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INTERNSHIP FEEDBACK

Sustainable Tourism at The Schoolhouse

Internship at
Beijing Mutianyu Schoolhouse Restaurant Company Limited (MSR)
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This feedback has for goal to give to the people interested in doing an internship at The Schoolhouse, an insight of what being an intern at The Schoolhouse means through my personal experience. If you have other concerns or questions that do not find answers in this paper, I will be pleased to try to answer them. Feel free to email me at gueho.audrey@gmail.com.

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I. Personal Background

a. Studies and previous work experiences

First of all, I am a French girl and I was 23 years old during my internship at The Schoolhouse.

I have a bachelor degree in three majors which are economics, political sciences and sociology.

I have a master degree in sustainable development with a major in management. The first year of my master was in the University Paris-Dauphine. The second year was an exchange between my university in Paris and the Agricultural University in Beijing.

In the context of my second year of master, I did a compulsory internship during the summer 2008. This internship lasted 3 months and took place in a French territorial administration, in the sustainable tourism field. The goal of this internship was to develop green equestrian tourism in the region.

b. China's experiences

To complete my last year of master degree, I moved in Beijing in September 2008. Thus, before moving to Mutianyu Village and working at The Schoolhouse, I lived nine months in Beijing.

My university courses were in English but, while I was in Beijing, I took daily Chinese classes during a total of three months. When I arrived in Mutianyu I was a beginner in Chinese, able to deal with simple everyday life issues.

During my nine months in Beijing as a foreign student, I also had the opportunity to travel to different places in China for trips lasting a few days to a month. Thus, when I arrived in Mutianyu, I had an experience of Beijing life and a quite broad insight of China.

c. Internship expectations

Considering my studies, my previous internship experience, my professional project at that time and my growing interest for the Chinese culture, I had several expectations concerning a non-compulsory internship to end my studies.

I wanted an internship that allowed me to extend my stay in China in order to diversify and enrich my Chinese experience. I was looking for a long-duration internship to gain a deeper work experience than my previous internship. I wanted to work in English to improve my language skills.

During my first internship, I grew interest for the issues related to sustainable tourism, but I didn't like the huge size and the spirit of the territorial administration I worked for. For my second internship, I was looking for this same sustainable tourism field but for another kind of organizations (private business, association or NGO).

During this previous internship, I had issues to efficiently organized myself and to get integrated in the organization, among my colleagues. I wanted to benefit from another internship to deal with these issues.

II. Internship Environment

a. The Schoolhouse

MSR is a 3-year-old small tourism hospitality company that grew very fast. At the end of 2009, MSR manages three restaurants (namely The Schoolhouse Canteen/western food, The Roadhouse/Chinese food, and Xiaolumian/noodle shop), eleven rental homes (under the name China Countryside Hotels) and a glass shop (The Schoolhouse Art Glass) in two villages, Mutianyu and its neighbor, Yingbeigou. When I arrived at The Schoolhouse, this organization confused me but, time goes on, it became clearer to me.

The guests greeted at The Schoolhouse, i.e. in the restaurants, in the rental homes and/or for private parties, are foreigners, especially Beijing expats, Chinese or tourist tours.

Despite its several restaurants and rental houses, the MSR team remains limited. The staff is preferentially composed of local villagers and almost only Chinese speaking. The managers and interns are Chinese or foreigners, and for the most English speaking.

As an intern I was more assimilated to the managers crew and worked in the office among them. Among the managers' team, I worked with people coming from different countries (Chinese, American, Indian, Filipino, Finish), which was a very enriching experience.

Generally my workday started at 8:30 am and finished at 6:00 pm, without any break. I had only one day off per week. At the beginning I was very surprised by this rhythm of work since it was very different from what I knew in France. But, as time goes on, I found a great satisfaction (to not say a sense of accomplishment) in working so much, as long as I knew it was for a determined period.

Working only in English but also a little in Chinese, was very challenging for me. During the first month, juggling between these two foreign languages and adjusting to the village life rhythm were very exhausting for me.

b. Mutianyu Village

The Schoolhouse is based in Mutianyu Village at one of the three most popular Beijing tourist sections of the Great Wall.

Mutianyu is located in the Bohai Township, in the Huairou District, in Beijing Province, at 1 to 1.5 hour from Beijing Downtown. It is a small countryside village (about 350 inhabitants), in the mountains north Beijing, at the foot of the Great Wall. The biggest closest city is Huairou, at 20-25 minutes drive from Mutianyu.

