

The Great Wall of China Trek - 2010

Introduction

I have just finished my fifth consecutive Charity Challenge Trek. Having previously done a Husky Sledding Trek in the Arctic, a Desert Trek in Namibia, an Andean Trek in Peru (up to Machu Picchu) and the ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania (the 'Roof of Africa'), this year I had chosen the "Great Wall of China" as the destination for my latest trek. The Wall is one of the most iconic structures of the world and proof of a seemingly impossible feat of human endeavour. The Wall was built to try and prevent the Mongol invasion, in ancient times, and stretches for an unimaginable 4000 miles. Building took nearly 2000 years and involved tens of millions of people. Even though the well known 'fact' that the Great Wall can be seen from the moon is actually a myth, initially put forward as Chinese propaganda, the Wall is still an amazing and very impressive historical site, on a par with other Wonders of the World.

Charity

This year I had chosen the charity 'Cancer Research UK' (CRUK). Cancer Research UK is the world's leading charity dedicated to beating cancer through research. Their groundbreaking work into the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer has saved millions of lives. Survival rates have doubled in the last thirty years and they have been at the heart of that progress. But one in three of us will still get cancer at some point and their vital work, funded entirely by the public, will help ensure that millions more people will survive. If you would like more information about CRUK, visit www.cancerresearchuk.org

I did this trek in memory of my mum, who died of cancer 5 years ago.

Organisation

As usual, I went with 'Across the Divide' (AtD), a superb British organisation, who organise, amongst other things, expedition style treks all over the world, all for charity. They are very safety and security conscious, and always take British expedition leaders and doctors on all their trips. They also work with local guides and teams of helpers, who all benefit from this employment, as do their families. AtD participants have donated some £43 million to charity over the years!

Preparation

As I had already done 4 different treks before, I more or less knew what to expect, at least from a physical point of view. Even though this trek was to be the least strenuous one I had done, I still decided that the way to enjoy it the most was to prepare properly. I prepared myself by doing some walking, running and cycling, and by going to the gym on a regular basis. I got myself some additional bits of equipment, such as a good four season sleeping bag (I had been told it was going to be cold in China!) and a new rucksack and kitbag. I also went to an introduction lecture, in London, where I met 7 of the other people who were to go on the trip (some of these people were to become good friends whilst on the actual trek). The speaker, Sid Cooper, was to be our

Expedition leader on the China Trek and he had already done this trip many times in the past. We knew we were in good hands! It was also great to see some photographs of what we were to see with our own eyes in just a few weeks time. To raise funds for CRUK I advertised the trek at work, in various magazines, amongst my friends and family and I again set up a 'Justgiving' web site. Over the months leading up to the trek I managed to collect nearly £2,500 for the charity. As I had paid for the trek myself, all this money went to CRUK.

To go or not to go!

That was indeed the question this time around. It was all to do with the eruption of an Icelandic Volcano and the subsequent ash cloud, drifting over most of Europe, and especially over the UK. Many flights were cancelled or postponed and airports were closed, all just a few days before we were to set off to China. We were being kept informed about our flights by the AtD staff on a daily basis, but, disappointingly, got the news that the trip had to be cancelled, or at least postponed, only hours before the actual intended time of leaving. Bags packed, passport ready, all psyched up, but nowhere to go. I quickly cancelled part of my holiday time at work. We soon got the news that the entire trip could be held about two weeks after the originally intended day of leaving and, amazingly, most of us (20 out of 26) managed to re-arrange our time off at work, so on Saturday 1st May 2010 we all met at Heathrow Airport for our trip to China. We were met by the Expedition Leader, Sid, and the Expedition Doctor, Ruth. This time there were to be no delays and we were off on our adventure. Great Wall, here we come!

Ni Hao!

