

Chapter Eight...early to late August 2007...in which I have three of the best weeks of my life

Hi everyone,

It's been a long time between drinks. Since last chapter, I've been living a *totally* different life - it's been three of the best weeks of my life, and, thus, this chapter will be dedicated to this place. Some names have been changed to protect a) the innocent, and b) random idiots.

This place is in the Chinese version of woop woop, called Red Horse Lake, aka *chi ma hu*, aka 赤马湖, about ninety minutes by bus west of Changsha (长沙), Hunan province's (湖南) capital, on a predominantly dirt and rock road. This little adventure started when Barry rolled up to my joint with a six pack (which is usual for him). He told me about this mate of his (Tom), who was starting some kind of English camp in Hunan, and he was recruiting teachers, so he was inviting people to come check the joint out. I checked out the place's website (www.redhorselake.com.cn). A few things got my attention, so I said yeah OK, let's check it out [*this website is long gone*].

To get there, we got a train from Wuchang to Changsha, where we were picked up and taxied to the office. Here we discovered that we'd be waiting for three hours, because, apparently, the van only went from the camp to Changsha and back *twice a day*. Eventually getting on the bus, the people in it (a couple of others doing a recce like us) were all pretty cool - there was instantly good rapport. I've noticed that China, and some places in particular, attracts the most bewilderingly strange cross-section of people, and, in this regard, Red Horse Lake is up there with the best...lots more on this later.

We got there, met a few people over chow, and got allocated rooms. We went down to this little wharf on the lake and had a few beers and a chinwag. I instantly liked the environment - a calm, quiet,

natural-looking lake maybe a k and a half from our part of the shore to the opposite bank.

Next day, after we had a look around...how can I describe this place?...it's difficult, because I can't figure out *what this place used to be, and who it might have originally been for*. But, well, here goes...it's like a resort, with small rooms with only a bed, air conditioner, TV, dunny and shower. The rooms are in wildly varying states of disrepair, and haven't been decently cleaned in years, maybe decades. Many of the rooms in these two-storey buildings look over a currently empty Olympic-sized swimming pool. To one side of this, there's a basketball court, and on the other, a volleyball court, which is looked over by coliseum-style concrete seats/steps, which look in such a decrepit state, it's like I've bumped into a deserted Roman city. Near the basketball court, there's a courtyard with buildings curiously painted with murals of western landmarks (Mount Rushmore, Big Ben, Hollywood, the Eiffel Tower, Sydney Opera House). The other buildings are a) teaching rooms, and b) works in progress (more on these soon).

OK, the place is a deserted resort, but who was here first? The massive pool would say athletes, and the western toilets say foreign athletes...but the fact that the rooms are small, and have no fridge, kitchen or anything, says that they were not athletes used to the Hilton – the same goes for the roads getting out here, or the lack thereof. And the general state of the place is a definition of the euphemism “renovator's dream”. So who was this joint intended for, and when?

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The deal with this joint nowadays, is, apparently, this – it's been deserted for an unknown period of time, and a small bunch of people (locals and foreigners) have taken it over to create a “total immersion environment” in which to learn English. In other words, there are no actual classes as such (they're so informal they hardly constitute the term “class”); instead, this place has the vision of becoming a foreigner-run place where students just hang out with

foreigners (ie a camp, with cafés and bars run by foreigners) and learn the language that way. Cool and noble vision.

On the second day, we went up to the local “town”, which is... how can I describe it...it’s rural China, mate!! It’s like being in a 3D *National Geographic*. It’s sublimely surreal – dirt streets, tiny open shops with fridges out the front, buildings made of simple wooden frames, none of them more than a storey tall, kids in faded shirts kicking a lone ball around, streets covered in drying chilies or garlic, sounds of insects, kids playing, mumbles of people talking from far away, an olfactory world that doesn’t assault your senses on a minute-by-minute basis like Wuhan does, a chicken or five wandering around...this wonderful, simple, unpretentious place was the China that I’d come to China to see.

