

Step by step

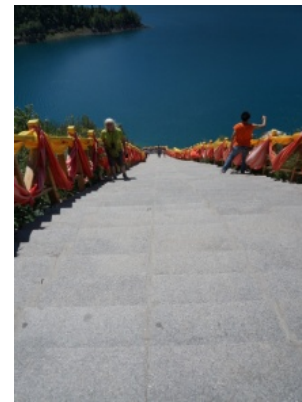
Ferry and Aukje September 2013

Our six floor apartment block does not have an elevator as no building of six floors or less is allowed one in China. We live on the fifth floor and teach on the fifth floor and thus there are many steps we negotiate every day. Tough? You get used to it and it is good exercise. Imagine the water-courier though. We buy our drinking water, ordering two 20 litre bottles at a time and they are delivered at our front door. After the holidays a new water-carrier came up. Not the strappy young man who lugged two containers up at the same time, but a much older man, who could only manage one, and took a lot longer to get up the stairs. Then he had to go down again to get us the next container. It's his job. Downstairs in front of the apartment he had parked his three wheel electrical motorbike packed with more bottles to deliver. He is lucky, he has electrical transport. We have seen men on pushbikes delivering as many as eight full bottles of water or gas.

China is the land of steps. There are many places where you have to go down some steps first, just to get up some others later. The mountains too are adorned with gigantic flights of stairs. During our short mid-autumn break we had a day out to Mount Yanzhi near Shandan, and it made us stand still – to admire the view and catch our breath at nearly 2800 metres – by the fact that all these steps were made by men and women, carrying huge amounts of concrete and stone slabs up this steep mountain.



Whereas in New Zealand tracks through the bush are mostly nice and soft underfoot, here in China your feet usually meet concrete, rock or the occasional wooden boardwalk. The sheer volume of people that use these paths

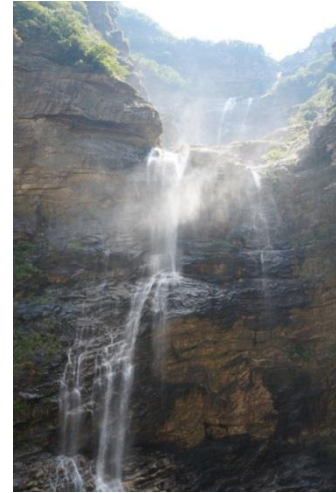


would probably leave the trails muddy and worn if it were not for the solid surface underneath. Also the most direct way to the top is straight up, so there are few meandering paths with a slowly ascending gradient.



Traveling in our free time has seen us climb many steps; under- or overpasses in busy cities, up and down mountains, up to temples, and up inside pagodas. This summer we visited Lushan National Park, a good 1200 metres above the city of Jiujiang. It was a popular summer resort for

western missionaries and visited by people like Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek, to escape the hot humid summers at lower altitudes. With every 100 metres up, the temperature seemed to drop one degree Celsius. We enjoyed a pleasant couple of days with temperatures just below 30°C for a change. On the mountain you can take buses to different beautiful sites in the area, one of them



the “three-step waterfall”. After a fifteen minute walk from the bus stop - on a path made of boulders laid in concrete - to the cable car that would cover a rough section of the mountain,



there was sign that it would be another kilometre and a half to the waterfall. It was straight down on steep steps only wide enough to accommodate small Chinese feet, large sections without a handrail. On the way down with wobbly knees, we could see on the faces of the people on their way up that the return trip was going to be hard work. Some of them chose being carried in a chair, but most, many of them of an age where you would not have been surprised to see them shuffle around with a

Zimmer-frame, did it under their own steam. A grandfather and his grandson were counting the steps as they hauled themselves up the steep steps. 1417, give or take a few, as I lost count a few times saying hello to people as more poured down to the waterfall as we made our way back up.

These steps need to be maintained and it is humbling when you take a break and you see a man doing the same, resting against a large flat rock that he is carrying on his back for some repair work further up the mountain.

We saw the Longsheng rice terraces near Guilin and the Zhuanglang terraced fields in Gansu, all man-made, uncountable hours of manpower to shift and tame mountains, one step at the time.

