

# Junior Takes Studies a World Away

Hilary Bird goes to China in search of a new experience

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HILLARY BIRD AT THE GREAT WALL IN BEIJING

Hilary Bird is a woman who craves the new and the different. A communication major from Mont Vernon, New Hampshire, Hilary decided to study abroad in China this semester because it was one of the few places in the world that promised to be entirely different from New Hampshire. Nothing wrong with the Granite State, she says, but she desperately wanted a brand new, "cool" experience.

Her wanderlust was not without trepidation.

"A week before I left I was like, 'What am I doing?'" recalls Hilary. "I was prepared to be with a group of kids who all had perfect Chinese, a deep understanding and fascination with the culture, Chinese classes that were really hard...oh, and toilets that I had to squat on."

What she found instead is a group of students much like her in many respects. Her program at Tsinghua University in Beijing serves 30 or so students, most bilingual American-born Chinese, with a handful of others from Korea, Japan, and the Netherlands. They may have different backgrounds, but they share a curiosity about China and a desire to experience the culture first-hand. In the classroom, Hilary has found her teachers to be patient and kind. The only fear realized was the toilets: she did, in fact, find toilets she had to squat on.

Hilary has also found the difference she was hoping for. Values, behaviors—even the way the Chinese language is structured, provide a contrast to American life. She's been surprised by many aspects of Chinese culture.

"I don't know how they manage to be simultaneously so rude and polite," says Hilary, as one example. "If someone is fat, they might say to them 'Wow, you are so fat! You must eat a lot!' But in the next moment, they are offering lots of food and are so gentle and polite. In the Chinese culture, being blunt is not being rude. It is simply being honest and straight-forward, and they highly value honesty."

With the hustle and bustle of the huge population, a sea of bicycles going in every direction, and a campus many times larger than UNH, life in Beijing is fast and close. The city is highly developed, the sky thick with smog. Durham truly seems a world away.

Beyond Beijing, the surprises continue. Used to seeing images of thriving Chinese cities on the U.S. news, Hilary did not expect to see such underdevelopment in the countryside.

"The rural areas, which make up 70 percent of China's population, still are in severe poverty. This has created a huge 'wealth gap,'" says Hilary. "This is the real China — people living in shacks where they have to find their own method of getting heat and there is one shared bathroom."

"This whole experience has shown me how much more there is in the world than what I'm used to. I think when the program is over I'll crave to learn more. It may mean more traveling in my future," says Hilary.

Hilary will remain in China through mid-June, riding her bike to class, tutoring two girls in English, trying restaurants with her new friends, and haggling over prices at the markets. She'll continue to take in the cultural differences—"The Chinese people I've seen are so patient," "There are no rules on the road...the number of people I've seen almost get hit by a car is amazing," and "I don't know if they have cheese here," are a few of her daily observations.

The fascination goes both ways. Hilary is frequently stopped on the street by people who wish to take a picture with her. As a foreigner in a country that has not always welcomed foreigners, she is a bit exotic. Many older Chinese have never seen a foreigner in person. "I feel like a movie star here," Hilary says.

The attention is a boost to her confidence, the confidence she's gained by stepping outside her comfort zone in search of the new, cool experience.

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