I quickly realised that the attitude towards foreigners here is gorgeously different – when they spotted me, or us, and I said *ni hao*, most of them beamed – a real, *genuine*, beaming smile. Little kids stood at the door and yelled “hello!!” at us, and I replied with both hello and *ni hao*. Their parents beamed. A minority just kept staring after we said hi, but it was a different *kind* of stare – like they’re *genuinely* stunned, because they’ve simply never seen a foreigner before, in stark contrast to the most common Wuhan-style stare, which says “wow, there’s another one of those weird things, I’ll stare at it and see what it does” [*there are definitely different kinds of stares, depending on a) if they’ve actually ever seen a foreigner before, and b) how shameless they are in staring at you. Red Horse Lake is an example of the former and Wuhan the latter. Their attitude towards foreigners is another factor which affects how they treat you, which can change according to any personal, social, political, geographical, historical or any other aspect, and you won’t know until it’s in front of you*].

We watched a few classes, and met some teachers. I liked what I saw. Very easy, free, informal. The main reasons I came back, two days later, to stay and work, were the work style, the environment, and the people. At night, after eating at an on-site restaurant populated by just us, we went down to the wharf again, which

was actually the home of a former world champion water skier. In this little room, there was a photo of her, sitting neglected but proud in a frame with a coating of grey dust, getting her medal in the early nineties or something. It seems that you can find world champions in odd places – an ex-world champion is currently living in a shack on the shores of a lake in a part of remote rural China that very few people have heard of.

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Now to my life in Red Horse Lake as a teacher, once I'd moved back for the summer break. I'll go day by day (sort of) for a while, because there's been so much cool stuff, so much weird politics (that I thankfully have to play no part in), so many cool people, and so many fun classes. Getting back there from Wuhan (this time Barryless, therefore alone) was interesting...I was lugging about forty kilos in 36-degree heat (expecting to be gone for a weekish), across a massively overcrowded road, and, once at the station, I found that I'd missed the train by *one minute*. When I discovered this, I gave any of the locals who cared to listen a short but extremely thorough course on English profanities and various ways to use them.

On my first day back, I got up at six am to find the electricity off. Yeah no worries, especially since, looking out the balcony window across the lake and the mostly-greenish hills, I could only wonder at how much this place beat Wuhan. After a coffee (canned), I went to the brekkie room for a presumed rendezvous with other people; but, alas, not a single soul graced the Lazy Susan. Hmm...OK, I thought, no biggie, so I happily explored and moseyed, bumping into locals here and there and pleasantly bewildering them. Eventually admitting defeat, I retreated to my room, figuring that if anyone wanted me, they'd know where I was.

Soon enough, Vincent – a Canadian who was, as far as I could tell, my second boss – rolled up. He worded me up – there were no classes today, Tom was in Wuhan, the other teachers had bailed, and Sue-Lin (more on her later) was off gallivanting in another

province. Also, he told me ever so casually, a hundred and twenty ten-to-twelve year old students were rolling up tomorrow at eleven. Hmmmm. So, after discussing my actual role there, dosh, and what to do on this particular day (nothing), he left me there both happily filled in and quite euphorically confused.

About an hour after that, I went to the local shop (about ten minute's walk down a dirt road). I gotta say, again, that rural China is pretty stunning. People are genuinely interested in you, and throw you smile after smile as you pass and say gudday to them. Streets are covered in chillies drying in the sun, sometimes corncobs as well. The surrounding landscape is just beautiful. Call me easily pleased, but being surrounded by makeshift farmland, bodies of not-totally-brown water, rolling green hills and billowing white clouds, after Wuchang, made me feel like a pothead returning to Byron Bay after a week in the "big smoke".

So that's about it for the first day. I just hung out with whoever was there, and we talked about what we were actually doing in Red Horse Lake (RHL), which seemed to be this – there were teacher's jobs, and, also, "entrepreneurial positions", in which you run a business, get a retainer for it, as well as any profits. Vincent and Tom were sizing me up to run the burger joint, but eventually we agreed that I'd be a teacher by day, and I'd run the burger joint at night, training staff, so that, ultimately, I'd have a coordinator role. Like so many things in China, and almost everything in RHL, it sounded great *in theory*.