We arrived at Beijing Airport after a 9 hour overnight flight, with most of us scattered around the plane. In Beijing we found all our bags had arrived (unlike last year!) so after getting some Chinese money (RMB Yuan) we boarded a nice, air-conditioned coach for our 3 hour transfer to our hotel. We were also introduced to the local staff members who were to be with us over the next week. Royce was a half Maori guy from New Zealand, who had been living in Beijing for quite a few years, learning Chinese medicine, and who spoke fluent Chinese. Lulu and Leo were young Chinese girls, who were to help us with interpretation of Chinese, to facilitate communication with the locals. Later we learnt that this interpretation was sometimes quite liberal! Bruce Lee (no, seriously!) was another helper / interpreter, and our main guide was Lu Sui, an austere man who didn't speak a word of English, although I suspected he understood a whole lot more. During the coach trip we saw some of the outskirts of the huge city of Beijing (20 million people in one city!), characterized mainly by poorly constructed high rise flats, with lots of aircon units on the outside, before the landscape changed from flat into that of many small craggy mountain peaks. We arrived at our hotel, on the edge of a man made lake, just before lunch. At the hotel we were divided into couples for room sharing. I was put with John, an accountant from Birmingham. Then there were Jules and Debs (sisters), Amanda and Alex (friends together and with Jules and Debs), Theresa and Stephanie (it took me till the end of the week to remember which

was which!), Andy and Phil (father and son), Ross and Steve, Dave and Ian, Karen and Holly, Carol and Gill (would have been celebrating her 40th birthday on the wall, before the trip was postponed!), and Beccy and Helen (who were to become my 'best buddies' on the trip). When we had found our rooms, we found out that there were 'normal' toilets in the bathrooms. We had been told about the 'unique' sanitary facilities in China and were expecting the worst. However, what we hadn't been told beforehand was that, just like in South America, you were not supposed to throw used toilet paper into the toilet, as this would cause a blockage! Guess what problem John and I had straight away? Yep! First mistake. The toilets downstairs, for public use, were of the squat variety, something we would encounter many times over during the next week, and of varying levels of hygienic state. After settling into our rooms, we were ready for some lunch. This was an event in itself! We were treated to a buffet of various freshly prepared Chinese dishes, which all had a little name card with them. These cards described the content of the dishes, both in Chinese and in English, although the translation was somewhat 'novel' in some cases. One dish apparently contained 'Pig Elbow'! I decided that it didn't look like pig elbows, so I tried it anyway. It was delicious. After lunch we had some free time, to rest, and to re-organise our bags. I also went on a little walk with some of the others in our group, enjoying the lovely sunny afternoon. Later that afternoon we all sat outside at some picnic tables and drank some (?) beers, whilst getting to know each other, and, more importantly, each other's names! After dinner, which was a repeat of lunch really, we had a major briefing by Sid, our leader, about what the rest of the week had in store for us all. I bought a 'Great Wall' cap from the hotel souvenir collection and went to bed, excited but slightly nervous of what was to follow over the next week.

Gubeikou – Tao Chun

We started the day with breakfast at the hotel. Apart from the various Chinese dishes we also had eggs, bacon, toast, jam and more familiar things. Not a bad start. After breakfast we had a short coach transfer to the start of the actual walk, in the village of Gubeikou. After a short climb up to the wall we saw a section of the wall, called the Gubeikou section, which had never been restored, leaving it somewhat overgrown and in disrepair. We were told that over the years local people had been using stones from the Wall to build their sheds, outside toilets and even their houses. Over the last few decades the government had been trying to convince the people to give up these stones to restore the Wall to its former state, but had not always been successful in this respect. Initially we didn't even realize that we were actually walking on the Wall, it was just like a mound of earth with sides to it. Still, we could see some miles into the distance, with the Wall rolling, climbing and descending, with scattered half fallen down towers every few hundred yards or so. The surrounding mountains were scraggy, sharply outlining the landscape, and rather dry. We were glad we were actually there and on the Wall, only a day and a half after leaving Heathrow. Not all parts of the Wall were as dilapidated so soon we were witnessing the many, many steps of the Wall, all a different size than the one before or after it, so that you just couldn't get into a rhythm at all. This was quite hard on the knees and thighs. After climbing some sections and

