This week was the moon cake festival which gave us a week off classes. The YAAD crew separated for the holiday, each with different destinations in mind. Adam headed towards Nanjing, Shelley and Sam set off for Shanghai and Dani and I went on a tour with our Costa Rican friends to Beijing, followed by a tour of Inner Mongolia.

In Beijing we first visited Tiananmen square and the forbidden city, finishing the evening in a beautiful park with a large group of fellow international students who were all studying in Beijing. The next day we visited the Summer Palace on a beautiful sunny day. The park was extremely crowded due to the holiday, but we managed to find quieter hidden places in the park to get away from the crowds and soak up the good weather. Our tour the next morning departed at 5am, and it turned out many of the other students we had met were joining us on our tour. The tour included a night in tradition Mongolian tents in the grasslands, a visit to the desert for camel riding and finally some Buddhist temples.

The Grass Lands were incredibly isolated. We all went for a walk to one of the nearby hills and standing at the top we couldn’t see civilisation in any direction. We saw a beautiful sunrise from our vantage point (and an even better sunrise the next morning apparently which I neglected to wake up for). Dinner that night was very communal in a large tent, followed by dancing outside in the middle of nowhere.

The desert was quite bizarre, as it just sort of started spontaneously where only meters away the land couldn’t be described as barren. We had a ride in a vehicle which could be best described as an open top tank which took us further into the desert. There we had a camel ride through the dunes, followed by a sand-sled ride down one of the largest sand dunes.

The next day was the Buddhist temple which was spectacularly ancient (featuring a 17m tall stone Buddha inside of a cave).

The journey had some hiccups along the way (resulting in an arrival at our hotel at 4am one night) however we saw many great sites along the way and definitely learnt a thing or two about travelling and China’s broader landscape, along with many new friends from all over the globe.

Sam and Shelley’s adventure to Shanghai sounded like a great success with shopping and karaoke. Sam bought a 120mm Hasselblad which the rest of us admired from a distance on his return (too scared to risk damaging it) and Shelley returned with some new shoes and clothes which she was very happy with.

On our return to Tianjin we all agreed it was good to be home in our familiar environment with many stories to tell and many questions to ask our fellow students about their own trips abroad (some having more success than others). The change of scene had been very nice, but we were all ready to tackle classes again on the following Monday.