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Now for a description of the ecosystem of souls that inhabited RHL during my stay there. I'd already sussed that China attracts a pretty strange breed of foreigner – normal people don't really fit in here (whatever a "normal" person is). However, in terms of a massively eclectic cross-section of bizarre people in one place, RHL is a nest of eccentricity. And, because it currently has a high turnover, RHL is/was a magnet for transitory weirdasses (during my twenty-four days there, I saw *nineteen* staff come and go, with

only ten of those present for the majority of that time). There's many factors to account for this, and I'll try to get to them all.

OK, the people...I'll start with someone who ran screaming while I was there. Dean's a forty or fifty-something ex-army guy who I enjoyed talking to one-on-one, but he had the social skills of an overly-territorial rhino. Sometimes his comments surprised even me (I'm not known for being very subtle) - blunt, you-think-that-not-say-it kind of comments. Dean was one of the currently failed entrepreneurs because of the failed political machinations of RHL - he was brought in to run a paintball range. I don't know much about paintball, but I do know that you need paintball guns for it - they never came. So by the time Dean left, he'd been sitting on his ass for months, being paid the retainer, and being bored out of his skull.

So bye bye Dean. Next there's Carol, of a similar age, another one with all the social finesse of a bull who'd been slapped in the face with an irate barracuda, who was there to run a coffee shop that never opened. She'd also been sitting on her retainer, and, at time of writing, I've left her there. Then there's some guy called Bill, a twenty-something pissed paedophile who'd been kicked out of at least two other places for cracking onto the kids (all of this is hearsay). I only met him twice. They flew him to Guangzhou to make sure he was gone. So bye bye Bill.

There was also Bill Part Two (I'm not using pseudonyms at all, am I?), who was a secret agent of some sort, possibly CIA, who was, apparently, at RHL between missions - he even had an assistant Chinese dwarf with him 24/7 (I kid you not). In retrospect, God knows who or what this guy actually was. The probability of his story being bullshit was somewhere between zero and a hundred percent - it's pretty hard to give a more accurate number.

Now, onto the long termers...let's start with Kevin. My God, I have no idea how to describe this guy. My usually flamboyant vocabulary just sits and stares at him. Well, I'll try...he's forty or fifty something, and he's travelled a lot around China, read a ton

of philosophical/new age/meditation kind of stuff (perhaps too much) in both English and Chinese (maybe more), and he always carries around a big jar of "tea", which is in inverted commas because I bet you a thousand *kuai* it ain't just tea he's drinking - he is *totally* off the planet. Whenever you see him walking around, he just stops now and then, anywhere, and does some form of seemingly impromptu *tai chi*, seemingly oblivious to anyone around him. When he's in a meeting, he's often reading a book, but when you ask him a question he's got an answer of some sort.

Well.....of some sort. Let me give you some examples. For a week, all the teachers had a daily Q & A session with the students, and Kevin's answers were...uumm...uumm...I *still* don't know what to make of them. For instance, when a student asked him something innocent like "do you like being a teacher", he went on about him not being a teacher at all, but instead being the wind and the sky and the trees and stuff. I remember listening to him in the corner of my ear, and wondering what the hell the students were possibly making of this guy. When one asked him "do you like Chinese movies", his answer discussed the artistic and moral ramifications of censorship versus passion (the kid who asked was about twelve). I can't really describe his answers much more, other than to say someone desperately needs to sample and loop this guy - they'd make a fortune. Adding to his sample and loopability was that about a third of his answers were in Chinese, and he whistles more than talks. I guess the biggest impression that he gave me is that maybe - just maybe - he's actually the next link in the mental and spiritual evolution of the human race. Maybe we should all be worshipping him. Either that, or he's just a stoned frootloop *par excellence*.

Then there's Ron, the seventy-four-year-old American basketball player. Yep, seventy-four, and he's still playing. He's hearing's shot, he forgets things on a regular basis, but he's cool, intelligent and sharp for his age. His wife died I don't know how long ago, and I think he's in China now because it's the only continent he hadn't been to before. He's had a pretty eventful life, including working for the American UFO investigation squad. Because he

teaches basketball, the kids adore him. They call him Grandad, but we all call him Einstein because of the uncanny resemblance.