towers, we were suddenly surprised to find a local standing there with a box full of ice creams! We were only too happy to buy some off him. Once we got to an area belonging to the Chinese military we were forced to make a detour from the wall and descended through some bushes and woods towards an old ruined farm, where we all had our lunch. This was the first of many packed lunches that week. We had been given a sandwich each in the morning, as well as peanuts, dried fruit, a banana and some more nibbles. The sandwich was a floppy white affair with just cheese and lettuce on it. I assumed that this was something typically Chinese, only to find out, at the end of the week (!), that you were supposed to 'finish' your sandwich by sticking more stuff inside it, like meat, more cheese or pickles! After lunch we walked back to the Wall, where we saw a brown snake slithering up the side of the Wall. After some more hours of walking we again started to descend from the Wall towards our camp site for the evening. As I walked down the many steps and into the woods, my left knee started playing up quite a lot. I have had surgery on that knee some years back and wondered if similar problems were coming back. I was quite worried at this time, thinking that perhaps I wouldn't be able to finish the walk over the next 4 days, so decided to ask the doctor, Ruth, to have a look at my knee that evening. At about 4pm we arrived at our first camp site, by now all made ready for us. The staff from the hotel had put up all our tents, as well as a mess tent, and some tables and camping stools around a fire pit. There were soft drinks and beer to buy, crisps and chocolate to buy, limitless tea and coffee to pour yourself, but, more importantly, the crew had built two men's and ladies' loos (yes, unfortunately just of the short drop type), and, most surprisingly, two shower tents! The girls were first to try these out and, witnessing by the many screams, they were not entirely warm. I decided to give myself a wet wipe wash. After all, I wasn't expecting showers and didn't want to forego the camping experience of cleaning yourself with just wipes. This sentiment didn't last beyond this first day though. When freshened up, I asked Ruth to check my knee. She found that there was no major problem and advised me on a suitable course of action for the next few days. Good thing I had brought lots of Nurofen then! After we had had a few drinks, we all sat down for our dinner, another Chinese buffet affair. After dinner we all sat around a hot camp fire, played some games, and had some more drinks. The evening got cold very soon so before too long I was nicely tucked up in my very warm sleeping bag, wondering what the next day would bring us.

Tao Chun – Simatai

The next day we woke up to a nice fresh morning, had breakfast and got ready for a nice day walking. Before we set off, we all did a good warming up, led by Sid, to loosen up all those stiff muscles from the day before, or the slightly restless night. We walked back towards the Wall, which included some very steep sections through the woods, and up some rocks. The section of the Wall we would be walking on this morning was called the Jinshanling section, and it had been wonderfully restored to its former glory. This meant that there were many beautiful views, over many miles, of proper walls, with perfect sides, steps and inclines, and well built towers. It also meant that this was a more touristic section, so we found salesmen and –women, trying to sell us souvenirs

