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Center for International Education

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FOILED PLANS IN CHINA LEAD TO ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

by Susannah Pratt '07

A dual major in international affairs and political science and member of the UNH Honors Program, Susannah Pratt spent spring and summer 2006 in China, studying at East China Normal University in Shanghai and conducting research with support from the UNH Summer Undergraduate Research Fund. Susannah plans a career with the U.S. Department of State or Intelligence Community.

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Susannah Pratt with her host family in China.

The waterfalls of Menghai in the southern Chinese province of Yunnan were our destination for the day. Our Finnish backpacker friends told us simply to, "head out of town, look for a mini-bus, drive for about an hour on unpaved roads, and then ask a local for directions to the trail to the falls." Simple enough for three invincible, highly-experienced students who had already survived two months navigating the even more daunting metropolis of Shanghai.

After an hour of waiting for the promised mini-bus and receiving blank stares from locals upon asking them about the renowned Menghai falls, we realized our back-packer friends may have given us wrong information, and we decided we would just have to be versatile and embark on another adventure. With the sun growing increasingly strong and spontaneity guiding our limbs, we flagged down the next rickety old bus headed towards us and chased after it until it was forced to stop.

Before the driver even had time to ask questions, we escorted ourselves onto the bus, and with the universal 'Hello' of wide smiles, we plopped ourselves down in a spare seat.

The bus, although not too large, was nearly filled with people of all ages. We decided it would be beneficial to inquire where we were actually headed, so we struck up a conversation with the gentleman seated beside us. Hearing that we were conversational in Mandarin, the entire bus excitedly joined in and before we knew it, we were the center of attention. After explaining that we were American students studying in Shanghai, we told our new friends of our failed search for the Menghai waterfalls and asked them where they were headed and if they could recommend any particular sights to visit. Looking slightly puzzled at first, they told us that this was not in fact a public bus, but rather a private bus they had rented for the day to take them to their annual family reunion at a fish farm outside of the city. Horribly embarrassed by our error, we apologized immediately and told them they could drop us off straightaway. Our new friends would have nothing to do with that idea, and instead opened their arms and demanded that we

lao Wai (old foreigners) join them for the day of fishing and celebrating. The girls and I looked at each other, and realizing that this was just the adventure we had been looking for, threw our arms in the air and gladly agreed to spend our day at the fish farm!

The next eight hours were some of the most memorable of my life. Learning how to fish with wobbly bamboo rods, preparing the fish for cooking, being taught the rules of Mahjong, struggling to learn Chinese card games, and then of course eating our catch--and about a thousand other dishes prepared from scratch in a primitive, open air kitchen--my memories from our afternoon at the fish farm are almost too surreal to recall. The hospitality and kindness of our hosts was absolutely mind-boggling to me, and I couldn't believe how eager they were to share their annual day of vacation and relaxation with complete strangers. After lunch, over more than a couple bottles of celebratory Santori beer and Chinese bai jiu (which our hosts refused to let us turn down!), we spoke for hours of America and China, the similarities and differences between our countries, the stereotypes and myths, our histories, our problems and our futures. When the sun began to set and the afternoon began to draw to a close, we boarded the mini-bus once again, this time completely at ease with those surrounding us, and headed back to the fortuitous location where we had been introduced hours earlier.

As we were being dropped off, we attempted to give some money to the head of the group, but he refused to accept so much as a penny. Profuse thanks and hopeful promises of returning in the future were all that we could offer, and before we knew it, the mini-bus bumbled off down the road and out of sight. We stood in complete awe for a minute, silently staring at one another, unaware of whether what we had just experienced was nothing more than a dream. Who could have predicted that an aborted search for waterfalls would have led us to such an adventure?

During that day spent at the fish farm, I learned more about China than any textbook could ever provide, and as I look back on it now, I can appreciate how it is the spontaneous and random moments like those, when you trust your instincts and adapt to the unexpected situation, that can turn out to be the most remarkable experiences of your life.

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