There's also Jalal, an articulate Pom who's in China to learn a martial art or two, and Nadia, a black African girl studying to be a highway engineer, sporting a thick African accent, which caused some problems with the kids [*accents can be a problem if you're teaching here. It's good to be warned – if you have a thick African, Indian, Scottish or Irish accent, you're going to have problems. You just need to remember that, in many parts of China, they've been raised on Hollywood, ie the American accent. The Harry Potter films, and BBC shows like Sherlock, diversified things a bit, but still, if your accent is thick, you'll have a hard time*]. Then there's Sue-Lin, a first-generation Chinese Australian. She's the most clued-in, with it gal I've met in ages.

My two main bosses are a) a sportsperson turned businessman (I'll just call him Tom Smithee), and the Canadian guy. There's also a couple of financiers, but they'll be mentioned later, along with the Chinese bosses...there's so much cross-cultural politics in RHL, and so much naked nepotism on the Chinese bosses' part, that a novel could be written about this place. The only question is whether it'd be a tragedy or a comedy...

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Next day...the hundred and twenty students rolled up, and me, Sue-Lin and a couple of others issued them with "passports" – there's a reception desk, an immigration counter, and a bank that they roll up to and do all this stuff in English, so it's like a simulation centre, hence "total immersion environment". We did paperwork, I asked a coupla random questions, and I just pointed them toward another desk. Fun 'n' easy.

I had an absolute *ball* the following day – we went for a "hike" with the students. We rounded up at six-thirty am, but, because of perplexingly ineffective organisation, we didn't leave until a quarter past eight. We wanted to leave earlier because the weather

was *HOT* (oh, I haven't mentioned the weather - remember this is the middle of central China's summer, which means that most days were in the high thirties).

We got into little rough 'n' tumble buses, and drove to a hill about half an hour away. Of the foreigners, only me and Sue-Lin came along. It was gloriously grassroots - on a crowded old bus, driving down a single-lane road covered in drying chillies, rice fields on either side stretching as far as the base of the nearest tree-covered hill, little clay buildings here and there used for who knows what, green hills surrounding us, and, of course, the locals doing whatever they do...just amazing, because there was something to see no matter *where* I looked, not to mention the continual soundtrack of energetic kids happily juggling languages all around me. After happily drinking in this environment, we stopped in a bushland near a couple of hills.

We went bushwalking, passing crops here and there, and after maybe forty-five minutes walk, we ended up on top of a hill overlooking the valley...after the dust-drenched industrial chaos of Wuhan, I was in *paradise*...rolling green hills, blue sky, and a panorama of white clouds...I was *so* impressed. We found someone's house and munched on some corncobs there - this old guy was busy making a bed frame from bamboo, chiselling away the mortise section, as Sue-Lin had a chat with him. Like so many times in RHL, this guy showed me the real face of China - just a simple guy, face canyoned from years of work, still smiling away modestly as he made his furniture by hand in a little hut in the middle of a bush.

After hours of joyous meandering, we bussed back to camp, had lunch, chilled for a bit, and then I had my first classes, which were four half-hour classes, one after the other. Because they were so short, they worked extremely well - there was no time for either me or the students to get bored. I can't remember what they were about, either the first time or over the next couple of weeks - it changed every day.

The students were from about eight to eighteen, and were divided into beginner, intermediate and advanced classes. Teaching each group was a different challenge, especially since I'd never done anything like it before. The challenge of the beginner's class was giving them concepts and words simple enough for them to understand (their level of English was A is for Apple kind of thing), while also trying somehow to get their attention. The advanced class was a totally different challenge - give them something intellectually stimulating. I used a few ideas that I'd used back in Wuhan, such as getting them to play a card game that they know in Chinese, but to translate it all into English - they loved that. I had to brainstorm something every night, but because the classes were so short, coming to class with just one or two ideas was enough.

