

## **Lydia Smith, single then a couple with children (2008-2018)**

### **China**

China has always been a complete fascination of mine. One of my earliest memories dates back to the late 80s when I recall playing with a paper cocktail umbrella and finding a very small scroll of paper inside- as I unravelled it I was amazed by the beauty of the 'letters' that I found. These were of course Chinese characters and probably stated that these accessories were 'made in China', a far cry from the secret message I thought it was! Since then I have always been fascinated by language and it was this experience that ultimately led to studying Chinese at university followed by 10 amazing years spent living first in Guangzhou then in Shanghai. As a family we left China in June 2018, we left on our terms with the prospect that someday we would be happy to return. Of course, China has been affected by Covid cases and travel restrictions so it is important to note that all my experiences below are based on pre-Covid conditions. We remain hopeful that restrictions will continue to ease as we firmly believe that China is a superb destination for young professionals and families alike.

### **Guangzhou**

I arrived in Guangzhou in August and the first observation I remember making was just how green and lush everywhere was. Guangzhou benefits from a tropical climate bringing in hot humid summers with frequent heavy downpours and mild winters- very different from the snow you often see in Beijing and sometimes Shanghai. In our time there we saw the metro system expand rapidly, taxis become easier to order and the rail system benefited from a huge upgrade to high speed. Getting around the city is very easy- like with many Chinese cities there are pockets or areas of the city where you go for Western bars/ restaurants, visit more cultured areas such as temples, etc, and huge markets where you can literally buy anything and everything. During our time there we witnessed the 'Zhujiang New Town' area develop, this has really shaped the GZ skyline to what you see now with the Pearl Tower, IFC, and Liede Bridge.

Guangzhou is home to a number of both British and bilingual schools offering a variety of curricula. There are few schools which are located within the CBD area but most are found a bit of a distance out of the city, this is largely because they require large pieces of land for swimming pools, football pitches, etc. When we first arrived we lived in the Baiyun district close to our school, at first there was quite a distance to get into the city but now with the improved metro, etc this time has almost halved making the city much more accessible for those who choose to live near their school for ease during the week. Apartments across the city vary and can be quite costly so it's always a good idea to ask schools for images and confirm allowances to see what you are entitled to/ can afford. Most schools will provide 2 bedroom apartments and it is easy to buy basic items from IKEA or online. You will find your big brands across the city such as Starbucks, Costa, H&M, Pizza Express, etc.

Even if you have a command of Mandarin you will find that Cantonese is more widely spoken but I honestly don't think you need much Chinese language ability to get about- signs are all in English as are Apps to help you get around. It's quite easy to go into a Chinese restaurant and point at pictures and you will pretty much get what you are after! I really do have very fond memories of GZ, first living there as a single female I felt incredibly safe, and later living together with my partner. There are so many activities to get involved in, sports clubs (rugby, Muay Thai, netball, etc) where you will meet people who aren't just teachers. Getting out of the city is very easy with the high-speed rail network, you can literally be on the other side of the country in a matter of hours. Hong Kong is also a popular weekend destination for shopping/ nights out etc. SE Asia is also pretty much on your doorstep for longer holidays.

In a nutshell, GZ offers some great schools and a wonderful Chinese culture- we have such fond memories of our time there and can honestly recommend the city to all those looking for adventure as well as access to home comforts.

## **Shanghai**

We moved up to Shanghai in August after around 6 years of living and working in Guangzhou. We honestly felt like we had moved to another country! One word to describe Shanghai is that it is just simply 'cool'. It is an amazing city to live in, it is fast-paced, changing, and dynamic, with access to everything and anything. We first experienced Shanghai as a young couple. At work, we were working in a start-up bilingual school where opportunities continued to be presented to us whilst at weekends we loved heading out to rooftop bars in leafy lanes or boozy brunches in the big 5\* hotels. This changed in Jan 2017 when we welcomed our first daughter who was born in an international clinic. With this, we found baby clubs on Saturday mornings allowing me to build a 'mum network' for playdates, all the usual things you do as a young family. We had access to foreign milk powder and never struggled to get anything we needed for Bea. I went back to work relatively early and we were incredibly lucky to have an 'ayi' who looked after Bea Mon to Fri, Hu Ayi really did a great job with Bea and I was really upset to leave her when we relocated back. In a nutshell, Shanghai has it all - it is an easy place to be and you can live life like a king or save as much as you can if you prefer eating/ drinking local.

Most schools are located out of the city and I would always recommend taking the school provided accommodation first so you get your bearings of the city- in your second year you will have a much better understanding of the city and know where you want to live, whether it is close to the gym, metro station, etc. Rent in areas such as the former French concession area can be expensive but we took the hit because we wanted to really experience living in the 'thick of it'. We loved Saturday morning strolls to bakeries for pastries and coffee. Shanghai is home to a large international community, we made friends with people who weren't just teachers, many were doing some very cool tech-based things, an example of the types of people the city attracts.

International education continues to boom across China and many cities are expanding due to this. I always say that China has been so good to us, allowing us to grow both professionally and personally. We wouldn't be able to do what we do today had it not been for the people we met in China and the experiences we had. It will always be a special place for us and I wholeheartedly recommend it as a destination!