and drinks. I bought some photo cards, a T-shirt ("I climbed the Great Wall!") and a metal commemorative "I climbed the Great Wall" plaque. Before lunch we had already walked the length of 16 towers! As many sections were very steep indeed, and it was about 30°C outside, the towers were great relief from the sun and to have a rest for the legs. After a while, I decided that it would be a good idea to play the odd song to amuse us. I had brought my iPod and Lulu had a small iPod speaker in her bag. Back at home I had collected some special 'China Music', the favourite of which being 'I like Chinese', by Monty Python. This caused some hilarity amongst the group, and especially our new Chinese friends. By the end of the week everybody knew this song quite well. After lunch we were told we only had another 19 towers to walk, and, after coming round from the shock, we were on our way. I had decided to use my walking sticks all the way today, to take some of the pressure off my knees, and so far it had worked, as they were holding up nicely. We were now doing part of the Simatai section of the Wall and as soon as we hit the 19th tower of the afternoon, we walked for about an hour towards our next camp site, on a slightly sloping bit of flat ground with nice views of the Wall in the distance. Again there were showers and this time around I wasn't going to miss out. Bliss! After settling into our tent, writing my daily diary and relaxing with a drink or two I started writing a doggy quiz for the evening, just in case we needed something to do after dinner. I thought back to the day just gone and decided that this was my favourite day so far, with absolutely amazing views of the Wall, awesome views of the surrounding area, a good stiff walk as proper exercise, knees that held up and very good company to boot! Dinner was not just the usual Chinese buffet, but, as a special treat, wok-fried chips and.....an entire spit-roast goat! Very nice. As we were having our dinner, the skies turned dark and within minutes we were overwhelmed by an almighty thunderstorm. Quickly all the food was picked up and we all went inside the old disused stables which were adjoining our camp site. We watched in awe as the rains came down and the daylight faded quickly. Some of us tried to reach our tents, either to get some rain coats, or at least to get our head torches. However, by now the field had turned into something from a wet Glastonbury and not everybody managed to stay upright all the way to their tents. Later that evening, whilst all huddling around the fire, we were treated to some historic facts about the Great Wall of China, told to us by local man Lu Sui, and interpreted, rather than translated, by Lulu. After that I held my doggy and animal quiz for whoever wanted to stay up still, and only a little while later I was lying in my tent, making sure the tent wouldn't blow away in the still very strong wind and rain, wondering why anyone in their right mind would ever choose to go camping! I managed not to get out of my sleeping bag and tent for a pee till about 6 am the next morning.

Simatai - Ganfang

We woke up in the morning with no more rain, so that at least we could sort our bags out in the dry. All our shoes, and much else too, were very muddy from the night before though. Some of the tents had leaked a bit due to the heavy rainfall throughout the night. The morning was still quite murky and misty so we all got our rain gear ready for the day's walk. After breakfast and our regular warming up session we first helped one

of the vans, belonging to the helpers, get out of the mud it was stuck in. Then we walked back to the Wall. As soon as we got there, we started to descend towards the very long and slightly scary looking suspension bridge over the gorge and river below. Quite a few people were not much looking forward to crossing this bridge, especially those with vertigo. One by one we got onto the bridge and slowly made our way across the gorge, while the bridge was gently swaying side to side. Some of us went hand-in-hand, very slowly, trying very hard not to look down, to try and prevent getting into a frenzy about it all. As soon as we had all reached the other side the sun came out, which caused the temperature to rise sharply straight away. Today was going to be another hot and sweaty day! We were told that today we would have to ascend the Wall past 12 towers in a row, all the way to the highest point on the Wall we would reach during the entire week, at nearly 1,000m altitude. Some sections were very steep, some steps absolutely massive, some of us had to use our hands and feet to climb up parts of the Wall, and we were all relieved every time we reached another tower, to rest, relax the legs, or just cool down for a bit. As we were, again, on a nicely restored section of the Wall we started to encounter sales people again. One of those was a local craftsman who had produced slate plaques, all depicting sections of the Great Wall, by engraving small dots on the slate by hand, using a small instrument. I bought one of these slate plaques which was then personalised for me, with my name and the date engraved onto it. It said: "He who has not climbed the Great Wall, is not a true man". I concurred! On one of the other towers we found a man selling Magnum ice creams! We gave in to temptation. A Magnum never tasted so good. One by one we climbed the 12 towers, step after step, breath after breath, till, finally, we reached the 'high point' of the walk. There we had our packed lunches (yes, white sandwiches with lettuce and cheese!), whilst we relaxed, congratulated each other, took some photographs, listened to some more songs and took in what we had done over the last 3 days or so. After lunch we had to retrace our steps for 6 towers before getting off the Wall. We then walked through woods, fields and villages and over some 'undulations' to our final destination of the village of Gangfang. On the way we saw some beautifully manicured, stepped (like rice paddies) fields where potatoes, corn or onions were grown. As we approached the village we were a bit shocked to see the small river at the edge of the village filled with rubbish; crap like sewage, plastic, paper, general waste and more. This was the same river in which, later on, we saw people washing their clothes! We also saw some horses tied to a chain, standing in or near this riverbed, which I found quite depressing. Even Lulu and Leo were slightly shocked and ashamed about this view. We soon arrived at the Gangfang primary school, where we found our tents already pitched on the school's playground. Some of the kids were still there and they quickly came to see us as we entered the school grounds. We communicated in pigeon English, and mainly with hands and feet. Most of us got our cameras out and the kids played up to this, just as any child would do. They may have been Chinese, but they were just as cheeky, enthusiastic, naughty, shy or boisterous as any kids. Some of the girls in our group were ambushed by little school girls and 'forced' into having temporary tattoos put on their arms. We had a look around the classrooms, which were very basic, and many of us had our photos taken with the kids. After that, and as soon as we had settled into our

