

Minielly, Hugh

Belleville family on five-month journey across China

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While the federal government has urged Canadians to leave strife-torn China, a Belleville family is continuing its trek through that country, bound for Pakistan.

Hugh Minielly, a Moira Secondary School teacher, his wife, Mary, and two school-aged children are in the midst of a five-month trip through China. The trip started in early April with their arrival in Hong Kong.

Minielly, who's on sabbatical, is expected back in Belleville in August.

The teacher wrote a letter, dated April 28, from Chengdu, Sichuan, outlining the family's trip to that point.

A postcard was subsequently received by Moira, when the Minielly family arrived in Beijing — the centre of daily demonstrations by Chinese students and, in the past several days, violent outbreaks between demonstrators and the military.

Minielly wrote the family arrived at Beijing after spending 14 hours on an overnight third-class train "the same day (Soviet President Mikhail) Gorbachev's helicopter landed in Tiananmen Square, which was awash with thousands of demonstrating Chinese students. It was an exciting entry to a great city."

Gorbachev was in China from May 14-18. On his visit to Beijing, 700,000 Chinese students packed Tiananmen Square.

Minielly said the family "planned to spend the week in Beijing to shake out the dust from the past month, see the sights and replenish our peanut butter stocks."

He ended the postcard by saying the family will "begin our long trek westward via the Silk Road to Pakistan."

It's presumed the Belleville family safely left Beijing during the last week of May, just days before military troops moved in and the violence erupted.

Over the past two days, Canadians have been airlifted from Beijing and Shanghai as reports spread the army is getting ready to move against students on campuses in the capital.

Canadian government reports indicate there are around 300 Canadians living and studying in Beijing and another 300 in the rest of China.

Wednesday, about 250 Canadians were evacuated from the violence in Beijing.

As far as the family's trip is concerned, Minielly wrote in the April letter that Hong Kong "was a great place to kick off from since it allowed us to wallow in the excesses of unbridled capitalism before crossing the river to see basically the same culture as affected by a totally different political and economic system — almost like the West Berlin to East Berlin crossing."

Hong Kong, about 2,000 km south of Beijing, he wrote, is "ultra modern with money gushing everywhere."

"After six days of enjoying these

excesses, however, we tired of the choking pollution, exorbitant prices... and less than pleasant attitudes of most people in this hectic city."

They then crossed the border into Canton (now Guangzhou) and they expressed "relief" and said there was a feeling "we had been moved back in time about 100 years."

"The traffic consisted of mainly bicycles and pedestrians with old buses and the odd taxi winding their way carefully through."

"In the early morning, the parks are filled with older people doing their very graceful Tai Chi exercises, women playing with their one child and men squatting on the grass, chatting with tea, and their bamboo bird cages hanging in nearby trees — all very peaceful."

The family left Canton and spent the next few days working its way up through the mountains by train, boat, "bone-shattering bus" and bike.

They commented on the beautiful

countryside, fascinating villages "but incredibly backward" communities.

"We have yet to see any form of mechanized agriculture or road-building equipment — all manual labor with water buffalo plowing the paddys and men and women with picks and shovels building roads."

"There is an amazing lack of police or military presence, unlike Eastern Europe or Russia," Minielly said.

During their trip, only two Mao statues were seen "and a few tattered Red Books in dusty flea markets."

"Economy wise, except for food, everything else seems hopelessly poor," Minielly wrote. "The average wage is about \$50 a month, including teachers (average class size is 50) and doctors. Factory workers get a bit more and farmers, now that they can sell produce in the free markets, are doing the best of all."

They found the presence of religion alive "but not well since the Red Guard ransacked most temples."

"There are still many Buddhist monasteries around but most have become tourist meccas selling trinkets and offering cheap accommodation."

As for clothing styles, they said the old still sport Mao jackets and cadre caps. "The latest in chic for ladies are skin-tight black pants, baggy blouses and high heels and for the guys it's dress shirts, bell-bottom pants and shoes with built-up heels and steel clickers."

On May 6, the family was aboard a Chinese streamer on the Yangtze River in central China.

"This, we are told, is a different China where most of the rebuilding is taking place. Already, we are seeing massive industries and huge tracts of agricultural land."

The Belleville family closed out the letter by saying they were on their way to Beijing "where we hope to spend a week before our long westward trek to the Pakistan border."