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## From Alberta to China, with nine kids in tow Bragg Creek family embarks on nine-month odyssey in Middle Kingdom

BY LICIA CORBELLA, CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 29, 2013

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The Coles family left for China on Tuesday to learn some Mandarin over the next nine months. Back row, from left to right: Daniel, 13; Christoff, 15; dad Cory, 36; Mka, 11, with Timi, 22-months-old, on her shoulders; and Aime, 10-months-old, held by mom Michelle, 36. Front row, left to right: Jerin, 3, Sasha, 9, Kaura, 5, and Niko, 7.

Photograph by: Licia Corbella

CALGARY — Many people will recall the reality television show Jon & Kate Plus 8. Well, how about Cory & Michelle Plus Nine go to China? It may not rhyme, but the Coles family's departure for China on Tuesday — while rife with its own logistical difficulties — promises to be a much more peaceful and healthy endeavour than the aforementioned TV show that led to a very public family breakdown.

Cory and Michelle Coles, both 36, and nine of their 10 children are flying off to China for nine months with the hope of learning Mandarin and understanding more about the fascinating culture behind the emerging superpower.

"In a country that until very recently had a one-child policy, something tells me we'll kind of stick out," says Cory, who graduated from law school in Manitoba in 2004 but never practised law.

"I already had four children by the time I graduated and wasn't prepared to spend the kind of time away from my family that's required in most law firms," explains Cory, who makes a living building houses in Manitoba, building decks and fences in Alberta, and running a linen business in the Calgary area as well.

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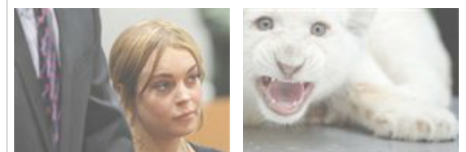
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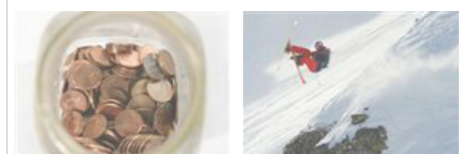
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The family, which lives on four hectares in a five-bedroom house in Bragg Creek, with two old horses, two cats and a dog, will be calling a three-bedroom apartment with 1 1/2 bathrooms in the city of Shenyang home for almost one year.

"The apartment is on the sixth floor and there's no elevator," Michelle says with a laugh.

"Manoeuvring those stairs with small children and groceries is going to factor into my exercise regime in a big way," she says bouncing 10-month-old Aime on her knee. Also, there's no bathtub, the one place Michelle says she gets some alone time at the end of a busy day.

"I think Michelle has had two baths every night for the past week," says Cory. "She's trying to get her fill now to last nine months."

What's most remarkable about this enormous brood is just how quiet and well-behaved they are.

Christoff, 15, Daniel, 13, Mika, 11, Sasha, 9, Niko, 7, Kaura 5, Jerin, 3, Timi, 22 months, and 10-month-old Aime all help out in their own way with getting the family ready for the "Coles' Family Adventure."

There is a lot of activity, but there is a calmness here that is so very rare. Timi is a bit out of sorts, so Mika is carrying her. Aime is playing happily with some of his blocks on the floor. Daniel and Sasha are practising their violins. Christoff is stringing another violin before packing all eight of them into a large hockey bag padded with winter coats. Jerin pretends to help by packing and unpacking his suitcase with great gusto. Soon, Timi has joined Aime on the floor. That provides Mika with the opportunity to head outside to brush their horses, Big Ben and Perogy, one last time.

Everyone has a task or is keeping themselves busy, and they go about it without making a fuss or much noise at all. Indeed, their home is more quiet than most with just two small children.

Michelle speaks in almost a whisper, always in French, and the children respond without complaint to any direction given.

"My predominant feeling right now is one of excitement, but I'm nervous, too, as I don't know what to expect," admits Daniel, 13, who is the Alberta wrestling champion for youth in the 48-kg category.

"I've done a lot of reading and westerners who go to China are typically greeted with a lot of curiosity, so we'll have lots of opportunities to try to speak the language," adds Daniel.

Michelle says the family has hired a Mandarin tutor to teach the older children and a nanny to help with the younger children and to speak to them in Mandarin. Michelle will also be teaching nannies, who hope to work in Canada and the United States, what is expected of them in the West.

There will be lots of learning going on for these children who are all home-schooled by Michelle, Cory and other tutors they hire.

Christoff, who is the Alberta wrestling champ in the 58 kg category for people 18-and-under, says he and Daniel will be training daily at the sports university in Shenyang, a city of about six million people in northeastern China.

Besides learning the language, the family intends to visit many important cultural sites within China and plans to take a government-controlled tour of North Korea and to Mount Everest in the months to come.

"Ultimately, when you're a family like ours, you try to be entrepreneurial in



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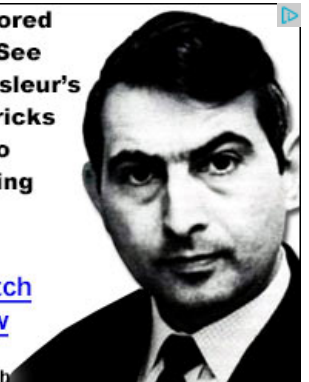
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every aspect, so it's our hope to start up our own tourism business in Alberta that caters to Chinese tourists to give them a taste of Canada that will blow them away," explains Cory.

"We had a Chinese nanny from Shenyang work for us for part of a year in Bragg Creek last year and she had never seen a star before in her life," recalls Cory.

"Think about that. She had never seen a star, never mind a sky full of them. So we will be exposed to many wonderful things in China, but it's our dream to expose tourists from China to the wonders of Alberta."

Cory says because their family is so large, bringing one Mandarin speaker into their home simply didn't work in an effort to learn the language. Pretty soon, their nanny was speaking English, rather than the other way around.

In an attempt to make the trip as inexpensive as possible, the resourceful family used Aeroplan points saved up over many years to get flights that had no fuel surcharges and other hidden costs, so it will take them four days to arrive in China.

The Coles family plans to start a blog that will be carried on the Calgary Herald website at [calgaryherald.com/opinion/calgary-bloggers/index.html](http://calgaryherald.com/opinion/calgary-bloggers/index.html), once they settle down, so friends and family can follow their adventures.

"Many of our friends are more interested in finding out how the Chinese people respond to us rather than to how we respond to our new surroundings," Cory admits with a chuckle.

Be it their experiences in China or the experiences of the Chinese people interacting with this interesting family, one thing is certain — it would be compelling enough to make for a gripping reality television show. How about, Two Plus Nine, Simply Divine?

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