

Monday, April 3, 2017

Dear Family and Friends:

I'm writing to add a specific Chinese National Park to your Bucket List of places-to-go-and-things-to-do before you "kick-the-bucket" as they say – Zhangjiajie (John-Jah-Gia) in Hunan Province. Truly, an amazing and fun place to visit – although the stair climbing (both up and down) is a killer!

I had heard about the Park because it was related to the movie, "Avatar" from several years ago. I knew that I wanted to visit the Hallelujah Mountain and the Glass Bridge so I mentioned it when I arrived at Huaihua University, which is also in Hunan Province. Last weekend four of us took the slow train to the town of Zhangjiajie where we were met by a driver and a guide. Early the next morning we set off for the park and started with a cable car ride high up into the mountains. For the FIRST TIME since I have been here, it did not rain! And it almost felt like it was sunny. The Glass Bridge wasn't quite what I was expecting but it was quite thrilling just the same. I read online that they had expected about 8,000 visitors a day on the bridge and were prepared to allow 800 at a time on it. Within the first week, they had had 80,000 visitors so they closed the bridge. We got there pretty early and found that all was in good shape.

After we were done we started walking down HUNDREDS of flights of stairs (my legs still hurt) headed for the bottom of the mountain so we could visit the Gorge. Thankfully, they had built in a couple of tourist-friendly shortcuts that gave us a break from the stairs. One was an old-fashioned looking slide that was just hip width for sliding down part of the way. We rented a piece of tough cloth that was tied around the waist and then around each leg to help be more slippery – and then we wore white gloves with dots on the palm that helped us to grab the edges to slow down or stop. I had no idea what I was getting in to but it sounded like fun. And it was.

A few (hundred) flights of stairs later we came upon a Zip-Line that was rigged between two mountains. Absolutely! My two translators and I jumped in line and suited up. Normally these two girls, college senior English majors, are scared of just about everything – from dogs to germs to heights to wild monkeys – but this trip seemed to be helping them find their mojo. One of them screamed the entire way across – but when she landed, she was so proud of herself that I think she would have done it again – except for having to walk down the mountain and then back up the other one to do it.

Many more flights of stairs later we made it to the bottom of the canyon and started walking along the river. Beautiful! I had visited a smaller but similar Gorge last year when I was teaching at Changzhi University. Everything about these landscapes is just overwhelming. Every now and then we were able to see the Glass Bridge that now looked like a tiny rope hanging between two mountains.



Glass Bridge



Posing with a Chinese ladies' group

3. Haworth/China 4-3-17

Our first amazing day at Zhangjiajie Park ended with a boat ride through the deeper parts of the river that took us back to our bus and then to the car.

Since it would take at least a week to see all the highlights of the park, we were only hitting the best of the best in our two-day visit. Day two involved several bus rides that took us between different viewing points in the mountain range. A lot of the scenery reminded me of parts of the Grand Canyon – certainly in dimension and in being so overwhelming. We stopped at several points with well-designed tourist and photo access. Everything was very controlled although many of the walkways had no handrails and you had to be careful where you were putting your feet. According to their website, 30.5 million people had visited the park in 2011 alone.

Since seeing the movie, “Avatar,” and finding out it was based on the mountains in Hunan Province, I had wanted to visit. I’ll have to go back and re-watch the movie now. One mountain, in particular, was renamed “Hallelujah Mountain” after the movie. On cloudy and rainy days (and, of course, these are the first sunny days since I’d gotten to China!) the clouds are below the mountain tops (and the tourists) so it looks like the mountains are floating.

I keep calling them mountains, but the ones that are standing in the middle of the gorge are really quartzite sandstone pillars (more than 3000 of them) that are beyond explanation. As tall as the mountains but completely inapproachable. Yet most of them have trees and even flowers growing in the rock.

After finally surviving the ups-and-downs of all the stairs, we exited via an impressive, 1070 foot, outdoor elevator that took us down to the bus area. And then we took the slow train back to Huaihua. My legs have not recovered yet. Amazingly my hip did OK. Many people have asked about my hip – I’ve tried Chinese massage, acupuncture, and cupping multiple times and now am surviving on pain meds. I’m hopeful this is not going to be part of the rest of my life.

Just a few days left and much to do. I’ll be back in Bemidji next week and all my students are expecting me to have the last grading done and to be over my jet lag! I’ll do my best.



Glass Bridge booties!



Tying on the "sliding cloth"



Definitely put Zhangjiajie on your Bucket List – but tone up your leg muscles before you go!

Janice Haworth

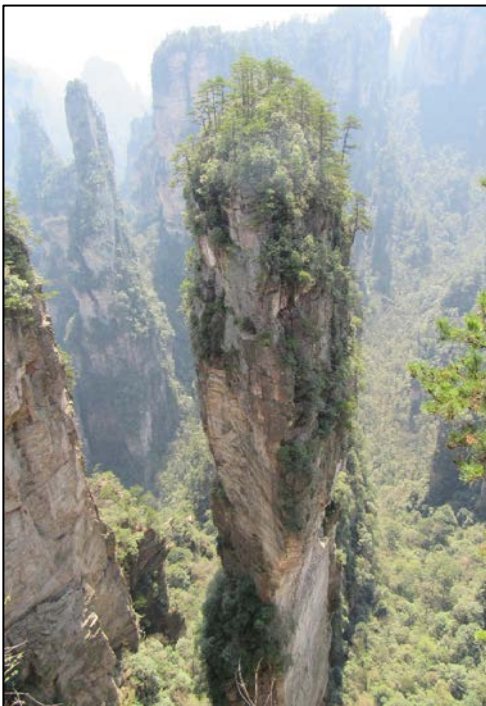
3. Haworth/China 4-3-17



Bailong Elevator at Zhangjiajie National Park



HUNDREDS of flights of stairs...



The Hallelujah Mountain



From the movie



For Marilyn J.!



Apparently, Wild Monkeys like watermelon