tents, some of us had a shower in the separate shower and toilet block that had been built at the school with money from previous groups' donations. Perhaps I should say some of us were tortured, as the showers were ice cold, and I mean ICE cold! This was borne out by the many screams coming from the shower block. As soon as I was clean, and cold, there was time to relax, do some reading, have a drink, or interact some more with the locals. I started writing my daily diary and, big children's friend that I am, got some interest from a little boy, who seemed to be very interested in my little China booklet. He was intrigued, and amused, by the many photos of his country. We then made some drawings together and tried to pronounce each other's names, which was funny to say the least. Some of us then had a walk through the rest of the village. We saw many very basic and small houses, without any front doors, or any luxuries whatsoever, but we did see some satellite dishes scattered around the village. We also found a little shop, where they sold, amongst many other things, cooked and vacuum-wrapped chicken feet, as snacks! We also found the only proper toilet pan we ever saw in the Chinese countryside, used, upside down, to prop up the wall of a shed near one of the houses. Interesting. Soon it was time for dinner, yet another delicious Chinese buffet, whilst sitting on the stone steps of the school building. Afterwards two open fire chimneys were placed before us, to keep us warm through the evening. We all just sat there, having a chat, drinking some beers and having a giggle. Royce surprised us by playing some blues on his mouth organ, and very well too! He played in a band, and was used to playing in front of big audiences. We then played the 'truth-or-lie-game', where people stand up and tell the rest of the people present 2 lies and 1 truth, with the audience trying to guess which was which. That way we found out some interesting and surprising information about our fellow travelers, such as the nice girl-next-door who used to pole dance! Or the guy who danced at the world ballroom championships. Or the girl who once was Miss Birmingham. We were also treated to a spontaneous Jive dance by Ross and Lulu! After some more drinks we all went to bed in our tents.

Gangfang to Lingxiu Garden Hotel

We all got up extra early the next morning, as we were to witness that morning's school assembly. Kids started to arrive for school at 6.15am! After breakfast we got ready for a special display. We first got a thank you speech from one of the little girls from the school, translated (we think!) by Lulu. Then the official school assembly was performed by the kids, ranging from about 4 to 8, without any help or interfering from any of the teachers, whilst the Chinese National Anthem was played and the Chinese flag was raised. One small boy said some words which were then repeated by the entire group in unison, whilst all saluting. All very impressive. We also got a speech from the school's head teacher, thanking us for the gifts we had brought with us for the kids. Many improvements had been made to the school and the children's lives through previous donations. It was all quite emotional to see the dedication from the kids to this ceremony, their pride in their country, tradition and heritage and the way in which they all behaved and as a consequence many of us had a tear in our eyes. Phil, the teacher in our group, then tried to teach the kids the famous old song of 'Frere Jacques', in Chinese! As soon as we had taken a nice group photo with all the kids and school staff,

