

Event Review

Tai Chi Caledonia 2013, Stirling, Scotland - written by the Tai Chi Life School, London



Tary Yip - Qigong

An incredible event in its 18th year, Tai Chi Caledonia has certainly stood the test of time with its tried and tested formula, with its great team scouting out up-and-coming and well established teachers, bringing them all together to create a harmonious and positive learning environment. As we all know, the long rocky road of tai chi training goes on and on, with its ups and downs; Tai Chi Caledonia is definitely one of the ups. The idyllic grounds and open spaces of the Stirling Sports University are beautiful, with lush grassy areas next to a lake set against a stunning Highland landscape, not forgetting a dose of that good old-fashioned fresh air for all you city folk (which we definitely are, coming up from the Big Smoke). Everyone was eager to get started and train with some fantastic instructors with decades of experience. There is ample space available for indoor training, but there is also nothing better than practicing tai chi and qi gong out in the elements, bathing in the glorious rays of sunshine – apparently you can get sunburnt in Scotland - and that was what it was all about this year.

Are you ready for over 34 hours of scheduled training over 6 days? Tai Chi Caledonia is like the Galapagos Islands, with its rich variety of unique forms of life. In one week, an event takes place like nothing else in the UK – from students to teachers, it is a melting pot of different styles, ages, levels and cultures. What more does a tai chi geek need? And there can be no better introduction to the art for an absolute beginner with 12 approachable, generous international instructors.

It all starts off with an explosive weekend of 45-minute speed-dating sessions – whether a scholar or boxer, these short workshops give you an opportunity to meet the instructors, and get a taste of various different teaching styles

and arts, as well as some straight-up practice and some philosophical discussion. Visitors staying the whole week will know whom they want to train with by the end of it, and even if you are only staying for the weekend you will get a fantastic introduction to the variety of internal arts represented by the instructors. By the end of the weekend, the positive atmosphere had so deeply impressed some people that they even decided to stay on for the whole week. And they were in for a treat.

After the excitement of the weekend, it is time to settle down and get real. With early starts and long days the training began. It was time to get our heads down with our chosen instructors.

The next four days presented an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other and bond through the shared activity of studying and exploring the arts. Students began to feel more comfortable with asking questions and teachers opened up more. Over the course of the week it was really interesting to feel the gradual relaxation of both the students and the instructors towards each other. At the start, it felt structured, more like a drop-in seminar. As the days progressed, so the relationship between student and teacher softened into a more personal experience.

Train, eat, sleep, socialise, push hands. You wouldn't think there would be time for anything else, yet every year there is a discussion panel for the teachers chaired by Ronnie Robinson. This year's topic was "The Future of Tai Chi". Ronnie pointed out that this year saw the largest crowd of young people who have attended Tai Chi Caledonia for many years. It was fairly relaxed and informal enough for the audience to warm up and ask questions and interact with the panel, but it was also a lively



Group Photo



Discussion

rocking and rolling debate with no punches pulled – perhaps due to the younger audience. It was interesting to hear the responses and compare them to the debate from two years ago on the same topic. Where before people were focusing on the ways in which the future of tai chi might be bleak, this year there was a much more upbeat, positive feeling among the instructors and the audience, many of whom seemed to feel the future of tai chi was not only secure but flourishing.

An event like this would not be complete without a showcase of skills from the instructors, and this year Tai Chi Caledonia was met with some awesome demonstrations, from the dazzling electric avenues of Chen style forms and freestyle fighting to the detailed scholar's concepts and approaches to technical push hands; and from full-on, direct xing yi to thrilling taiji kung fu fan and cool and groovy downtown qi gong forms.

After all the excitement of the day, you can return to your own private room to gently



New Games

reflect on your experience. The self-catered chalets at the University are clean and comfy, with breakfast and snacks regularly topped up (the classic Scottish shortbread will always keep you sweet and seemed never to run out) and of course cooking yourself is always an option – rumour has it the Italian contingent will sometimes cook up a storm.

The kitchen areas are always the place to be when people are involved. They are a great place to hang out and party, indulge in good old banter, and exchange stories from around the world. Everyone stays in chalets nearby each other so there is a tai chi village vibe bringing friends old and new from the wider tai chi community together.

The kitchen isn't the only place that brings people together. With informal pushing hands training sessions in the evening people can practice the art of talking without talking (with apologies to Bruce Lee). This gave a great opportunity to truly engage with teachers and students all on the same platform, which



Daniel Romeo

Ben Morris

Margherita Padalino

was refreshing and fun. Nowhere to run and nowhere to hide - simply engaging on every level without any fuss. At one point almost all the teachers were playing and sharing with great sportsmanship. A night to remember.

A pleasant warm surprise was the New Games, which involved lots of fun with water balloons and roly-poly, and almost ended up with Ronnie being the sole entrant for the wet t-shirt competition after a few of us found him a worthy recipient for the spare water balloons.

Another adventurous evening entailed a Chinese restaurant and a graveyard, with everyone smartly dressed for a change. It was nice to get off the campus and do something non-tai chi, and not talk shop for a while. If you thought tai chi people weren't competitive then the Environmental Art competition would have proved you wrong. We had a lot of fun making natural installations using objects we found in the area. Big up to the winning chalet with their piece with the paper plates or whatever. Our boar was way better.

Having helped put together an event or two, we recognise the organisational challenges faced by the team at Tai Chi Caledonia. A group of us had a fun time helping to set up one of the two evening buffets ourselves. It felt nice to be lending a helping hand to make the event run smoothly and be as positive as possible. One thing that stood out for us was out of nowhere the famous Scottish Taoist Ronnie Robinson had spontaneously decided around about 10:00 pm that has going to make us all bacon butties, so he hopped into his car and went off to the shops, returning with a sackful of bacon. How about that? That was above and beyond the call of duty. The night was then filled with the sounds and smells of people cooking up

bacon sarnies (tattie scones for the veggies).

We heartily recommend Tai Chi Caledonia. In the tai chi community we all understand loyalty and commitment as students and teachers; this once-a-year event where the organisers invite you to train for a week with a dozen teachers of different styles is a summer tai chi banquet to relish. Whether Wu style, Yang style, Chen style, Sun style, Fan form, Qi gong mother sequence, xingyi or dalu it is beneficial to taste all the dishes that the Chinese internal arts have to offer.

In order for tai chi to grow and reach a wider audience it is important to learn from other teachers, and for teachers to share and spread ideas.

To put on a week-long event that provides so much training, with accommodation and food as well as social events for the price of entry is very fair to say the least and we always felt welcomed and provided for. It is a great opportunity to do some intensive training or simply taste all the flavours and take it at your own pace, perhaps be introduced to some unfamiliar aspects of internal martial arts, and meet up with the wider tai chi community in the UK and Europe. Pro tip: the ice cream is good, really cheap and located in the café next to the main gym, watch out for the Iru Bru one.

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Photos:
Audrey Hillis: Discussion
Duncan Stonebridge: Daniel Romeo
Luigi Mesurca: New Games
Anna Ranne: Group Photo
Ronnie Robinson: Others



Gianfranco Pace & Marco Borzi



Tina Faulkner



Nabil Ranne



Faye Yip



Luke Shepherd



Barry McGinlay & Emma North