

Final week in Salaqi Inner Mongolia 2015

Angela Evans

We've had a good week. On Saturday we visited the local museum which is in an impressive new complex. After passing some stalls selling historical bric a brac (including some Mao memorabilia) we saw a displays about life in the area, including life in the grasslands. There was a collection of photographs taken in the area: some dating from the 1970s were a reminder of how different the area was at that time – no cars, just a few bicycles and very traditional buildings, unlike modern Salaqi which has shopping malls, wide streets and areas of middle class housing. The museum closed at 11am and we were then taken to a park just outside Salaqi and enjoyed the displays of flowers and orchards before going to a barbecue area, fortunately well-shaded, where some of the helpers and teachers had organised everything. It was a chance to relax and enjoy a meal together. We packed up before the rain started, and spent the evening in our hotel. Diana (who organises most of our meals) supplied us with pizza so that we didn't have to go out in the rain.

Diana had already invited us to visit her home village on Sunday and had suggested that we should go in the evening, but when I asked whether we could go to church she reorganised the day and we set out at 8am. We drove south from Salaqi with her aunt and cousin and reached a substantial village, Ershisiqingdi. When we arrived at the church the priest told us that we were too late for mass, as it had taken place at 6am, but he showed us around the church compound which included a museum. We discovered that during the Boxer Rising of 1900 a Belgian missionary, Bishop Hamer and some Chinese Christians had been put to death and the church had been destroyed, although shortly afterwards the church had been rebuilt by the local Christians. I had already heard of Bishop Hamer as he had previously worked in Wuwei, which I had visited several times while I was working in Gansu.

After our visit to the church Diana took us to the village where her family comes from. We were greeted by a large crowd and there were performances from two groups of dancers. It was wonderful to receive such a warm welcome, although noticeable that the village consisted mainly of older people and some children with few people between 20 and 60. We then visited some of Diana's relatives who produced a wonderful meal. The farm house was quite a contrast to the flats which most people live in in Chinese cities.

We began our final week's teaching on Monday, completing our showing of Bend it like Beckham on Monday afternoon, Then on Tuesday we held a 'wedding' - the bride would not hold hands with the groom, but we enjoyed champagne (lemonade) and a very soft cake (which those of you who have been to China may have sampled before). Morning lessons continued as before, as we fitted in more topics and activities we wanted to cover. On Wednesday and Thursday afternoons the teachers prepared performances of fairy stories –

fun for them, and less work for us! We had an impressive emperor (the Emperor's New Clothes) a scary wolf and a tragic match girl. We had meals out on Wednesday and Thursday: one was a dumpling party at the home of a Mongolian teacher, which was great fun and an opportunity to see a Chinese home close to the school where we had been working; on the next day we went to a local coffee shop with three teachers -t hey had pizza while we had fried rice.

On Friday we had our last two lessons with our own classes before a short closing ceremony, concluding with Auld Lang's Syne. There was time for more photos with teachers. We have had many photos taken during the past three weeks, sometimes by total strangers. We were invited out to lunch by some of the teachers. I had hoped for something simple but it was a generous selection of dishes, including an enormous fish, delicious egg-plant and local meat pie. In the evening we were invited to the home of Lisa, one of our helpers, and the other three came with husbands and children and shared the cooking. We have been really blessed with hospitality in Salaqi and opportunities to spend time out of class with the teachers.

We leave for Shanghai this morning, where we will meet up with the other SEP teams and share our experiences before going our separate ways on Monday. We've had a wonderful time in Salaqi, occasionally chaotic, sometimes surprising, but our overwhelming impression has been of the friendliness of the teachers and of people we have met in the town and the countryside.