Chinese International Orienteering.

Picture this. Running through a vast bamboo forest in rural China, the hills rolling out either side of you into a land of towering skyscrapers and pointed temples. You search for your control in the endless trees that all look the same and remember five days before when China was just a name on a map.

On an unremarkable Thursday evening in December, six teenagers – Meg Sommers, Imogen Wilson, Nick Wilson, Louis MacMillan, Catherine Bloom and Jura MacMillan – met in Heathrow airport, full of anticipation for exploring the unknown, and began their One Belt One Road International Orienteering Training camp in China. We grouped up with our team leaders Ben and Zuzka and the eight Czech Republic orienteers and boarded our 12 hour flight, arriving at 5pm the next day in Shanghai.

We were then picked up by a bus and started a seven hour journey through Shanghai and out to Nanjing to meet up with the Norwegian, Swedish and Chinese orienteers. After some icebreakers, a breakdown and marvelling at the skyscrapers that guided us through the night, we arrived at the hotel at midnight. However, we didn’t feel prepared to wake up at 6am the next day, 11pm British time, for the opening ceremony.

The next morning, breakfast consisted of some deep fried rice and a bit of soft bread, we hopped on a bus and made fast friends with our fellow orienteers. On the outskirts of Nanjing, which contains 8 million people, we made our appearance on Chinese television for the opening ceremony. But it didn’t stop there as throughout the week we were flocked by Chinese locals who had never seen a white person in their lives! We set off for our first taste of Chinese orienteering in a surreal red forested parkland, spotting traditional temples scattered amongst the Chinese tourists. Control sites varied from rocks engraved with Chinese calligraphy to the top of mini temples. The course was technically easy but running at 3am British time proved challenging for team UK.

Some team building traditional games at a school filled our afternoon. We got a record 9 bounces of a tennis ball on a drum controlled by 15 ropes and successfully scored goals in our three teams with the three sided ball. In the evening, we were taken to a famous lantern lit shopping street with the Nanjing wall majestically marking the end of the street and then got to try our first Chinese meal and try our hand at eating with chopsticks. We all sat round several round tables with a round glass spinning table on top of that. About 15 plates of weird and wonderful food ranging from jellyfish to snake/lizard (we weren’t quite sure!) were brought out. Lets just say that the rice was the best part!

On day two of orienteering, we were taken to a scrubby mixed forest with thorn bushes waiting to ruin our legs, given a map which was mostly green and paired off with a younger Chinese orienteer. Some of the faster runners were by themselves and enjoyed the light green course when we managed to avoid the thorns. By this time we had made friends with the other teams and so were able to do some training analysis of the forest which was similar to those at home. A bus ride later and we were happily exploring the history of the area in the Nanjing Museum which housed everything from shelves of pots to a fake street that stretched off under the museum. After having our pictures taken by half of China outside the museum, we were put into pairs and buddied with a Chinese orienteer similar in age with who we spent the evening. Imogen and I took a taxi to Grace’s house where we had a lovely home-made Chinese meal cooked by her parents who didn’t speak a word of English and learned about the Chinese school and home life. Others went to shopping malls or out to Chinese restaurants where they experienced different scenes and ate Chinese HotPot – where all your food is cooked in boiling water and eaten straight out of the pot.

By the next morning, the Chinese cuisine was beginning to take its toll and there were a few unwell orienteers. However, spirits were not low as after a few hours on a bus we arrived at a bamboo forest to do some more technical orienteering. As features contours were not obvious and the features sparse the concentration was on the compass as well as the amazing trees! After a lunch of whole duck and fish, we were taken to a park in the next town and paired u with a young Chinese orienteer where we coached them around a beautiful park next to a lake. Saying goodbye, we travelled along, stopping for dinner and a quick temple visit on the way to a small fishing village further round the lake.

