night, once during the day, and once at sunrise for the official flag-raising ceremony. We also visited the Forbidden City, the Great Wall of China (one of those pinch me am I really here moments), the Summer Palace, and the Temple of Heaven. We also visited a cloisonné workshop and saw the Bird's Nest & Water Cube from the 2008 Olympics. We visited 2 local hutongs, which are narrow alleyways that are neighborhoods often with public restrooms. We also took a moonlight boat ride on a local lake. We had wonderful lunches & dinners as well as terrific breakfast buffets in the hotel. On October 13, 2008, we departed Beijing for Harbin near the Russian border.

We arrived in Harbin at 6:30pm & went to dinner before checking in at the Harbin Shangri-la Hotel. The next morning following a buffet breakfast, we went to the Siberian Tiger Park whose mission is to study, breed, release & ultimately save the Manchurian tiger from extinction. We saw many tigers and a few other big cats up close & personal, not only from a bus tour but also from a walking tour. After lunch at a local restaurant, we went to Harbin Polarland, an aquarium that also has arctic wolves, arctic foxes, penguins, sea lions, seals, polar bears, and beluga whales. We attended the sea lion show and the beluga whale show. On the way back to the hotel, we made a brief stop at the Church of Saint Sophia, a Russian Orthodox Church built in 1907. That evening we went to a dumpling restaurant and then took a walk along the pedestrian walking/shopping street. The next morning, the local Chinese people were out in force along the river behind the hotel doing a variety of exercises. We enjoyed another buffet breakfast at the hotel before departing for the airport and our flight to Xi'an.

On October 15th, we flew from Harbin to Xi'an with a stop over in Qingdao (also known as Tsingtao, same as the beer). Xi'an translates to Western Peaceful City. We stayed in the Golden Flower Shangri-La Hotel. Xi'an is the home of the famous Museum of Terracotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shihuang. We spent the better part of an entire day at the museum and even met the farmer who discovered the warriors while drilling a well in 1074. We also ventured inside the city walls to the Muslim Market near the Drum Tower. We attended the Tang Dynasty Theater for a show featuring music, instruments & costumes historically researched to the Tang Dynasty from 618-907AD. We visited the Little Wild Goose Pagoda, the Xi'an History Museum, and the Jade Arts & Crafts Center before departing for Chengdu on October 17th.

On October 17th, we flew to Chengdu in the Sichuan province. Sichuan means "4 roads or 4 rivers" Chengdu means "Become a Capital." We stayed at the Jin Jiang Hotel. On the 18th, we spent the day at Giant Panda Research & Breeding Center & Museum. We had a presentation on the work being done at the center before touring the facility. The highlights for us was the nursery with about 10 baby pandas that were about 3-months old and having our pictures taken with a 2-year old panda. That evening, we walked through the bird & fish market, then spent some time exploring a downtown modern grocery store. The following day, we spent the morning at the Chengdu Zoo. Watching the people was as interesting as watching the animals. It was also very interesting to compare the practices at this zoo in China to those of our zoos in the U.S. That afternoon we walked to Tianfu Square on our own, one of only 2 squares in all of China with a statue of Chairman Mao. We spent a couple hours people-watching and

wandered back to our hotel past the Peoples Park and along the river. That evening we attended the Sichuan performance that included fantastic costumes, shadow puppets & the famous "Changing of the Masks." On October 20th, we visited the Qingyang Gong Temple, the oldest & most extensive Taoist temple in the Chengdu area before departing for Guilin.

We arrived in Guilin at 6:35pm on October 20, 2008. After a 40-minute bus ride, we arrived at our hotel and had dinner in the restaurant. From our balcony we took pictures of the lake. The next day, we went on a 4-hour cruise on the Li River. The scenery was amazing. We started out in the rain but the weather improved as we went. Beautiful peaks, small boats & rafts, water buffalo, cormorant fishermen, people washing clothes, tending to their cattle & working rice paddies. A buffet lunch was cooked & served on board. We walked around for about an hour in the small village where we docked. Then we went to Fubo Hill where we climbed 354 steps to the top for a panoramic view of Guilin. From there we went to the airport for our flight to Shanghai.

Our flight to Shanghai landed at 10:20pm on October 21, 2008. We checked into our hotel at 11:30pm. The next day we visited the Jade Buddha Temple. Then the group went to a silk art gallery. While the group shopped for various silk products, we crossed the road and hung around in a neighborhood seeing real life in Shanghai. Following lunch we went to The Bund which is Shanghai's very modern waterfront. The skyscrapers there are magnificent. After that we went to the Shanghai Museum which is one of the first class museums in the world. Our time was limited so we concentrated on China's minority populations, currency, calligraphy & painting, furniture & bronze. That evening we had our farewell dinner with our group and then attended the Shanghai acrobats show. When we returned to our hotel after the show, we went walking on the nearby streets to see the neon lights of Shanghai.

On October 23, 2008, we went by bus to the Shanghai airport and from there flew to Chicago (13.5 hours) then home to BWI.

Pictures from our trip can be viewed at the following link:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/larryandhildeschinatrip>

Given the factors that made this trip unique for us as expressed at the beginning, it exceeded our expectations in every way. The members of our AZAD group were friendly & interesting people who we shared a common bond with. We enjoyed getting to know them and sharing stories & experiences. The 5-star hotels and the meals were exceptional. Together with five domestic flights all over China, friendly & expert local guides in each city, a well planned & organized itinerary, and the many wonders of China that we experienced, this AZAD trip was an outstanding value well worth every penny we paid for it. Even with our previous travel experience, we could never have done this same trip on our own in the time allotted or the within the budget we spent. Thank you AZAD!!