

Sagehorn attends ag tour of China as state FFA officer

Written by April Peregoy

Most people who travel to other countries hope that while they're there, they can meet new people and experience a culture different from their own. Yet, between all the tourist stops, few get the opportunity to actually witness the way ordinary people live their lives day to day.

Elisa Sagehorn, daughter of Keith and Diane Sagehorn, is one of those lucky few who was able to get a real sense of the way many Chinese people work and live, when she traveled with other Colorado State FFA officers to China Nov. 10-20.

Sagehorn, a 2008 graduate of HHS, is an executive committee member of the FFA's state officer team. Her duties as an officer are hard to describe in a few words, as they encompass a wide variety of services.

Basically, being a state officer is all about service, she said. Though she is based out of her home, she travels all over the state to work with and teach to different local chapters. She's also always on call to attend conferences, speeches and funerals as an FFA representative.

Though she had to put her college plans on hold one year to be an officer, Sagehorn said she is probably learning much more than her peers in school. "It's a different kind of education I'm getting," she said.

Certainly she got quite an education on her trip to China. According to Sagehorn, the purpose of the trip was to experience agriculture in another country, and to compare it with agriculture in the U.S. "It also gave us an opportunity to work as a team and bond, and to learn to work as a team with people who don't speak English," she said.

The group of 10 officers spent the first four days of their journey in Beijing. They did some of the usual sightseeing activities, including a visit to Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden Palace, the Great Wall and the new Olympic Stadium.

On the first day, the FFA officers visited the American Embassy, where they were briefed by the USDA agricultural attaché on basic Chinese agricultural customs and what to expect during their visit.

For instance, Sagehorn said, she and the others learned that land in China is measured by units called mu. Fifteen mu equals one hectare, which is equivalent to 2.7 acres. The average farm size in China is also much smaller than the farms in the U.S. Sagehorn said most are one-acre farms.

Nearly everything produced is grown in greenhouses and crops are in the ground all year long. Everything is done by hand labor—there are no tractors.

Sagehorn said she was especially struck by the corn harvesting process. She said rather than doing it when the corn is moist like it is done in the U.S., the Chinese allow the corn to dry before they gather the stalks. When the corn is sent to feedlots for feed, water is again added to the corn to make silage.

A special treat for the group was a tour of Beijing's Ecological Farm Village. This particular farm has won many international awards for its ability to remain entirely self-sufficient. Over 800 people, making up 260 families, live in the village in a communal environment.

The village grows organic vegetables like eggplant, celery, turnips and cauliflower in the 200 greenhouses located on the farm. Over 200,000 chickens are also raised on the farm and produce enough eggs in one hour to supply each person in Beijing with one egg.

The farmers of the village are incredibly proud of their high-tech facility, said Sagehorn. However, she admitted, at first glance a Westerner would probably not think it is.

What makes this village so unique is its ability to produce its own gas supply. Manure from the chickens is used to create methane gas at the village's gas station. The station supplies gas for seven neighboring cities, which is transferred by an underground pipeline.

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A journey to a local meat company also proved to be a lesson, not just on the meat industry in China, but also in Islamic religion. As this particular company is owned by Muslims, everything is done according to the rules of Islam.

Slaughtering can only take place on Wednesdays and Thursdays, and a prayer must be said for every cow that is butchered. At 300 head a day, this means the prayers and slaughtering must be done very quickly—approximately one head per minute.

Sagehorn added the company does not breed its cattle; they buy them at approximately one year of age. The company is a major supplier for KFC, Pizza Hut and the local supermarkets.

A special beef hot-pot lunch allowed the group to sample the meat. Sagehorn said the dish is similar to fondue, only with broth. Inside the broth are different kinds of meats and vegetables.

“There was one thing in there, though, we couldn’t figure out what it was. It turned out to be a seven-year-old egg.”

Having made a commitment to try new things while on her trip, she was the only member of the group willing to try the egg. So how was it?

“It was chewy on the outside,” she answered, “but the inside tasted like an egg. It was definitely different...I don’t think I’d ever do it again.”

However, the biggest culture shock of all was felt by the FFA members during their walk through the Xin Fa Di Wholesale Market. As the second-largest market in the world, Xin Fa Di is the means by which most goods are supplied to the Beijing market.

Within the market is a meat building, which is where Sagehorn said the group got the biggest surprise of all. Inside were huge tables lined up from end to end, displaying all the different types and cuts of meat. According to Sagehorn, the meat was kept out at room temperature, with small freezers hooked up behind them. No gloves were used and the meat was uncovered, which attracted a large amount of flies.

“We’re used to seeing our meat covered up and in freezers at the grocery store,” said Sagehorn.

