

Coming from afar to My World Mandarin Nature School for Summer Camp?

Hi! I'm Erin and my children spent 6 weeks with My World Mandarin Nature School for Summer Camp in the Summer of 2021. My children were 5 and 7 years old and had prior experience with Mandarin Immersion through their school, however, by the time that we went to camp, the kids had not been in an immersion environment for 18 months. We're originally from Southern California (Orange County) and we also convinced two other families from SoCal to join us for this adventure (total of 5 children). For us, this was a "baby step" to seeing how it would work to go to China or Taiwan for the summer.

How camp works:

Camp is at a different location every day. Trails, parks, and nature areas are throughout the "East Bay" of Seattle, mainly in Redmond, Bellevue, Issaquah, and Mercer Island. Orien will provide you the location for camp the next day on the evening prior. She will let you know if there's a possibility of water play as well. I do not believe that you will attend the same park more than one time per week.

Camp is 100% immersion and Mandarin-speaking only. This includes adults and during pickup and drop off. Your child is split up into groups by approximate age and are assigned an adult to watch over them for the day and be their guide. I believe that these groupings are fluid and many groups play together.

At a very basic sense, you are dropping your child off in a different park every day with a whole bunch of kids and requiring them to only speak Mandarin. Their purpose is to explore the outdoors. This could mean that they are finding a hill and rolling down it, it could be using sticks to create a fort, it could be using their imaginations and creating stories, or they could be exploring the different plants and animals that they come across. For us, this was great as it is a very different environment than home and there were a lot of new things to discover.

Where should you stay? Anywhere that you'd like!

Our family did a 6-week Air B&B rental of a basement apartment in the Coal Creek area of Bellevue. One of the other SoCal families did an executive apartment rental in Redmond across from the Microsoft campus, while the third family stayed with friends in Seattle/Columbia City. I would highly recommend that wherever you stay has laundry facilities in your home. My kids came home dirty everyday and clothes needed laundering due to them being wet or muddy.

Staying in Coal Creek (Southern Bellevue) provided some camp locations only being a 7-10 minute drive (Lake Sammamish State Park and parks off Lakemont Blvd SD). Parks in Redmond (Education Hill area) were about a 25 minute drive and getting to Mercer Island took about 15 minutes. Camp is nominally 945-315 daily so the commute to drop off and pickup is not burdened too badly by commuter traffic.

You will need your own vehicle. I would not recommend relying on public transportation to drop off/pick up your children. We drove from SoCal.

What do the kids need to bring for camp?

Each child should be able to carry their own backpack. The backpack should have a change of clothes (regardless of water play), their lunch/snack, and a water bottle. On days that there is water play, a towel is needed along with bathing suit, change of clothes, and water shoes.

The attire for camp is clothing that you aren't afraid to get dirty in or get damaged. My children wore t-shirts and leggings/pants. They also alternated between hiking shoes and tennis shoes. No special camp clothes are needed and if things became worn out, we replaced them with clothes from Old Navy or Target.

Items that are nice to have as extras include (these are the things we are adding to our pack next time):

- a waterproof/dry bag (this is for the dirty clothes, wet bathing suit, etc. A gallon ziplock will work fine, but we found that the Columbia PFG Dry Bag Set worked great and is a more sustainable solution.
 - https://www.columbia.com/p/3-piece-pfg-dry-bag-set-GSO0053.html?dwvar_GSO0053_color=469&pos=0
- Small Turkish Towel. The Turkish towels are thin, they roll up very small, and are a good all purpose towel to either wipe off dirt and mud or to sit on, if needed. This also works well for the water play towel to dry off with.
 - https://smile.amazon.com/dp/B083K4KJ8?ref=nb_sb_ss_w_as-ypp-ro-model_ypp_ro_model_k1_1_18&=undefined&crd=HXVX948PZNaN&srefix=turkish%2Btowel%2Bhand&th=1

Lunch is similar to what you would pack for a school lunch. Sandwiches, chips, fruit, etc. No microwaves or refrigerators are available.

Language Expectations:

We saw great progress in our children's language usage during our six-week camp time. Orien and her team remind the children to speak Chinese to one another and after their first week of attendance, the children did not need to be reminded. My children were hesitant upon arrival to camp; I'm sure that they didn't remember what they already knew, and after the first few days, found themselves to be less self-conscious to speak Chinese. As their time at camp wore on, we would find them speaking Chinese to each other at home and to their friends. As our family only speaks English and neither parent speaks Chinese, this was a sign that the immersion environment was working, and the kids were having fun.

The children learned some very specific nature words (banana slug) as well as general "summer" vocabulary and environmental vocabulary.

Final Thoughts:

All of the families that traveled from SoCal used the "work from home" excuse to work from the Bellevue area. "Home" just happened to be in Washington instead of California.

Drop off and pick up are at some non-traditional times. To make this work out with work-responsibilities, we would start work/login early, take our "lunch" to drop off the kids, and then stop work at 3 for pickup and then spent the remainder of the day doing tourist-type things and exploring the area.

By spending weekends and afternoons as "tourists" we were able to really explore the area with less crowds. There's no better time to see the Space Needle than a weekday evening. Visiting Pike Place Market on an overcast Saturday had many less people than a beautiful sunny day. Knowing that you are

“here” for a few weeks really gives you the freedom to be a more relaxed tourist. It was a great experience.

We spent most weekends exploring other areas of Seattle. We had family hikes at Snoqualmie Falls and Tiger Mountain. We visited Carkeek Park and the Ballard Locks. We drove around Mercer Island and visited as many parks as we could find. We ventured to Anacortes, WA and Bellingham, WA to check out Guemes Island, Deception Pass State Park, and the Stimpson Family Nature Reserve. And then there was the outlet shopping.

Summer is the best time to be in the Pacific Northwest. For the six weeks that we were there in 2021, it only rained 2 total days. There were 2 days that were “very, very hot” and most of the time the weather was sunny and in the 70s/80s.

This was the most memorable summer that we’ve had with the children. The idea of “moving” temporarily to somewhere new, living like a local, and constantly exploring like a tourist was great for our family. Going to My World Mandarin Nature Camp provided the children structure and the adventures that the kids had while there are experiences that they continue to talk about many months later.

I’m happy to answer any questions that you might have about camp, about how we managed as not being from “around there,” or about how we made the drive up and back an adventure (Crater Lake, the Jelly Belly Factory, Tillamook Creamery Tour are a few places we stopped). We are an electric car family, so we had the added challenge of figuring out car charging. We also send our children to a Montessori school and this camp aligns well with Montessori pedagogy for teaching and speaking Mandarin versus a more traditional Chinese school environment.

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