

This essay is about the eight weeks that I spent working for Adventure-Ship this summer. It was a good eight weeks. I think I got a lot done, and I learned quite a bit.

When asked what I did this summer, I usually respond, “I was working for a small non-profit group in Hong Kong that does sailing programs for disabled kids.”* If my audience bothers to ask for detail (and they usually will, since it’s a pretty interesting thing to be doing in a pretty interesting place), I approximate my job as a “curriculum consultant”. I think this best describes what I did for AS; it also sounds much better than “unpaid summer intern”, which was my official title.

I worked on three major projects this summer: an evaluation of the safety and effectiveness of the current Adventure-Ship training program; a collection of guidelines for teaching students with various disabilities; and a curriculum proposal for groups returning for their second, third, or fourth trip. I also made a display of nautical knots, but that was mostly a gift.

This wasn’t always a fun job. I spent about twelve days on the boat, and being the only native English speaker on the boat was difficult at times. The office was tough only because this was my first full-time desk job, and my wrists proved too weak for so many hours at a computer.

* The official Adventure-Ship nomenclature is “children with disabilities”, so I suppose I should explain why I use this term here and throughout:

My disabled friends prefer “disabled” to “[person, child, etc.] with disabilities”. They consider the latter unnecessarily euphemistic and condescending. It has been argued that “people with disabilities” puts emphasis on the fact that they are people first and that their disability is not a defining trait; however, because English favors an adjective-noun word order and because spoken English tends to emphasize the last word in a phrase, I think this awkward construction actually draws considerable attention to the disability and the speaker’s discomfort with it.

Of course, there are some groups for people with disabilities who prefer to be called just that, so it makes perfect sense that Adventure-Ship should continue using this moniker in public statements and literature to avoid alienating any part of its audience. But since I have the luxury here of terminological interpolation, I’m going to stick with “disabled” to avoid ear-splitters like “playing with a child with a disability.”

Having said that, I did have a good time overall. It's tough to complain too much about bumming around the islands of Hong Kong in a gorgeous junk with 40 happy kids and an energetic crew who also happen to be great cooks. Nor can a single word be spoken against the Adventure-Ship office as long as Mimi Yeung, AS's executive secretary and secret mastermind, is there with hot tea and extra umbrellas for the occasional typhoon.

Mimi deserves at least a paragraph of her own here, if not whole monographs. I've known no one in my life so devoted to her job, and I don't think I could have had a better hostess in a new country. Mimi met me at the airport. She showed me around my neighborhood. She taught me the intricacies of the MTR. She bought candy for me at work. She planned a trip to Macau for us, and researched another to Thailand for me. She took me to the movies. She told me where to go shopping. She got me a tutoring job. She introduced me to her grandmother. She was nothing but nice and generous and helpful at every turn, and anyone whose life is just a little bit richer for the part that Adventure-Ship has played is in her debt.

I want to explain why AS is a worthwhile program and why I'm glad I had the chance to help it along, but to do so I think I should begin with my reactions to Hong Kong.

It's the most beautiful city skyline I've ever seen. I like that there are mountains and sea so close to each other. If you're interested in business and good Asian food, it's one of the best places in the world to live. A few firsts for me: live horse racing, internet gaming rooms (bring earplugs), Coke in the bottle made with sugar instead of corn syrup, class eight typhoons (what happened to four through seven?), HK\$20 t-shirts, HK\$70

New Yorkers, dragon boat races, clean subway trains, styptic air-conditioning in public places, tofu-based dessert soups, jitneys and charabancs.

Hong Kong is also humid and smoggy and crowded, and that weighed heavily on me. Hong Kong makes it hard to be outside. It's 65 degrees indoors *everywhere*, even on the buses, so you always have to wear pants at least and sometimes even a sweater to avoid catching cold, but all the extra clothing just makes it worse when you do get outside and you end up scrambling through the thermonuclear heat along a perfect vector to the next air-conditioned shelter where in five minutes time your sweat-drenched clothes will freeze to your skin. Outside is Bad in Hong Kong.

It's precisely because of this forced indoorsiness that Adventure-Ship is so desperately needed for HK's youth, and not just those with disabilities. I wasn't so surprised to learn that many of the children in the disabled groups had not been on a boat before—while I didn't have any firsthand evidence of it, it made sense to me that parents of disabled children would tend to be very protective. I was shocked, however, when I found that many of the students from a Hong Kong University group, people my age and in all ways able, had never before swum in the ocean despite living on an island surrounded by it. Several couldn't swim at all. I swim piscatorially and have done so since my age was counted in months, so this might have actually been my greatest moment of culture shock all summer.*

The way I see it, Adventure-Ship's main purpose right now is to get kids outside and show them that it's not always Bad, that in fact it's frequently fun and enlightening. There's more to it than just this—inspiring personal growth, teaching about the ocean,

* Judging by their reactions, it seems the students suffered a similar shock when they learned that I didn't own a cell phone.

etc.—but these are limited by the program’s current time constraints and the weaknesses of the beautiful-but-increasingly-decrepit *Huan*. What AS has this very minute is the ability to capture young imaginations and get them thinking about what’s Out There, beyond the seawalls and Star Ferries. There’s only so much that can be learned in one day on the water, but with a lot of work and little luck Adventure-Ship can start a chain-reaction in a child, piquing his curiosity about uncontrolled environs and maybe even starting a lifelong trend of exploring them.

Adventure-Ship is not a perfect program, in part because it is not ready to offer that kind of in-depth outdoor experience. I spent a good part of the summer working on this problem, and I feel confident that Adventure-Ship will be ready to expand its program to a more thorough curriculum by the time the new *Huan* is christened. But despite this fault, there’s something here that keeps schools, volunteers and donors coming back, and it is more than just the force of a twenty-year history: our imaginations have been captured, just like those of our students. We share more than a ship with them; we share a dream of where that ship can take us.

The greatest pleasure of this job was being asked to dream that future, to imagine what is really possible for Adventure-Ship in the years to come. I am grateful for that opportunity. Few people are asked to dream professionally, and I’m proud to be one...I guess you could say it’s a dream come true.