

The Great Wall of China Trek by Don Mullan

On Saturday 20th October 2007 we began our ascent towards the Great Wall of China. There were 17 trekkers raising funds for Children in Crossfire, accompanied by three Chinese guides and interpreters, and two representatives of 'Across the Divide', a UK based organisation specialising in charity expeditions.

The climb was tough, through thick woodlands, each step requiring concentration and effort. But once reached, the vista offered by the Great Wall was breathtaking.

Gerry Bradley, a senior correspondent with BBC Radio Foyle captured the mood when he said to me: "Awesome is a word I seldom use, for it is overused. Yet, there is no other word for what we are seeing and experiencing."

As far as the eye could see the Great Wall snaked ahead and behind, reminiscent of the long tail of a kite on a stormy day. To our north, the rising sun ignited a magical landscape in which we could see 16 waves of mountains washing towards us, each gaining colour and depth with every step.

We were filled with awe at the thought of the tenacity of the people who had embarked on such a mammoth project. Stretching for over 4000 miles from east to west, this Wonder of the World took 2000 years to complete. It was begun 200 years before the birth of Christ and by the time Christopher Columbus had stumbled inadvertently up the Americas in 1492, it was still under construction.

I had erroneously surmised that the Great Wall, like water, had followed the line of least resistance. What stunned me was the fact that, having chosen a range of mountains upon which they wanted to build the Wall, the Chinese were uncompromising. The builders had stuck rigidly to following the mountain summit and if this required building up and over craggy peaks, that's exactly what they did.

Our group comprised Irish, British and Chinese and over a five day period we developed firm friendships and loyal affection.

We were particularly moved by our Chinese support team who erected and dismantled our campsites each day of the 5 day treks and who cooked breakfast, lunch and dinner. We will forever remember their graciousness, gentleness and generosity. They worked with enormous dedication and, especially in the mornings, despite the bitter cold, with warmth and kindness.

The highlight of our trek was on the third and fourth day when we camped in the grounds of a primary school in the small town of Ganfang. We had the opportunity to interact with the children before they went home on the first day and upon their arrival for school on the second. I was reminded of the lyrics of a John Denver song:

"The children and the flowers are my sisters and my brothers.
Their laughter and their loveliness would clear a cloudy day..."

And so it was. I have two abiding memories of that visit. The first was of a little boy who took an immediate liking for BBC journalist Gerry Bradley. There was an immediate rapport. When I asked him his age he answered 'Ten'. At that moment a great poignancy struck me. This innocent child was the same age as Richard Moore, the founding director of Children in Crossfire, for whom we were trekking, when he was shot and blinded in Derry in 1972.



The other memory is of a group of girls who surrounded Colleen Stewart, fascinated by her blonde hair. Their interaction is one of my favourite pictures of the entire trip I have posted on MySpace. I have entitled it 'Touching Gold', and it captures the childish joy of three little Chinese girls as they play with Colleen's hair. What struck me forcefully was

how similar these children are to children across the world. Their little drawings where the same drawings my own children had created back in Ireland at the same age.

The group became familiar with me snapping pictures on my Nokia mobile phones that they coined the phrase "A Nokia Moment!" By the time the trek has finished, every time someone wanted to take a picture they called out: "A Nokia Moment!"

There were times the trek was positively dangerous and required enormous concentration and care. We became all too aware of this on our first day of trekking when one of our group, Tony Fitzimons, lost his footing and broke a leg. We were saddened when Tony returned from hospital to our campsite in plaster of Paris, simply to collect his belongs and begin the journey back to Beijing and home to Ireland.

Our group was, by no means, entirely fit for the challenges the climb up to and along the Great Wall held. But there was great determination and endurance and by the time we crossed the finishing line five days later, it was really quite emotional. Along the way we had jelled from being a bunch of 22 individuals to a group that had grown in loyalty and affection. And hopefully a group that will stay in touch and willing to continue supporting the work of Children in Crossfire.

At our celebratory banquet in Beijing that evening I spoke of the walk as having been a mini peace process. We had Northern and Southern Irish, British, Catholics and Protestants, as well as our Chinese hosts. In the process of hiking and helping one another, we discovered our common humanity and learned that we all have far more connecting us than dividing us.