



**Sensing majesty:** Left, at the Great Wall of China, Julie Woods wears her trademark pink T-shirt, bearing the words "That Blind Woman", and CanTeen bandanna. Above, in a rice paddy at Longji.

## HORIZONS

### Vietnam special

» The modern Ho Chi Minh, formerly known as Saigon, is a fast-developing metropolis that offers visitors a wide range of experiences. Architecture, markets and restaurants are equal to any modern city. House of Travel has a four-night package, with return airfares, from \$2075 a person, twin share. Flights are with Thai Airways from Christchurch to Ho Chi Minh City via Bangkok, one night's accommodation in Bangkok, three nights' accommodation in Ho Chi Minh City, breakfast daily, return airport transfers and city sightseeing in Ho Chi Minh City. Sales to November 11 for travel October 5 to November 30, 2011, and January 16 to March 31, 2012. Phone 0800 838 747 or visit [houseoftravel.co.nz](http://houseoftravel.co.nz).

### Indian experience

» A seven-night Indian package, with Christchurch return airfares, is available from House of Travel from \$3259 a person, twin share. Return Christchurch flights are with Thai Airways to Delhi via Bangkok. Included are one night's accommodation in Bangkok, one night's accommodation in Delhi, a six-day/five-night Golden Triangle tour which includes accommodation, breakfast daily, four dinners, private air-conditioned car with driver, private English-speaking guide, entrance and monument fees, elephant ride, rickshaw ride and return airport transfers in Bangkok and Delhi. Highlights include the Taj Mahal, the pink city, Jaipur and Amber Fort. Sales to November 18 for travel October 5 to November 30, 2011, and January 16 to March 31, 2012. Phone 0800 838 747 or visit [houseoftravel.co.nz](http://houseoftravel.co.nz).

### Irish charm

» Explore Ireland in the company of knowledgeable, fun-loving Irish guides and discover its renowned scenery, humour, toe-tapping music and hospitality. House of Travel has a tour from \$790 per person, twin share, operating from February to December, 2012. Price includes airport transfers on arrival and departure, four nights' hotel accommodation with breakfast daily, four dinners, transport by luxury coach and sightseeing as per itinerary. Phone 0800 838 747, or visit [houseoftravel.co.nz](http://houseoftravel.co.nz).

### Mauritius beckons

» Holiday packages for the luxurious Indian Ocean destination of Mauritius are on offer from Flight Centre. They including Christchurch return airfares flying Emirates and seven nights' accommodation with buffet breakfast and dinner daily from \$3659 a person, twin share. Sales to October 9, 2011, for travel January 17 to March 31, 2012. Phone 0800 427 555 or visit [flightcentre.co.nz](http://flightcentre.co.nz).

### Sights of Samoa

» Flight Centre has Samoa holidays including Christchurch return airfares flying Air New Zealand, five nights' accommodation with tropical breakfast daily and airport transfers from \$1035 a person, twin share. Sales to October 10 for travel October 25 to November 30, 2011, and February 1 to March 31, 2012. Phone 0800 427 555 or visit [flightcentre.co.nz](http://flightcentre.co.nz).

### Food festival

» Melbourne's 20th annual Food and Wine Festival on March 2 to 21, 2012, will again attract experts from around the globe, including celebrity chefs and winemakers. You can join them for everything from gourmet cooking classes to tasting Australia's best produce. Flight Centre has Melbourne holidays, including Christchurch return airfares and two nights' accommodation from \$569 a person, twin share. Sales to October 10, 2011, for travel February 1 to March 21, 2012. Phone 0800 427 555 or visit [flightcentre.co.nz](http://flightcentre.co.nz).

### Queenstown stay

» Stay in the beautiful Wakatipu Basin and receive daily continental breakfast, internet and late checkout when staying at five-star Manata Lodge Apartments. The "Wotif Drive South Island" is from \$171 a night for two people (normal full rate is \$450). Available to book for stays until December 22. Contact Wotif.com on 0800 441 092 or [wotif.co.nz/hotelW1887](http://wotif.co.nz/hotelW1887).

# SENSATIONAL journey

Hundreds of shuffling feet around totally blind Julie Woods in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, whispered history. Her hearing, smell and touch carried her on a Chinese tour. She talks to SARAH BOND.

**T**here are people everywhere, and when you stand in a queue, what is considered a polite personal gap in New Zealand, in China is room for three families!" For Julie Woods – "That Blind Woman" – this was her first impression of the People's Republic of China, home to the world's largest population and oldest civilisation.

Inflammation scarred her retinas – Stargardt disease – and gradually left Woods 14 years ago, at the age of 31, completely blind.

The New Zealand Foundation of the Blind helped the Dunedin woman reclaim the living of life. Woods, her husband Ron Espelin, and teenage sons Sebastian and Zac have just returned from a trip to mainland China.

While in China, Woods had personal guides on each leg of her trip. "They were all highly educated and spoke excellent English. They were also all women because of the toilet issues." Woods starts giggling when she describes the challenges posed by the Chinese "squat toilets", something a sighted traveller wouldn't have a problem

with. "It wasn't because they were dirty; it was just that the foot placements were always a different width and I never knew which way to face!" she says.