MSR provided me an accommodation: I spent three months in the staff dormitory located in the buildings of The Roadhouse, at about 20 minutes walk from The Schoolhouse Restaurant (where is the office), then three months in the “managers’ house”, a traditional courtyard village house next door to The Schoolhouse.

Broadly speaking, I had to adjust myself to the lack of comfort and the short supply of goods (food) available in the village. But I definitely consider living in the village as a great experience that not only gave me an exceptional experience of the Chinese countryside life, but also made me redefine my own standard of living.

In the staff dormitory, I had my own room and shared the bathroom with one of the lady, employed at The Schoolhouse. During the three months I spent there my principal difficulty turned out to be the lack of company caused by the language barrier. Even if the staff living in the dormitory was very kind to me, I was not able (or too shy) to really share time with them.

In the managers’ house, I shared my room with the other intern. Since it’s a traditional courtyard dwelling, I had to go outside each time I wanted to use the kitchen or the bathroom. Since mid-November and the beginning of winter, living in the manager’s house became more difficult for me. Indeed I felt hard to deal with the lack of comfort since the days became shorter and colder.

III. Internship Projects and Assistance in Operations

a. Initial projects

Interns at The Schoolhouse are in charge of their own projects.

According to my interest and the needs of The Schoolhouse, I defined with the help of Jim my own projects, before starting my internship. I was interested by a project achieving two kinds of goals: first extending the stay of the guests (usually guests stay only one night in the village) by offering activities that are respectful of the environment and of the people, second

increasing the awareness of the guests about the sustainable actions of The Schoolhouse, and sustainable development and tourism (especially awareness of children).

I thus defined the main lines of three projects, not all of the same importance.

My main project was writing a biking guide about the Bohai Township. I had to bike in all Bohai and even further to create rides, and to collect information and pictures. Then I wrote a book showing these rides and explaining the village life in Bohai, in French then translating in English.

My second project was creating a curriculum for children about sustainable development issues we deal with at The Schoolhouse. I finally created four classes: three for primary school children (concerning sustainable gardening, composting and waste recycling, and Mutianyu's biodiversity and ecosystem) and one for junior high school kids (concerning social geography and sustainable development).

My last project was writing a "sustainability note" to increase people's awareness about what is done at The Schoolhouse concerning sustainable development, and especially in the rental homes.

I was completely in charge of these three projects: I had to define them precisely and to organize my internship in order to complete them all. I immediately took this part very seriously since it has been my issue with my previous internship. I had the opportunity to apply concretely project management skills that I learned during my master courses.

Furthermore, and that what I liked at The Schoolhouse compared to my previous internship, the small size of the company allows dynamism and freedom. That means that as long as I really wanted to do something, I found the help and means to achieve my projects.

But even if I was responsible for these projects, I had not to deal with them completely by myself. As an intern I had to refer to Jim. Weekly meetings with Jim were helpful for me to redefine, correct or affirm the way I was working on my projects.

My projects products (especially the curriculum and the sustainability note) were aimed to be used on The Schoolhouse and China Countryside Hotels websites. I didn't realize at the beginning the interest for me but, since I always have been encouraged to put my name on my products, I can now find my name associated to my work on internet. That's definitely valuable for my professional experience.

b. Additional projects

Time goes on, I had the opportunity to be in charge of three other projects.

First I took over the project of another intern who left after my three first months of internship: the Schoolhouse Sustainable Food Program. This program is organized around three projects: composting, sustainable gardening, and fruits and nuts trees. I had to manage the program, to lead meetings, to train the staff and to update the related documents.

Another small project I was in charge was managing a ten-day event at The Schoolhouse in partnership with the WWF China in order to increase guests' awareness about climate change and sustainable development: the Vote Earth Event. Managing an event was something very new for me, and very challenging (even stressful). Eventually I consider that I managed this event successfully.

After this "Vote Earth at The Schoolhouse" I have been in charge of another smaller event: the monthly Saturday Movie Nights. I had to manage this new regular event at The Schoolhouse and I decided to show movies related to sustainable development issues.

Concerning my initial main projects, my regret was that they were mostly writing and they really involved only my own work (and not the whole company). Thus they looked more like the academic work I was used to do. These three additional projects counterbalanced this negative aspect of my internship by giving me the opportunity of managing and involving more people in my work.