we started our walk for the day. This took us mainly onto roads through several villages. We encountered men on motorbikes, carrying live duck and geese in their baskets on the back, women trying to sell us water or ice creams, old men carrying big loads on their backs and a man selling freshly made, still hot, tofu from a little cart. At about lunchtime we started climbing towards yet another, slightly crumbled, section of the Wall, at the Bailing Arch. Here we got to take 10 minutes to ourselves, away from the others, to have some 'me-time'. It was time to reflect on what we had done, or why we had come all this way, to think about lost loved ones, or at least to have some proper personal space and time, for a change. After that we took some more photographs, as this was the last time on the Wall that week, before starting a very steep and difficult descent down a very rocky mountain. In the next village we found a playground where we had our packed lunches. Finally we walked on the road towards the hotel where we started our journey into the unknown a few days before. Back in our rooms we got the chance to have a proper, hot, shower, use a 'normal' toilet, have a shave and put on some clean clothes we had left behind in the hotel. After dinner we all bought some further souvenirs, such as Great Wall books etc., from the hotel collection and most of us played pool for most of the night. We had one more half day walking ahead of us the next day.

Lingxiu – Beijing

The last day's trekking began with saying goodbye to the hotel staff who had been looking after us for the last 6 days or so, including cooking some unbelievably good, if unusual, food. We then took a big group photo, before setting off for our last walk. We walked for about 3 hours, mainly through some woods, including nice smelling pine trees, up a big long hill and through some little villages. At the end of the walk we were greeted by fireworks and a proper finishing line with banner. As we passed through the 'finish' we celebrated our week long walk, with many ups and downs (literally), experiencing the Chinese people, food and environment, as well as the achievement of climbing many steps of the Great Wall. We were handed a glass of champagne and had lunch packages given to us. After that we boarded the coach which took us to the enormous city of Beijing, where we would stay in a hotel somewhere in the centre. Entering Beijing it became clear that this was a very, very big city. Traffic was extremely busy, and noisy, containing everything from bicycles, via rickshaws, to cars, coaches and trucks, all seemingly in a permanent state of chaos. We arrived in the early afternoon, and after settling into our very nice rooms and having a shower we got into some clean clothes again, before heading out to see some of the city life. Helen, Beccy, John and I went to find some coffee. We soon found the Tiger Coffee Shop and had cappuccinos, as well as some pizza. We also found the huge indoor marketplace, where quite a few of our group were to buy some souvenirs over the next day or so, and the girls found a massage and manicure/pedicure place where they made an appointment to get pampered later on that afternoon. We saw a fairly poor area of Beijing, with many small Chinese shops, as well as a much more upmarket area, with shops such as Tissot, Puma, Cartier, Reiss and even Starbucks and Costa coffee shops. After some more afternoon relaxing we got ready for the evening's Gala dinner, which was a short

coach trip away. We arrived at a very nice restaurant, where we had an entire room to ourselves. A sumptuous buffet was laid out for us, of even higher quality than before, and we all sat around 3 huge tables for the last dinner with all of us together. There were the obligatory thank-you-speeches by various people, aimed at the leaders and organisers, as well as a word of appreciation for us from Sid, the boss man. We also handed over our pooled tips, for all the local staff, to Royce to distribute. We had also arranged for Gill, who would have celebrated her 40th birthday during the trip, had it not been postponed, to receive a birthday cake, including some candles (not quite 40, but still). All in all we had a great evening and dinner to celebrate our week's trek. We all finished the evening by going out in Beijing, visiting some roof terrace bars in Bar Street, drinking till the small hours for some.