She added there were fat tables set up for each seller. After cutting up the meat, the butchers would throw the fat through the air onto the tables. While all this might not sound very sanitary to Westerners, Sagehorn said everything was very clean.

The group’s time in Beijing closed with a Kung Fu Show, which featured different acts of performing arts from the Tang Dynasty era. The show, explained Sagehorn, was fashioned after the kind that used to be performed for royalty during that time.

A dumpling dinner was served during the show, and the group had the chance to sample every kind of dumpling cooked in every way possible.

Real Chinese food is different than American Chinese, said Sagehorn. The diet contains a lot more vegetables and not as much meat. Restaurants feature more of a banquet style of dining and the food is served on lazy susans.

For health reasons, the group was cautioned to stay away from meat and to not drink the water. They also chose to eat their meals with chopsticks rather than forks.

During their first night in China, group members were treated to a Peking Duck Banquet. Sagehorn said the dinner is an absolute must for any tourist to participate in while visiting Beijing. The dinner ritual requires a very specific way to cut up, cook and serve the bird.

And the end result? “It wasn’t bad, but I think I’ll stick with beef,” said Sagehorn.

Upon leaving Beijing, the group took a train to Xian, one of the oldest settled regions of China. Sagehorn described it as being more condensed, but cleaner than Beijing. A bike ride along a portion of the old city wall allowed her and the rest of the officers a good glimpse of the

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city from above.

Out of all the activities and sightseeing the FFA visitors did, Sagehorn said it was agreed their visit to Northwest A&F University, just outside of Xian, was everybody's favorite. It was there they were able to speak with other students of agriculture and their professors.

"We didn't learn as much from them as we hoped, though," said Sagehorn. "It turned out they were just as excited to see us as we were to see them, and we spent more time answering their questions and talking about ourselves than we intended."

This was something the officers encountered at most places they went, said Sagehorn. "Most Chinese people have never seen a Westerner other than on TV," she said. "Often they had more questions for us than we did for them."

However, she added, some of the officers are still keeping in touch with the students they met that day.

What the group did learn from the students was somewhat surprising. For instance, though most of the students are majoring in agriculture, they are still up in the air about whether that's the direction they will take when they graduate.

Sagehorn also learned 80 percent of the people in China work in agriculture, but 80 percent of those in the field do not have any agricultural education background. One of the goals of the university is to teach these farmers more effective and efficient agricultural practices.

After Xian, the group took a flight to Shanghai, where they stopped at the Sun Qiao Modern Agri Development Zone. The Zone has won many awards for its research and has received visits from important world leaders.

Like the other farms the group saw, this one had greenhouses, but it also had more open plots of land, including water plots to grow water chestnuts and garlic chutes. Many of the materials and ideas used at the Zone came from other countries such as Japan, Denmark and Holland, according to Sagehorn.

Next, came a two-hour canal ride to the city of Suzhou. "It was really cool," she said. "It was gorgeous." However, she experienced another jolt of culture shock during the ride as they came upon houses situated right on the river.

"I saw families doing their laundry right in the river," she said, "which I didn't think much about until I realized up the river a ways there was a sewer line that was draining right into the canal." She added she also viewed people dumping their trash directly in the river.

At Suzhou, the group visited a traditional silk factory, took a tour of the Vegetable Research Institute and went to a big dairy farm.

The facility at the dairy farm, said Sagehorn, was pretty similar to ones in the U.S. except for one special room. This room, she said, was used by scientists to come up with different flavors of milk.

The group was able to sample some of the 30 varieties of milk flavors offered by the dairy. This included the most popular flavor in China: red bean. "It was not good," said Sagehorn.

Returning to Shanghai, group members took some time to do more of the typical sightseeing activities. They saw the Yu Garden, shopped along Nanjing Road and walked down the Bund. They even took an elevator to the top of the Pearl Tower—the largest in the world.

Their last evening they attended an evening performance of Chinese acrobats, which Sagehorn could only describe as "insane." She learned the young acrobats are taken from their homes at the age of 4 to begin their training and are only allowed to see their families once a year.

The young performers are trained for Olympic competition, but also can perform incredible

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yo-yo tricks, stunts and contortionist movements, according to Sagehorn.

Looking back on her trip, Sagehorn said it was a very unique experience. She was especially touched by the Chinese people she met. "There was more of a sense of community," she said. "Even though we had an interpreter, they really tried to communicate to us directly."

The trip to China was not paid for by the state, and Sagehorn said she was able to come up with the money by selling her beef this past summer. However, there were a couple of people who helped by donating some money. She said that is definitely appreciated by her.

Most of the other officers who attended, said Sagehorn, had sponsors who helped them pay for their trips. As a tribute to those people, she said the group is trying to put together a special presentation for their viewing.