In conclusion, my projects (initial and additional) make me very satisfied. I think they are great projects to enrich my work experience and value my CV. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to express myself in a range of different ways (and notably creative and artistic), which I really appreciated.

c. Assistance in operations

Since The Schoolhouse is a small-sized enterprise, I considered normal to help in different operations or functions. Most of the time I had to help in the front of the house, to serve or run the food in the restaurants and to check in guests in the rental homes. I was also one day per week on duty, which meant answering the phone during 24 hours. I saw this duty as a constraint but, with practice and habits, it became easier to accept it.

As I was able to talk a little Chinese, this part of my work as an intern was a great experience because I had the opportunity to share more time with the Chinese staff.

On the other hand I was also part of the weekly marketing meetings and of other management operations, which helped me to better understand the spirit and vision of The Schoolhouse, and the functioning of a small sustainable business.

So, to my point of view, assisting in The Schoolhouse operations was not only normal but also enriching to better understand the whole company.

IV. Personal Reflections and Conclusions

a. Difficulties & regrets

My biggest difficulty has been to deal with visa issues. I arrived at The Schoolhouse with a student visa expiring in July. I had to exit the country to make a business visa and then, once came back in Beijing, I had to extend this visa twice to make it run until the end of my internship. According to my internship offer terms, I was in charge of my own visa, but I finally received help from The Schoolhouse to clearly understand and supply the requested documents.

Another difficulty has been to adjust to the village life. Winter has been particularly difficult for me because the village life can be very boring. During the warmer seasons, I used to hike or just relax outside but in winter, with the shorter and colder days, I easily got bored after work. Fortunately I had a lot of dinners and parties with my colleagues after work, in the village or in Huairou.

If I had a regret, it would have been to not have had enough time to completely see the use of my projects, i.e. the use of the curriculum with classes and the publication of the biking guide (the guide was published after I finished my internship).

b. Achievements & gained skills

Concerning my projects, my greatest achievements are the biking guide and the Vote Earth Event. Writing a book is a great accomplishment and having the opportunity to discover the whole Bohai Township and even further by bike was definitely a great travel experience.

Concerning the language skills, I was, at the end of my internship, able to notice real improvements in English but also in Chinese.

By helping at The Schoolhouse I deepened my ability of using computers and internet. As a first experience in a small company, I noticed huge differences with the organization where I did my previous internship: the importance of the company vision, the way to deal with my colleagues, the impact of the partners' and managers' personalities on the development of the

business, the balance between a commitment in sustainable tourism and the need of making profit, the way to deal with competitors... I also discovered the tourism industry in China and deepened my understanding of what can be the practical implementation of the sustainability principles.

In regard of the problems I had during my previous internship, I consider I improved: I was well integrated in the company life and among my colleagues, and I quite efficiently organized my projects and tasks.

Lastly it is obvious that an internship at The Schoolhouse has not only given to me an experience in a small sustainable tourism business: living in a Chinese village at the foot of the Great Wall of China is definitely an integral part of the internship. Even if it's not directly professional skills, the experience of the Chinese countryside way of life is worthy and the presence of the Great Wall is evocative to whoever you talk and wherever you are .

c. Future projects

My next project is to continue improving my English thanks to a long travel in an English-speaking country.

After that trip I think for the moment of continuing working in the sustainable tourism field or in communication around sustainable development issues. I would like to have an experience in another kind of organizations, such as an NGO or an association.

V. Summary and Advices

My internship at The Schoolhouse has been rich of a lot of kinds of experiences. What made me enjoy my time there were above all my projects, my relationships with my colleagues, the spirit and the vision of The Schoolhouse, and the beauty of the area.

I think I have been particularly lucky to have the biking guide project since it let me discover deeply the township and enjoy the landscapes.

But I have to confess that six months of village life has been enough for me and I don't think I would have enjoyed staying longer.

The advices I could give to benefit as much as possible from an internship at The Schoolhouse would be:

- To learn at least a little Chinese before starting the internship: it could be hard to find enough time or self-motivation to learn Chinese beside work.

- To plan time to travel before or after your internship if it's your first trip to China: it could be frustrating to be in China but to only experiment Mutianyu, Huairou or Beijing.
- To really ask yourself whether you can live in a Chinese countryside village and basically spend all your time with a restrictive group of the same people.