Free day in Beijing

The next day was a free day to explore Beijing, and everybody made up their own minds where to go and what to do. Eight of us decided that we all wanted to visit Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City and decided to take two taxis there from the hotel. What could possibly go wrong? I entered the first taxi with three of the girls, whilst John would take the second with 3 others. We arranged to meet 'in the bottom right hand corner of T-square' in case we got lost. Good plan! Our taxi drove for about 20 hairy minutes through a very busy Beijing and suddenly gestured that we had to get out and walk the last bit in the direction he pointed in. We paid our £2 equivalent taxi fee and started walking. Then we walked and we walked and we never saw anything resembling T-square or even signs saying this. I started to get a little suspicious. After a while I saw some small buses, which looked more like big golf carts, and someone who spoke two words of English and we were told the bus would take us to T-Square. We paid some RMB and boarded the bus. After a few minutes we were dropped at what we thought would be T-Square. However, it turned out to be the Forbidden City. Still no sign of the others and I was just a little miffed. After all, I had meant to spend the last day with my new found best friends and was very annoyed that our best laid plans seemed to have been thwarted by some stupid taxi driver. Beijing is a very big city and it's not easy to find somebody amongst the other 20 million or so people! After a few frantic phone calls between our group and the other, which had been dropped correctly at T-Square, we finally met up and went on our visit to the Forbidden City. By now it was very hot and after we bought some tickets for the entry fee we all joined the huge queues of people wandering very slowly through the many, many courtyards and temples of the Forbidden City. Even though the buildings were absolutely stunning and very impressive in size and expanse, soon it began to be a bit of a chore, feeling like sardines in a tin, and seeing similar buildings, roofs, statues and thrones time and time again, so we decided to get out and relax in an adjoining park. We walked towards the park, bought some drinks and sat down on some grass in the park for a rest. After that we needed some lunch and John thought it was a good idea to take a taxi to another part of Beijing, near the Lama Temple. We tried to get two taxis to stay together this time, which of course failed! We should have known. Still, after some further 20 minutes

in the ridiculously busy Beijing traffic, we all met up again in the old town. We soon found a Chinese restaurant with a menu with pictures and some English words on it, so we got a table and ordered some food. When I say some, I mean lots! Another interesting experience. Helen and I went back to the hotel, whilst some of the others went for a walk in the Hutong, the old small streets in the old town. When back at the hotel, I decided that I needed some more souvenirs and went back to the indoor market. This can best be described as organised chaos. There were 7 levels with lots of small stalls, with people trying to sell you clothes, shoes, souvenirs, food and whatever else. You are supposed to, nay expected to, haggle, which comes easier to some people than to others. I eventually managed to find my chosen trinkets and went back to the hotel for another shower. That evening five of us went for a nice meal at the local bar, The Den, for a change from Chinese food. We had fish and chips, hamburgers and pasta. Afterwards we went to an outside terrace to have coffee and drinks till late that night and we met up with most of the others too. Even the late night heavy rain couldn't dampen the nice cosy end-of-a-successful-trek atmosphere that evening.

Home sweet home

The next day we all got ready for the coach trip to the airport for our flight back home. I felt sad that the trip was over, but also excited to be home again. My own bed, my own shower, and, most of all, proper toilets, beckoned for me back home. There was just one more chance to spend our last few RMB at the airport's shops and before we knew it we were back at Heathrow. We said some quick goodbyes to our new found friends, to try and avoid too many tears. We had shared a unique adventure, sharing everything with people we had hardly known a week or so before, seeing some amazing sights and achieving something truly special. We promised to stay in touch.

As I'm writing this, I'm already preparing my usual evening talk and photo presentation which I always do for my sponsors and friends. I can't wait to tell the story and go through the hundreds of photographs and many short videos I took, to bring it all back to life again in a few weeks time.

As most of you will probably expect, this will not be the last of my adventurous trips. I've now done 5 very different treks, all special in their own way, and I've got 5 more in mind. First though, I'm taking a year out from my charity treks. However, I've got a very special trip planned for next year: I'm going to visit Antarctica! There's just a chance I will do a report, and a presentation about that one too, so watch this space!

Pete van Dongen

