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National Holiday

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National holiday has ended recently (October 1 to 9) and the program took us on a trip to Chengde from October 3 to 5. Chengde has a variety of temples, gardens and palaces that are all worth a visit. Because we already paid the program fee, we paid in advance for all travels and this trip was free. We took a bus from campus and stopped by the most well-preserved section of the Great Wall, which is called Jinshanling. It was the first time I'd ever seen the Great Wall in person and it's truly awe-inspiring. The Great Wall is an array of grey-brown bricks stacked so high it makes you feel like you're in a maze, even though it's essentially a straight line. The stairs are all uneven, with some steps wider and some steps higher than others so that if invading troops are on horses, the horses won't be able to find a rhythm. After the Great Wall, we filed back into the bus and headed the rest of the way to Chengde. I tried to do a bit of homework on the bus, but when you're surrounded by interesting people in an interesting place, homework never seems as important. Chengde was cold, but it was nothing compared to Inner Mongolia. National holiday, which is the equivalent of fall break, is the perfect time to travel due to its length. Chengde only lasted until the 5th, so from the 6th to the 8th a group of us decided to go to Inner Mongolia! It's crowded and hard to get transportation, so I'd suggest always booking a month in advance if you can. Train tickets generally don't go on sale until a week before departure, which I feel is a good system (if you can get around the massive lines). We took a flight to Hohhot, one of the major cities in Inner Mongolia, and booked a tour. Both the flight and the one night, two day tour were around 200 dollars (USD) each. We rode horses the first day, and it's always surprising how little concern there is for safety. I assume there's no such thing as a lawsuit against small horse farms far out in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, because there was nothing to sign that said "if you die, we are not responsible." At the end of the ride, the guide started using his whip to make popping noises that spurred the horses to go as fast as they could. I'm grateful all of us were in fairly good shape and no one fell off, although I came close to it a few times. It was insanely fun though. The night of the 6th was spent in a Mongolian yurt. If you don't know what it is, it's a small hut that has basically no heating. We locked our yurts with padlocks from the outside, so I'd call it a sort of metal safe for humans to sleep in. I will never ever stay in a yurt again (unless it's much warmer) but I'm glad to be able to say I've spent a night in a Mongolian yurt. We were supposed to watch the sunrise at 5 a.m., and all our alarms went off, but none of us thought it was worth getting out of bed once we felt the temperature. We rode camels the next day, and went sand-sliding to finish the tour off. Finally, we checked into our 5-star hotel to recuperate and take wonderful hot showers. The last day we explored Hohhot on our own. It's a great city, very relaxed, and there are good deals everywhere. I returned to Beijing with a cold and a wealth of experiences in China under my belt, and I'm so glad to have had the opportunity to explore.