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**LIFE**



Approaching the Great Wall  
All photos courtesy of the author

**THE THOUGHT OF** his ten-year-old twins spending two weeks in China made Craig Miller only slightly anxious. The kids weren't alone — Seth and Claire were in China with classmates and their teacher for The International School's capstone trip. It was just that every other child had a parent accompanying them.

"It wasn't exactly that our parents weren't able to go," Claire recounted. "Our family just agreed that the trip would change us more if we went on our own."

For mom Anaïs, it seemed natural for her kids to go abroad without her. "When I was eleven, I went to a summer camp program in Mexico. I stayed with a local family on the weekends, and it was an absolutely fantastic experience. So I felt it was normal for kids to travel without their parents. After all, having experiences separate from your parents is a natural part of growing up. So for all our years at The International School, I assumed that the kids would go to China without us. We always portrayed [the] capstone [trip] as, 'You will do this in fifth grade, you'll do it on your own, and that will be part of the achievement.'"

"When our family talked about it last summer, the kids both said they wanted to go alone," Craig explained. "They said it quietly at first, but whenever we discussed it they were consistent. They both knew that they were going to be independent and adaptable to make the trip a good experience."

"In the end, the kids basically told us, 'You can come if you want, it would be nice to have you there, but we don't need you and we don't particularly want you to come,'" Anaïs added. So when other parents agreed to chaperone Seth and Claire, the adventure began. Each child would spend one week in China living with a local family and attending a local school, and a second week sightseeing with their classmates and parents from Portland.

"Before the trip, I was sort of anxious about how I was going to talk and interact with people in Chinese," Seth admitted. "But I didn't have any trouble and I really liked it. I felt comfortable in my host family's house because everyone was really nice to me. They were excited to have me there."

"I also felt like I made a friend, even though it was only a week," Seth added. "My pen-pal was really nice. And we have some stuff in common. One day we went to this really big Ferris wheel and took a ton of pictures, me and him with our arms over each others' backs doing peace signs."

"I loved the home stay because they really opened their family to us," Claire said. "They tried to make us comfortable, and they bought us things to make us feel at home. I met both sets of grandparents, and they called me 'little sister' in Chinese, which was sweet."

For Anaïs, those relationships are a big part of the trip's value. "Craig and I have lived and worked in other countries and have friends in other places. That's part of who we are. Now the

kids have their own friends in another country, so it's part of who they are too. It connects them to us in a new way."


For Seth and Claire, being so far from their parents, it was nice to know that their twin was nearby. "They're each other's first defender against anything that might be upsetting," said Anaïs. "They both really want to make sure the other is okay." So it was particularly important that the trip be an equally good experience for both kids. If one of them had been unhappy or had a lesser experience, it could have ruined the trip for both.

Claire echoed the sentiment. "You always want exactly the same thing as your twin, exactly fair. So that doesn't mean you just side for yourself — you also side for the other person. You worry about it if something is uneven."

Seth and Claire are both thoughtful about the trip's meaning. "I think I've grown because of it," Seth said. "I haven't really changed much but I feel more independent now."

"It was very valuable because I made new friends," Claire added. "I found out what it is like in China culturally, how families are, the differences and similarities, and what it's like traveling."

"We had two big motivations for the kids to go to The International School," Anaïs explained. "One was learning the language as an invaluable skill. We also really wanted them to grow up with the idea that it's very normal to be around people from other cultures. This trip makes that more concrete. I can see it in the way they talk about it. China is a real place for them now. They really know people and have friends there."

It's not abstract, it's part of life, and they're connected to another part of the world." 



Seth with host mom & brother



Seth presenting to Chinese school



Claire with host sister



Claire with gift from host school

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