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For the next few days I basically taught four classes in the morning, and tried my best to run the burger joint at night. And when I say "try my best", well, the place had some fundamental problems. For instance, correct me if I'm wrong, but hamburger places have hamburgers in them.

...So now is a good time to introduce the politics/ineffective organisation at RHL. During the vast majority of the time I ran this burger joint, I had no burgers to sell; only drinks, and, sometimes, chips. The reasons for this were that a) the supplies came from Changsha (not a problem for anyone organised), b), when they actually sent someone, they sent a Chinese person to do a westerner's shopping (it makes a big difference), and c) directly opposing senses of priorities between the foreign and local people. I ordered supplies, and they came...once. I sold them all in one night. I ordered more. They came back incomplete and wrong. I ordered more. One delivery had six hundred buns with nothing to put in them [*I kid you not. I still can't believe it, all these years later... imagine getting a delivery of six hundred buns and nothing else*].

One night, we sold a hundred burgers and made over a thousand *kuai*. The Chinese seem to be money-driven, but my

experiences out in RHL put that theory in doubt. In RHL, it wasn't about money, it was about themselves. Example after example emerged of them looking after themselves, and being extremely blatant about it, usually at the expense of the foreigners. It was entertaining to witness all these politics in the early days, when I knew I was leaving, but, later, when I wanted to move there, the more frustrating and disappointing it all became. You'll hear more of it soon.

But, well, in any workplace, it's the people you work with that make a job, and me, Tom, Vincent and his wife, Sue-Lin, Jalal, Ron and Nadia made a core team, with Kevin and Carol floating around the periphery (literally or otherwise), and I felt a sense of camaraderie that I'd not felt before in China. We looked out for each other, and it often feel like a little family - here, at RHL, where we were united in bewilderment.

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Day twelve...what I did in the intervening days you've heard, and I had a damn good time doing it [*I'll always remember these days as some of the most fun in my life...the environment, my job, the enthusiasm of the kids, and my wonderfully eclectic co-workers...it all just clicked. As I now know, summer camps here are a huge gamble (see the later Chapter on Changsha). In RHL, the gamble paid off*].

Around day twelve, however, we got some visitors, including my other employer from Wuhan (an Australian), and Barry, but, as timing would have it, they came at the same time as, shall I call him, Bill Part Three.

Bill Part Three was, basically, a drunken asshole. He was OK when sober, but that was almost never. When drunk, he was just an asshole that got everyone's riles up - he was one of the most convincing arguments for sobriety I'd ever met. And, because I was the barkeep, I had to both put up with him, *and* keep fuelling his incessant gasbagging. He was *hard work*. Basically, he got drunk, insulted the crap out of anyone and everyone, but, in the

morning all was forgotten...according to him.

At time of writing, he was one of the financiers of RHL. The day after he arrived, a second financier called Bill Part Four rolled up. He was good mates of Bill Part Three, and was generally a pretty good bloke, but when Bill Parts Three and Four got together, the amount of inebriated testosterone was ridiculous. Bill Part Four was a full-blown entrepreneurial businessman, as far as I could tell, and RHL was just one of the pies he had his fingers in. I also sussed out that if I moved to RHL, I'd see Bill Part Four fairly regularly, but Bill Part Three basically never. That sounded cool, but, at time of writing, Bill Part Four has been sacked by the Chinese partners – because I saw his character, it's pretty obvious that he wanted to get people off their asses who were actually very comfortable on their asses, so they told him to fuck off.

Bill Part Four was also a mate of one of the Chinese bosses, who I'll just call J. J strikes you as a pretty warm kind of person, if a bit of a yarnspinner (he's the only Chinese partner who can speak any English). With time, and with the aid of the massively bloated grapevine, I found that he's less of a yarnspinner and more of a bullshitter (yes, there is a difference)...promise after promise kept getting made and never fulfilled. For anyone who remembers that old English series *Minder*, J has been called the Arthur Daley of RHL. I also heard that he spins yarn after yarn to the main Chinese financier, who I'll call Chinese Bill Part One, who, as a result, has no clue of what's going on in his own backyard.