Guilin was their first destination – and Helen, their first guide, took her job very seriously. She provided a constant flow of information on their drive to the Longji and the "dragon's back" rice terraces. When walking up the hill to Ping An village that is surrounded by rice paddies, Woods put both hands out and touched each side of the narrow path. "I could feel the cool greenness and hear the people in their traditional costumes swishing past."

According to Julie, in the heat every one of the 1000 steps upwards seemed like an epic journey. "I heard a sedan chair being carried past and had a surge of hope. Unfortunately, Helen was adamant that sedan chairs are for lazy people." The inhabitants of Ping An either entertain the thousands of tourists who come to visit their "ethnic hotels", or work as rice paddy farmers alongside their water buffalo. An old man, with hands wrinkled from years of working in the



**In touch with the past:** An introduction to the Terracotta Warriors at the modern factory near the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor.

paddy fields reached out to help Woods. "I held his hand and as I stepped into a paddy field and I felt like I was living a millennium's worth of history," says Woods.

Julie also felt like she was reliving history when she visited

### GETTING THERE

China Holidays, including a 12-day small-group tour departing Shanghai and finishing in Beijing, with eight nights hostel and hotel accommodation, three nights on overnight trains and all transport, is available from Flight Centre. Among the features are: an Intrepid Tour leader, informal Mandarin language lesson, walking tours through Shanghai and Xi'an,

Hutong walking tour in Beijing and a Great Wall Trek from Jinshanling to Gubeikou.

**Total price:** From \$1675 a person, twin share. Christchurch return flights available from \$1908 a person. Sales till October 17, 2011, for travel till March 31, 2012, on selected Mondays. Ph 0800 427 555 or visit [flightcentre.co.nz](http://flightcentre.co.nz).

a traditional Chinese farmhouse. "We were loaded into a modified golf cart, and I held on tight. As we surged through the traffic I simply couldn't see when our driver was going to slam on the brakes! On arrival, hearing water surging from the waterspout, Woods pumped the ancient handle and felt like Helen Keller discovering a new world. She even ground rice flour using a traditional hand mill.

Exploring Elephant Trunk Hill, Seven Stars Park and a silk factory took up the last day in Guilin. Symbolism is everywhere

in China and names such as Camel Hill, Crescent Mountain and Flower Bridge, gave Woods a good idea of what landforms were surrounding her. After she had been feeling "silk soft and light enough for an emperor", the Silk factory provided Woods with her least favourite Chinese taste sensation. Woods is well known for her catch phrase "why not?", so she was easily persuaded that eating a silkworm pupa would bring her good health. But the crunchy chrysalis turned out to be a Chinese delicacy that Woods does not recommend.

Visiting a pit of 6000 statues inside a giant shed meant little to Woods, but she was interested to talk to one of the farmers who discovered the Terracotta Warriors tomb in 1975. At the modern-day terracotta factory, Wendy, their guide, was able to guide Woods' hands over warrior replicas.

In Beijing, standing in Tiananmen Square, Woods felt she was finally celebrating the people of China, not a celestial emperor. On the day they visited, the Square was crammed with people, even though the tomb of Mao Tse Tung was closed. To Woods, the hundreds of shuffling feet seemed to whisper history. "I can still remember Mao's statue being toppled over; and seeing that one man standing in front of a tank on TV; it seemed bizarre to be standing right there." The leafy smells at the Summer Palace were a relief after the surging volumes of people in Tiananmen Square. "The Garden of Harmony is amazing; I touched 800-year-old cypress trees, and it was weird to hear cicadas, just like we have in New Zealand," says Woods. "I can understand why people think the palace marks the meeting point

between Heaven and Earth. We walked the Long Corridor that led to the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest and took a boat ride on the lake. It was hard to believe we were in the middle of a city, even if we were surrounded by hundreds of acres of garden."

According to Woods, "like visiting the Eiffel Tower in Europe, you know you are in China when you are walk on the Great Wall. It takes 12 "blind woman" steps to walk across the wall, and Woods describes how one side is higher than the other, with special buttresses for archers to shoot from. The towers, which are exactly two arrow flights apart, allowed every angle of the wall to be defended. "My guide kept apologising as we walked up to a watchtower because the steps were so uneven. I said, 'Don't worry they were thousands of years in the making'." She met a Chinese family who had come to experience the 2000-year-old feat of engineering. They asked about her white cane, and Woods began to explain about what it was like to be a blind traveller in a foreign country, with her guide Alice acting as a translator.

"Without even thinking, I

pulled out my book *How to Make a Silver Lining* from my backpack and gave it to their 22-year-old son who had just finished university. He was so excited, all he could say was, 'Wow, I am so lucky! Your T-shirt should say 'That Great Woman', not 'That Blind Woman'."

Heading back to their hotel in central Beijing, Woods met a Chinese blind person for the first time.

He was begging on the train. "It was incredible. There are around 13 million blind people in China, and this was the first one that I had met."

She becomes quietly reflective when saying, "I really loved Beijing and the rest of China.

"But it was this blind man on the train that made me realise how lucky I am to have been born in New Zealand and have the freedom to travel home."

### COVER

Julie Woods and two Chinese villagers in traditional dress, surrounded by rice paddies, on the way to Ping An Village.

Photo: RON ESPLIN