Waking up in the hotel which looked more like a temple, we ate a breakfast of warm noodles and walked up the hills behind the village and into a tea and orange plantation. The hillsides had been narrowly terraced, and so we were running through an uneven forest whilst trying to navigate through the many little paths made by the locals and with a little bit of urban orienteering thrown in. away from the smog of the cities, we had a brilliant time running through the technical trees. After our course, there was a short spell of picking and eating the delicious oranges before we walked back through the town. As we wound our way through the narrow streets, we came across a street vendor making and selling honey from the comb to the pot, and so we tried some. I have never had honey that tasted like oranges but I hope I do again. As we travelled back to Nanjing on the bus, we shared out the traditional British food we brought with us, the shortbread was more popular than oatcakes. We also enjoyed some biscuits from the Czech Republic and Norwegian chocolate.

Our last day of orienteering dawned and we set off up into the Chinese countryside looking forward to an urban sprint race. We arrived at a small village up in the hills and started for our race at one minute intervals. We ran through a mixture of small houses, restaurants, over boardwalks and through a forest and really enjoyed comparing ourselves to our foreign friends. After lunch in the town, we explored the boardwalks over the river and found some friendly goats before heading back to the bus and drove to the official closing ceremony. At the Nanjing Bureau of Sport we were again greeted by the national press and relived the past few days by thanking the sponsors of the wonderful training camp. At dinner, the athletes and coaches had an unofficial closing ceremony where stories and traditional songs were exchanged amongst everyone. As thanks, the British and Czech Republic teams presented the organisers with maps from our own countries and ever athlete was presented with a medal to commemorate our time in China. Back at the hotel, team GB and Czech Republic grabbed their bags and said a tearful fair-well to our new Swedish and Norwegian friends and promised to visit each other soon. We then boosted to the train station where we took the night train at midnight which took us to Huangshan City. The train consisted of a carriage with a small corridor down one side and then open compartments with six bunk beds, three beds high, in each one. Bedding was provided so everyone tucked up for a night on a Chinese train.

We arrived at 7am and jumped on a bus which took us through bamboo and tea planted hills to the base of the National Park containing Huangshan Mountain (the Yellow Mountain). Here we had a healthy breakfast of KFC and snickers and got a bus that took us up to 800 meters high. We started the 1000 meters of climb up concrete steps through bamboo forest which quickly led us up the sides of the granite peaks that the park is famous for. As we climbed ever higher the forest thinned and we were able to see all the other mountains of the park rolling away beneath us. Many pictures and snickers bars later, we reached the top and found the hotel where we were going to stay for the night. The boys decided to go for a run around the plateaux at the top of the mountain while the girls went for a walk before we got too cold and turned back! The boys came back with some more epic pictures and we all went for dinner. Afterwards we all played the straw game and fell into bed.

-10 degrees Celsius outside with beautiful sunshine was what we woke up to and so we left the hotel and walked up the nearest peak to get the full view of the mountain plateaux. The air was misty and all the moisture in the air froze into tiny ice crystals giving the air a sparkly touch as the mountains loomed out towards us. We walked around at the top to take in the beautiful views and then found a short cut. The narrow-cliff path. This was a steep icy set of steps that we had to go down holding onto the rock at the side. With the near-death experience for the day over, we walked off down the mountain to the Welcoming Pine where we stopped for lunch on a platform over looking the many mountains below us. When we reached the bottom, we took the bus back to Huangshan City where we again took the night train but this time it was to Shanghai.

Waking up to skyscrapers out the window we saw our first real sight of the enormity of Shanghai. We stopped off at the youth hostel we were staying in to leave our bags and walked into the city. Starting off in the old town and working our way into the centre where we were walking under huge skyscrapers and twisted buildings. We visited the famous Oriental Pearl and then crossed the river to the Bund street where we could see the skyline of Shanghai. A quick stop back at the hostel and we went back out for karaoke.

The next morning, we took the underground to a train station where we boarded and 350km/hour train that took us to the airport. 12 hours of flying later and we looked down on London to see snow on the runway of Heathrow airport. Due to this we had to wait another three hours in the plane on the runway, queued for an hour for passport control and then searched for another hour for our bags. By this time it was 4am Chinese time so we were nearly asleep on the floor but managed to find our bags and get safely out the airport. The Scots and Czechs had missed their flights home but we managed to get home over the next few days safely to recount the experiences we’d had.

Thank you everyone for making this such a wonderful trip and I hope it continues for the next few years, sheh sheh!

Jura MacMillan