The Chinese contingent is unashamedly nepotistic. Tons of the staff are somehow related – a brother-in-law here, a mate-of-a-mate there. The grapevine is bloated with such revelations, and things click and pennies drop on a regular basis (especially in regards to people who should be sacked but they're related to someone, for instance the guy who “drives” the bus from Changsha to the camp, who has all the driving abilities, not to mention idea of timetables, of a partially-digested lamington). It's good to know this, because it helps explain odd things when they invariably happen.

I'll mention some of the wildlife, since I saw a lot of it at the bar at night, since the light bulb out the back attracted this that and the other. Firstly, there were little bats around at dusk, which are cool, as well as huge dragonflies and even bigger locusts *en masse*. The latter get to about ten centimetres long, and have huge, spindly hind legs. I got a good look at a dragonfly one night, and it looked like it had a coating of armour – it looked amazing. There were also snakes, although I never saw a live one (a skeleton of one was being picked clean by ants in the volleyball court). There were also huge Huntsman spiders here and there, which made me wonder where the species originated (they looked different from the ones in Oz, but not much). There were also big white water birds of some sort. All in all, summer in RHL is thriving with life (all this is worth mentioning because Wuhan has none).

One night when the motley crew were here is particularly noteworthy...normally, we foreigners chow in one room, while the Chinese scoff in another. One thing the Chinese people do whenever they get the chance to is get smashed on *baijiu*, the mega-strong rice wine I mentioned earlier. One night, Tom and Bill Part Four decided to screw around with the security staff – unannounced, one of them wandered into their room, who all cheered a hearty greeting, and poured him, and themselves huge bowls of this rice wine out of a two-litre plastic bottle (yep, plastic). They all yell *ganbei*, which is cheers [no, *ganbei* (干杯) *literally translates as “dry cup”, which means you need to drink it all. In English, it would be “bottoms up” or something like that*], and sculled it...Tom first, then Bill Part Four, then me, then Bill Part Four again...so, because they were all *ganbei*-ing to all these foreigners, the entire security staff was plastered that night. Apparently, this is how you win street cred/do business over here – and, well, if I said I didn't have fun, I'd be lying.

On the fourteenth or fifteenth day, both the Bills vamoosed, and I was offered a contract with RHL...but, well, there were too many variables to the nature/stability of the entire venture at the

moment, from what I could see. If RHL could iron out its ripples (more like canyons and glaciers), I'd probably be writing this out there, instead of back in Zhongnan like I'm doing now.

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Tom shouted us to a night on the "town", ie a little five-horse village about twenty minutes away. This was great fun, and I guess it was one of the nights that made me glad I got my butt to China. Being out in this little KTV club in the middle of nowhere, being with a bunch of people I'd grown massively fond of over the past few weeks, drunk on bad Chinese beer and dancing to Ricky Martin or somesuch gunk, was just fun. We got back home to see the sky *coated* in stars, the sky being the tapestry of light it always was before neon and pollution stole it. Stunning. What a night, what a finale.

So how can I wrap this up? As far as I can tell, RHL will either close down within a couple of months, or the Chinese partners will start doing things that do not concern only themselves. Right now, the place desperately needs people like me, Sue-Lin, Vincent, Tom, and some others I met fleetingly, but it's exactly these people that RHL's Chinese complement is currently scaring away. But, well, I have a feeling that they'll only realise all this when everyone's desert them...fortunately or otherwise, I'm now one of them. The burger place will now close, simply because there's no-one else there to open it - and they've lost, from what I heard, a not unpopular teacher. As the Americans say, period.

But well, that's what they lost. But what I gained from RHL is a ton of great memories, a not half bad paycheck (haggled), and, something I didn't see coming, a lot more confidence as a teacher - I'm actually good with kids. They really are like little sponges.

So I'm back in Wuhan, Sue-Lin, Nadia and Jalal have done the bolt, and I've left Vincent and Tom out in woop woop to get this place up and running...my heart goes out to them.

'Til next time, love yaz all

Ash