Chamber to offer trip to China

By Ann Dahm
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A year ago if someone had told me the Michigan City Area Chamber of Commerce would be the impetus for a trip to China, I would have thought it impossible. Having recently returned from a tour of Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou and Hangzhou with other chamber executives, a China trip became a reality for me in 2012 and an opportunity for others in our community during 2013.

My trip to China was organized by Citslink for the Indiana Chamber Executives Association and included chamber executives and their companions from the tri-state area of Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. Citslink is the largest China tour operator in North America. Citslink’s China trip program began in 1982, and began working exclusively with Chambers of Commerce in 1994. Today they work with 800 chambers in the U.S. and Canada and send 20,000 chamber passengers to China annually. In October 2013 Citslink will be leading a trip to China for Michigan City Area Chamber members and the general public. A free informational meeting featuring Citslink’s president, Leo Liu, will be held on Jan.15 at 5:30 p.m. at the La Porte County Convention and Visitors Bureau in Marquette Mall.

Experiencing China through this tour prompted me to invert the well-known phrase "think global, act local" and to think local about Michigan City as I acted global, setting foot in a country halfway around the world that is so far away and yet so integrated into our lives. The 43 people in our tour group met at JFK International Airport to begin our trans-continental flight across the Arctic Circle and the International Dateline with arrival at Beijing Airport in the capital of China. The long flight and the sights that greeted us began a week of experiences in extremes and contrasts.

The overwhelming first impression was of the density of urbanization, home to tens of millions of people; expansive modern architecture, noted by our local tour guide as having been built in the past 20 years; and extreme capitalism, with businesses large and small evident everywhere. None of this was totally surprising, but reading about China, even seeing pictures or video does not fully convey the reality of the experience.

The traffic was an amazing amalgam of cars: many of them expensive luxury models, along with buses and electric scooters and bicycles. We traveled from the airport to our fabulous accommodations at the Sheraton Beijing Dongcheng Hotel through dense cityscape of high-rise buildings and modern urban architecture. City lights along the nighttime drive were a sensory overload of neon; familiar business names in English as well as signs with colorful Chinese characters. The sight prompted someone in our party to say, “It could only be described as New York City on steroids!” These displays of capitalism would seem contradictory in a communist country, but entrepreneurialism is foremost in China’s culture.

Our three day stay in Beijing was packed with tours of the contemporary, e.g. the site of the 2008 Olympics with its Bird’s Nest Stadium, and the modern expansion of Tiananmen Square interspersed with tours of the ancient including the Forbidden City, the Great Wall and the Ming Emperors’ Tombs. Highlights of our visit were trips to the pearl and jade factory stores, the Beijing Duck dinner, the gardens of the Summer Palace, lunch at the home of a local family and a tour of Old Beijing by rickshaw. Our stay ended with a business dinner hosted by local officials.

The next day we took a morning flight to Shanghai then a charter bus ride to Suzhou. This magnificent “smaller” city of waterways, with an urban population of over 5.81 million compared to Beijing’s 9.65 million and Shanghai’s 12.29 million, is aptly dubbed the Venice of the East. That evening we were guests at a banquet with members of the Suzhou municipal government. Two half-days visiting Tiger Hill, the centuries old Lingering Garden, a silk factory, the National Embroidery Institute and a boat ride through the winding canals of Suzhou ended with a charter bus ride to Hangzhou. There we visited the Lingyin Buddhist Temple, enjoyed a relaxing boat ride on West Lake and toured the Longjing Green Tea Plantation. We were driven back to Shanghai for our remaining day in China. It
began with a panel discussion addressing the question: "What is it like doing business in China?" The panel of American businesspeople who have worked in China for some time provided candid answers to our questions. Then a visit to the Bund – the city’s famous waterfront park was a reminder of Michigan City’s lakefront location. The busy day continued with a visit to the silk rug factory outlet, then Yu Garden and the bazaar in the Old City. Our evening entertainment was a spectacular performance by Chinese jugglers and acrobats.

The days in Suzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai were perhaps my favorite part of the trip and made me long for more time in this incredibly fascinating place.