



Xe: Let's kick this off, can you introduce yourself and what you are doing in Xi'an?

ES: Sure. My name is Ed Sander (known to some in Xi'an as Bihü), I'm from the The Netherlands and have been living in Xi'an since April. I'm an International Volunteer, working as a marketing consultant for an NGO (Non-Government Organization) called Shaanxi Western Development Foundation, that runs a local volunteer center and also does projects for disabled people and environmental awareness. I have been placed in this organization by VSO.

Xe: What is VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas)?

ES: VSO is an international development organization that works in 44 of the poorest countries in the world (yes, even in China 10% of the people are still living in poverty). Unlike other charity organizations VSO does not send money or goods but recruits volunteers in various areas of expertise (e.g. doctors, teachers, consultants) and sends them to Africa or Asia to share their skills with local organizations. The aim is to help these organizations build their capacities, thereby enabling and empowering them to fight poverty and help the disadvantaged in their own countries. More information can be found at www.vsointernational.org.

Xe: VSO has projects all over the world doing different things, what is the focus in Xi'an?

ES: The focus of VSO in China has recently shifted from teaching and HIV/AIDS prevention to national volunteering. China has reached the phase of development where it should no longer need volunteers from other countries because it has enough skilled people among its population. VSO China has therefore partnered with organizations in cities like Xi'an to set up local volunteer centers that act as an intermediate between people wanting to volunteer and NGOs that need volunteer resources. VSO China has also started to recruit Chinese volunteers (e.g. doctors) to send to developing countries in Africa.

Xe: Are you the first or last VSO volunteer in Xi'an how long will you be here?

ES: There have been other volunteers before me (some of

you might still remember Glen and Amy) and a new volunteer, Vanessa, has just arrived. My placement is for one year, but if I enjoy it enough I will consider staying longer.

Xe: What was the largest obstacle you have had to overcome in volunteering in Xi'an and how have you surmounted it?

ES: Besides the language barrier the most important obstacle is the lack of real business thinking. That's a very common thing in NGOs and maybe especially so in countries like China. This often results in having to fix questionable decision making. It takes a lot of patience, which unfortunately is not one of my biggest strengths.

Xe: For you what is the best part of living and working here?

ES: Learning about a completely different culture, learning the language, travelling around the country during my days off and the delicious Chinese food. And of course the diversity of my läowài and local friends.

Xe: Have you always been so socially minded? Before you took that step into the VSO world what did you do for a career?

ES: To be completely honest, I got more socially minded after I studied Buddhist philosophy and travelled through many different countries in Asia. That really changed my perspective on the world and what should matter in life. I've been working in database and online marketing for almost 20 years and decided to look for a way to combine my profession – which I really enjoy – with a way to make a difference in this world, on whatever small scale.

Xe: What is one piece of advice you would give others that are either looking at volunteering or working in China?

ES: Just one?! Well, the most important thing would be to read about the culture before coming. Concepts like guanxi (connections) and mianzi (face) are highly important to understand when you're planning to work with Chinese people. Try to understand these before you arrive. And after you arrive, don't judge everything that happens around you based on your own cultural background. Be open-minded and try to understand.

Xe: If you hadn't landed amongst us here in Xi'an where else would you like to be?

ES: When I signed up with VSO I was ready to go to basically any Asian country. Cambodia and Laos would have been high on my list as potential placements.

Xe: When you get a spare moment what do you like to do? What are your hobbies and interests?

ES: I love movies and music. I couldn't bring my bass guitar with me so I'm trying to learn how to play acoustic guitar. I also spend about an hour a day learning Chinese, I write a lot for my blog (edsander.com/blog) and whenever there's some fun going on I'll head out with my friends. Whenever I have time I also try to help the Xi'an International Business Forum (xibf.org) with their online marketing.

Xe: Back in the real world you are an author, teacher, and marketing guru. What are the differences you see in the Chinese population when it comes to brand marketing and consumer mindset?

ES: I wouldn't call myself a guru, but as they say 'in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king'. From what I've seen China is still a few decades behind in marketing. Companies are still focusing on selling as much product as possible instead of maximizing customer value by stimu-

lating loyalty and meeting customer needs. As such, the aspect of service is still very much absent in many Chinese businesses. Another difference with the West is that Chinese consumers constantly want to try new products and brands, whereas westerners tend to stick with brands they like and can relate to.

Xe: Sooner or later all of us will have to make the decision to stay in Xi'an or move on, if/when you move on what's next on your plan?

ES: I don't have a next plan. I'll go where the road takes me and do whatever feels good at the time. I doubt though if I will be able to return to a regular day job at a corporation that cares only about profit and shareholder value.

Xe: What is one thing you have wanted to do in Xi'an but haven't been able to yet?

ES: Climb Hua Shan.

Xe: You seem to be a man about town, what is the best way to get out there and meet like-minded folks?

ES: I tend to hang out with two groups of people. First there's my läowài friends that I meet at the excellent Xi'anese events. Second, there's a group of both läowài and locals that regularly meet in a Language Exchange group that has been set-up on the TalkXian website. The latter tend to do more Chinese things, like sing at KTV, an activity I love to do. I don't understand people that say they're bored in Xi'an because there's so much to do and so many nice people to meet through these two media.

Volunteering by day and socializing by night it seems that you have made Xi'an your home (for now) so let's test your Xi'anese-ness;

a). What is your favorite Chinese food and where do you get it from?

ES: There's many, but tangcu liji has to be one of my favorites. And of course there's rou jia mo, liang pi, jian bing guozi, gongbao ji ding, huo guo ... the list goes on and on. I normally eat in small restaurants in the village behind Keji Lu and Goaxin Si Lu, near where I live.

b). Where is your favorite place to go for a drink?

ES: Either the Belgian Bar or in the summers the kao rou places around Gaoxin or the pond behind my apartment, where we often meet up with friends.

c). Favorite places for pizza? Favorite places to get western food (non-pizza)

ES: Believe it or not, but I prefer to eat Chinese food, even if Western food would be cheaper than it is. Back in Holland I would already eat rice dishes five times a week.

d). Where do you like to get a cup of coffee or tea?

ES: A good cup of coffee is simply too expensive for a volunteer. On average it costs 1/3rd of our total daily budget, so it's simply not worth it. Drinking instant Nescafe instead is just one of those adjustments that we have to make.

Xe: Finally the question that usually makes folks empty their pockets before they sit down with us: What do you have in your pockets right now?

ES: My wallet with the meager remains of this month's volunteer allowance, a battered smartphone, a lighter, a pack of cigarettes (yes I know I said I'd quit!) and the key to 'The Cave' (my small dark apartment).

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